

THE HISTORY OF
ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH
BUFFALO, WYOMING.

(From 1880 to November 8, 1950)

THE HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE OF CHEYENNE

BUFFALO, WYOMING

The history of St. John the Baptist parish began in the year 1880 with the Rev. Micheal F. Cassidy, who is the first priest known to have visited the town. He came from Rawlins, Wyo. twice a year and celebrated Mass at Fort McKinney.

The Rev. Henry Bex was the first resident priest. A congregation of eight or ten persons attended the celebration of Mass in the dining room of the John A. Fisher home which was located on North Main Street where the Chrysler-Plymouth garage is now located. Later Mass was held in a log school house which was located on North Main Street where the Hersey apartments now stand.

In the year 1885 six lots were secured from J. W. Hart, and the title conveyed by warranty deed to Bishop James O'Connor, of Omaha, Nebraska. Before the end of the year a wooden church was erected with no debt on the parish. The first church was known as St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Father Bex made his home for the most part with the John A. Fischer family. The residents of Buffalo and the surrounding country were grateful for the priveleges of a new church and pastor. The long distance to the nearest church at Billings, Montana had greatly lessened the number of church goers among the pioneers and they welcomed the opportunity to go more frequently.

It was not long till the needs of the parish had outgrown the little frame church, and in 1888, under the guidance of Rev. E. J. Engelbrecht, work was started on a new brick church. The brick church was built on the sight of the new stone church just completed. The old frame church was rented as a home for a while and finally the building was sold to Jeff McRae who tore it down and moved it away. Father Engelbrecht was pastor till December, 1888. A mortgage was placed upon the property to secure the debt. From the date of the departure of Father Engelbrecht until 1892, Sheridan, Wyo., was attended as a mission of Buffalo. In 1892 the Rev. C. Scollen came to Buffalo and was pastor until 1894. During the years from 1897 to 1907 Buffalo was a mission attended from Sheridan. During this period the walls of the brick church started cracking and the building was considered unsafe for public use. It was condemned and torn down and the bricks were sold and the money received applied to the funds for the present frame church.

In the year 1907 Father Duffy secured the four lots on which the present wood frame church and rectory stand for \$425.00. The title to the old property had become somewhat confused and it seemed wise to acquire new property at the time. In response to an appeal by Father Duffy the sum of \$3000.00 was subscribed for the new church. Father Duffy was ably assisted in his appeal by Bryan Long, who also gave the largest single subscription in the form of \$250.00. Many non-Catholics contributed to the fund and only four of the many who were asked declined.

The present frame church was begun by Father Prendergast. It was completed by the Rev. Francis J. Keller. With the completion of the building a debt of \$600.00 remained. Succeeding Father Keller was the Rev. T. D. Lynch, who, after a short term, was succeeded by the Rev. Patrick Long. Following his departure, Buffalo was attended by the Rev. Henry Schellinger from Carneyville, and the Rev. John Duffy from Sheridan until the arrival of the Rev. Fridolin Huessle, in August, 1912. Father Huessle was pastor until 1914.

During the next two years Father Duffy occasionally attended Buffalo from Sheridan holding services Sunday evening and Mass on Monday morning.

In March, 1916, Buffalo was taken over by Newcastle. Mass was said on the first Sunday of every month by the Rev. James A. Boland and Rev. John O. Laughlin. In September, 1917, his Excellency, Bishop McGovern, authorized the Rev. John T. Nicholson to take up his residence in Buffalo, as pastor, with Gillette, Arvada and Clearmont as missions.

In the interval following the departure of Father Huesle in 1914, the temporal affairs of the parish were ably carried on by the St. Francis Altar Society, an organization consisting of the women of the congregation.

A subscription fund for a parish rectory was started on the first Sunday of October, 1917. Approximately \$1,400.00 was subscribed. The largest subscriptions were given by John Esponda (\$500.00) and Bryan Long (\$200.00). Father Nicholson moved to Buffalo in the latter part of October, and work on the new rectory started early in November. The building was ready for occupancy in February, 1918. The St. Francis Altar Society provided most of the furnishings and several private donations of housekeeping articles were made. More than three thousand dollars had been collected in the subscription drive.

According to a local tradition Bishop Lenihan administered confirmation in Buffalo, but there is no authentic record of the event. The Most Rev. James J. Keane, D. D. Bishop of Cheyenne, confirmed fourteen persons on June 5, 1908. Twenty persons were confirmed on June 13, 1917, by the Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D. D.

There are no records of marriages, baptisms, or deaths in Buffalo previous to the pastorate of Father Keller, who was in charge of the parish from January 1908 to January 1910, with the exception of one baptism on July 29, 1888. This was found in one of the old record books of the church.

With the organization of the League of the Sacred Heart in 1917, there was a noticeable increase in the number of monthly communions.

During the year 1917 the congregation was augmented by the advent of a number of homesteaders.

On June 3, 1918, the old church property (the six lots west of the present wood frame church) was conveyed by warranty deed to St John the Baptist Church on payment of all expenses, namely taxes and interest, which amounted to \$185.00. There remained on the property a mortgage held by Mrs. Joseph Knight of Cheyenne, Wyo.

With the completion of the rectory of Buffalo, and secure in the assurance that the organization of the parish was functioning smoothly, Father Nicholson devoted his attention to the missions.

In 1919, the Church of St. Mary was built in Clearmont, Wyo. The principal donor was Miss Agnes Wynne of New York, who gave \$1,500.00 to the church with the request that it be erected in memory of her sister, Mary Theresa Wynne. Miss Wynne also donated the altar linen and a painting of the crucifixion. A set of stations of the cross was donated by Miss Wynne's nephew, George Kerwin. Statues were donated by Martin Etchart, Manuel Orneles, and Joseph Borges. Mr. and Mrs. Stone gave a missal and Mrs. W. Ward gave the organ. The Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D. D. Bishop of Cheyenne, dedicated the church August 17, 1919.

In 1919, the church of St. Catherine was built in Arvada. The lot was purchased from the Arvada Townsite Company for \$50.00 and the Catholic Church Extension Society donated the sum of \$1000.00 to be used for the building. The church was completed in 1919, and dedicated by Bishop McGovern August 13, 1919. The total debt remaining on the completion of the church was \$600.00. This debt was paid on June 4, 1926.

Mass was celebrated for the first time in Kaycee by Father Nicholson on January 30, 1920, at the home of Mr. William Loogstyn.

In January, 1921, Father Nicholson was transferred to Laramie, and was succeeded in Buffalo by Rev. John J. O'Connor. Father O'Connor was pastor until January 1923, when he was transferred to Evanston. Father O'Connor was the first priest to say Mass in the district between Kaycee and Salt Creek, on August 23, 1921, at the home of Patrick O'Connor.

The Rev. Edward McDonnell succeeded Father O'Connor and it was during his pastorate that confirmation was administered by the Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D. D. Bishop of Cheyenne, October 16, 1923, to a class of eleven.

On January 10, 1924, the Rev. John Brady was transferred from Newcastle to Buffalo. Father Brady had a concrete retaining wall built in the basements of the rectory and of the church. Mrs. Knight of Cheyenne, received payment of \$300.00 May 27, 1925, and the title to the six lots west of the wood church was cleared.

In October, 1926, the parish of Buffalo was divided. A new parish was established at Gillette with Arvada as a mission of that town. The other mission, Rozet, was taken from the vast territory of the Newcastle parish.

Father Brady celebrated Mass for the first time in Sussex, Wyo., in April, 1928. Approximately seventeen persons were present in the hall, and four received the sacrament of Baptism.

The Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D. D. Bishop of Cheyenne, administered confirmation in Buffalo in 1928, to a class of twelve; in 1931, to a class of thirty-two; in 1934 to a class of thirty-four; in 1937, to a class of thirty. There were fifteen baptisms in 1938, and four marriages.

The foregoing has been taken, in part, from a book "The History of the Diocese of Cheyenne", written by Bishop P. A. McGovern. The following is written and compiled by Mildred Payne, a convert.

Father Brady was in Buffalo until 1943, when he was succeeded on March 10, 1943, by the Rev. Alphonsus H. Grannan, who was transferred here from Casper.

By the fall of the same year there was a noticeable increase in the reception of Holy Communion; also in the attendance at daily Mass. It has been well said that if one would keep up the spiritual progress, the rest would take care of itself.

During the fall and winter seasons of 1943 and 1944, Released Time Religious Education classes were conducted by Father Grannan. The classes were largely attended, and many non-Catholic students participated. When, by a ruling of the Federal Government, religious training in connection with public schools, was forbidden, the students as well as the parish suffered a loss.

Clearmont, at this time, was a small mission, but with possibilities for future growth. Mass was said at St. Mary's Church on the first Saturday and the fourth Sunday of each month.

Buffalo was small enough that one Mass could be said on that Sunday, but as the parish grew two Masses each Sunday became necessary, so that in 1946, Father Grannan obtained special faculties to trinate, that is, to say three Masses in one day. Thereafter Mass was said on the second and fourth Sundays of each month at Clearmont. Being a late Mass, the people of Clearmont are to be commended on the large percentage who receive Holy Communion.

An artistic brick church for the Buffalo parish had long been the dream of Bishop McGovern, and in 1943, he ordered that such a church be our goal, so, endeavoring to fulfill this expectation, members of the parish met and pledged themselves large sums of money toward building a new and better House of God. The first contribution came from a non-Catholic, Mrs. Richard M. Kennedy, who left a bequest, when she died in 1937, of \$500.00 to be used toward the building of a new Catholic Church. She was closely followed by the John Belus family, who gave \$300.00. The \$800.00 was a start, and of course, inspired others to give. And so the building fund slowly grew.

It was a happy day indeed, when it was learned that on March 3, 1944, Count and Countess Thorne-Rider had deeded their property on South Main Street to the church, as a location for the future church building, and later there was some discussion of the possibility of their building a church. However, this plan was never carried, and instead Count and Countess Thorne-Rider proposed a contribution of \$25,000.00 towards the erection of a new church.

It was decided to start planning for the financing and building of a new church and the Building Committee composed of Tom Villnave, John Camino, Dr. W. J. Knebel, Daniel K. Ahern, John Belus, Frank Schmitz, George F. Washut, Bernard Marten and Gaston Irigaray, got busy, with the result that the increase in funds was great for a while. Some of the members still favored trying to build on the former Thorne-Rider property, but because of a clause stating the Thorne-Riders could occupy the premises at any time until their death, it was deemed inadvisable to use the property.

Plans were being made during the spring and summer of 1943 for a ~~Mission Week~~ in the fall. Father Kenneth Hoffman of the Diocesan Missionaries of Chicago officiated at the mission the week of September 12 to 17, 1943. Father Hoffman was again in the Buffalo parish to hold a mission on October 26 to 31, 1947. Both missions were well attended and successfully carried out.

In 1943, there were 19 baptisms; 1 marriage. In 1944, 16 baptisms; 2 marriages; 1 convert. In 1945, 25 baptisms; 2 marriages; 15 converts. In 1946, 24 baptisms; 5 marriages; 6 converts. In 1947, 31 baptisms; 9 marriages; 5 converts. In 1948, 38 baptisms; 12 marriages; 9 converts. In 1949, 36 baptisms; 3 converts.

On September 8, 1945, the Most Reverend Patrick A. McGovern, Bishop of Cheyenne, administered the sacrament of confirmation to 31 persons. Forty-four persons were confirmed on October 17, 1949, by the Rev. Hubert M. Newell, coadjutor Bishop of Cheyenne.

In the spring of 1949, Mr. Monroe was asked to draw up a new set of plans for a smaller church, which he did for an additional \$3,193.00. A picture of the proposed church was hung in the vestibule of the present church and drew a lot of interesting comment. The plans for the new church arrived and were approved.

On Saturday, June 18, 1949, the ladies of the parish had a bake sale and tea. The proceeds of \$367.00 was deposited to the building fund.

Bids were called for and opened on August 1, 1949, at 2:00 p.m. at the former Thorne-Rider home, with Husman Bros. contractors of Sheridan, Wyo., being the low bidders; but even their bid of \$105,358.00 was much too high, so the only recourse was to seek a lower bid. Mr. Husman was really interested in building the church, so he presented a revised bid of \$70,974.00. For said amount his company agreed to build the main body of the church, up to the roof, we were to do the excavating, pour the footings, foundations and floor; put the windows in, do the shingling, the electrical wiring, painting, hanging of doors, laying tile flooring, and other small details.

On Wednesday, August 17, 1949, a meeting was held at the former Thorne-Rider home, and after much discussion, it was decided to start building. The men agreed to furnish labor as needed, the women would keep the men happy with nourishing lunches.

On Friday, August 19, 1949, Bishop McGovern wrote and suggested we go ahead as planned, so that same afternoon Father Grannan blessed the ground on which the future church would stand, so after many long years of false starts and set backs a new church was finally becoming a reality. A new building committee was chosen, namely: John Belus, Jack O'Leary, Ralph Perry, Ben Leppink, and Tom Villnave. On the finance committee was Bill Perry, John Camino, Dr. W. J. Knebel, Bill Kirven, Ray Thorburn, John Marton, Martin Camino, and Bob Perry. ~~Bill~~ Bill Kirven was elected lawyer and Frank Hicks was chosen to do the printing. The surveying was done by Clyde Wood and E. O. Eader, civil engineers. Mr. Wood donated his time and labor, and Mr. Eader a part of his.

Lige Miller, a non-Catholic, donated his drag-line and time, (the usual cost being \$10.00 an hr.) and dug the basement and foundation, the gas and water lines. Plummer McGrady, a local feed merchant, donated his truck which was driven the first day by Father Grannan, and the second day by Jim Miller, (son of Lige) who also donated his time.

The first pouring of footings was on Sept. 17, and quite a crew showed up to work. A list of those who donated time and those who gave materials appears on a separate sheet. Lunches were served to the workers at different times by some of the ladies of the parish.

The first financial drive after the building was started was in November, and was considered a success, netting \$8,183.64 in six weeks.

The Daughters of Isabella was organized on October 9, 1949, with 47 charter members. The first officers of the group were: Mrs. Madeline Harriet, Worthy Regent; Mrs. Meriam Hicks, Honorary Past Regent; Mrs. Doris Smith, Vice Regent; Mrs. Mildred Payne, Chancellor; Mrs. Anita Smith, Recording Secretary; Mrs. Rosemary Wilczynski, Financial Secretary; Mrs. Virginia Knebel, Custodian; Mrs. Marie Buzzell, Treasurer; Mrs. Jaqueline Perry, Scribe; Anne Smith, Monitor; Nancy Hackert, First Guide; Annette Rangunot, Second Guide; Mrs. Jean Kern, Outer Guard; Mrs. Marilyn Zeiser, Inner Guard; Mrs. Mary Louise Curutchet, Banner Bearer; Mrs. Mary O'Leary, Mrs. Grace Miller, and Mrs. Mildred Ahern, Trustees; and Father Grannan, Chaplain. In December of the same year, the D. of I. sponsored a bake sale and raffle, the money from the raffle being donated to the building fund. The first big undertaking of this group was the sponsoring of a benefit auction on February 25, 1950. There was a bake sale and needle work booth; the John Belus family donated a steer which was raffled off, and lunches were sold all day, with free coffee for anyone who wished to have it. Altogether the sum of \$3,940.00 was deposited to the building fund from this auction and raffle. Later on in the season this same organization sponsored a Box Social which brought in \$127.30 for the new church.

In November, 1949, a member of the parish, while watching the building of the new church, was inspired and wrote the following poem:-

SHADOWS OF THE FUTURE

Stone by stone, row by row,
I watch the House of God begin to
grow
With work from many hands,
As I gaze, I do not see
The jumbled maze, but the church
that is to be—
How strong and sturdy it stands!
A church to last throughout the
years,
To share the joys, sorrows, strife
and tears
Of all within the fold,
Wherein Christ reigns as King of
Kings,
Revered and adored above all things
As in the days of old.
A stately cross atop the spire—
Slim finger pointing ever higher
To God upon His throne.
The cross arms outflung so wide—
Entreating all to come inside
And claim Him as their own.
Stained windows wide, through
which the sun
Touches the head of everyone,
Like a benediction from above,
I see the steps, the oaken door,
Through which the people, more
and more
Come to seek God-given love.
As I gaze in reverie
Happy children pass by me
As the bells begin to peal.
And as I silently reflect,
I see them enter and genuflect
To a God Whose Presence is
near.
The heavy door swings back in
place,
And once again I'm face to face
With a world of reality.
The half-built church stands there,
Like a silent, unfinished prayer
To the Blessed Trinity.

Nov. 1949

In definite contrast to the winter before, which was the worst in eighty years, the winter of '49 and '50 was quite open so that some work of the church was possible throughout the winter. One of the workers was heard to declare that the Good Lord surely knew how badly we needed a church and so gave us the mild weather.

When spring came, and it became warm enough for steady work, the corner of Snider and Lobban Ave. became a hive of activity; men running the mixer for the cement that would hold together the rock that rose row upon row, other men pouring cement for the basement, foundation and floor. As the work progressed, different ways were devised as a means to raise the needed money, besides the building fund drives; the Junior Choir raffled a blanket, which was donated by Louis Frey. The receipts from this raffle were \$205.50, which was turned in to the building fund. In addition, a series of breakfasts were given by the parish ladies, the proceeds all going to the building fund.

During Lent, four members of the Daughters of Isabella (Minnie Anxo, Dorothy Larramendy, Stella Inchauspe and Mildred Payne), working with funds allowed by the diocese, painted some of the rooms of the rectory, laid linoleum, purchased curtains for the entire house and had a new cabinet sink installed. In June, 1950, after Father Grannan left for retreat some of the members of the parish purchased a new bedroom suite, installed a built-in medicine chest, and carpeted the stairs of the rectory. When Father Grannan returned the D. of I. presented him with a linen shower on June 22. A quantity of sheets, pillow cases, towels, wash cloths, blankets, etc. were given. With the rectory in fair shape and a good supply of linens, we were ready for the influx of tourist priests.

On June 18, 1950, a group of the men met and organized the Father DeSmet Council 3332, knights of Columbus. There were 45 Charter Members. The first officers elected were: Frank Hicks, Grand Knight; Bryon Nelson, Deputy Grand Knight; Dr. W. J. Knebel, Chancellor; Bill Perry and Tom Smith, Records; Ray Thorburn, Financial Secretary; John Marton, Treasurer; Bill Wilcynski, Lecturer; Bill Kirven, Advocate; Cleo Johnson, Warden; Bob Perry, Louis Frey, and Bernard Leppink, Guards; John Camino, Tom Villnave, and Remi Sturbeaux, Board of Trustees; and Fr. A. H. Grannan, Chaplain.

For the past year Bishop McGovern had been very ill, but having expressed an ardent desire to see the church at the first opportunity, he was driven up from Cheyenne by Bishop Newell on the ninth of August. They were both very pleased with the church and with the progress made. Bishop Newell made the remark that the church, with perhaps the addition of a roof or two, would still be intact after 500 years. Those of you who read this in years to come will have some idea as to the truth of this statement.

On the afternoon of August 18 several "bobby-soxers", Nancy Hicks, Georgia and Connie Washut, Theresa Rangunot, with Mildred Payne, Dr. W. J. Knebel and Fr. Grannan puttied all the nail holes in the beams in the ceiling, before the scaffolding was taken down.

As the church was nearing completion, a card was made and put up stating that now was the time, if anyone cared to do so, to donate articles for the church; as a result many things have been given, including the organ, the altars, several pews, and many smaller items.

The largest single contribution has been a gift of \$12,500.00 ^{which came} from Bishop P. A. McGovern. Another large contribution was that of the Belus family which amounted to \$6,542.36. The Belus family not only gave in money, but also time and labor. Whenever, help was desired, they were among the first to volunteer; sometimes just two or three of the boys would appear, then again the entire male part of the family would leave the ranch and appear for work. They were never too busy but that they couldn't give some time to God. "For God has promised, give and it shall be given unto you; good measure and pressed down and shaken together and running over shall they give into your bosom. For with the same measure that you shall mete, withal it shall be measured to you again." (From Luke VI, 38).

Father Grannan chose a committee to meet on October 9 for the

Furtherance of the dedication and banquet. C. W. Johnson was to act as leader for the photographers, Frank Hicks and Mrs. Allen Payne were to see to the advertising and printing of programs. Mrs. G. W. Washut and Father Grannan were to get out the invitations, Mrs. Washut and Mrs. Payne to keep track of the invitations as they came in. Mrs. Payne was asked to find rooms for the visiting priests and to take charge of the rectory meals for the Bishop and Priests. Mrs. S. U. Harriet as Regent of the Daughters of Isabella was in charge of planning the Dedication Banquet and a brunch at the Thorne-Rider house for the priests. William Kirven was chosen main speaker of the evening with Ralph Perry as Toastmaster. Ralph Perry and Mrs. W. J. Knebel were to plan the evening program. The Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus were to act as honor guards for the Bishop, and the Third Degree Knights were to be ushers.

Now the church is about finished, thirteen years of hoping, praying and planning, and fourteen months of work about to be realized. Despite the objections to overcome; the hurdles to surmount, a dream is coming true. For "If it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it, else perhaps you may find yourselves fighting even against God." Acts. V, 39.

It is a beautiful building, one the whole town is proud of and one to live up to. 'The Gem of the Diocese', it is called. It is fitting that the church should stand just there, for on this site stood the brick church built in 1888, In digging the foundation for this church, the men dug portions of the foundation of the old brick church.

The Most Reverend Hubert M. Newell, coadjutor Bishop of Cheyenne, will officiate at Solemn High Mass ~~coram pontifice~~ and at the dedication ceremonies, wherein the building on the corner will become indeed a House of God, and the Glory of God shall shine through the rose colored windows.

Date, Nov. 6, 1950.