



A Brief History of the Jesuit Retreat House Site by William Fliss

Since 1961 the Jesuit Retreat House on Lake Winnebago has fostered spiritual growth for thousands of men and women. Its atmosphere of quiet, peace, and prayer has been enriched by the natural beauty of the site, nestled on the lake's western shoreline, six miles south of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The Jesuits were not the first to notice the area's Tremendous beauty. The site of the current retreat house boasts a long and fascinating past.

The lost community of Perryville

Recorded history of the property begins in 1851 when Jackson and Ruth Swift settled the land with their family. The elderly Swifts were looking for an attractive site to spend their remaining years, but their entrepreneurial son-in-law, Henry C. Morgan, had other ideas. He constructed a sawmill and steamboat dock, and his successful lumber business soon attracted a small community of settlers. The Swifts named the community "Perryville" in honor of Ruth's maiden name. Perryville thrived during the 1850s, but economic forces that were largely beyond the family's control doomed the lumber business. By the time of the Civil War, Perryville was a ghost town.

Playground for the rich and powerful

Following the death of Morgan's widow, the land passed into the hands of local farmers until it was purchased around the turn of the twentieth century by two brothers, Ezra and Homer Fahrney, co-owners of a patent medicine business in Chicago. The company had been founded by their late father, Dr. Peter Fahrney, a Swiss émigré known by the nickname, "Patent Medicine King." The family built its fortune around a product called "Alpen Kräuter" a tonic remedy said to cure a variety of ailments. Lucrative sales enabled the brothers to establish adjoining summer estates on Lake Winnebago. The Fahrneys planted thousands of new trees on the property. By 1910, locals were referring to it as "Fahrnwald," or "Fahrney's Woods."

By 1918 Homer had left Ezra in sole control of the property on Lake Winnebago. In that year Ezra constructed a 30-room brick mansion that still stands today as part of the Jesuit Retreat House. Along with the main house, Fahrney built a boathouse and three car garage. The 400-acre estate became Ezra's summer home, a place where he could indulge his passions for hunting and fishing. He entertained many prominent

businessmen and politicians at Fahrwald, and its relaxing environment won admirers among Chicago's wealthy. In 1926 President Calvin Coolidge sent a representative to investigate purchasing the property as a potential summer White House. The sale never happened, but Coolidge's interest shows how the splendor of Fahrwald had been voiced far and wide.

Chicago gangsters have been reported among the guests that Ezra hosted at Fahrwald, and one source suggests that both Fahrney brothers were involved in organized crime. Whatever the truth to this claim, the 1920s were a prosperous decade for the Fahrneys. Sales of Alpen Kräuter remained strong, aided perhaps by the remedy's 14 percent alcohol content. During the era of Prohibition, patent medicines became a popular and legal way to consume alcohol.

The school for disabled children

Ezra Fahrney remained a bachelor until his death in 1930. He bequeathed Fahrwald to his nephew, John L. Vette, Jr. Although Fahrney had not been regarded as a particularly pious man, he commented in his will -- somewhat prophetically it would seem -- that the house on Lake Winnebago might be suitable for sale to a religious order. Fahrney's nephew chose to live on the site with his own family for several years before splitting up the property. In 1944 Vette sold the mansion and the acreage immediately surrounding the house to the Milton H. Berry Foundation.

The Berry School for the Handicapped soon opened on the site, devoted to educating children with cerebral palsy. The school did not flourish, and, by 1951, the Berry Foundation sought a buyer for the property. In December of that year it accepted a \$65,000 purchase offer from the Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits wanted to establish a second novitiate for the province, to ease the overcrowding at its novitiate in Florissant, Missouri. The beautiful site on Lake Winnebago was ideal. For \$18,500, Vette sold the Jesuits some of his own land that adjoined the Berry property, increasing the total area for the novitiate to 18 acres. Bishop Stanislaus V. Bonn of Green Bay formally announced the purchases in February 1952.

A training ground for Jesuits

The summer and early fall of 1952 saw a tempest of activity on the shore of Lake Winnebago as the Jesuits prepared their new novitiate. Construction began in June on a 42-room rectangular dormitory for the novices. It would be named Manresa in memory of the Spanish place where St. Ignatius of Loyola began formulating his *Spiritual Exercises*. Construction workers also transformed the second floor of Fahrney's brick garage into a chapel. Years later this building would be renamed La Storta, in honor of the place, near Rome, where St. Ignatius experienced a mystical vision of the Holy Trinity. Lastly, the workers built a breezeway to connect the three buildings. Very Rev. Joseph A. Gschwend, S.J. led the first group of Jesuits on the site. Gschwend would serve as rector and master of novices.

The novitiate officially opened on October 26th, 1952, although the majority of novices did not arrive from Missouri until November 7th. On October 30th, Bishop Bonn presided at a dedication ceremony. A crowd of 70 attended the event, among them the Jesuit Provincial and all the clergy of Oshkosh. The Jesuits invited the public to inspect their novitiate on Sunday, November 2nd, and 1,200 visitors reportedly toured the buildings and grounds that day.

Over the next eight years, the Jesuit Novitiate of the Sacred Heart would be home to nearly 400 young men entering the Society. The novitiate would also play a role in the life of the diocese. In 1955, for instance, 2,000 people from fourteen Catholic organizations in the area converged on the site to celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi. The worshipers defied cloudy skies and cold winds to participate in a procession of the Blessed Sacrament that wound its way among altars set up around the property. In 1957 the Jesuit Fathers began giving retreats at the novitiate -- a harbinger of things to come.

From novitiate to retreat house

The number of Jesuits in the United States soared during the 1950s. In 1955 the Society divided its Missouri Province and established a separate province to the north with headquarters in Wisconsin. New vocations swamped the capacity of the Oshkosh novitiate, leading the Wisconsin Province to construct another facility in 1958 at St. Bonifacius, Minnesota. By 1960 the Jesuits had decided to close the site on Lake Winnebago and transfer its novices to St. Bonifacius.

Urged on by a group of laymen from the area, Bishop Bona granted the Jesuits permission to transform the novitiate into a new retreat house for the Green Bay diocese. Rev. Jim Corrigan, S.J. became the house's first director and oversaw extensive interior remodeling of the facility. In February 1961, with renovations completed, the Jesuit Retreat House sign was raised on Fond Du Lac Road.

Thirty-six men made the very first retreat, preached by Fr. Corrigan on February 23-26, 1961. It was called the "Jesuit Dads" retreat, because most retreatants were fathers of men in the Society. By the end of that year, 482 men had made a retreat at the house. In 1962 the number rose to 793. In 1965 those making a retreat numbered 1,221, and the number would rise slowly but steadily to the end of the decade. Retreats were grounded, then as now, in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and took place over four days, beginning on Thursday evening and concluding on Sunday afternoon. Then as now, silence was observed during the retreats, a feature that surprised many new retreatants but became a cherished part of the experience on Lake Winnebago.

Women began visiting the Jesuit Retreat House in 1964. These first gatherings were single-day events called "Days of Recollection;" however, beginning in 1966, groups of women started coming to the site for full 4-day weekend retreats. In 1965 the Jesuits on Lake Winnebago began one of their most popular ministries by offering retreats that

blended Ignatian spirituality with the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Retreatants Clementina “Tina” Heder and Harold Belvoir would establish a scholarship fund that has helped many men and women who need the AA retreat but cannot afford the suggested donation.

The Jesuit Retreat House gained a following of loyal and generous retreatants, men and women who returned each year for spiritual guidance and refreshment. Of particular note were the retreat coordinators who organized their groups and labored to recruit new retreatants for the house.

Growth in the number of retreatants was accompanied by an increase in physical space. In 1966 the Jesuit Retreat House achieved its present size when the Wisconsin Province acquired an additional plot of land from Fahrney’s nephew, John L. Vette, Jr. For years Vette had operated a small electronics plant adjacent to the retreat house. In 1966 he moved the factory into the City of Oshkosh and then sold the land to the Jesuits for a very reasonable price.

Struggle and renewal

The retreat movement struggled nationwide in the wake of the Second Vatican Council as traditional devotional practices -- including spiritual retreats -- declined generally among the laity. The Society of Jesus found itself competing for fewer retreatants with newer retreat initiatives such as “Cursillo” and “Building a Better World.” The Retreat House on Lake Winnebago fared better than many of its counterparts, aided undoubtedly by the hard work of its coordinators and group leaders. Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, the annual number of retreatants visiting the house had leveled off and even declined somewhat.

The Jesuits rose to these challenges. They strove to make the weekend “Preached” retreats speak more clearly to the complex lives of modern people, and they established a strong program of “Directed” retreats, especially for clergy and women religious. In contrast to a Preached retreat -- which guests experience as a group under a retreat leader -- a Directed retreat allows an individual to make a private retreat over a period of days, meeting daily with an assigned spiritual director. These efforts bore fruit: in 1976 a resurgent Jesuit Retreat House reported a new high of 1,417 retreatants. A decade later, approximately 2,000 men and women were visiting the house annually, a rate that has remained steady to the present.

The Jesuits made other changes to their retreat offerings. Beginning in 1979, a Reconciliation service and Healing service were added to the Preached retreats. In the mid-1980s, the Jesuits worked with the Green Bay diocese to offer a new “Singles/ Singles Again” retreat. This offering lasted for only two years; however, a new retreat for married couples enjoyed greater success. First offered in the summer of 1988, couples retreats have remained popular to the present.

As the years passed and leadership of the Jesuit Retreat House changed hands, a

constant worry for each director was the physical well-being of the facility. Its aging buildings required continual monitoring and improvement, and resources had to be found to cover the costs of major items, such as a new boiler, and relatively minor items like mattresses and bedding. Remodeling of the buildings took place over time, and the grounds improved. In 1974 the Jesuits installed a flashing blue light at the end of the peninsula. Called the “Loyola Light”, it has aided outdoorsmen in finding their way back home. Also in the 1970s, the distinctive Stations of the Cross were placed around the grounds. In 1991 work was completed on the beautiful outdoor Shrine of the Sacred Heart, located near the pond.

The Retreat House’s chapel was an enduring concern for the directors. Originally located on the second floor of Fahrney’s brick garage, the chapel had been moved to the structure’s first floor in 1976, and the upstairs converted into additional rooms for retreatants. This improved the situation, but it was not a long-term solution. The Jesuits dreamed of a new chapel, in the form of a major addition to the Retreat House complex. Unfortunately, the estimated cost for such a project (\$485,000-\$525,000) deferred the dream for many years. Finally, in July 1988, an anonymous donor offered a grant that would match up to \$350,000 for a new chapel. Donors rose to the occasion, and, with the financial obstacle removed, a groundbreaking took place on July 22, 1989.

A year later, on August 19, 1990, the Retreat House staff and 500 guests celebrated its completion with a Liturgy of Dedication. The new chapel was over twice the size of the old space. Eyes were drawn undoubtedly to the remarkable Corpus of the Crucified Christ -- a gift from the Green Bay Holy Week retreatants -- and to the beauty of Lake Winnebago visible through the chapel’s many windows.

A golden legacy

For a half-century the Jesuit Retreat House on Lake Winnebago has deepened God’s Life in the lives of the men and women who visit here. This brief history cannot begin to do justice to the experiences of the thousands of retreatants. Their stories would fill volumes. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the staff of Jesuit Retreat House has carried out its mission of fostering spiritual enrichment rooted in the Gospels, the Catholic tradition and the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. They have been aided over the decades by the hard work and enthusiasm of the many retreat group leaders and coordinators. As Director Jack Rainaldo, S.J. wrote in his annual report for 1986, these men and women are truly “the backbone of this retreat house.”

Directors of the Jesuit Retreat House, 1961-present

Rev. Jim Corrigan, S.J., 1961-1963
Rev. Joe Shinnars, S.J., 1963-1974
Rev. Charlie Mullen, S.J. (interim director), 1974-1975
Rev. Perry Roets, S.J., 1975-1980
Rev. Jim Gladstone, S.J., 1980-1983
Rev. Jack Rainaldo, S.J., 1983-1989

Rev. Dick McCaslin, S.J., 1989-2001
Rev. Mike Morrison, S.J., 2001-2003
Rev. John Schwantes, S.J., 2003-present

Associate Directors and Resident Staff of the Jesuit Retreat House, 1961-present

Rev. Oscar "Ben" Benzinger, S.J., 2005-2006
Rev. Richard Cahill, S.J., 1963-1964
Rev. Neil Carr, S.J., 1996-????
Rev. Orville Catuso, S.J., 1996-????
Rev. Gene Donahue, S.J., 2007-present
Rev. Bob Dufford, S.J., 1995-2009
Rev. Joseph Gregory, S.J., 1964
Rev. Jim Hauser, S.J., 1977-1982
Rev. Daniel Higgins, S.J., 1961
Rev. Larry Jonas, S.J., 1981-1986
Rev. Benno Kornely, S.J., 1975-1981
Sr. Kerry Larkin, O.S.M., 2007-present
Rev. Jeffrey Loebel, S.J., 1991-1992
Br. Gerald McKeever, S.J., 1983-1986, 1992-1995
Sr. Joyanne Mueller, O.S.F., 1984-1986
Rev. Charlie Mullen, S.J., 1964-1974
Sr. Mary Jacqueline Pratt, O.S.U., 2002-2007
Rev. Bob Purcell, S.J., 1985-1988
Rev. Jack Rainaldo, S.J., 1974-1977
Rev. Bill Renn, S.J., 1973-1982
Rev. Tom Schloemer, S.J., 2010-present
Sr. Marie Schwan, C.S.J., 1988-2002
Rev. Joe Shinnars, S.J., 1961-1963, 1988-1992
Rev. Gene Zimmerman, S.J., 1992-2000