

Note: The following article appeared in the program for the 50th anniversary of Holy Soul/St. Vincent de Paul Parish in 1977. The author of the article is unknown. Its descriptions of the parish and the Diocese of Amarillo were accurate as of 1977 but some of them have been superseded by subsequent events in the life of the Church.

The History of a Catholic Parish on the High Plains

The record of history is always a colorful tapestry of human lives and personalities, full of dramatic accounts of men and women as they experience triumph and tragedy, success and failure, sorrow and happiness, each life with its own unique pattern of events and conditions. Nowhere in America has this pageant of human affairs, under the Divine Guidance of Almighty God, been more varied or more thrilling than here in the center of the fabulous modern industrial empire of the High Plains of Texas, in the City of Pampa.

All the drama of life in Western America has been a part of the development of this area : The wild, free Comanches and Kiowas, the Spanish explorers in their search for the golden cities of Cibola, the explorers and traders who scouted the Plains on their way to the mountains and goldfields of the far West, the wagon trains of settlers seeking new lives on the frontier, the gallant cavalry detachments who protected these settlers as best they could, the buffalo hunters who came to their inevitable confrontations with the Indian tribes, the early day cattlemen who braved the hardships of an unsettled country to found the Panhandle's first industry, the farmers with their homesteads, the railroads that opened the West to permanent settlement, the oil men who turned this area into an industrial empire of unsurpassed riches, and the modern agribusiness and related industrial firms who completed its transition into a thriving commercial domain, filled with metropolitan areas of business, education, culture and recreation.

Modern day Catholics may indeed be deeply grateful that the Holy Church has had its servants who walked side by side with these brave pioneers, and who labored as hard to establish the spiritual life on these plains as others did .to build material prosperity. From the Padres who accompanied the first explorers to the latest priest or nun in one of the modern parish installations of the present day, all of them have served God and the Holy Church with the same zeal and dedication. As a result, the residents of the Panhandle of Texas have had available to them the blessings of the Faith which they hold so dear and which has sustained them throughout the years. At this Anniversary of the Parish it is fitting to record the names and deeds of some of these faithful Clergy, Religious, and Catholic men and women who established the religious facilities of the area.

Early permanent settlement of the Panhandle followed the path of the military forts, the large ranches and the railroads. The early settlers of the Catholic Faith kept up their devotions as best they could in their own homes, and relied upon whatever circuit riding missionary pries t'> might chance to come to them. The opportunity to have such a priest say Mass in a home for a small group of families was an event of great spiritual blessing. As the numbers of settlers increased,

the Faithful sought temporary quarters in any room in the community which was available to them, no matter what other purposes it might serve at other times.

The entire Panhandle area was at first administered by the Archdiocese of San Antonio. Under the conditions of primitive roads, horse drawn transportation, and very limited numbers of Clergy available to that Diocese, the almost insurmountable difficulties of sending priests to the isolated Catholics of the area can hardly be imagined. The Bishops of San Antonio called upon every established Church and every missionary center of priests in the surrounding states of Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas and Missouri to send any priest who could be spared to make a tour through the Plains in order to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and perform the baptisms, marriages and confirmations needed here. By far the largest number of these early missionary priests came from the order of Benedictines in the states of Arkansas and Oklahoma. In addition to the large center in Arkansas, this order had others at Antlers and at what was later to become the town of Shawnee, Oklahoma, where schools were conducted by the Sisters of the Order. Priests from these centers came to hear confessions and perform baptisms at Fort Elliott, in the present town of Mobeetie, Texas. On their way to and from the fort, they would stop at private homes to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, for a single family or as many neighbors as could be gathered there. As the number of settlers slowly increased, so, of course, did the number of Faithful attending the home Masses. As the soldiers, scouts and traders associated with the fort began to settle permanently in the Eastern Panhandle, their example was followed by other families seeking new homes. When these people were added to the large ranches such as the XIT, the Matador, and the JA, owned by partnerships or corporations, the amount of business going on in the Plains area justified the building of railroads.

Then in 1888 both the A.T. & S.F. and Fort Worth and Denver Railroads built into the Panhandle, and large tracts of land became available for settlement as a result of these ventures. Small towns sprang up along both railroads, with Clarendon being the principal town along one, and such places as Canadian, Panhandle "City", Amarillo and others being established along the other route.

The influx of Catholics among the workers who built the railroads, and the settlers taking advantage of the land now open for purchase, as well as merchants in the small towns swelled the Catholic population to such an extent that no occasional visits from missionary priests would suffice. In 1890 the Diocese of Dallas was formed, which included the entire Panhandle. While under conditions existing at that time, Dallas was still quite far away; it was certainly not as distant as San Antonio. All available priests who could be interested in missionary work were recruited and sent into the area of West Texas, including those from the Benedictines of Arkansas and Oklahoma. These missionary priests were headquartered first in Dallas, then in Fort Worth, then in Henrietta in Clay County, Texas, and finally in Clarendon, where the first permanent Church in the Panhandle was built. Among these zealous missionaries stationed in that town was one who was destined to play a great part in the establishment of the Church in the

Panhandle, Father David Henry Dunn, who was, incidentally, no relation to Bishop Dunne of Dallas.

Father Dunn was born in Rosenallis, Ireland, in 1869, and came to Milwaukee at the age of 17. In 1899 he was ordained for the Archdiocese of Chicago. In the year preceding his ordination he became ill with tuberculosis and was not expected to live. Father was transferred to the Diocese of Dallas in the hope that the sunny, dry air of Texas would improve his health. He made a vow that if God would permit him to be cured, he would devote the rest of his life to working in the mission field of the Panhandle and West Texas. He did improve, and he kept his vow. Father Dunn was assigned first to Clarendon where a Church and parochial school were already established. Father was filled with the fervent wish to serve God and the Holy Church, and to see the vast reaches of the Panhandle filled with Catholic homes and places of worship. As it happened, the area was booming at this time, and he realized that an opportunity was at hand for this wish to come true. Large numbers of settlers were being actively recruited by land developers, urging them to move from thickly settled areas to the new and thinly settled regions of the Panhandle where cheap land was available. Many of them came, sometimes in whole "colonies," and in some cases these settlements consisted entirely of Catholic people. Father Dunn saw the need for development of the Church in the area to serve their religious requirements and he moved with all the vigor of his nature to supply these services.

In 1901 Father Dunn transferred his headquarters to Amarillo from Clarendon, this city being more centrally located. This young priest, with frail health, had a territory of forty counties and forty thousand square miles, over half the territory of the Diocese of Dallas. Only two Churches existed in the entire territory - Clarendon and Tascosa. So well did Father work with the help of other missionaries, that in 1903 the original Sacred Heart Church was built in Amarillo, and a month later a Church at Nazareth was dedicated. Father Joseph Reisdorff was assigned to the later Church, and so became the only other resident Priest in the entire Panhandle. In the period from 1900 to 1920 the few resident Priests from such centers as Clarendon, Amarillo, Nazareth and St. Francis, supplemented by other Priests for short terms, served the Panhandle by dividing the territory into areas including as many Mass Stations as could be reached from their centers of operation. As more and more Catholics came, each separate Mass Station began fervently to petition the Bishops of Dallas and San Antonio for Priests.

In rapid succession, three events or conditions were to take place which would forever alter the destiny of the Panhandle area, either for good or for ill. The first of these was the flood of refugees from Mexico who entered the United States as a result of an extended period of revolution in their own country. From 1910 until 1927 conditions were so unsettled in that country that no stable government could be formed. This period ended tragically by pitting one faction of the government against the Church. As a result of this, thousands of Mexican Catholics were forced to flee to the United States. This large group of Catholics simply added to the number of people who must be ministered to by the already beleaguered and over-burdened Clergy of the Diocese of Dallas and San Antonio. It was at once evident that no amount of effort

on their part could even begin to cope with this new Paso was erected, thus relieving the pressure for a time. But the influx continued unabated, with many of the Mexicans settling in the Panhandle area outside the new Diocese of El Paso. '

The second event, World War I and its unfortunate aftermath of disruption of all ordinary life merely caused a short period of diversion of the efforts of the citizens of the Panhandle to build their economy and social institutions, and none at all in the incoming flow of refugees.

The third was the discovery of oil and natural gas in the Panhandle and the resulting boom. Natural gas was discovered in 1917, and oil in 1921. Incidentally, irrigated farming had begun around Hereford in 1911. Helium was discovered in 1920, and the production of oil began the following year. Population growth in the 70 counties which now comprise the Diocese of Amarillo doubled during the decade of the nineteen twenties. Towns doubled and tripled in size and new ones sprang up overnight. Money draws people and business wherever it is to be found.

The growth of the Pampa Parish followed the same pattern as that of the other Panhandle communities. At first there were very few Catholic families here. The L.H. Sullins family came in 1916, and the A. R. Sawyer family somewhat later. Mass was said in the Sawyer home, and the first marriage in the Parish, that between A. J. "Frenchy" Huval and Louise Griffith, was performed there. Area families may have been visited by Priests from Clarendon, Amarillo and St. Francis before 1923, particularly by the seemingly tireless Priests of Amarillo. It may also be noted that Churches had been built in Groom in 1907, in St. Francis in 1908, in White Deer in 1913, and in Canadian in 1914. While many of these did not have resident Priests, all of them had Mass said and the Sacraments administered with considerable frequency. It can be assumed that Catholics here were able to receive the necessary ministry of their Faith without undue hardship.

The oil boom and the resulting growth of population brought about the final step in changing the lonely, isolated, thinly settled Panhandle from a mission area with a few hard-pressed Priests desperately struggling to cover its great distances to a flourishing region with many persons of the Catholic Faith. The frantic growth of population forced the Bishop of Dallas to redouble his already zealous efforts to send Priests and religious to the workers and merchants swarming into the boom towns and oil camps. Of all the dedicated servants of God who came to this new field to labor here, none was to have a greater effect than that of the Rev. John H. Krukkert, the "Priest-Builder" of what was shortly to become the Diocese of Amarillo.

Father Krukkert was born in Enschede, Holland, in 1890. He was educated for the priesthood in Switzerland and was ordained there in 1920 for the Diocese of Dallas in the United States. In the next year he arrived in Dallas and was assigned as an assistant in a parish there. When he arrived he had no knowledge of the English language, although he was fluent in many others. He immediately set to work to learn this new language, and rapidly acquired a speaking knowledge of it. But even his most admiring and devoted followers will freely admit that he never mastered

it, but that he picked up American slang expressions instead of formal speech. This was to remain with him throughout his life of service. In 1923 Father Krukkert was sent as Pastor to the parish of St. Francis in the Panhandle, and here he found his life work.

He saw here a mission field of great promise and he devoted all his life to its development. He began his work by bringing his ministry to the community of Panhandle, which had no Church, to White Deer, where there was an established parish but no Priest, and to Pampa where efforts were just beginning to organize a parish. With his parish of St. Francis, this gave him five communities to serve. In spite of distances involved, he managed to offer Mass once or twice a month in the four missions. As Father made these trips he was busy every minute baptizing, validating civil marriages, giving instructions, hearing confessions. The personal friends of this dedicated man often wondered how he accepted the contrast between the established Church of his native Holland and the conditions in the oil boom towns of West Texas. During the later part of his service in the local area, Sacred Heart Parish of White Deer was given a resident pastor and Holy Souls of Pampa became its mission. Father Krukkert continued to serve Panhandle and Borger as missions until the fall of 1927.

In 1927 Father was transferred to Plainview, and for the remainder of his amazing career as a builder of Churches, rectories, and parishes he served in the southern part of the Diocese of Amarillo. Before leaving this immediate area, he built a new Church at St. Francis. built St. Teresa's in Panhandle, the famous "tar paper Church" in Borger, had plans underway to build St. John's there and most importantly of all for the purposes of this account, had purchased two lots in Pampa at the corner of Browning and Ward Streets, with an option to purchase four more. On this property the first Church in Pampa, named Holy Souls, with its rectory, school and parish hall were to be built.

The almost incredible career of service achieved by Father Krukkert was certainly greatly helped by the fortunate coincidence of the erection of the Amarillo Diocese during Father's service here, and the consecration and installation of such a dynamic and effective Bishop as the Rev. Rudolph A. Gerken. The young Priest was sent to the oil boom town of Ranger, Texas, to establish a Church. He succeeded so well that when the Holy Father and the Bishops of Dallas, El Paso and San Antonio decided to erect the new Diocese of Amarillo, Father was their choice for its first Bishop. Bishop Gerken began his efforts to build the new Diocese at once, recruiting Priests, missionaries and the religious, and continually promoting the building of new Missions, Churches, schools and hospitals. This vigorous support greatly enhanced the growth of the new Diocese.

From this point the steady march of events toward the growth of the parish at Pampa moved forward without interruption and with few delays. The numbers of Catholic people among the new residents associated with the oilfields made the formation of a parish a necessity clearly recognized by all the community. The vigorous work done by Father Krukkert was continued by the Faithful in Pampa, and by his successors among the Clergy.

The Catholic people soon reached sufficient numbers to make saying Mass in private homes inconvenient. Arrangements were then made to use the American Legion Hall. When this was no longer available, Masses were said in the Grand Theater. When the theater burned down a short while later, permission was obtained to use the Chamber of Commerce rooms in the White Deer Land Company building. In 1926 Father Krukkert finished building the rectory at White Deer, and Pampa was made a mission of that Church. When Father was transferred to Plainview in the spring of 1927, the Rev. M. G. French took up residence at White Deer and the service of Pampa. Father French continued the drive for funds to build a Church here, with the zealous and dedicated help of the Catholics of Pampa. One of the earliest meetings to discuss plans for this drive was called by Mr. and Mrs. Lynn Boyd, and was held in the office of the Sykes, Rast and Boyd Lumber Company. With the funds raised locally and with a donation of \$5,000.00 from the Extension Society, plans were drawn and construction begun on the lots obtained by Father Krukkert.

The cornerstone for the building was laid by Bishop Gerken in April, 1928. The name "Holy Souls" was chosen for the Parish in honor both of the souls in Purgatory and of the Departed in whose memory funds had been donated to the building of the Church. A small metal box with a number of commemorative items was placed in the cornerstone, and this box was later transferred to the same position in the new St. Vincent de Paul Church. In July of 1928 Rev. Joseph Wonderly succeeded Father French as Pastor at White Deer. Holy Souls Church was completed in the same year, and the building was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day, 1928, by Bishop Gerken. Father Wonderly began a drive for funds to build a rectory here. The drive was successful, and the rectory was constructed in the late summer and fall of 1930. In October of 1930 Father Wonderly was transferred to Pampa as first resident Pastor of Holy Souls Church.

Events were not only moving at a steady pace toward the establishment of permanent Church installations on the High Plains, but were doing so at a great rate of speed. In the thirty years from 1870 to 1900 the Plains were changed from a desolate region inhabited by a few soldiers, buffalo hunters and ranchers and visited by an occasional missionary Priest to a land with ready transportation in the form of railroads and in which towns and settlements were growing rapidly. In two short decades from 1900 to 1920 the area enjoyed a great expansion farms and trading centers due to intensive land development promotions. However, all this growth was to be surpassed within ten short years from 1920 to 1930, due to the oil boom. In this decade the Diocese of Amarillo was established in what had been a mission territory, and Pampa as well as a number of other communities became a Parish complete with Church, rectory and resident Pastor. In the next decade there occurred a set of events and conditions that might have wiped out all this progress except for the Providence of God and the dedication of the lay people of this community.

The conditions referred to were the worst depression of modern time~ and the most severe drought in the history of the United .States. Those were years of terrible suffering in the regions of the Panhandle in which farming was the only source of income, and of greatly reduced trade

and business throughout the country. Conditions in the Amarillo Diocese were desperate. The economic crash and dust bowl struck just as the new Diocese was involved in a program of extensive building and expansion, and debts had been contracted with the expectation that prosperity would continue. The records of Bishops Gerken and Lucey are filled with heart-rending accounts of the plight of the people of the Diocese and of the difficulties of Church administration and financing. During this period support for Priests declined, three Churches in the Diocese burned, and funds from the Extension Society dwindled. Bishop Gerken organized the Catholic Charities of Amarillo in 1932, made appeals throughout the Diocese for donations, opened a clinic for Mexican Americans in Amarillo, and had free meals dispensed from St. Anthony's Hospital. The only bright spot in the Diocese was the support and development of Price College in Amarillo. But as noted, a kind Providence and the zeal of the parishioners in the towns of Pampa and Borger made it possible for them to continue the reduction of the parish debts, and in Pampa to add a parochial school to the installations here. In 1937 Holy Souls Parish opened a school staffed by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. The building of the Grotto of our Lady of Lourdes on the grounds on May 20, 1946, and the purchase of a building from the former Pampa Air Force Base in 1949 completed the physical plant of Holy Souls Church in its original location at Ward and Browning.

This period of tribulation and difficulties ended in 1940 with improved rainfall and increased business resulting from the demands of nations arming for World War II. In that year another important event occurred in the history of the Holy Souls Parish at Pampa. Father Wonderly was transferred, and the Vincentian Fathers took over the care of the Parish. Since that time this Order has supplied all Priests serving the Parish, the first Vincentian pastor being Father William Stack, C.M. The members of the Parish are deeply grateful for the faithful and dedicated work done by the Priests of this Order in their service to this community.

From the beginning of the decade of the forties until the present Lime events have resulted in the establishment of stable industrial and commercial enterprises on the High Plains which have replaced the oil boom with prosperous economic development. Many areas in the United States have experienced booms - mining, timber, shipping, military and defense installations - but few of them have survived the ending of their particular bonanza to become areas of flourishing economic growth. It is remarkable that this has happened in the Panhandle and the Plains.

During the years of World War II the industries and installations of the Plains worked around the clock at a frantic pace to supply first our Allies and then our own military forces with the strategic materials needed for our eventual victory. Every drop of petroleum products, every pound of carbon black, every gun barrel, every pound of beef and every bushel of wheat was desperately needed. The Cabot Companies expanded their facilities and enlarged their operations. Phillips Petroleum Company in Borger went into production with synthetic rubber, in addition to their other products. When the war ended, the tremendous demand for housing, automobiles, furniture, appliances and services of all kinds generated by the establishment of new households by returning servicemen carried on the increase in trade. This was followed by

continued expansion in the commercial development of the natural resources of this region and of the industrial processes related to these materials. The Celanese Corporation located a synthetic fiber raw materials plant here and Pantex in Amarillo continued in operation. Irrigated farming was mechanized and developed into a tremendous enterprise. New natural gas fields were discovered in the eastern Panhandle. Meat packing plants, feedlots, and other plants connected with agribusiness sprang up over the Plains. With this commercial growth permanent residents of the Catholic faith settled here to establish their homes and careers, with the resulting expansion of demands for larger church facilities, schools, and other services.

It was soon realized that the Holy Souls Church building was unsound and far too small, and that the School was inadequate for the growing number of Catholics here. Early in the decade of the fifties a project was started to build a school, convent and rectory, and eventually a Church at a new site. A tract of land, 16 acres in all, was purchased on the northern boundary of the City of Pampa lying north of 23rd Street and west of the Perryton highway. This is the present site of the fine physical plant of St. Vincent de Paul Church, and its facilities. As is always the case, the first need was for fund raising. Several drives were held, with donations and pledges being secured.

The original finance and building committee was composed of Fred J. Neslage, Chairman; E. J. Dunigan, Jr., Vice-Chairman; James B. Massa, and the late Roy E. McKernan, who together with his wife Julia were very generous benefactors to the Parish. The first phase of the building program included the school - gymnasium, cafeteria, building, the rectory and the convent. The school complex building contains a ten-classroom school with library, cafeteria, kitchen and other facilities, and a gymnasium large enough to hold a full size basketball court, with room for bleachers and a stage. The first phase also included an eleven room convent and an eight room two-story rectory for the Vincentian Fathers. The gymnasium was used for Church services for some nine years before the Church was constructed.

The first phase was completed in 1959, and blessed and dedicated on September 27 of that year by Most Reverend John L. Morkovsky, Bishop of Amarillo. It was dedicated under the name of St. Vincent de Paul although the Parish had been known as Holy Souls since its inception. The school was under the direction of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, who also staff St. Anthony's Hospital in Amarillo, as well as St. Mary's Academy there.

In 1967 the final phase of the million-dollar building program lasting for 15 years was completed with the new Church. The Church was built of the same white brick-steel framework construction and in the same architectural style as the earlier buildings. The building and finance committee for this work consisted of Fred J. Neslage, Chairman; E. J. Dunigan, Jr., Vice-Chairman, James Massa, J.J. O'Connor and John Sweeney. Many other committees were formed for special tasks and performed splendid, dedicated work. The general contractor of the building project was Allen Ritter Construction Company, and the architect was Charles L. Monnet, Jr. of Oklahoma City.

The building seats approximately 600 persons, and has off-street parking for 250 cars. It contains a 75' bell tower at the northeast corner of the Church, with the baptistery on the ground floor of the tower. Also included are a sound-proof, glass enclosed "cry" room, a bride's room, and a spacious organ loft, with a number of beautiful stained glass windows in the structure. It contains year-around air conditioning and a completely carpeted interior. It was completed under the tenure of Vincentian Pastor Rev. William Brennan, and was dedicated by Bishop Lawrence DeFalco of Amarillo on October 27, 1968.

The Vincentian Pastors who have served the Parish following Father William tack, C.M. are: Fathers Otto Meyer, C.M., Myle Moynihan, C.M., Otto Meyer, C.M. for a second term, Edward Cashman, C.M., William Brennan, C.M., Francis Hynes, C.M., Wendelin Dunker, C.M., Frederick Marsch, C.M., and Francis Hynes, C.M. also for a second term.

The following Vincentian Fathers also have served as assistants to the Parish, with some of them probably serving as temporary Pastors: Vincent Winn (D), John Casey, Francis Lynn, Robert McWilliams (D), Harold Guyott (D), Leo Moore, Allen DeWitt, Robert Brennan (D), Frank Kunz, William Stein, James McDonald, Anthony Soklich, Ignatius Weiczarek, Richard Lang (D), Vincent Walsh (D), John Clark, Phillip LeFevre, Jan Jankowski, William Horan, Robert Corcoran (D), Edward Whooley, John Roche, Ronald Ransom, Jerome Calcagno, Charles Welter, Francis Hynes, Wendelin Dunker, Martin Culligan and Joseph Gregor.

The original facilities at the Holy Souls location have been disposed of in the following manner: the Church structure was demolished, the rectory later deeded to the Genesis House for Boys, the parish hall purchased and used by Frank Keim Council No. 2767 of the Knights of Columbus, and the school building is used as a Community Day Care Center. Having served their purposes for the Church, these buildings continue to be of use to other organizations. Meanwhile all the activities of the Parish are concentrated in the beautiful new plant of St. Vincent de Paul, which is a joy to the Faithful of Pampa and a source of much worthwhile service to the entire community.

The present Parish of St. Vincent de Paul in Pampa, with all its fine facilities, represents the culmination of a long and interesting period of history, and of the Blessings of Almighty God and the dedication of many people. Our Lord has been indeed Kind and Merciful in His Loving Care for those who yearned for the Blessings of our Holy Faith to be made available to them as they carved out homes and communities in this land. Our Lord has preserved the people here through many hardships and trials, and has sent His faithful Servants with their visions of growth and development to be made by the Holy Mother Church in this once lonely and desolate area. He has also sent many dedicated and zealous parishioners to work for the Church throughout the entire Panhandle, and through their generosity and effective service has made possible the accomplishments which are evident today. The Clergy and parishioners of St. Vincent de Paul, on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Parish, give thanks to God for His Mercies, our deepest gratitude to all those whose unselfish dedication has built this Church and its

facilities, and look forward with abiding Faith and perfect Confidence to the future under the Divine Love and Protection of a Just and Merciful God.