

**A HISTORY OF ST. PAUL'S PARISH  
PINE BLUFFS WYOMING  
1913-1993**

**By Martha Thompson  
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The 70th anniversary of the dedication of St. Paul's, the first Catholic church built in Pine Bluffs, was celebrated October 5, 1983. [First part by Martha Thompson, "Church in Pine Bluffs Celebrates 70th Anniversary," (Wyoming State Tribune, October 6, 1983).]

The Rev. Gerard Schellinger, native of Holland and the first permanent priest of the newly established parish of St. Paul's in 1912, was head of the church and its missions at Carpenter and Albin when the first church was built in 1913. The new church was built in 1961.

Before Father Schellinger was appointed to St. Paul's parish in 1912, Pine Bluffs and surrounding small towns were missions of St. Mary's Cathedral in Cheyenne.

There were elaborate ceremonies when the first church was dedicated in Pine Bluffs on Sunday, October 5, 1913. Father Schellinger celebrated a solemn High Mass at 10 a. m. and Bishop P. A. McGovern of St. Mary's Cathedral gave the address. The Cathedral choir sang High Mass for ranchers and farmers and townspeople in the Pine Bluffs area and for a few parishioners from Cheyenne who braved stormy weather to help dedicate the new church.

Parishioners and visitors were invited to attend ceremonies and to "bring their baskets and take dinner" at Blair Hall right after the dedication.

Although Catholics under Father Schellinger constructed their first church building in 1913, it was not the first time services were held in Pine Bluffs. Priests from Cheyenne, arriving in town on the Union

Pacific Railroad trains, held services in the community before the turn of the century.

The late Tom Branigan of Albin said he came in 1880 to Egbert, Wyo., with his mother and his father, a section foreman on the UP. In his recollection of church services in early days, he remembered that Mass was said in ranch houses and in section houses up and down the railroad at Hillsdale, Egbert and Pine Bluffs.

Many of the section hands under Tom's father at Egbert and under Peter Keenan, section foreman at Hillsdale, and their families often rode in the caboose of the trains and even on handcars to get to Mass, Tom said.

An October 1938, news story in the Pine Bluffs Post said the first Mass in Pine Bluffs was held in 1907 in Blair Hall, the building just across the street now from the newspaper office, by the Rev. James Duffy of the Cathedral.

But Tom said he remembered Masses being held there much earlier than that. Some of the Masses were said by the Rev. James M. Ryan of Cheyenne. He officiated at the marriage of Tom's mother and father in earlier years in Columbus, Neb.

A movie called "Union Pacific" was made sometime in the early 1930s and when it was shown in Pine Bluffs almost every resident of this area attended the show. Father Ryan played himself in the movie.

Father Schellinger first arrived in Pine Bluffs on October 12, 1912, by horse and buggy from Cheyenne. And his first church services were in Blair Hall. A native of Alkmaar, Holland, he was born on April 22, 1888, made his theological studies at the University of Louvain, Belgium, and after his ordination on July 14, 1912, he came to the United States the following September.

In a letter to the late Mrs. T. J. "Molly" Joyce of Pine Bluffs, Father Schellinger wrote from Corpus Christi, Tex., that he distinctly remembered the cost of the church. It was \$3600, which was considered a big sum for that time. "The debt was paid in two years," he said. "There was no rectory, as you well remember-I lived in the sacristy of the church."

The church was located on a plot of ground on the south side of Eighth Street, just west of the Sumner Miller residence at the end of Main Street going south. The ground was donated by J.B. Gilliam, who was not a Catholic.

That first church was just east of the present rectory and it was razed after the building of the new St. Paul's on East Fourth and Beech Streets in 1961.

News of the construction of a Catholic Church in Pine Bluffs was announced in the December 13, 1912, issue of the Post, which said that a building was to be started soon. In the meantime, the story said, morning services would be held every two weeks, beginning the following Sunday.

As construction proceeded, the Post said, "It is a neat structure, 34x60 feet. It is well-lighted and ventilated, and in a few weeks will be furnished with pews." The article also said that two rooms would "be fitted at the back" for the pastor.

Mrs. Joyce, who came to Pine Bluffs as a homesteader in 1907 with her husband, "Tad," from Sutton, Neb., was a longtime member of St. Paul's Church until she moved to Laramie and died at her home there several years ago. She attended the dedication in 1913 and remembered it was raining that day. She also remembered that one of the members of the Cathedral choir was Mayme Dunstan O'Connell, aunt of Murrin Keenan of St. Paul's church.

A notation in Mrs. Joyce's scrapbook said that Father James Duffy was the first priest to come regularly to St. Paul's to say Mass while Pine Bluffs was a mission of Cheyenne and he served from 1904 until 1913. He was later made the first Bishop of the Diocese of Grand Island.

Murrin's mother, the late Ann Dunstan Keenan, was born in 1884 on the Dunstan Ranch southwest of Pine Bluffs, ranched now by LeRoy and Richard Gardner. From 1915 to 1952, she and her husband, Tom, served as postmasters of Pine Bluffs, alternating as political spheres changed from election to election from Democratic to Republican. In 1962, she said that going to Mass in Pine Bluffs in early years was not an everyday occurrence. It was a highlight for the ranchers and railroaders.

Ann said the first that anyone knew that services were to be held was when news went out by the grapevine that Father was coming on Number 9 from Sidney, since Cheyenne was still mission territory in early days. Ranchers and crews gathered with their families on the appointed day for the long-awaited celebration of Mass.

The pioneer said she remembered that one of the very first early priests to say Mass at Pine Bluffs was Father McCarty from Sidney. He was a great hunter and Tom Keenan claimed that Father's favorite Mass site was the Egbert section house because he could start right after the big family covered-dish meals after church services and hunt for antelope at the Anthony Wilkinson ranch.

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of St. Mary's Cathedral in 1968, parishioners from Pine Bluffs told their recollections of early services in Pine Bluffs. The late C. C. Gross said that in pioneer times, services were held by priests traveling on the UP trains and they were held in Blair Hall, above the store owned by his parents, Charles James Gross and Mary Dolan Gross, later Mary "Molly" Wilkinson. On Saturday nights, dances were held in the hall.

Services were held infrequently, Gross said, and when word came that they were to be held, his mother posted £ notice in the store and word traveled about the area to the William Dunstans, the Thomas Kellys, the William Dolans, the William Rowlands, the Peter Keenans and others.

Gross said he served Mass for the priests and he told about the makeshift equipment used. He said on occasion he reached for the cruets and accidentally bumped into the wooden sawhorses and knocked down all the seating arrangements and the people sitting there.

One of the oldest Catholic families in the Pine Bluffs area were Gross' grandparents. His grandfather, William Dolan, was in the U. S. Navy during the Civil War and was captured at New Orleans. After he was mustered out o service, he went to work for the Union Pacific Railroad and came west with the building of the transcontinental railway. He was one of the first employees of the Union Pacific to go into cattle ranching. He established the Dolan Ranch southwest of Pine Bluffs in 1868 and had the first homestead grant in the eastern part of the county in 1875.

Ann Bresnahan Cooney, the oldest living pioneer member of St. Paul's Church, is a resident of Mountain Tower Healthcare and may be the only living person who attended the dedication of St. Paul's Church in 1913. Her father was a boilermaker with the UP and moved to a farm in the Albin area in 1915. She said he was at Mass at old S1 John's church in Cheyenne the day Tom Horn broke out of jail.

Ann said one other first dates with her late husband, Frank Cooney, was when they attended the dedication of St. Paul's Church.

In a letter to Mrs. Joyce in 1962, Father Schellinger wrote, "I remember I traveled pretty well all over Laramie County - on horseback, motorcycle and finally in a primitive-type automobile. For some reason or another my name became a legend, among Protestants as well as

Catholics. I felt at the time I was sowing the seed for a harvest to be reaped by others.”

Parishioners at Carpenter remember when he came cross-country by horseback for services at St. Raphael Church. One Sunday he got lost in a blizzard on his way back to Pine Bluffs and his horse led him to a chicken house, where he spent the night. The next morning he discovered he was covered with mites and that he was in the yard of one of his parishioners, Tony Vochman.

Father graduated to a motorcycle to make his trips about the time the Ku Klux Klan was active in Pine Bluff burning crosses on the bluffs above his quarters and making threats.

One Sunday on a trip to Carpenter, he thought he heard a volley of shots from the Klan, but the faster he drove the louder the shots became, until he calmed down enough, he said, to recognize the backfire of his machine.

In 1953, Father Schellinger revisited his Carpenter mission and told of his introduction to the community September 1912, when he accompanied Father Duffy. They came on the CB&Q train, called the “puddle jumper” by residents.

Having known the magnificent cathedrals of Europe, Father did not expect the best in the prairies of Wyoming but he told of walking with Father Duffy to an unpainted lean-to about the size of a homestead kitchen standing a village with a general store and a few shacks, he said. He received his first rude awakening about his new parish he said, when he asked Father Duffy where the church was.

“You’re leaning on it,” Father Duffy said.

He said his ride on a horse to Carpenter his first Sunday there was the second time he had ever been on a horse. The first, he said, was on a merry-go-round at a carnival in Belgium.

During his 1953 visit to Carpenter, he admired the church he built in 1917 to replace the shack. The average Easter and Christmas collection, he said, was about 62 cents in depression days.

Father spent a lot of time in his early years in eastern Laramie County at the T. J. Joyce homestead and Mo Joyce and Catherine Thompson told many stories about Father and his mission trips. About the time Father left his Book of Office at Joyce's and the children tore it to pieces and no one would take the blame. About the time he aim at Johnny Joyce's cat with a gun, intending to miss, but didn't, and Johnny got even by locking Father in t outhouse. When his mother came to rescue Father, Johnny said, "Don't let him out. I've got him in a place where won't kill any more cats."

Father's colorful career as a pioneer priest in the county came to a close on October 4, 1917. He had resigned his pastorate of St. Paul's earlier to volunteer for duty as a chaplain with the First Cavalry at Fort D. A. Russell Cheyenne until he was sent overseas. He was the first Catholic priest in the U. S. to volunteer as a chaplain World War I, he said.

One of his last official acts in the parish was to marry Catherine Cross and George Thompson of Carpenter at £ Mary's Cathedral on September 10, 1917.

Father served as chaplain in the Army from August, 1917, to December, 1918. After he was mustered out of service he served in Kemmerer, Rawlins and Newcastle. He baptized the present pastor of St. Paul's, Rev. Gary Ruzicka. Later he was chaplain at DePaul Hospital in Cheyenne.

When he died in Corpus Christi, Tex., on December 20, 1965, following a colorful career, his obituary noted that he was assistant rector of North American College in Louvain, Belgium, from 1933 to 1935. He attained national prominence, the obituary stated, when he instructed and baptized William "Bill" Carlisle, one of the last of the 0 West's bank robbers who was an inmate at the state penitentiary in Rawlins when Father Schellinger was rector St. Joseph's Church.

Through Father's efforts, the former train robber was paroled and later became a successful motel operator Laramie.

A story in the July 25, 1958, Wyoming Catholic Register makes exciting reading. It is the story of Carlisle career as a train robber and his conversion. It is entitled, "Train Robber Derailed Into Church."

A twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the building of St. Paul's Church in Pine Bluffs was held on October 3 1938, according to a story in the Pine Bluffs Post on October 27, 1938.

Ceremonies began with the serving of a dinner to church dignitaries and prominent members of the clergy, townspeople and friends from surrounding communities on Saturday evening. The Rev. Jerome Denk, pastor, sang High Mass the following morning and the choir from St. Mary's Cathedral in Cheyenne sang for the services. Mrs. T. Joe Cahill was director and organist.

The Rev. James Hartman, pastor of St. Mary's Cathedral, attended the service. Rosary and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was held at 2 o'clock. Catholics from Carpenter St. Raphael's Church and Albin St. Joseph Church also participated in the celebration.

When the 50th anniversary of St. Paul's Church arrived in 1963, the occasion slipped by without fanfare. A new St. Paul's Church had been built and laying of the cornerstone took place on March 6, 1961, bringing construction of the \$108,000 church to a formal conclusion.

The Rev. John Corrigan, who was in charge of construction, said the first Mass in the new church on Palm Sunday On Tuesday, April 6, 1961, Bishop Hubert M. Newell of Cheyenne presided at dedication ceremonies.

The church architecture was of modern Romanesque lines of red brick and stone construction. It measured 104x4 feet and contained three beautiful cream cordovan altars. A nine-foot Italian hand-carved crucifix surmounted the main drape of gold spun beige, surrounded by indirect lighting. The same art studios in Italy supplied the hand carved statues of Mary and Joseph for the two side altars. They were donated by George and Catherine Thompson of Carpenter.

Lending a distinctive mark to the new church was a six-foot iron-bronze gilded statue of St. Paul, which enhances the bell tower. George Stoval of Fort Collins was general contractor for the building designed to seat 400 persons.

A parade of clergy has marched through the parish of St. Paul's Church since the first pastor, the Rev. Gerard Schellinger arrived in the fall of 1912 and left to go to World War I with the First Cavalry of Fort D. A. Russell in September of 1917.

Rev. Michael Healy was pastor from October 1917, to June, 1925. The Rev. James McBride followed him, who was stationed in the parish from June, 1925, to July, 1932. In July, 1932, the Rev. Walter Nicholson came to serve the parish until July of 1935 when the Rev. Jerome Denk, who remained as pastor until December of 1938, succeeded him. Rev. Charles Gormly was pastor from December, 1939 to 1942; the Rev. William McCormick from 1948 to 1950.

In June of 1950, the Rev. James Ruddy arrived and served for three months, when he was succeeded in September by the Rev. James Godley who remained until 1955. The Rev. John Corrigan served from 1955 to

1961; the Rev. Herbert Krause from 1961 to 1962; the Rev. Philip Colibraro from March to September, 1962; the Rev. Michael Butler from 1962 to 1972; the Rev. Philip Colibraro returned in 1972 and remained until 1978; and the Rev. Patrick Trujillo served from 1978 to 1983.

The Rev. Gary Ruzicka arrived to take charge of the parish in June, 1983, and served until November, 1983, when the Rev. John Savio was named pastor. Msgr. Lawrence Etchingham succeeded Father Savio in May, 1986.

Father Etchingham retired in 1990, then Rev. Vern Clark, served only until 1991 before he was called to Greybull to assist the Rev. John Meyer who was very ill and died soon afterwards.

Theresa Wyburn was named pastoral administrator for St. Paul's Church in 1991 and when she resigned in 1992 Betty Mowry who is serving now in that capacity succeeded her.

The Rev. Angel Ornelas, son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Angel Ornelas, Sr., is the only Pine Bluffs native to have been ordained to the priesthood. His ordination took place in 1965, a historic occasion for the people of the Pine Bluffs parish and the missions of St. Raphael's at Carpenter and St. Joseph's at Albin.

Pine Bluffs Missions

Albin Burns Carpenter

1913-1993

[From Thompson's Pine Bluffs 1913-1993 had pictures of the churches, but we could not save them when we scanned. Ed.]

St. Peter's Church at Carpenter was established by homesteaders in 1909 who purchased the old town hall and two lots for \$125. A new church was built by Father Schellinger and dedicated in August, 1917, and was renamed St. Raphael's Church at the request of a donor who gave

monies for the building through the Catholic Extension Society for their assistance in building rural churches.

St. Joseph's Church, Albin, was constructed under the direction of Father Gerard Schellinger in 1915. The first time a bishop had attended Mass there was in 1982 on November 7 when Bishop Joseph Hart of the Diocese of Cheyenne concelebrated the Mass there following renovation of the church. A rose window above the altar was donated by Elizabeth Donahue Anderson in memory of her husband, Floyd, and by JoAnn Lemaster and her late husband, Gene Lemaster.

St. Mary's Church, Burns, was built by Father Schellinger in 1914 and dedicated in 1915. Diminishing Catholic congregation forced closure of the church during Father Jerome Denk's term in Pine Bluffs in 1935 when there were only two practicing Catholics. But the church has been given a new lease on life when Em and Jack Curless suggested the church be obtained for the Texas Trail Museum complex in Pine Bluffs. It was donated by Gary and Irene Humphrey, moved here in 1992, and is being renovated now.

BURNS

1932-1991

St. Mary's Church restored

Martha Thompson

St. Mary's Church in the historical complex at the Texas Trail Museum has received a face-lift from volunteer carpenters and in the not too distant future will be ready for viewing.

Among those carpenters are Jim Sterle and Cliff Haukap. Sterle said among other things done, an attractive new floor has been installed by Kerry Reher. Another was placing of the altar donated by John Lemaster of Albin.

The altar and religious items was a gift to his mother, Alice Lemaster, from the Rev. John Corrigan, Pastor of the Eastern Laramie County Churches, when he was in charge of building a new St. Paul's Church in Pine Bluffs in 1961 to replace the original one built in 1913.

St. Mary's Church was built in Burns in 1914 at a cost of \$1,000 by Father Gerard Schellinger who came to Wyoming from Holland to build churches in eastern Laramie County. He built St. Paul's in Pine Bluffs in 1913, and St. Joseph's in Albin in 1914. In 1917, he built a new church in Carpenter to replace St. Peter's remodeled in 1909 by early homesteaders from the first town hall there. They paid \$125 for the hall and two lots.

The original St. Paul's was abandoned and demolished when the new church was built in 1961. Sterle said he was baptized in the original St. Paul's and he is enjoying sharing his carpenter talents on old St. Mary's.

The Muddy Creek School of the late 1800s on the Dolan Ranch southwest of Pine Bluffs and a railroad caboos has been moved to the museum complex and the board discussed the possibility of securing a pioneer church. Jack and Em Curless suggested the abandoned St. Mary's at Burns.

The owners of the church turned granary, Gary and Irene Humphrey, made a gift of the church when contacted, if the board would arrange for its move and clear the lots.

In the exchange, it was discovered that the church was named St. Paul's but Bishop P.A. McGovern in his published story of the early churches writes that the church at Burns was St. Mary's.

His story also records that by 1932 there were only three families attending Mass and only five practicing Catholics and by 1955 there were only two and the decision was made to close the church as they could attend church at Pine Bluffs, Carpenter, or Cheyenne.

On a Friday in morning, October 11, 1991, after a monumental effort on the part of the movers, the church of St. Mary's arrived at the Texas Trail complex.

It was evident that major restoration was needed. The floor was removed, plaster on the ceiling had fallen, the walls were cracked, the windows had to be replaced, the roof re-done and the foundation shored up to meet the code of the fire marshal.

An effort was made by Barbara Zimmerman to have stained glass windows fashioned through Polly Burkett and her art class although they were not in place in the original church.

The museum board appealed for the donation of pews. Jim and Vera Zitek of Grover donated an organ from the former St. Mary's Church in Grover.

Sterle said one interesting thing has occurred since he and Haukap have been working on the building; a woman called to ask if there was a possibility that a wedding be performed in the church.

The new resident priest of St. Paul's Church, the Rev. Hugo Blotsky said he would have to research that project.

One of the very valuable gifts to the St. Mary's Church was made by the Lemaster family, formerly of Albin, who had gifted the altar, religious statues and related items presented by the Rev. John Corrigan to the mother of the family, the late Alice Lemaster who established a chapel in the second story of the family home at Albin. The Rev. John Corrigan Pastor at Pine Bluffs St. Paul's Church moved the best of items from original St. Paul's church when he began building a new one in 1961 and gave them to Alice.

Some of those known to have attended St. Mary's church at Bums were John Lemaster and his brothers and sisters, the late Calvin and Earl, Van,

and sisters, Viola Person, Eileen Bollig, and Wreatha .Hodgeman. The late Gerald Thompson and his parents and two brothers of Carpenter also attended, and John, Wreatha, Gene, Eileen, and Earl were baptized at St. Mary's.

After the church was closed, it was used for several years as a granary to store wheat, first by Lawrence Scott, then by Tom Killebrew and finally by the Humphreys.

Now it has been restored again to its original purpose, a church.