

Rev. Theodore Van den Broek

Good Afternoon. I am Fr. Theodore Van den Broek. I was the founder and first pastor of St. Johns Parish here in Little Chute. I was born November 5, 1783 in Amsterdam, Holland. I was one of 2 children born to Abraham and Elizabeth (de Meyne) Van den Broek. I had one sister. I was, in early manhood, a man of five feet ten inches in height, well built, but not fleshy, with mild hazel eyes, brown hair, fine regular features, polished in manner, and possessed the gentle spirit of God within me. (Show photo board of Fr. Van den Broek.)

When I graduated I was a master of the Greek, Latin, German, French and Dutch languages.

I was first in the Franciscan Order, but after having obtained the papal dispensation, I was received into the Dominican Order in 1817. This was a better fit for me. This is the same order that Little Chute native, Fr Bert Ebben belongs to.

I was pastor at Alkmaar and Tiel in the Netherlands. While at Alkmaar I wrote three large volumes of "Sermons on the Sundays and Holydays of the Year." "I have edited these sermons not as a guide for older priests but for the encouragement of Catholics who cannot attend divine services". In 1830 I obtained permission to depart as Missionary for America.

I left Holland in 1832 landing in Baltimore. I traveled by rail and then steamboat until I reached St Rose Convent near Springfield Kentucky, nine weeks after I left Holland. At St. Rose I prepared myself for missionary work, by studying English and the manners and customs of the Americans. After spending some time in Sumerset, Ohio, I was sent among the Indians.

"In the beginning my mission was a continual journeying to and fro, preaching to the Indians who settled between Lake Michigan, Lake Superior and the Mississippi called Monominees, Otchipwes, and Winnebagoes to convert them to the Faith. Divine Providence has so greatly blessed my work that the most of them have become good Catholics and might serve as an example to many born in the Faith"

One day, between Monroe and Detroit, I strayed from the road seven hours distant from the nearest house; my horse sank with me in a marsh: all help seemed impossible. Fortunately, however by slipping backwards off the horse I reached solid ground. I prayed fervently, full of confidence in Almighty God, and began to call with all my might. Beyond all expectation I heard a voice on the other side of the pond. From which I received help, while I thought myself far separated from all mankind. Two men by means of trees saved my horse. Without their help I should have perished as these roads are very seldom traversed. .

On the 6th of December 1836 I took myself 24 miles higher up the river into the woods, to the Indians at a place called La Petite Chute (Little Falls) a small waterfall near Grand Cocallin – an Indian name meaning rapids--- as we know it-- Kaukauna. The land bordering the Fox River; La Petite Chute (Little Falls) is a very pleasant place. On my arrival there it was all woods. An Indian woman at once built me a hut or wigwam about fifteen feet long and six feet high, it was finished in half a day. I lived in it from Pentecost to October 1837. Meanwhile with the Indians help, I began to build a church and parsonage. For six months the wigwam was both my house and my church. My congregation soon increased to fifty Christians who heard Mass in the open air. It did not take long until the number reached two hundred.

The first year, 1837, the church was under roof covered with bark. The joists of the floor served as benches. The second year, 1838, the floor was covered with boards and the roof also. In 1839 the congregation had so increased that I was obliged to enlarge the church by 20 feet and we built a tower beside it. (Show photo board of Church) I had no other altar equipment than an old Chalice and some other necessary articles. My congregation this year, 1838, numbers six hundred souls, and the church is finished. In the area around the church, I can now sow one hundred bushels of grain. It is a very lush and fertile country. All kinds of trees are to be found in the woods and some wild fruits.

The Indians come to school to me every day to learn to read and write as well as the different trades. I must often make a journey of two hundred miles to visit the Winnebago Indians. Last winter 1842, on one of these journeys I was nearly

frozen, because in a range of sixty to seventy miles there is not a house to be met with. At Fort Winnebago near Portage, Wis., I baptized twenty Indians; among them were some 90, 100, and 110 years old.

My labor is incredibly great: Sunday afternoon I preach in French, English and German and the afternoon in the Indian language. Moreover I have school every day, besides visiting the sick and making numberless journeys to distant missions. I enjoy good health and everything through God's help is easy although I am in my sixtieth year.

While I was celebrating Mass in the backwoods of Wisconsin on Holy Thursday, which happened to be the day of my mother's death, at the elevation of the Sacred Host, I had a premonition that my mother was dying, and it proved only too true.

From the fact that my parents left my sister and I 120,000 florins it is evident that my parents must have been in very good circumstances, if not wealthy.

My mother died in 1844 and left me 20,000 gulden and a like sum to my only sister, Mrs. Ootmar, a widow.

During my time with the Indians I had no regular income but my inheritance, which I drew upon to provide for me and my Indians until it had diminished to 10,000 florins. This sum I had entrusted to a notary in Amsterdam. When I tried to reclaim it I found that the notary had absconded with it.

I returned to the land of my birth on August 13, 1847. My plans were to return to Wisconsin as soon as possible but the voyage is very difficult to make so I spent the winter in Europe. I made use of this opportunity to write an account of my sojourn in America and also appeal to my countrymen to immigrate to the land of freedom. I portrayed the beauty of the country, the fertility of the soil, and climate in such glowing colors that they responded to my appeal. Emigrants flocked from all parts of Holland in such numbers that I engaged three ships to transport them to America; the Maria Magdalena, Libra and the America.

On Easter Sunday, 1848, we were in mid-ocean. I celebrated Mass early in that morning, the morning was bright but soon became clouded, and we suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a fearful storm which continued to rage with a steady increasing fury. On Monday and Tuesday all the port holes were closed and the deck cleared. The waves dashed over the top. The Captain and crew were all lashed to the deck. Towards evening the greatest danger was imminent: the cabin boy stated that the Captain had called for an ax to cut away the mast in order to save the ship. I was found kneeling before a crucifix in my room. I arose instantly, got out of the cabin and walked on deck to where the Captain was – not with-standing that every wave swept the vessel, I walked firm and unaided, supported undoubtedly by my guardian angel – and commanded the Captain to stop. The Captain, struck speechless by my command of authority, stopped and behold the storm began to abate!

Captain Smith of the ship Mary Magdalen gave me a rough time. Whenever I talked about my wigwam church or my three log churches the Captain could not understand how I could leave my parish church at Alkmaar for a wild country. I would reply, at the last day God will not ask me whether my church was a wigwam or a log church. He asks not for churches but for souls, and the soul of the poorest Indian living in the most miserable wigwam is as dear to him as the soul of the greatest sovereign.

On the 20th of June, the day before Pentecost, my party and I reached our destination – Little Chute, Wisconsin. (There many of the emigrants settled, building homes and farms. Many are buried in this cemetery. Many of their decedents still live in Little Chute)

On All Saints Day, November, in the year 1851, a solemn High Mass was to be celebrated for the first time in Little Chute. I was to be the celebrant and alas was also a victim. During Mass while preaching on the beauty of heaven and the glory of the saints I was stricken with a stroke and dropped unconscious into the arms of Rev. Father Daems. I remained unconscious until the 5th, my birthday, when I died at 68 years of age.

My remains were buried in our own churchyard where later the present stone church was erected. At the time of laying the foundation for a new addition to the church, there was some doubt as to the exact location of my grave.

In 1894 Rev. Father Knegtel, had an excavation made under the church for heating apparatus. While the laborers were at work in the middle of the church in front of the sanctuary they came upon my grave. This was September 8th, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin. In great excitement they ran in haste to inform the pastor. He returned with them to the spot and reverently removed the remains to one side. There can be no doubt as to the identity of the remains. I was the only priest buried there, and with the remains were found my beloved rosary, a wax chalice, pieces of stole and chasuble. My remains are now laid to rest in the back of St John's church. There is a marble stone in the church wall marking the place. God has indeed blessed my work here in Little Chute. St John's church still remains and is celebrating 175 years as a parish this year, 2011.

My name is Dave Van Eperen and I will become a deacon at St John's Church next weekend. Thank you for coming to hear the story.

Little Chute Historical Society Cemetery Walk 2011

