

**HISTORIES**  
**of**  
**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN WYOMING**

“Wyoming is like a small town with very long streets.”  
(Governor Mike Sullivan)

The title, “History of the Catholic Church in Wyoming,” was given to the project of updating the history of the diocese by Bishop Hubert Newell of Cheyenne, the idea sparked by the USA Bicentennial Celebration in 1976. On January 6, 2000, Bishop Joseph Hart gave permission to establish an official website for the Diocese of Cheyenne [[www.dioceseofcheyenne.org](http://www.dioceseofcheyenne.org)] and to publish archival sources on it. The *Wyoming History News* (Wyoming State Historical Society: March, 2000) noticed the event with an invitation to readers to offer additions, corrections or criticisms.

“Histories” rather than “History” seemed a more accurate designation for our collection of writings by different authors, sources indispensable for reference and for producing any number of parish and general histories. “*Monumenta Diocesis Cheyennensis Historica Cyberica*” was certainly too cumbersome and too pretentious a title to claim for this collection. Unlike the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* we did not have to go back a thousand years to collect documents and fragments from monasteries and chanceries and take two centuries to do it. This collection was more like the *Monumenta Franciscana* or the Jesuit *Annuae Litterae* which were started soon after the foundation of the respective Orders and continued through time. But we do have a critical mass of histories, most of what there is since the beginning of Wyoming, the last place founded on earth a little more than a century ago.

We have collected or written, scanned and digitized about 400 documents from the Archives of the Diocese of Cheyenne—more than 3,000 pages—organized as an Index and herein presented as a kind of annotated bibliography of selected examples hyperlinked to each item. Since 1997 the work on this history was done by people at the chancery, priests, scholars, friends, and many parishioners. Particularly helpful were the members of the 2003 and 2005 Wheatland Confirmation classes who scanned and proofread hundreds of pages of manuscripts, a massive job acknowledged in the Wyoming Catholic Register (March 2004). Except for a grant of \$1150 from the Catholic Church Extension Society, the \$13,000 cost of the enterprise—money spent for computer apparatus, travel, scanner wages and stipends—was paid by the Diocese of Cheyenne and continued to be supported by Bishop David Ricken. Publishing these historical sources on the internet has made them immediately accessible, virtually eliminating the ‘very long streets of small town Wyoming.’

## CONTENTS of the INDEX

### General Histories and Writings

General narrative histories were arranged at the top of the Index in chronological order, headed by my article, "The Catholic Church in Wyoming," published in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Catholic University of America Press, 2002). The chapters from Bishop Patrick McGovern's *History of The Diocese of Cheyenne* (Cheyenne: Wyoming Labor Journal, Feast of the Epiphany, A.D. 1941) were distinguished by the date "1941." Manuscript histories of bishops and of a few parishes, written in the 1980s by Fr Harold Stansell, S.J. (Regis), were included and are of primary interest because of the often quoted "Reminiscences" of Bishop Newell.

### Parish Histories

Ten-year parish histories (1950-2000), since 1970 submitted in a standard questionnaire form, were listed on the Index alphabetically by the town name followed by the date of the report. Histories of separate parishes in the same town were further designated by the title of the church in the order of their foundation. Mission histories were attached to the home parish. Manuscript histories of parishes written around 1925 and 1939, often used *verbatim* in the 1941 *History*, and parish jubilee histories were distinguished by a range of dates following the town and church name. The ten-year histories comprised the largest number of items and the jubilee histories comprised the largest number of pages on the Index. Recently, churches have begun to use these cyber-sources to produce their own centennials.

The following were other examples of histories on the Index:

*Catholicism in the Upper Wind River Valley: A History of the Catholic Church in Dubois, Wyoming, to 1987* was written and published by Fr John Broderick, SJ (Weston), who spent his summers in Dubois for more than a decade and who also read many of our manuscripts and gave invaluable critical advice on method.

Ellin Margaret Kelly, who has written extensively about St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, contributed the manuscript "History of St. Anthony's Church, Cody, Wyoming" (1831-2000) and the article, "In the Path of Father DeSmet: The Catholic Church in the Rocky Mountains."

## **Histories of Religious Orders and Schools**

Histories of religious orders and schools covering the whole State were listed on the Index with the prefix “WY” to group them in a series.

“Histories of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth in Wyoming” by Laramie-born Sister Catherine Louise Lehardt, S.C.L., chronicled the oldest and largest religious congregation serving in Wyoming, almost 500 Sisters since 1875. Sister Joanna, the 68 year-old, 300 pound superior of the group who went to the Wind River Indian Reservation in 1888, was celebrated at her jubilee there as “Big Chief Squaw.”

“Histories of The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia in Wyoming since 1892” by Sister Emily Ann Herbes, O.S.F., who, after editing *Celebrating the Journey...1855-1970* for the 150<sup>th</sup>-year jubilee of her congregation in 2005, reduced the Sisters’ Wyoming house-histories to a 100-page manuscript.

“History of the Catholic Schools in Wyoming” (University of Wyoming MA thesis, 1971) was written by a diocesan priest, Father Charles Hardy.

## **Primary Documents - Bulls, Decrees, and Rescripts**

The Conventual Franciscan Concession (1911), decree and rescripts came from the Archives of the Conventual Franciscans (Mount Saint Francis, Indiana). For fifty years (1910-1960) the friars were based in Douglas and served Catholics in four eastern Wyoming counties along the North Platte River (Converse, Platte, Niobrara, and Goshen) which they claimed to have been the largest territorial parish in the United States (11,000 square miles).

Not included on the Index was the 1887 Papal Bull erecting the Diocese of Cheyenne. And a fascinating addition would be the 1887-1896 correspondence of Bishop Burke with Rome about suppressing the diocese—“After taking stock of his vast territory, the bishop concluded that the establishment of the see had been premature, and set out for Rome to have it suppressed” (see McGovern [1941] 8-10). Decrees establishing parishes, with the exception of that which established St. Leo Parish, Lusk (1947), were also missing.

## PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT

### **Parish Boundaries and Official Maps**

Maps were used to define parish boundaries authoritatively. A prime example was the 1925 map with parish boundaries, churches, missions, and stations marked and bearing the handwritten signature of the bishop with the title: "First time limits definitely set: Jan. 23, 1925 +Patrick A. McGovern." Another example was the map attached to the letter defining Hartville parish (1955) with the boundaries drawn on a fragment of the Wyoming Official Highway Map. The State of Wyoming Transportation Commission (Dec. 13, 2001) courteously granted us non-exclusive use of this familiar classic to be our basic map-guide, specifically for the official website of the Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne with the acknowledgment: "Used with the approval of the Wyoming Transportation Commission."

### **Parish Priests since 1868**

We have compiled a sortable list of Wyoming priests since 1868, including names, parish assignments and other vital data. This was done because an early effort to develop an oral history of the diocese from interviews with retired priests was postponed when memories stalled or conflated (e.g., "I'll never forget what's-his-name"). In prospect now is to record an audio-video digitized conversation which we might call "Monsignors in Cyberia." Lack of time and technical expertise prevented us from developing a cyberized collection of maps, pictures, or other visual or audio sources. For instance, we digitized a unique old tape recording of the almost lost art of patterned bell ringing at SS Cyril and Methodius Church in Rock Springs, and are just discovering how to upload it on the web.

## **Railroads and Wyoming Towns**

The following is an example of a short non-scrolling introductory page from which one can get to the parish histories quickly. The town and parish names are to be hyperlinked to the Index. The names of railroads were hyperlinked to the illustrated railroad histories offered on the internet by the railroads themselves.

Railroads fathered most of the towns in Wyoming.

The Union Pacific Railroad established the first five principal section towns in Wyoming—Cheyenne, Laramie City, Rawlins, Green River, and Evanston (1867-1868). Coal started Rock Springs (1868) and Kemmerer which was connected to the mainline by the Oregon Short Line (1884). Pine Bluffs became the largest cattle shipping point on the Union Pacific (1884). Saratoga was linked to the mainline by a spur to supply timber for railroad ties (1907).

The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, building a railway parallel north of the Union Pacific, founded Lusk, Douglas, Glenrock, and Casper (1886-1888). The Northwestern pushed on west through Riverton, skirting St Stephens, to terminate at Lander (1906), where it was said, “the rails end and the trails begin.”

The Burlington Railroad, later the Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe (BNSF), crossed northeastern Wyoming diagonally founding Newcastle, Gillette, and Sheridan (1890-1894) on its way to Billings, Montana, and later built back into northwestern Wyoming through Powell to Cody (1901), the eastern entrance to Yellowstone National Park.

The Burlington then built a railroad up the Bighorn River through Lovell, Greybull, Worland, and Thermopolis, through the Wind River Canyon and back to Casper (1906-1914) to connect with an older line up the North Platte River through Torrington to the coal and iron mines near Hartville-Guernsey (1900).

The Colorado and Southern Railroad, later part of the Burlington system, connecting Denver to Douglas established Wheatland (1892). Buffalo, originally by-passed because of a cattle war, was later briefly linked to the mainline.

Pinedale and Jackson never had a railroad.

## **Methodology Quick Reference Guide**

### **Focus Group ...** *What information do we want to gather?*

- Bishop, diocese, chancery
- Priests, nuns (parishes, missions, schools)

### **Gathering Information ...** *The most time consuming section.*

- Who will contribute?
- How will contributions be made?
- Who will edit and/or write content
- Make use of parishioners for help
- Use of Word documents vs. PDF scanned files (protection of historic text).

NOTE: A link can be put on the site for a free download of Adobe Reader.

*Hint: Start small and add more later. Relieves the pressure and gives opportunity to add new content regularly to keep people coming back to the site.*

### **IT (Information Technology) Considerations ...** *Down the cyberspace highway.*

- IT support determines finished product via expertise and budget
- Audience considerations: knowledge and access via phone line vs. high speed internet.

*Hint: Images and pictures are very big files and are slow to open.*

### **Presentation ...** *How will the site look to the audience?*

- Documents should show both right and left margins (Word documents at 75% zoom) so audience only has to scroll down as they read.
- Headings and sections should flow logically.

*Hint: Keep it simple. Pages cluttered with information discourage audience and makes information harder to find.*

### **Going Live ...** *Rolling out the site to the public.*

- Check all links before and after going live! There are always glitches moving from the development to the live site.
- Get the word out! Use of the Catholic Register and announcements at Mass to encourage people to visit the site.

### **Feedback ...** *Inquiries and contact information a must!*

- Who will handle inquiries for the site?
- Recommended that inquiries be handled by the site manager rather than IT via email to allow a record.