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HISTORY OF SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH, YREKA

With the discovery of gold along the American River in Coloma in January 1848 by James Marshall, foreman of John Sutter's sawmill, there began a stampede of people from around the world hoping to strike it rich in the gold fields of Northern California.

Yreka was born in 1851 when large amounts of gold dust were found in nearby streams and rivers. First a mining settlement, then a town sprang up. In 1853, the first Catholic missionary arrived in Siskiyou County when Father James Croke, a traveling missionary from Oregon, made a visit on horseback to the section around Jacksonville, and tradition has it that he came down as far as Yreka to hold services for the miners there, as well as in the camps of the surrounding diggings.

In early 1853, the Austrian born Benedictine priest named Father Florian Schwenninger, OSB was sent north from San Francisco by Archbishop Joseph Alemany into the area of Shasta, Trinity and Siskiyou Counties. He made his way to Sawyer's Bar and the Salmon River mining camps.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Salmon Mountains where Sawyer's Bar is Located

In the fall of 1854, Father Hugh Gallagher returned to San Francisco from his trip to Europe and with him came two young Irish priests destined for the missions in California. They were Father James Cassin and Father Thomas Cody from the Diocese of Dublin, Ireland. On July 18, 1855, these two young priests were appointed as pastor and assistant by San Francisco's Archbishop Alemany to serve Yreka in the Siskiyou district, with jurisdiction over Crescent City in Del Norte County on the Pacific coast.

Fathers Cassin and Cody left Ireland for California with romantic notions of California's climate and topography. As Henry Walsh, SJ puts it in his book, *Hallowed were the Gold Dust Trails*, "Father Cassin had been told that California was a singularly beautiful country, where men became wealthy overnight, and so in imagination he pictured to himself a romantic extent of territory, about as large as one of the counties of Ireland, with green valleys and gently rolling hills, dotted here and there with great wide-spreading trees, dreaming in a semi-tropical climate, the landscape set off with pleasant ravines through which coursed the purest of crystal streams, from whose glistening beds one might leisurely gather large nuggets of silver and gold.

"The picture of this glorious bower of bliss was soon to be shattered when they experienced a taste of real hardship as they left Marysville and went bumping along for one hundred and twenty miles over a dusty road, to be let down tired and nervous in the sunbaked little village of Shasta. But their trials were not yet over; from Shasta they had to submit to another one hundred and twenty mile jaunt on the back of a mule over one of the most crooked and hazardous trails in the whole of the mining country. A period of respite was granted them, however, when they descended Scott Mountain and arrived at the ranch of an Irishman named Callaghan, who had settled in the southern end of the Scott Valley as early as the year 1851.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Scott Valley between Etna and Fort Jones

“Once they arrived over the hill in Yreka, they were welcomed hospitably and immediately set about arranging their plan of action. Father Cody assumed the role of traveling missionary to the area of Crescent City along the Pacific coast in Del Norte County while Father Cassin’s charge was to serve Yreka which contained about six thousand inhabitants in 1855. Prices were high at that time, as much as two and a half dollars being asked for a plate of ham and eggs. Although Yreka might not be considered high up on the list of lawless and rip-roaring towns, it still could boast of saloons and gambling houses, with a couple of lynching bees thrown in for good measure.

“One of their great sources of trouble was a nearby tribe of Klamath Indians, against whose incursions they always maintained a well-armed company of sentries. It is said that no Indian was ever allowed to come into town.” (Henry Walsh, *Hallowed Were the Gold Dust Trails*, 1946)



Drawing of the Temporary Church of 1854

It appears that in the fall of 1854, the first Catholic Church, a very temporary one, was built about one hundred feet north of what is presently Yama Street. The next year Father Cassin moved the congregation into a new wooden structure while the Wetzel family remodeled the former temporary church into a residence which was finally destroyed by fire in 1941.

The second Catholic Church built in Yreka was much larger and of wood construction. It was put up in the fall of 1855 adjoining the Catholic cemetery on a hill east of the city limits. It stood some 60 yards west of the cemetery’s front fence. This little church, near its cemetery, served the Catholic population for the next ten years. However, it became obvious that the site was too close to Yreka Creek which had a habit of flooding and plans were made for another structure, one both safer and more convenient.

In 1860, Pope Pius IX created the Vicariate of Marysville and appointed Father Eugene O’Connell, a professor at All Hallows College in Dublin, Ireland, as bishop of the vicariate. All the territory of the northern most counties of California became part of this new vicariate including the Counties of Siskiyou, Trinity and Shasta. Bishop O’Connell made his first pastoral visit to Yreka in 1861.

The bishop appointed Father Patrick Farrelly pastor of the Yreka parish in 1863. In 1865 a lot was secured in the town at the southeast corner of Fourth and Lane Streets which was large enough to accommodate both a church and a parish house.

In 1866, construction of a new “permanent” brick church began. Father Farrelly also wanted to establish an academy for young women taught by religious sisters he hoped to bring to Yreka. The new church was formally dedicated on May 3, 1867 in an elaborate liturgy. An eloquent sermon was given by the Father James Buchard, SJ, the famous Native American Jesuit priest who was acknowledged as one of the ablest orators on the Pacific coast. A one dollar admission charge per person was made at the door as a way to raise funds to liquidate the indebtedness of the church which amounted to about \$700.



Photo from the Yreka Parish Archives

Interior of the First Saint Joseph Church Built in 1865

In 1869, Father Farrelly purchased land for an academy on Butte and Fourth Streets. Construction of the academy began but permission for the French Canadian Sisters of Montreal to staff the academy was revoked by the superiors in France. Father Farrelly sent a letter to Bishop O’Connell, who was attending the First Vatican Council in Rome, to ask if he would be willing stop in Montreal on his way back from Rome to try to persuade the superior to change her mind. Instead of this, Bishop O’Connell persuaded the Sisters of Mercy of Manchester, New Hampshire to send a small group of sisters to Yreka to staff the academy.

Four professed Sisters of Mercy with one novice and one postulant arrived in Yreka on February 2, 1871. By 1872, "Saint Joseph Academy for Young Ladies" was operating. The Academy began with five students but within a few years enrollment increased to 85 students.



St. Joseph's Academy, Yreka, California

(Courtesy Father Kieran Mc Mahon)

The opening of the Academy, however, coincided with a downturn in Yreka's economic fortunes: the mines were depleted and people were moving away. The Sisters remained and operated the Academy until January 1882 when they decided to move from Yreka to Saint Gertrude Academy in Rio Vista to continue their work of teaching.

In spite of the best plans of the church building committee, "permanent" turned out to be relative. On the Fourth of July, 1871, just six years after the committee's plans were completed, fire broke out in a Chinese laundry on Miner Street between Third Street and Broadway. The fire raged three days and before it was extinguished it had engulfed and destroyed both the church and the parish house. A contributing factor to the devastation may have been that most Yrekans were in Jacksonville, Oregon for the celebration of the Fourth of July and were unavailable to fight the fire. By 1873, the Yreka parish had an indebtedness of \$9,000.

It took four years until September 1875 before plans were completed for a new church. Construction of the Gothic Revival style building took more than a year to build, and on Christmas Eve 1876, the Midnight Mass was the first liturgy celebrated in the new Saint Joseph Church.

A parish house built on the south end of the lot in 1887 served as the rectory until 1939, when the present rectory was built.



Saint Joseph Church in 1876

The third Saint Joseph Church served its congregation well for almost a century and a quarter; however, as town and congregation grew, so did the need for space. In September 1955 during the pastorate of Father Patrick McTague, an addition was added to the church. During the time of construction, the liturgy was held in the parish house. The newly enlarged church was opened for Mass on June 10, 1956.

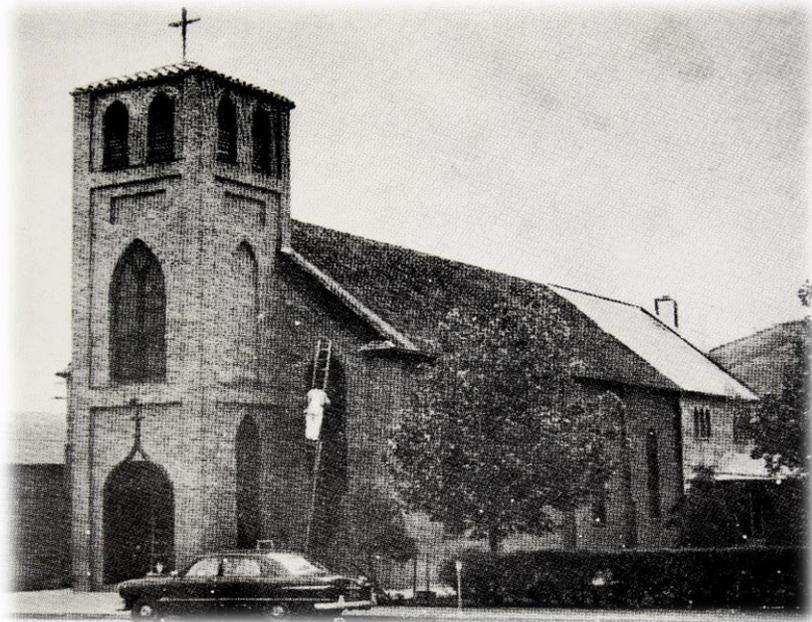
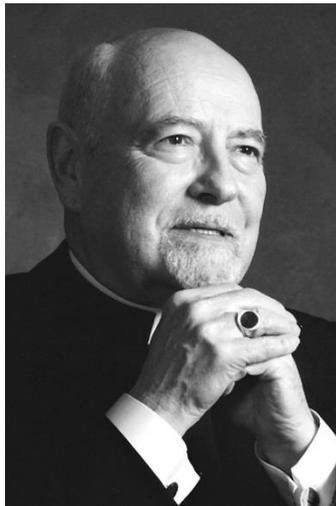


Photo from the Yreka Parish Archives

Saint Joseph Church, Yreka in 1956

In 1958 Father Thomas Boland served as pastor of Yreka for one year. Father Frank Sullivan who had been pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Fort Jones succeeded Father Boland in 1959. Father Sullivan served as Yreka's pastor for 17 years and as his health began to fail, Bishop Alden Bell appointed Father Kieran McMahon as assistant him in the parish. When Father Sullivan stepped down as pastor in 1976, Father McMahon succeeded him as pastor. Father McMahon served as Yreka's pastor for 17 years until Bishop Francis Quinn appointed him pastor of Saint Robert Parish in Sacramento where he served until his retirement in 2011.



Father Kieran McMahon

After the lengthy pastorates of Fathers Sullivan and McMahon, the succeeding pastors had relatively short pastorates. Father Troy Powers served as pastor of Yreka for only two years followed by Father Bill Hold who served four years. Father Sean O'Leary then took the helm of leadership for four years followed by a short interim of Father Gilberto Peña-Martinez.

In 2002, Bishop William Weigand appointed Sister Anne Chester, RSM, as Parish Steward of both Saint Joseph Parish, Yreka and Sacred Heart Parish, Fort Jones with Father John Lawrence serving as the sacramental priest for both parishes. Father Aiden O'Reilly, pastor of Saint Anthony Parish in Mount Shasta, was appointed supervising priest by the bishop. After two years as parish steward, Sister Anne was elected to the Leadership Team of the Mercy Sisters of Auburn and had to step down as parish steward.

Succeeding Sister Anne was Father Maurice O'Brien who served as Yreka's pastor for three years, 2004 to 2007. Following Father O'Brien was Father Bernard Tape who served for two years. In 2009, Father Aldrin Basarte was appointed parish administrator of Yreka and Fort Jones until Bishop Soto named him administrator of Saint Mel Parish, Fair Oaks in 2013. The present pastor is Father Julito Orpilla who serves both Yreka and Fort Jones Parishes as pastor.

Archivist's Final Thoughts

Saint Joseph Parish in Yreka was one of the first parishes in the northern-most recesses of the Archdiocese of San Francisco under the leadership of Archbishop Alemany. Over the past century and a half, this parish has seen periods of growth and recession, depending on the state of gold mining in each era.

In the past century and a half, over 50 priests have served the people of Yreka and the missions associated with this church. Through the myriad of changes, the Catholic community has held together decade after decade. We thank and congratulate all the priests and dedicated laity who kept the faith alive and flourishing over the decades of the nineteen, twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. May God's blessings enrich the members of Saint Joseph Parish by being instruments of justice, mercy and peace in Siskiyou County.

PRIESTS WHO HAVE SERVED SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

Missionary priests from Oregon served the area prior to 1854

Father James Croke, traveling missionary	1853
Father Florian Schwenniger, OSB	1854-1855
Father James Cassin	1855
Father Thomas Cody	1855-1856
Father James Croke	1856-1857
Father L Snyder	1857-1859
Father John Handy	1859-1860
Father Hugh P Gallagher	1860
Father Thomas Crinnian	1860-1864
Father Guido Malassi	1864-1865
Father Patrick Farrelly	1865-1872
Father Stephen Kearney	1872
Father Patrick O'Kane	1872-1874
Father James J Callan	1874-1875
Father James J Claire	1875-1879
Father W J Walsh	1879
Father Leon Happts	1879-1887
Father Cornelius McGrath	1887-1889
Father Patrick Guerin	1889-1891
Father P Fernandez	1891-1894
Father John F Quinn	1884-1897
Father Seraphine G Soares	1897-1899
Father James O'Meara	1899-1902
Father Jerome J Enright	1902-1905
Father John Azevedo	1905-1908
Father James O'Flanagan	1908-1910
Father Michael Cahir	1910-1914
Father P J McCarthy	1914-1919
Father P J O'Sullivan	1919
Father Martin J Sears	1919-1921
Father James Grealy	1921
Father Francis McEnaney	1921-1922
Father M F McNaboe	1922-1925
Father Joseph Hanrahan	1925-1930
Father Michael M Hogan	1930-1931
Father Michael O'Connor	1931-1946
Father Patrick F Keane	1946-1948
Father John McGoldrick	1948-1949
Father John O'Connor	1949-1952
Father Patrick McTague	1952-1958

Father Thomas Boland	1958-1959
Father Francis A Sullivan	1959-1976
Father Kieran McMahon	1976-1993
Father Troy Powers	1993-1994
Father William Hold	1994-1998
Father Sean O'Leary	1998-2002
Father Gilberto Peña-Martinez	2002
Sister Anne Chester, RSM, Parish Steward	2002-2004
Father John M Lawrence, Parish Priest	2002-2004
Father Maurice O'Brien,	2004-2007
Father Bernard Tape	2007-2009
Father Aldrin Basarte, Administrator	2009-2013
Father Julito Orpilla	2013-



Photo by John E Boll 2011

Sanctuary of Saint Joseph Church, Yreka