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St. Joseph's in Wright celebrates continuity

By **Jim Mencarelli**
The Grand Rapids Press

A sense of continuity hangs in the air at St. Joseph's Catholic School in Wright Township.

It's visible in the red brick building constructed in 1910 and it's noticeable with the students, most following in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents and, in many cases, great-grandparents.

The school celebrates its 125th year today, a historical legacy that began in a log cabin in 1855 and continued through a succession of buildings to the red schoolhouse now in use.

St. Joseph's has served the mostly German community that initially settled this part of Ottawa and northwestern Kent counties in the mid-1800s and has remained generation after generation.

"It makes this a very traditional school," said Sister Margaret Kienstra, the school's principal. "The parents have a real interest in the school and a desire to keep it going."

"Actually, this is not just a school, it's a community, and a community that's very involved."

The church and school sit in the middle of Wright, a four-corners community in the



PRESS PHOTO/JIM MENCARELLI

see CONTINUITY, Page 6 Sister Margaret Kienstra: "This is not just a school, it's a community. . ."

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township's northeast corner. This area was settled around 1844 by Henry Host and his wife Mary Omor, Germans who came from the Alsace-Lorraine region.

More German Catholics followed and soon a missionary priest out of Grand Rapids was visiting the families monthly by horseback. In 1853, a log cabin was built to house missionaries overnight.

Records show the parish school was started in 1865, classes being held in the cabin. Later, when a church was built, the school moved to the church basement.

A wood-frame school building was constructed in 1885 with living quarters upstairs for nuns and teachers. It had a pot-bellied stove and wooden benches. German was taught during morning classes and English in the afternoons.

The present red brick schoolhouse was built in 1910 and comes complete with a cupola. The

schoolhouse stands along 8th Avenue with the church cemetery behind it.

Unlike many rural schools, St. Joseph's has not lost enrollment in recent years. The farming community around here has remained constant over the last century, still a largely German community.

Most of the 103 children enrolled today in kindergarten through eighth grades are descendants of the original pioneers.

The parish plans a celebration of the school's 125 years. It is to be held today with a spring program from 1 to 7 p.m. in which students will re-enact part of the history. The public is invited.

"This is a real family-oriented school," said Kienstra. "Everyone knows everyone else, and they're real friendly. The students take an interest in studying because it's not just the teachers pushing them, but the parents as well."

"Most of the parents attended this school, as did their parents. They know what needs to be learned."