

CHAPTER XLIII

PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS

The first settlement in Wisconsin was made near the present site of DePere by the French, and a considerable part of DePere is of French origin. The existence of a strong French element attracted other foreign peoples of Catholic faith, principally Dutch, Irish and German. Each of these four nationalities maintained a Catholic parochial school, and the enrollment in these schools was almost equal to the enrollment in the two public school systems. The public schools were generally believed to offer better general training. One of the wealthiest Catholics sent his children to West DePere schools throughout their course; a few others did the same. A larger number started their children in the public schools, and transferred them to the church school for two years before confirmation and then returned them to the public schools. In this way not far from half of the high school pupils were Catholic.

The Bennet Law, to which reference was made in the Chapter on "Presidential Election of 1892", had aroused the Catholics to a defense of their schools, and feeling was still high when Grandfather went to DePere. However, throughout his three years at DePere, he refrained from all controversy with the church schools, feeling died down and many children were transferred back to the public schools.

It was a source of friction that when a child was transferred to the parochial school for two years, he lost a grade in the public school. It happened that when a child for two years spent fully half his time on

religious instruction, in two years he made only one year's advancement in arithmetic and other public school studies. The more intelligent Catholics recognized this and gave good support.

To illustrate: One good Catholic said to Grandfather one day: "My neighbor, Vansistine, was in yesterday. He was hopping mad because when his boy came to you from the church school, you put the boy one grade below where he thought he belonged. I told him: 'Vansistine, I tell you what you do. Take the boy out, send him to the church school for two years more, then send him to the public schools, and if they put the boy where he belongs, they will put him one grade below where he now is.'"

One rather amusing episode grew out of this multiplicity of school systems. The first year Grandfather was in DePere it occurred to someone to get up a monster parade on Decoration Day (May 30) with school children from the two public schools and the four parochial schools all in line with Civil War veterans and brass bands. The parade was to start on the West Side and march across the long bridge which spanned the Fox River. The West DePere schools were assigned the first of the line. Then were to come the two parochial schools from West DePere, followed by public schools of East DePere and the two parochial schools of East DePere.

Grandfather surmised there might be trouble and had all his teachers out and several of the most dependable high school boys coached to help with order. The parochial schools arrived, each in charge of a man, it not being deemed appropriate for the sisters to march with the children. The West Side parochial schools followed West DePere schools, then a brass band, then the East Side parochial schools were lined up.

The East Side public schools arrived a bit late, in charge of a man, but with no teacher along. As soon as they arrived, the bands struck up and the procession started. The East Side public schools instead of waiting to drop in at the end of the procession just dropped into the lines of the parochial schools and soon the schools were so mixed together that it was impossible to sort them out.

Soon an East Side public school boy and a parochial school boy started a fight that soon developed into a "free-for-all". The boys would have a good fight and then run pell mell to catch up with the parade and then fight again. Grandfather saw, with a brass band in the middle of the school parade, the impossibility of bringing any order out of the situation.

Obviously he could not be on both sides of the band at once. The best he could do was to prevent a church versus public school fight on his side of the brass band and let Nature take its course at the rear of the procession. The parade behind the band developed into quite a spectacle. With the aid of police, the children finally reached the East Side Park, many of the boys by this time looking quite different from when their mothers had sent them off in their best suits with clean shirts and new neckties.

The town was scandalized, the local papers made unpleasant remarks and the East Side schools were held responsible for the meloe because they sent their children without teachers. Meanwhile, those who still retained a sense of humor saw that the boys had had a good time and that the best thing to do was to laugh it off.