

St. Michael Historian



Official Newsletter of the St. Michael Historical Society, St. Michael, Minnesota

August 2018, Summer

Volume 12, Issue 3

At STMA High School, the Entrepreneurship Class operates the Knights R' Us school store. Nearly every year the students in that class want to design a shirt that says something like "STMA Knights: since (year)", and so somebody inevitably approaches me and says, "Hey Mr. Zahler, when did we begin?" And then I ask in return, "Who? The district? STMA? The high school?"

And then they give me the usual look of puzzlement as if I am the one who misunderstood the question. And then I continue, "You see, the answer is not so simple. There isn't one year that indicates the start of what we are today." Sometimes they are actually curious and stick around for my long answer to their question, but most of the time they just scowl and run off to choose whatever year they think sounds "cooler". Hence, there are a number of shirts worn today with years printed on them ranging from 1964 to 1969. Some of them are correct depending on which question is being answered. I chose the word "birth" for the title purposely because, like children, our school district didn't just come into the world in one instance. It was a process that took several years. Let me explain.

To understand the context of how the current STMA school district came into being, we need to first look at what existed before it. Since statehood in 1858, the legislature gave authority to establish school districts to the county commissioners. As residents petitioned the county for a school in their vicinity, the commissioners, through the County Superintendent of Schools, created new school districts and numbered them in succession regardless of where in the county they existed. A school district, then, simply meant the building of a school house that served the families who lived within a couple of miles of it (the history of rural schools was discussed in the February 2017 issue of this publication). The rural districts were typically Common School Districts meaning that they were governed mostly by the county. Others, usually those schools in the towns, were designated as Independent School Districts which meant that they elected their own school board and had more control over the operation of their school. By the year 1900, there were over 8,000 school districts (of either designation) in the state of Minnesota; seven districts (#s 19, 20, 44, 46, 49, 134, and 139) existed just within what would eventually become the district boundaries (mostly) of STMA. The process of consolidating schools in order to simplify the bureaucracy and improve financial efficiency started early in the 20th century but with little success and always with resistance by local residents. The first noticeable change in St. Michael and Albertville happened in 1957 when the legislature ordered the renumbering of the districts. Independent School District (ISD) 134 in Albertville became ISD 888 and ISD 20 in St. Michael became ISD 885. Therefore, ISD 885, the current district identification, was established in 1957, but it only applied to the public school district in St. Michael.

The Birth of a School District Celebrating 50 Years of ST.M.A.

By Bob Zahler



*Public school used from 1905 to 1940,
and mostly for 7th and 8th grade boys.*

The odd situation for ISD 888 in Albertville and ISD 885 in St. Michael was that since the 1940s, neither district was operating their own school building. Both districts rented rooms within the Catholic school buildings in their respective towns. State law at the time required that the districts offer a minimum of two grades in order to maintain their district identity, use their public school property taxes, and receive state aid. For the local school boards it seemed not only financially more efficient, but also more convenient for the homogeneous Catholic populations to have children attend just one school building for grades one through eight (neither district offered high school). The designation of which two grades were considered "public" was not consistent and varied depending on capabilities and desires of the religious and lay teachers. For example, Lois Zachman, one of the public school teachers hired by District 885,

stated that she was hired to teach the 7th and 8th grades in the Catholic school building, but that her training was in elementary education. After one year of teaching thirty-nine 7th and 8th graders in the one rented room, she told the Catholic school principal that she would rather teach the younger grades, so a switch was made; and the following year, grades three and four were designated “public school” while grades seven and eight were taught by nuns.

This arrangement of public school districts renting rooms in parochial buildings was not unique to St. Michael and Albertville, but it was a situation that the Minnesota Department of Education was trying to end everywhere since it obstructed its consolidation efforts. In May of 1962, Eugene Meyer, the Director of Ungraded Elementary Schools in the state Department of Education, concluded examinations of the rented public school rooms in the two communities. While the reports came back positive in regard to the teaching and the facilities, he noted at the end of both reports that the law allowed school boards to lease rooms “when necessary” for “emergency situations”, and not as a permanent arrangement. He also implied that he expected the school boards to develop a plan to build their own public schools. At the same time, Meyer sent a memo to Erling Johnson, the Commissioner of Education. In this memo he discussed the situations in St. Michael and Albertville and how both districts were considering renting additional rooms from the Catholic parishes due to increasing enrollment. These rental agreements required state approval, and the school board clerks for both districts (LeRoy Lindenfelser and Hermes Gutzwiller in Albertville and St. Michael, respectively) had neglected to submit their rental agreements for the past two years. Technically, they could have lost their state aid for not abiding by the rules. These were likely just honest oversights by the boards and not attempts to fly under the radar. After all, things had been handled very informally in the two communities where the combined population was still about 1,000 residents. But Director Meyer, in addition to bringing the violations to the attention of the Commissioner, began building the case to coerce St. Michael and Albertville into consolidation by concluding his memo: “Instead of making provision for the public school pupils in district-owned facilities, these two districts appear to be increasing the rental of space arrangements. It is recommended that appropriate action be taken by the State Department of Education to bring about a termination of the use of rented facilities in these two districts in Wright County.” This was the opening salvo against St. Michael and Albertville in the Department of Education’s battle to force little districts into consolidation.

In the fall of 1962 both LeRoy Lindenfelser and Hermes Gutzwiller, as board clerks, received letters from Commissioner Johnson informing them that that while their rental agreements would likely be approved for the current year, he wanted the school boards to come to St. Paul where he could talk to them about their districts’ plans for building separate school facilities. Since both districts were offering just two grades, the commissioner probably presumed that he would be able to use his St. Paul office to intimidate these farmers into abandoning their districts and allowing themselves to be annexed by a larger district like Elk River, Monticello, or Buffalo. What was discussed and agreed upon at that meeting is uncertain except that it is widely known that school board member Oscar Berning, who used his association with Senator Tom Welch of Buffalo to impress upon Commissioner Johnson that St. Michael and Albertville would not be bullied into annexation.

In the spring of 1963 the state legislature increased the pressure to consolidate by passing a statute requiring all school districts to operate an elementary, junior high, or senior high building (no more renting). If they didn’t, they faced forced annexation by a neighboring district that did. Additionally, if the district didn’t operate a secondary school, property owners would have to pay a “non-resident tax” to help pay for secondary education in another district. Estimates were that over \$50,000 in tax revenue would leave St. Michael and Albertville, a substantial sum in 1963. Another important consideration was the fate of surrounding rural school districts. It was generally understood that the days of the one-room school houses, or country schools, was coming to an end and that consolidation was going to happen eventually. If St. Michael and Albertville did not come together, then the rural districts would have no choice but to join with Buffalo, Monticello, or Elk River. If there was a merger between St. Michael and Albertville, they might pull-in many of the rural districts, especially those whose families already tended to associate with the two towns. Of course, this was somewhat of a gamble since there had never been a public secondary school in St. Michael or Albertville and there was no guarantee that rural families would vote to join them as opposed to joining one of the larger neighboring districts who had had high school programs for over 50 years with facilities already in place and paid for. Additionally, a St. Michael-Albertville merger was not one being encouraged by the Department of Education.

In December of 1963, Commissioner Johnson once again summoned the members of the Albertville and St. Michael school boards to St. Paul to discuss their plans to build schools (and likely try to convince them into annexation). This invitation

was also likely prompted by another inspection by Director Meyer who visited the two public school rooms rented in the parochial school buildings in November. Like previous reports, the assessment of the teaching and the facilities was generally positive. However, in his report for District 885 in St. Michael, Director Meyer concluded his report this way:

It is questionable whether there is a clear understanding that these two rooms constitute public school. Bus pupils are brought in at 8:00 o'clock so they might attend mass, girls wear the regular uniform worn by girls attending the parochial school, pupils and teachers participate in the school lunch provided by the parochial school in the school lunch room at a cost of 25¢ per pupil, and in the space entitled "Name of School" on the cover of the attendance register, one teacher wrote "St. Michaels" and not "District 885" as is customary in public school districts. It appears that the teachers, pupils and community think of these two rooms as part of the parochial school and not a truly public school. It is recommended that District 885 provide a public school building for the public school pupils of the district and that the rental of space be discontinued as soon as possible. [emphasis added]

It should be noted that the US Supreme Court had recently announced two landmark decisions in 1962 and 1963 clarifying the separation of church and state in public schools; so the pressure to get public schools out of these rental agreements with religious institutions was not just a state concern. When Commissioner Johnson met with the two school boards in January of 1964, he made some things abundantly clear. In a memo for the files he recorded that he told the school boards that rental agreements between the districts and parishes would only be approved for 1963-64; that steps must be taken to merge the two districts; and that the merged district could offer all elementary grades, transport their kids to neighboring schools, or operate their own school up to at least the 9th grade so that property owners could avoid paying a non-resident county tuition tax of 58 mills. Although there was opposition from some people in Albertville who wanted to remain independent from St. Michael, a special meeting of ISD 885 was held on February 28, 1964 at which ISD 888 (Albertville) requested to be annexed into ISD 885. The alternative to annexation by St. Michael was dissolution of both districts. Ultimately, the board members of both districts decided that despite petty rivalries, neither St. Michael nor Albertville wanted to be absorbed by others, and merger was the best option to preserve their identities. This annexation vote, then, can be considered the beginning of the STMA school district. The merger became official as of July 1, 1964; and with no little sense of urgency, the board of the newly-merged school district began making plans to build a public school; but convincing residents to go along with this plan was complicated by the existence of the Catholic high school in St. Michael.

To the Commissioner
Minnesota State Dept. of Education
Centennial Building
St. Paul, Minnesota

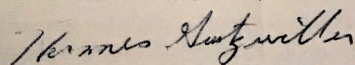
Dear Commissioner:

At a school board meeting of District # 885 held February 28 at St. Micheal a motion was made and approved to accept the request of District #888 of Albertville to annex all or part of District #888 to District #885 through dessolution which is now in progress. This is the first step for our future plans.

At this time we request the permission of the Department to renew our rental contract for the school year of 1964-1965 as in the past. This is necessary so that we can make the proper arrangements with our teachers before April 1, 1964.

Thanking you

Sincerely yours,



Hermes Gutzwiller
Clerk of District #885
Wright County
St. Micheal, Minnesota

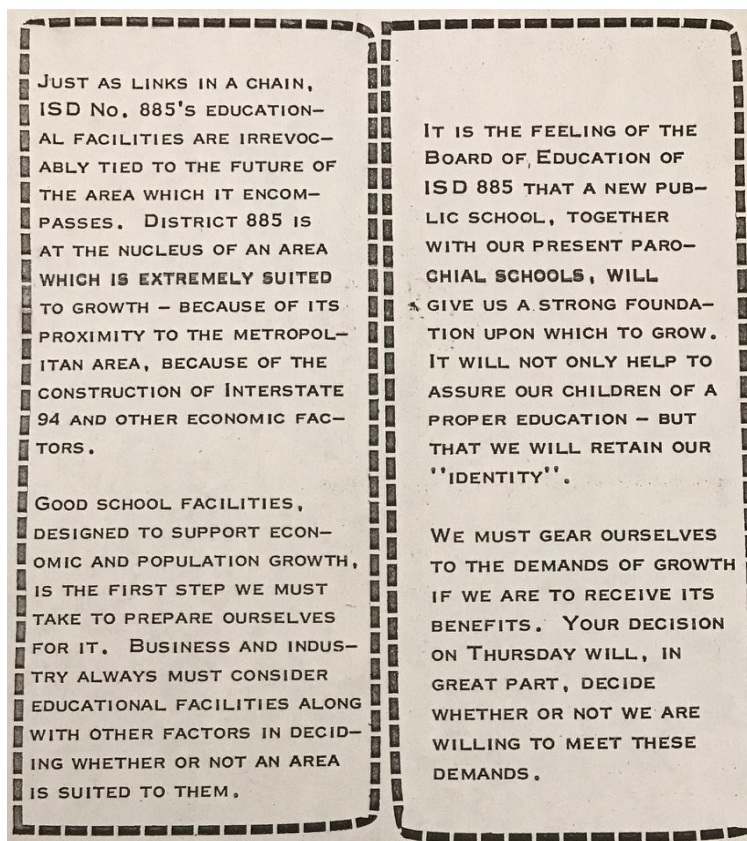
Up to this point (1964), nearly all students living in town attended either St. Albert's or St. Michael's Catholic grade schools, receiving two years of public school at some point in grades 1-8 in rented rooms, and then attended St. Michael Catholic High School, although there were still some who attended public high school in Buffalo, Monticello, or Elk River. In reality, people gave very little thought to the existence of the public school districts in the villages since they were imbedded within the Catholic school systems. Now that the public school was being forced to build their own facilities, most people, including St. Michael's pastor, Fr. Henry Geisenkoetter, did not believe the communities could financially sustain parallel school systems that went to grade 12.

On the one hand, there was an obvious solution, which was to follow the lead of the town of Pierz where they also had both Catholic and public school systems. In 1963 the public school district in Pierz opened a public junior high school (grades 7-9), the smallest public school they could operate to meet the letter of the law, and then rented elementary space as needed. The attractive part of this solution to Geisenkoetter, besides allowing the property owners (who are also parishioners) to keep their tax dollars, was that it would relieve enrollment pressures to add staff at the Catholic

Letter from March 2, 1964. The new STMA is announced.

high school and would also provide a place for students who could not pass the entrance exam. The awkward side to this solution was that after ten years of haranguing parents about the importance of sending their kids to Catholic school, he would have to concede that in order for this to work, some parents would have to send their kids to public school. In numerous letters to St. Paul, Fr. Geisenkoetter begged permission from the archbishop to release the parents from their Catholic education obligation, at least for the junior high years. The archbishop never gave the permission Fr. Geisenkoetter sought, but threw his hands up as he knew that the pastor and the parish leaders had already made up their minds to go forward with the plan (see *Faith, Family, and Farming* pp. 126-129 for details on this controversy).

Both Albertville and St. Michael had separate public school buildings at one time, but St. Michael razed its school in 1940 and Albertville converted its school to a fire hall probably around the same time. Building a modern school would require buying land, hiring an architect, and holding a bond referendum to secure the funding. The new joint school board charged with completing this monumental task consisted of Harold Barthel, Reiny Marx, LeRoy Lindenfelser, Lois Zachman, Hermes Gutzwiller, and Oscar Berning. To guide them through these uncharted waters, the board hired John Onisken, the superintendent from Pierz, where they had just completed a similar process. In October 1964 Assistant Commissioner of Education T.J. Berning (no relation to the St. Michael Bernings) met with board and impressed upon them the need to build not just a junior high building, but one that would house grades 1-9 (to end the renting of space in parochial schools). It is also apparent that by this point the progressives in the community, largely businessmen, had decided that the future of the town depended on a good public school system in order to attract both businesses and families, some of whom might not be Catholic (as a side note, the St. Michael Village Council established the first Planning Commission in May 1966). By early 1965 the school board had located land for the new school on the farm of the Hengels brothers and hired the architecture firm of Pinault-Truszinski of St. Cloud to make building sketches for a grades 1-9 school building. The eventual building plans were drawn in such a way so that additions could be made when enrollment might allow the expansion of grades 10-12, although it wasn't expected to happen as soon as it did. The \$1.5 million bond referendum, held June 17, 1965, passed easily by a vote of 398 to 120.



Above: excerpts from literature sent to district voters before the bond referendum in June of 1965.

Another task that needed to be completed was the hiring of a superintendent. John Onisken, the superintendent from Pierz who helped the STMA school district get the building project started, also helped the board hire William "Bill" Tidmarsh to be STMA's first full-time superintendent. Bill had been superintendent in Royalton and was the first president of the Lion's Club there. Onisken was also a Lion's Club member in Pierz and no doubt had a personal connection with Tidmarsh. Bill Tidmarsh started July 1, 1966 and on July 15, they broke ground for the new school. The board selected the Dean L. Wichter Company as the general contractor for the project, and since the district did not yet have a building, they rented rooms above Vern's Red & White Store (now Ditto's Bar) for the superintendent's office. In the meantime, with firm plans now underway, the Department of Education allowed the district to continue renting a great number of rooms in the parish buildings.

The new public school building was still under construction in the spring of 1967 when the Minnesota Legislature delivered the final blow to rural schools and to any district without a public high school by making it a requirement that all school districts offer grades 1-12 or be forced into annexation. Despite the fact that St. Michael and Albertville had been so adamant about keeping their identity in their meetings with officials in St. Paul, the pressure to merge with our larger neighbors persisted. New Commissioner of Education, Duane Mattheis, in a letter from September 1967 to school board clerk Dr. Tom Hagerty, laid out the options of either joining a school district with an existing twelve-year program or adding on to our current program to include grades 10-12. He concluded: "It would seem that the first alternative [merger with another district] would be the wiser choice for your district, and that the possibility of the merger with either Elk River or Monticello should be fully explored." After all that the two communities had gone through in the previous four years, it was unlikely that they would suddenly concede to being annexed by Monticello or Elk River. The school board conducted a survey and 87% of respondents wanted to remain independent and not be annexed by another school district. There was still, however, a major hurdle to overcome, and that was the Catholic high school. Running two complete programs, side by side, was not financially possible as the parishioners footing the bill for the Catholic school were largely the same people who were paying for the public school. Additionally, enrollment numbers in the lower grades of the Catholic school were already dropping, the high school was in need of a new roof, and Barthel's Bus Service had announced that it could no longer afford to bus kids in from Crystal thus dropping future enrollment even further. The writing was on the wall for the Catholic high school, but the final decision on its future was delayed while Fr. Geisenkoetter lobbied the archbishop for advice on what to do.



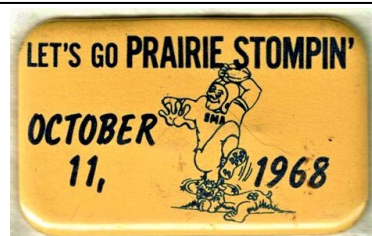
STMA's first public school building as it appeared in July 1968.

The new public school opened in September 1967 with 549 students and long-time St. Michael teacher, Joe Huber, as its principal. It operated for just one year as a grades 1-9 building. On March 5, 1968 the school board voted to offer a complete K-12 program starting in the '68-'69 school year in order to avoid forced annexation. Three weeks later St. Michael's parish board announced that it would close the doors of the Catholic high school after graduation in May. In explaining the decision, Msgr. Geisenkoetter said that the community could not allow "annihilation" of the district by

forced annexation, and stated that it was financially impossible to run both parochial and public high schools. Additionally, allowing the district to establish a public high school in St. Michael would allow the students to receive religious instruction during release time in the school day, which would not likely occur if the high school students were forced to attend a school in Buffalo, Monticello, or Elk River. Shortly thereafter, the school board voted to allow current Catholic school juniors, who were not district residents, to finish their senior year with their classmates at the new public high school.



Left: Bill Tidmarsh became STMA's first superintendent in July 1966. Right: Joe Huber, who had been teaching in St. Michael for 20 years, became the public school's first principal in 1967.



**St. Michael
Historical Society**
11800 Town Center Drive
St. Michael, MN 55376

Phone: 763-416-7967

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.saintmichaelhistory.org

Like us on **Facebook!**

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.

Publisher: Bob Zahler

Editors: Sheldon Barthel
Stephen S. Barthel

By August of 1968 the district decided that it would rent space in the St. Albert's and St. Michael's parish buildings for elementary grades as the public school needed more space for the junior and senior high grades. With most of the adjacent rural schools closing and joining STMA, the district opened the school year with an enrollment of 950 students. Noticeably absent from this population were students from just north of Albertville whose parents voted in 1966 to join Elk River. Due to the able leadership of the school board and Superintendent Tidmarsh, the '68-'69 school year opened with little fanfare or difficulty. In other words, for most kids it was just the start of another school year. There were, of course, a lot of new teachers, many of whom were recruited from South Dakota, Bill Tidmarsh's home state. The football season started as in previous years with coach Rolland Kallstrom simply moving from the Catholic high school to the public. The one thing that hadn't been decided yet was the school nickname. The Catholic high school teams were called the Mikes, but they wanted something different for the new public school. 52 different names had been suggested, but after a vote by the student body, the school board formerly accepted the students' preference of the nickname "Knights" on October 14, 1968. The students' other top choices put before the school board had been the Marauders and the Golden Eagles. The school song of the Catholic high school was the Notre Dame Victory March, and it was decided that that didn't need to change other than some of the lyrics. Additionally, the school colors remained royal blue and gold. In this way, the transition from parochial system to public system was less jarring and they retained a sense of tradition.

After five years of wrestling with the Department of Education, heated discussions among neighbors, discernment in the church pews, and tough decisions by the school board; the STMA Knights were finally born. Like a child coming into the world, this was just the beginning of many years of nurtured growth. Fifty years later we can boast that "Excellence is our tradition".



Upper left: Homecoming button from 1968. STMA's opponent was Lester Prairie. Above: the public school custodial staff included Head Custodian Merrel Schumm and custodians Nicky and Lorena Zachman.

WANTED!!

Do you have any school memorabilia that you could loan for an historic display in October? We're looking for anything that will help evoke memories of early STMA. Contact Bob Zahler: zahlerb66@gmail.com

Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room at City Hall

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Sept. 10, 6:30 PM | Stephen Barthel: Adding Memories (photos, documents, etc.) to Family Tree in familysearch.org |
| Sept. 10, 7:00 PM | Regular Board meeting |
| Oct. 8, 6:30 PM | Stephen Barthel: Adding and Attaching Sources to Family Tree in familysearch.org |
| Oct. 8, 7:00 PM | Regular Board meeting |
| Nov. 12, 7:00 PM | Regular Board meeting |