

PHS Leads Restoration of Polish Army Memorial

By Matthew Gryczan

At one of the most prominent sites in Holy Cross Cemetery there stands a life-sized statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary with her arms outstretched in a pose that suggests “Welcome Home.”

Her welcome is meant for the more than 70 local men who chose to leave the safety of Grand Rapids to fight for the liberation of Poland during World War I. Many of those war heroes are now resting at Holy Cross, having seen their dream of Poland’s reunification become reality.

For a time, they -- and the monument -- were forgotten.

A few weeks ago, the Marian statue was missing a thumb and was encrusted with lichens, flanked by two granite urns with faded artificial flowers and two flag poles, one that flew a black, tattered Missing-In-Action flag. Even today a mound of earth partially covers a concrete slab directly in front of her, as if someone were buried there.

Little was known about the 14-foot-wide granite monument and who commissioned it, save for a couple of clues about its origin – the inscription of years “1914” and “1918” and two phrases in Polish. And since



Dane Larsen does final polish on the thumb repair he performed on the monument to local veterans of the Blue Army at Holy Cross Cemetery.

little was known, little was done to maintain it.

But no longer.

In partnership with the cemetery, the Polish Heritage Society has embarked on a project to restore the monument to its former grace and beauty, and so allow it to fulfill the intent of its patrons.

Hundreds of Polish Americans in Grand Rapids sacrificed to build the monument during the Great Depression. Schoolchildren gave

their candy money, societies would contribute winnings from “pedro” gambling parties, and priests at the city’s three predominantly Polish parishes encouraged parishioners to give during special collections. Monument Committee president Michal Buzalski gave \$100; Stanislaw Kalinoski gave 25 cents.

The committee began the collections in 1927 at a time when communities around the country were building monuments to U.S. soldiers who fought and

died in what was then known as The Great War. What we now call WWI ended in 1918, and citizens wanted to recognize the soldiers’ sacrifices before their names faded from memory. Citizens of Grand Rapids raised funds voluntarily to pay for a two-pillar monument erected in 1926 in what is now known as Veterans Memorial Park.

But the local men who fought and died for the independence

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The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to pshgrandrapids@gmail.com.

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of Poland during WWI weren't U.S. soldiers: they fought under the Polish flag with the blessing of the U.S. government. The federal government allowed all Poles who were not U.S. citizens and not subject to the draft to enlist in the new Polish army, nicknamed The Blue Army. More than 70 men answered the call, but the names of those who died didn't appear on the downtown Grand Rapids monument.

The Echo Tygodniowe, a Polish language weekly newspaper that carried local and international

news for thousands of new Polish immigrants in Grand Rapids, became a driving force to make sure their sacrifices weren't forgotten.

Starting in 1928, The Echo ran weekly stories that included an artist's rendering of the monument and listing of names and contributions. Three sectors of the city comprising Grand Rapids Polonia (Polonia Grandrapidska) supplied the bulk of the funds: the St. Adalbert's neighborhood called Wojciechowo, the St. Isidore's neighborhood dubbed Izydorowo or Cegielnia (Brickyard), and the Sacred Heart neighborhood named Krakowo (for the city of Krakow) or Sercowo (the Heart's Area).

"Compatriots!" said one translated story that appeared in The

Echo in 1928. "Let's build a monument at the Polish Cemetery to the fallen heroes of the World War and to the great veterans who took part in the war. Let no one say that there is no money for this noble cause. Let all the old and young give. Let every Polish child give at least 5 cents in their classes to the teaching sisters in parish schools. Let all societies give, however small (the contribution)."

By 1929, the board that oversaw the Polish Roman Catholic Cemetery – now known as Holy Cross – chose a highly visible site for the monument as a fitting tribute to the soldiers.

It is believed that the monument was dedicated in 1931 or 1932, when a pamphlet printed in Octo-

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Sylvester Taylor uses a soft bristle brush and D/2 cleaner on base of the Polish army monument to remove lichens and mineral stains.

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ber that year for a meeting of the Stowarzyszenie Weteranów Armii Polskiej w Ameryce (SWAP) held in Grand Rapids. The pamphlet translated makes reference to "the Polish community in Grand Rapids, out of gratitude, erected a wonderful monument to them at the Polish Cemetery, which will remind future generations of their heroic deeds."

The monument bears a Polish inscription that reads translated: "Polish Heroes of World War I, from Polonia in Grand Rapids Michigan." There do not appear to be any other identifying marks on the monument.

In 1997, the cemetery apparently allowed additions to the monument that were not part of its original concept – additions that some say detract from its original design.

The local post of SWAP – better known under its Americanized name The Polish Army Veterans Association of America (PAVA) – paid for the pouring of a concrete slab approximately 11 feet by 6 feet in the front of the monument and an altar for outdoor Masses. When it was nearing its dissolution, PAVA Post 97 apparently used some funds from the sale of its club on Bridge Street to pay for the slab and an altar that commemorated members of PAVA and SWAP who fought in WWI and WWII.

The altar and slab were dedicated on May 30, 1998 with a blessing by Mons. Edward Hankiewicz, a presentation of wreaths, dedication speech, a rifle salute and playing of

Taps, and a rendition of the song, *Spój Kolego w Ciemnym Grobie*.

Later the altar was moved to a more level location at the main mausoleum on the north side of the cemetery, essentially eliminating the need for the concrete pad that is now covered by dirt and weeds.

In September last year, members of the PHS accidentally became aware of the monument as an outcome of research into the local men who joined the Blue Army. Cemetery staff had no information, but Diocesan Archivist Angela Yondo was able to locate a reference to the monument in the book "The Church of St. Isidore," by Eduard Adam Skendzel.

In the course of more than 100 hours of research, the PHS locat-

ed the original minutes of the cemetery board, documents from PAVA and the stories in *The Echo* to piece together a more complete understanding of how the monument came into being. The task was complicated by the fact the sources were written in Polish.

But research was only the first step of the project. Over the years, the monument fell on hard times. The thumb on the right hand of the Marian statue was broken off, the entire monument was encrusted with lichens and mineral stains, flowers left by visitors have become old and tattered, and a mound of earth partially covers the chipped concrete slab.

In April, the PHS made a pro-

posal to the cemetery to restore the monument and make it a focal point of beauty for Holy Cross.

"Holy Cross Cemetery is pleased to partner with the society to help restore this meaningful monument memorializing an important period of local Polish American history," said Connie Sacha, managing director of the Diocese of Grand Rapids Catholic Cemeteries. "The cemetery board in 1929 specifically chose its current site because of its prominence, and the monument will be reflective of that when the work is completed. It will continue to stand proudly as

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PHS Board from left to right: Michael Jasperse, Rosemary Maciejewski, Matt Gryczan, Thaddeus Broda, Anthony Zasuwa, Teresa Bonham, Mike Kozal, John Theisen. (Not pictured: Angela Walejewski-Zasuwa, Elena Chaidez, Martin Rogalski)

PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

Whenever you think of anything – or anyone – over 100 years old, you often wonder whether they’ve seen better days.

But that’s not the case with Eastern Avenue Hall, which celebrated its more than 125th anniversary in May. The festivities were held in lively style with Polish dinners and drinks at the hall while listening and dancing the night away to Gerry Kaminski’s Polka Network and BRENA, Grand Rapids top party band.

Everyone calls the place Eastern Avenue Hall, but if you want to get formal, it’s the Sacred Heart Society of St. Isidore’s Church, also known as The Sacred Heart Benevolent Society, founded on May 18, 1896. The society was founded by Albert Szymanski, John Konieczka and Valentine Wila. John’s home was the setting for their very first meeting, and Albert was elected as the first president.

Advertisers in the commemorative book congratulated the Sacred Heart Society on its 125th Anniversary, but the numbers don’t add up. If you can still subtract using pencil and paper or can use a calculator, it’s the club’s 127th anniversary. But don’t get too tech-

nical, because the celebration was delayed from May 2021 because of the Covid pandemic.

It indeed held the grand celebration this year “with all the frills and activities of previous jubilees.”

The original constitution of the organization holds up very well by today’s standards. The society’s first main objectives is to serve God, country and fraternally assist its members and their families, primarily in times of sickness, death or other “misfortunes.” It’s second main objective is always foster loyalty and respect for the laws of their new American fatherland.

Construction of the current clubhouse on the corner of Eastern Avenue and Harvey Street began in 1907 and was completed at the cost of \$9,000. They officially opened on November 20, 1907.

In 2010 it was decided that the building required some necessary repairs and updates, and about \$500,000 has been invested into the revitalization of the club building. As they head into their 127th year, Eastern Hall is confident and proud that their updates have given them a place where they can strive to continue the traditions, hopes, and dreams that their forefathers had back in 1896 when they started the Sacred Heart Society of St. Isidore’s Church.

The PHS welcomes Sarah Sharpe and Jon Cook as new members! Recruited by recently elected board member Rosemary Maciejewski, Sarah and her husband Jon are not from Polish descent, but they like our vibe.

“I was particularly interested in becoming involved with a local organization that gives back to the community like the Polish Heritage Society,” Sarah said. They moved to the Westside three years ago and love it. Right back at you, Sarah!



Jon Cook and Sarah Sharpe

Thank you to Richard Steng for donating Polish gramophone records of the epic poem Pan Tadeusz. Written by the Polish poet, writer, philosopher and translator Adam Mickiewicz, it is deemed one of the last great epic poems in European literature. It is compulsory reading in Polish schools and has been translated into 33 languages. They’ll be available for purchase at Dozynki in the cultural tent.



Richard Steng

We held our annual picnic and one of two general meetings for the membership on June

25 at Oriole Park in Wyoming. A faithful group of 25 Poles chased away the rain and gathered for some classic picnic fare and fellowship.

Three fresh faces have joined the board: Director Rosemary Maciejewski, Director Thaddeus Broda and Recording Secretary Matthew Gryczan. Teresa Bonham was installed as new president. Treasurer Michael Jasperse gave a financial report, and I gave a report on the success of the Wigilia dinner and how we may improve the event this year. More on that in my future columns!

Outgoing president Adam Porczynski gave an informal report on the upcoming Dozynki Festival, then went through the installation of new board members. The audience applauded Adam, outgoing Recording Secretary Dennis Ziomkowski and outgoing director Thaddeus Szyzlowski for their service.

Matt gave a brief description of the monument in Holy Cross Cemetery in Grand Rapids that honors local men from Grand Rapids who fought in the Blue Army. He helped to discover the history of the monument that has fallen into disrepair and asked for funds to restore the monument to its full beauty. A motion was passed unanimously to support the restoration up to \$425.



Polish Veterans Memorial

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a tribute to the soldiers and the community members who helped fund it.”

Based on an assessment of required work, Sacha commissioned GreenSlate Granite & Marble in Rockford to fashion a replacement thumb and cement it to the statue.

“I love this sort of work,” said GreenSlate owner Dane Larsen, who has repaired other statues for the diocese. “I wish this is all I did.” He said he first selected a piece of aged grey granite to match the color of

the monument, then crafted the piece with a Dremel grinder and hand sanding. Larsen has a full shop for stonework that includes repair and fabrication of bartops, countertops, vanities and cremation bases.

The PHS board approved funding at its June general meeting to clean the monument, purchase two Polish flags for the flagpoles, buy red and white artificial flowers for the urns and recaulk seams.

V’s Powerwash and Restoration in Grand Rapids was selected to clean the monument by hand with soft bristled brushes, then

apply D/2 Biological Solution that is used by the National Cemetery Administration to restore headstones in national parks and the nation’s graveyards. Sylvester Taylor, owner of V’s Powerwash, said he uses that technique to restore grey granite, rather than blast the surface with power washing.

Discussions are still underway regarding what to do about the earth mound in front of the monument and the concrete slab. A number of visitors to the monument – including WOOD TV8 re-

porter Elena Cousino who covered the cleaning of the monument – have commented that the mound is unsightly and should be removed.

Hankiewicz, who serves on the Diocese of Grand Rapids Catholic Cemeteries Board that oversees Holy Cross and who also is a lifetime member of the PHS, said he is in favor of removing the earth mound and possibly the slab itself. He said he was proud of the fact that the PHS has become involved in the monument’s restoration, given its importance to local Polish-American history.

Polish Heritage Society Dozynki Festival Planning Continues

You can start laying out your best red duds for the upcoming Dozynki Festival in August and show your Polish pride.

Or better yet, get on the Polish Heritage Society website and become part of the festival yourself as a volunteer!

If you ask any volunteer whether it’s fun and worth his or her time, you’d get a resounding “Tak!” And with the current SignUpGenius system on the PHS website, it only takes a few keystrokes to sign up for something that suits your fancy.

Regardless of which side of the token counter you choose, one thing is for certain: it’s fun for all when you check the boxes. Live music, check. Great food and beverages, check. Children’s tent, check. Contests, check. Vendors with items you won’t find elsewhere, check. Meeting new people, check.

Free admission, double check!

As the longest running ethnic festival in Grand Rapids, Dozynki has established a reputation for being a fun, family friendly event that showcases Polish culture, featuring live music and a large dance area, a children’s tent, vendors offering Polish cuisine and items, and a tent that explains local Polish-American history and the contributions of famous Polish-Americans.

Other fun activities during the festival include the paczki eating contest, crowning of the Busia Queen and a performance by the P.R.C.U.A. Malbork Dance Ensemble, a dance group for youth ages 3-18 that teaches traditional Polish folk dances with authentic garb.

Let’s look over the lineup of Polka music, probably the happiest music in the universe.

Friday

Noon to 4 p.m.: Virgil Baker’s Just For Fun Band

6 p.m. to 10 p.m. (Close): Tony

Blazonczyk and New Phaze Band
Saturday

Noon to 4 p.m.: Bruce Packard Band

6 p.m. to 10 p.m. (Close) Gerry Kaminski’s Polka Network, alternating with Jimmy K and Ethnic Sounds

Sunday,

Noon to 5 p.m. (Close) Trent Urbytes and Polka Riot

When it comes to food, there’s plenty to choose from.

St. Isidore Benevolent Aid Society/Diamond Hall: Polish combo plates and more

Cannonsburg Village/Honey Creek Inn: potato sausages to drunken mushrooms

That Polish Girl Catering/Lewandoski’s Market: Polka bobs and pierogi

J and C Concessions: Polish sausage and burgers

Barry G’s Italian Ice: frozen des-

serts

The Lemonade Trailer: lemonade and snacks

The festival is the major fundraiser for the Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids, a non-profit organization founded in 1963 to perpetuate and advance the Polish culture that has been so integral to metro Grand Rapids.

Among other activities such as the Christmas Wigilia dinner and the Matka Boska Zielna, the society awards scholarships annually to students of Polish/Lithuanian descent who attend Michigan colleges and universities.

This year the society awarded \$6,000 to Michigan students who are pursuing their life’s goals.



Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5

Annual Adult Membership \$20

Annual Family or Business Membership \$35

Lifetime Membership \$150

ONLINE

You can join the Polish Heritage Society online by going to our website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/>, filling out the Membership form and paying by using the PayPal Button.

MAIL

Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

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