ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CHURCH

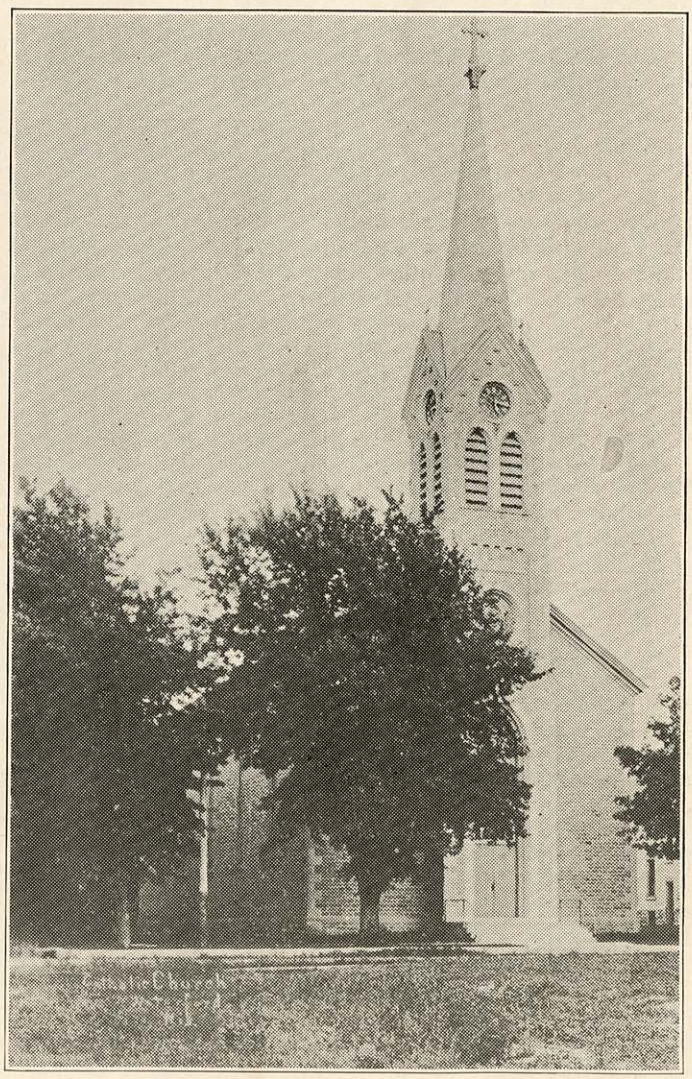
The St. Thomas Aquinas congregation at Waterford, Wisconsin, was founded in the year, 1850, by Rev. M. Kundig. The pioneer settlers of Waterford were a few English families. They found this beauty spot of Wisconsin in the year, 1837, and made it their home. The place was called Waterford from the fact that the Fox river could be forded conveniently only at this place.

About the year 1842 also a few Irish families found their way to Waterford, and made it their future home. In 1843 these few Irish families were visited for the first time by a Catholic missionary, Father Morrissy, who passed through Waterford on his way from Milwaukee to Janesville. He called the few Catholic families together at the home of Edward Bennett, now the James DeGrave place, and administered to their spiritual wants. This was probably the first time that mass was celebrated in the township of Waterford. The names of some of these early settlers are still familiar, as: Bennett, Cunningham, Quinn, Mealy, Nolan and Kelly.

L. Sanders was the first German Catholic that came to Waterford, and a little later a German Catholic family, a certain Mueller, also came to Waterford. Two years later a few more German Catholics came to Waterford, among them were C. Klunkefort and G. Kleinvehn.

The Catholics who had settled about Waterford were obliged to go to Burlington to attend devine services. During the years 1845-46 the number of Catholic families had considerably increased, consequently Catholic missionary priests visited Waterford more frequently and at regular intervals. In June, 1846, divine services were held for the first time in the village of Waterford by Rev. Kendeler, of Burlington, in the then newly erected cooper shop of C. Klunkefort. In 1847 Father R. Schraudenbach visited Waterford repeatedly. Later in the year Rev. M. Wisbauer, then pastor of St Mary's congregation at Burlington, came occasionally to Waterford to conduct divine services. In 1848 the Catholics at Waterford were attended to by Rev. M. Kundig, then stationed at St. Martins. Father M. Kundig came regularly to Waterford once a month and said mass in the above named cooper shop or in some private house.

Although the number of Catholics was still small, Father Kundig urged them to build a church. A man by the name of Samuel C. Russ, not a Catholic donated a half block for the purpose of erecting a church. Later on the other half of the block was bought for the sum of $175. The subscriptions for the building of a church were rather small, ranging between $5 and $10. The people were indeed willing, but they were poor. At first there was some disagreement as to the place, and material of which the new church was to be built. It was finally agreed upon to build the church of stone. The building was begun in 1849, but was not completed until the year 1851. Due to lack of funds and dissensions the building of the church was at a standstill for about a year. During this time Rev. M. Kundig did not come to Waterford. The people were again obliged to go to Burlington until Father H. Fusseder, who was then with Father Wisbauer, at Burlington, volunteered to visit Waterford every other week. He encouraged the people to complete the church. His suggestion to place the church under the patronage of St. Thomas was accepted. The following year, 1850, Rev. M. Kundig attended again to Waterford. He took the matter of completing the church into his own hands. He at once let the contracts for the mason and carpenter work. The building of the church now made rapid progress, until it was again interrupted by the approaching winter. The following spring, 1851, the work was at once resumed, and in a short time the exterior of the



building was completed, so that it could be used for divine services. It was used for the first time on the feast of Corpus Christi.

Father Kundig's next care was a school. A certain L. Luig gave a room to be used for school purposes, and a certain Lensing, a farmer, was engaged as teacher, on a salary of $8 a month. Twelve children attended the school. On April 22, 1852, Father Kundig organized a Ladies' Aid society. The ladies undertook the furnishing of the new church. They had indeed little to offer, but they were animated by a true spirit of sacrifice, and they succeeded in their undertaking.

In September, 1852, St. Thomas Aquinas congregation obtained in Rev. M. Gernbauer its first resident pastor. Although the inside of the church was not yet plastered, Father Gernbauer's first care was to erect a school building. He had an addition built to the church, half of which served as a sacristy, and the other half as a school room. The following year, 1853, the inside of the church was completed. It was dedicated on September 8 by Bishop J. M. Henni. On the same day the bishop administered the sacrament of confirmation and consecrated the cemetery. This was the bishop's first visit to Waterford. The following year Father Gernbauer found it necessary to use the whole building for school purposes. He then had the wooden addition to the church moved to some other place and built a new sacristy. Father Gernbauer was a zealous priest. He was well liked by his people. With sorrowing hearts they bid him farewell when he left for St. Francis to assume a professorship at the seminary.

His successor was Rev. H. Seif, who remained only two months, not long enough to get acquainted with the people. His successor, Rev. H. M. Stehle, also remained only a few months. From January, 1856, until October of the same year, Rev. C. Schraudenbach visited the parish occasionally until a new pastor was appointed in the person of Rev. S. Sanner. Rev. S. Sanner requested the people to erect a suitable rectory aside of the church for their pastor. The people saw the need of a proper dwelling for their pastor and acceded to his request. During the year of 1857 the material for the house was brought to the place, and the following year the two story stone building, now occupied by the school sisters, was built. In October, 1860, Rev. S. Sanner was transferred to another place. Rev. Minderer, who came to Waterford after Father Sanner remained only a few months. He could not speak English whilst a large portion of the parish was Irish. He felt that he could not serve a large portion of the parish, and consequently left.

Rev. G. M. Heiss then came to Waterford and remained for three years. The parish had now all the necessary buildings, except an addition to the school, and Father Heiss could devote all his time and energy to the spiritual welfare of the parish. Would that all pastors could be free from money affairs, and thus be able to give all their time to pastoral cares. A heavy yoke would be taken off their shoulders, and a great hindrance removed from making success of their ministry.

Father J P. Pierron

Father Heiss was succeeded by Rev. L. Conrad. He came to Waterford on May 10, 1864. Father Conrad's first care was again the school. Although the school had been enlarged twice it could no longer accommodate the increased number of children. In those days parents still knew that children are a blessing from heaven and a source of happiness, not a hindrance. Is it not a pity to see now so many school houses standing empty? Father Conrad explained the need of a larger school to the parish. The people saw the need and recognized in Father Conrad an able and a zealous priest, and placed the whole matter of building a new school into his hands. Father Conrad thanked the people for their confidence and promised to work only for the best interests of the parish. He also promised to get sisters for the school instead of lay teachers. Lay teachers in those days were nothing to brag about. The branch in which they showed the greatest proficiency was in drawing their salary. Father Conrad succeeded in his pledge to get religious school teachers, who make teaching a life work. In September, 1864, three school sisters of Notre Dame, arrived at Waterford to take charge of the school. They lived in a small shack rented for their accommodation, but they were satisfied with their humble abode. Meanwhile the members of the parish were busy hauling material for the new school and sisters' home. Most of the people had no money to give, but they willingly signed notes to make the new school possible. Certainly, no one can accuse the Catholics of Waterford of being neglectful in educating their children. Their example is most worthy of emulation. All honor and respect to the pioneers of St. Thomas Aquinas congregation who made such great sacrifices for the education of their children. The school was built not with cash, but secured by notes and it still stands today, a noble memorial to the pioneers of the St. Thomas Aquinas congregation. The building is now 57 years old and still serving the noble purpose for which it was erected. The mason work was done by Wm. Plucker, for the sum of $510, and the carpenter work was done by B. Giesing for the sum of $300. The parish furnished all the material. The total cost in cash was $3,480.64. In the following year Rev. L. Conrad returned again to Trinity church at Milwaukee. During his short stay at Waterford he had also planted many fruit trees on the church property. For many years his successors enjoyed the fruit thereof.

After Father Conrad, Rev. P. DeBerge came to Waterford. On account of some friction between the school sisters and some of the parishoners, the sisters resigned and returned again to Milwaukee. Father DeBerge became discouraged and left after a stay of only eight months.

His successor was Rev. C. Exel. He found the parish in great disorder. Besides the trouble mentioned above,

which had been caused, not by the parish, but by a few disgruntled members, the Irish families living towards the east of Waterford organized a new parish at Dover, near Eagle Lake. This weakened the parish at Waterford considerably. When Father C. Exel saw that he was unable to restore peace and union in the parish, he decided to leave.

He was succeeded by Rev. J. M. Joerger, who arrived at Waterford sometime in December, 1867. He found the parish in a very disorderly condition. But he was a young and zealous priest. In a short time he brought again order out of choas. His first care was the school. He pleaded with the Notre Dame School Sisters to return again to Waterford. They finally yielded and sent two teachers. They re-opened the school on September 7, 1868, and have remained here ever since.

In 1870 Rev. J. M. Joerger bought a small pipe organ for the church at a cost of $425. Rev. Joerger was a great student. While at Waterford. he composed and edited a small volume of poems. He moreover prepared himself for and successfully passed an examination for the title of doctor of divinity. After laboring very successfully for five years he left Waterford. During these five years he had won the love and esteem of all. The parish regretted to see him leave.

His successor was Rev. G. Strickner. He did not like Waterford and left after a stay of only nine months.

Rev. H. Uhlenmeyer, who had quite a reputation as a doctor of medicine, stayed also only a year. He built a small addition to the school, in order to give a little more comfort to the school sisters.

Rev. P. Schwaiger arrived at Waterford in December, 1874. At first he labored with good success. He had the small pipe organ in the church rebuilt and enlarged. He had great care for the cemetery and had it fenced in. He was a zealous and good pastor, but perhaps a little imprudent by listening to gossip. He soon found considerable opposition on the part of some families. This made his stay at Waterford unpleasant and practically fruitless. He left Waterford on April 10, 1877.

Up to this time the pastors of St. Thomas Aquinas congregation remained as a rule only a short time, and many of them experienced considerable trouble. Who was the cause of this trouble, the parishioners or the pastors? Perhaps both deserve due credit, according to the maxim: "It takes two to make a quarrel." But the result was that the parish had acquired an unenviable notoriety.

The successor of Rev. P. Schwaiger was Rev. P. A. Schumacher, He came to Waterford on May 19, 1877, against his will, as he himself testifies in a written statement. The bishop practically forced him to come to Waterford. He found the parish in great disorder, but as he states himself, the parish as such showed a good will, and the few professional "knockers" gradually weakened and finally gave up.

The old church had by this time outlived its usefulness, It was dilapidated and too small. The parish numbered only eighty families, and many of them were actually poor. Nevertheless, the parish decided to build a new church. Preparations for the new church were at once begun. The stones for the walls were obtained from the neighborhood, while the cut stones were gotten from Waukesha. The parish furnished all the material. Work on the new church was begun in the spring of 1880. On the ninth day of May the cornerstone was laid by Rev. M. Wisbauer. The building progressed very rapidly. By the end of October the exterior of the church was completed. Work was then suspended until April, 1881. During the summer months also the interior of the church was completed, even decorated. The building committee consisted of H. Reesmann, H. Dreesmann, H. Essmann, L. Sanders and J. Wiener.

On account of the illness of Archbishop Henni, the consecration of the church was indefinitely postponed, but it was blessed on the 4th of October by Bishop M. Heiss, of LaCrosse. On June 21, 1882, the church was solemnly consecrated by Most Rev. H. Heiss, then archbishop of Milwaukee. By the end of the year 1882 also new altars and pews had been installed. The year was fittingly concluded by a mission given by two Jesuit fathers. The total cash expenses of the church, including altars, pews, two bells and some statues. amounted to $10,600, but including the work done gratis by the parishioners, the total cost amounted to about $20,000.

After the church was completed Rev. Schumacher could devote all his time to the spiritual welfare of the parish, and he did so with great success, until he was called to Milwaukee, August 16, 1888, to organize a new parish in the district known as Bay View.

Father Schumacher's activity at Waterford inaugurated a new era in the history of the St. Thomas Aquinas congregation. From that time on there existed a better understanding between the pastors and the parishioners. The evolutionary and revolutionary period gradually gave way to a peaceful and profitable co-operation.

The successor to Father Schumacher was Rev. S. Schwinn. He found the parish in a prospering condition. He continued the good work of his predecessor. He improved the rectory by adding to it a two story frame building.

When he left on January 14, 1898, his place at Waterford was filled by Rev. B. Weyer. During the six years of his rectorship, several improvements were made on the church premises. He had part of the basement of the church dug out and a furnace installed. The tower clock was also obtained through his efforts, and a new rectory was built. He saw the need of better living quarters for the school sisters, and therefore, urged the parish to build a new rectory and remodel the old rectory for a dwelling for the sisters. The new rectory was built in 1901, but not without some opposition. The cost of the new building amounted to about $3,300. Father Weyer enjoyed the new house for about three years. During these years he experienced considerable opposition. He was a good priest, but misunderstood.

His successor was Rev. A. Albers. He had left a nice congregation and had come to Waterford upon an urgent request of Archbishop Katzer. At first he was disappointed in the place and at times downhearted, but as he got acquainted with the people he found them good and willing. One of his first cares was to keep the rain out of the church, by having it reshingled. The following year electric lights were installed in the church and rectory. A sad incident happened on July 22, 1907. Just before early mass the tower of the church was struck by lightning, and a man from Milwaukee, W. Miksch, was killed. This tragedy taught the parish a lesson and for their own safety as well

as for the safety of their children, they had lightning rods put on the church and school. The following year Father Albers had cement sidewalks built about the church and school. In 1909 he had the church redecorated at a cost of $1,150. The work was done by the well-known church decorator, H. J. Gaertner, of Milwaukee. In 1910 he had the electric lights also installed in the sisters dwellng. His next care was the cemetery. He had the low places filled in and then had the cemetery surveyed and platted. Then he undertook to have a cement sidewalk built from the church to the cemetery. This work he did not see completed, for he died on May 1, 1912. His death was a shock to the whole village, for he was loved and respected by all.

His successor, Rev. J. P. Pierron, arrived at Waterford on July 2, 1912. He found conditions by far more encouraging than they had been depicted to him. He found the parish united and in a flourshing condition. Father Albers had worked very successfully for the material and spiritual welfare of the parish, and his work was appreciated by the people. They loved him. When speaking of him they still call him "Good Father Albers." Nor was this esteem expressed in words only. They offered to his successor the sum of $800 to erect a memorial chapel over his grave. This chapel was built in 1913. Both the mason, Jos Dreesmann and the carpenter, Jos. Harter, exhausted their skill in making this chapel a beautiful and worthy monument to a devoted pastor, by a grateful parish. In connection with the chapel the cemetery was cleaned, leaning monuments set straight again, etc. A crew of twenty-five men was kept busy for two days.

In 1914 urgent repairs and improvements were made on the church and the sister's home. The old windows in the church had become very defective and were replaced by new art-glass windows. The new windows were all donated; they cost $1,700. A new heating plant was installed in the church at a cost of $1,296.50. Other repairs on the church and the sister's house amounted to about $600. At the end of the year all bills were paid in full.

The following year a beautiful entrance to the cemetery was built at a cost of $400. Further improvements on the cemetery were indefinitely postponed on account of the war prices on iron. In 1916 repairs on the school and painting the school and church caused again an extra expense of over $1,000.

In the following year, 1917, our country became entangled in the great European war. This cast a dark gloom over the whole country. The young men were drafted into the army and the people at home did all in their power to make the life of the soldiers as comfortable as possible and thus help win the war. The St. Thomas Aquinas congregation had thirty-four of its young men in the army and navy, and one young lady acting as nurse. The first young man of the parish to leave for the battle field, Alfred Essman, was also the first and the only one of the parish who lost his life in fighting for his country. The first collection in the parish for the soldiers welfare amounted to $337.50. Afterwards the Racine County War Chest was established, which was kept brim full till the end of the war.

In 1919 the St. Thomas Aquinas school society was founded for the purpose of maintaining a free school in connection with the church. An endowment fund for the school was started, towards which the parishoners contributed very liberally.

On November 22, 1919, the church was set on fire by the burning out of the chimney, due to the burning of soft coal. Hard coal could not be obtained. This happened at a time when the pastor was very sick. The church was saved from destruction by the valiant work of the Waterford volunteer fire department. The saving of the church was also made possible by the excellent water system of the village. The saving of the St. Thomas Aquinas church from destruction is alone worth more than the total cost of the water system. The St. Thomas Aquinas congregation owes a vote of thanks to the volunteer fire department of Waterford, and to the "Old Man of the Waterford Post," Ed. Malone, and his associates, for promoting the scheme of an adequate water system. The fire damage to the church amounted to $1,313.32. It was covered by insurance. In repairing the fire loss, the whole church was cleaned and new improvements were made, to the amount of about $1,000. During the long illness of Father Pierron, which lasted over a year, Rev. George Knackert took care of the parish.

On February 13, 1921, a drive was inaugurated among the Catholics of Wisconsin to collect a fund of $5,000,000 for the seminary at St. Francis, and for the many Catholic charitable institutions in the state. The St. Thomas Aquinas congregation of Waterford, has the singular distinction of being the first Catholic parish in the state to complete its drive by over-subscribing its quota by $2,082.43; the total subscriptions amounted to $7,932.43. To this was added in the year 1921 an extra expense of about $900 for repairs and painting of the rectory and the sisters' house.

In March, 1922, the old organ in the church was replaced by a new seven stop pipe organ, built by the Schafer Organ Co., Slinger, Wis. The organ cost $2,750. It was used for the first time on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, celebrated on Sunday, March 12, 1922. This new acquisition for the church is the work of the Married Ladies' society.

The St. Thomas Aquinas congregation, of Waterford, Wis., had its ups and downs like every other pioneer congregation in the state. It has seen dark and gloomy days, but every cloud that passed over it had a silver lining. The struggles and trials of the past have only served to clean out its dried up and decaying branches, and today it stands equal to any parish in the state.

J. P. PIERRON.

P. S. The writer of this article has striven to give a true history of the St. Thomas Aquinas congregation. No attempt has been made to conceal or to excuse any historical fact. Up to the time of the building of the present church in 1880, the writer has stated the facts as recorded up to that time by Rev. P. A. Schumacher.