

The Beginning...

In the 1840's, many immigrants came to Fort Smith for job opportunities. Most of them were Irish Catholics that moved to the area to work on military construction. One of these immigrants, Michael Manning, became the first permanent resident of Fort Smith who was of the Catholic faith. The first known Mass was actually conducted in his home, most likely by one of the Jesuit missionaries that periodically came through Fort Smith.

As more Catholics moved to town, a need for a church greatly increased. Manning deeded land for a church, and along with several others, got Bishop Andrew Byrne interested in their project. Bishop Byrne was appointed the first Bishop of the Diocese of Little Rock, on November 28th, 1843 by Pope Gregory XVI. Eventually, contributions were raised and soon Saint Patrick's, the "little log church" became a reality. According to hand written notes by Father John Monaghan, Saint Patrick's first pastor, a building contract was signed on December 3rd, 1847. The church, approximately 20 feet by 40 feet, was of log construction. It was located on North Third and Hickory Streets, which today would be North Third and North D Streets. The first Catholic cemetery was located north of the church.

This log church was used for 12-13 years until the structure became too small and most likely unstable. It was abandoned and worship services were moved to what was probably an old officer's barrack on the grounds of Fort Belknap, which today would have been located at South D Street and Lexington Avenue.

During the 1840's the Federal Government did not provide direct cash support for public schools. They would however, donate a section of land for the community to sell. The proceeds from the sale would be used to establish a school system. When land in Fort Smith was put up for sale, Bishop Byrne purchased it. This land encompassed the area between the borders of Dodson Avenue to Greenwood Avenue, to Grand Avenue (Catholic Avenue), to North Tenth / Towson Avenue.

In 1862, Bishop Byrne died, and the Diocese was left without a spiritual leader for five years. In 1867, the Reverend Edward Fitzgerald was appointed as the second Bishop of Little Rock. In August of that same year, he came to Fort Smith to dedicate the new white frame Catholic Church. It was built in the same location as the current Immaculate Conception Church on North 13th Street.

Records show that as early as 1879, German immigrants came to Fort Smith. It is believed that the railroads were the main reason for this. Beginning in the fall of 1875, the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad Company, a branch of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad Company, brought editors from the northern and northwestern states to see the land along the railroad. These excursions helped spread the word about Arkansas throughout the country and to the German-language press.

In the mid 1870's, land in Arkansas sold for as little as fifty cents to two dollars an acre. Undeveloped federal land could even be had for free if the new owners agreed



Southeast corner of the first church

to live on the land for at least five years and pay its taxes. One did not even have to be a citizen at that time to get the land, but only declare to eventually become one.

The lure of the land deals were not the only enticements for the Germans. Germany was suffering from the economic depression of 1873 and the establishment of a Prussian dominated rule. There was great political, economic and religious unrest. This restlessness caused



The main altar on the east end of the church

many Germans to migrate to the United States in hopes of a better life.

The newspaper, WEEKLY NEW ERA, dated Thursday, March 16th, 1882 stated *"Last year the German immigration to this country exceeded that of any previous years and all other nations combined. Let them come. There is room for them and they are needed for they bring money, brains and muscle."*

During this period of immigration, rates for passage from Europe to America were as low as \$25 per person. This cost even included a railroad ticket to a destination in the inland United States. Children between the ages of three and five traveled for one-half fare, and those under three traveled for free.

When the German immigrants came to Fort Smith, the only Catholic Church in town was Saint Patrick's. They joined the parish, but quickly found the language to be a major barrier. Many of the older settlers were not able to master the English language to such an extent that they were not able to follow the sermons or even make their confessions. In consequence, many fell away from their faith.

In 1884, a group of German Catholic men met and organized a German speaking organization. It was named the Saint Joseph's Mutual Aid Society. A constitution and by-laws were drawn up, which specifically and precisely stated the purpose of the society. The purpose was to benefit its members spiritually, socially and even financially. One of the first subjects discussed was to remedy their religious hazard. A delegation of members were appointed to approach the Bishop of Little Rock, explain their spiritual plight, and ask him to establish a German-speaking parish in Fort Smith. The Reverend Edward Fitzgerald met with the delegation and heard their pleas. He generously promised to help them and shortly afterwards donated a whole city block on which a church and other parish buildings could be erected.

In the spring of 1886, about fifty German families came together to form a congregation named after their patron saint. Saint Boniface Catholic Church was becoming a reality. It was not an easy task for them to collect the funds for building a church, school, and pastor's residence. They however, went to work with a great energy and succeeded in their undertaking. One of their first fundraisers was a lawn social that was organized by four lady parishioners. The "Lawn Social" became an event that has been held every year for 125 years.

In 1887, the original Saint Boniface Church, a small wooden structure, was built in the center of the 200 block of North 18th Street. With the passing of years, the congregation grew to 120 families and the church became too small. In the summer of 1904, the church was remodeled and a transept was built increasing the seating capacity to 400.

Saint Boniface Parish continued to grow. Many families from surrounding area Benedictine parishes moved to Fort Smith. Having previously been under the spiritual guidance of the Benedictine Fathers, they sought mem-



Interior views of the first church



bership in Saint Boniface. The crowded conditions at every Mass eventually proved once again that the church was too small and would have to be replaced. It was decided to start raising money for a new church. Even the "Great Depression" did not hinder efforts, and by 1937 plans were being made for a new church.

The first decision made was to move the location of the church. Instead of being in the center of the block on North 18th Street, it would be moved to the corner of North 18th and North B Streets, which was considered a more prominent location.