



# NOJOSHING

Indian word for "straight tongue"

Land protrudes out into Lake Michigan like a straight tongue

Newsletter published quarterly

Non-Profit Organization 501c3

## June 2026

### Life in an Old Farmhouse

by Anna Passante

Do you remember Mary Becker's history articles in the *Reminder Enterprise* newspaper? Our historical society has issues on microfilm that date back to the early 1970s. What wonderful flashbacks of St. Francis and Cudahy history.

Recently, I found one of Becker's articles in the St. Francis Historical Society archives. It was a 1987 interview with Charles Zell, son of Adam Zelibapka. In the interview, Charles talks about his childhood in St. Francis.

In April 1923, after his mother, Ann, died in childbirth in Illinois, Charles' father moved his 10 children to a section of Town of Lake, now part of the city of St. Francis. They rented an old farmhouse addressed 3321 East Thompson Avenue (later razed). "The house sat so far back on the lot that it should have been addressed Norwich not Thompson Avenue," said Charles. "The hayfield extended back to the existing woods on the west end of Nathaniel Greene Park."

Father Adam and his oldest son, John, took jobs working nights at the Federal Rubber Company in Cudahy. The old farmhouse was a rental with no running water or electricity. Without a hand-operated roller washer, clothes were washed on a scrub board and wrung out by hand. A pot-bellied stove in the living room was the only source of heat. The children who slept upstairs had a "duchny" (Czech slang term for a goose down quilt) to keep them warm, which did the job "except for their noses and ear tips." The farmhouse was sparsely furnished. Charles recalled that they didn't have a single easy chair or davenport or rocker, and they had to stand most of the time, even for meals.

But Father Adam was happy to have the farmhouse where there was space for a big garden to feed the family. There were pigs to be butchered for meat, milk from the cow, chickens for eggs and meat, as well as an apple orchard.

The children attended Thompson School just two blocks west of the farmhouse. The first day of school, they had to stay home to pick apples. "Pa", as he was known to the kids, thought picking apples and storing them was more productive than the first school day, which was pretty much spent enrolling students. Charles enjoyed school and had a special affection for his teacher Miss Brader. "Miss Brader was my sweetheart," he said. Charles told Mary Becker that because he lacked a mother's love, he transferred some of it to his teachers. He went on to say, "the companionship of the kids in school gave me warmth and pleasure that I did not find in the poor surrounds of our dilapidated house."

When the younger children came home from school at lunchtime, they would have a lunch of "a chunk of homemade bread, a large cup of 'clabber milk' that was kept in large crocks in the cool cellar," wrote Becker. What is clabber milk? "It's nothing else than sour, unpasteurized milk that

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gets thick and looks like Jell-O. I haven't had any since we left the farm for the simple reason that pasteurized milk cannot be turned that way," explained Charles.

During summer vacation, the older kids sold vegetables from their "rickety wagon," going into Cudahy as far south as Morris Avenue. They munched on leftover vegetables on the way back.

Once one of the kids finished eighth grade, he or she took over the job of "chief cook" or housekeeper, while the previous house worker found a job to help bring in more money. Pa worked second shift which worked well, allowing him to leave orders for chores that needed to be done.

It was difficult for Pa to work full-time and take care of the children, but he felt he was doing a pretty good job of it. So, it was not surprising that Pa was not so happy when a woman from a county agency visited and offered to teach the girls "family housekeeping skills." Becker did not mention whether or not Pa took the worker up on her offer, but one could surmise that he did not.

Pa prepped meals on Sundays, usually baking bread and chopping the cabbage to make sauerkraut that was packed into barrels. The Sunday noon meal was one to look forward to. A few chickens were sacrificed for Pa's special chicken soup with "zapraska" gravy. The soup, along with homemade noodles and sauerkraut, was a wonderful meal. There was always sauerkraut on hand, but it was not the kids' favorite. But the rule was: no chicken until the sauerkraut was eaten. Pa's classic remark was said in Slovak, "Why don't you eat your sauerkraut—does it hang on your ribs?"

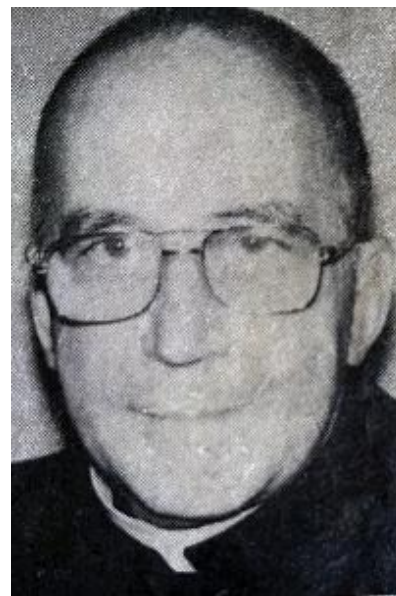
The family lived in the farmhouse for six years. They then moved to a farm near the airport and later one on South Whitnall Avenue. In 1931 Pa died. The older kids who were in their 20s were employed and worked hard to keep the family together. A year after their father died, the older boys thought they would give city living a shot and moved into Cudahy.

At one point, Charles changed his surname to Zell. His brothers Anthony and William also took the surname Zell. Brothers Joseph, Paul, and August went by the surname Zale, but brother John continued with Zelibapka. All three sisters married and took their husband's name.

**There are some interesting details about Charles Zell/Zelibapka taken from his June 23, 2005, obituary in the *George Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta.**

Charles was born in 1912 in Mecca, Indiana, the fifth of eleven children. The family was living in East St. Louis, Illinois, when his mother died in 1922. At that point, the family moved to the farmhouse in St. Francis. In early adulthood, Charles worked for George J. Meyer Manufacturing Company, but he always longed to be a priest. His decision to do so took place on July 2, 1938, before a statue of St. Anne in the St. Louis Cathedral. In an obit, Charles was quoted as saying, "I never had any special devotion to St. Anne, but was at this time drawn to the statue by some supernatural power. I knelt down to say the prayer on the plaque of the kneeler and immediately felt a great peace and strength of soul. All uncertainty vanished from my mind. As I left the church, I knew what I had to do."

In 1944, Charles joined the Trappist monks at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. They were members of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. The members lead a monastic way of life in solitude and silence, in assiduous prayer and joyful penitence. Charles was a "Brother" at this point, not a priest. This is a sect of Cistercian monks that originated in France and followed the teachings of the seventeenth-century abbot, Armand de Rance. The monastic life at Gethsemane Abbey was not something that Charles had a problem with. In his obit, Charles was quoted as saying, "I fell into the life at Gethsemane in stride. I felt sorry for some of those people who came from a city. Growing up, we had to get up early in the morning and didn't have any warm water to wash ourselves, just cold water. At Gethsemane, it was the same. Up early and cold water. Sleeping on a straw mattress and boards." Having been poor, working hard on the farm, and accustomed to going to bed hungry at times, this life was not going to be a trial. He was ordained into the priesthood May 1, 1980. According to Mary Becker, he was ordained at his home parish, St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Cudahy.



## A Surprise Letter From Sanok, Poland

by Anna Passante

It is not unusual for the historical society to receive letters seeking information about a past resident or a family member of St. Francis, but it was surprising when a letter from Poland arrived in our mailbox. Not only was it from Poland, but also the letter was written in Polish! Bozena Aszklar who lives in Sanok, Poland, sent the letter. Her distant relative is Joseph Aszklar (1867-1942), a carpenter and sculptor, who immigrated to America and arrived in Milwaukee in 1908. He later settled in St. Francis.

One of our board members, Jan Pientok, had the letter translated by Carolina Vega, the community engagement project manager at Clement Manor on Howard Avenue in Greenfield, Wisconsin. Bozena began her letter as follows:

***“While searching for information regarding my surname, by some miracle I came across the biography of Jozef Aszklar...”***

This biography she mentioned is a short article I wrote for our June 2015 historical society newsletter. I was surprised to learn that the article was on the worldwide web. I have reprinted the article on page four of this issue.

Bozena was thrilled to find information about her ancestor. She included in her letter a printout from Wikipedia, written in Polish, about Jozef Aszklar. I used an online translation tool to translate the Wikipedia article. I found out these facts about artwork executed by Aszklar while living in Poland before his immigration to America:

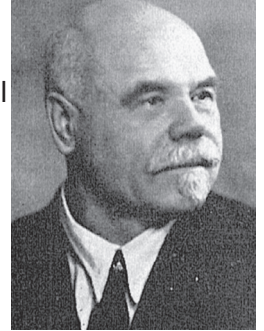
- 1895 to 1897: interior decoration of the Church of All Saints in Iwonicz, Poland
- 1898: constructed high altar in the Church of St. Adalbert in Cieszanów
- 1899: created figures for the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szepesolaszi
- Executed sculptures for the high altar of the Church of St. Lawrence in Rymanów
- Created sculptural works for the Church of St. Margaret in Targowiska
- 1902: created the stone pedestal base for the Tadeusz Kościuszko Monument in Sanok. Nazi occupiers demolished the monument in September 1940. [Aszklar would have another opportunity to contribute to the memory of Tadeusz Kosciuszko when he was commissioned to create the bust of Kosciuszko in Pulaski Park in Cudahy, Wisconsin]

Bozena is very proud of the fact that the Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok, Poland, has documented all of Aszklar’s achievements in Poland up to the year 1903.

At the end of her letter, Bozena wrote, “This extraordinary and very interesting life should be completed and connected. I am certain that with your help, we will do it.”

I was able to email Bozena about 20 articles that I found in newspaper databases about Aszklar’s work in Wisconsin. This is a translation of her response to receiving those articles:

***“Thank you so much, so much. I’m speechless and breathless. This is an extraordinary continuation of the life of such a talented man. He accomplished so much in Poland, and no one knows how much in the USA. Incredible. If you hadn’t written this article, I, on the other side of the world, would have known nothing. I think it’s our shared success and also my duty to continue Joseph Aszklar’s biography. Thank you so much for all the tremendous work you’ve done. I’ll be in touch, my dear Anna. Bozena Aszklar”***



Joseph Aszklar



Bozena Aszklar



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## Joseph Aszklar

By Anna Passante

Sculptor Joseph Aszklar was known for his bronze, stone, and wood sculptures, and especially for ecclesiastical figures. His art studio was in the city of St. Francis at 3862 South Iowa Avenue, now the site of the Golden Living Center nursing home. Aszklar was born in Austria in 1867 and later moved to Poland. As a small boy, he carved biblical figures out of wood and soapstone. Later he studied in Krakow, Poland, carving frames for pictures painted by noted Polish artists. These frames were commissioned by King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria. Aszklar went on to carve under the watchful eyes of sculptors Casimer Chodzinski and Casimer Wakulski.

Aszklar immigrated to America from Poland in 1908 and resided in Chicago for two years, practicing woodcarving there. His wife, Wanda, remained in Europe. She immigrated in 1910 with the couple's five-year-old daughter, Emily. The couple then settled in Milwaukee. From 1910 to 1913, Aszklar carved for the Rauwolf Ecclesiastical Arch Company. By 1918, he had his own art studio in St. Francis. As a child, the late Tom Milner (a historical society member) lived on Howard Avenue just east of Aszklar, and he remembers Aszklar's studio in a two-car garage. Milner, as a child, would often stop and talk to Aszklar as he worked.

In 1918, Aszklar landed a commission at Holy Hill in Hubertus, Wisconsin. He sculpted fourteen outdoor Stations of the Cross from 1918 to 1928. These life-size statues were carved from five-ton Bedford stone blocks, with the sculptures placed in fieldstone grottos. The sculptures remain there today.

Aszklar also was commissioned to sculpt a bust of General Casimir Pulaski for Pulaski Park in Cudahy, Wisconsin, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Pulaski's death in 1929. General Casimir Pulaski came to fight on the side of the Americans in the 1776 American War of Independence. The bust, cast in bronze, was cast by a Pole in Germany. Polish and American documents of historical interest were placed in a metal case inside the bust. The \$12,000 cost of the monument was raised by the Milwaukee Poles under the direction of Bernard Adamkiewicz and sponsored by the Polish Central Association of Cudahy. A parade preceded the unveiling that took place on June 5, 1932, with nearly 4,000 attendees. Aszklar was present at the dedication.

Aszklar was commissioned in 1933 by Ellen Drew to design and execute a bronze-plated steel angel in Calvary Cemetery for the grave of her husband, Patrick Drew, who died in 1903.

At age 75, Aszklar carved a life-sized Christ for the School Sisters of Notre Dame. To create the piece, he worked out of the Benzing & Mingesz monument shop. The shop may have been in an existing building at 4141 North Green Bay Avenue on Milwaukee's north side.

Aszklar died September 5, 1942, at age 75. Before his death, he had spent the summers at his St. Francis home, tending a vegetable garden and in winter residing with his daughter in Milwaukee.



Pulaski Bust at Pulaski Park in Cudahy, WI  
Left: Joseph Aszklar

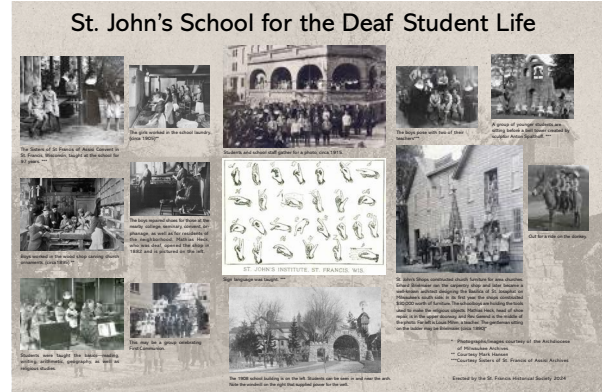
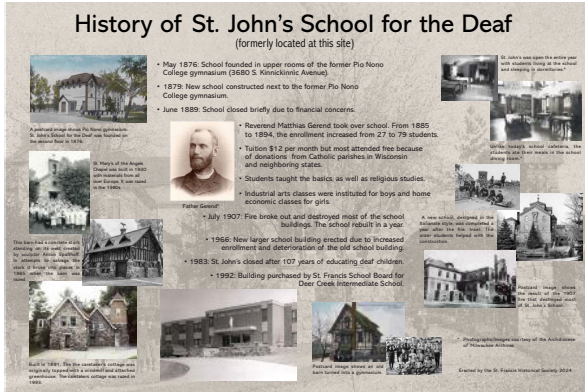


One of the Stations of the Cross at Holy Hill

# What's New?

## St. John's School for the Deaf Historical Signs Donated by the Historical Society

St. John's School for the Deaf historical signs were dedicated on May 9, the weekend of the St. John's Alumni's event at Deer Creek Intermediate School. The signs, created by John Toth at MKEGraphics, were placed near the front doors of Deer Creek Intermediate School. Parents, students, and visitor snow have easy access to them. Thank you, St. Francis School System, for installing the signs. There were 150 attendees at the alumni event. They were very pleased with the signs. Historical Society vice-president, George Ramoni, gave a speech about the history of St. John's.



## Dedication of Jared Thompson's Headstone

Jared Thompson, St. Francis pioneer and founder of the Lake Protestant Cemetery, has a new headstone. The September newsletter will have the date of the fall dedication of the stone.

## Jessica Michna as Dolly Madison

Jessica Michna is scheduled to present her portrayal of Dolly Madison on June 11 at 6:30 p.m. at the St. Francis Civic Center, 3400 E. Howard Avenue. This is the Society's contribution to the celebration of America's 250th anniversary.

## Wisconsin Lighthouse Program

Ken and Barb Wardius will be presenting a program on Wisconsin lighthouses on Thursday, August 6, at 6:30 pm. They have written a number of books on lighthouses. Watch your postal mail for your personal invitation.

## City's anniversary

The city of St. Francis is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. There will be a celebration party on the 4th of July at Vretenar Memorial Park. The historical society will have a table. Come visit us!!!

## To the Editor

This is an excerpt of an email from historical society member Mike Rudolf about the Citie gas station article that Anna Passante wrote for the March 2026 newsletter:

*I do remember a station there from my days at Sacred Heart School. My Uncle Steve would have worked there in the early 1930's. That building was replaced by a more modern building that sold Cities Service gas. We now know it as Citgo. The building pictured was before my time. I don't remember when the businesses ceased operations there but I remember having my car serviced there as late as 1986.*

**Mike Rudolf**

# Photos from the dedication of the St. John's School for the Deaf historical signs





Left: historical society vice president, George Ramponi, gave a talk about the history of St. John's.





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 are welcome.**

June 13, 2026

July 18, 2026

August 15, 2026

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

**Facebook:** St. Francis Historical Society

**Email:** st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com

**Address:** 3400 E. Howard Ave.

**Website:** stfranciswihistoricalsociety.org

**Phone:** 414-316-4391