

History  
of  
St. Joseph School  
Bryan, Texas

St. Joseph School in Bryan, Texas has been educating Brazos County children for over 100 years. In its early years the school primarily served the children of the Catholic immigrant community, many of whom did not speak English when they started school. Over the years the school population has grown and changed with the community. At the present time (October, 1993), the school has nearly 400 children enrolled. Children educated at St. Joseph School have gone on to distinguish themselves through service to their communities and their country over the years.

It is not possible to fix a precise date for the opening of St. Joseph School. Various sources provide different dates between 1890 and 1895. The school's own history file contains a document written during the 1946-47 school year that specifies 1894 as the year the school was established.<sup>1</sup> Accounts obtained from other sources indicate the school dates from 1891,<sup>2</sup> 1892,<sup>3</sup> 1893,<sup>4</sup> and 1895.<sup>5</sup> There are no local newspapers available for the time period

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<sup>1</sup>Unpublished history "St. Joseph School, Bryan, Texas," contained in the school's file entitled, "School History." No author listed.

<sup>2</sup>"Saint Joseph Church, Bryan, Texas," Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, TX, no author listed, undated document. Based upon mention of events and people then living, document had to have been written after 1917 and before 1953.

<sup>3</sup>"Questionnaire for the use of the Chancery Office, Diocese of Galveston," Catholic Archives of Texas. Document is in the handwriting of Msgr. J. B. Gleissner, pastor of St. Joseph Church from 1904 until his death in 1953. The document is undated, but mentions Father C. J. Martin as a current Assistant Pastor. Because Father Martin was at St. Joseph from 1928- 29, the questionnaire must have been completed during one of those years. Brazos County was a part of the Galveston Diocese until November 15, 1947, when the Austin Diocese was created.

<sup>4</sup>Gleissner, J.B., "St. Joseph School, Bryan, Texas," Copy obtained from the Archives of the Incarnate Word Sisters, Houston, TX. This is another handwritten, undated, document. The only clues to its age are the mention of the year 1930, when the Incarnate Word Sisters came to Bryan to teach; the sentence, "At present 110 attend St. Joseph's;" and a reference to Msgr. Pelnar, "now residing in West, Texas." Msgr. Pelnar died in 1940.

<sup>5</sup>"St. Joseph Parish, Bryan, Texas, 100th Anniversary, 1873-1973." No author listed. Booklet commemorating the centennial of the parish community. This booklet contains the first mention of the 1895 date. Because histories written many years earlier give other dates, there is considerable doubt regarding the accuracy of this date.

between October, 1890 and November, 1894, so none of these dates can be verified using the newspaper as a contemporaneous source.

Although accounts of the year the school began may vary, all sources agree that Father Joseph Pelnar was the person who established the school. Father Pelnar came to St. Joseph in 1890 as a newly ordained priest, and was the church pastor from July, 1890 until February, 1900. He erected the first school building, a two-room frame building, at a cost of approximately \$1,000. The first teacher was Miss M. Elizabeth Carr; also referred to as "Dollie" Carr, a graduate of St. Mary's Academy in Austin, and a convert to the Catholic faith. Despite hardships, she remained the faithful teacher at the school until the Ursuline Sisters came to teach in 1901.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1890s, enrollment at the school was modest by today's standards, approximately 25 to 35 students. However, it is important to remember that transportation was difficult, and public transportation non-existent. "People living too far from the village could not send the children, hence the attendance was small"<sup>7</sup> The "lower grades" were taught,<sup>8</sup> presumably first through seventh.<sup>9</sup> Children were required to be at least seven years old to begin first grade, and no tuition was charged.

On September 6, 1900, one of the greatest natural disasters ever to occur in the United States struck the city of Galveston, Texas. Over 6,000 people died during the hurricane known as "the Great Storm." As a result of the damage the storm inflicted on their convent and school in Galveston, a group of Ursuline Sisters came to Bryan in 1901, "seeking a site for a boarding academy outside the then apparently doomed Island city,".<sup>10</sup> Most of the Ursuline Sisters in Bryan concentrated on the operation of the Villa Maria Academy, the boarding school for girls they built and operated approximately a mile and a half east of St. Joseph School.

<sup>6</sup>Questionnaire, Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Gleissner, Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Questionnaire, Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>"Chronicles of St. Joseph School," Archives of St. Joseph School, Bryan, TX. This is an unpublished journal kept by students at the school. Entries were regular from 1931-37, then sporadic, at best until 1952. When the journal commenced, the oldest children were the seventh graders.

<sup>10</sup>Miller, Sister Ignatius, **Ursulines of the Central Province**, 1983, (unpublished,) p. 289. Copies of pages concerning the Bryan community obtained from the Ursuline Convent Archives and Museum in New Orleans, LA.

However, they also provided teachers for the St. Joseph children during the years they were in Bryan, 1901-1930.

Life was not easy for the students or the teachers during those early years. The trolley connecting the town to the Academy did not exist until 1912, so the sisters were compelled to walk both ways, "...beset as they were by stares, shying horses, and a fiercely barking dog, of whom Mother Clare Sahagun in her uncertain English said, in what must have been the understatement of those days, 'He clear his throat at us'."<sup>11</sup>

Physical conditions at the school were primitive by today's standards. There was no running water. Drinking water was provided from a cistern that collected rain water from the roof. Separate wooden privies for the boys and girls were located toward the back property line. There was no electricity. During the 1920's one of the students, Frank A. Zubik, came to school before the students or teachers arrived and built a fire in the stove on cold winter days. It was not unusual for school to be dismissed early on dark days because the students could not see to read.<sup>12</sup>

Until the second school building was built in 1925, all seven grades were taught in two separate rooms by two Ursuline sisters. There was no janitorial service. During the last 15 minutes of the day, the students were required to perform those chores. They would "sweep, dust, carry out trash, wash black boards (not chalk boards) and clean black board erasers."<sup>13</sup>

With the extension of the Interurban Trolley in 1912, transportation improved for the sisters. They would ride the trolley from Villa Maria Academy, along Ursuline street to E. 24th St., where the school children would always meet them and carry their brief cases and packages to school, which was located at the corner of E. 25th St. (now William Joel Bryan Parkway) and S. Preston St.

In addition to teaching the normal classroom subjects of the day, as well as a program of religious instruction, the sisters had to contend with other difficulties. A significant number of the children did not speak English, but rather Polish, Bohemian, and Czech. Frank Zubik recalls that sister Cyrilla, the catechism

<sup>11</sup>Ursuline History ,p. 290,

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Frank Zubik, June 14, 1993. Mr. Zubik attended St. Joseph School from 1919-27. His father was a well-known tailor who would give him a buggy ride only if he were ready to leave when the elder Zubik went to work, otherwise the young Zubik had to walk a mile and a quarter to school.

<sup>13</sup>Zubik, Frank A., "Early History of St. Joseph School," unpublished handwritten document, dated September 27, 1987, located in "School History" file of St. Joseph School.

teacher, took him aside every day for the purpose of teaching him to speak English. He spoke only Czech when he started school.<sup>14</sup> The Ursuline history remarks that the sisters, "...struggled at the parish school with parishioners unhappy because the Ursulines could not provide teachers who were native speakers of Polish and Bohemian."<sup>15</sup> During the late 1920's Msgr. Gleissner, the pastor of the parish who had grown up in Bavaria, advised the bishop that, "...my greatest hardships (are) the study of the Bohemian and Polish languages and to try to americanize (sic) them."<sup>16</sup>

Zubik's brief history reports that there was a dress and conduct code at the time: "All girls wore dresses - no slacks. Boys wore long stockings with knee pants. There was no sex, no alcohol, no drugs - just clean living." However, the outside world did intervene in a rather dramatic way on occasion. Zubik reports that on two separate days, approximately a year apart, he and his brother, who were the first children to arrive at school, discovered paper shoe boxes in the school cloakroom that held abandoned newborn babies. The first child was dead; the second survived and was adopted by a local Catholic family. Zubik recalls these as "disturbing mornings," and remarks that, "At our tender age we knew very little how the problems were handled."<sup>17</sup>

Attendance appears to have increased gradually over the years. In fact, the Ursuline sisters report that in 1921 they were educating the thirty sixth and seventh graders from St. Joseph at the Villa Maria Academy. Whether this situation was due to overcrowding or other considerations is not specified.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, a new, two story frame school building and sisters' dwelling was erected in 1925 on the same site as the original school building. Classrooms, a kitchen, and dining room were downstairs, while the sisters lived upstairs. The new building featured running water and electricity, and cost \$15,000.<sup>19</sup>

In 1929 the Ursuline Sisters, beset by financial problems, decided to close the Villa Maria Academy and leave Bryan. They had never been able to attract a sufficient number of boarders to

<sup>14</sup>Zubik interview, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ursuline History, p. 291

<sup>16</sup>Questionnaire, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Zubik, Early History, Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ursuline history, pp. 291-92.

<sup>19</sup>Gleissner, Ibid.

ensure their financial security.<sup>20</sup> By all accounts, the decision was a wrenching one for all concerned, especially Msgr. Gleissner" who had worked closely with the sisters for 25 years.<sup>21</sup> Three of the Ursuline sisters volunteered to remain in Bryan for one more year to teach at St. Joseph, with the understanding that they too, would leave at the end of the school year. The three sisters who remained the extra year were sisters Seraphine Kopchinsky, Cyrilla Wolf, and Carmelita Orozco. All three of these sisters were from Bryan,<sup>22</sup> and presumably had family ties in the area.

After searching for a new order of sisters to teach at the school, Msgr. Gleissner finally approached the Incarnate Word sisters in Houston, and was told that they would help if they were able. Sister Berchmans and two other sisters arrived in 1930,<sup>23</sup> beginning a legacy of service to the school that would endure for over 50 years, until the last Incarnate Word sister left in 1981.

A journal kept by the school children during the 1930's, entitled Chronicles of St. Joseph's School, reveals children engaged in typical childhood activities, planting gardens and trees, putting on programs, getting into fights, and worrying about tests. There is no mention of the Depression that was underway at that time, although the children did make note of a county-wide parade of all the school children to celebrate the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth, the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, the administration of diphtheria shots to everyone at school, and the Texas Centennial celebration. Surprising references include the mention of a chicken yard on the property, an afternoon-long snow on March 10, 1932, and the apparent suicide of the Superintendent of Public Schools in September of 1932.<sup>24</sup>

Approximately eighty students appear to have been enrolled each year from 1930-1935. The Chronicles account mentions the fact that the fifth through seventh grades were combined into a classroom of 31 pupils in September, 1932.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1946-47 school year, the enrollment at the school had grown to 160, doubling that of 10 years earlier. During or before

<sup>20</sup>Ursuline History, p. 291

<sup>21</sup>Ursuline History, pp. 292-293; Gleissner, Ibid.; and Gleissner, J.B., memoirs, page 11, as reprinted in Parish 100th Anniversary booklet, Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ursuline History, p. 293

<sup>23</sup>Gleissner, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Chronicles, Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

that year an eighth grade was added to the school.<sup>26</sup> A consistent increase in enrollment ensued until a record enrollment of 498 pupils was reached in 1957.

This rapid increase in enrollment necessitated the replacement of the second school building. Construction of a new school commenced during 1948 when the enrollment was approximately 200. Father Tim Valenta, then the associate pastor, oversaw the construction and performed much of the construction work himself. A new convent for the sisters was also constructed at the same time. The students moved into the new building on April 27, 1949. Immediately thereafter the vacated school building was torn down, and a gym was constructed where the old building had been. Msgr. Gleissner told the children he was sad to see the old building razed because he had built it 25 years earlier.<sup>27</sup> In 1952 a new addition to the school was built to accommodate the burgeoning enrollment. A picture of the interior of a classroom from this era shows a class of 36 students with one sister,<sup>28</sup> conditions that would be deemed unacceptable today! Classrooms were finally air conditioned in 1987.

Although the records are incomplete, it appears that enrollment slowly declined through the 60's and 70's. The enrollment for the 1979-80 school year was 258. Since that time it has gradually increased, hovering around 300 during the early 1980's, and now approaching 400.<sup>29</sup>

Because parents will no longer tolerate classes in excess of 40 children, the school has been required to add classrooms recently, even though enrollment is lower than it was in past years. In 1988 a two-story building housing four classrooms was added to the physical plant. It is located between the gym and the classrooms added in 1952.

In 1990 the Bryan Independent School District decided to abandon the handsome Art Deco Travis Elementary School building, which was built in 1927. Fortunately, the school was located on property adjoining the St. Joseph School campus. This decision presented the school with a unique opportunity to double its capacity, resolve its overcrowding problems, and make a significant contribution to the cause of historic preservation. Under the leadership of Father John McCaffrey, pastor of St. Joseph Church, the school purchased the building from the school district, along

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.214.

<sup>28</sup>Parish 100th Anniversary booklet, Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>School records.

with the 2.75 acres upon which it sits, for \$ 110,000.<sup>30</sup> The property was converted into the St. Joseph elementary school campus in September of 1990. Currently, the elementary campus houses the PK through fifth grade classes, while the middle school campus houses sixth through ninth grade. The ninth grade was added in 1993.

While the sisters used to fully staff the school, the diminishing number of women joining their religious order affected the Incarnate Word sisters' ability to send as many sisters as were needed. The first lay principal of the school was appointed in 1972, and the last Incarnate Word sister to teach at the school left in 1981. One sister from the Holy Cross Order taught at the school in the ensuing year, and then a sister who was a member of the Order of St. Francis taught religion at the school until 1988. Since the time she left, the school has been completely staffed by lay faculty.

Over the years the goal of St. Joseph School has been to provide the students with basic education in a Catholic context. It has unquestionably succeeded at this endeavor. Its graduates have been leaders in the local public high schools in both the academic and social arenas. Many of these graduates have a strong loyalty to the school, best exemplified by Mr. Zubik's vow that, "Everything good that ever happened to me was because of St. Joseph's School."<sup>31</sup> Some families now have enrolled the third generation of their children to attend the school.

In certain physical ways, St. Joseph has changed dramatically over the years, reflecting similar changes in American society. However, it remains true to its original purpose of providing local children with the best education possible so that they will become responsible and productive American citizens.

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October 7, 1993

<sup>30</sup>Church Records..

<sup>31</sup>Zubik, interview.

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