

ISIDORE WILLIAM SCHMITT 1913-1995

Hello, my name is Isidore William Schmitt. You can call me "Izzy". I was born on July 30, 1913 on the family farm about 2 ½ miles northeast of Westphalia. I was the sixth of ten children born to John P. Schmitt and Regina Ott Schmitt.

In September of 1920, at the age of 7 years, I entered the first grade at St. Mary's School in Westphalia. I loved to go to school as a break from working on the farm. Going to school didn't mean I didn't have to work however. I still had to get up early in the morning and do my chores: feed the chickens and hogs and milk the cows; then walk to school which started at 7:30 AM.

The 4th of July picnic was always exciting for us. For spending money, my brothers and sisters and I would catch sparrows by hand at night from around the straw stack where they made their nests. We would take them to town the next day and get 2 cents per head for them. At that time, in Michigan, in the 1920s, there was a bounty on sparrows because they were spreading disease and causing crop damage for farmers. One time, I saved up \$2.98 and bought a sheepskin coat with my "sparrow money".

When I graduated from the eighth grade in 1928, there were 10 boys and 10 girls in my class. My Dad also died that year. There was no High School in Westphalia at the time. So, it was decided that I should go to Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit since I already had a brother, Albert, going to that school. But, after attending for 2 years, my mother realized that she could not afford to have 2 sons go there. It was a sacrifice but I decided to let Albert pursue his education. So, I came home to help work the farm. Several years later, I met the love of my life, Regina Koenigsknecht, from Fowler. We were married by my brother, Fr. Albert, in 1939. We had 4 children: Gerald, Richard, Ruth and Jean. They were all very good kids (most of the time). We had 13 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

Before working at St. Mary's, I had several other jobs. I worked for Harold Pung on his farm in Fowler. I drove a semi-truck for Clarence Freund, hauling logs to the Freund Saw Mill which was located on Price Road across the road from the cemetery, just east of the creek. The truck was also used to haul beer from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Detroit, Flint, Owosso and Ionia. All barrels and cases had to be hand-loaded and unloaded. I also worked a short time for Consumers Energy in Lansing.

I worked for St. Mary's for 37 years. In the early days, the janitor had to wind the old church clock by hand, daily, around noon. The Angelus was rung by hand at 6:00 AM, 12:00 Noon and 6:00 PM. All bells were rung by hand in the old church. Every New Year's Eve, the bells were rung from 11:55 PM til midnight to ring out the old year. The clock would strike 12:00 midnight. Then the bells were rung til 12:05 AM to ring in the New Year.

All furnaces on the church grounds were fired by hand. Coal had to be shoveled into the furnaces and ashes taken out. After natural gas became available in the area, the coal furnaces were converted to gas.

Every morning, the nuns would walk to church at 6:45 AM to receive Communion. Sidewalks had to be shoveled for them. After Fr. Miller became pastor, he changed that and he would take Holy Communion to the convent.

Snow was shoveled by hand until a tractor and scraper were bought around 1951. All the maintenance to the buildings, both inside and outside, had to be done. Also all the lawns had to be mowed.

When I started taking care of the cemetery, a lot of the trees toward the front, along both sides of the driveways had to be planted. That was a priority for Fr. Gutha. All graves were dug by hand. An old model "A" pickup was used to haul dirt. So, when the tractor was bought and a trailer, with a hand crank dump box, was built at Gross Machine Shop, it made digging graves easier and faster. In later years, Leo Fedewa would dig the graves with his backhoe.

The lawn mowing was done with walk-behind mowers. In later years, a couple of riding mowers were bought and used whenever possible to save time.

Every year, the fish pond had to be drained and the fish taken out before it got cold. They were put in the old rectory basement in a tank for the winter. In the spring, they were moved back to the cemetery. Tomb stone footings were poured using a small cement mixer, behind the vault, and wheeling the cement to where it was needed. Once, someone asked me, "How many people are buried out here?" I said, "All of them".

I drove the only St. Mary's School bus. It was a 54 passenger 1957 Chevy. It was used for transporting the basketball teams. The children prayed the rosary to and from games. The bus was also used for parish trips and transporting children to and from school from the northwest area of the parish. One year, I bought each child, on the bus, a whistle for Christmas. I told them, "Don't blow the whistle on the bus. Wait till you get home!" That night, I got a couple of phone calls telling me, "Izzy, please don't do that again! Those whistles are driving us crazy." I drove the bus for 14 years. It made 84,000 miles.

One of my jobs, that didn't make me any friends, was blinking the lights at weddings in the old hall. The hall was to be empty by 11:30 PM. So, when I blinked the lights at 11:15 PM, most people were having a good time and didn't want to go home yet. Lets blink them once more for old time's sake.

I wore many hats at St. Mary's. Also, I was a volunteer fireman for 20 years. When the church fire occurred in 1959, a fireman from Fowler and I climbed the scaffolding on the north side of the church, where the fire started. We chopped a hole in the side but fought a losing battle. The fire had such an early start and was burning on the opposite side of the large beams and we couldn't get to it. I inhaled a lot of smoke and was forced to get out which was probably one of the hardest things that I ever had to do. It was a heartbreaking time for everyone.

Sometimes, I was a chauffeur for the good Sisters of Christian Charity. Whenever a Sister was sent to or from the Mother House, in Wilmette, Illinois, I would transport them and the large trunks, containing all they had. They were picked up or taken to the train station in Battle Creek. It was always a good feeling to bring them to Westphalia for the first time. Sometimes, when they had to leave, it was kind of sad for them.

I was a spiritual person. I prayed the rosary daily with family, whenever possible, and was able to recite the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary by heart. I was a Eucharistic Minister and a member of the church choir. And I was honored to play the role of Christ in a parish passion play in 1942.

I enjoyed retirement and spent a lot of time in my little barns, in the back yard, working on wood projects. Regina and I loved playing cards with the "Solo Gang". Going on a balloon ride was very enjoyable; just flying over town and the countryside.

I also loved playing little jokes on people. Once, I went to the Post Office and noticed Delbert Thelen's car and Stanley Wieber's car parked next to each other. You all know that they are neighbors. I reached into Stanley's car and got his garage door opener and put it in Delbert's car and put Delbert's opener in Stanley's car. When each of them got home, they opened the other's garage door.

Sometimes, the jokes were also on me. I always wondered who put those two darn chickens in my backyard between the two little barns. I always blamed John Lehman for that. He always denied it! If anyone here knows who did it - let me know.

One of my favorite nuns was Sr. Angelica [Ruth Hengesbach]. Regina and I even named one of our daughters, Ruth, after her. While she was still going to school, we would kid around a lot. One day, I was upstairs in the gym, nailing down some floor boards. She was just standing there talking and would not move her foot over. So, I nailed her shoe to the floor. In 1995, when I was very ill in the hospital, she came to see me and still remembered that event. We had a nice visit - this was the night before I died. As she was leaving, she said to me, "Isidore, du bist ein guter mann." ["You are a good man."]

Thank you all for coming!