

**BLACK FRANCISCANS OF
ST. JAMES CHURCH DOUGLAS, WYOMING
1909-1960**

**Memoir found in archives at Douglas and
Black Franciscans (Our Lady of Consolation, Indiana)**

They were called the “Black Franciscans” because of the black habit they wore which was common to their branch of the Franciscan Order, the Friars Minor Conventuals. The first Franciscan Father arrived in Douglas in 1909, when Rev. Ignatius Berna, O.M.C., was sent by his superiors in response to an appeal from Bishop James John Keane, who was then Bishop of the Diocese of Cheyenne. The vast diocese was in urgent need of priests to care for the spiritual and educational needs of the Catholic community. Father Ignatius Berna had been teaching at Trenton College, Trenton, New Jersey, before he was assigned to St. James Church in Douglas, Wyoming,

Father Ignatius had been instructed to build a new church and rectory, and he was very zealous in his work of selecting a new site for the buildings. The property was soon located and purchased from Harry LeBar at the southeast corner of Fifth and Elm Streets. The site included two lots and a seven room house, and the old church, which had been erected in 1898, was sold to defray the costs of the new property.

Mass was then said in one of the rooms of the house and was known as the Chapel. On Sundays, besides an early Mass held in the Chapel, a later Mass was held in the Lodge of the Unity Temple of Douglas.

Bishop James A. Keane approved of the parish of St. James, Douglas, Wyoming, together with several missions, on December 15, 1910, and the sacred congregation of religious confirmed this in December, 1911. The cornerstone of the new St. James Church was laid at 2:30 P.M., on Sunday, October 14, 1912. Father Ignatius Berna was commissioned to perform the ceremony due to the illness of Bishop Patrick A. McGovern. A concert of sacred music was given by the Third Regiment Band, N. G., of Wyoming. A large crowd of representative citizens witnessed the ceremony. An eloquent discourse was delivered by the pastor, the title being “The True Church,” Father Ignatius. Two assistants were present, Rev. James Hermes, O.M.C. and Rev. Dominic Miller, O.M.C. Rev. George Bryant also attended the ceremony. Rev. Bryant had served the St. James Church from Casper, Wyoming.

The new church was dedicated by Bishop Patrick McGovern on June 1, 1913. A Solemn High Mass was sung and the church was crowded. The Bishop was assisted by Father Ignatius Berna, Father James, and Father Dominic.

Father Ignatius Berna did not remain long in Douglas after the church was dedicated and he left for Utica, New York, in September, 1913. Father Ignatius was tubercular and even before his departure from Douglas he could not speak above a whisper. He died in Syracuse, New York, on

February 9, 1914. Father Dominic Miller died on October 6, 1913, but the St. James Church would stand for many years with its edifice of pronounced English Gothic lines as a beautiful piece of architectural work and the efforts of the first Wyoming Franciscans.

Father James succeeded Father Ignatius Berna as the new pastor of St. James and received two new assistants, Father Mathias Schneiders and Father Isadore Rafferty.

The Franciscans had started their missionary work and they served the Catholics of various communities by travelling over mountains, lofty plateaus, and prairie land that covered 11,000 square miles.

St. James Church of Douglas served as the center of an ever expanding program of missionary work, and eventually the Franciscans were ministering to Catholics in Wheatland, Torrington, Glendo, Sunrise, Chugwater, Van Tassel, Manville and Flattop, Wyoming. For a time in the later 1920s the Franciscans accepted charge of the Salt Creek community, now known as Midwest, and the neighboring mission of Lavoye. This area was turned over to St. Anthony's Parish, Casper, Wyoming, in 1930.

Bishop McGovern donated a new automobile to the St. James parish in 1935. This gift must have been received with great joy by the Franciscans who traveled so many miles in their missionary work.

Following are excerpts from "The True Voice" in an introduction to an article that was written about the history of the Catholic Churches at Douglas and the attached missions:

"Douglas is at the present time a pioneer town. It is started along the right lines and the future of this town is assured. Consider the surprise of the traveler who comes to this town to find a modern, well-equipped hotel, a Catholic church and other public buildings such as he finds in eastern territory."

There were several Franciscan Fathers assigned to St. James over the years. Among these were Father Adolph Bernholz, Father Theodore Elckholtz, Father Herman J. Block, Father Van Dreumel, Father Ignatius Hanley, Father Adolph, Father Bruno, Father Singleton, Father Bernadine, and Father Fidelis, who served St. James for ten years.

Recreation was a welcome diversion from their long hours of missionary work and several of the Franciscan Fathers were excellent Bridge players. Picnics and social gatherings were attended by the Franciscans. Father Adolph, who was pastor at St. James Church for eight years, was an active worker for all of the Douglas civic enterprises. Father Isadore Rafferty entered the service of the United States as a chaplain in 1918.

Rev. Martin Collett, O.F.M. Conv., was the pastor of St. James Church in 1960 when it became necessary for the Franciscans to relinquish the St. James Church. Again, another great need had developed for priests to staff other educational and mission activities.

A chapter in the history of the Diocese of Cheyenne came to a close on September 15, 1960, when the Franciscan Fathers, who once cared for a mission area of 11,000 square miles, returned the St. James Parish to the Diocese of Cheyenne.