

GILLETTE
ST. MATTHEW'S CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
PARISH HISTORY
Celebrating 75 years of Faith, Family and Fellowship, 1926-2001
September 21, 2001
By Verna Hays

The time was 1892. The place was the Burlington Railroad section house. Word had gone out the night before that a visiting priest from South Dakota was in town, and Gillette's handful of Catholics had gathered the following morning for the celebration of Mass.

In August of that year, railroad tracks reached Gillette, and it was just a short time later that priests from South Dakota began making periodic visits to minister to the Catholics in this area. The first priest known to have celebrated Mass in Gillette was the Rev. R.G. Cassidy of Hot Springs, South Dakota. Several of Gillette's early-day Catholics worked for the railroad, and it may have been for this reason that the first Masses were offered in the railroad section house. Later, Masses were celebrated in the city hall and in the homes of two parishioners—James T. Morgan and John T. Daly.

As the Diocese of Cheyenne developed and grew, priests from Sheridan, Buffalo, and Newcastle ministered to the mission area of Gillette. The Rev. R J. Lynch of Newcastle occupies a prominent place in the developing days of our parish. The first St. Matthew's Church was built under his direction and opened for services in 1907. This was the "little white church" built at the corner of Sixth and Main. Bishop Patrick McGovern's *The History of the Diocese of Cheyenne* state: "The two lots for the church were purchased for \$175, an amount which had been collected principally by Mrs. Morgan, and Mrs. Daly."

On September 18, 1926, Gillette was established as a parish in its own right with missions at Arvada and Rozet. Rev. R.P. Szymanski was appointed the first pastor. He was succeeded by Rev. John Marley in 1928 and Rev. James McBride in 1938.

Discovery of oil and uranium in Campbell County in the mid-40s resulted in a population boom. This, coupled with the natural growth of the parish, necessitated plans for a larger church. The little white church was moved half a block south and used at that location while a new brick church was being constructed at Sixth and Main. The new church was dedicated by Bishop Hubert M. Newell on July 26, 1951. Rev. James Power, who succeeded Father McBride in 1944, led in the fundraising and construction of the second St. Matthew's Church. The new church had a seating capacity of 250 people. The parish at that time consisted of 150 families.

Some structural changes were made to the little white church, and it was used as a parish hall for the next ten years.

Rev. George Stoll was installed as pastor of St. Matthew's in 1954, and he was followed by Rev. Charles Brady in 1959.

During Father Brady's pastorate, the little white church/parish hall building was removed and a large brick parish hall was built on that site between Sixth and Seventh on Main Street. It was completed in 1962 and contained a gymnasium/meeting hall, kitchen, classrooms and a small apartment. The apartment was used in the early 60s by Extension Lay Volunteers who ministered at St. Matthew's.

[2] Rev. Cornelius O'Connor served as pastor from 1968 until 1970 when Msgr. James Ruddy became pastor.

Continued growth in the parish necessitated plans for a larger church. The church property at Sixth and Main was sold, and on November 1, 1974, the parish purchased land at the corner of East Ninth Street and Butler Spaeth Road. While the new church was being built, Mass was offered in the parish hall on Main Street. The beautiful new complex, costing \$850,000, was dedicated by Bishop Hubert M. Newell on August 18, 1976. The complex consisted of St. Matthew's Church (with a seating capacity of 660), a church hall, CCD classrooms and rectory. Several years later a home at 1608 Monte Vista Lane was purchased for use as a rectory, and the former rectory was converted into offices for the growing parish staff.

Following the death of Msgr. Ruddy on August 10, 1978, Rev. Joseph Fraher was appointed pastor of St. Matthew's. In 1979, he was joined by Rev. Vincent Langfield who served as co-pastor until 1981. Rev. William Gianola became pastor in 1983 and was succeeded by Rev. Tom Ogg in 1986.

In September of 1999, Father Ogg was transferred to Powell, and Father Tom Kadera was installed as pastor of St. Matthew's.

Priests who have served as parochial vicars at St. Matthew's are the Revs. James Healy, Vincent Bauer, Tibor Furak, Kevin Koch, Ed Dolinar, August Koeune, Sam Hayes, Patrick Shea, Tom Kadera, Rory Schiffbauer, Andrew Duncan, James Schumacher and Karl Millis.

Deacons who have served at St. Matthew's are Peter Johnson, John Aloisio and Stan Piasecki. Sisters who have ministered in our parish are Mary Kelliher, Anita Montavon, Agnes Clare Beyer, Christella Dee, Letitia Lenherr, Rita Menke, Julianne Koch, JoAnn Schmitz and Carol Mechtenberg.

In November of 1986, parishioner Dick Holland expressed his dream of a parish newsletter to improve communication in the parish and to build a feeling of Catholic community. With the encouragement of Father Ogg, support of the parish council, and assistance from wife Kathy Holland, this dream became a reality, and in June of 1987, the first issue of St. Matthew's Catholic Community Newsletter was printed. It continued under the leadership of the Hollands until 1992, when Bonnie Baumberger assumed editorial responsibility.

St. Matthew's was—and is—a vibrant, growing faith community. In 1989, a Needs Assessment confirmed what many people already recognized—that the parish was in need of more space if it wanted to continue to meet the needs of its parishioners. In 1990, Father Ogg expressed a desire for St. Matthew's to become a "Sacrificial Parish," and a Building Fund was established.

[3] In 1991, the parish purchased the Gambles building on Hwy. 59 for \$185,000. Money was not taken from the Building Fund for this purchase. The Gambles building purchase was a temporary "stop-gap" measure, and the parish council continued to look into the possibility of a new building. The Gambles building was later sold.

On September 26, 1994, members of the parish council voted unanimously in favor of building a new facility. The architectural firm of Rundquist & Hard P.C. was selected, and in November of 1995, the design for the Family Life Center was chosen.

Ground was broken for the Family Life Center in September of 1996 and upon completion was dedicated by Bishop Joseph Hart on June 24, 1998. The facility—which cost \$4,244,000—includes 14 classrooms, a library/resource room, 2 conference rooms, a youth room, music area, multipurpose room/gym (with boys' and girls' shower-locker rooms adjacent), kitchen, three offices, a staff meeting room, reception area and a chapel where weekday Mass is celebrated. The facility is an asset not only to the parish but to the community.

As St. Matthew's celebrates its 75th anniversary as a parish, we have come a long way—from a handful of Catholics gathering for Mass in a railroad section house to a lovely church complex and Family Life Center with more than 1500 families involved in a wide range of activities and ministries. St. Matthew's is also responsible for two mission churches—St. Patrick's at Moorcroft and Blessed Sacrament at Wright.

Four Masses are offered at St. Matthew's each weekend, including a Life Teen Mass that is especially popular with the young people. Masses in Spanish are offered one Friday each month in ministry to and in cooperation with St. Matthew's Hispanic community. Bilingual Masses are also offered occasionally on weekends.

Seventy-five years ago, lay participation at Mass was pretty much limited to musicians, ushers and altar boys. Other lay participation in the parish consisted of altar care, fundraising and limited assistance with religious education. For many years, visiting sisters conducted a week of "sisters' school" each summer, and they prepared the children for First Confession and Communion. Now lay people are serving at Mass as eucharistic ministers, lectors, ushers, male and female altar servers, and music ministers (including operation of the sound system). Lay people assist with liturgy and environment planning, are visitors and eucharistic ministers to shut-ins, hospital and nursing home patients, offer assistance to hospital patients upon their release, provide funeral dinners, serve as Communion service presiders, assist with marriage preparation, youth ministry and all aspects of religious education from CCD classes to RCIA classes. In June of this year, 190 children participated in Vacation Bible School at St. Matthew's. There are also several adult faith-sharing groups in the parish. A staff of 22 (8 fulltime and 14 part-time) guides and coordinates St. Matthew's many activities and ministries.

With Gods help—and in cooperation with His grace—may we at St. Matthew’s continue to grow in love and service for another 75 years—and beyond.

ST. MATTHEW’S CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
“Spiritual Enrichment! Personal Involvement!”