

Laramie, St. Lawrence O'Toole Bishop McGovern

[119] Although a settlement had begun at Laramie in the spring of 1868, the town was not incorporated until the following year. At that time the only priest in the Territory of Wyoming was Rev. William Kelly, pastor of Cheyenne. He is authority for the statement that he occasionally celebrated Mass on Sunday at Laramie and Fort Sanders; and the records show that he and his successors officiated on week-days from time to time until the appointment of a resident pastor. On July 12, 1869, Bishop O'Gorman, of Omaha, assisted by Frs. Ryan, Millany and Kelly, administered the sacrament of confirmation and laid the corner-stone of a church that was started. This undertaking seems to have made no further progress until the advent of the first local pastor, early in 1872.

This young priest, Rev. Eugene Cusson, was of French-Canadian stock, and took charge of Laramie shortly after his ordination. It is marvelous what he was able to accomplish during his seven years' pastorate. His first care was to secure title to the church property. The Union Pacific Railroad company issued a quit-claim deed to lots 1 and 2, block 190, generously. donating this land to the Catholic Church (June [120] 19, 1872). He then proceeded to build the stone church, and pushed it to completion; it was dedicated under the patronage of St. Lawrence O'Toole.

In 1874 the Union Pacific established a rolling mill in Laramie, and, for the benefit of its employees operated a small hospital, which, however, functioned but a brief space. Consequently, officials of the Union Pacific and the Albany county commissioners discussed with Fr. Cusson the feasibility of securing Catholic sisters to open a hospital. Quite accidentally the pastor met Mother Xavier Ross, of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, on the platform of the railway station in Cheyenne. Mother Xavier agreed to send representatives to confer with the Union Pacific officials and the county commissioners, and, as a result, it was

decided to establish the hospital. While the old frame building was being repaired, the sisters were busy collecting money and supplies, and getting ready the necessary bedding and furnishings. Under the name of St. Joseph the twenty-four-bed hospital was formally opened Feb. 1, 1876, with Sister Joanna Bruner in charge, assisted by Sisters Martha Meade, Mary Agnes Toole and Mary De Pazzi Lane. From this date to Oct. 13, 1895, four hundred and thirty-five patients were received and treated.

So far as is known the only hospital within the present territory of Wyoming antedating the two (or [121] one?) referred to above was a military hospital, likewise located at Laramie, and evidently conducted for the benefit of the soldiers in neighboring Fort Sanders:

“I visited Laramie City August 3d (1870), for the purpose of examining the garden of Dr. Latham, who has charge of a military hospital at this place, and who is experimenting with various vegetables and cereals in order to ascertain what can be raised here.” >n1 Preliminary Report of the U.S. Geological Survey of Wyoming and portions of contiguous territories. (Second annual report of progress). By F.V. Hayden, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1872. This survey was made from July 15, 1870 to Jan. 1, 1871.>

Pleased with their work in the hospital, Fr. Cusson invited the sisters to open a parochial school. This they did in a rented building not far from the church, in Sept., 1878. Sisters Loretto Foley and Francis De Sales Cannan taught the eight grades, with an attendance of about eighty pupils. The following year the sisters bought a roomy frame building on A street, and, with additional teachers, it assumed the ambitious title of St. Mary's Academy. This institution continued, with varying fortune, until 1900, when it was closed for lack of support. Besides the elementary work of the grades, music and sewing were taught. During this period the attendance fluctuated, at one time reaching the creditable record of one hundred, including about twenty-five boarders.

[122] When one is informed that the population of Laramie in 1880 was but 2,696, he begins to understand what a hazardous venture was the foundation of these two establishments in those pioneer days.

Returning to Rev. Eugene Cusson, it is to be borne in mind that there was no priest in Wyoming either north or west of Laramie throughout his pastorate. We find him, therefore, officiating regularly in Rawlins and Evanston. In the latter place he held services in the local school building up to the year 1877, when a church was purchased from the Baptists; within a month it was out of debt.

Trips to the northern country were more difficult, because they must needs be made by stage over wretched roads. Nevertheless it is recorded that he made missionary journeys in 1877 and 1878 to minister to the Catholics at South Pass, Atlantic City and Camp Brown (Lander).

Early in 1879 Fr. Cusson was transferred to Nebraska City, where for many years he shepherded the flock committed to his care, according to the best traditions of apostolic zeal.

Before passing to the next pastor it may be well to cite figures from the parish register, as it will give some idea of the Catholic population. From Sept., 1872 to Sept., 1873, twenty baptisms are recorded, [123] these including all from Laramie to Evanston. Only three marriages are entered for the year 1873.

In the middle of Feb., 1879, began the long and stormy pastorate of Rev. Hugh Cumiskey, whose term of office lasted almost forty-one years.

We have already referred to St. Joseph's hospital, which was housed in a frame building near the railroad tracks. In 1878 the sisters in charge, having in mind the erection of a more substantial and more commodious structure, purchased a plot of land east of town, and about a mile from the church. Building operations were begun immediately, while two nuns set out to collect funds. Three thousand dollars were appropriated

by the Territorial legislature to assist in the undertaking, but, even so, the amount of money on hand was not sufficient to justify prosecution of the work. It was brought to a halt, and the beginning of 1879 found the building but half-completed, \$5,000.00 in debt, and \$15,000.00 more required for its completion.

After a considerable delay the hospital was finally made ready for occupation early in 1883. It was a fine-appearing three-story brick building, which provided accommodations for approximately fifty patients. The solemn dedication took place on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (Jan. 25th), with the inaugural Mass celebrated by Rev. Hugh Cummiskey, assisted [124] by Rev. M.F. Cassidy, of Rawlins, and Rev; John Hayes, of Cheyenne.

For several years the hospital prospered. Later, however, the Union Pacific railroad shops were moved to Rawlins, and their patients were sent to Denver for hospitalization. The last Union Pacific patient was John Smith, registered April 12, 1886. The American Protective Association, that bigoted organization, whose *bête noire* was Catholics, made its appearance in 1892, and was soon strong enough to coerce the authorities into withdrawing the county patients. The last Albany county patient received was Albert Vogel, entered Dec. 18, 1894. The sisters struggled until the fall of 1895, and, no longer able to meet their expenses, moved into a building directly opposite the present church, owned by the local parish. As there was no prospect of successfully continuing their work, the sisters returned to the motherhouse the following year.

A few years after their departure (July 18, 1900), the hospital building, together with the four acres of land surrounding it, was deeded to The Diocese of Cheyenne for the sum of one dollar. On Sept. 1, 1902, Fr. Cummiskey, as administrator of the diocese, donated the property to the Sisters of St. Joseph, of Concordia, Kansas, together with the house and lot opposite the church, on condition that they open and [125] conduct a

Catholic orphanage. He also collected \$3,500.00, which he deposited in the bank in the name of the "Sisters of St. Joseph, to be used for the orphans of the State of Wyoming." The sisters immediately started a school and orphanage, but, as was to be expected, they lacked sufficient support and closed within a year. On the withdrawal of the sisters there was a legal contest between them and Fr. Cumiskey concerning the ownership of the property. An appeal to the proper ecclesiastical authority brought a decision in favor of the latter. Strange to relate, both pieces of real estate were deeded to the Church of St. Lawrence O'Toole, although the hospital property rightly belonged to The Diocese of Cheyenne.

While treating of real estate, it may be in order to finish this subject. The property opposite the church, (lot 4, block 201) already referred to in preceding paragraphs, was purchased by the parish Aug. 25, 1890, for \$5,000.00; the property to the rear of the church (lot 3, block 190) was secured July 24, 1888, for \$4,000.00.

It is now time to turn to Fr. Cumiskey's activities in other directions. In 1885 he added a sanctuary and sacristy to the church, and made other substantial improvements at a cost of \$17,000.00, with a debt of only \$3,000.00.

[126] In his account of his pastorate he touches upon "so-called Catholic organizations." His first reference is to the Clan na Gaels, organized in Laramie about 1883: he relates that they came to an inglorious end in a grand "free for all," and seems grateful that they gave no trouble to the Church. His next reference is to the "Irish Union," which he declares gave public scandal by its disregard for ecclesiastical regulations. It was denounced from the altar, and presumably came to a premature end. Then followed the Hibernians. "After a troublesome career, they died a well-merited death, for which the pastor had every reason to thank the Lord." Finally came the Knights of Columbus, whose organization he opposed from the beginning. Throughout the existence of the council the

pastor and members were at swords' points, and when Bishop Keane was promoted to Dubuque in 1911, the pastor, as administrator and head of the diocese, forced the higher authorities of the order to revoke the local charter.

The last mention of the hospital property left it in possession of the Church of St. Lawrence O'Toole. In the year 1916 (Aug. 31) the parish sold this property to Rt. Rev. Nathaniel S. Thomas, the Episcopalian bishop of Wyoming, for the sum of \$4,625.00, which was deposited in the parochial treasury. The building was rehabilitated, and is again used as a home for [127] dependent children, under the name of Cathedral Home.

Various episodes which have a significant appeal as colorful incidents in the life of a pioneer priest are set down in Fr. Cumiskey's narrative of those early days. Following is an excerpt concerning one of his earliest experiences:

“Bishop O'Connor, of Omaha, when sending me here, said that the Laramie parish had been quite troublesome, but in time it would improve. In the latter part of February, 1879, shortly after I arrived, my residence was attacked at midnight. The doors were broken down and other acts of vandalism perpetrated. I held my ground and the attackers did not enter the house. On the following day I provided myself with means of self-defense, and gave due notice of my intentions.

“I was not troubled in this respect again until the American Protective Association organized here in 1892. On the 15th of May, 1895, they broke into the church, scattered the Blessed Sacrament around the sanctuary, stole the ciborium, chalice, and in brief did all the mischief they could. While they were doing this an A.P.A. policeman watched at the church to notify them in case of detection. The same policeman shortly afterward broke his neck by falling into a shaft at Leadville, Colo. Every participant in [128] the outrage met with a horrible end. The

church was broken into again, and my house entered twice in my absence. Nothing could be done so far as taking civil action was concerned, because the judge and civil officers belonged to the same gang.

“Three members of the A.P.A. came to the church the Sunday after the last outrage to hear what I had to say. Well, I had something to say, and they heard it. Some weak-kneed Catholics thought my language was too strong, and they feared it would bring vengeance on the Catholics of the town. Did it? By no means! the church and the house were never again disturbed by the pests. The president of the University of Wyoming was present on this particular Sunday and he said the A.P.A.s were scared to death.

“Up to recent years a priest’s time was generally taken up with attending small and scattered missions and sick calls. Some laughable occurrences happened at times in connection with the latter. Permit me to mention one which occurred in the latter part of 1879. The Indians of the White River agency, Colorado, went on the war path and killed Mr. Meeker, the agent, and carried off some members of his family. They came north toward Rawlins. Major Thornburg, the commandant at Fort Steele (15 miles from Rawlins) was sent to drive them back to the agency. The Indians ambushed him. The major was killed, and [129] with him the greater part of his command. The Indians then continued their march toward Rawlins, and camped within three miles of that place, where they killed a man named Jordan.

“As might be expected the people of the town became greatly excited and hastily arranged to repel any attack that might be made. A cannon was placed at every window in the Union Pacific shops, and people were instructed to go there as soon as the Indians appeared. Most all the women left Rawlins, but one remained, and she caused me no little discomfiture. Rev. M.F. Cassidy, the priest at Rawlins, had contracted typhoid fever a month or so before the event of which I am writing. He

was at the sisters' hospital in Laramie. A certain Mrs. Goodwin, of Rawlins, got sick and I was notified by telegram to come and prepare her for death. This was the very day the Indians were so near the city.

“After giving her the last sacraments, it being about two o'clock a.m., I went from one small hotel to another to get a room. My efforts were useless, as men were sleeping on the floor wherever I went. There was a little room attached to the church, and I concluded to make it my headquarters for the remainder of the night. The church was about the first building on the road over which the Indians would pass had [130] they decided to advance, a circumstance by no means reassuring or calculated to make me feel comfortable.

“I was weary and I retired, regardless of my unpleasant thoughts and feelings because of the proximity of undesirable neighbors. The lower part of the window in the little room was about one foot from the ground. I mention this because it will make more intelligible what happened later. An hour or so after I had retired I was awakened by a terrific crash, and when I looked around I saw the glass scattered over the room. It is easy to guess what my first thoughts were. I got out of that room with more haste than elegance, fully determined to beat the supposed Indians to the shops. Not hearing any war whoops, and realizing that I would be a laughing-stock if no Indians were near, I turned back to reconnoiter, and what do you suppose I found? It appeared the Catholics of Rawlins had removed a tin chimney that had been on the church and replaced it with a brick one. A pig came around making investigations and got its head fastened in the cast-off chimney, and then proceeded to bombard the window. As I am not a Jew, I felt an irresistible desire to eat that porker.

“Sometimes a priest was required to make long and disagreeable journeys to attend the dying. Not infrequently I have traveled three days, and on one occasion six days, on horseback, with the temperature [131] from ten to twenty degrees below zero during the entire trip. On this

particular trip I was accompanied by one of the Younger brothers, who as a train robber had operated with Jesse James. He was a fugitive from justice, and I felt I was too. In all fairness I must say that he was very gentlemanly and kind to me. In fact I was glad to have him with me; for one night we were followed by several grizzly bears, and bears with an appetite too, as it was bitterly cold and the snow was very deep.”

The above quotations, while they may have no particular historical significance, reveal a most intimate side of the life of a pioneer priest.

Fr. Cummiskey was born at Tonawanda, Pa., Aug. 15, 1854, and was ordained Nov. 2, 1877. Various honors came to him from his superiors: he held the office of vicar-general under four bishops; served as administrator of the diocese three different times, covering in all a period of more than five years; and, during the regime of Bishop Keane, was named by Rome a Rt. Rev. monsignor.

His end came rather suddenly as the result of a ruptured appendix, and he passed away Oct. 3, 1920. He was held in esteem by all the citizens of Laramie, irrespective of creed, because throughout his many years of residence among them, he had ever been the exemplar of priestly virtue. However, his idea of [132] discipline was Draconian, and the sentiments of his own people toward their pastor are better described as veneration and reverence rather than affection; for the least infraction of the moral code on the part of the parishioners would merit a philippic at the Sunday Mass.

In his will Monsignor Cummiskey left \$3,300.00 to the Church of St. Lawrence O’Toole, and \$1,500.00 for the support of orphans; while the residue of his estate, after certain bequests to relatives, was left to foreign missions.

Bishop McGovern was in Rome on his ad limina visit when Msgr. Cummiskey died. Early in January, 1921, Rev. John T. Nicholson was

appointed pastor of Laramie, and at the same time vicar-general of the diocese. With the passing of the years the parish of St. Lawrence O'Toole had grown; for the official census of 1920 credited the city with 6,300 inhabitants. Realizing that the attendance had outgrown the small church of pioneer days, Fr. Nicholson at once began preparations for the erection of a larger edifice. An appeal was made to the congregation, which numbered about 200 families, and committees were appointed to solicit the necessary funds. Progress was slow, but finally the cornerstone was laid by Bishop McGovern July 19, 1925. The sermon was given by Rev. Michael Kenny, S.J.

[133] The bishop had the happiness of dedicating the new edifice June 6, 1926, and preached at the solemn high Mass which followed. At solemn vespers in the evening Rev. William O'Ryan, of Denver, delivered the discourse. The total cost of the building and furnishings was about \$80,000.00, while the debt was \$35,000.00. The seating capacity is 400. It should be mentioned that when Fr. Nicholson took charge of the parish, there was \$16,000.00 in the treasury.

In 1927 the barn next to the parochial residence was leased for an automobile repair shop and filling station; and the old church was fitted up as a parish center. Next to this the pastor erected a cheap stucco building, which was rented to a restaurateur.

In the spiritual realm Fr. Nicholson did much for the people committed to his care. Through his efforts attendance at the catechism classes was increased and the teaching staff improved. The Forty Hours devotion was introduced, and is observed every year. The Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, the Children of Mary, and the Third Order of Franciscans for persons living in the world, were canonically erected. To promote the welfare of the Catholic students attending the state university the Newman Club was established.

After a devoted service of fourteen years, the Very Rev. John T. Nicholson, V.G., departed this life amid his parishioners Feb. 7, 1935, and was buried [134] beside his predecessor in the Catholic cemetery. Fr. Nicholson was born in county Sligo, Ireland, studied at Mungret, in his native country, and at Cincinnati, where he was ordained in 1897 for the diocese of Galveston. While pastor in Houston he contracted malarial fever, and found it advisable to seek a higher altitude. In Wyoming he was pastor successively at Newcastle, Buffalo, and Laramie. He was 66 years of age at the time of his death. A fortunate investment that he had made in a gold mine in the Black Hills had turned out most profitably, so that he was able to provide in his testament a fund of \$20,000.00 for the education of deserving children of slender means.

To the vacant parish of Laramie was now called a young priest, Rev. John McDevitt, J.C.D., who took over the charge March 1, 1935. A few facts may be set down to give in summary form the present condition of the parish.

The Knights of Columbus had been re-organized in 1930, and the council has about 100 members, with a Fourth Degree assembly of thirty. A Boy Scout troop and a Girl Scout troop have been established and are functioning successfully. In 1936 a square block, bounded by Kearney, Sheridan, Third and Fourth streets, was purchased for \$11,000.00, of which \$3,000.00 was a donation secured by Bishop McGovern. [135] This property is intended for a future parochial center and school. Annually since 1936, a religious vacation school is conducted by the Sisters of Charity (Casper) for the children. The Newman Club has been resuscitated, and boasts 135 members who are deeply interested in all that pertains to Catholic life.

With the approval of the bishop, the Catholic School of Religion was formally inaugurated in January, 1938. The university grants nine hours of a total of transfer credits to any university student who satisfactorily completes the course, which is taught by Dr. McDevitt. A branch of the

Legion of Mary was organized by Miss Mary Duffy, of Dublin, Ireland, in October, 1938. This society has for its purpose the reclamation of fallen-away Catholics and the revival of spiritual life in those who have become apathetic.

At the opening of 1937 Rock River became a regularly attended mission station. Mass and catechism classes are held there regularly once a month, and on Christmas and Easter.

The gross revenue of St. Lawrence O'Toole's parish is now (1940) in excess of \$9,000.00, and the debt \$15,500.00. Laramie is a beautiful city of 10,627 inhabitants, numbers 300 Catholic families, and has 174 Catholic students at the state university.

Rev. John McDevitt, the present pastor, was born in Philadelphia, June 6, 1898, made his studies at St. [136] Eunan's College, Letterkenny, and St. Patrick's College, Carlow, Ireland, where he was ordained in 1923. Going thence to Rome, he took a course in canon law, receiving his doctorate in 1926, since which time he has held the office of Defender of the Marriage Bond in the diocese of Cheyenne. Before his appointment to Laramie, he held charges at Monarch and Kemmerer. Rev. Adolph Pate is assistant pastor in the parish.