

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION PARISH - DEER LODGE, MONTANA

Immaculate Conception parish has the distinction of being the first parish in Montana Territory. The first parish priest in Montana Territory was the Reverend Remigius DeRyckere. He is synonymous with the early history of our parish.

Missionaries had been to Montana Territory before 1866. The names of the Jesuit Fathers DeSmet, Zerbinati, Giorda, Ravalli, Point, Hoecken and others are intricately woven into early Montana history. Father Joseph Giorda, S.J., one of the missionaries who passed through the Deer Lodge valley in 1864 reported the need for a resident priest in the area to Bishop Blanchet of Nesqually. The area around the small settlement of Cottonwood, later named Deer Lodge, attracted a large number of miners, many of whom brought their families with them. Father DeRyckere, however, was the first to come not as a missionary but as the first diocesan priest.

“Remigius DeRyckere was born on August 6, 1836, in Emelghem, West Flanders, Belgium. After his primary instruction at home, he went to the petit Seminaire of Roulers. His theological studies were made in the American college of Louvaine. He left his native land in 1865 for the diocese of Nesqually, Washington Territory. In June of 1866, Father DeRyckere received his letter of appointment to visit the eastern part of this extensive diocese, which ranged “East and West from the summit of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and North and South between parallels 49 and 46 North latitude as far as the bend in the Columbia River, the river then was the southern boundary to the Coast.”

His trip on horseback from Vancouver to Deer Lodge took between three and four weeks. The first leg of

the journey was to Walla Walla where he was forced to wait nearly three weeks before joining an eastward bound caravan of travellers. This rough trading post gave the young immigrant priest a preview of things to come. He succeeded in joining a group of miners and a few Jesuit missionaries making the trip east. The ride through unsettled country was a strenuous one but the group finally arrived in the little settlement of Cottonwood (now Deer Lodge) on July 27, 1866. He could find no lodging of any sort and spent the first week beneath the shelter of trees close to the home of Johnny Grant. Sometimes when in a reminiscent mood, he would tell a few friends, assembled at his fireside, that he became so lonesome when seeing his newly made acquaintances moving northeastward as to feel his very heart sink within him. He was 29 years old, timid, without money, and no place to live. Then, through the hospitality of Johnny Grant, he was taken into a small cabin adjacent to the home. It was in Johnny Grant's home that he offered his first Mass in the Deer Lodge Valley.

The new pastor wasted no time starting to build a chapel and lodging place of his own. The small log building, a mere 42 by 18 feet, was adequate to meet the immediate needs of the frontier camp. The room was partitioned off so as to leave 30 feet by 18 feet for the chapel and the remainder for his lodging. The first Mass was celebrated in Deer Lodge's first church on December 8, 1866. Since this was the feast of the Immaculate Conception, he named the parish in honor of our Blessed Mother. This humble building was believed to be situated on Main Street on the southwest corner of Main and Milwaukee. A king-hearted woodchopper graciously permitted him every morning to take an armful of wood, as much as he could carry, and he made the load so heavy that it kept his one-room building from freezing for a whole day, more or less. Thus, the first Catholic church in Montana Territory was established.

The area in miles of the new parish would alone have dismayed a less courageous man. Among the camps which he visited while making “his rounds” were Blackfoot City, Washington Gulch, McClellan Gulch, Lincoln, Pioneer, Bear Gulch, Flint Creek Valley, Philipsburg, Cable City, German Gulch, Silver Bow, Rockertown, and the small mining camp of Butte City. The task at hand must have seemed insurmountable to



him, as, in 1867, he wrote to his bishop giving his views concerning his difficult position here: A young inexperienced clergyman out by himself, among people of all nationalities and creeds, good, bad, and indifferent. All over the district were a fair number of Catholics; they even formed a majority of the inhabitants in some of the camps. He begged that another and more experienced clergyman might be sent to take charge of the district, declaring his willingness to remain with him as his assistant. An answer came: "Have no one to spare. Do the best you can. God will help you."

In 1868, he set about building a small church at Rockertown, but before the work was completed the town was virtually deserted. While this experience dampened his enthusiasm to build, it also taught him a valuable lesson; his was to be for some time a shifting congregation following the fortunes of the gold strikes. This unsettled and restless state of the mining camps was to continue for the next decade.

Father DeRyckere filed his Intent to Naturalize in the Deer Lodge County court house in Deer Lodge, Montana Territory, on April 20, 1869. He became a Naturalized citizen on September 4, 1871.

In 1871 Father DeRyckere purchased 10 lots on the west side of the 600 block of Main Street, Block 34. It is believed he erected the frame church building of the north end of Block 34 in the vicinity of the present Downing Chevrolet property. He had continuing correspondence with the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, urging them to establish a hospital in Deer Lodge. In October, 1873, four nuns came from Leavenworth and set up a temporary hospital in a building on the corner of 3rd and D Streets, while suitable buildings were being constructed. In February 1874, the Sisters moved from their temporary log building into the new St. Joseph's Hospital, a large frame structure. The hospital was built on the east side of Dixon Street facing Mount Powell between Montana Avenue and St. Mary's Avenue. This entire block was donated to Father DeRyckere by Messers. Claggett and Dixon for this purpose. He then gave the Sisters the deed to the land. Improvements were subsequently made to the premises, and the original frame was replaced by a substantial brick structure in 1882.

Also in the year of 1874, Father DeRyckere purchased a site west of the hospital for a new and larger church. This site is the block where the present church buildings are situated. There was a cemetery on the east side of the block at the time which he subsequently purchased for a nominal fee. The purchase agreement with the commissioners called for Father to remove the graves to a burial site one mile west of the town, the present Hillcrest

Cemetery. The new church was blessed and opened on March 19, 1875. Small living quarters were in the back of the church building. The building cost about \$11,000 including furnishings and is still in use today (St. Mary's Hall next to pastor's house.)

At this time, he began supervising the building of more churches in the area. The first church in Butte, St. Patrick's, was built in 1876 and it was a mission church of Deer Lodge until March, 1881. He supervised the building of: St. Philips in Philipsburg, 1872; St. Peter's in Anaconda, 1888; and St. Thomas in Helmville in 1889. As late as 1906, 49 years after Father DeRyckere arrived in "Cottonwood", his parish was still attending the mission churches of Philipsburg, Garnet, Flint Creek, Bearmouth, Helmville, Elliston, Gold Creek, Garrison, and Race Track. In 1910 he observed his 44th anniversary as pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish.

With so many of his flock living in isolated rural areas, Father DeRyckere announced his intention to build a boarding school to serve the children. In 1878 work began on the building which was to become St. Mary's Academy, a boarding school for girls. It was completed in 1881. The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth agreed to staff the school in time for the opening of the academic year in 1882. The original structure had been enlarged to almost twice its original dimensions. It continued in operation until 1963 when it was privately purchased and turned into an apartment building due to the construction of a new St. Mary's School, the present St. Mary's Center. The historical St. Mary's Academy building was razed in a devastating fire in the early morning hours of October 1, 1990.

Once the girls of his widespread parish had been cared for by the opening of St. Mary's Academy, Father DeRyckere's attention turned to the boys of the area. His own new residence was finished in 1893 and he converted his former home in the rear of the church into a complex of small classrooms. The boys were enrolled in the first five grades. The school was named St. Remigius in honor of the pastor. The enrollment never exceeded 20. By November 1901, enrollment had dropped to only 12 boys and the Sister teacher was withdrawn. The school was closed and the brief history of St. Remigius School had ended.

During the years after 1876, Father DeRyckere had a succession of assistants assigned to help him with his very large parish including: Rev. Poulin, Rev. Peter DeSiere, Rev. J.J. Dols, Rev. A.H. Lambaere, Rev. Thomas F. Stack, Rev. Phelan, Rev. Daniel Foley, Rev. Michael McCormick, and Rev. Thomas Landy. In 1910, realizing his failing strength, Father Remigius DeRyckere returned to his native Belgium to spend his remaining years with his family. He corresponded with friends here until the outbreak of World

of the first field mass offered in this valley. Later the annual field Mass was moved to Gold Creek to better accommodate the communities, but has since been discontinued.

With the coming of the interstate, the church on its original site had to be moved. With so many of the parishioners being from Avon and Elliston, it was decided that the church be moved to Avon. The land it is located on in Avon was bought from Howard and Kathryn Price and Kenny and Jeannie Price for \$1,500 on September 12, 1972. Father William Flemming was pastor. On November 14, 1972 St. Theodore's arrived in Avon after a 13 mile, five hour trip from Garrison. Bishop Raymond Hunthausen rededicated the newly relocated church in June 1973. Father Flemming said a special Mass in celebration and thanksgiving for the many people who helped. He blessed the church and grounds. After Mass a cocktail hour was given at Mr. and Mrs. Henry Price's home followed by a turkey dinner and dance at the Avon community Clubhouse.

Joe Kasperrick of Butte, son-in-law of Norbert and Theresa Mannix, was master of ceremony. Helping in the celebration was Bishop Hunthausen's sister, Marie of Helena, who was a former school teacher in Avon. Reverend Leonard Jensen and Reverend A.N. Kaparich.

Father Flemming prayed to St. Theodore for success and assistance in the move of the church in Garrison to the new site, and when there was talk in the parish of renaming the church Father believed that after the success and all of his prayers to St. Theodore that we should retain the name since all of his prayers were answered. (Maybe St. Theodore was giving Father a little nudge about the stipulation that had long been forgotten).

Father Flemming had a religious education program under way in October 1974. He gave a training program to the women volunteers.

Father Flemming served as priest until his sudden death on September 23, 1977 at the age of 54.

Mary Blood gave the cross that is behind the altar in memory of her husband Charlie.

Since the move to Avon different donations were made to the church. The Stations of the Cross were from Norbert and Theresa Mannix. Infant of Prague in memory of Jeannie Bignell by her parents Sam and Lue Bignell and children and grandmothers Mary Blood and Ella Bignell. The sign outside the church was donated by Bob and Sherry Thomas and family, in memory of their son Barney. Gary and Carla Malsam and family gave the sanctuary light set. Ruth Schultz, who taught ceramic classes and had a kiln, donated a beautiful Nativity set and many of her students painted the figurines. The bell and tower was installed in July 1977 in loving memory of Sammy P. Bignell by Lue Tavenner and their children Judy, Janet, Jim, Joyce, John, Joe, and Kathy. Bill, Bob, and Bruce Thomas families along with Jim and Sue Hiltz and Antila families gave the baptismal pitcher, and bowl in memory of their brother Barney and Bob and Sherry's son Barney and Sue's son Wylie Antila. A luna for the monstrance was given in memory of Sammy Joe and Issac Price by their grandparents Bill and Marilyn Thomas. The stain glass window which was to be done by Father Barry, who was killed

in a car accident while pastor at our mission, was done by Bob O'Laughlin, a stain glass apprentice under Father Barry. In 1995 Father Patrick McGurk did a very impressive ceremony when he blessed the chalice that was donated from the parish in Deer Lodge.

The podium and partial wall and side wings were done by John Quigley III.

Scott Grazier of Garrison, had the church's organ registered with Reed Organ Society Inc., maker of instrument. Estey on July 22, 1995.

There is a plaque in the church that reads: "In gratitude of their generosity and support toward our parish." In memory of the Peter Pauley Family by J.E. Corette. Nellie Maron by Edward O'Keefe. Father Jim Barry by Bob O'Laughlin.

The parish has had Altar Society and had RCIA as needed. Presently there is church school starting with children as young as three and religious education classes for the older children. The weekly cenacle, Star of Peace, meets on Monday evenings at 7:30.

2-12-22 to 9-23-26	Fr. P. Marnane	Drummond Pastor
9-23-26 to 9-49	Fr. Patrick Casey	Drummond Pastor
9-49 to 2-28-52	Fr. Charles McCarthy	Drummond Pastor
2-28-52 to 9-56	Fr. Leonard Jensen	Drummond Pastor
9-20-56 to 10-2-57	Fr. James Dowdall	Drummond Pastor
10-2-57 to 1-15-64	Fr. William Morley	Drummond Pastor
1-16-64 to 8-1-67	Fr. Emmett Lowney	Drummond Pastor
12-1-66 to 7-6-72	Fr. John Kerrigan	Drummond Pastor
7-6-72 until death	Fr. William Flemming	Drummond Pastor
9-23-77 to 7-11-78	Fr. Kaparick	Deer Lodge Pastor
7-6-78 to 7-11-79	Fr. Thomas Gannon	Drummond Pastor
79 to 80	Fr. Patrick G. Patton	Drummond Pastor
7-9-80 to 9-8-80	Fr. James Barry	Drummond Pastor
7-9-80 to 8-13-82	Fr. Juan Diphe	Helmville Pastor
8-13-82 to 1983	Fr. Joe Pat Moran	Helmville Pastor
7-18-84 to 7-9-86	Fr. Robert Beaulieu	Helmville Pastor
7-19-86 to	Fr. William Greytak	Helmville Co. of Pastoral Ministry
1-2-87 to 9-9-87	Fr. John Ward	Drummond Pastor
9-9-87 to 7-8-88	Fr. Leo Proxell	Drummond Pastor
7-8-88 to 7-5-89	Fr. Jose Pacis	Drummond Pastor
7-5-89 to 8-1-93	Fr. Jacob Vadekkekudy	Drummond Pastor
7-7-93 to present	Fr. Patrick McGurk	Deer Lodge Pastor