

HISTORY of ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH
RIVERTON
1906-1987
Father Ronald Stolcis

This is a brief history of our parish--gleaned from the official history of St. Margaret's Parish written by its pastors over the years.

The Riverton Catholic Church started in the year 1906, about the same time as the town began. The Catholic population of Riverton was too small to support a resident pastor in those early days. Consequently Riverton was attached to St. Stephen's Indian Mission and the Jesuit Fathers attended to the spiritual needs of the people. Father John B. Sifton, S.J., was the first priest to come to Riverton and because there was no church, services were held in John Malone's black shack in the southeast part of town. Mass was celebrated twice a month at Malone's until 1911 when, with the generous support of the people, Father Sifton built a wooden frame church, which served as the parish hall from 1952-1987. The new church was dedicated to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1922 (she was canonized in 1920) by Bishop Patrick A. McGovern. The parish was incorporated that same year with Mr. A.C. Allen and Mr. Joseph Vincent as the first lay trustees of the parish.

In 1912, owing to increased need at St. Stephen's, Father Sifton's services had to be withdrawn from Riverton, and Father William Keavey of Lander attended Riverton during 1912 and 1913. Mass was still said only twice a month because of the many other places he also attended. But "owing to the long distance between Lander and Riverton" and the ill health of Father Keavey, it was considered necessary for Riverton to be again attended from St. Stephen's. From 1913 to 1923 the Jesuit Fathers Aloysius Keel, E.S. McNamara, J.V. O'Connor, and M.J. Hofferer served the Riverton Catholic population which by 1923 had increased so much that Mass was celebrated every Sunday.

The time had finally arrived when a resident pastor was required and Father William J. Short was appointed the first resident priest in 1923. Father Short was endowed with “unusual gifts of organization and during his time the Riverton parish, though small, became one of the most active in the state.” Soon after, however, because the prospect of prosperity was not encouraging and many people were moving away, Father Short was transferred to Kemmerer in mid-1924 and the Riverton parish was to be attended from Lander -- the most expedient arrangement. The priests during this period were Fathers Edward Cassidy, J.J. Mullins, and Martin Kennedy. Mass was now being offered each Sunday and holyday.

Our parish history started in 1926: “The members of St. Margaret’s parish, like all other Riverton people, are optimistic about the future of Riverton and the Riverton Valley, and no doubt their courage and perseverance will be rewarded in the near future by an era of prosperity, when once again they shall have the services of a resident pastor, a blessing which they richly deserve.”

During the years of 1926 through 1936, the pastors from Lander and their assistants continued to minister to the needs of St. Margaret’s parish, which was served by Fathers Daniel O’Doherty, Arthur J. Cram and Leo B. Morgan.

In 1936, the Jesuit Fathers from St. Stephen’s again served Riverton.

In 1937, the church was served by Fathers Walter McGrath, Francis Penny, and Theodore Rath, a Precious Blood Father, who attended for a year from Lander, and then in August of 1938 became the second resident pastor of St. Margaret’s. He was followed as pastor by another Precious Blood priest, Father Albert F. Kaiser, who (as he states in his own portion of the parish history) “was a missionary and author of God with us. During his pastorate, Mass was offered twice each Sunday except on the fourth Sunday of each month when he offered Mass at the

newly established mission in Pavillion. (At this time Morton was a mission of St. Stephen's Mission and Mass was offered each second and fifth Sunday.)

During this time also a Eucharistic Holy Hour was observed on the first Friday of each month, and additional devotions were held on Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent. A study club was begun. The greatest achievement, according to Father Kaiser, was the establishment of the Apostolate of Prayer. He believed that a "Praying parish will soon become a paying or self-supporting one." He struggled to upgrade the financial support of the parish which, he stated, "has been slow and intermittent in this regard." During this time, also, the church was lengthened twenty-two feet to accommodate the people, and the "dingy wooden cross" was replaced with a gilded one.

Under the impetus of Father John Spillane, who became pastor in 1939, a building fund was begun in preparation for the construction of the new brick church--one that would be suitable in size to meet the needs of the growing Riverton population. Due to Father Spillane's untiring efforts, many were brought back to the church and new members were added.

During Father Spillane's illness, Fathers Michael McBrien and Thomas Cleary served as administrators of the parish.

Following Father Spillane's death- on November 20, 1948, Father Cleary was appointed pastor at Lander, and Father Adolph Pate became the pastor of St. Margaret's. After Spillane was pastor of St. Margaret's for nearly ten years, he hoped to build the new church. Father Pate describes him as "a priest of great zeal and ambition being both firm and kind."

In the fall of 1949 a building drive was initiated; plans for the new church were finalized in 1950; the bid of \$86,939 by the A. N. Nelson Construction Company of Riverton was accepted, and the construction

of the building and the laying of the corner stone took place in early 1951. The new church was dedicated on February 20, 1952 by Bishop Hubert M. Newell. The frame church was then converted into a Parish Hall.

Uranium was discovered within the parish boundaries in 1953, accounting for a large influx of people to the parish, the number of families almost doubling from 153 to 290. Masses were now also being said at Shoshoni and Gas Hills, as well as at Pavillion.

Towards the end of the 1950's, plans were being considered for a Catholic School at St. Margaret's. Bids for a new school were opened in early 1962, with the contract also going to A. N. Nelson Construction Company at \$145,121.

A new dimension was added to parish activity with the coming of the Extension Lay Volunteers in August of 1963. Their work continued in the parish during the next five years.

A happy day for our parish was the arrival of our Sisters--of the Order of St. Francis from Glenriddle, Pennsylvania, and the opening of the first four grades at our St. Margaret's Elementary School. Sister Marie Monica was the first principal. The fifth grade was added in the fall of 1966, and the sixth grade in 1967.

The 1960's also saw the purchase of new property for the Church in Shoshoni; the purchase of the Kirch property for a new rectory in Riverton, the adding of Dubois as a mission of the parish--resulting also in the building of the new church in 1964 at Dubois. This necessitated the services of two priests at St. Margaret's, and Father Cletus Prado became the first associate pastor.

Father Adolph Pate retired after twenty-three years as pastor at St. Margaret's in 1972 because of illness, and took up residence at St. Joseph's Church in Rawlins.

Father Jerome Logue was appointed pastor at that time. The beloved Father Pate died in 1973 and was buried at Mountain View Cemetery in Riverton next to the gravesite of Father Spillane. The rosary is recited at this site each year on Memorial Day by the members of the parish. Father Pate was known as a good friend of all, catholic and non-Catholic alike. His daily visits to Memorial Hospital were a source of inspiration to persons of all faiths, and his many acts of charity will never be known because he wanted it that way.

During the pastorate of Father Logue, the Parish Council was begun in 1973 in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. The Council continues to be a vital working force with the parish. A renovation of the sanctuary in keeping with the renewal of Vatican II also took place during this time.

Father Joseph Fraher became pastor of our church in August of 1974. The Parish Education Committee was formed during his pastorate.

Father Gerald Chleborad next was appointed pastor as Father Fraher became pastor at St. Matthew's Church in Gillette. As a result of a study conducted by the Parish Education committee, a kindergarten was added to St. Margaret's School in the fall of 1979. Sister Dolores Herbeck, a native of Riverton, was principal of the school at that time--as she continues to be at present. Following the re-structuring of the public school system at the time of the opening of a new public high school, a middle school concept was introduced, including the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. It was decided at that time to follow this public school arrangement, and with regret the 6th grade at St. Margaret's was discontinued at the end of the 1979-1980 school year.

The 1970's also saw the moving of St. Edward's Church to its present location near Morton and the building of an addition to it, due mainly to the efforts of Ethel Griebel and Father Ron Stolcis.

The assistant pastors who have served the Riverton parish over the years include Fathers Cletus Prado, Gilbert Callahan, William Gianola, Colm Woods, James Doudican, William Espenshade, Vincent Langfield, Ron Stolcis, Victor Grabrian, John Robinson, Tibor Furak, Robert Lynch, and Patrick Shea.

The other Franciscan Sisters who have been principals at our parish school are (in addition to Sister Marie Monica Borden) Sisters Joan Kiely, Barbara Jackson, and Dolores Herbeck.

Some of the notable activities of the early 80's at St. Margaret's included the study and conceiving of plans for a new Parish Center to be lovingly dedicated as the Pate Center. Due to a sudden change' in the economics of the times, this project was tabled for the present. As a beginning phase of the parish Evangelization Program, two Parish Renewal Weekends were conducted by Father Chleborad during the Lent of 1981.

The summer of 1982 noted the transformation of the old brick rectory to the west of the church into our lovely new convent--and marking of the first time that our sisters have had their residence in Riverton--terminating their many year daily treks from and to St. Stephen's. The summer of 1982 also brought Father Ron Stolcis as pastor of St. Margaret's.

In 1984 St. Margaret's Church added beautiful stained glass windows commemorating six American saints, with three smaller windows showing Catholic Symbols.

Under the leadership of Father Ron Stolcis, after years of planning, ground was broken for the new Parish Center on July 29, 1985. Construction of the center began on August 1, 1985 with the dedication of the finished facility on May 25, 1986.

The new center is attached to the west end of the present school and consists of a full sized gymnasium. Also, a portion of the 100-foot by

150 foot building has three floors. The top floor has two classrooms and a library. The street level floor has a kitchen, a storeroom, two locker rooms, two public bathrooms and a classroom. The parish hall is located in the basement along with two storerooms, two public bathrooms, and the boiler room.

During all the years of St. Margaret's existence the parish has continued to grow, not only in buildings and numbers, but in the faith and practice of the Christian Way of Life. Each year, larger and larger numbers have been nourished by the Lord's Word, and have received the ministrations of the sacraments from the hands of their priests--and with the renewed ministries restored by the Vatican Council--from the hands of their fellow parishioners. Male and female readers and ministers of the Lord's Body and the Cup of His Precious Blood are now everyday occurrences in the life of our parish, as are the many other roles of service now participated in by our members.

Today as we think of our heavenly patron, St. Margaret Mary, let us be mindful of all those good people who have gone before us, who left us a rich heritage of this faith, their efforts and their financial support.

Let us keep these people in our prayers, grateful for their legacy, and trusting that they are now enjoying the fruits of their labors in the heavenly kingdom.

Let us strive to be worthy of the heritage they bequeathed to us, and strive with all our hearts to do our part in continuing what they have begun, to faithfully continue to build up this part of the Lord's kingdom, to leave an even greater inheritance to those who follow us, to build up more and more the kingdom, until that day when we will enter into the glory of the Father. To him, the kingdom, and the honor, and the glory forever!