

Roger Gronefeld

Ancestry

Roger Gronefeld's mom, Helen Mattie, went to Saint Peter Grade School. She didn't go to high school because she had to earn money because of the Depression. She worked at a factory, International Shoe Company, on Fifth Street.

His dad, Emil, was from Frieden's Church in Saint Charles. They were married at Saint Peter in 1936 but not in the church. They were married in the church rectory on a Wednesday; they couldn't be married in the church because Roger's dad was Episcopalian, not Catholic. His dad was required to take instructions. This requirement about not being married in the church changed before Vatican II. They were married by Father Pezold, who also baptized Roger. For the reception, they had a big barn dance at the farm on Hackmann Road.

Roger traced his family tree and found an interesting fact. His parent's ancestors were both from the same town in Germany, West Phalia, in the diocese of Munster. His dad's parents came to Kentucky in the early 1800's. His mom's side came to Old Monroe in the late 1800's and then moved to Ehlman Road. His mother's maiden name was Burkemper.

He has his mom's and her parents' baptismal certificates and marriage licenses. His mother's baptismal certificate is in German. His dad's confirmation from Frieden's from the 1800's is also in German.

Grade School and High School Days

Saint Charles was a small town when he was in school. There were farms at West Clay and First Capitol and also on Boonslick. Kingshighway was the end of Saint Charles.

Roger Gronefeld went to Saint Charles Borromeo for all of grade school since his family lived at 809 N. Fourth St. Jefferson was the dividing line between Saint Charles Borromeo and Saint Peter. His family moved to Eighth and McDonough in 1951. For continuity, he finished grade school at Saint Charles Borromeo and then went to Saint Peter High School. He graduated in 1956, the last class there. He

showed his graduation ring, which had a scroll in the center and leaves on either side. There were no particular closing ceremonies. The kids were aware that the high school was going to close because the building was in bad shape. He was surprised that the fire department kept the building open because there was only one entrance and then steps. The gym was on the top floor. There was a metal stair escape on Third Street. Ceiling plaster would fall on the students. The radiator broke one winter and in one second the whole room was full of steam instantly.

In high school half the students were from Saint Charles Borromeo and half were from Saint Peter Grade School. Everyone blended and it was a close knit group. Many of the former students still keep in touch; even now they get together at Christmas for lunch or dinner.

The nuns watched to make sure the children learned something. They were very dedicated. There were about 40 students in a grade. He corresponded with the nuns after he left school.

He was a server in grade school and high school and also at Sacred Heart Academy. There were no lectors or Eucharistic Ministers then.

Roger was in the choir at Saint Charles Borromeo and also at Saint Peter. He was also a drum major. He stated, "I'm the only one that could fit in the uniform." The band practiced at Marian Hall where the chapel now is. There were about 40 people from all grades in it. The nun was the leader and also the music teacher. Kids got to events either on the school bus or by driving there.

The east side of the church had metal, like fencing, on the windows to protect them from balls. Homebase was at the corner at First Capitol and the balls were hit toward the church.

The Family Businesses

Roger's parents opened The Tavern (it was officially Gronefeld's) on September 9, 1929, which was a few weeks before the Depression. It was on First Capitol between Jackson and Tompkin. His parents, and his dad's brother and his wife ran it. Since this was during the days of Prohibition, they sold "near beer." They also owned a Conoco gas station next door.

Roger would walk from Saint Charles Borromeo to the tavern and gas station to work. He worked until 6:00 on weeknights and then had to do his homework at home. Kids worked back then. At The Tavern he would sweep floors and wash windows. Roger worked at the gas station putting gas in the gas tanks.

He even had a uniform. The gas tank was in the front under the windshield. Gas was 20 cents a gallon then. The station also did mechanical work.

Everyone was trustworthy. The ladies could trust them for gas and for checking the antifreeze in the winter. They had many repeat customers, who he is still friends with now.

When Roger was older, he had a farm in Troy. He would work at the family businesses and be back at the farm on weekends. Roger's parents finally closed the businesses after 51 years in 1981. After they passed away, he found every bill they ever had for fifty years.

The Depression and World War II

At the beginning of the Depression for one or two weeks, the banks closed. No one could cash checks, even from reputable places. Men that his family knew would come in with checks from International Shoe Company that they couldn't cash. The men would beg Roger's family to loan them money because they couldn't feed their families. Roger's family would loan the men money to buy groceries. They were always very generous.

During World War II, there was rationing. There were ration coupons for gas and groceries. People couldn't buy these items without coupons. When World War II started, the government took Roger's dad and put him at Curtiss Wright. Since Curtiss Wright was doing critical work for planes, the workers needed to be able to get there. Roger's dad would walk the parking lot and check for bad tires. He would give the people a receipt to get new tires. It was the only way to get new tires.

Roger's grandpa and mom ran the station. During the war, everyone pitched in. His aunts who had been homemakers worked at Kratz, an airplane place on Old Saint Charles Rock Road. He remembers one blackout in Saint Charles during the war. People had to turn all their lights off.

Cemetery

Roger's parents moved to Eighth and McDonough in 1951, with the house backing to the cemetery. The cemetery had big wooden fences along Schaefer, which was a dirt road then. Neighbors had gardens between the road and fence because they didn't have big boards.

Mike Hannon used to be the handyman at church as well as the groundskeeper at the cemetery. He was a “jack of all trades.” He came from Ireland as a young adult and always carried a rosary from Our Lady of Knock. He used to dig the graves by hand, even when he was in his eighties. He didn’t want to disturb other graves. Every vault person knew that the casket would fit perfectly into the grave. Mike always kept track of exactly how many graves he had dug.

The grass used to be cut with big scythes, which are used to cut wheat. It took one month or longer to get from one end to another of the cemetery, so it wasn’t kept mowed like it is now.

Roger saw various things at the cemetery, from someone shining a light on a tombstone at night and scaring him as a kid, to a Civil War Re-enactment. It was normally held at the Saint Charles Riverfront Festival but the river flooded the area and the re-enactment was moved to where the Saint Peter and Lutheran parts of the cemetery met. He was walking his dog when he saw all this. He saw the North and the South, cannons, and all these people falling and exclaimed to himself, “I’m the only survivor of the Civil War.”

The Parish Center

One of the main reasons the parish center was built in the early 60’s was because the grade school was expanding. There were over 300 kids in school. There was no room in the high school because it had been condemned and torn down shortly after it was empty in 1956. Sometimes RCIA met in the hospital and the people had to take the TV and VCR to the hospital. There was no gym or kitchen, and fish fries used to be cooked in the cafeteria.

One proposed area for the parish center was at First Capitol and Second where Locust Hill Dairy was across Second Street. It was determined that putting the parish center here would take up too much parking. It was eventually decided to put it where it currently is but logistics had to be worked out. There was a confectionary there that belonged to Dr. Felder. He worked out a deal with the church to trade the confectionary lot for a house three doors up First Capitol where he then had his office. Third Street also was closed off. Saint Peter had to petition the Saint Charles City Council regarding this.

People probably don’t realize that there is a big spring under the parish center on the First Capitol side. They use a sump pump because of this.

Convent

Marian Hall was where the Chapel is now but closer to Clay (First Capitol) than the church. It had a chapel which was used for weekday Masses; the church didn't have to be heated with a wood stove, which made it so hot. There were also some classrooms. The nuns lived in attached brick cottages which were between Marian Hall and where the 1960 school building is. Colloquially, people referred to Marian Hall and the cottages as the "old convent." Eventually, there were fewer nuns and they had lay teachers, like Miss Boerding, who taught for over forty years. These buildings were eventually torn down when Father Strauss was here because they were so dilapidated.

The newer convent was built where the Early Learning Center (ELC) now is. When the nuns left, the convent was vacant. At first it was made into a shared living community; people had to be able to take care of themselves. It wasn't feasible to keep it open. It then became the Early Learning Center. There are many children of workers at the hospital and downtown that use the ELC. Some of these people have even gone through RCIA. The ELC has helped the community and the parish. The income has also helped to run an expensive historic parish.

The Chapel

The chapel was dedicated in 1998 during Father Art Bromschwig's time. He was the proponent of building the chapel. At that time there was a huge need for additional classrooms. There were no restrooms in church; people would use the restrooms at the hospital because the cafeteria wasn't open. There was no gathering area for the church. Brides had to dress in the parish center, which was bad when it rained. Someone had to clean up the parish center after the wedding, which often fell to Betty Elmendorf.

Roger was on the parish council then and helped with the chapel planning. Various areas were studied as to where the chapel should be built. They wanted it near the church so brides could dress there and not have to go outside in the rain. One proposed area was where the old high school was. However, when it was torn down, the boilers were left there and covered. They didn't want to disturb this because of asbestos. It made more sense to keep this as handicapped parking.

The architect designed the chapel to match the church, with its red brick and similar architectural details. It took about a year to build. Many people actually think this was the first church because it matches so well. Roger stated, "There was a lot of good planning. Everything was thought out. The chapel turned out beautifully."

Parishioners are always so generous and give enough money for anything. Parishioners bought stained glass windows. There were ten big windows and could be bought for \$11,500. There were also smaller windows. The contributions were amazing.

Dave Stahlschmidt built the altar and he made the Holy Water fonts. When the inside of the church was redecorated, he redid the Crucifix to match the one in church.

The Stations of the Cross came from the convent. They were painted to match the ones in the church. The mission cross, which is in German, came from the church basement. Roger stated that it's amazing what is in the basement. There are different miscellaneous items and statues. People don't throw things away.

Weekday Masses used to be held in the chapel but now there are too many people at the 6:30 a.m. Mass to fit in the chapel. Eucharistic Adoration is held there. Small funerals are held in the chapel itself; the gathering space is also used for funeral visitations before the funeral Mass. The gathering space is good for people to congregate, sell various items or recruit volunteers, and have display cases of Saint Peter's artifacts. Families with small children sit in the chapel and can watch the closed circuit TV of the Mass.

Eventually the classrooms weren't needed. Father Bauer had them turned into the parish offices. It was hard for the priests living in the rectory to constantly hear the doorbell ringing and have all that activity in their house. There used to be a meeting room in the basement of the rectory.

Painting of the Church

The church was repainted in 2019. People had to celebrate Easter Mass under scaffolding. The church was never closed during this time. If it had been closed, Mass would have had to be held in the parish center and chairs would have had to be taken up and down.

Father Seper formed a committee to help study the painting of the church; Roger was on the committee. They visited about five churches for ideas. Saint Paul in Eureka had recently redone their church so that was a church they visited. Father Seper and Deacon Larry wanted symbolism with the painting. For example, there are grapes and wheat around the altar.

Artists, painters, and the committee of about six people met weekly for three weeks to figure out how the church should be painted. The lead contractor would show various choices for the sections along the windows, such as marble and imitation brick. The people were concerned about the blending of colors. The hardest area was behind the altar. They decided on brown behind the statues to blend in. They left the Latin words, *Mysterium Fidei*, Mystery of Faith, behind the tabernacle.

The flooring was changed from red carpet to tile. The red carpet was there when Roger was in high school. (As a side note, under the sanctuary floor, there's beautiful tile work underneath the wood.) The people studied various textures and kinds of flooring. One consideration was that they didn't want the tile to slide when a coffin was rolled down it for a funeral.

The architect, parishioner Steve Hollander, was really good and thought of things people didn't think of. He knew what companies to use. For example, he knew which company to take the pews out and then put them back in.

Everything is balanced and everybody did a decent job. Roger stated, "We did it right." People from other places are amazed. Many people haven't been in a church like that. The closest Catholic church with the beautiful statues and altar is All Saints.

Beauty of Saint Peter Church

Roger stated that many people don't realize what we have at Saint Peter Church. They need to walk around and see what we have. It feels like you're in a church.

People didn't used to be able to read and write. They used the visuals of the church to understand the Bible. The Bible comes to life with the Stations of the Cross, the statues, and the stained glass windows.

Roger stated that it's historic. It's like a mini basilica with its windows, stained glass, and painting, from the top of the tower to the deepest part of the basement.

Roger said, "We've had great pastors that have recognized the importance of preservation of the buildings and everything. They've been enthusiastic about keeping stuff up and keeping things the way it was. We've had generous parishioners who have donated." He further stated, "Ninety nine percent of people don't realize what we have. Seventy five percent of stuff here couldn't be made now."

Volunteering

Roger was a server in grade school up until Covid when they couldn't have servers. For over thirty years he's been a lector and Eucharistic Minister. He sang in both the regular choir and the Resurrection choir, and cantored when the cantor didn't show up.

He also decorated the inside and outside of the church with flowers for many years starting in the mid 1990's. He spent over forty hours a week watering all the plants. Father Ron Hopmeir groomed Roger regarding plants. Father had owned a greenhouse and done yard work in Arnold before he became a priest. At one time, Saint Peter had the largest poinsettia wholesale order at Bask and Skinker in Saint Louis; they had 500 poinsettias. Flowers cascaded down from the altar to the transept at Easter. They used to decorate more when flowers were cheaper. At Palm Sunday, palms were tied to the ends of every other pew.

Roger was involved in the Thursday Maintenance group. He put louvres in the steeple. He stated that the steps to the steeple are steep. They're small, creaky, and old. Roger said, "Don't go up if you're scared of heights." He described the clockworks up there. They sit on a beautiful cast iron table and the clock is in a glass case.

Clergy

Roger described the priests as dedicated and just like everyone else and he enjoys being around them. "We've been lucky with our priests and deacons."

Father Strauss was here when Roger was in grade school; Roger has known Father Art Bromschwig since high school. Father Peet was here when Roger started getting involved in the parish as an adult. Father Cole played the accordeon and took lessons. He used to play at get togethers. Roger stated that it wasn't uncommon for priests to drive school buses.

He has a story about Father Ron Hopmeir. He was ordained at Christmas and Saint Peter was his first assignment. Father Art (Bromschwig) was on vacation. At his first Mass here, he accidentally turned on the air conditioner in the winter.

Roger described the priests as being more human and approachable now than previously. He has them over at his house.

Deacon Tom Willbrand was the first deacon. It was different having deacons because the parish used to rely on the congregation.

He described Deacon Larry as fantastic. There's no one better. He stated, "How does he get his energy"?

Current Day

He didn't like the changes after Vatican II at first but now he likes the changes. The old prayer books used to have Latin on one side and English on the other side. The language in the readings has changed a bit.

He starts his weekday by going to Mass at 6:30, which he's been doing since the early 80's. It's peaceful and a nice, quiet way to start the day with the Eucharist. Now if he's not at Mass for a few days, people ask if something is wrong.

He's noticed many new parishioners, which he attributes to the church. "It looks and feels like a church." When he is an Eucharistic Minister, he notices many teens and young adults in their early 20's. We have very good young priests for Lindenwood and the Neumann Center. "Kids who come here and go to RCIA are very dedicated." He said the internet helps and also Deacon Larry.

Roger stated, "It's like a community, like a family. It's been a pleasure to be here."