Origin of local Catholic schools goes back 150 years

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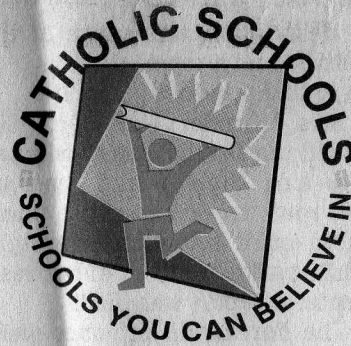
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The origin of the Catholic School System in Fort Madison dates back to 1846 according to Sr. Virginia Klesner.

According to research conducted by Sr. Virginia, Father Alleman, the first pastor of St. Joseph's Church, secured Steven Schulte as the first Catholic School teacher in Lee County in 1846. In 1850, Valentine Buechel also became an instructor. Buechel was later elected state senator in 1859.

On Sept. 14, 1860 two school Sisters of Notre Dame from Milwaukee, Wis., arrived in Fort Madison to teach at the school. At this time the school was formally named "Kreutz Erhohung Schule," which is German for "Holy Cross School." School enrollment was recorded on Sept. 17 of that same year as 130 and rose to 180 in a short period of time.

On Sept. 7, 1861 two more Sisters arrived in Fort Madison to conduct classes in high school subjects and music and in the spring of 1865 enrollment had expanded to 267.

It was decided at this time that with the increased enrollment the school was too small and plans began for a new school to be built closer to the middle of town. Today, this location is 11th Street and Avenue E. By Nov. 9 of that year the new school was ready.

In 1871, the St. Mary's Parish Church Community was formed and the school continued to be the German school. According to Sr. Virginia's research, in 1874 St. Joseph's reopened its own school, "St. Joseph School," an English school with the Dominican Sisters teaching there until 1885, when the Sisters of Humility of Mary came to St. Joseph School.

St. Joseph's parish established a school for the families of the "west end" in 1892 which was served by the Sisters of Humility of Mary, which later was the Sacred Heart School in 1893. This school was built at 23rd and Ave. I and the teachers were School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Just before the turn of the century in 1899 a new school building was erected, "St. Mary's" at 11th and Ave. E.

Many changes took place in the 1900's including the addition of the 12th grade in 1922.

Catholic Central High School was formally founded in 1925 and served students from Sacred Heart and St. Mary's parishes. Enrollment at this time was 82. In it's first 20 years Catholic Central graduated 546 students.

The year of 1955 brought about changes that made Catholic Central High School closer to what we know it today. "Catholic Central" was dropped and "Aquinas" was added. The consolidated high school served all three Fort Madison parishes and the Rev. Raymond Schwank was the first principal of Aquinas High School. Enrollment that first year was 206 in grades 9-12. In June of 1958 49 seniors graduated.

That August the new building for Aquinas High School, it's present location, was ready. The Aquinas faculty consisted of five School Sisters of Notre Dame, four Sisters of Humility, one lay teacher, five part-time Priest catechists and Father Schwank.

The three Catholic Parishes, St. Joseph's, St. Mary's and Sacred Heart retained their elementary schools until 1977 when plans were made for an interparochial Catholic School System. Those first plans made Aquinas East as grades 1,2,3 and 4; Aquinas West as grades kindergarten, 5,6,7 and 8 and Aquinas High School grades 9-12.

Tragedy struck the system on Aug. 2, 1979 when fire destroyed the vacant St. Mary's School building.

The newest addition to the Catholic School System is Happy World Preschool which started Sept. 2, 1980.