



# NOJOSHING

Indian word for "straight tongue"

land protrudes out into Lake Michigan like a straight tongue

Newsletter published quarterly

Non-Profit Organization 501c3

## September 2024

### Gertie's Story

by Tamara Saviano

*St. Francis native and 1979 graduate of St. Francis High School*

I was blessed with a three-decade relationship with my great grandmother, Myrtle Gertrude Thompson Borland. Her friends called her Gert, or sometimes Gertie. I loved that. "Can I call you Gertie?" I once asked. "No, you can call me Grandma," she replied.

Grandma Gertie was my daily solace during my brief unhappy marriage in 1980. Every morning, I walked over to Gertie's and hauled myself up the steep curved stairway to the upper flat where she lived above my maternal grandparents, Ellis and Jeanne Leavitt. My great-grandfather, Oliver Borland, (Gertie's husband) died in 1979, and Gertie was deep in the throes of fresh grief.

Gertie was 82 and I was 19. Both of us lonely. One of us just beginning adult life and the other in the winter of her years. Gertie's scalp shone under brittle, thin curls, and she shuffled around the house, hunched by osteoporosis. But her eyes still sparkled behind thick glasses, and her sweet playfulness remained. I clung to Gertie's solidness and the satisfying familiarity of our family home.

Our days together settled into a comfortable routine. We'd have tea and toast for breakfast and then play cards until lunch. She'd mix up chicken salad spread for lunch, as I diced fresh fruit into two bowls and spooned cottage cheese over it.

Gertie regaled me of stories from our family history. Gertie, the daughter of Sylvia May Wentworth and Charles Henry Thompson, is a Thompson by her father and a Wentworth by her mother. This fact was remarked upon often, mostly by Gertie herself. Gertie liked to say that the Wentworths and Thompsons "are strong stock." Even in the 1700s and 1800s, many of them lived more than 80 years.

Gertie was born in Town of Lake on September 9, 1898. Her parents owned green houses and a farm on Whitnall Avenue between Brust and Pennsylvania avenues. Gertie grew up in a loving home with five siblings—four of them lived long enough for me to know.

The Thompsons and Wentworths come from a long line of Town of Lake pioneers. My fifth great-grandparents are Zebedee Packard and Nancy



Top: Oliver Borland  
Above: Oliver and Gert in the greenhouse 1920



Sylvia May Wentworth and Charles Henry Thompson

Ransom. My fourth great-grandparents are Sylvia Elizabeth Packard and George H. Wentworth.

In 1839, George H. and Sylvia Wentworth built their house and barn high on a hill overlooking Lake Michigan after receiving a soldier's grant of 160 acres for his participation in the Black Hawk War. Since 1962, St. Francis High School, my alma mater, has stood on the property.

When George H. Wentworth died on December 23, 1901, at age 86, he was saluted as "the man who had lived in Milwaukee longer than any man now living." George lived long enough to meet his great granddaughter, the fabulous Gertie.

Sylvia and George's son, George G. Wentworth, my third great grandfather, married Adeline Eaton on June 8, 1871, in Town of Lake. Their daughter, Sylvia May, is Gertie's mother. Sylvia May, known as "May," was still alive when I was born in 1961. May's husband, Charles Henry Thompson, was the grandson of Jared Thompson and Frances Hayden—also early settlers of Town of Lake. Jared Thompson was elected the first chairman of Town of Lake in 1842. He owned a tin store on Water Street. He was a Methodist minister and justice of the peace.

Around 1865, Jared deeded his land to the school district, on which Thompson Elementary School was built. It was still in operation during my childhood, and many of my friends attended school there. Jared died at the age of 85 in 1890, eight years before Gertie was born.



Gertie and Oliver Borland's duplex at 3542 East Armour in Cudahy. They lived upstairs and daughter Jeanne and son-in-law Ellis lived downstairs.

Gertie married Oliver Wendell Borland on December 20, 1919. They raised their family, my grandmother Jeanne and great uncle Charles, at 3542 East Armour Avenue in Cudahy. Both Gertie and Oliver worked at Bucyrus Erie, along with a young fellow named Ellis Leavitt. Gertie's daughter, Jeanne, married Ellis. They moved into the lower flat on Armour Avenue and raised six daughters (including my mother), while Gertie and Oliver lived upstairs. The home was the family gathering place for more than 60 years. Every holiday season, the kitchen was a tangle of fingers and hands shaping Christmas cookies. Gertie baked a stollen for each of her grandchildren's families. Gertie

entertained grandchildren with her organ and accordion, accompanied by Oliver on marimba. She gossiped on the phone with friends, told silly jokes, and sent everyone home with baggies filled with cookies and candy.

Gertie died on December 7, 1990, at age 92.



Gertie loved to entertain at family gatherings on the organ and accordion accompanied by Oliver on marimba.



All photos courtesy of Tamara Saviano



## What's New?

### John Gurda

John Gurda will be presenting "Milwaukee: A City Built on Water" on Thursday, September 19 at 6:30 pm (doors open at 6:00 p.m. for refreshments). The location is St. Francis Civic Center, 3400 E. Howard Avenue. Watch your mail for a flyer about this event.

### Historical signs for St. John's School for the Deaf

Work is continuing on the two historical panels memorializing St. John's School for the Deaf that will be installed at Deer Creek Intermediate School at 3680 South Kinnickinnic Avenue. The signs will be installed and dedicated in spring 2025.

### Correction for the "A Town of Lake Family" story by Julie Hughes in the June 2024 newsletter

The Bonniwell farm was not located on the site of the Lakeside Power Plant building. It was located three blocks south of the actual power plant building on South Lake Drive.

## Remembering St. John's School for the Deaf

By Karen Gersonde

I grew up in St. Francis on East Crawford Avenue in the 1960s and 1970s and went to Sacred Heart of Jesus Grade School. Since I walked to school with my friends, often times we would cut through St. John's School for the Deaf on Kinnickinnic Avenue to get to Sacred Heart. It was just a shortcut for us. And since we not only walked to and from school, but also walked home for lunch and back, I became pretty familiar with the grounds of St. John's and knew every inch of it.

My childhood memories are of the old school building that was constructed in 1908. (The present building replaced it in 1966.) Those old buildings always intrigued me. They were so old looking in a creepy kind of way to me, as a child. They were majestic, yet dark looking from enduring decades of Wisconsin weather. The brick was definitely dark and covered in years of dirt and grime. For sure, they had seen better days.

In front of the property was a small man-made pond. It wasn't the cleanest or prettiest-looking water, but nevertheless, it was still a pond. And ponds, no matter what condition, always attracted me. My friends and I would go fishing in it, even though we probably weren't supposed to. It was private property, after all, and we knew it. But we took our chances and went anyway. I remember all I caught were crayfish. I would usually have the boys take the crayfish off the hook for me, because I truly did not like crayfish. Of course, they knew this, and most often would chase me around with the crayfish in hand. I would scream and run away, which they thought was hilarious. I guess in retrospect, it was pretty funny. I don't believe I ever caught any real fish in that pond. It didn't matter. It was a fun way to pass the summer days.

When we cut through the property on school days, often times the deaf children were outside at recess or lunchtime. We would wave to them, and they would wave back. They were playing outside like normal children--laughing, smiling, running around, playing ball, jump rope, etc. Sometimes during the summer months, our neighborhood boys would play baseball with them behind their school. I was told that some of the deaf children could hit a mean baseball. I never played directly with the children there, but I would ride my bicycle through their grounds quite often, usually when no one was outside. It was actually quite peaceful and serene there.



Top: St. John's School for the Deaf 1908 building with the pond that Karen remembered.. Above: St. Mary's of the Angels

I was sad to learn that St. John's was replacing the old building with a new one. They were all so much a part of my childhood. I hated to see it all end. My father took some photos of a little brick chapel, St. Mary's of the Angels, which was on the south end of the property, near the main driveway before it was razed. It was a rustic looking chapel. I don't believe I was ever in it. It would have been nice to pray there just one time, but I never saw it open.

I miss St. John's School for the Deaf. I miss the old buildings, the pond, and the children playing outside. I am glad, however, that the City of St. Francis took over the property and turned it into Deer Creek Intermediate School. I am glad there still are children playing, laughing, and learning there, on those hallowed grounds. It is great to see that life and learning still go on there.

## By George...I think he's got it!!!

by St. Francis Historical Society board member George Ramponi



### Dr. Thomas Fitzgibbon, Seminary Doctor

by George Ramponi

One should never discount the power of serendipity in the pursuit of knowledge. Earlier this summer my sister Donna and her husband, Steve, having recently moved to Fond du Lac, decided to take a stroll through Calvary Cemetery, a local cemetery. There they found a monument with the engraving, "Dr. Thomas Fitzgibbon buried at St. Francis, Wisconsin, Sept. 15, 1916." Curious, sis messaged me asking whether or not he may have been a priest. Fortunately, I have an old copy of the centennial history of the Saint Francis Seminary, *Halcyon Days*, by Monsignor Peter Leo Johnson that I had purchased years ago.

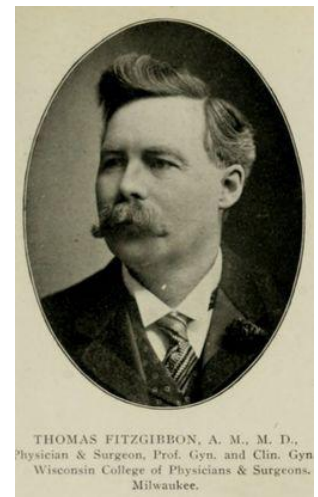
This is what I found about Fitzgibbon:

Dr. Thomas Fitzgibbon was born March 1, 1854, in Troy, New York. The family moved to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, where he received his medical degree, which I have yet to discover. He arrived in Milwaukee County by 1893. He hung his shingle at 401 Grand (now Wisconsin) Avenue, and by 1893 was one of the founding faculty members of the Wisconsin College of Physicians and Surgeons (CPS). It was the first such establishment in Milwaukee County. Fitzgibbon was an owner of CPS, along with the rest of the staff and administration. It was a capital stock operation.

According to *The Medical History of Milwaukee 1834-1914*, by Louis Frank, the earliest location of CPS was at the corner of Walnut and 25th streets. The first floor consisted of a reception area, classrooms, and a pharmacy. The two floors above made up Presbyterian Hospital. It was fully staffed and capable of accommodating 100 patients. Dr. Fitzgibbon lectured twice a week as a professor of Gynaecology and Clinical Gynaecology (this spelling for Gynecology continued into the early 20th century). Gynaecology involves the treatment of women's diseases, especially those of the reproductive organs. The doctor conducted "rounds" with students in the upstairs hospital.

Along side his private practice and teaching duties, he took on a third job. On his first visit to the St. Francis Seminary on November 25, 1893, he took over for Dr. Louis Reinhard as regular attending physician. Monsignor Johnson writes in his book: "By a rare blending, Dr. Fitzgibbon combined in himself the qualities of a first rate physician, perfect gentlemen, and devout Catholic." This might explain his departure from the College of Physicians and Surgeons--- too many Presbyterians. (Ecumenism—the principle or aim of promoting unity among the world's Christian Churches—wasn't a "thing" back then).

At the time of his first visit to the seminary, the infirmary was then located on the second floor of the seminary main building. It was the bailiwick of one Sister Seraphine O'Brien who was assigned the main nursing duties in 1879. She served for 18 years until her death around 1897. Waves of diphtheria, scarlet fever, and influenza swept through the seminary between 1880-1900 forcing occasional closures





and/or extended holidays. Sister Seraphine might have had a role in Dr. Fitzgibbon's gratis lectures on hygiene and nursing at the convent.

The seminarians were quite fond of Dr. Fitzgibbon, in part because a few of them suffering homesickness could apply for a slightly extended "rest at home." After twelve years with the seminary, Dr. Fitzgibbon contacted influenza and passed away September 15, 1916. On a humanizing note, the doctor always wore a white carnation in his lapel "as a sensible expression of a lasting affection for his fiancée, who had met an early death.

Fitzgibbon is buried in the St. Francis Seminary Cemetery on the grounds of the seminary. So that means the inscription on the monument is found at Fond du Lac is just a cenotaph ("in memory of." The monument is in the Fitzgibbon family plot, where his father, John, his mother, Mary, and some of his siblings are also buried.



This is the monument in the Fond du Lac cemetery. It is probably a Fitzgibbon family monument.



Fitzgibbon's grave stone in St. Francis De Sales Seminary cemetery in St. Francis.



**"Molly Brown:  
Hard Scrabble to High Society"**

Jessica Michna wowed her audience in June when she performed as Unsinkable Molly Brown on June 13th. Nearly 50 people attended.



**St. Francis Days Parade**

Board member Jay Wesner had his Corvette in the parade accompanied by board member, George Ramponi. Board members Anna Passante and Bill Drefthal walked in the parade.





# Mathias Heck, Cobbler and Teacher

By Anna Passante

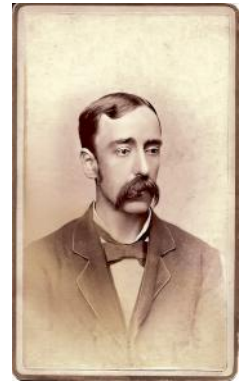
For 107 years, St. John's School for the Deaf educated deaf students, teaching the basics—reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, as well as religious studies. To prepare them for the outside world, industrial arts classes were instituted for boys and home economic classes for girls. The boys worked in the St. John's workshops constructing church furniture and church ornaments for area churches. These activities earned money for the school. The girls worked in the school laundry and were taught other domestic skills, such as sewing, cooking, and baking.

In 1884, Mathias Heck operated a shoe repair/cobbler shop, where the boys repaired shoes for those at the nearby college, seminary, convent, orphanage, as well as for residents of the neighborhood. This also brought in needed revenue for the school.

Mathias Heck was born in Germany in 1844. At age four, he lost his hearing due to measles. His father, Nicholas, was a tailor back in Germany. Mathias' family immigrated to America in 1851, settling in Indiana on a farm. In 1856, at age 12, Mathias attended Indiana School for the Deaf. Along with a basic education, he received industrial arts training, learning the trade of cobbling/shoemaker. By the age of 20, he was working as a cobbler.

In 1884, at age 40, Heck came to St. John's School for the Deaf to run the cobbler/shoe repair shop. This may have been the first manual arts program offered at the school. The shoe repair shop was located in the upper rooms of the former Pio Nono College Gymnasium next to St. John's. The shoe repair shop later moved to a building on the St. John's property known as the Water Tower.

This building, with an attached greenhouse, at one time was topped with a windmill that supplied power for the well. Heck worked with student apprentices, teaching them a skill that would later provide them with employment.



Mathias Heck



Girls worked in the laundry learning housekeeping and employment skills. Photo courtesy Mark Hanson



Mathias Heck on left, is working with two deaf students repairing shoes. Photo courtesy Mark Hanson

Right: The Water Tower building was remodeled into the caretaker's cottage pictured here.

Far right: Postcard image of what appears to be the side view of the Water Tower building with the windmill and greenhouses.





Heck married Clara Fuhrmann of Dubuque, Iowa, in 1895. Clara attended St. John's from the age of nine in 1876 until 1881. According to Mathias Heck's obituary, Clara was the first student enrolled at the school on May 10, 1878. Clara lost her hearing at age two due to a high fever that damaged her inner ears.

The couple had two sons: Hilary, born in 1897, and Michael in 1899. Clara developed tuberculosis shortly after their marriage. She returned to her family in Iowa where she died in 1903 at the age of 35. The young boys were placed in an orphanage (most likely St. Aemilian Orphanage in St. Francis) because their father had no one to care for them while he worked. They stayed at the orphanage until about 1906, at which time their father had remarried, and the boys were brought back home.

Neither Hilary nor Michael was deaf, but both had deaf children. Michael's son, Hilary, showed signs of deafness at age two. In 1931, Hilary's daughter Bernice became deaf at age four. Bernice was the first second-generation pupil to study at St. John's School for the Deaf. A year later, her cousin Hilary was enrolled at the school. Both graduated from eighth grade in June 1944.

Mathias Heck died in 1935. He had worked at St. John's for 50 years up until his death at 90 years old. In his obituary, his grandson Hilary Heck recalled stories that Grandpa Mathias told about his early life. There was the story about Mathias seeing Abraham Lincoln speak in Indianapolis, when Lincoln campaigned for the U.S. presidency in 1860. Mathias told Hilary the story about his family hiding livestock in the woods from the foraging Union soldiers during the Civil War. Mathias was proud that his first presidential vote helped put General Ulysses S. Grant into the White House.



Mathias Heck with sons Hilary and Michael.  
Photo courtesy of grandson Robert Heck.



St. John's Shops: The gentleman in the vest standing in the upstairs doorway is Mathias Heck. Photo courtesy Mark Hanson



Wedding photo of Mathias and Clara.  
Photo courtesy of grandson Robert Heck whose father was Hilary Heck.



St. Francis Historical Society  
3400 E. Howard Ave.  
St. Francis, WI 53235

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**Newsletter**

Anna Passante

*Mark Your Calendar*

**Meetings at the St. Francis Civic Center at 3400 E. Howard Ave.:**

**The monthly board meetings are the 3rd Saturday of the month at 9:30 a.m. Visitors welcomed.**

September 21, 2024

October 19, 2024

November 16, 2024

**Upcoming events** (see “What’s New” column for details)

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