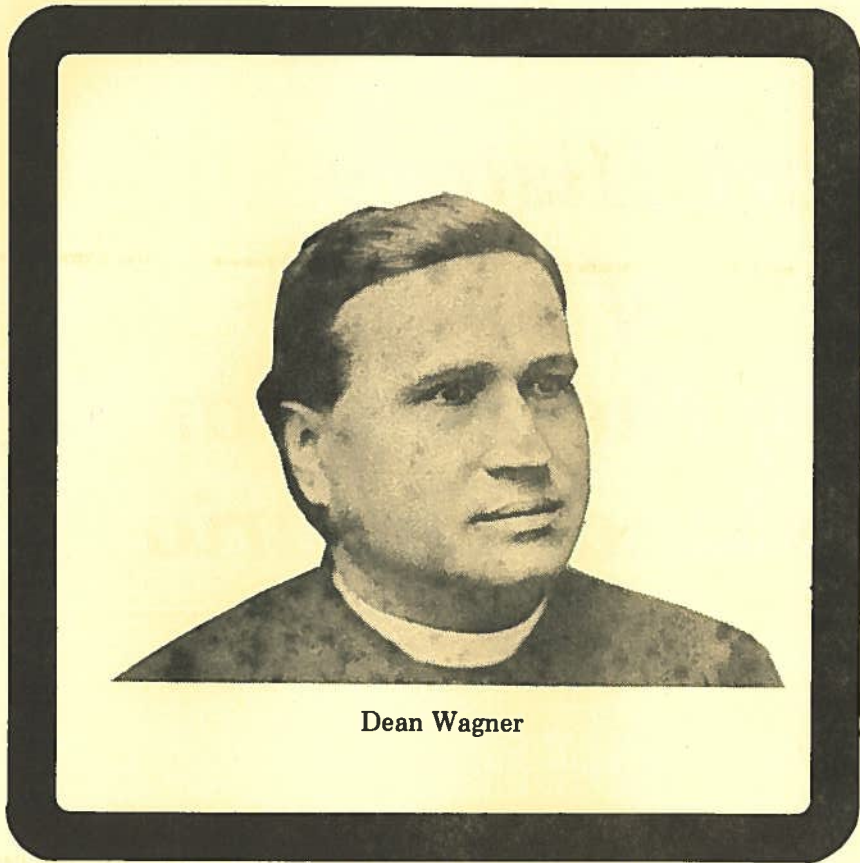


A
Short History
of
The Star of the Sea Parish
Pelee Island, Ontario



The Church as it looked originally in 1887.

1887 - 1987



Dean Wagner



New insul-stone siding installed 1947

The following is an excerpt from Page 1 in the records of Our Lady, Star of The Sea Church, as written by Dean Wagner, who had been appointed by the bishop of London to see what might be done to further the spiritual welfare of the Catholic Pelee Islanders. The history of our Church is rather interesting, and we thought you might like to share it with us:

"Pelee Island, 5th June, 1887" The history of the Catholic Church in Pelee Island up to the present date is told in a few words. The first and oldest catholic resident of the Island is Mr. James Cummings, who has been light-house keeper for nearly 38 years. During these 38 years many Catholics came to the island with the intention of making it their permanent home, but finding neither church nor school they removed again to other parts. During these last few years however, a small number of Catholics have permanently settled down on this beautiful Isle and they form now the little nucleus of the future parish of Our Lady "Star of The Sea". During all these past years the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered only twice on the Island -once on Augt.22nd, 1862, by the Rev. John Dandat, then parish priest of Amherstburg, and again in Augt. 1878, by the Rev. Fr. Dissneur of Kelly's Island. Last Fall the Rt. Rev. John Walsh, Bishop of London, placed the Island under the spiritual care of the Very Rev. I.F. Wagner, Dean of Windsor. This Rev'd gentleman, towards the end of Oct. sent down one of his assistants, Rev. Fr. McManus to see what might be done towards furthering the spiritual welfare of the Catholic Islanders. Fr. McManus said Mass at Mr. Jas. Cummings' residence in the presence of an audience of eleven persons and before he left the Island he discovered six Catholic families. As the winter came on immediately after, nothing more could be done on the Island before Spring. However, Dean Wagner, from the report made to him by Fr. McManus, came to the conclusion that a chapel was urgently needed on the Island and that in the future, the Catholic residents should be regularly visited by the Priest. He then went to work and organized a bazaar on a small scale among his parishioners of St. Alphonsus, from which he realized \$385. towards the building of the projected chapel. Early in the Spring, Dean Wagner sent down to the Island, the Rev. Fr. M.McGrath, with a view to make further inquiries as to the probable number of Catholic residents on the Island. The Rev'd gentleman said Mass for the people at Mr. Cummings' residence, and in his subsequent investigating tour, discovered thirteen catholic families. Meantime a subscription had been started with a view towards the building of the Chapel. The result proved satisfactory, and the joyful news was announced to the people that the Chapel should be built forthwith. Mr. James Cummings, the veteran Catholic of the Island at once donated an acre of land to build the chapel upon, and the contract for the building was given a few days after to Mr. J. B. L'Weureux of Windsor. On the 3rd of May, 1887, all the material of the chapel which had been prepared at Windsor, was shipped down to the Island per steamer "City of Dresden", Dean Wagner & the Carpenters - 5 in Number, taking passage fare on the same boat. The next day the erection of the Chapel was begun and the workmen labored so well that the whole carpenter work was completed within just four weeks. And to the credit of Mr. L'Weureux, the designer & builder of the chapel, it may be mentioned that he has done his job in a workmanlike manner, and to the full & complete satisfaction of all concerned, so much so that St.Mary's Chapel stands there as the very gem of the Island.

Whilst the building of the Chapel was going on, on the island, Dean Wagner interested himself in favor of his dear Islanders, amongst the good people of his congregation at Windsor, and succeeded in obtaining for the Chapel the following gifts. A Bell, 300 lbs weight, from Miss Christine Langlois. A set of beautiful stations of the Cross from Louise Montrenil. A neat little altar from Mrs. James Cotten. The statue of Our Lady, Star of the Sea from Mrs. Bernard Fox. On the 3rd of June, the Bell was shipped down to the Island per steamer "City of Dresden" and on the following Sunday, Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, was solomely blessed and consecrated by Dean Wagner, immediately before the Mass, which was on that day, for the first time, offered up in the still unfinished chapel. The ceremony took place in the presence of a congregation of about eighty persons, fully one half of them belonging to other denominations. (June 5)

(Note: All of these items still remain in our Church today.)

Dean Wagner continues in his notes.. "Again I claim space in your valuable columns still further bring into Prominence that dear little Island, the Gem of all the Isles with which the Western Portion of Lake Erie is so Beautifully dotted. I call it the Gem of Erie Isles not because of its apparant Beauties, but because of what it is destined to become when our good and Progressive Government will have done justice to this long forgotten and ignored portion of its' extensive Dominion." (We're still waiting!)

Apparently the Chapel was left unfinished until 1909. There is a notation in the book that in August, 1909, the Chapel was plastered at the cost of \$50.00. Signed...Gabriel Fuma, C.S.B.

Then the Church fell on rather bad times. The next history or writings pertaining to it's condition read as follows: Beginning Sept. 1916 and ending Sept. 1917, Rev. V.I. Donnelly, C.S.B. was in charge of the Pelee Island mission. Mass was said alternately at Gerry Mahoney's at the south end of the island and at Gil Ouelettes' at the north end, as the church was badly in need of repairs, thanks mostly to the "Roustabouts" who little else but destroy what we built up. The writer was informed that the island "sports" had damaged other churches built on the island, which showed that their grudge was not against the Catholic church in particular. The necessity of repairing the church was pointed out and arrangements were made to have the work done during the winter months. But spring found nothing had been accomplished. Then the excuse was offered that there was no money and that the farmers would be too busy attending to their fields and crops to attempt any repairs before Fall. In Sept. 1917 Rev. M. J. Ryan C.S.B. lately appointed pastor of the parish of Amherstburg, to which the mission belonged, paid a visit to the island and took charge of the work.

There are a lot of marriages, baptisms, etc. entered in the book. One of interest might be the following: "On June 6, 1926 was baptized John Star Hamel, born Dec. 17, 1925 of the lawful marriage of Craton Anthony Hamel and Catherine Isabelle McCormick. Sponsors: John Mahoney and Julia McCormick." Signed: Luke Beuglet C.S.B.

It is 1927 before there is any more _____
mention of repairs or renovations made to the Chapel.

It is now 1927, and Fr. Harvey Wilbur C.S.B. is sent to take care of our little Mission. He decided to have a mission, and altho it started out poorly, it turned out to be very successful. The speaker was Fr. Donnelly, and as word spread about the island, large numbers turned out for the evening services. The following are a few excerpts from his writings: "The Chapel was very much too small to hold the number of people who came. The Protestants far outnumbered the Catholic people in attendance. This must have had a good effect on our own people because each evening they came in greater numbers. The little chapel looked very nice during this meet. I raised about fifteen dollars to buy lumber to make kneeling benches, which were sadly needed for the chapel. Myself, Mr. Felix Bauhaus and Mr. Fred Ouellette put them together and painted them. After harping and harping about the need of a new roof which was now for some time sadly in need of repair, the men, under the leadership of Mr. Felix Bauhaus bought roofing and put it on. And they also put new cement steps in front of the church and repaired the foundation. The ladies raised money for a new carpet for the Sanctuary. The people seemed pleased with the new appearance of the chapel and the mission. The ladies raised a sum of \$32.00 which I spent on green and white paint to paint the outside of the chapel. I did not begin this Historical book of Pelee, but I feel that once it was started it should be kept up for future record." G. Harvey Wilbur, C.S.B. Nov. 18, 1928"

Father L. A. Wemple then took care of Pelee Island in 1937. He reports that in the summer of 1938 "greater plans were made. This summer the church was to be shingled so that the rain would not drip down upon the main altar and down the walls. Accordingly, an excursion was organized for the islanders to go to Put-In-Bay, Ohio. The sum of \$34.50 was realized from the excursion, another \$12.00 was added from a dance. The shingles were up in two days and then Mr. Fred Ouellette painted the church white with green trimming. Once again, the little church dedicated to Our Lady, Star of the Sea, was a thing of beauty and all the island was proud of it."

On August 17, 1943, Rev. F.J. Walsh was appointed the first resident administrator of Pelee Island. Previous to this, the island was a mission of St. Michael's, Leamington. Fr. Walsh wrote: "On my first visit to the island, which was reached by boat from Kingsville (S.S. Pelee), a mission was in progress. At the conclusion of the mission, His Excellency Bishop Kidd, paid his first visit to the island and administered the sacrament of confirmation. I returned to the mainland to prepare supplies to spend the winter on the island. The following week I returned to take possession of the Star of The Sea. Fr. Wemple generously left a bicycle in excellent condition which was an excellent conditioner for one who had become soft in a city parish. During the summer of '43 the bishop had authorized Fr. Wemple to buy a rectory. This was purchased from Harold Beard and the next step was to move it next to the church where a cement foundation had been constructed. The contract was given to Julius Callowant of the island. Unfortunately the proper equip. was not available and the house collapsed on the road in front of Art Fergusons blacksmith shop, a short distance from the church. It had to be torn down and rebuilt on the chosen site. This was done with volunteer help under Mr. Callowants directions, assisted by FRed Ouellette and myself. It was a long and expensive job, not completed until the summer of 1944 when I moved

Fr. Walsh continues: "On my arrival in Aug. 1943, I had determined to batch in the sacristy until the new rectory was completed. However, when the cool breezes from Lake Erie began to sweep across the island with regularity in the Fall, this was found to be unhealthy and impractical, and accommodations were accepted with Mrs. Margaret McCormick, prop. of the north-end pool-room. Later on in the winter, owing to the distance from the pool-room to the church, accommodations were taken with Mr. & Mrs. Chas. Oare on the East-West road, a short distance from the church. Mass was offered for the first time at Christmas, in 1943. The rectory was ready for occupancy in June 1944. It was greatly appreciated and made the life of the priest more in keeping with the privacy demanded by his work. The first Midnight Mass was offered at Christmas of 1944. It was a low Mass with a choir composed of Catholics, Anglicans, Menonites, etc., singing the Christmas carols. It indeed was a solemn occasion with the church packed to capacity. During the winter of 1944-45 many rumours were going about that Fr. Walsh would be leaving Pelee Island and a successor would be appointed. Many curates throughout the Diocese were fearful, but the lot fell on Rev. T.G. Dill" Fr. Dills then writes: " I was told to report on Pelee Island on August, 1945. I caught the boat "The Pelee" at Kingsville and arrived in about an hour and a half at the island in time for supper. We ate supper at the Hotel Pelee and then they left me to my fate. For a while I was looked on with curiosity, but soon got acquainted with many of the people whom I found friendly and kind. In July 1947 the steeple of the church was covered with green asphalt shingles by Mr. Hammond Crawford, one of the ever-ready non-catholics of the island who gladly assisted the priest. A generous donation from the congregation, as well as from some non-Catholics made it possible to buy new windows for the church. The old glass, bent by the years of wind and rain and covered on the inside with a coloured, faded and translucent paper, was replaced by glass which cast a light blue tint in the church. Drafts, due to fallen out putty was decreased considerably and rattling window panes were heard no more. Altho the congregation on Sunday mornings was very small (about 12-15 for 8 mos. of the year, and about 25 during the summer) and they were all trustworthy, still it was the custom to have a one-armed man, Joseph Bauhaus take up the collection! In Sept. of 1947, I was succeeded by Fr. S. Nouvion, who was to stay at Leamington during the week and go to the island for Sundays." Sept. 1947. Fr. Nouvion writes: "Little did I dream that when I visited Fr. Dill in July, 1947, that I would be back to Pelee Island in Sept. as administrator. When I look back over the last three years and ten mos. it was not so difficult, especially since I did not live on the island all of the time. One of the first things I did was to rent the rectory, reserving a room for myself. At the end of Nov. Kenneth Hoare and his young bride (Non-Catholics) moved into the furnished rectory. It was a "break" for them, just starting out, and great convenience to the priest coming into a warm, clean house for the week-end and certainly a saving to the parish by way of a small income and the care given to the furniture and house. I was invited to Mrs. M. Bauhaus' for my meals, and never will I forget the genuine hospitality and concern with the Bauhaus family showed during my stay on the island. All my predecessors as far back as 1917 will remember this family".

Fr. Nouvion writes: "Midnight Mass in 1947 was quite a scene. High Mass was offered, probably for the first time. The church was lit up with Coleman and Aladdin lamps. The choir, who sang the Mass of St. Basil, intermingles with carols, was composed of two or three Catholics, two Anglicans, Two mennonites, and organist was wife of Dr. Reese of the island). " (During the Spring and summer, dances and raffles were held to raise money to repair the foundation of the Church). Fr. reports "In Oct. the Rieger Construction Co. of Pelee Island, raised the church from its crumbling stone foundation and laid a new footing. Over 300 cement bloks were laid by Wardle Co. of Leamington and the church was lowered on its new foundation by the end of Nov. In Dec. a vestibule was added to the front of the church and two new bridges (stone & concrete) were placed over the ditch, one bridge in front of the church and the other in front of the rectory driveway. All the above cost about \$510.00. In Sept. of 1949 another Labour Day affair was held, netting \$480.00. On Nov.2nd the first piece of insul-stone siding was nailed to the church (grey with black mortar marks) and by the 17th of Dec. all the church was covered, same the tower, which was completed the following spring and summer. The trimmings were then painted white. Even the cross on the steeple was challenged with a paint brush taped to a stick. In 1950 a third Labour Day event brought in \$580.00. In October preparations were made to renovate the interior of the church and materials were procured before the S.S. Pelee put up for the winter. Back in Fr. Fumas' time, Fred Ouellette, during the winter, had covered the cracked plaster with pressed tin patterns. All this had to be removed - tin, plaster and accumulated dust and dirt - before the Ten-Test was glued and nailed to the lath. The whole interior was sufficiently completed for Midnight Mass. What a difference from that first Xmas! IN all the work that was done to improve the appearance and comfort of the chapel of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, mention must be made of the men who offered their services. Mr. J oseph Ouellette, Mr. Fred Deschamps, Creighton Hamel, Joseph and Cyril Bauahus, Edward Bourdeau, Bill Hill, Don Gow, Camiel Rollens and two non-Catholics, Hammond Crawford and Fred Steer. Altho it seems that the material side of the parish was stressed, the spiritual side held its primary and important position. On Easter Tuesday, 1951, Fr. Thompson of Amherstburg gave 20 native, black walnut pews to the island Church. Fourteen of them were remodeled and re-finished at St. Michaels' school at Leamington, by myself and Mr. L. Lemieux. They were transported and arranged in the church before I was transfered to London.."

The Capuchin Fathers of Blenheim were in charge of the Island from 1952 till 1962. Fr. Sigmund Tommelyn came to us, and also Fr. Anacletus spent 8 mos. on the island. He writes lovely things about the Catholics and islanders: "I came from a city parish in St. Boniface, Manitoba, and to come to the Island was rather a fantastic change. But a change in many ways for the better. There I found the warmth, the goodness, the kindness of those who regulary came to Mass. The 8 months I spent have been in many ways a lesson in charity for me. People down here are much closer together, they are like one family, and as much they have a tremendous love and devotion for their priests, whenever I needed help, they have ALWAYS given help. They gave me to eat, they gave me their truckor car whenever I needed it. They came to meet me at the boat or at the airfield. In fact I seldam seen a group of Christians with so much love for their priests. Of course, they had known several priests, good priests, in fact. Then of course they mentioned very often Fr. Ladislaus,"

Our dear Fr. Ladislaus wrote: Sept. 1956. "I Father Ladislaus O.F.M. Cap. age 66 came to the island as residing priest. 1956 Ursuline sisters held summer catechism school and it worked fine. In 1958 was installed the new furnace for the church, and in 1959 the church inside was painted and everybody found it cosy. The population of the whole island goes down. There was a time that there were one thousand people, now only 500. The Catholic population dwindles from fifty to thirty-five souls. The average congregation in winter is 20, but it is really faithful and the church committee is courageous. " During the spring of 1960 Fr. Ladislaus suffered a heart attack. He was helped by Mr. Don Gow and especially by Fred Deschamps who stayed with the very sick father all night, till he was transfered to the mainland. Fr. Sigmund replaced Fr. Ladislaus until July 1st. Then Fr. Michael came over for the week-ends. Fr. Sigmund did great work here, spiritually & otherwise. He painted the church and

house, planted a flower garden, etc. The people here loved him and were very sorry to see him go. In July 1960 Religious instructions were given the children by the Ursuline nuns from Chatham. The 9 children attending were: Jane Hamel, Karen Williams, Susan Gow, Larry Steer, Roger Steer, Arnold Ferguson, Patrick McInnis, Julie Rollo and Jackie Hamel. Fr. Michael/that these instructions did wonders!
Fr. Niewandt took care of us in 1968. He writes "June 9th, 1968. Came by boat on Sat. June 8th. Brought along a Sign painted by Jones (Chatham - free of charge) with these lines on "Star of The Sea, Est. 1887. First Mass on P.I. August 22nd, 1862".

While the permanent Catholic population of the island was lessening, the "summer" parishioners were increasing in number. Fr. Newland reported in an article in the paper that the church has had a standing-room only attendance of up to 150. At that time the parishioners do all maintenance work on the church building and other routine jobs a resident priest would normally do. The only other parish activity is a weekly bingo during the summer.

The following is an excerpt from a letter written to Fr. Walsh, by a Fr. Fitzpatrick, who had said Mass on Pelee Island back in 1910. He states "Pelee Island had a special appeal to me. Have never forgotten my lone trip from Amherstburg to the Island. An old tug boat, I believe owned by the islanders, a fourth rate outfit, manned by a crew of three was about the only way to getting to Pelee. I was the only passenger aboard. Left Amherstburg in midst of a continuous lightening storm late in afternoon. Headed out into a rough sea and thought each moment my last. Found that the crew had imbibed freely. Nightfall and the boat without bow or stern lights on. Haven't said my rosary or rosaries so well, as I did on that wave lashed ship, tossing about like a cork on that dark..dark night. Sea was still running heavy as the Capt. approached Pelee wharf. Somehow he got the boat's bow pointed for the wharf and managed to rip off a number of the bow timbers, and at last succeeded in getting boat on a horizontal slant, hawsered to the wharf, and just as gang-plank was thrown up, boat hawser unloosed and they had to fish gang plank from the lake. Finally it was made secure and I was welcomed by an Indian to make his house my stay. Spent two days with him in squalid quarters and still have the memories of the egg and fish diet so frequently served. However, God love him, I was safer there than on the tug-boat!"

(I found this letter so interesting...wanted to share it with you all. M. Hamel)

There are no written records that we have, after 1969, when the Capuchins gave up taking care of the Pelee Island Parish. So, for the future history of this church, I will try, from memory, to fill in the last few years. I believe that Fr. Bob Warden came to take care of us temporarily in 1969. He flew to the island for the first time with a priest from McGregor, Fr. Beneteau, who flew his own plane. We had gone all the previous winter without Mass on the island. When Spring arrived and still no priest, Starr Hamel telephoned the Bishop of London, requesting that someone be sent over to the island. Fr. Warden arrived the very next Sunday. However, to back-track- during the sixties, we were also taken care of by Fr. Seth White, a retired diocesan priest, who came to live in our rectory with his sister. He stayed with us until ill-health required him to return to live on the mainland. He was very kind to us, and tried to encourage us to keep the Church and the rectory in good repair. However, all during these years, our Catholics were dropping away from the church, slowly, but surely. Back to 1969. During the 70's, we were still from time to time, service by diocesan priests and the Capuchins. Fr. Sigmond Tommelyn was taking care of three parishes - two small ones on the mainland, and Pelee Island. He could only come over for Mass on the island for Sunday evenings, and rarely made it during the winter months. This was bad for the tourists as well, as most of them left on the ferry at 6:00 pm for Sandusky, and only a few of us were left for Mass on Sunday evening. So, our collections fell off, and we did not have much money with which to keep up the buildings. The congregation of the permanent Catholics was now so small that we had to discontinue our weekly summer bingos as we had no help, and our financial situation grew even worse. Then, approx. around 1980, the bishop appointed Fr. Jack Dougherty, a Basilian priest to take care of us. Fr. Jack started having Mass twice on the week-ends, and our summer congregation grew very large, and thus our collections grew. Once again, we started to have some money to repair the church, which by now, was getting in disrepair. Under Fr. Jack's

leadership and encouragement, we set about during the next 7 years, to save and raise funds to fix up the rectory and church. First we put new white siding on the rectory, and then a couple of years also, we sided the church. It was decided that we should restore the church, now nearly 100 years old and soon to be an historical landmark, to it's original condition. However, it was far too expensive to buy the vertical siding that it started out with, so we settled for the horizontal, white siding. Then it was time to start on the inside. There were a lot of major repairs needed, and we had little money. The congregation was now down to a very few and most of them too elderly to take on the work themselves, as they had many times in the past. So, a contractor was engaged to give us an estimate for the work. It was a staggering amount of \$20,000.00! Thru Fr. Jack's careful mangement of our collections, we had around \$7000.00 to start out with, but still needed to raise the rest. So, it was decided to start a fund-raising campaign, and appeal to our summer parisoners for donations. Letters were mailed out to everyone by Mr. Starr Hamel, and everyone responded generously, beyond our highest hopes. The pews, donated to the church back in the 40's, were re-dedicated, and also the windows, from the people who gave large donations. Thus, we were able to raise the extra money needed to repair and renovate the interior. Our 100 anniversary was quickly approaching, and it was Fr. Jack's dream to have the church ready for that big day. With the help of all the summer parishoners, and also from many non-Catholics on the island, plus the hard work of the few permanent Catholics on the island, everything was completed by the date set for the celebrator on August 2nd, 1987.

As a relative newcomer to the island, which was in 1955 as the bride of Starr Hamel, I have wittnessed many changes in the Catholic Church over here. The island population has dwindled from around 500 permanent residents to now just over 200. So, our Catholic population also has dwindled - perhaps from 50 to around 10! The core that is left, are loyal and dedicated, but I worry about the future years. Some of the Catholics have moved away, but a lot of them have fallen away from the church, for lack of continual religious instructions. Our Lady in Star Of The Sea Church, continues to weep for us over here, but she stands as an ever encouraging symbol of our Faith and trust in God's plan for us all. At this time, I believe the following list is the few remaining practising, resident Catholics on Pelee Island.

Starr & Mary Hamel; Don and Agnes Gow; Doreen Wallace; Nancy Feltz; Paul Feltz; Heidi Feltz; William Hill; Margaret Rieger; Lynn Tiessen; Alexander Tiessen; Aaron Tiessen.

Signed: Mary E. Hamel - Aug. 2, 1987



The Church as it is today - 1987