

HISTORY OF IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHURCH,

ST. MARYS, KANSAS

On September 9, 1848, Fr. Verredt, Fr. Manrice Gailland, the four Sisters of the Sacred Heart who had also been at Sugar Creek, Joseph Bertrand, guide and interpreter, several Brothers and a pupil named Charlot arrived at their new home.

Two log houses were partially finished, 60'x 21'x 21' tall. The west building near College Creek at First Street was assigned to the nuns. Its five rooms were crudely plastered. A temporary chapel was quickly built and services were held in the little frame church on November 12, 1848.

The permanent log cabin church was constructed in the cruciform design, 90'x55' in transept and 21' high and was completed in November, 1849.

In May of 1851, Bishop John Miede, S.J., Vicar Apostolic of the Indian Territory east of the Rockies selected St. Marys for his residential headquarters and the church for his Pro-Cathedral. A wooden house served as palace for the "Bishop of the Indians." When Bishop Miede returned from a trip to Rome in 1854, he brought back precious articles for the log cathedral, including fine vestments, an organ, and the treasured painting of the Immaculate Conception by the artist, Benito. In August of 1855, Bishop Miede transferred his see to Leavenworth.

During the first year, (1849) a school building was completed for the boys. An addition to the nun's residence served as the girl's classroom. The Jesuits with the four Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Mother Lucille Mathevon, Madam Mary Ann O'Connor, Sister Louise Amyot and Sister Mary Layton, began teaching the students.

Fr. Gailland's diary reports that during the first few months there were five girls boarding with the sisters. It also named Bernard Bertrand, Ezechill Pellitier, William and Francis Darling, Francis La Fromboise and Hilary Nadeau as being among the first male students. The first winter (1848) was so intensely cold that the ink in the pen froze as Fr. Gailland tried to write and Christmas Eve mass was cancelled. The ice on the river froze so thick that year that people could drive their team and wagons across it without fear of falling through.

Just a year later, however, in September 1849, Fr. Verreydt reported 57 boarding and 10 day school boys and girls studying with the sisters. With the 1861 signing of the Indian Treaty, most of the Mission and Woods (Citizens) Bands went to Oklahoma and the Prairie Band went to Mayetta. With attendance dropping in 1879, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart returned to their mother house, ending 30 years of dedicated service.

Also with the signing of the 1861 Treaty and leaving of a large number of Indian families, it was observed that "most of the mission scholars are white children. The Indians do not send their children much now." The Jesuit leaders, seeing this, sent Rev. Joseph Keller, S.J. to the mission in May 1869 with the word that a college was to be built at St. Marys, Both the city and the college were granted charters in 1869.

The little log cabin cathedral which had been erected in 1849 served the Mission well, but by 1873 it was deteriorating and beyond repair. In the spring of 1874, under the pastorate of Fr. Francis Kuppens, work was begun on a second church on what is now the south side of the 200 block of East Bertrand. The stone for the church was quarried on the mission grounds. In February of 1875, the Blessed Sacrament was carried in solemn procession from the old log church across the avenue to the new stone church. The old wooden alters carved by Brother Mazelle were also transferred and there was a new organ, zinc stations of the cross and baptismal font. Mrs. Palmer gave a silver sanctuary lamp and a processional cross. Fr. Kuppens asked the farmers of the parish to donate logs for a ceiling. At the college sawmill, John Meehan cut the logs into squares. A beautiful ceiling of squares of oak, ash, cedar, pine and walnut completed the sanctuary.

On a bitterly cold day, December 29, 1879, a disaster struck. Fire broke out in the sacristy of the new church. People rushed in to save what they could carry out including the pipes of the new organ and the Benito painting of the Immaculate Conception.

The present church building was started in 1881 and was dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1882. By the Right Rev. Louis Fink, O.S.B.D.D. The new bell replacing the old Fr. Gaillard Memorial Bell which was lost in the fire was consecrated and hoisted into place.

It is impossible to separate the history of the Immaculate Conception Church from the parochial school system. They are so closely interwoven with the work of the Jesuits, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and the Sisters of Charity.

In 1881, the Sisters of Charity come from Leavenworth to found the parochial school system. They were provided with permanent quarters in the residence of Benjamin Bertrand near the church. It also served as the school and rooms were gradually added as enrollment increased. By 1890, there were 220 pupils. To accommodate the increased enrollment, a new school building was started on August 15, 1894. It was a two story stone building with six large classrooms and two offices. The second floor contained the chapel and a hall to seat 600.

Many of the boys of high school age attended classes at the college until 1931 when it became a School of Divinity while the older girls had classes at the new Immaculate Conception Academy. In 1906, it was reported that 245 were enrolled with another 45 young women at the Academy. It was noted that the practice of dropping out after 5th and 6th grade was disappearing and that nearly all the children graduated from the 8th grade.

With the church and school built, it was time to provide better living quarters for the Sisters of Charity who had worked so faithfully in the parish. The Sisters home was begun in 1902 and the stone building was completed. The nuns taught both elementary and high school classes until 1946, then they taught only the grade school students. The Sisters of Charity were withdrawn from the parish in 1970.

Over the years, there have been several remodelings, redecoratings, (at least four), since the Immaculate Conception Church (cornerstone laid July 31, 1881) was begun. Once was in 1931, in preparation for the 50th Golden Jubilee Celebration of the present Church. In 1948, a building was

erected, using concrete blocks that were salvaged from the removed barracks at the Salina Air Base that had been built during WWII. A celebration was held in commemoration of the 100th Centennial Anniversary of the Jesuit Mission begun in 1848. The Centennial Building was so named. In 1963, a project renovation of the Church was completed. A new marble altar, a gift, was presented. A painter reported that the “tiny” cross atop the Church steeple is actually 8 feet high and 130 feet above the street. In 1998-1999, a renovation of the Church took place. The latest renovation of the Church and Adoration Chapel (started in 1991) was done in 2011, reflecting the theological and liturgical colors of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Pastors at the Immaculate Conception Parish since the arrival of the Jesuits at the Mission in 1848 have been Jesuit Fathers:

List the priest here: **1. Felix Verreydt to 25. Edward Thro**

The Jesuits left St. Marys on June 24, 1971. At that time the Immaculate Conception congregation and Catholic Churches in neighboring communities have been served by a capable team of Fathers: Richard Etzel (1971-1977), Robert Hasenkamp (1971-1977), Thomas Kearns (1971-1977), and Al Rockers (1971-1977). After the team left in 1977, the following priest have served Immaculate Conception Church: Clarence Krajicek (1977-1981), John Erickson (1981-1990), Carl Dekat (1990-1998), Earl Dekat (1998-2001), John Torrez (2002-2005), John Riley (2005-2009), Ben Gomes (2009-2010), Bruce Ansems (2010-12/31/12), Abbot Barnabas Senecal, O.S.B. (1/1/13-6/30/13), Gerard Senecal, O.S.B. (7/1/13-8/1/2014), and Raymond May (8/1/14 to present).

In 2014, His Excellency Joseph F. Naumann is Archbishop of Kansas City, Kansas, Fr. Gerard Senecal, O.S.B. , is Parochial Vicar of Immaculate Conception and St. Stanislaus Parishes.

The author of this pamphlet is Galen Rezac, and the photography is by Bill Flanagan. (Excerpts taken from Dorothy Hoobler's And They Called The Site St. Marys) Brochure printed in 2014.