



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

June 2015

HSGL Annual Meeting - A History of LCC

Saturday, June 6, 2015 - 11:45am Lunch and Lecture

1:00pm Walking Tour

*Lansing Community College, Arts & Sciences Building
Rooms 104 & 105*

Join HSGL and LCC History Professor David Siwik for a lecture on the history of LCC over lunch at 11:45 followed by a walking tour of the campus detailing both the history of the college and its newly installed colorful artwork at 1:00. Reservations for lunch are required. Please RSVP to (517) 282-0671 or info@lansinghistory.org by May 30 to attend. Reservations for the walking tour are not required.

Elections for the HSGL Board will be held at the meeting. Proposed members are:

- Valerie Marvin – President 2015 - 2016
- Bill Castanier – Vice President 2015 - 2016
- Tim Kaltenbach – Treasurer 2015 - 2016
- Ron Emery – Secretary 2015 - 2016
- Bob Rose – Trustee 2015 - 2017
- Anne Wilson – Trustee 2015 – 2017
- Harry Emmons – Trustee – 2015 - 2017

Harper House Fundraiser Nets \$2400!

Thank you to everyone who generously supported the Harper House event! Thank you also to Brian Huggler and Ken Ross for opening their beautiful home to us.

John Herrmann's Banned Novel, *What Happened*

Thursday, June 11, 2015 - 7:00pm

Library of Michigan - 702 W. Kalamazoo St.

John Herrmann, Lansing's Lost Generation author, wrote *What Happens* in the 1920s, when it was banned for being lewd and obscene. Now the largely autobiographical novel has been published for the first time, 89 years later. Enjoy a lecture by Herrmann researcher Dr. Sara Kosiva as she details Herrmann's career, and her efforts to bring his work back into print.

Growing Eastward on Michigan Ave.

Thursday, June 18, 2015 - 7:00pm

*Tour meets at Christ Lutheran Church
122 S. Pennsylvania Ave.*

Learn about Lansing's eastward growth in the early 20th century with this tour of East Michigan landmarks including Sparrow Hospital, Fabiano's, Christ Lutheran Church, and Resurrection Church.

Holling C. Holling, Author of *Paddle to the Sea*

Thursday, June 25, 2015 - 7:00pm

Lansing City Hall - 124 W. Michigan Ave.

Enter the imagination of a small boy from Eaton Rapids who grew up to be a well-known illustrator and author, best known for the Caldecott Honor book *Paddle to the Sea*. During his long career Holling also worked as a propaganda artist during World War II and created natural history dioramas for museums. Join HSGL for a lecture about Holling's nationally recognized art.

A Man Named John
By Ron Emery

At 9:35AM on New Years Day, 1960 in the Church of the Resurrection, the only sounds emanating from the congregation were the anxious coughs and subdued murmurs of the uneasy and apprehensive congregation. The pastor and founder of the parish was uncharacteristically late for the 9:30 Mass. After all, this was not the 12:30 PM "Alka Seltzer" Mass on Sunday for those who had stayed too long at Emil's the night before. Shortly, the somber news reached the church pews: around 9:15AM Assistant Pastor Eugene Sears had found the 79 year old cleric, in his bed, the victim of a fatal heart attack. Thus ended the long and illustrious career of Monsignor John A. Gabriels.

The next morning the State Journal front-page headline read "THREE CIVIC LEADERS DIE" reinforcing the celebrity of "Fr. John." The report of his passing shared top billing with Dorr M. Shotwell, chairman of the board of the J.W. Knapp Company. His passing was reported above the death of local architect Lee Black who died the same morning.

Beginning on Sunday, January 3rd, John A. Gabriels body lie in state at the Church of the Resurrection until the 11AM funeral Mass on Tuesday the 5th. Over a thousand parishioners and friends filed past his open casket in tribute to the fallen clergyman in the church adorned in black and violet drapes. Officers from the Michigan State Police and the Knights of Columbus stood guard in shifts as an honor guard around the casket.

On Tuesday, January 5th, over 900 mourners attended his solemn funeral Mass at the church he built. Mourners included Joseph H. Albers, Bishop of Lansing, 120 priests, 15 monsignors, 90 nuns, and numerous non-Catholic clergy. Governor G. Mennen Williams, Lansing Mayor Ralph Crego, Joseph Childs, Commissioner of the State Police, and other government and community officials and friends also attended. Following the funeral, his casket was taken to St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery in Lansing, where the celebrity clergyman was interred in the "Priests' Circle" the newest addition to the cemetery. He was first priest to be so honored.

A Community Celebrity

Msgr. Gabriels was a preacher, an evangelist, a storyteller, a mover and a shaker in the Lansing community for over 38 years. Indeed, he was a local celebrity well known to the business, political and civic as well as religious community in the area. His reputation in the community far exceeded his 5'8", 185-pound frame.

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P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901
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Officers & Board Members

Valerie Marvin – President	Jesse LaSorda – Trustee
Bill Castanier – Vice President	Erik Nelson - Trustee
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That he was an important civic leader was apparent years earlier when on July 1st, 1931 a large crowd gathered at the Kearns Hotel to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his ordination as a priest. The "Toastmaster" at that event was the Secretary of the Lansing Chamber of Commerce. Lansing's mayor and other city and business officials attended.

Twenty-five years later, in May of 1956, Lansing civic and religious leaders again paid tribute to Msgr. Gabriels on the 50th anniversary of his ordination. Twelve hundred Catholics, Protestants and Jews turned out for the celebration held in the Olds Engineering Hall on General Motor's campus in Lansing. Governor Williams, the mayors of Lansing and East Lansing, the Commissioner of the State Police, and business and industry leaders attended. Msgr. was presented with an "undisclosed amount of money" for him to use to take a vacation "and to be used for nothing else." Then a curtain was lifted disclosing a new 1956 Oldsmobile hardtop, a gift purchased from money raised from all of the guests to the celebration. The "top act" of the evening was not the vaudeville entertainment, but the anecdotes delivered by the guest of honor that "knocked the audience in the aisles."

Fr. John's work in the community was often newsworthy. When ground was broken for a new church or a new school and when it was completed and dedicated the newspapers reported it. When he donned his Old News Boy apparel for the annual newspaper charity sale, the news reported it. When his Sunday sermons and Mass began being broadcast over a local radio station a newspaper article followed. When he lead a local group of Catholics to Rome and had an audience with the Pope, the photographs appeared in the paper. When American bandleader Benny Goodman came to Lansing, Msgr. was there and was photographed with the "King of Swing." His humble beginnings could not have foretold his celebrity at his death.

Birth, Early Life and Education

Contemporary newspaper articles throughout his life reported that Fr. John A. Gabriels was born in Detroit on March 3, 1881. In fact, he was born in Port Huron as John Lorrain to David Lorrain and Mary Cormier. His biological father drowned before his birth and his mother could or did not want to raise him. Accordingly, on June 23, 1881 the infant was "admitted to" the House of Providence on Grand Boulevard in Detroit. The very next day, June 24, 1881, John Gabriels and his wife Catherine adopted the infant John Lorrain.

John Gabriels and his wife, Catherine, lived in Detroit on Rivard Street just blocks from Woodward Avenue and the city center. Young John was educated in the parochial schools of that city. After finishing elementary school at SS Peter and Paul on St. Antoine Street, he attended high school at Detroit College High (now U of D High). He showed much academic promise as he continued his secondary education at Detroit College (now U of D) He paid his way through high school and college by working during the summers as a tutor for "retarded children." He graduated from Detroit College in 1901 receiving numerous academic awards including awards for rhetoric. The latter award augured well for someone set to speak from the pulpit. In every year he earned recognition for Good Conduct and Deportment.

He was selected as a member of the Detroit Philomathic Society while an undergraduate. The Society, organized in 1878,

was established to develop and foster in students a taste for eloquence and literature.

During his third year in college he made a major decision in his life -- to enter the priesthood.

Seminary

He began his priestly studies in 1901 at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, the oldest Catholic seminary in the United States. There he followed in the footsteps of the early Catholic icon and creator of the famed "Baltimore Catechism," America's first Bishop and Archbishop, John Carroll. Young John received degrees in philosophy and theology, graduating in 1906. The burgeoning Catholic population of Detroit would require his priestly services.

Young Father John

Accordingly, Fr. John was ordained on July 1, 1906 in Detroit by his mentor, Bishop John Foley. He was immediately assigned as an assistant to SS Peter and Paul Cathedral located on St. Antoine Street near Larned just off from E. Jefferson. This was the home parish for the bishops of Detroit since 1848.

At the Cathedral, he shared priestly duties with Rev. M. J. P. Dempsey, pastor, and Rev. J. G. McCormick. The Sunday Mass schedule was packed with five Masses, Sunday school, and Vespers.

As a young priest at the Cathedral, he quickly made his mark. He was a frequent speaker at the Cathedral Literary Society meetings, and the Catholic Study Club. He spoke on topics as diverse as Catholics in science, history, culture and literature. The Free Press reported in April of 1909 that a talk he gave about the catacombs under the City of Rome was "very enthusiastically received and acknowledged by a standing vote of thanks." On other occasions he was described as a "simple and convincing speaker."

In 1908, Detroit Catholics voted Fr. John as the city's most popular priest. The Detroit Free Press reported that his nearest competitor in the voting for the honor was over 3000 votes behind.

In April of 1917 one of his sermons at SS Peter and Paul was reported favorably in the weekly financial newspaper, *Commerce and Finance*. Amid articles about railroads, iron and steel stocks and business performance, the newspaper quoted liberally from one of Fr. John's sermons in which he urged early marriage (25 for women and 25-30 for men). Fr. John stated that their was "sin in long courtships" and that the 6 million bachelors and 4 million bachelorettes in the country were "a detriment to the nation." The newspaper concluded its report by saying that Fr. Gabriels was right, men should marry and marry young.

He was next assigned simultaneously to SS Peter and Paul Parish on High Street in Ionia, and Chaplain at the Michigan Reformatory in 1917. The latter was a detention facility for juvenile offenders.

Fr. John's part-time work at the institution was well received. Indeed, T.C. Burns, the Warden of the Reformatory wrote to Bishop Gallagher in the spring of 1922 asking that Fr. John be hired as a full time Chaplain when rumors spread that

the priest would be reassigned elsewhere. The warden described Fr. John as "doing good work" and is "wonderful as he is one of these straight-from-the-shoulder fellows". Burns further described him as "possessed of a wonderful personality, and holds the admiration and respect of all boys, regardless of religious creed."

In an apologetic letter to T.C. Burns, Bishop Gallagher advised that "because of a dearth of priests" in the Detroit diocese, it was "practically impossible to sacrifice a priest from the field of parish work" when more parishes need to be established. Accordingly, the bishop sent Fr. Gabriels to Lansing to found a second Catholic parish in the capital city and to serve as Chaplain of the Boys Vocational School in Lansing. The new parish was to serve a growing number of Catholics east of the Grand River in downtown Lansing and beyond.

Establishing Resurrection Parish

The new parish boundaries would run from the Michigan Central and Pere Marquette railroad tracks in downtown Lansing, east to include serve East Lansing, Okemos, Haslett and Bath. Initially, on July 7th of 1922, Fr. Gabriels bought property on the north side of East Michigan Avenue between Rumsey and Custer for the new parish. He named the parish the Church of the Resurrection, since the Resurrection of Jesus was the cornerstone of all of Christianity. To expound on his selection he quoted St. Paul:

"If Christ not be risen again, our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain."

On September 15th of that year, ground was broken for a 12-room school building with the basement to also be used temporarily as a church. A house on the corner of Michigan and Rumsey was used as the rectory. 120 families made up the new parish at that time.

By the end of 1922, Resurrection Parish blossomed. The first Mass on premises was celebrated on Christmas Day 1922. By the end of the year, the parish had multiple clubs such as a Ladies Club, Ushers Club, the Holy Name Society, a bridge club, and two ladies circles.

Over the next six years additional property in the block on the north side of Michigan Avenue was purchased for construction of a school building with a church in the basement, and a convent for the Adrian Dominican nuns who would staff the school once built.

Resurrection School

By 1926, parish enrollment had increased to 300 families. The desire for a school became evident and fundraising for that purpose began. With small donations from parishioners and large ones from outside sources, Fr. John built and opened Resurrection School in 1926 with an enrollment of 350 students. Nuns from the Sisters of St. Dominic of Adrian Michigan were enlisted to come to the school and teach. The school graduated its first 9th grade class in 1931. A high school building was completed in 1938. By 1938 the student enrollment had grown to 552 grade school students, and 200 high school students. The first class of 12th graders graduated in 1939. That same year construction began on a new school classroom building. When finished the church campus included two classroom buildings, an annex, and a cafeteria. The school

reached a maximum enrollment for grades 1st through 12th of 1099 in 1959. In 1963, the last Resurrection high school class graduated as a new high school named after Msgr. opened its doors in 1963.

Msgr. was highly visible to Resurrection school students. He was seen frequently in the school, often dressed in his Michigan State Police Chaplain's uniform. He appeared at most school plays, concerts, and programs, often seated up front sporting a wide smile displaying the pride he derived from the performance of the students in the school he started. He would appear at the all school assemblies at the end of the year to pass out report cards. He would pass out the cards with a smile, only occasionally having to comment on a "bad fish" – a less than stellar report- received by a student. He sat on the dais at the honors invocations and award giving ceremonies in the high school.

Pastor

No one questioned who was in charge of the parish and its finances, Msgr. was. He instituted a "seat collection" for each Mass – 25 cents at the 12:30 pm Mass on Sundays, and 10 cents for the other five Masses. A families' contribution the previous week would be published in the bulletin the following Sunday. With arms folded in front of him, he would walk the church aisles while the collection was taken; his glance intended to encourage contributions. More than once he would exhort contributions with the warning "If we don't have a good collection today so we can make our monthly payment on Monday, the Western and Southern Insurance Company will send the police to pick me up and send me to jail."

Having gotten off to a good start establishing the parish, Fr. John looked to expand Resurrection's standing in the community. In 1934 Fr. John had persuaded radio station WJIM to regularly broadcast the 11 AM Sunday Mass on the radio one Sunday a month. The first broadcast was September 16th. By 1937 WJIM was broadcasting the Mass every Sunday at 11 AM. This brought Fr. John, his stories and humor-filled sermons to the entire Lansing area. Thus began the longest running religious radio program in the United States, a tradition that continues today.

As an evangelist, Fr. John was unsurpassed. By 1958 he was credited with 1841 converts while at Resurrection. He baptized 6109 infants, and married 1536 couples. Perhaps his popularity with couples was his propensity to accommodate their wishes. One older parishioner married by Msgr. remembered that her husband wanted his brother, a non-Catholic, to witness the marriage as the best man. Msgr. accommodated the couple by allowing the bride's brother, an altar boy and Catholic, to sign the license as the witness.

Although he called the 12:30 PM Mass on Sunday the "Alka Seltzer" Mass, he usually celebrated it himself. With sandwich and a thermos of coffee in hand, he would then receive parishioners in the rectory while he ate. Given church doctrine in those days, he had to fast from midnight the night before.

Once the new Church was open, Msgr. noticed that quite a number of small children were coming to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. To discourage this and to encourage the kids to come during the day he promised the kids that they would get a gift at the day time Masses. So instead of going to Midnight

Mass, a child at one of the day masses would receive either a small plastic statue of Jesus or a holy card with a picture of a saint on one side and a mirror on the other side of it.

The Altar Boys at Resurrection were in awe of Msgr. In the days before Vatican II, Masses were said in Latin with Altar Boys who had to learn the prayers at the foot of the altar *in Latin*. Unlike the young priests, who were sticklers for precise Latin, Msgr. allowed less than precision in the Latin prayers. A good meter and a few Latin syllables would suffice for the *Confiteor* or the *Suscipiat* when the Latin didn't flow. Similarly, after the priest washed his hands at the altar, the young priests would meticulously refold the hand towel before giving it back to the altar boy. Msgr. simply crumpled it up and threw it back at the altar boy.

Msgr. would request two altar boys from the 6th and 7th grade to serve at funerals during the week. In addition to a morning off from school, the boys got a ride in Msgr.'s REO Flying Cloud or later, his Oldsmobile, as well as a tip.

The Altar Boys at the 12:30PM Masses on Sundays were rewarded for giving up half of their weekend with a 50 or 75 cent "tip" for serving at the "Alka Seltzer" Mass.

Fr. John was also not bashful about using his connections to help parishioners in need. During the height of the depression, on his mother's advice a young parishioner came to Fr. John for help finding work. Fr. John went to his desk, jotted down a note and directed the young jobseeker to take this to the personnel department at Oldsmobile. When presented with that note, the young man was offered a job at Motor Wheel, a job he held until retirement decades later.

He was protective of his parish. On a hot summer day in the early 1950's he and some parishioners bravely stood in front of the rectory and church offering lemonade rather than recriminations to a group of costumed Ku Klux Klansmen as they marched west down Michigan Avenue to the State Capitol. That the Klan burned a fiery cross in front of the church at that time is apocryphal. So too is the recollection of one parishioner that Msgr. stood his ground with a group of armed parishioners.

Father Gabriels' Sermons

Fr. Gabriels excelled in debate and public speaking in his college days. His facility for public speaking carried over into his sermons. When asked why he continued to attend and weekly contribute a dollar to Resurrection, a long ago parishioner was quoted as saying "Well, it is worth a dollar to hear Fr. Gabriels." Fr. Gabriels believed "that many brilliant sermons were too deep for the average individual. Following the example of Jesus, the great parable teller, Fr. Gabriels sermons were filled with stories and liberally garnished with humor." He was quoted as saying "If you can't say something in 5 minutes, its not worth saying."

His sermons would liken telling a lie to throwing a rubber ball against a wall because if you weren't careful it would come right back and hit you in the face. On Easter Sunday, on observing a standing room only crowd, he often began his sermon by welcoming back all of the "Easter bunnies" to Mass who hadn't been there since Christmas. Similarly, at Christmas he would sometimes "wish all of you a happy Easter because I won't see some of you again until next Christmas." He often ended his sermon with the admonition that "It would be better

for a man to have a milestone around his neck and he be cast into the depth of the sea” than to engage in the conduct he proscribed in his sermon.

Long time sports journalist George S. Alderton, of the State Journal, in a column shortly after Msgr.’s death described him as a rare man who appreciated a funny story. Alderton said that over the years he had helped feed the priest humorous anecdotes that Alderton would run across in his newspaper work. These stories would routinely appear in Msgr.’s sermons.

Community and Philanthropic Efforts

Shortly before his death, Msgr. Gabriels’ name appeared in *The American Catholic’s Who’s Who* for the 1960-61 editions. His name had appeared in this publication for many years previously and for good reason. Among his civic and philanthropic engagements were the following:

- Rotary Club of Lansing (1924-1951)
- City Merchants Bureau
- Lansing Chamber of Commerce
- Lansing Community Chest (chairman 1937, 1939)
- Knights of Columbus
- Elks
- Boys Scouts of America (24 years)
- Old News Boys Association (30 years)
- Lansing Safety Bureau

In 1932 he inspired the establishment of the Fr. John Cribbage Tournament, a non-denominational charity to provide clothing for needy families. The tournament was held at Emil’s on East Michigan Avenue for years.

In 1958, the Fr. John fund was established to continue the work he had already informally been doing on his own - helping needy families by personally soliciting money from local businesses. Msgr. "would go to a lot of different businesses collecting money and bringing it to needy families." Msgr. would say "I need \$30 because a family needs things ‘ and they would give it to him." School officials would refer families to the fund, which in turn would give the family a voucher to shop at area stores. The fund continued for 56 years after its inception in large part because of the good name of Msgr. The money would be distributed to Catholic charities, and in the ecumenical spirit to the Lansing City Rescue Mission and other non-denominational organizations.

For 30 years, with a newspaper sack over his shoulder, a yellow band on his fedora, and an Old News Boys badge on his lapel, he used his skills as a salesman to solicit donations for shoes for needy kids on the northwest corner of South Washington and Allegan Street downtown. To noone’s surprise, he was good at it collecting as much as \$160 in donations in a single day himself, a princely sum in those depression-era days.

John A. Gabriels, The Man

Father John was not a physically imposing figure. According to various documents completed during his life he was described as 5’ 9” tall and weighed about 185 pounds. He had brown-eye, with black hair, a full face, a dark or ruddy complexion, a “medium” forehead, mouth and chin, with a straight and medium sized nose, and a small mole on the left cheek near the mouth.”

He was known as “Father John” to his many non-Catholic friends and was described as “congenial,” with “unselfish devotion to his duty”. He had a “piercing gaze.”

He was known to walk the neighborhoods of his parish and speak to parishioners as he went along. It was said that one of his favorite pastimes was to venture downtown to watch the stock market ticker tape and “hobnob” with Protestant clergy.

He befriended several Protestant clergymen before ecumenism was in vogue. A particularly close friend was Lansing pastor Dr. Julius Fischbach of the downtown First Baptist Church.

After his death, numerous public and private officials spoke of their friendship with Fr. John. Then Governor G. Mennen Williams described Msgr. Gabriels as “an outstanding churchman and one of our finest citizens...[t]hose who knew [him] soon came to love him for his zeal, his kindness, and his thoughtfulness for the less fortunate.” The Governor said that he “will miss [Msgr.] as a close personal friend.”

Paul A Martin, State journal publisher and a close friend said:

“Fr. John was one of those rare individuals who could meet on common ground men and women regardless of race, religion or social standing and call them friend...”

Lansing Mayor Ralph Crego called him a “friend of thousands in the community.”

Henry Ponitz of the Rotary Club said he was “loved by everyone regardless of faith. He was very civic minded and his death is a blow to everyone in the city.”

William Mahoney, director of labor relations at Oldsmobile said, “To me he was Mr. Lansing. His death is a terrific loss to the community.”

His friend and clerical colleague, Msgr. Jerome McEachin, of St. Thomas Aquinas in East Lansing, eulogized him citing the Gospel of John:

“There came a man sent from God, whose name was John...as a witness, to testify about the light, so that all might believe through him.”

Following his death, The Catholic Weekly, the newspaper of the Diocese of Lansing, summarized his impressive legacy:

Fr. John was first and foremost a priest of God. He achieved lasting fame as a civic leader; storyteller; radio preacher; and convert-maker.

To the needy he gave money; to the discouraged, inspiration; to the bigoted, a new insight; to the intelligent, a new Catholic loyalty; and to everyone, the friendly warmth of his dynamic personality....His only enemies were ignorance, bigotry and intolerance.”

A few short years later, the diocese of Lansing built a new high school on Lansing’s east side two blocks from Resurrection Parish and named it Monsignor John A. Gabriels High School. The Knights of Columbus Council #11099 begun at Resurrection Parish was also named in his honor and continues his legacy of Christian Charity.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

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