

St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church
Evanston, Wyoming
100 Years of Faith
1873-1984
(Anonymous Group)

Evanston started life in 1873, when the Rev. Eugene Cusson, who was in charge of the Laramie pastorate, performed the first priestly ministrations in the vicinity. Fr. Cusson swept the Wyoming range from Laramie to the Utah border. At this time there were 12 Catholic families in Evanston.

Mass was celebrated in the school building until 1877 when the Baptist Church building was purchased for \$1,100.00. The small group of parishioners paid for the new church in only one month. From 1879 to 1884, St. Mary Magdalen was still a mission church and was attended by Rev. M. F. Cassidy from Rawlins where he was pastor.

St. Mary Magdalen's first resident pastor, Rev. Christopher Fitzgerald, came to Evanston in 1884. Through the endeavors of Fr. Fitzgerald, a beautiful altar, statues, and pews were added to the church. In 1885 he secured a plot of ground for a Catholic cemetery. Fr. Fitzgerald was interested in the town and did much for its progress, including working for the establishment of the fire department.

The Territory of Wyoming was made a separate Diocese on August 9, 1887 and Rev. Maurice F. Burke, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, was selected the first Bishop. After taking stock of this vast territory with 5 diocesan priests, and Catholics scattered near and far, Bishop Burke concluded that the establishment of the See had been premature, and he set out for Rome to have it suppressed. Following investigation by Rome, the Territory of Wyoming remained as the Cheyenne Diocese and Bishop Burke stayed until 1893 when he was transferred to St. Joseph, Missouri. Owing to the representations that had been made by Bishop Burke, the diocese was allowed to remain vacant for several years during which time an administrator, V. Rev. Hugh Cumisky, managed its affairs.

In 1885 Rev. Peter Casey came to Evanston as pastor. The Catholic population of Western Wyoming was growing and in 1898 a coal mining camp called Kemmerer, became a mission of the Evanston church and was also served by Fr. Casey.

The second bishop of the Cheyenne diocese, Rev. Thomas M. Lenihan of Fort Dodge, Iowa, reached Wyoming during Passion Week in 1897. Though he had been in good health, Bishop Lenihan was soon afflicted with kidney disease and heart trouble and after a couple of years, was forced to move to a lower altitude. He returned to Iowa and died in 1901.

Several months after the death of Bishop Lenihan, Cheyenne Diocese received a new chief pastor Most Reverend James J. Keane. In the years he led the Diocese of Cheyenne, Bishop Keane went from town to town preaching missions to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

During the next years, little can be obtained regarding the history of the parish, except the names of tenures of the pastors:

Rev. Thomas Hayes 1902-1903

Rev. Patrick Walsh 1903-1904

Rev. Thomas Barrett 1904-1907

Rev. D. M. Tully 1907-1908

Rev. M. A. Kennedy 1908-1910

Rev. P. J. Lynch 1910-1911

Rev. R. B. Groener 1911-1914

Rev. Michael Stagno Nov. & Dec. 1914

The fourth Bishop of Cheyenne, Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, from Omaha, was appointed in 1912. Bishop McGovern headed the church in Wyoming for nearly 40 years, until his death in 1951. He worked to increase the number of clergy to serve his growing flock. Bishop McGovern, realizing the need for care of Wyoming's dependent children, was instrumental in establishing St. Joseph's Children's Home in Torrington

Rev. John F. Moreton became parish priest of St. Mary Magdalen's in 1915. In 1920, under Fr. Moreton's leadership, the house and lot adjoining the church on the east side was purchased from a Mrs. Fiero for \$4,750.00. This house was the remodeled school building in which Mass was first celebrated in Evanston and now became the rectory. In winter, the old church was heated by coal stoves, and as a small child, Eleanor Staniforth recalls Fr. Moreton saying Mass in a small room off the sacristy, with the parishioners kneeling on the floor.

Rev. John J. O'Connor was pastor in Evanston from 1923-1932. In a letter sent to Fr. O'Connor on January 23, 1925, Bishop McGovern said, "The enclosed map shows in black ink the limits of the Evanston parish, now for the first time accurately defined." The enclosed map shows the parish boundaries as Uinta County. During this period of time, in 1926, the railroad roundhouse and shops were closed and Evanston was no longer a railroad division. Many old Catholic families were transferred elsewhere and it was a discouraging time for the parish. However, in 1927, his excellency Bishop McGovern confirmed classes of 8 and in 1928 there were 35 families on the parish roster.

Fr. O'Connor also served the mission area of Bridger Valley Mary Rodzinak recalled when she first moved to the area in 1925 Mass was held weather permitting, in the homes of the parishioners. By 1928, there were 16 Catholic families in the Fort Bridger vicinity and Mass was celebrated twice a month in the Legion Hall, whenever roads were passable. Eleven children made their first Holy Communion on Sept. 1, 1928, the first regular class in the history of the town.

The first masses in the Bridger Valley were held on the Eardley ranch in Fort Bridger in the early 1900's to about 1916. Later, masses were held at the Mary Sheehan Watson ranch in the Milburne area.

Fr. O'Connor is fondly remembered by longtime parishioners, Dorothy O'Connor and Eleanor Staniforth. He performed the weddings of both Dorothy and her husband Harry, and Eleanor and her husband Thomas. Fr. O'Connor was well liked in the community. He was transferred to Torrington in January 1932.

The next resident pastor, Rev. Edward Cassidy, was to serve St. Mary Magdalen's and St. Helen's Mission in Fort Bridger for 19 years.

The Catholic population in Uinta County continued to grow and in 1934, 17 candidates were confirmed by Bishop McGovern. This same year, plans were made to build a church at Fort Bridger. There were now 20 families and the hall they had been using was no longer suitable. A gift of \$3,000.00 was received from the Catholic Extension Society and the church was dedicated November 11, 1935, free from debt on land donated by Albino Hlhn, the local blacksmith and craftsman.

In 1938, a class of 24 was confirmed at St. Mary Magdalen's; a class of 14 made their first Holy Communion; there were 5 baptisms and 2 marriages. The parishioners of St. Mary Magdalen were still attending the church that had been bought in 1877 when Fr. Cusson was visiting pastor, with only a few improvements in the original structure.

Fr. Cassidy and the parishioners were making plans to begin a fund drive toward building a new church late in 1938. The building fund became immediately necessary when in the early morning hours of January 4, 1939 a fire completely destroyed the church and living quarters. The fire was tragic not only because of the loss of structures, but baptismal and other important records of the church were lost.

Following the fire, Mass was held over the Durnford Mortuary until a new church could be built. The fund raising for the new church was a community effort. Banks and other business, Catholics and non-Catholics alike donated to the building fund. The parish from insurance received \$4,200.00 and \$7,500.00 was raised by the building fund.

Fr. Cassidy planned the new church and modeled it after the parish church in Derrylin, County Fermanagh, N. Ireland, which had been his home. The new church was built of native rock gathered around Evanston. The men of the parish and other men in the community donated their time to help in the actual construction. The first Mass in the beautiful new church was said at Midnight December 25, 1939.

The parishioners worked very hard to pay off the debt of their new church. Dinners were served and raffles were held on the lawn of the church. Dr. Whalen, the Superintendent of the State Hospital at that time, was a parishioner and offered the facilities of the kitchen at the hospital to cook the meats and prepare the food for the dinners.

Fr. Cassidy passed away on October 24, 1951, while he was still pastor of St. Mary Magdalen.

Following the death of Fr. Cassidy, the Rev. Gerard Schellinger was assigned to Evanston. Fr. John Marley followed him in June of 1952 by Fr. Bonaventure Knaebel and in October 1952. In December of 1953, Rev. John J. Corrigan came to St. Mary Magdalen. During this period of time the church continued to grow and Fort Bridger continued as a mission served by the resident pastor from Evanston.

Bishop Hubert M. Newell, fifth bishop of the diocese, was appointed coadjutor to Bishop McGovern in 1947, and became ordinary in 1951. Under Bishop Newell's guidance, the church in Wyoming grew and new programs were instituted to serve the needs of the people. Twelve new parishes were established and many other building projects completed under his direction.

In 1953 the ladies of St. Mary Magdalen were beginning their second twenty-five years as an organization. The first twenty-five years consisted mainly of keeping the altar linens in good condition and serving hot lunches to the courthouse employees and business people. For the past 40 years Eleanor Staniforth has taken care of the linens for the altar.

Father James Godley was assigned to St. Mary Magdalen Church in Evanston and St. Helen's Mission, Ft. Bridger in February 1955. Fr. Godley served the Catholic families of Evanston and the Bridger Valley for more than eleven years. He celebrated his Silver Jubilee on June 9, 1965 with an Open House given in his honor by the ladies of the Altar Society at the parish rectory. Under Fr. Godley's guidance, the Evanston ladies hosted their first Deanery Meeting in 1957, and the ladies from St. Helen's hosted the first Deanery Meeting by a Mission in 1960. Fr. Godley was transferred to Green River in October, 1966, where he remains as pastor.

Rev. Philip Colibraro came to Evanston as pastor of St. Mary Magdalen's and St. Helen's in Oct. 1966. Fr. Colibraro was very active in the community and served as parish priest under August 1972. Under the direction of Fr. Colibraro, the Catholic Center was built, with ground breaking on May 13, 1968 and the Dedication on Jan. 21, 1969. The St. Francis of Assisi Shrine, in honor of the Sisters of Holy Cross Hospital, Salt Lake City, Utah, was dedicated on September 12, 1968.

In September of 1969, the first Deanery Meeting was held in the new center.

The first special observance commemorating the 95th jubilee of St. Mary Magdalen was held March 3, 1968 when members of the family donated a music and sound system in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Edward McGarry and son. The traveling priest Fr. Cusson celebrated the 95th jubilee in remembrance of the first visit to Evanston as a mission in 1873.

In 1969, the interior of the church was re-decorated. The old altar was removed, new carpets were laid, new drapes hung, and new light fixtures installed. The Resurrected Christ was also installed over the altar.

The Catholic population in the Bridger Valley continued to grow and on June 24, 1970, groundbreaking was held for a Church Center. The dedication of the new facility was on December 3, 1970.

The new rectory for St. Mary Magdalen was built in 1972, and serves today as the home of the pastor and the church office.

The Uinta County Knights of Columbus, Council 6216, was chartered in March, 1970 and held their first meeting on March 31, 1970. There were 32 charter members with Lee Guild serving as first Grand Knight.

In August 1972, Fr. Bart Svete was assigned to St. Mary Magdalen and St. Helen's. Fr. Svete is a dedicated and spiritual priest who served the Catholics of Uinta County until June, 1975. Fr. Svete is now retired.

Fr. Colm P. Woods was transferred to Evanston from Lusk in June, 1975. Fr. Woods served as pastor until October, 1976, when he resigned from the active ministry; went to graduate school to complete graduate studies in psychology and is now a licensed psychologist in Evanston.

Fr. Thomas Cleary came to Evanston in November 1976. He served for two years and is now enjoying retirement in Ireland.

The Knights of Columbus hosted the state convention in April, 1977. Meetings were held in the Center, including a welcome pancake supper served by the ECCW.

In July 1976, it was announced that the Most Reverend Joseph Hart had been appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Cheyenne to assist Bishop Newell. Bishop Newell consecrated him at St. Mary's Cathedral in Cheyenne on August 31, 1976. Unexpectedly on January 3, 1978 it was announced that the Holy Father had accepted Bishop Newell's resignation as Ordinary of the Diocese of Cheyenne. Bishop Newell was spiritual leader of the people of Wyoming for 27 years.

On April 25, 1978, Bishop Hart was named Sixth Bishop of Cheyenne. His installation was held June 12, 1978 in St. Mary's Cathedral. Bishop Hart travels the state of Wyoming providing spiritual guidance to a growing Catholic population.

Fr. Vincent Langfield was pastor of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Helen's from Sept. 6, 1978 to August 1979. Fr. Langfield suffered from poor health and has since passed away.

In 1979 Evanston began to experience the Overthrust Boom, with its in-flux of oil and construction workers. Fr. William Espenshade was transfer-red to Evanston in August 1979 as pastor of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Helen's. During his tenure as pastor the parish grew from 75 to 200 families. During his four years in Evanston, Fr. Espenshade became involved in a number of community programs. He was transferred to Buffalo on June 15, 1983.

Our current pastor, Father Patrick Trujillo was assigned to Evanston in June 1983. In addition to his duties as pastor of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Helen's, Fr. Trujillo is also in charge of the Spanish Apostolate for the Cheyenne Diocese. Fr. Trujillo is currently on leave from the parish.

Rev. James P. Callahan is the parish administrator during the leave of Fr. Trujillo. Fr. Callahan is on loan to the diocese of Cheyenne from the archdiocese of St. Louis. As administrator here, he serves the same functions as pastor for the parish.

This written history of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Helens may seem to be only an account of the comings and goings of the clergy and the building of structures, but let us remember that the people are the church. It is impossible to recount the many ways the people of our churches have touched the lives of one another during this past 100 years and the ways in which their priests have inspired them.

Our history can serve as an example for us when we look back and see how much was accomplished by so few. As fewer clergy are called upon to serve more people, the parishioners may once again be required to minister to one another as they did in the days of Fr. Cusson.

The Church membership has many opportunities to become more active and to enrich their own lives, as well as the lives of others within the parish by actively joining the many parish organizations. The ladies organization, ECCW, affords the opportunity to become acquainted with the women of the church, and to experience fellowship and understanding of our faith. Knights of Columbus, a charitable men's organization enables the men of the parish to participate in different activities. The CYO is an active, fun, Christian group of teenagers, grades 9 through 12 who are involved with parish as well as state functions, thus renewing their faith. Catechism classes are held for children grades K through 8. They have experienced many different ways of loving and serving our Lord. There is also a Preschool program. Many people are giving of their time and talents in order to keep these groups active and alive.