

A History of Saint Mary, Church of the Assumption

By Betty Ross Crook, J.D.

Priests visited Waco Village as early as 1855. The statement of a woman who came from England to Galveston and on to Waco by oxcart was that the first Mass was said in a private home in 1869 by Father J.L. Bussant, who became the first pastor. He was a missionary from France. He and others saw the laying of the cornerstone of the first church on July 24, 1870 on the northeast corner of Washington and Sixth Streets, the present site of the county courthouse. Waco's population was 3,618. The Suspension Bridge across the Brazos River had been completed, a garrison of U.S. Army troops occupied Waco, cattle drives came through town to use the new bridge, and that may have been the beginning of Waco's nickname of Six-Shooter Junction. Mass was said in a room measuring 15 by 18 feet until the first church building was completed in 1873. Father Bussant had the help of Father F. Fleury from 1876 to 1879. Father Fleury established mission stations near Waco at Belton, Lampasas, Brownwood, Fort Griffin, Breckenridge, Eastland, Comanche, Hamilton, and Gatesville. Since this was before the automobile, he surely traveled by horseback or train. Records show he founded St. Martin's Church at Tours and Assumption Church at West.

Another French priest, Father A. Badelon, became the pastor in 1880. He was working upon the second location of the church in 1879, three blocks down Washington Street at Ninth Street. It measured 26 by 50 feet. The third church structure, this one much larger, was started in 1883 and finished in 1886 at the same location. Father Badelon's term as pastor ended in 1897.

Pastors after that were Father P.J. Clancy, 1897-1910, Father E.A. Kelly, 1910-1919, Father P.A. Meckman, 1919-1926, Father J.P. O'Leary, 1926-1932, Father Thomas F. Hogan, 1932-1934, Msgr. John J. Kearns, 1934-1970, Msgr. Edward A. Rabroker, 1970-1988, Msgr. John E. Driscoll, 1988-1990, Father William Barrow as Administrator, 1990-1991, Father Angelo Bertini, 1991-2006, Father Irudayaraj Nelapati-Thomas, from India, May 1, 2006 to and June 30, 2010, and Father Joseph F. Geloney Jr., July 1, 2010 to present.

The third location, fourth church building, is the present one at the corner of 14th Street and Washington Avenue, completed in 1942. On the adjoining land at 13th Street and Washington, St. Mary's School, the first parochial elementary school in Waco, operated from 1948 until 2001, when it closed. Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet came from St. Louis, Missouri, to staff it. When it closed, the students enrolled in St. Louis Elementary School, with their education subsidized by St. Mary's Parish. That tuition assistance continues now for new St. Mary's families and tuition assistance for students at Reicher Catholic High School has been added.

Father Bussant invited the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur (Belgium) to Waco to establish a school, three answered the call, and Sacred Heart Academy opened with three pupils on October 1, 1873. Both boys and girls, Catholic and non-Catholic, were in the elementary section and only girls in the high school for a quality education until it

closed in 1946. At 8th and Clay Streets, the Community of St. Basil, from Toronto, Canada, opened St. Basil's College, a high school for young men, in 1899. In 1902, a new school was built where St. Louis Catholic Church and Reicher High School now stand. It was a red brick building, topped with a cross studded with electric lights to shine across the prairie. That cross was shining until 1915, when it closed. Msgr. Kearns was the leader in establishing Reicher Catholic High School in 1954. It was named for Louis J. Reicher, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Austin, which was established in 1948. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet taught there as well as at St. Mary's School.

St. Mary's sacramental records are filled with Spanish names, which may be explained by revolution in Mexico. This was their parish until Bishop C.E. Byrne, Bishop of Galveston, invited the Franciscans of the Third Order to come from Spain to Waco and St. Francis on the Brazos Church was built in downtown Waco in 1924.

In 1951, St. Mary's had over 1,700 families on its rolls and Waco's population was about 100,000. Its census decreased because of formation of other parishes: St. Joseph's in Bellmead in 1951, St. John the Baptist in East Waco in 1953, Sacred Heart in South Waco as an extension of St. Francis on the Brazos in 1957, St. Louis in North Waco in 1968, then St. Jerome Church in Hewitt in 1983. St. Eugene's in McGregor and St. Joseph's in Elk were originally missions of St. Mary's. The Catholic Student Center at Baylor University was assigned to St. Mary's and continued so until St. Peter's Center was built on land adjoining the campus.

On November 8, 1970, St. Mary's celebrated its centennial. On August 26, 1990, our church received a historical marker from the State of Texas, 121 years after it was founded. It is smaller now, and is still known as the mother church of Waco.

History revised in 2007 by Betty Ross Crook, J.D.