

"CATHOLIC CHURCH IN WYOMING" New Catholic Encyclopedia

"CATHOLIC CHURCH IN WYOMING" New Catholic Encyclopedia (2002)

The name, "Wyoming," is said to mean "mountains with large plains between." The American historian Bancroft preferred "Fontana" as the source of so many rivers. The landscape of Wyoming is big, "tremendous," to use a favorite word of Lewis and Clark; in the words of the psalmist, its "mountains leap like rams and the rivers clap their hands." Astride the continental divide the region was part of three annexations to the United States—the Louisiana purchase (1803), the Oregon country (1846), and the Mexican cession (1848)—reflecting historic European claims defined by the major western watersheds—the Missouri-Mississippi, the Snake-Columbia, and the Green-Colorado. The Rocky Mountains break up into several distinct ranges, providing openings, the easiest by way of the Oregon-California trail over the well-watered South pass or of the more direct Overland trail through the great divide basin, the route followed by the Union Pacific railroad, which brought settlement.

Before 1867 Wyoming was still largely terra incognita, having no definite name, no clear political organization, and no permanent population. The territory of Wyoming was organized in 1868, with newly founded Cheyenne the capital of a squared-off area of 100,000 square miles, exactly defined by the 104th and 111th meridians of longitude and the 41st and 45th parallels of north latitude. In 1869, the first Wyoming territorial legislature established legal equality for women, giving them the right to vote and hold office, hence the appellation "Equality State." The creation of the first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872, brought more national notice. Wyoming was admitted to the Union in 1890 as the forty-fourth state.

On July 5, 1840, the Jesuit Fr. Pierre-Jean De Smet, had "the consolation of celebrating the holy sacrifice of the Mass," the first such documented in what became Wyoming. De Smet, coming from St. Louis with the American Fur Company's expedition to the Rendezvous on the Green river near present-day Daniel, was traveling to the Flathead in answer to their request for "blackrobes," perhaps inspired by Catholic Iroquois who had drifted west. The Flathead delegation, with some Nez Percé and Shoshone, mountain men, and traders made up the congregation. De Smet wrote: "It was a spectacle truly moving to the heart of a missionary, to behold an assembly composed of so many different nations,

who all assisted at our holy mysteries with great satisfaction. The Canadians sang hymns in French and Latin, and the Indians [sic] in their native tongue. It was truly a Catholic worship. . . . This place has been called since that time, by the French Canadians, la prairie de la Messe" (Chittenden, I, 262).

In 1850, Wyoming east of the continental divide was included in the vicariate apostolic of the Indian [sic] Territory; Wyoming west of the divide was a practically inaccessible part of the province of Oregon City (established 1846). The first vicar apostolic was a Jesuit, John Baptist Miège (1850-1859), a Savoyard newly arrived from Rome, who established a residence in Leavenworth, Kansas, and then, in consultation with Fr. De Smet, worked to divide the vicariate, unmanageable because of its size. The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith detached the northern part by creating the vicariate apostolic of Nebraska in 1857. Bishop Miège continued as administrator until a vicar apostolic could be found. The first vicar apostolic of Nebraska (1859-1874) was a Trappist monk, James Miles O'Gorman, born in Tipperary and prior of New Melleray abbey near Dubuque. Bishop O'Gorman established his residence in Omaha, the starting point of the Union Pacific railroad. In 1867 Bishop O'Gorman entrusted to Fr. William Kelly the first "parish" in Wyoming, a parish which included the whole length of the state along the railroad extending from Sidney, Nebraska, to the Wasatch Mountains in Utah (about 500 miles). When the railroad was completed in 1869, Bishop O'Gorman took it and became the first Catholic bishop to visit Wyoming. James O'Connor, a native of Ireland and priest of Philadelphia, was second vicar apostolic of Nebraska (1875-1885) and first bishop of Omaha (1885-1890). In 1877 Bishop O'Connor made a three month visitation of the Catholic communities, the first towns and parishes in Wyoming having grown up around railroad supply points, about 100 miles apart, and around the coal mines constructed to fuel the trains.

In 1884, the Jesuits founded St. Stephen's Indian [sic] Mission on the Wind River reservation shared by the Shoshone and the Northern Arapahoe. The Society of Jesus responded to Bishop O'Connor's petition by sending from the German house in Buffalo, New York, John Jutz, S.J., and Brother Ursus Nunlist, S.J., who immediately started building near the confluence of the Little and Big Wind Rivers. Jesuits, at least 59 of them through 2000, three or four at a time, came from several provinces of the Society of Jesus in turn: the German (Buffalo, NY, 1884-1886), Missouri (St. Louis, 1886-1891), an Italian (California Rocky Mountain Mission, 1891-1912), again Missouri

(St. Louis, 1912-1992), and then Wisconsin (Milwaukee, since 1992). St. Stephen's school was first attended by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (1888-1890), then the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas (1891-1892), and finally Franciscan Sisters from Philadelphia came in 1892 and have remained to date. Fortunately, it happened that Bishop O'Connor was the spiritual director of Miss, later Mother Katharine M. Drexel, heiress and foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who was ever ready to assist generously with funds at the foundation of St. Stephen's and at several critical times thereafter, most notably in 1928 when fire destroyed many mission buildings.

The diocese of Cheyenne (*Cheyennensis*), coterminous with the state of Wyoming, was erected by Pope Leo XIII on August 2, 1887, as suffragan St. Louis. Maurice Francis Burke, born in Ireland and a priest of Chicago, was the first bishop of Cheyenne (1887-1893). Upon his arrival in Wyoming, Bishop Burke found a diocese about the size of Great Britain, with 4 diocesan priests, a Jesuit priest and brother, 8 churches and 28 missions (soon to be 43), for about 450 families, or 7,500 widely scattered Catholics. There were 21 religious women: Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, who conducted an academy and school in Cheyenne, and Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, who staffed a hospital and school in Laramie. Bishop Burke faced attacks against the Catholic Church by members of the American Protective Association ("Know Nothings"), whose hostility eventually obliged the Sisters of Charity to leave Laramie. Bishop Burke concluded that the diocese ought to be suppressed; but Rome rejected this proposal. In 1893 the diocese of Cheyenne was attached to the ecclesiastical province of Dubuque and Bishop Burke was transferred to the see of St. Joseph, Missouri. Fr. Hugh Cumiskey, pastor in Laramie, was appointed administrator of the diocese (1893-1897).

Thomas Mathias Lenihan (1897-1901), Bishop Burke's successor appointed after almost four years, was born in Ireland and a priest of Dubuque, whose poor health, exacerbated by the high altitude and dryness, severely restricted his activity and finally compelled him to return to Iowa where he died. Fr. Cumiskey was again appointed administrator (1901-1902).

James John Keane, third bishop of Cheyenne (1902-1911), raised in Minnesota and a priest of St. Paul, came to Wyoming at a time when economic conditions were rapidly improving after a decade of depression. Population increased 60% between 1900 and 1910. Newly opened irrigated lands and new methods of dry farming, increased coal and iron mining, timber cutting, and exploration of vast oil and natural gas reserves, attracted immigrants. Bishop Keane undertook the task of bringing order to the

diocesan administration and incorporated the diocese according to the laws of the state of Wyoming. Pastors were instructed to incorporate the parishes, each to have a board, which included the bishop, the pastor and two lay trustees. Soon after its foundation in 1905 Bishop Keane appealed to the Catholic Church Extension Society which became a generous and never failing channel of funds for the benefit of the Church in Wyoming. Bishop Keane directed the building of a residence and a cathedral in Cheyenne, laying the cornerstone of the cathedral July 7, 1907. On August 11, 1911 Bishop Keane was named archbishop of Dubuque.

Conventual Franciscans (Order of Friars Minor Conventual), sometimes called Black Franciscans because of the color of their habit, came to Wyoming in 1909 at the invitation of Bishop Keane. Originally, these friars were from the province of the Immaculate Conception (New York), then, after 1926, from the province of Our Lady of Consolation (Indiana). Fr. Ignatius Berna was the first to arrive. On December 15, 1910, Bishop Keane formally entrusted to him and the order the spiritual care of the parish of St. James in Douglas, together with churches and missions, founded and to be founded, in four counties of eastern Wyoming-Converse, Niobrara, Goshen, and Platte-an area of more than 11,000 square miles, about one-tenth of the state, making it one of the largest territorial parishes in the United States. The Sacred Congregation of Religious confirmed this action Dec. 1, 1911. St. James friary in Douglas was the center for 13 missions serving ranchers, farmers, miners, and oil-field workers. The friars usually traveled by rail until Bishop McGovern bought them an automobile in 1935. 49 Franciscans served at St. James friary for a half-century. Then, because of commitments elsewhere, the Conventual Franciscans withdrew from Wyoming, formally relinquishing their remaining churches on September 15, 1960, the act confirmed November 28, 1960, by the Sacred Congregation of Religious.

Patrick Aloysius McGovern (1912-1951), the austere and formidable fourth bishop of Cheyenne, was a native and priest of Omaha. Bishop McGovern held two synods, one at the beginning of his administration (1913) in order to introduce himself to the priests, and one at the end (1948) to introduce the new coadjutor bishop, Hubert Newell. The further purpose of both synods, which included only priests, was to provide for the orderly government of clergy and people and to promote ecclesiastical discipline. At the 1913 synod, Bishop McGovern promulgated the decrees of the plenary councils of Baltimore and the statutes of the first synod of the diocese of Omaha in order to place the governance of the diocese on a regular juridical foundation. Similarly, the 1948 synod passed regulations regarding the

conduct and duties of priests, administration of sacraments, conduct of liturgy, preaching and giving instructions, and the care of temporalities, all to accord with the 1917 code of Canon Law. Himself an orphan, Bishop McGovern was very much concerned about the plight of orphans in Wyoming, and worked tirelessly to establish St. Joseph's Children's Home (1930) and to obtain Sisters to care for the orphans, eventually welcoming Franciscan Sisters from Wisconsin. By 1990 St. Joseph's had become a home for troubled children and had a lay administration. In 1941 the diocese of Cheyenne became suffragan of the newly created metropolitan province of Denver.

Hubert Michael Newell (1951-1978), native and a priest of Denver, was named coadjutor bishop of Cheyenne, with the right of succession, on August 2, 1947, and he succeeded to the office of ordinary at the death of his predecessor on November 8, 1951. Bishop Newell began publication of the Wyoming Catholic Register (April 11, 1952). In 1953, he persuaded the ladies of the long-existing altar and rosary societies to form the Wyoming Council of Catholic Women, a chapter of the national organization, with similar aims and functions as the Knights of Columbus. Bishop Newell promoted the Catholic Youth Organization, holding in 1959 its first state convention. He attended all the sessions of the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, and after the Council quickly mandated the prescribed liturgical changes, and in 1974 began commissioning men and women as lay ministers of the Eucharist. In 1972, the diocesan presbyteral council recommended that there be a mandatory retirement of pastors and that the tenure of pastors and assistants be limited to a defined term, recommendations which, when put into effect, ended an era during which pastors remained in the same place for life. Bishop Newell set up a diocesan pastoral council and a board for Catholic education, the members of both elected by their deaneries. Hubert Joseph Hart came to Cheyenne as auxiliary bishop in 1976, and in 1978 Bishop Newell resigned as ordinary, but remained as apostolic administrator until a successor was named.

Joseph Hart, born in Missouri and a priest of Kansas City-St. Joseph, was installed as sixth bishop of Cheyenne, on June 12, 1978, after an unprecedented consultative poll of the Catholics in Wyoming, directed by the diocesan pastoral council. Bishop Hart began immediately to ordain married men as deacons. Benedictine nuns of Perpetual Adoration, from Clyde, Missouri (Maria-Rickenbach, near Engleberg, Switzerland), founded a monastery in Wyoming in 1983. Bishop Hart continued the post-Vatican II process of encouraging lay consultation. After 1980, he saw to the establishment of parish pastoral

councils and, after 1985, parish finance councils throughout the diocese. In 1993, Bishop Hart invited the laity, prepared by a three-year spiritual renewal program, to participate in the third diocesan synod, whom he invited "to dance out to the edge of possibility" in finding and solving problems together, in an ongoing process. In answer to Bishop Hart's petition for a successor, the Holy See appointed David Laurin Ricken, born in Kansas and a priest of Pueblo, and on January 6, 2000, Pope John Paul II ordained him coadjutor bishop of Cheyenne.

The increase in population in Wyoming was steady, if at times slow, advancing from about 9,000 in 1870 to about 330,000 in 1950, to nearly 500,000 in 2000, of which 10-15% were Catholics. The number of priests increased from 4 in 1887 to 14 in 1912, to 70 in 1972. In 2000 there were 51 diocesan priests, of whom 34 were active, and 10 religious priests, assisted by 10 permanent deacons, one religious brother and 24 religious Sisters serving 36 parishes, 42 missions, and 6 parochial schools.

Bibliography

De Smet, Pierre Jean, S.J., *Life, Letters and Travels*, eds., H.M. Chittenden and A.T. Richardson (New York: F.P. Harper, 1905).

Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming, 1540-1888* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890).

Henry W. Casper, S.J., *History of the Catholic Church in Nebraska*, vols. 1 & 2 (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1960, 1966).

P.A. McGovern, *History of the Diocese of Cheyenne* (Cheyenne: privately printed, 1941).

H.M. Newell, "Diocese of Cheyenne" article in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1964).

W.E. Mullen, "Wyoming" article in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912).

Gloria S. Carlson, *A Brief History of the Diocese of Cheyenne. Third Synod Documents*, Cheyenne (May 1993).

Rev. Jan Joseph Santich, Ph.D.
St. Patrick Church
Wheatland, Wyoming