Church Bells Call Twenty-five Congregations to Worship

Mockingly characterized as the “parish village of the west” because of the religious tussle of its founders, Appleton has always been a city of churches. Practically all denominations are represented here, and it is estimated most conservatively that eight out of every ten persons in the city have church affiliations.

The city was born in a Methodist environment, but a tolerant community barred no one, and among the earliest arrivals were devotees of other faiths.

There are twenty-five church organizations in Appleton today, representing the Seven Day Adventists, Baptist, Christian Scientist, Catholic, Congregational, Episcopal, Evangelical, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Pente-costal, Presbyterian, Reformed denominations, the Salvation Army and the Young Men’s Christian Association. Some of these church structures are among the most beautiful in this section of the state.

Of the total population in the city of 25,267 (last census) 24,500 attend a church.

Confronted with the tremendously task of clearing their land, building homes, and providing food, the earliest pioneers laid down their task on the Sabbath and conducted a service in the home of John F. Johnston. The Methodist society was organized in February, 1849, with eleven members.

The Rev. A. B. Randall was the first pastor, he coming here with the first arrivals in 1848. That same year persons of the Catholic faith held Mass in the home of Hippolitus Grignon, the first permanent settler in Appleton. Though Amos Lawrence, the donor of property and money for the college, was an Episcopalian, the Episcopalian church was not established here until 1860. Presbyterian held services here as early as 1850, and a split in this congregation led to the development of the Congregational church a few years later. The Baptist church was founded in 1854.

The Presbyterians held services in an old structure on what is now Oneida St. in 1851. James Gilmore and Fred Packard were deacons, and the story is told that while Gilmore was in the woods cutting timber for a church building, the society had a meeting and converted the organization into a Congregational church. The deacons looked upon the matter as deception. An effort was made to reduce Gilmore to the ranks, but he clung to his claim as a Presbyterian deacon and won out. His group acquired a lot on Lawrence St. for the erection of a church and about $10,000 in cash to start operations.

There were many Irish people in the village, attracted here by the abundant work on the waterpowers and relief from famine that existed in their homeland.

Catholic services were conducted for this group in the second ward school building in 1855 by the Rev. Father Cugler. The St. Mary parish was organized in 1857 and two years later a church was donated and a $1700 structure was erected. In 1864 the congregation had grown to the point where it was able to erect the first parochial school in the city. The Rev. Louis Dael was the first resident priest in the city. Dissention between factions resulted in the establishment of the German Catholic church in 1867. Servite fathers continued in charge.

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