

Museum News: Children of Faith – The Catholics of Sanderson

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

In the dark and dusty little room the new priest raised his hand and called the faithful: “Laudetur Jesus Christus” and the congregation responded “Et Maria Immaculata.” Thus began the ministry of the Oblate, Father Mangon, in 1903 to a congregation of Hispanic and Anglo parishioners in a tiny adobe hut in the small town of Sanderson, Texas.

Catholic work in this area of Texas began long before the town of Sanderson was settled. As early as 1860, 22 years before the town

was founded, Catholic missionaries from France and Mexico visited the area to address the needs of Native Americans and the few Mexican settlers who lived here.

After the Mexican War of 1848 the whole area north of the Rio Grande was "sold" to the United States and all settlers became American citizens. A boundary survey determined the official border and the results were ratified in 1853. With this agreement thousands of square miles and thousands of Mexican citizens suddenly found themselves on the north side of the border, including the few Mexican folks who lived in the future Terrell County area.

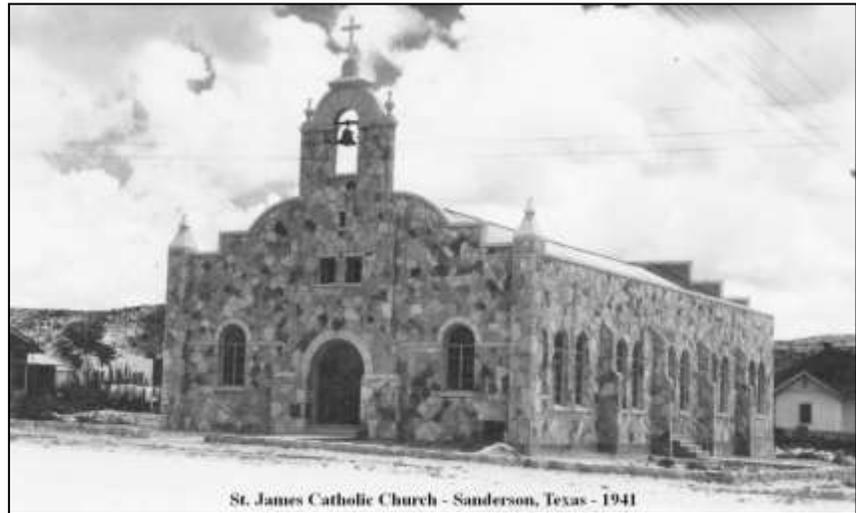
When Indian disturbances were finally quelled in 1881 and the railroad passed through in 1882, Hispanic and Anglo folks began to settle in the area of Sanderson, an important division point on the railroad and a thriving ranching area. Though Hispanics traditionally have been Roman Catholic, there were also a sizeable number of Irish and German settlers who also embraced the Catholic faith. But, a church was not constructed even though there was a large, potential parish forming as new settlers moved into the area. Services were held occasionally in a small adobe hut, but it was only a meeting place and not a consecrated building.

In 1901, Joe Kerr moved to Sanderson to work in the Hancock and Hancock mercantile store. Born in Ireland, he was a devout Catholic and had the means and fortitude to begin pushing for a local Catholic congregation, but he was unmarried and busy building his career. With the arrival of his sister in 1902, Mamie Kerr Kuykendall and her husband, Tom, immediately began to push for the church hierarchy to send more priests to the area, especially since their visits were infrequent. Mamie wrote to Bishop S. J. Forest of the San Antonio Diocese and asked him to send out a priest to minister to the local believers. Mamie was a quiet, sweet Irish woman, but where her church was concerned, she was a prayer warrior and a force to be reckoned with by the church leaders. Bishop Forest sent out a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Father Mangon, who began to come to Sanderson semiannually.

Mamie Kuykendall and the other congregants were not satisfied with that schedule and they began once again to petition the church leadership to establish a permanent work in Sanderson.

Finally, in 1903 Bishop Forest decided it was time to come visit the congregation at Sanderson. Receiving a warm welcome and a splendid reception, Bishop Forest increased Father Mangon's visits, and by 1907 he began coming every month.

In 1904 the congregation decided that the one-room, windowless adobe hut with its dirt floor was no longer a fitting place for worship. Under the leadership of Anglo and Hispanic leaders and thanks to Tom Kuykendall, money was raised to purchase a lot on Oak Street in Sanderson on which to build a new church. Then, a fund was begun to purchase building materials, contributed not only by Catholics but by many Protestant friends. Those folks who could not contribute money began to donate labor and building materials, especially adobe bricks made by local



St. James Catholic Church - Sanderson, Texas - 1941

craftsmen. The structure was finished in in 1905 and consecrated by Bishop Forest in 1906. Christened the Church of the Immaculate Conception in honor of Father Mangon's Oblate order, it served the congregation for the next 37 years.

Although Oblate priests visited regularly to serve the congregation, it was not until 1916 that Father J. A. Coulombe was assigned to the parish as a resident priest. By this time the congregation had been absorbed into the new Diocese of El Paso, and its leader, Bishop Anthony Shuler, made many visits here. Through the years many missionary priests came to hold programs at the church, along with the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, who came to raise funds for their orphanage.

With the arrival of Father Coulombe it was necessary to provide a rectory for his home. Once again the congregation set about raising funds to purchase property and raise a building. At this time, another devout Catholic lady, Mrs. Ida Wolfram McGinley, donated the property for the rectory up on Hackberry Street. Born to a Prussian family that had immigrated to San Antonio, Mrs. McGinley and her Irish husband, Ed, were wonderful citizens of Sanderson and faithful Catholics. Although they moved to Del Rio in 1912, they still had business interests in Sanderson and loved the town and its inhabitants. Mr. McGinley had bought out Charlie Wilson and established many of the modern conveniences of Sanderson, including the modern water system, the electricity generation plant and an ice plant. But, his job as a railroad engineer transferred him to Del Rio and, reluctantly, they moved away. Even so, the rectory was completed about 1916-17, and eventually a parish hall was constructed, and the congregation thrived and grew.

By 1939 the little Church of Immaculate Conception had become too small for the swelling congregation. The resident priest, Father Constantino Varona approached Bishop Shuler to see about building a new church. With a \$1000 loan from the Catholic Church Extension Society in 1940, local funds were raised to begin purchase of lots adjoining the rectory on Hackberry, and contractor O. J. Cresswell was secured to do the construction under the leadership of Robert Kerr as the building chairman. Using plans for the Kerrs' lovely home church in Cambellton, Texas, the new edifice was erected and the old Immaculate church and its name was retired and the building taken down.

The new building, now named St. James, was constructed of native stone and huge slag glass windows depicting Bible scenes and characters were installed. Much larger than the old church, the new St. James Church became a comfortable home for the local Catholic congregation. In later years a church education building and a large church hall were added.

Today, many generations of the faithful have come and gone in the new building. The St. James Church campus and its wonderful witness have become a point of pride for the Roman Catholic congregation of Sanderson.