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March 31, 2020

Teaching Aviation to Underprivileged Boys: The Founding of Lewis University

Lewis University has a large footprint in the Village of Romeoville, but do you know its humble origins? How generous donations of land, funds, and materials created a haven for Chicago's poorest boys and produced an institution nearing its 90th anniversary?



1920, the Archdiocese of Chicago had numerous schools for their parishioners, but they wanted to be sure all kids could be educated, even if they couldn't afford the existing schools. Bernard J. Shiel, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago, had a vision to construct a school where work skills could be taught to underprivileged Chicago boys. At about the same time these technical school plans were being formulated, an aging Michael and Frances Fitzpatrick approached the Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Mundelein, about donating 170 acres of land to the church. The Archbishop put Fitzpatrick's land together with Shiel's idea and a school began to take shape.

Funding was the next step, but the economy of the late 1920's was on shaky ground. Sheil, who was now responsible for the entire school project, brought up fundraising with the Holy Name Society of Chicago. This was an organization of 150,000 men from Chicago parishes who supported the Archdiocese in creative ways. The Society came through and, in recognition of their generosity, the institution was named the Holy Name Technical School when it opened in 1932.

Sheil continued to look for benefactors for his institution and found one in developer, manufacturer, and industrialist Frank J. Lewis. Lewis saw the good the new school would do and was able to arrange for salvaged construction materials from demolished buildings to be sent to the school. Over the years, Lewis would continue his support of the school through salvaged materials and financing. In 1934, the school honored him by renaming the institution Lewis Holy Name Technical School.

Sheil wanted the boys to be taught technical skills and self-confidence so they could quickly find a job in an economy trapped in the Great Depression. He also had an eye to the future and chose the exciting new field of aviation as a focal point. Flight was still cutting edge at the time. In 1927, Charles Lindbergh made his famous solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Amelia Earhart became the first woman to do the same in 1932, just 10 days prior to the school's dedication.

The students were the poorest of the poor. As Shiel himself said, "The entrance fee is absolute poverty. If the boy's parents can afford to pay tuition, the boy is not accepted." Chicago parishes nominated the young men who would be sent to the school and 15-20 boys were part of the first class. These students received a technical education combined with classes to help with other skills like writing, arithmetic, religion, and communication. The students lived a life of structure at the institution and were even required to wear uniforms.

Many things have changed since the founding of the school, including the name (five changes), the all-boys restriction, and not accepting tuition paying students. One thing that has not changed, however, is its focus on aviation. The sports teams are called the Flyers, their mascot is an old time pilot, they have an MD-80 airplane on campus, and students take to the skies in aircraft dozens of times a day. What started as a passion project for the underprivileged has become one of the top universities in the Midwest and Romeoville is thrilled to be called its home.