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ST JOSEPH PARISH, FOREST HILL Church in the Gold Dust Trails

By Father John Dwyer, printed April 15, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

When Bishop O'Connell visited Father Dalton of Grass Valley shortly after his arrival in the new Vicariate, Father Dalton must have made a great plea for the people who lived in the Placer County area around Forest Hill. Father Dalton had himself built the church in Forest Hill and had dedicated it on Sunday, June 20, 1860. Furthermore, he also opened a new church in Iowa Hill on June 10, 1860. He likewise built up the community of Michigan Bluff. Father Dalton's pleas for the people in this area met with a warm response from Bishop O'Connell. The bishop had only one priest available, the young Dublin priest he had brought with him from Ireland. Therefore on July 14, 1861, Father Francis Joseph Blake was appointed Pastor of St Joseph Church, Forest Hill, a parish which was to become one of the principal ones of the old Grass Valley Diocese, the first one created by Bishop O'Connell.

Father Blake set to work at once. He had his first baptism on July 20, 1861. Father Dalton, as was his custom, had already opened a school in June 17, 1861, hiring a Miss O'Connor at \$50 per month as the teacher. This school was to flourish as the years went on. When the year ended on June 6, 1862, the school had cost \$586 and the total income for the year had been only \$168.75. Two parishioners who lived near the church in Forest Hill picked up the difference for the year.

Meanwhile, Father Blake made improvements to the church. On May 1, 1862 he paid a carpenter \$294 for making 24 new pews. He raised \$118 of this by "selling" the pews to parishioners who had exclusive use of them when they came to church. Things were going well, when suddenly a letter came from the Archbishop of Dublin summoning Father Blake back to the Archdiocese of Dublin. Bishop O'Connell was disturbed but had to acquiesce. It cost him \$400 of the money from the Propagation of the Faith to pay Father Blake's fare back to Ireland.

Fortunately, a new priest from New York had come to the Vicariate, Father George Rigby. It was he who took over when Father Blake left in November. However, Father Rigby did not work out as pastor of Forest Hill so that by June of 1863, the bishop transferred him as an assistant to Virginia City.

The pastor of Placerville assumed the care of Forest Hill until the new priests arrived in the fall. The new pastor was Father James Callan who had been an assistant in Marysville. During his term as pastor, Father Callan built a mission church in Colfax. It was during Father Callan's time as pastor that we get a fine glimpse of Forest Hill on the occasion of the visit of Bishop O'Connell in June 1867. The bishop stayed in Forest Hill a total of eight days, and the account

tells us that he was in the confessional daily from morning until late at night. On Monday, Bishop O'Connell blessed the cemetery. On Thursday he gave confirmation to 30 persons. That evening the 82 pupils of St Joseph School entertained him from 7:30 unto 10:30 before a crowd of 400 people. On Friday evening the bishop was serenaded by the Forest Hill Brass Band and was presented with a purse of \$200 which he accepted only on condition that he be allowed to send it to All Hallows for the education of future priests for the Marysville Vicariate.



Photo from Diocesan Archive

First Catholic Church in Forest Hill

Most probably it was during Father Callan's term as pastor that the famous church bell was purchased. It seems that a Greek Orthodox congregation in Boston desiring a bell for their church ordered one cast. When it was completed they were not satisfied with the tone, and rejected it ordering a second one cast. The first one was sold and eventually made its way by ship around the Horn to San Francisco where Father Callan heard about it. He purchased it for \$3,000 and it was hauled by a Mr Davis to the Forest Hill Church. The bell was much too heavy for the tiny steeple of the church and it received a temporary home until the Forest Hill congregation built a new church in the location where the bell monument now stands. At that time a steeple capable of housing the huge bell was erected. The occasion of hauling and installing the bell in the new tower was an event in Forest Hill history. All traces of the church have dis-

appeared but a special monument holds the bell, now silent, a mute testimony to an era long gone.

When Bishop O'Connell was preparing to leave for Rome to attend the First Vatican Council, searching for a good man to leave in charge of Marysville Cathedral, he chose Father Callan, transferring him from Forest Hill in October 1868. The new pastor of St Joseph in Forest Hill was Father Daniel Meagher, a priest who grew so fond of the community that he returned a second time as pastor in 1892.

It was during Father Meagher's days in Forest Hill that Father Mevel came to live with him while the railroad was under construction across the Sierras. Father Meagher was moved from Forest Hill in the fall of 1872 and his place was taken by Father Andrew O'Donnell who previously had been pastor of Colusa.

In those early days of Bishop O'Connell's rule over the diocese, two years was about the limit of most appointments, but Father O'Donnell stayed three years, until after Christmas 1875. He was succeeded by another great pioneer Father William Moloney, a priest who spent some 13 years in the Nevada desert. The beauty of Forest Hill must have been a welcome respite to him while it lasted. In early in 1879, the bishop sent him back to Nevada and replaced him by the somewhat sickly Father Thomas Pettit who eventually had to give up the parish because of his health. He was listed by the bishop as one of two "confirmed invalids" in 1882, and he died on July 24, 1884.

It was Father Michael O'Reilly who was to have the record for the longest stay as pastor of Forest Hill during the ten years from 1882-1892. During his long pastorate, the community of Forest Hill declined and the neighboring communities on the opposite ridge along which the railroad travelled gradually grew.



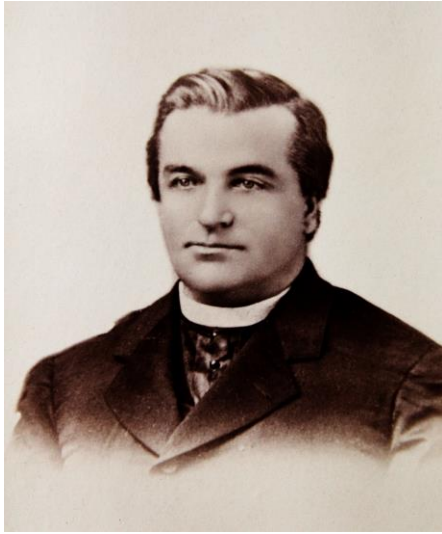
Photo by John E Boll 2012

St Joseph Church in Forest Hill, Mission of Auburn

St Joseph Parish, Auburn rents this Lutheran Church for Sunday Mass in Forest Hill

When Father Daniel Meagher returned for the second time in 1892-1898 he found a much declined parish. There were destined to be only two more pastors of St Joseph Church, Forest Hill, Father Dennis Horgan from 1898 to 1900 and Father Gerald Stack from 1900 to 1903.

At that time Bishop Grace could see that the community of Auburn was the more central place for the residence of the priests, and from that date on Forest Hill became a mission of Auburn. Except for the bell monument on the side of the road, and the lovely old cemetery at the far edge of town, there is no way by which the visitor would guess that this was once one of the thriving parishes of the old Grass Valley and early Sacramento Diocese.



Father James Callan



Father Andrew O'Donnell



Father Thomas Pettit