

# St. Michael Historian



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## Monuments Honoring the Founders *by Bob Zahler*

Recently, the American Legion began erecting a monument to the veterans who served from our community. That's a proper and honorable thing to do as they deserve recognition for their sacrifice. But what about those tough and brave men and women who faced all adversity to build this community? How do we honor their sacrifice? Let's be honest. There would be no history of St. Michael to research and remember if it had not been for the pioneers who first made the life-altering decision to leave their ancient homelands, then risked their own lives and the lives of their children to travel thousands of miles to an unknown land, and finally suffered exposure to the elements and mosquitoes to carve out working farms from the thick woods, brush, and swamps that were once St. Michael. Some of them died on the way here; while others died just trying to tame the wilderness: accidents, sickness, and disease from living in primitive conditions without the aid of doctors.

While one could argue that it was obviously a risk worth taking since most of the pioneers, thirty or forty years later, found themselves in a better all-around situation than when they left Europe; we tend to gloss-over the human price that was paid to achieve that goal. These people were not just entrepreneurs risking savings accounts or borrowed money; these were people who put everything on the line in order that their descendants would have better lives. Keep in mind that some of our founders were men and women in the middle or later stages of their expected lifespan. Many were in their forties or older when they immigrated, at a time when life expectancy (for those who made it past the age of 10) was only 58; and so they were fully aware that they, personally, would never experience the benefit of their risky venture. They were looking after their progeny (that's us). The next generation, the children of the pioneers, only faced a somewhat easier life. Setting up profitable farms took many years, and it was 50 or more years after initial settlement before St. Michael started having the advantages that were available to people in other long-established communities in the United States or in Europe. These hard-working people deserve our gratitude and honor as well.



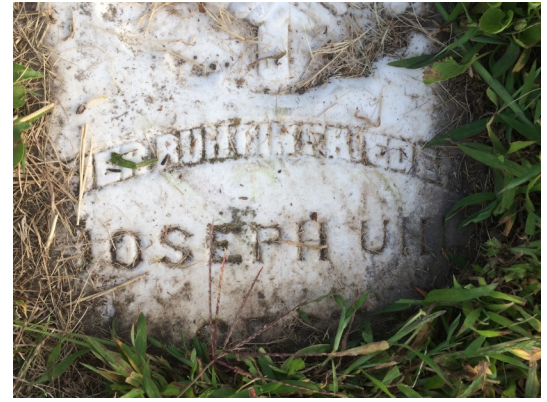
*This is the earliest gravestone in the old cemetery. It marks the burial place of Johann K. Ayd, the first individual to explore and settle land that would become St. Michael. He was born in 1801 (1799 according to records in Germany) and died in 1867.*

The immediate survivors honored their deceased loved ones with a grave marker, and the community, through the Catholic Parish, pledged to maintain their final resting place for perpetuity. That's it. Thus far our only effort to honor the founders has been through the maintenance of their graves. And while we have been fortunate to have had some extremely conscientious caretakers of our cemeteries over the years, the natural elements and vandalism have made that task a difficult one. In many instances it is already too late to preserve the markers of certain founders as they have either partially or completely eroded.

It has always been the official policy of St. Michael's Parish that maintaining the actual grave marker is the responsibility of the family. The parish only maintains the cemetery grounds. For many years this task was left to the parish janitor, sometimes called the sexton. They tended to be a jack-of-all-trades sort of person who mowed the grass, dug graves, painted parish buildings, and rang the church bells. Grave digging was especially hard work and they received extra pay for that task: \$6 in the warm months and \$8 in the winter as digging graves in the middle of winter usually required spreading hot coals on the ground to

thaw it out for digging. Early janitors included Tony Wey, Fred Borngesser, Alois Hackenmueller, and Meinrad “Boy” Daleiden, who held that post for 32 years until 1943. Following Boy was Clem Zachmann, and then starting in the early 1950s Alfred Barthel took this position. One of Alfred’s first tasks was to lay out the “new” cemetery south of town on land donated by Boy Daleiden before his death. A professional designer had proposed a plan for the cemetery, but Alfred thought that it was an inefficient use of space. Fr. Geisenkoetter, who arrived as pastor just as the new cemetery was being put into

use, also asked Alfred to take on the duty of selling the graves, which had previously been one of the tasks of the pastor. It was at this time that the job of cemetery caretaker moved beyond that of just mowing the grass. Basically, all aspects of the management and upkeep of the cemeteries, both the one by the historic church and cemetery south of town, was under Alfred’s care. In 1962 Alfred started receiving help from his son Duane and daughter-in-law Kathy. Much to Duane and Kathy’s amazement, Alfred managed the sale of the graves, or plots, without the use of any map showing where people had been buried or even which plots had been purchased for future use. He had everything memorized. The old cemetery in town was nearly full by this point, and if there ever was a map of that cemetery, it had been lost long ago. One of the great gifts given to this community from Duane and Kathy Barthel was that in 1976 they created maps for both the old and new cemeteries. The new one was pretty straight forward as the graves were well marked with relatively new stones; but mapping the old cemetery required patience and painstaking work in trying to transcribe what had been carved into the old stones. By this time already some markers were gone or difficult to decipher due to erosion. Now, 40 years have passed since that task was completed, and many of the markers that they were able to read and record in 1976 have become unreadable.



*Above left: the broken gravestone of Johann Zachmann who headed the first family to settle in St. Michael in 1855. His wife was Emily Ayd, daughter of Johann K. Ayd. Their homestead was near the present site of the Rachel Contracting Company on Highway 241. Above right: the nearly buried gravestone of Joseph Uhl. He settled the land east of the lake that bears his name in the southwest part of town.*



*Above: Minnesota author, Sinclair Lewis, stopped at St. Michael’s Cemetery around 1942. He traveled through St. Michael on his way from St. Paul to Sauk Centre. Lewis used cemeteries to find interesting names to use in his novels.*

Alfred Barthel continued as parish janitor until he resigned in the early 1970s, but he continued to be caretaker of the cemeteries, thus removing this task from whoever succeeded him as janitor. After Alfred’s death in 1976, Duane and Kathy took over the job of cemetery caretakers. One of the most time-consuming jobs was the weekly mowing, especially in the old cemetery with the many upright stones that required trimming. Starting around 1980 the parish made an arrangement with the Knights of Columbus. They would do the weekly mowing in exchange for funding assistance from the parish coffers to help with their charitable work. It was “win-win” deal since most of the work of the KCs was done in and for the parish. This partnership continued until a few years ago when the Parish Youth Group, under the direction of John O’Sullivan, took over the mowing. Other maintenance in the cemeteries such as pruning trees, cleaning up the planting beds around the central crucifixes, and general clean up continued to be done by Duane and



Kathy, their kids, and other volunteers from the parish. In the fall of 2016 Duane and Kathy handed over the caretaker position to their son and daughter-in-law, Kerry and Kathy Jo. Interestingly, Kathy Jo is the granddaughter of previous long-time caretaker Boy Daleiden.

In the last couple of years the Barthels have been working with parish administrator John Bonham to put some investment back into the cemeteries. The money generated from sale of graves (which is really the sale of a perpetual maintenance agreement, not the sale of any land) goes into the Cemetery Fund. Some of this money has recently been used to hire a contractor to straighten some of the large stones in the old cemetery. This was done for both safety and aesthetic purposes. Additionally, new planting beds around the crucifixes have been created, and the dying spruce trees in the old cemetery have been removed. While significant and much-needed work has been done, there is still more that should be done to preserve the memory of our founders. Some of the upright stones have broken off from their bases and are now laying in the grass. Some markers have been laying there so long that the sod is starting to consume them. Kerry and Kathy Jo are very committed to doing as much as they can to maintain these memorials to our dead, but families need to be reminded that they still have a responsibility to take care of their deceased relative's markers.

We've already lost one complete cemetery, the one that existed near Berning's Mill at the site of the first church from 1856 to 1866; and many markers in the old cemetery in town are gone or will soon be gone. Hopefully, we can still save the ones that remain readable. But perhaps it's time to consider another more proper monument to our founders. How about a statue dedicated to their memory? St. Michael could use such a statue to remind all of us, both native and non-native, of those who toiled and suffered so that we could live here today. Statues and grave markers, after all, do nothing for those who are dead. We create them so that we, the living, can find inspiration from those who went before us, remember those who guided us, and show the world that we recognize the debt we owe to them.



*Above is one of the earliest photos of the Historic Church of St. Michael. Today the church retains the majestic beauty of 125 years ago.*

## **St. Michael's Parish to Celebrate 125th Anniversary of the Consecration of Historic Church September 9th**

Once in awhile events are important enough to warrant a visit by the archbishop, and this is one of those events. On September 29, 1892, after nearly three years of work, the now "historic" Church of St. Michael was consecrated, which meant that it was made sacred or officially dedicated for use as a church. In 1892 this dedication was celebrated by James McGolrick, Bishop of the Duluth Diocese. Newspapers of the time said it was one of the biggest events ever held in the community. The parishioners were celebrating their most significant accomplishment since the parish's founding in 1856. On Saturday, September 9, 2017 that historic event from 125 years ago will be remembered with a special mass celebrated by Archbishop Bernard Hebda of the Diocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Following mass visitors are invited to a luncheon served by the Knights of Columbus in the gymnasium of the Community Education Building (previously St. Michael Catholic High School) behind the Historic Church. Also, a display of historic photos and artifacts will be available for viewing in the church basement. Guests are invited to park behind the Catholic School across the street. Reserved parking for people with limited mobility will be available in the lot immediately behind the church, and there will also be parking west of the Community Education Building. The Preservation Committee hopes to see a large turnout for this very special occasion.

*St. Michael's fire trucks in 1953: '52 International with Lloyd Dick, Norbert Barthel & Allen Jaeb; '46 Studebaker with Clarence Gutzwiller & Lee Reinhart; 1929 Chevrolet a.k.a. "Suzy" with Clarence Dick & Oscar Dehmer*



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*We're on the Web!*

See us at:

[www.saintmichaelhistory.org](http://www.saintmichaelhistory.org)

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

*This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.*

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## St. Michael Fire Department Celebrates 100 Years

by *Bob Zahler*

St. Michael's firefighters are gearing up to celebrate the centennial of their organization in 1917. The history of the town's fire department is murky. It is known from references in newspapers and maps that the town had fire fighting equipment prior to 1917. There was, for example, a small building located near the current site of the Main Street Farmer restaurant that was designated on maps as a "hose house", which likely meant that it contained a wagon, perhaps a pumper or a hose cart, that would be pulled by a horse to fires. The firefighters of over a 100 years ago were all volunteers and were probably just whoever lived within earshot of the fire bell. There were no requirements on who could be a fireman, no training, no compensation in case of injury, and no plan for how to keep the equipment up-to-date. Fire fighting was simply one of the problems that the village council had to address. Since fires were sporadic, it is likely that the council tended to put firefighting on the back burner until a fire occurred and they discovered that they were ill-prepared.

This started to change in 1917 when the St. Michael Fire Department officially organized. Organization meant that St. Michael finally had a group of men who were dedicated to fighting fires in the best way possible. Until 1971 the fire department kept its equipment in a two-stall "fire barn" downtown. In 1971 the village council purchased the vacant St. Michael Co-operative Creamery building which provided more space for the fire trucks. In 1999 this outdated building was demolished and the city built Central Fire Station on the same location. Additionally, the old Frankfort Township Hall was turned over to the fire department as a station to better serve the eastern part of town.

The 100th Anniversary Celebration will take place on Saturday, September 23 from 3:00 to 11:30 PM at the Daze and Knights Fest Grounds by City Hall. Entertainment includes a beer tent and free performances by Blake Duncan, Short on Cash, and Hitchville. Come join the St. Michael Fire Department celebrate 100 years of providing the community with experienced and dedicated fire fighting service.

## Upcoming Events

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|------------------------|--|
| Saturday, September 9  | Celebration marking the 125th anniversary of the consecration of St. Michael's Historic Catholic Church. See page 3 for details on mass, luncheon, and historic display. |
| Monday, September 11   | 7:00 PM. Monthly board meeting, Library Conference Room at City Hall, 11800 Town Center Drive.   |
| Saturday, September 23 | Celebration marking centennial of the St. Michael Fire Department. See above article for details.  |
| Monday, October 9      | 7:00 PM. Monthly board meeting, Library Conference Room at City Hall, 11800 Town Center Drive.   |
| Monday, November 13    | 7:00 PM. Monthly board meeting, Library Conference Room at City Hall, 11800 Town Center Drive.   |