SAINT MICHAEL PARISH

A History
by
Tony Rawe

(Adapted for this publication)

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the enduring parishioners of Saint Michael's. Those hardy souls of past and present who have worked hard, together, through good times and bad, for the betterment of their spiritual and temporal community. Though our buildings may pass into history, though our priest may come and go, it is the people, those durable souls who worship through the years in this parish that give it permanence; that attest to the lasting presence of Jesus Christ on the high plains.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THE GENESIS

The Roman Catholic Church dates back more than twenty centuries, the Catholic Church in America goes back to the 1500's, but the history of the Catholic Church's existence in the present area of Saint Michael's Parish reaches back just over one hundred years.

A Vicariate-Apostolic was established in Denver in 1868. However, no activity seems to have occurred in our region until somewhat later. According to Father Joseph O'Bieme, who was pastor here from 1924 to 1936, the first reference to Catholic Church activity was to some New Mexican priest who periodically traveled through here from Las Animas. It seems they would follow Horse Creek until they were directly east of Pikes Peak and then turn west towards present day Colorado Springs. This occurred around 1880.

Later it appears that some Franciscans from the Denver area visited the local faithful on a sporadic basis. Still later Benedictines from Pueblo would sometimes tend to the spiritual
needs here in part because many of the original members of the parish came here from the area of Pueblo and the Arkansas River Valley.

About the turn of the century, local services when available were held in the home of Michael Balsick, an early pioneer, whose homestead was approximately two miles west of the town of Calhan. Those services were conducted by priests from Pueblo. The parish and church later founded in Calhan were named St. Michael in his honor.

Although composed of from one to as many as four churches (early 1900's) the parish has never had more than one priest formally assigned to it on a permanent basis.

The parish boundaries, somewhat nebulous, as derived from official Archdiocese of Denver records are as follows:
North: The County line between Douglas, Elbert and El Paso counties,
East: The west boundary of the Limon parish,
South: The El Paso county line,
West: Eastonville Road. (This will change with the establishment of St. Benedict of Falcon.

The real impetus to the development of a Catholic presence in our area came with the arrival of the Most Reverend J. Henry Tihen as Bishop of Denver in 1917. He decided to build churches in Matheson and Ramah to supplement the original church in Calhan that had been built in 1905. He directed Father C. J. Vaughn of Elbert and Father St. Louis to accomplish this task.

SAINT MICHAEL CHURCH
CALHAN

In 1905, Father G. Raber, who was at the time pastor in Elbert, Colorado, erected a small church in Calhan on land donated by Marie White. It was located on 8th Street on the northeast corner of present church property. According to the "Pike View Farmer," a local newspaper, it was the first church built in Calhan. Its purpose was to serve as the main church for the mission areas of Ramah, Matheson, and Hollywood. The church property was enlarged later with land from Mr. Joseph Bosetti, according to a Warranty Deed dated July 17, 1931.
The church was named in honor of Mr. Michael Balsick, as alluded to previously.

The first priest assigned full-time to Calhan was Father J. S. Zybura, who arrived in 1920. Between 1905 and 1920 the duties were performed by the priests from Elbert. Primarily, with Father St. Louis administering while building churches in Ramah and Matheson.

Father Zybura bought a house to serve as the parish rectory in 1920 and the priest has resided in Calhan ever since. The original rectory was located at 555 Boulder St. There was some controversy over the purchase of this house at the time, but this is related in a subsequent chapter. Father Zybura, in a letter to the Bishop in 1921 stated that the four missions consisted on only 55 families. Later that year he moved to a hospital in Colorado Springs due to serious ill health.
From then until the fall of 1923, Father Francis J. Brady tended to the faithful. Then came Father John Kelly. He noted that a Mrs. Penrose had paid $100 on the church debt. However, he managed to raise the parish debt by $500 within four months and this created such a stir among the parishioners that early in 1924 he decided to "retire to more congenial surroundings." He left and never looked back. Father St. Louis again filled in until the arrival of Father Joseph O'Bieme later that year.

Father O'Bieme served for almost twelve years, until December 1936. In his correspondence with the Bishop he noted that his problems were mainly the parish debt and the interest. In 1932, he wrote to Denver mentioning three bank failures in the area and this, coupled with the poor demand for farm produce caused him to request that the parish be allowed to forego some collections that year. The Bishop consented and sent him $50 in the form of Mass Stipends to help him get by.

Father Leonard Gall arrived in 1936 and had such trouble making ends meet that he began publishing a bulletin listing monthly dues and how much had been paid, by name. Father Gall was followed by Father Andrew Torpor from 1940 thru 1943, and by Father William Gallagher from 1944 until the summer of 1946.

Father William Zolp arrived in what he referred to as "Calhan, the howling wilderness," in June 1946 and stayed for 27 years until his death in 1973.

Father Zolp expressed himself in a straight-forward manner, and often, to the Archbishop in Denver. He was very protective of his little flock and attempted to shelter them from the demands of Denver almost as much as from the Devil. He lived frugally, stretching both his own resources and those of his people. His frequent letters to the Archbishop stressing his dire straights often elicited donations in the form of $25 Mass stipends. In a letter dated in January 1949, he wrote,

"When the weather got to 10 below zero, I was forced to stay at my neighborhouse as my own shack was too cold and had not a drop of water."

An example of another letter to the Archbishop:

St Michael's Church
Calhan, Colorado
March 10, 1950

The Most Reverend Urban J. Vehr D. D.
1536 Logan Street
Denver, Colorado

Your Excellency:

Please find enclosed three dollars towards the collection for the Indian and Negro missions. The sum is small indeed: but as it didn't come from the blue sky, which is
predominant here in Calhan and where there isn't much of anything else, the source of income must be necessarily meager, regardless of the cause and even my own bear existence. I made this statement because I want your Excellency to rebuke me not for the smallness of the offering, but for being extravagant.

Right now I need $500 to finish the repairs of the house in Calhan and that of Sacred Heart Church in Ramah. The repairs of both properties were discontinued for lack of funds. Besides I need money to buy me clothes, for the last year my wages was only $400, out of which sum $200 went to the maintenance of a car.

A few years ago, Mr. R. E. Gammon donated two lots to the Sacred Heart Church in Ramah. Lately I found that the deeds had not been registered in the Treasury Department of El Paso County. Please send the deeds, which need to be registered, either to me or directly to the Treasury Department of El Paso County. A prompt action will prevent from selling the property for taxes.

Respectfully yours,
Father Zolp

Father Zolp personally built the present rectory at St. Michael's, with volunteer help. The original parsonage on Boulder St. Was sold to Mr. Hal Warren for the sum of $6,000 in March of 1959.

In the early 60's the need for a larger main church in Calhan was discerned by Father Zolp. In a letter dated 10 December 1962, Bishop Vehr sent a $1000 contribution to get a fund drive for a new church started. He also mentioned in this letter that the price received for the old parsonage was available as well.

After much planning, an agreement between the "owner" and the architect was signed on 1 August 1965. The architects were the firm of Lusk and Wallace. The building was to seat 150 persons and to cost $64,140.00. The agreement between the "owner" and the contractor was signed on 13 May, 1966.

The new Saint Michael Church was dedicated on Monday, 17 April 1967. The parish received a contribution from the Archdiocese Development Fund of $71,930. Part of that, plus donations from parishioners paid for interior furnishings. The old church was later torn down.

Father Zolp died in a Colorado Springs hospital on 1 November 1973. He had been born in Lithuania on 26 April 1895, ordained in Denver on 9 June 1929. For over a quarter of a century he was a dedicated shepherd of his people.

Father Zolp was followed by Father Richard Ling (1973 - 1975). Father Ling was present during the creation of the Parish Council and its early formative period. He once became so concerned about the fact that the front pews were usually empty while the back pews were full that he roped off several of the back pews. This didn't sit too well with the parishioners.
When Father Ling left, he was replaced by Father John Keenan (1975-1981). On a personal basis, Father Keenan was the kindest and gentlest of men, but from the pulpit he could rain fire and brimstone on his parishioners and occasionally on the bishops as well. He held very strong views on Vatican II and didn’t hesitate to state them.

Early in 1981, Father Robert Mann arrived at Saint Michael's. He was pastor until 1983. Father Mann was a popular priest within the parish and in the surrounding community. He worked closely with the parish council and many things were accomplished during his tenure. The entrance ramp, graveling of the church parking lot, storm windows on the church and rectory, and the stained glass window featuring Saint Michael were all effected while he was pastor. Father Mann was involved also with a woman from his last parish, and after being transferred to St. Paul Parish in Colorado Springs, he married her and left the priesthood for a time. He eventually obtained an annulment and returned to the priesthood back east.

Father John P. Schuneman arrived in 1983. He came here from northwest Colorado and was quite a handyman. With volunteer help he built the present "Halloran Hall" school building. However, he didn’t handle finances very well and didn’t get along with the Parish Council, so after an investigation by the Colorado Springs Diocese (Established 30 January 1984), he was relieved as pastor.

Father Jim Halloran arrived here in January 1988, scheduled to stay for about three years. He was supposed to retire but accepted this assignment and was loved by all. The ladies of the parish took such good care of him that he stayed until September 1999. When asked if he would like to attend any event, his only question was, "Are we going to eat?" Father Jim celebrated his 50th anniversary as a priest here and refused all offers of gifts so the Parish Council decided to name the school building "Halloran Hall" in his honor.

Father Jacob Gebechristos was appointed pastor in September 1999. He was from Ethiopia. The parish made great efforts to welcome him, but unfortunately, he suffered from severe mental problems which caused him to inadvertently alienate much of the parish so in June 2000 he was transferred to a facility where he could get the help he needed.

SACRED HEART CHURCH
RAMAH

The Sacred Heart Church in Ramah was built on land received from Lemuel Gammon. According to a warrant deed dated II :14 AM, 3 February 1919, "for the consideration of one dollar in hand paid, hereby sell and convey to Right Reverend J. Henry Tihen DD, Bishop of Denver .... the following real property situated in the county of El Paso and the State of Colorado to wit: lots number eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen in block numbered two refilling of the town of Ramah, Colorado ..."

The Catholic Church extension society, headquartered in Chicago honored a request for funds by contributing $500 towards the erection of the church. Fund drives were established to raise the rest of the money.
Father J. S. Zybura arrived in 1920. At a meeting of the majority of parishioners on 14 March 1920, he explained "in English and in Slovak" the Bishop's desire to establish a resident pastor in Ramah. This pastor would care for the four churches of Calhan, Ramah, Matheson, and Holtwood. Each mission would be expected to bear a monetary quota based on the number of families in each, to finance a rectory in Ramah. He stated that he would hold services twice per month in each mission. The people were in unanimous agreement with this.

Rain delayed the construction of the rectory in Ramah. Meanwhile, Father Zyabura found a house in Calhan that he considered very suitable with a bargain purchase price of $3,900. He wrote to Bishop Tielen on 10 May 1920, requesting permission to buy it. He mentioned in the letter that there was some urgency to avoid losing this opportunity.

The Bishop answered by phone, "Buy it." This was somewhat disappointing to the people of Ramah and it was so expressed in correspondence to the Diocese. Some tempers flared and loose statements were made in the heat of the moment. The owner of the Ramah Lumber Company, in a letter to the Bishop dated 3 June 1920, expressed great anxiety as to whether he would even be paid for some materials already delivered to the proposed building site in Ramah. This was all eventually settled and the house in Calhan became the parish rectory.

The Sacred Heart Church was closed from June until October 1923 resulting from an altercation in front of the church which ended with the keys being refused to Father Brady. Eventually, proper apologies were made and feelings soothed with the help of a Mr. Griffin, and the Bishop instructed that services be re-instated.

According to Father Leonard Gall, a violent windstorm hit the church building in August 1937, carrying the belfry a hundred feet and smashing it. Paint was taken off the north side of the building, twenty window panes were broken and much plaster fell on the newly varnished pews. Unfortunately, the insurance policy only covered fire. The Bishop sent $100 to help with reconstruction. The Bishop authorized the erection of the Stations of the Cross on 20 January 1938.

In August 1938, Father Gall was shocked when the Greek Orthodox priest came to Mass to witness the Confirmation Service.

In the spring of 1957, another violent storm hit Sacred Heart. This time it was properly insured and the Phillips, Pieper, and Fosha Insurance Company sent a check for $200.

With the death of Father Zolp and the arrival of Father Ling, services were discontinued in Ramah. The church had a long and colorful history and was very dear to the hearts of its parishioners. After standing virtually unused for ten years, it was sold on 11 June 1983.
SAINT AGNES
MATHESON

(Note: The following is reprinted with the kind permission of Kittie Holt)

In order to attend Catholic Church services back in 1908, the residents of the Matheson community must need to leave home before sun-up by spring wagon or any horse drawn means of transportation available, to reach Calhan in time for Mass, and the afternoon would be spent when they arrived home again. In 1911, services were available in Limon, a few miles nearer.

The first church services held in Matheson in 1913, were in the little one room schoolhouse, located on Broadway and Kelly st. on Saturday. If the schoolhouse was needed for other purposes on that day, Mass was held in a building that is now an old garage at the Turner's Service Station in east Matheson.

Father Keifer came out from Denver, Colorado for Mass and later Father Larken from Elbert, Colorado. Father Cornelius J. Vaughn from the Sacred Heart Church in Elbert was pastor until 1919 when he appealed for funds from the Catholic Church Extension Society and received a $500 gift to build a church in Matheson that was named St. Joseph.

Through donations from Catholics and Protestants, under the supervision of Father St. Louis, who was an architect and carpenter at the age of 78, and with the help of two local carpenters, Mr. McKenny and Eddie Allison, and donated labor from the community, the church was completed in 1921.

Due to a $1,000 donation, the name of the church was changed from St. Joseph to St. Agnes, in honor of the donor's wife, whose name was Agnes.

The vestments, statues, altar and altar accessories were donated by the Catholic Church Extension Society. John Matheson donated the land for the church building and also a cemetery plot that was never developed. He also donated a stand on which one of the statues was placed.

Father Subura (Zybura) from Calhan was the first priest to have Mass in the new church, and since that time Matheson has been consolidated with the Calhan and Ramah churches.

Subsequent priest officiating in the Matheson church were: Father Brady, Father Kelly, Father O'Bierne, Father Gall, Father Torpor, Father Gallagher and Father Zolp.

Father Zolp's first service in the Matheson church was in 1946 and his last was in 1973 due to his failing health. At his death in that year, Father Richard Ling took up residence in Calhan and at this time church services in Matheson and Ramah were discontinued and Mass for the community was held in Calhan. (All above from Kittie Holt)

In October 1933, due to "Federal Aid Project No E79E," part of the above mentioned land was condemned by the "Commissioners of condemnation" for the building of present day U>S> Highway 24 and the church was paid $460. In September 1966, a heavy hailstorm
damaged the roof of the church as noted by Father Zolp.

St. Agnes Church in Matheson, being unused, was sold to the Cirbo Brothers in December 1975.

THE HOLTWOOD CONGREGATION
HOLTWOOD

Holtwood was a small community a little more than 20 miles east of Calhan and approximately the same distance south of Simla, CO. It sat astride the crossroads of Kendrick (County Line) Road and Corona Road.

Although there is little information surviving, it appears that shortly after 1900, the relatively few families of the area converted a former schoolhouse into a church that served them for about fifteen years. With the decline in local families and the improvement in transportation, it became little used. Bishop Vehr authorized its sale in a letter dated 24 December 1937. An offer was received from Mr. Orcutt for $60, which the parishioners felt was fair and it was sold to him on 25 March 1938.