

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 2

Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

No 2

FR JOHN SHANAHAN IN GRASS VALLEY NEWS OF GOLD RUSH REACHES NEW YORK

By Fr John Dwyer, printed January 8, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

There are few men in history who can claim as many "firsts" as Father John Shanahan. Born in Kilkenny, Ireland in 1793, he crossed the Atlantic at an early age to the United States. He seems to have been able to get a good education because when he enrolled at Mount St Mary Seminary at Emmitsburg, Maryland in August 1820, he was able to pay for his theological studies by teaching algebra and geometry in the college department. When he was ordained on September 19, 1823, he was the first missionary priest to have been ordained from Emmitsburg.

Ordained by the first resident Bishop of New York, Bishop John Connelly, he was one of only eight priests in the entire states of New York and New Jersey. Resident at St Patrick Cathedral where the bishop and one assistant priest: two were at St Peter's on Barclay Street thus making four priests in New York City. Another priest was assigned to the territory now constituting the Diocese of Albany: one more was at Utica, where the Erie Canal was under construction. All of west New York, from Auburn to Buffalo had one priest and Paterson, New Jersey, a parish covering an area that now comprises two complete dioceses, had the one remaining priest.

Not a single priest was stationed on Long island, the present dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre. In fact, the first church in Brooklyn, St James on Jay Street, was under construction and Father Shanahan's first Mass was said in the building "on a few boards clumsily laid together."

After Bishop Connelly's death, Father Shanahan was assigned to St John Church, Utica, where much of his time was spent in the saddle, traveling up and down the Erie Canal administering to the Irish laborers who were building it. From 1826 to 1828 Father Shanahan labored at St John's, Paterson, New Jersey. At the end of 1827 the parish was divided and Troy became a parish center with Father Shanahan appointed its second pastor in 1829. For the next fourteen years he took care of St Peter's, Troy and its nine missions extending north to the Canadian border. In 1842 ill health overtook him and it was from Chatham, New Brunswick, Canada, that he came in 1845 to assist Father Moran in Newark, New Jersey for three years, after which he returned to Utica.

Meanwhile gold had been discovered three thousand miles away in far off California and the fever reached a high pitch in New York in 1849 and 1850. Most probably many of the men he knew during the construction days of the Erie Canal were among those who headed for California. Whatever the reason, so did Father Shanahan, a man, who according to one source, "had naturally contracted the habit of traveling." The remarkable thing is that he was already

fifty-seven years old, whereas the average age of those heading for the mines was between eighteen and thirty-five.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Immaculate Conception Church, Downieville
Established 1853

We find Father Shanahan stationed at Sonoma Mission in June 1851, assisting Bishop Alemany of Monterey when he came there on June 5, 1851 to give confirmation to thirty four persons.

But by September Father Shanahan was in the mining country, traveling by boat to Sacramento and then on another boat to Marysville. He headed for the mining country and determined to make his headquarters in the town of Nevada and to cover the mines of Plumas, Sierra and Nevada Counties. The first deed recorded in the Nevada County Recorder's Office shows that on October 2, 1851 Father Shanahan bought a lot from Thomas Gill of Downieville for \$100. Perhaps the lot had a cabin on it. But soon thereafter in October, Father Shanahan built a little church on Coyote Street and named it "St Peter's," a touch of nostalgia for the church in far off Troy. One year later he built a small church in Grass Valley, just west of Boston Ravine, which he named St Patrick, at a cost of \$1,700.

Archbishop Alemany, now of San Francisco, came in August 1853 and gave confirmation both in Nevada and in Grass Valley. But that visit revealed an aging and infirm John Shanahan. He was now 61 years old, a remarkable age for those times and his eyesight was failing him. So on November 28, 1853 the Archbishop gave Father Shanahan permission to return to New York, and the Bishop of New York assigned him for a while to Nativity parish on Second Avenue. The following year, John Shanahan moved to his final residence, St Peter's on Barclay Street where he resided until his death on August 8, 1870. After 1864 he became totally blind, but remained alert, offering the Mass of the Blessed Virgin daily, acting as confessor to the priests of the area, and keeping himself well informed on everything that was going on.

Among the first missionaries on the east coast, John Shanahan stands as the first missionary in the mines of Northern California and founder of the church in Nevada City and Grass Valley.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

**Interior of Immaculate Conception Church
Downieville**