

**History of Mary Queen of Heaven Mission Church
(formerly St. Theresa the Little Flower)**

1924-2000

Chugwater, Wyoming

**[Francis Gard, Karen Wedemeyer, Beth Baker, parishioners of the
year 2000]**

Popular legend explains the origin of the name “Chugwater.” Long ago a [Mandan]} chief was disabled during a tribal buffalo hunt. His “lazy” son, Ahwiprie known as “The Dreamer,” discovered how much easier it was to stampede a herd of buffalo over the crumbly chalk cliffs than to stalk them on foot with spears and arrows. When the buffalo hit the ground below they made a “chug” sound, either from the impact or from the bursting of their stomachs. The area and creek was called the place or water “where the buffalo go chug,” hence “Chugwater.” Many arrowheads found along Chug Creek’s banks attest to the presence of Indians – Mandan, Comanche, Kiowa, Shoshone, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, and Sioux – who hunted the abundant herds of game. Deer, and antelope are still hunted by sportsmen from all over the United States every fall.

During the winter of 1858-1859 the earliest white settlers brought in stock to feed. The cattle did well and in the following years many large cattle ranches were established in the area. The largest of these, the Swan Land and Cattle Company (now a National Historic Site) played a key role in Chugwater’s early development. An engineer of the Swan first laid out the town of Chugwater in 1886 (Chugwater celebrated its Centennial on June 3 and 4, 1986). In 1914 the final plat was completed locating lot sizes of the town as they were in 2000. Another part of the agricultural community, the dry land farmers, began settling the area east of Chugwater in the early 1900s. These ranchers and farmers comprise the outlying community of Chugwater with everyone coming into town for church, clubs and school.

Chugwater had been a stage station on the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stagecoach Line in 1872. Later the railroad was built north and for a time ended at Chugwater, which became central for loading grain and stock for shipment. Catholic ranchers and homesteaders must drive many miles in all kinds of weather in order to assist at Mass; in the early days one family regularly drove a mule team twenty-five miles from Goshen Hole. The Kennedy, McDonald, Ewart and Gard families were among the pioneer Catholic residents of Chugwater.

The Regina Club, a women's group, formed the nucleus for the social life of the Catholics of Chugwater. Church suppers, card parties and other projects made it possible not only to support their church but also to make contributions to the diocesan fund, and later to the building of the new church in Wheatland.

The first Masses celebrated in Chugwater were held at the home of Degan Palaily [?]. Later, Masses were offered in the hotel and at the Chugwater school. There was never a resident priest. From 1909-1969 Chugwater was served by the Conventual Friars (O.M.C., later O.F.M.Conv.), called "Black Franciscans" from the color of their habit. The friars were based in Douglas and would come to Chugwater once a month. After 1942 the friar who lived in Wheatland served the church in Chugwater. These priests would come to Chugwater by train on Saturday to say Mass, stay overnight there, and then return north to offer Mass on Sunday in Wheatland. In the 1930s Mass began to be celebrated on Sunday mornings until 1975 when the mission was closed for a period because of lack of priests; the last Mass was celebrated by Msgr. Corrigan, September 28, 1975 and the mission was re-opened with Mass on June 19, 1982 (Sat., 7:30), with Father John Murray officiating.

Father Theodore, O.F.M.Conv., procured a place of worship in Chugwater in 1924 at the cost of \$125. This first church building had been a school house located south of Chugwater where the teacher was one of the parishioners, Bertha Ewart, aunt of Francis Gard. This

building was converted into a church dedicated to St. Theresa of Lisieux, the “Little Flower of Jesus.” The back half of the old church was the original school house. In 1926 the size of the building was doubled when the men of the parish, including Homer Gard, extended the sanctuary part of the church to its present dimensions. Father Leonard Wren, O.F.M.Conv., a later pastor, made the altar and pedestals for the decoration of the sanctuary. On April 26, 1958, Wayne and Bessie Cave conveyed the Chugwater church property (lot in block 14) to the mission by a warranty deed with release of homestead rights.

The community acquired wooden pews from the old church in Keeline [Fr. Shea] and an organ from the old church in Wheatland.

During the 1970s and 1980s Chugwater suffered a decline in prosperity, principally as a result of the completion in 1975 of Interstate Highway 25 which bypassed the town. Chugwater did not have a gas station, a bank or a restaurant. The fight to keep the Chugwater School open was an especially tough one. In 1985 the community gathered together to discuss the future of Chugwater. The community vision arrived at during that forum resulted in the start of rebuilding the commitment to the survival of Chugwater and initiated the beginning of many new businesses, including a bank that was a replica of the one built in the 1920s, two restaurants, a gas and convenience station, a new motel, an insurance company, a hair salon, the famous Chugwater Chili Corporation. Moreover, because of continuing growth and the hope of further expansion a number of projects were underway at the end of the twentieth century to accommodate more people and businesses in Chugwater, including a housing project completed in 1999, reconstruction of several streets, and the upgrading and expanding of the water system. The new look on Main Street reflected the growth in businesses and in civic improvements. Most exciting and gratifying for the people was the fact that not only did they convince the local school district to keep the school open in the 1980s, but in 2000 our children started attending a new secondary school financed by a Platte County

bond issue. The Chugwater community believed Chugwater would continue to grow because Chugwater was a community that cared.

The Catholics of Chugwater were a small, but committed community. The few families that moved into the community were welcomed by the families born and raised there. Children ranging in age from toddlers to a graduating senior attended Mass, joined on many Sundays by college students from Chugwater. Several Catholics chose to attend other churches in Chugwater. Some, because of mixed marriages. Others, because St. Theresa's Church was so extremely small that it was perhaps threatening to people who like to attend Mass and sit in the back pew; there were no "back pews" in the old St. Theresa's.

In 1999-2000 a new Catholic church was built in Chugwater and named Mary Queen of Heaven at the blessing by Bishop Joseph Hart on June 20, 2000. David McGuire was the general contractor and Roger Baalman was the architect. The church was made possible by the very generous grants of a donor of the Catholic Church Extension Society (\$151,000), of the Church of St. Patrick in Wheatland (\$50,000), of , and others. Members of the Chugwater and Wheatland communities also donated time and work to complete the new church. The community of Chugwater was very hopeful that the town and churches would grow and the Catholics are very excited about the gift of the new Catholic Church in Chugwater, Mary Queen of Heaven, where there is room for everyone to praise God.

**[Used on Program for Liturgy
of the Blessing of the Church, June 20, 2000]**

**Brief History of
Mary Queen of Heaven
Catholic Church in Chugwater
(formerly the Church of St. Theresa the Little Flower)**

The name, “Chugwater,” is explained by a popular legend. Once upon a time an Indian known as “The Dreamer” was being lazy and dreamed how much easier it would be to stampede a herd of buffalo over the crumbly chalk cliffs than to stalk them on foot with spears and arrows. And when the buffalo hit the ground, they went “chug!” from the impact, or from the bursting of their bellies. The creek and place were called “where the buffalo go chug,” hence “Chugwater.”

The town of Chugwater was laid out in 1886 as the headquarters of the immense Swan Land and Cattle Company (controlled 750,000 acres from Ogallala to Rawlins), the largest ranch of many which settlers founded since the winter of 1858-1859. In the 1870s Chugwater was a stage station on the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stagecoach Line, replaced by the railroad in the 1880s. Dry land farmers began settling east of Chugwater in the early 1900s.

The Eucharist was celebrated in Chugwater first in private homes, the hotel, and later at the Chugwater school by itinerant priests who came earliest on horseback, later by railroad. From 1910-1970 Chugwater was served by the Conventual Franciscan Friars, called “Black Franciscans” from the color of their habit. The Franciscans, based in Douglas, served twelve churches in a parish covering 10,000 square miles. A friar-priest would come to Chugwater once a month by train on Saturday to say Mass, stay overnight, then return north to offer Mass on Sunday in Wheatland. Since the 1930s Mass was celebrated on Sunday mornings,

except 1975-1982 when no priest was available. After 1942 the pastor resided in Wheatland.

The old Catholic Church of Chugwater, St. Theresa of Lisieux, the “Little Flower of Jesus,” was established in 1924 when Franciscan Father Theodore paid \$125 for a school house located south of Chugwater in the Little Bear area. One of the early teachers was Bertha Ewart, aunt of Francis Gard. The back half of the old church was the original building; in 1926, the size of the building was doubled when the men of the parish, including Homer Gard, extended the sanctuary to the dimensions it retained until 2000 when the old church building was given to the town of Chugwater to further serve as a library and as itself, a museum. In 1958 Wayne and Bessie Cave donated the property for the church.

The new church, blessed under the title of Mary Queen of Heaven by Bishop Joseph Hart on June 20, 2000, was built in 1999-2000 by David McGuire of Chugwater with the architect Roger Baalman of Laramie. The church building was made possible by a very generous donation through The Catholic Church Extension Society and a substantial contribution from the Church of St. Patrick in Wheatland. Members of the Chugwater and Wheatland communities also donated work-time to complete the new church. The mahogany and redwood altar, replacing the older pine portable altar, was made by hand by Father Leonard, the last Franciscan pastor.

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