

Pioneer John Schildgen Left a Bright Legacy

He Pushed Early German Immigrants in Grosse Pointe To Teach Their Children to Read & Write (in English)

Today in Washington the big push is for universal education. The plan has its doubters.

Before the Civil War in early Wilmette a parishioner of St. Joseph Church (before there was a school) campaigned to give children of German immigrants the tools for reading and writing basic English. He too encountered opposition, mostly from other settlers who wondered why this interloper, himself a German immigrant with a foreign dialect, was pushing for Grosse Point boys and girls to learn English.

John Schildgen, a pioneer and early civic leader, came to U.S. as an orphan from Trier in Prussia at age 16. Later he was among the early settlers who designated land on the north shore **New Trier** for their native soil. First he had to make his way.

After landing in Chicago he moved in with an uncle. He hauled wood to earn a few dollars. Then the two, uncle and nephew, caught sight of the open landscape up the north shore of Lake Michigan. They found a tract near Winnetka, purchased 30 acres, total cost \$142, which they then sold to the North Western Railroad Company at \$75 per acre.

Now Schildgen could settle down. At age 23 he married Katharina Wilhelm, 19, a newcomer with her parents from Oldenburg, Germany. The wedding was in St. Joseph's Church. Year was the Fall of 1852. They were to have 14 children. Schildgen insisted all of his children learn the language of his adopted land. He wanted his neighbors' children to have the same advantage. Schildgen had not been able to attend public schools when he came to America, and realized the drawback in social and business contact. He set his goal to enter public service and campaigned for divided school districts in the township. He became Grosse Point's school director and won a post on the Board of Education which lasted 14 years. He held other positions and was Justice of



Great-great grandson Robert Heinzen and wife Elizabeth (Spies) Heinzen today in Wilmette.

the Peace for 20 years.

At the summit of his career he was recognized by the CHICAGO MAGAZINE of Lake City Publishing Co.

"No man in the community has done more to advance the cause of education in Wilmette than John Schildgen."

He also became a wealthy landowner. He and a brother-in-law once owned all of the Indian Hills tract

Of the 14 children three daughters became nuns and a son a priest. Many old timers remember **Father Frank Schildgen** who died here in 1945. The nuns were **Sister Phillipa** (Katherine Schildgen);

Sister Wilhelmina (Josephine Schildgen), and **Sister Constantia** (Margaret Schildgen). Nine other Schildgen children married and lived for many years in this region - **Magdalena** married Mathias Selzer, **John** married Margaret Hoffman, **Mary Anne** married William Selzer, **Barbara** married Frank Alles, **Peter** married Agnes Sickinger, **Anthony** married Mary Elizabeth Schmittgen, **Joseph** married Theresa Bohnon, **Bernard** married Anne Schmidt, and **William** married Clara Isabelle Grossman and later Katherine Rose Reilly.

Mathias, fifth oldest child, never married and died at age 24.

Any Schildgen descendants still living here?

Robert Heinzen and his wife **Elizabeth (Spies) Heinzen** live on Hawthorne Lane off Romona Road. He is a great-great grandson of the patriarch John Schildgen. They have nine children. Bob and Elizabeth live within the boundaries of St. Joseph Church, but attend St. Francis Xavier. Why?

Bob explains: "We were married 48 years ago in that church, and it still has blessed memories."

Bob's mother was **Gertrude Schildgen**, daughter of the second generation Joseph. Bob Heinzen used to be a fervent member at St. Joseph's. He was in the first graduation class (1936) at the new school. Also when His Eminence George Cardinal Mundelein dedicated our present church on September 24, 1939, celebrant of the Mass was Father Frank Schildgen, then age 65, and an altar boy was his nephew Bob Heinzen.

The oldest living descendant is 96-year old **Rose Schildgen** who lives at Maryhaven in Glenview. She is the daughter of **Joseph Schildgen** and **Theresa Bohnon** who are shown in a group picture on this page. She is Bob Heinzen's aunt and granddaughter of the old patriarch who started it all.

Rose who plays Bingo several times a week at Maryhaven, buried three husbands. So the oldest descendant is really **Rose Schildgen Daley Brown Matthews**.

96 Years Ago she was christened in St. Joseph Church



Rose Schildgen - now at Maryhaven in Glenview



Photo taken June 24, 1934, second generation Schildgens. Front row seated, left to right: Anthony Schildgen, Barbara Schildgen Alles, Father Frank Schildgen, Lena Schildgen Selzer. Rear - Ben, Will and his wife Katherine, Theresa Bohnon Schildgen and Joseph Schildgen. The latter were parents of 96-year old Rose, pictured at Maryhaven.

St. Peter asked "Where the hell is Buffalo Grove?"

Father Frank Schildgen was posted at many outlying parishes in the Chicago Archdiocese during his long years in the priesthood. His brother Joe visited him one Sunday at a very rural (then) parish in Buffalo Grove. Looking over a vast expanse of uncultivated land, Joe asked his reverend brother:

"You like it out here?"
The priest replied: "It's o.k. if you want the great outdoors."

Joe encouraged his brother. "Make the best of it."

The priest thought a moment, then told Joe: "I'm only concerned when I die and go to face St. Peter he will ask: 'Who are you, and where from?' 'I'll say Father Frank Schildgen from Buffalo Grove.'"

And St. Peter will reply: "Where the hell is Buffalo Grove?"

