

## **The History of the Catholic Church at Wheatland, Wyoming Contributed by Patricia (Mullen) Erickson**

The history of St. Patrick's Church in Wheatland began in 1885, with the first celebration of Mass at the home of Patrick Mullin on the Laramie River. Rev. Francis Nugent celebrated the Mass. Reverend Nugent would ride into the ranch on horseback carrying an altar stone and other necessary things for Mass. A table was used for an altar and the Mass was said in the home. My dad said he could vividly remember the priest's black boots, which he always wore.

No one knew when the priest would arrive. When the priest did come to say Mass, one of the men or young boys were sent to tell the rest of the people that Mass would be held at the Patrick Mullin home. The members would then come by horseback and in buggies.

In the late nineties the settlers decided a church was needed. Patrick Mullin was appointed to contact the business people of Wheatland and others in the territory. Some of the businesses contacted included Wheatland Mercantile, F.L. Nine and Son, Scoval Saddle Shop, Globe Hotel, Wheatland Development Co., Tisch Drug, I. W. Gray and Kenny Dry Goods.

Charles Goodrich was awarded the contract to build the church. The bricks were made in Wheatland. McCallum and Crane, who also did the carpentry, did the brick laying. Monetary assistance was not only given but good moral support was extended. Much of the lumber was hauled from the saw mill located in the hills west of Wheatland by John and Pat Mullin with assistance extended in formulating the structure by their other brothers, Mike and Tom.

The construction of the present church was begun in 1891 when the parishioners began hauling lumber from the sawmills in the mountains. The distance was about twenty-five miles using teams and wagons. In

order to build a church of large size it was necessary to have long beams. The beams were very heavy and two wagons had to be used with reaches extended on the wagons in order to haul the lumber the distance to the building site in town. The journey proved to be long and tedious for all the men and boys who helped with the lumber and the building. Bricks necessary for the building were kilned in the brickyard in town.

Prior to finishing the church, services were held in the brick schoolhouse located south of the fire hall and above the big ditch, which goes through town. The children of these early families were also confirmed in the schoolhouse, as was my dad. In 1900, the congregation consisted of the \*\*\*Rouses: Charles, Reubin, Cass, Bertha, Agnes, Jenny, Ben, and Ann; Klasserts; Pat O'Connors; John Morrisey; Mullins: Tom, John, Pat and Mike; the John Bradleys; John Wilkinson and Pat Daley.

The parishioners didn't want to go in debt for any building material so the church was not completed until 1898. There were no windows installed in the front or back of the church. The main altar in the church was an altar that had been in the cathedral in Cheyenne. It was necessary that the altar be cut down in order to bring it into the church. The top of the altar was taken off after many years because it was too top heavy. A lot of people missed the altar top after it was removed.

The Reverend James Keating came as the first priest in 1898. Later, services were conducted by Bishop Lenihan, Reverend James Duffy and various priests from Cheyenne and Casper. On August 12, 1905, the church was incorporated with Casper Rouse and John Mullin as lay trustees.

In 1904, Mayme Cronin, later to be Mrs. Mick Mullin, wife to a son of Pat Mullin, was asked by Father Duffy, "How about music in the church?" There was no organ in the church at this time and consequently no singing or music of any kind. Father Duffy asked that Miss Cronin have an organ for the church the next time he came down from Douglas.

Three months later the organ was in the church. It was second hand and cost forty-five dollars. Funds for the organ were raised by solicitation. With the members being a little short of their goal, someone went to Tom Carroll's saloon and there the rest of the money was obtained for the organ.

The parishioners came to church by buggies and on horseback. The horses were tied up behind the church. There was also a little brick building set up with two rest rooms side by side. Services were held later in the morning due to the mode of travel and we were usually late arriving home sometime in the early afternoon. The waiting on the stoves to warm up in the winter and waiting on hot ranges in the summer for dinner to be prepared was often very trying. Usually the meal was canned pork or beef, as there was no refrigeration in those days. To this day some of us can't stand canned pork or beef!

The Reverend Patrick Long was a resident priest from February 1907 until July 1910. He also took charge of the missions in Guernsey, Sunrise, Hartville, Torrington, and Glendo. The church in Glendo was built in 1900 at a cost of eight hundred dollars.

Father Ignatius Berna, a Franciscan, took Wheatland as a mission parish on December 15, 1910. The mission was confirmed during his stay on January 11, 1911. Father Berna had throat trouble and wasn't in Wheatland very long. The Franciscans, being missionary priests, had charge of Wheatland about thirty years. They lived in Douglas and came by train to Wheatland.

In 1913, Father James Hermes was pastor of the Catholic Church in Douglas and also had charge of the mission church in Wheatland, St. Patrick's.

During Father Hermes stay, Mass was held once a month, and that was on a weekday. Then later, Mass was held on Sunday, then two Sundays,

and finally every Sunday. There were two rooms in the back of the church with cold water piped into one of the rooms. Eight homemade pews were in the church with unpadded kneeling benches. The organ was in the back of the church. There was an altar rail with two steps in front of the altar. Red carpeting was around the altar. Father Hermes bought twelve pews from Sears Roebuck, which were later installed. A large heating wood and coal stove was near the altar. The members sitting next to the stove usually roasted while the others farther away froze. The church was not heated between services. Each parishioner left a small offering on the table in the back of the church.

In June or July 1913, Father Hermes organized the Altar and Rosary Society for St. Patrick's Church of Wheatland. The following ladies were charter members: Mrs. J.H. Yeast, Mrs. Corrigan, Mrs. Mike Mullin, Mrs. Florence Atchinson, Mrs. Mayme Yates, Mrs. James Carroll, Mrs. Lena (Mullin) McClure, Miss Maggie Daugherty, Misses Nellie and Kate Mullen, Miss Agnes Rouse, Mrs. T. J. Ferguson, Miss Veronica Ferguson, Miss Mary Maloney and Mrs. Mike Gibbons. This consisted of all the ladies in the parish at that time. The meetings of the society were held in the back of the church for a long time. Then meetings were held in the homes of different members until the hall was built.

Mrs. James Carroll was elected the first president of the society. The only known chartered member of the group \*\*\*still present in 1975 is Mrs. Lena (Mullin) McClure. It was the duties of the members to take care of the altar and clean the church. For many years each Society member took her turn at cleaning the church. At present time, a janitor is hired to do the cleaning. However, the members still do special cleanings at Christmas, Easter and other special times. It was very difficult to clean the floor in those early days because they were made of pine. Often while scrubbing, you got splinters in your fingers. All the hot water for the cleaning had to be carried from the home of Mrs. Joe Yeast, a block from the church, because the church had only cold water

plumbing for years. While the Church was just a mission with Mass only once a month, (later twice a month), the needs were not many. However, neither were its comforts.

Once or twice a year a box supper was given to raise the necessary funds. In the early days of the Society, these events took place in the Commercial Hotel (now the LaRamie) which was generously donated by Tom Carroll the proprietor.

On July 3, 1920, lots one and two, on which the church stands, were bought from Bishop Patrick McGovern of Cheyenne. In addition to the sacristy in the rear of the Church, there was a furnished bedroom for the priest who came on the train from Douglas to Wheatland once a month. Since Mass was held in Wheatland only once a month, and with the Wyoming nights being very cold approximately ten months of the year, the priests probably felt much like they were sleeping in a cold storage room. There was a coal stove in the room with coal and kindling nearby, but the priest rarely lit the fire in the room as it took too long for the coal stove to heat up. Once the Altar and Rosary Society bought an electric heating pad and left it in his room, together with the instructions for its use, but the priest never did use it.\*\*\*{how did she know?} It always remained in its place in the drawer. The Franciscans had just one car, so they used it mostly for sick calls.

Father James and Father George came to give us forty hours. In the early days of the church it was forty hours. In present day it is now thirteen hours of devotion.

Father Ignatius Hanley started the Third Order. He also drew two pictures for the vestibule in the Church. One of the pictures was chosen and built.

Father Martin spaded the grounds, planted a lawn and grew flowers. One lady was making a visit to the church when the priests were still living in

the back room. Father Miller was doing some cooking and she remarked that the church smelled like roses. Father replied that he was cooking some onions and also burning some Chinese perfume.

One of the priests came from Douglas on the train to say Mass one time, and someone told him the congregation consisted of mostly cowboys. It must have really frightened him because he wouldn't stay at the church, but went to Carroll's Hotel (the Commercial), and took the next train back to Douglas.

After the 10:30 Mass, the priest and some lay person helped with teaching catechism. Later after Mass, for years, many ladies who volunteered to teach the different classes taught the children catechism. Many of the women were parents of the children and also members of the Altar and Rosary Society. We still have many faithful women and men who teach the different classes today. In later years, we have had nuns from different towns who conducted a summer school for a week to the children and culminated the week's work with a First Communion Class. The classes were held in the hall and the rectory which was located next to the church.

When St. Patrick's had a resident priest in 1940, there were many improvements made, including the planting of a lawn and shrubs. The exterior of the church was also stuccoed. A new vestibule was added onto the exterior of the church. All of the improvements were made under the guidance of Fathers Brendon, Weishaar, Marcellus Lell, and Martin Collect. Since 1940, St. Patrick's has had a resident priest.

When Father Clement Orth was here it was decided to enlarge the church. The two back rooms of the original church, which were the sacristy and the priest's room, were taken out and the church altar was moved to the back of the church. A new sacristy and a hall were added to the back of the church onto the original building. When the hall was finished the Altar and Rosary Society furnished chairs and tables for the

hall. A modern kitchen was also furnished with table service for one hundred.

Father Ferdinand Gruss bought the first rectory. For years the priests lived in limited accommodations in the rear of the church. Father Gruss bought a brick home on Ninth and Walnut Streets in 1948. This house was later sold in 1957. The sanctuary of the church was then redecorated and a choir loft was added. A few years later, a window was put in the loft for ventilation.

In 1957 lots three and four came up for sale. These lots, which joined the church property on the north, were purchased from Neil G. Gardner. The large house was used for a rectory until 1970. This former rectory is now used for classrooms in addition to the hall.

In 1962, the Altar and Rosary Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. There were two charter members present, Veronica Ferguson and Lena (Mullin) McClure. The Altar and Rosary Society is now known as the Council of Catholic Women. They still have fund raising projects, plus cleaning activities and teaching.

Father Leonard Wren came to St. Patrick's in 1957. He arrived just after the first rectory had been sold so he lived in the Windom Apartments until the rectory adjoining the church on the north was bought. During his stay, many improvements were made in the interior of the church. He cut the altar down and covered the base of the old altar with beautiful paneling. New tile was put down on the old pine floor. The church was paneled. He also made candlestick holders and many other things from wood. He bought the house next to the rectory from George Grant on January 6, 1970. This house is now the church's present rectory. Father Wren was the last Franciscan priest to serve in our parish. He left Wheatland in September 1970 for a new assignment in Minnesota.

Twenty-eight Franciscan priests plus three or four religious brothers served in Wheatland. The following Fathers served: James, Mathias, George, Henry, Adolph, Isadore, Bruno, Ignatius, Martin, Theodore, Lawrence, Dennis, Claude, Adrian, Marcellus, Miller, Mark, Brenan, Charles, Edward, Bernard, Ferdinand, Clement, Anselm, Thomas, Leonard, Eugene, Andrew, Fidellis, Ignatius Berna, Anacleto, Cornelius and Philip.

Those past days of the Fathers and the church still hold many memories for some of us. I remember my brother Joe and I rode to church on horseback once because it was raining and had been for almost a week. Then the old Model-T saw a mud puddle, it just coughed and would not run. Needless to say, we arrived very soaked. When the priest mentioned a First Communion class, it reminded us of our own. We made our First Communion on a very cold day in November, with only the heat from the old stove, and all the grownups present. My mother had taught us the prayers we should know. The only advantage was mother and dad always took us up to the front of the church, which was a little warmer. Mother sat on one end of the pew and Dad sat on the other. We seven children sat sandwiched in between.

In September 1970, Monsignor Fred J. Kimmett came as pastor of St. Patrick's. The church was painted and carpeted when he was here. He left in June of 1975 to retire. He is now at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Torrington.

Monsignor John J. Corrigan became St. Patrick's new pastor in June 1975. And so the church continued to grow from that very small beginning with its small congregation and faithful parishioners.