

**A History of St. Patrick's Catholic Church
Wheatland, Wyoming
100 Years: 1898-1998
Centennial Celebration, August 22, 1998
Compiled by Virginia Howshar**

“Quite an Irish settlement of Mullin brothers, with their families and in-laws, all on adjoining homesteads, stretched out for some miles along the Laramie river in what is now Platte County, Wyoming. The first ones were Pat and John, who left their Irish potato fields and hightailed it to America in 1865, after listening to Sir Horace Plunkett tell about the New World and its opportunities. They worked and roamed their way across the country to Ft. Collins, Colorado, where they started raising cattle, but soon drove their herd north into Wyoming and filed on their Laramie river homesteads about 1875. Brother John joined them in 1883 and built a new log cabin home for his Old Country bride. Mike and his family were next in 1885. Then came Tom Mullin and a sister, with her husband, John Bradley.”

Virginia Cole Trenholm's "Footprints on the Frontier" records that "it is believed that Father Nugent of Cheyenne held the first Mass in the region at the Pat Mullin home in 1885, but it was by no means the last. Thereafter with this ready-made congregation at hand, similar services, rotating between the several Mullin homes, were held at every opportunity."

Father Francis Nugent rode to the ranches on horseback carrying an altar stone and the other necessary items. No one knew when the priest would arrive. When he was seen on the horizon, one of the men rode in to inform the rest of the people and members would come by horseback and in buggies.

In the late 1880's the settlers decided a church was needed. Charles Goodrich was awarded the contract to build the church. The bricks were

kilned in Wheatland. The brick laying was done by McCallum and Crane, who also did the carpentry. Much of the lumber was hauled 25 miles from the sawmill, located in the hills west of Wheatland, by the four Mullin brothers.

Construction was begun in 1891. To build a church of sufficient size, it was necessary to have extremely long beams. Two wagons with reaches extended were used to haul the beams. While the church was under construction services were held in the brick schoolhouse located south of the fire hall and above the big ditch. The parishioners did not want to go into debt for building materials so the church was not completed until 1898. The main altar came from the Cathedral in Cheyenne. It was necessary for the altar to be cut down in order to bring it into the church. In later years the top was taken off because it was top heavy.

The Reverend James Keating came as the first pastor in 1898. By 1900 the congregation consisted of the Rouses, Klasserts, Pat O'Connors, John Morrisseys, the Mullins, John Bradleys, John Wilkinson, and Pat Daly.

In 1904 Mayme Cronin set about raising money for a church organ. Three months later the organ was in the church. It was second hand and cost \$45. Funds were raised by solicitation and when members were just a little short of their goal someone made a trip to Tom Carroll's saloon and it was there the rest of the money was obtained.

On August 12, 1905, the new St. Patrick's was incorporated for the Diocese of Cheyenne with Casper Rouse and John Mullin as lay trustees. The Reverend Patrick Long was the resident priest from February 1907 until July of 1910. Then Father Ignatius Berna, a Franciscan from the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, took Wheatland as a mission parish on December 15, 1910. The mission was confirmed during his stay on January 11, 1911.

The Franciscans missionary priests, from Huntington, Indiana has long been established in a Mission House at Douglas, Wyoming. It was from there with as many as six priests at a time that these dedicated men served the vast mission field of eastern Wyoming. In 1940 Wheatland got its first Franciscan resident pastor and the church at Wheatland has had a pastor in residence since that time.

In 1913 Father James Hermes traveled from Douglas to hold Mass once a month, on a week day, then eventually every Sunday. Father Hermes bought 12 pews from Sears, Roebuck to add to the eight homemade pews. A large heating stove was near the altar. The members sitting next to the stove usually roasted while the others froze!

In the summer of that year, 1913, Father Hermes organized the Altar and Rosary Society at St. Patrick's. Mrs. James Carroll was elected the first president. It was the duty of the members to take care of the altar and clean the church for the monthly services.

The priests who came from Douglas stayed in a furnished bedroom in the back of the church. A stove was in the room with coal and kindling nearby, but the priests rarely lit the fire as it took so long for the stove to heat up.

Over the years the priests and the members have made many improvements to the building and grounds. Father Ignatius Homely drew two pictures for the vestibule. One was chosen and built. Father Martin beautified the grounds by adding a lawn and flowers. The exterior of the church was stuccoed. Later a second vestibule was added. The two back rooms of the original church, which were the priest's room and the sacristy, were eventually taken out and a new sacristy and parish hall were constructed.

The sanctuary was redecorated and a choir loft added by Father Ferdinand Gruss. Father Gruss was also responsible for purchasing the

first rectory, a home still standing at the corner of 10th and Walnut Streets. In more recent years the church has been painted and carpeted.

On January 7, 1957, St. Patrick's acquired additional property located just north of the old church to use as a rectory and classroom building. A third rectory, now in use, was acquired from George Grant in 1970. It is located on the corner of 9th and Spruce Streets. This meant that the church now owned the whole half-block.

In 1963 the Altar and Rosary Society celebrated its 50th anniversary with two of the charter members present, Veronica Ferguson and Lena (Mullin)McClure. The group is now known as St. Patrick's Council of Catholic Women.

More than thirty Franciscan friars served at St. Patrick's over the years. Then, in January of 1970, Bishop Hubert M. Newell, canonically established St. Patrick's as a diocesan parish with Monsignor F.J. Kimmett as the new pastor. Monsignor Kimmett served as the pastor until his retirement in June of 1975 when Monsignor John J. Corrigan began his pastorate. In August of 1978 Sr. Beatrice Lorenz, Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters came to St. Patrick's to serve as director of the religious education program.

A new chapter in the history of St. Patrick's Parish began on March 16, 1980, when the first meeting of the newly formed St. Patrick's Parish Council was held. Parishioners were elected persons to serve and this council immediately became concerned with the need for renovating or replacing the existing church facilities.

A committee was formed to make a feasibility study of the parish needs, and that committee was active over a period of six months. Their report indicated that the foundation of the building was in poor condition and that it would be unadvisable to attempt to remodel or add to it. Therefore, it was recommended that an architect be employed to make

preliminary plans for a new parish plant consisting of a church, parish activity center, and religious education center. Keith Ames, an architect from Longmont, Colorado, was consulted in December 1980.

A moratorium on new building projects throughout the diocese was in effect in 1981, but discussion of proposed plans continued in anticipation of the time when construction could begin. In June 1982 committees were reorganized, and the project was once again undertaken. A Building Committee with Earl Ferguson as Chairman and Jack Berger as Vice-Chairman worked with the architect, Keith Ames and Associates, to finalize the plans for the multi-purpose building. A Finance Committee with Gene Hayes as Chairman and Jake Wilhelm as Vice-Chairman planned and presented a most successful campaign for pledges to finance the building program, in November of 1982. The success of this campaign voiced the desire of St. Patrick's parish family that it was indeed ready and willing to build a new parish plant. The parish savings account held \$150,000, and an additional \$250,000 was pledged to be paid over three years. Sister parishes around the state loaned money to begin the construction.

Approval to proceed with the project was given by Bishop Hart. Final plans and specifications were prepared and advertised for bids, which were opened on May 6, 1983. Norb Olind Construction Company of Wheatland submitted the low bid and was awarded the contract in the amount of \$459,730. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on June 20, 1983, and construction began on property owned by the parish north of the existing church.

The members of St. Patrick's parish family as well as the entire community of Wheatland watched with pride as building progressed. The new St. Patrick's Church was a place of worship, which reflected sacredness and dignity. Completion was in time for Palm Sunday 1984. The dedication ceremony was held on May 9, 1984 with Most Reverend Joseph Hart, Bishop of the Diocese of Cheyenne as Principal Celebrant.

Assistants to Bishop Hart were most Reverend Hubert M. Newell, retired Bishop of the Diocese of Cheyenne. Monsignor John J. Corrigan, pastor, Father John Murray, Administrator and 35 other priests of the Diocese.

Father John Murray served as administrator from January 1982 until December of 1984, during Monsignor Corrigan's illness. The Monsignor died in November of 1984 and Father Cletus Prado was assigned pastor for a short time.

Father Malcolm Reid arrived in January of 1985. During the six and one half years he was pastor, he set up a plan to retire the debt incurred for building the new parish plant. Parishioners were encouraged to save a dollar a day and contribute that in a second collection taken up at all weekend Masses. Though Father Reid was reassigned to Rawlins in June 1991, the new pastor, Father John Savio, continued the plan.

On St. Patrick's Day, March 19, 1992, Bishop Joseph Hart concelebrated Mass with Fathers John Savio, John Murray, and Joseph Moroney. After a parish dinner, the priests "burned" the note on the debt remaining of \$200,000. Father Savio eagerly gave credit to Father Reid for his major part in this accomplishment.

Father Joseph P. Fraher became pastor in October of 1992 and remained until his retirement in June of 1995. Father Charles Velasquez was assigned pastor and resided until June of 1998. Father Kevin Koch of St. Rose of Lima parish in Torrington is administrator until a new pastor is assigned by Bishop Hart. The church at Wheatland continues from its humble beginnings of celebrations of Mass in a log home to the present with its good priests and pastors serving the faithful parishioners.

Information obtained from Virginia Cole Treholm's "Footprints on the Frontier" and excerpts from "John Hunton's Diary," a history researched

by Patricia Mullen Erickson, “A History of Catholic Churches at Douglas and Attached Missions,” and information written by Adelaide Dunham for the dedication of the present church in 1984.

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