

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll

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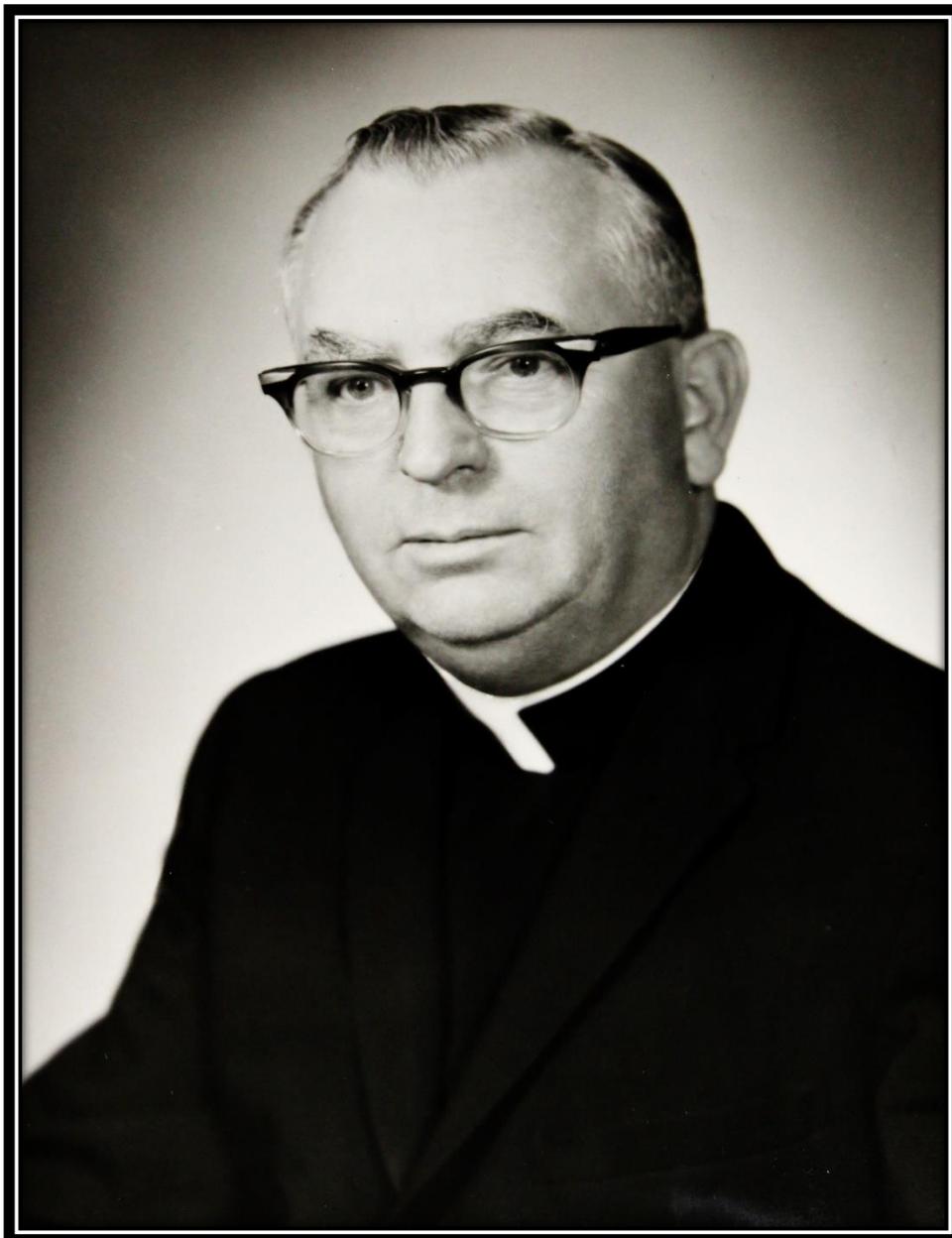
Father Bernard McElwee

Native of the Parish of Desertmartin, County Derry, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Pastor Emeritus of Saint Isidore Parish, Yuba City

September 29, 1907 – September 25, 1981



Bernard McElwee, son of Francis McElwee and Mary Ann Mulholland, was born on September 29, 1907 in the Parish of Desertmartin, Country Derry, Ireland. He was baptized the day of his birth in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Keenaught, County Derry.

BARNEY BEGINS HIS EDUCATION

Barney began his primary education at Saint Columb's School from 1914 to 1918 and then moved to Saint Joseph School in Lurgin in 1918. For his secondary education, he matriculated to Rainy Public School in Magherafelt until 1926 and then on to Saint Columb's School in Derry, Ireland for one year.



Photo from the web

Saint Columb's Cathedral, Derry, Ireland

ALL HALLOWS COLLEGE AND ORDINATION

In 1928, Barney entered All Hallows College in Dublin where he did his theological studies. On June 24, 1934, he was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento by Bishop Michael O'Brien, bishop of the Diocese of Ardfert and Agahdoe which became the Diocese of Kerry in 1952.



Photo from the Web

Catholic Cathedral of Kerry

ARRIVES IN SACRAMENTO

Father McElwee arrived in the Diocese of Sacramento in October 1934 to begin his life of ministry in Northern California.

FIRST ASSIGNMENT, MARYSVILLE

Newly ordained Father McElwee was assigned to Saint Joseph Parish in Marysville on January 1, 1935 by Bishop Robert Armstrong as assistant to Father Patrick Guerin. Saint Joseph Church served as the first cathedral for the Vicariate of Marysville since its founding in 1860. Father McElwee served in Marysville until January 15, 1944. He and other priests would cross the Feather River to celebrate Mass for farm workers in fields, warehouses and at the Richland Housing area.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Joseph Church, Marysville

APPOINTED PASTOR OF SAINT ANTHONY PARISH, WALNUT GROVE

After serving as an assistant priest in Marysville for nine years, Father McElwee was appointed to his first pastorate at Saint Anthony Parish in Walnut Grove along the Sacramento River. He served this parish community for five years until January 15, 1949.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Anthony Church, Walnut Grove

PASTOR OF SAINT JAMES PARISH, DAVIS

On January 15, 1949, Bishop Armstrong appointed Father McElwee pastor of Saint James Parish in Davis. In the late 1940s, Davis had a population of about 3,000 people. The University of California at Davis, established in 1908 as the University Farm for research and science-based instruction of UC Berkeley, began to grow and by 1959, UC Davis had grown into a general campus with its own personality and strengths.

During the four years that Father McElwee was pastor of Saint James Parish, it was a time of growth in the city due to the accelerated growth of the University. Life in Davis revolved around the life of the University since Davis was a university town for the University of California. The population of Davis in 2018 was 69,289 with a university school enrollment of 35,189, making it one of the largest campuses in the UC University systems.



Photo by John E Boll

The Original Saint James Church in Davis which is now part of the Davis Newman Center

FOUNDING PASTOR OF SAINT ISIDORE CHURCH

On January 15, 1952, Bishop Armstrong appointed Father McElwee as the founding pastor of the newly created Saint Isidore Parish in Yuba City. Father McElwee's first task was to find a place where he could begin gathering the Catholic community in Yuba City to celebrate Mass on Sundays.

SECURES A CHAPEL FROM CAMP BEALE

The Army base at Camp Beale located across the Feather River and east of Marysville was being converted to Beale Air Force Base at this time.

During World War II, prisoners of war were held at the Beale Army base. The former Italian prisoners' chapel was acquired by Father McElwee and was moved to a site on Cooper Avenue in Yuba City where the Cooper Avenue Baptist Church is located today. This Army chapel became the temporary church where the Catholic community of Yuba City began its life as the Saint Isidore Parish of Yuba City and Sutter County.



Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

The Chapel at Camp Beale Army Base



Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

Moving the Beale Army Chapel to Yuba City in 1953

PURCHASE OF A PERMANENT SITE FOR THE NEW PARISH

Father McElwee was able to purchase a 17 acre parcel of land known as the Gray property on and around Clark Avenue as the permanent site for Saint Isidore Parish. The former Italian prisoners' chapel was moved to this location on March 9, 1953 and would become the parish church until the permanent church was constructed in 1960.



Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

Moving the Chapel to Clark Avenue

BUILDING OF A PARISH SCHOOL

The next step in development of the new parish was the building of a parish school. The school opened its doors in September 1955 and was called Holy Angels School. It was staffed by the Sisters of Notre Dame who commuted daily from their convent at Notre Dame School across the street from Saint Joseph Church in Marysville.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Isidore Parish School

THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1955

On Christmas Eve, December 24, 1955, the Marysville-Yuba City area was hit by a severe rainstorm. The water of the Feather River began to rise rapidly and no one knew if the levees would hold. People were evacuated from their homes and Father McElwee was forced to leave the parish as well. The raging river overflow its banks and the levee broke on the Yuba City side of the river flooding Yuba City. St Isidore Church and School were flooded in 12 feet of water.

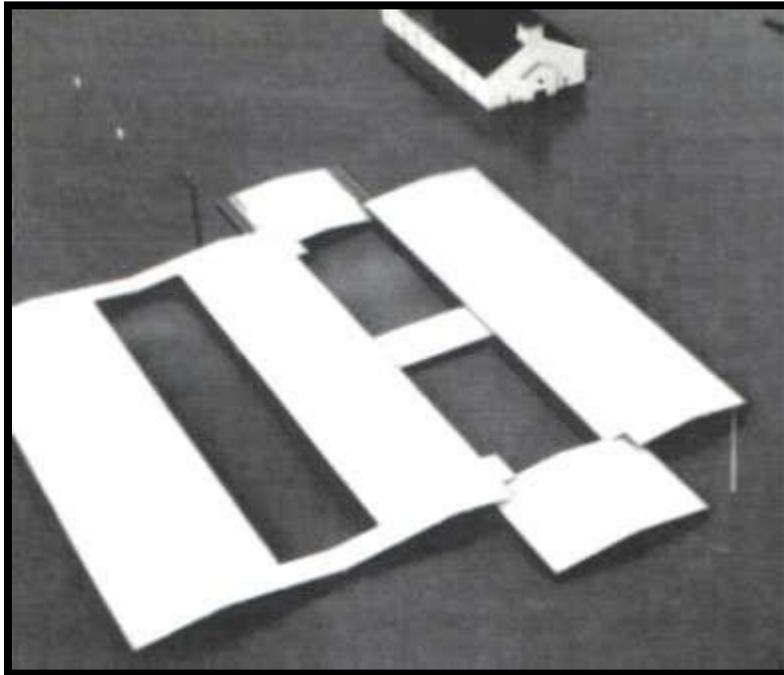


Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

The Flooded Saint Isidore Church and School in 1955

BEGINNING AGAIN

As the flood waters receded, the work began to repair the severely damaged parish facilities in Yuba City. It was heart-breaking and expense work for the residents of Yuba City to restore their homes and for Saint Isidore Parish to repair the school and church. There was no other choice but to rebuild and move forward.

THE PARISH BUILDS A CONVENT

After the repairs were made to the church and school, the parish community decided to build a convent in 1958 so the Notre Dame Sisters who taught at the school would no longer have to commute back and forth daily from Marysville to Yuba City.

TIME TO BUILD A CHURCH

In 1959, the parish began construction of its permanent church. As the project began, Father McElwee asked Bishop Joseph McGucken for permission to install air conditioning in the new church since summers in the Sacramento Valley were usually very hot. Bishop McGucken denied permission for air conditioners to be installed in the new church.

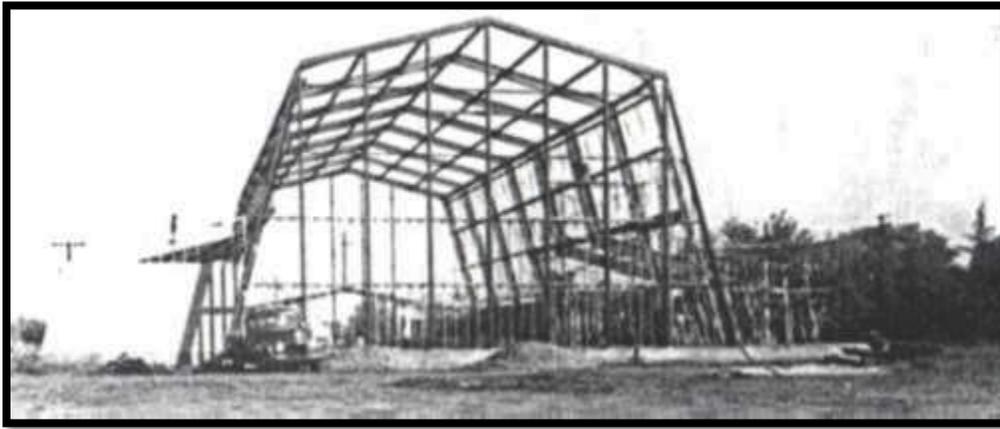


Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

Construction Begins on the new Saint Isidore Church

The design of the new church was to reflect the local agricultural buildings and fruit packing sheds of Sutter County. Father McElwee and the parish community felt such a design was especially appropriate in Sutter County since the primary industry was agriculture and the church was named after and dedicated to Saint Isidore, the Patron Saint of Farmers.

DEDICATION OF THE CHURCH

The newly completed church was dedicated on June 12, 1960 by Bishop Joseph McGucken. It was a hot day and Bishop McGucken sweated profusely during the liturgy. No doubt, Father McElwee smiled to himself hoping that the bishop realized his error in judgment by not allowing air conditioners to be installed in the church during its construction. Later, Bishop Bell allowed the parish to install air conditioners.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Isidore Church Today

BUILDING A PERMANENT RECTORY

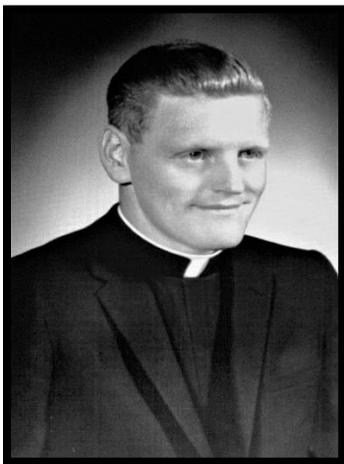
In the spring of 1963, construction began on a new rectory built on the parish site next to the church. Before this time, Father McElwee and his assistant priests lived in a house on Cooper Avenue. From this point forward, the priests would live on the parish site.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Isidore Parish Priests' Residence

FATHER JAMES McKNIGHT REFLECTS ON THE LIFE OF FATHER McELWEE



Father James McKnight

Father James McKnight, pastor emeritus of Saint Canice Church in Nevada City, served as an assistant to Father McElwee from 1969 to 1971. In an interview with him, Father McKnight said that Father Barney McElwee was very involved with the Social Justice teaching of the Church.

Father Joseph Bishop was an assistant to Father McElwee and worked primarily with the Spanish speaking community. Father Joe purchased a house in Yuba City and turned it into a Hispanic Center.

In 1971, Cesar Chavez came to Yuba City to speak at a farm workers' rally. Father Barney allowed Chavez to stay in the parish rectory which was a courageous act to do since many farmers in the

area were against the efforts of Chavez to organize farm workers. Father Barney supported social justice for all people long before it was common to do so. He was a man ahead of his time.

Father McKnight said that Father McElwee loved the liturgical changes initiated by the Second Vatican Council. He encouraged Folk Masses and installed Eucharistic Ministers. He himself trained the lectors to proclaim the Word of the God properly at the parish Masses.

Regarding rectory living, Father Barney was always hospitable and made the rectory a home for his assistants where everyone was welcome. He invited his assistant priests to join him for refreshments before dinner and then they enjoyed dinner together. Father Barney held no grudges against his parochial vicars, even when they had differences of opinions and views. He held no grudges against anyone.

Father McKnight remembers the time when Father Joe Bishop purchased a dog for Father Barney as a Christmas present and Joe named the dog Alden. The housekeeper's little daughter also wanted a dog so Father Joe bought her one and named the dog Higgins. When Bishop Alden Bell came to the parish for confirmation, the housekeeper's daughter asked the bishop if he would like to see Alden chase Higgins around the house. Father Joe put the little girl up to it. The dogs chased after one another in the house and Bishop Bell had a great laugh over the incident.

Father Barney was an extrovert and loved to socialize both in the rectory and with parishioners. The parish was a very social community and Father Barney loved it. When the parish held a progressive dinner, he loved going to various houses for the different dinner courses. Parishioners were very close to the priests of the parish.



Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

Father McElwee visits with Robert & Peggy Steel after the Baptism of their son

Father Barney celebrated a Saturday morning Mass for the children in Faith Formation every week for a different class. He loved spending time with the children of the parish.

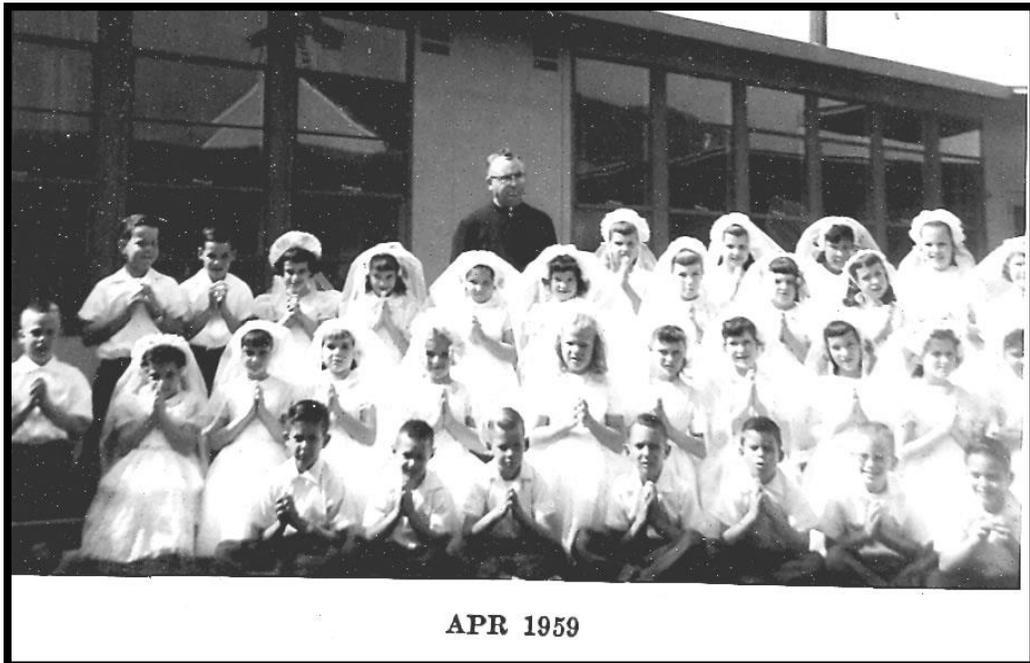


Photo from St Isidore Parish Archives

Holy Angel's School First Communion Class, 1959

FATHER McELWEE RETIRES

After 21 years as pastor of Saint Isidore Parish, Father McElwee retired on June 30, 1973, at the age of 65. Succeeding him as the second pastor was his assistant, Father Joseph Bishop. Father Barney continued to live in the parish rectory for the next 8 years.

FATHER McELWEE'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

During the many years Father McElwee served as pastor of Saint Isidore Parish, he was a member of the Sutter County Housing Authority, the Tri-County Commission for Aging and the Board of Directors of the County Family Services Agency. His involvement in the life of the local community gave evidence to his great desire to improve the lives of the people of Sutter County.

DEATH COMES TO FATHER McELWEE

After eight years of retirement, Father McElwee died in his sleep at Saint Isidore Rectory during the night of September 24-25, 1981, a few days before his 74th birthday.

FUNERAL MASS FOR FATHER McELWEE

A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated for Father McElwee in Saint Isidore Church on Tuesday, September 29, 1981, which happened to be Father McElwee's 74th birthday. The main celebrant at the Mass was Bishop Francis A Quinn and Father Eugene Lucas, who served as assistant pastor

at Saint Isidore Church, was the homilist. The Yuba-Sutter Oratorio Society sang at the Mass. This society performs Handel's Messiah at the church every Christmas season, a tradition begun by Father McElwee. Parish music groups also participated in singing parts of the Mass.

After the Funeral Mass, the body of Father McElwee taken to the Sutter Cemetery in Yuba City where his body was laid to rest until the day of the resurrection of the dead.



Photo from the St Isidore Parish Archives

The Headstone of Father McElwee, Sutter Cemetery, Yuba City

SIMULTANEOUS MASS CELEBRATED IN IRELAND

While the Funeral Mass was being celebrated in Yuba City for Father Bernard McElwee, his nephew, Father Christopher McElwee, celebrated a Mass in Ireland for family members at about the same time as the Funeral Mass in Yuba City. That provided Father Barney's relatives in Ireland to join together for a Memorial Mass as they commended him to the loving and merciful care of the Lord.

IN MEMORIAM

Father Barney McElwee was a man ahead of his times. Friendly and outgoing by nature, he exuded a spirit of welcome and friendship to all who came his way. He held no grudges and felt comfortable when people disagreed with his point of view. He never allowed a disagreement to destroy a friendship.

He always welcomed fellow priests to the parish rectory and knew the rectory was not his house but the common house of the priests who lived in it. He knew when it was time to retire and enjoyed eight years of retirement in the community of Yuba City where he spent a good part of his life. And when the final day came, the Lord called him home while he slept at home in his own bed.



Photo from the Website for Derry, Ireland

Derry, Ireland

Father Bernard McElwee was loved by his parish family and he loved them as well. As he looked back over the years he served the People of God in the Diocese of Sacramento, he no doubt nodded with a smile saying, "It was a good life and I loved being a priest."

Thank you, Father Barney, for your generous spirit and tireless effort to bring the justice and mercy of God to the lives of your people. Indeed, you were a kind and loving shepherd.



Rest now in Peace!