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Recommended Citation

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12/14/2009

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During the late 19th century the, United States was rapidly industrializing and had a growing need for coal; this area of Kansas was more than happy to dig deep into the ground to find this valuable resource. While many native-born Americans came from the east to work in the Cherokee-Crawford coalfields, the need for labor nearly outweighed the need for coal. To meet this need many of the mine owners decided to look beyond the boundaries of the United States and go to the European continent to find people willing to work in the mines. Numerous Italians, Scots, Germans, Yugoslavians, English, Welsh, French, and Belgians were brought in.¹ With them they brought many of their customs and beliefs. Many of the Italians in the area were members of the Roman Catholic faith.² In this area for many years the Catholic miners were ministered to by the Missionaries at the Osage Mission, which was located about thirty miles northwest of modern day Pittsburg in what is now St. Paul. For many years once a month a circuit rider from the mission would ride to many of the coal fields and hold a mass. From 1882

¹ William E. Powel, "European Settlement in the Cherokee- Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas." *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1975): 150-166.

² William E. Powel, *Italia on Kansas Prairie: Italian Occupancy in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field*. 1997, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg .

to 1890 many churches were founded within and outside of the coal fields one of which is Our Lady of Lourdes church in Pittsburg.

This paper will show that through the work of several of the missionaries sent to the area, the foundation of St. Mary's Colgan in Pittsburg, the evolution of the into a permanent stone structures, gave the immigrants the support and education that they needed to become not only good Catholics but also good Americans. In addition, it will also explain how the church was able to become the driving force in not only retaining their culture and heritage but also in helping them to accept their new home.

Starting in 1840's when the Osage mission was established in present day St. Paul several of the so called "circuit riders" would make their way into the areas where they were needed, and hold services in the homes of the Catholics that would have them. Beginning in the early 1880's after the mission had begun to focus their ministry towards western Kansas, an assortment of Priest were sent into Crawford, and Cherokee counties coal camps. Some of these camps and towns include Arma, Chicopee, Flemming, and Frontenac. During this time in a group of Catholics began to attend Mass in the Odd Fellows' Hall at 6th and Locust, led by Reverend Eugenio Bononcini from the church in Scammon, Kansas. It was here that Our Lady of Lourdes would make its start. In 1883 construction was complete and on May 26th the first mass was held in the official Our Lady of Lourdes Church.

Because of the influx of Italian immigrants into the mines the catholic church had an unprecedented growth in this area. Now this is a point where one can see the immigrants, especially the Italians, begging to become accepted by the residents of Pittsburg. It was in this period of time that you can begin to see the immigrants become more accepted. It is said by Raffiael Purgatoria in her address to the Crawford County historical society, that it was during

this time that many of the Italians in the area began to accept their social identity as a group and became more comfortable in their surroundings.³ Through this it can be inferred that through the common bond many of these immigrants held together through the church help them to assimilate in to their surroundings and become more comfortable in a foreign land.

As the new miners came to their new homes many of them had concerns about how much of their old lives they had to leave behind. Most of the young Italian immigrants could not speak English and many felt very isolated in this new foreign land.⁴ Help to these miners came in the form of an Italian count who had become a priest.

Fr Paul Ponziglione was born to the Italian noble family of the Fearros, receiving a education befitting his title of count he became an academic learning Latin English Greek , and at the age of twenty one suspended his university education to become a priest in the society of Jesus. Leaving Italy in 1848 he came to America to begin his work as a missionary, he was sent to the Osage Mission in Kansas of all places where he almost immediately his was given the position of a "Circuit Rider".⁵ In this position he was tasked to ride the trails throughout most of southern Kansas founding over seventy Churches including a missionary station that he or another Jesuit would visit once a month in a small mining camp known as Cow Creek which became part of what is to day known as the City of Pittsburg.⁶

In his journeys he said many masses in the homes of the miners who would have him, but he was soon called to duty in the plains of Kansas to help spread the faith to the new settlers in the west. It has not been disclosed if the superiors of the mission sent Fr. Ponziglione to the mine areas because of his Italian ancestry and title. In fact after 1865 he was sent mostly to the central

³Raffael Purgatoria, "Italians in Crawford County." (Reading, Crawford County Historical Society from Crawford County Historical Society, Frontenac, Kansas, September 14, 1947).

⁴ Powel, Italia on Kansas Prairie: Italian Occupancy in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field.

⁵ Kelly, Wright. *Osage Mission Sesquicentennial*. Wichita, Ks: Jostens, 1997.

⁶ Wright. *Osage Mission Sesquicentennial*

and western halves of the state and the services were transferred to another priest, but one can imagine the image of a fellow Italian immigrant working in a deep mine shaft to come above ground and see an Italian count in priest robes preparing to hear their confessions, and say mass to serve them.

This powerful image may help to explain why that after 1865 it was no longer necessary for an Italian priest to come to the camps because the Italian immigrants knew that the church would always be there for them. On many of his journeys throughout the coal camps Fr Ponziglone met a friend who though had been born only ninety miles away from him, had to come halfway across the world to meet.

The man who would become the man who the Italian miners would come to identify with was not a nobleman, but was one who had great faith and was more than willing to provide service to the immigrants in whatever way he could. Fr. Eugenio Bononcini was born in December of 1835 in San Martino, Italy⁷. He grew up in way far different than that of the noble count Ponziglone. Born to peasants, Bononcini led a life in which he had to work hard for everything he had, in his auto biography he recalls that "our poverty was so great, that I remember a cold slice of corn meal mush in the morning was a dainty for me."⁸ Being an incredibly smart man, he began took to learning with a ferocity that caught the attention of a distant uncle who had become his benefactor. Thanks to his uncle's intervention Bononcini received his doctorate in Divinity from the University of Bologna.⁹ In 1858 he became ordained as a priest, where for a short time he served a few small parishes in Italy before being called to

⁷ Eugenio Bononcini, *Autobiography of a Western Missionary*. St.Paul Ks: Journal Press, 1942.

⁸ Wright. *Osage Mission Sesquicentennial*

⁹ Bononcini, *Autobiography of a Western Missionary*

serve as a missionary. He was sent to the Diocese of Leavenworth, under the leadership of Bishop Miede who was a Jesuit.¹⁰

This also brings to light the oddity and curiousness of Bononcini. Most of the priests in the State of Kansas at the time were members of either the Society of Jesus-the Jesuits- or the Order of St. Benedictine-the Benedictines. In fact, until Bononcini's arrival in the coalfields there was not a so-called secular Catholic Priest in the entire region. In this time, it was uncommon for a parish priest, let alone a missionary such as Bononcini, to not be a member of any of these societies. However, this also gave the father more autonomy than his Jesuit or Benedictine friends had: by not being in these groups he did not have to answer to whomever the Superior of their order and was able to report directly to the bishop. This allowed for the young Italian to become more involved with his parishioners than some of the circuit riders who many were lucky to see once a month. This service provided a more solid community foundation for the Italian immigrants who suffered from linguistic and cultural isolation.

Soon this young man who was sent to America was sent to a small fort through which he would be able to aid his fellow countrymen. In 1860 he was sent to take over the parish in Fort Scott which he described as a very rough military outpost in what he refers to as the great rebellion, or as we know it the civil war.¹¹ It was here that by chance he met his fellow Italian minister Fr. Ponziglione. The two, realizing that there were from the same areas in the old country, became fast and lifelong friends.

After the war, it was Fr. Ponziglione who helped to introduce Bononcini to the mining camps. It was here that Fr Bononcini was to make his greatest impact. In his time serving the different mining camps he founded Roman Catholic Church's in several of the camps such as

¹⁰ Wright, *Osage Mission Sesquicentennial*

¹¹ Bononcini, *Autobiography of a Western Missionary*

Mulberry, Chicopee, Scammon, Arma and 15 others all in what is now the little Balkans area of Kansas.¹²

However, it was a church he helped to reestablish and make permanent in the city of Pittsburg that would be not only the biggest church he would find in both size of parishioners but also in size of impact. At the time, Fr Bononcini was the parish priest for Scammon and shared the traveling duties to Pittsburg with some of the other priests in the town.¹³ After become tired of the large numbers that had to be turned away from Mass due to size restrictions on the house in which services were held while he was performing the sacraments, he received permission from the Bishop to purchase two lots of land for 650 dollars each from the city. On December, 2, 1882, work was begun on a simple log church built to accommodate the size of the Fathers growing parish.

As the church began to build in grow Fr. Bononcini and those priests who followed him began the process of making a church that truly served its parishioners. In the spring of 1883, to a packed house Father Bononcini dedicated the new church in the name of Our Lady of Lourdes St Mary the virgin mother of our lord and savior Jesus Christ, or as it is more simply known St. Mary's Cogan. It was not until 1884 the diocese deemed the church large enough that a permanent priest was assigned to the parish. Fr Robert Loehrer earned the distinction as the first official parish priest on record for the St Mary's parish.¹⁴ In his two years, he came to the conclusion that the masses he said for the German immigrants far outnumbered the masses he said in any other language. So beginning in 1885 the numbers of masses said in what is known as

¹² Kelly Wright, *Osage Mission Sesquicentennial*

¹³ M. Augustine Clarian, *The Founding and Early Development of Pittsburg*. 1934, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg KS.

¹⁴ Edward McNally, "Priests Established Mission." *Pittsburg Almanac 1876-1976* 1 (1986): 77.

the German rite were made more frequent than the masses said in the American rite.¹⁵ Also under Fr. Loehrer two additional rooms were added to the frame of the church, one was a rectory for the priest, the other a classroom. After Loehrer came the Reverend F.S. Hawelka who decided to build a church and school in the city of Frontenac in 1892 to accommodate the growing number of Italian immigrants in the town.¹⁶

The next priest to take over the parish was the Dr J.A. Pompeny who became determined to bring the sisters of St. Joseph in to Pittsburg to run the cities parochial school system. The next radical change to happen to St. Mary's came in 1904 when Father James Donahue came to the city to take over the parish he mistakenly saw "anchor of hope" on a church steeple and immediately made his way to the church only to embarrassingly discover the Methodist church on Eighth on Locust. At that moment, he immediately decided that a new church with a steeple tall enough to be seen was too made so that as he put it, "no one would make the same mistake as he did once again."¹⁷

This became the present church at ninth and locust, one of the few Kansas Churches that are built in the 'gothic' style in Carthage stone at a cost nearing 30,000 dollars.¹⁸

In this 20-year period from 1884 to 1904, the church underwent a rapid growth in parishioners, now this growth is owed less to fact of the evangelizing of the Catholic Church and more to thank for the rapid demand for coal and labor for the mines. Research shows that in this time the greatest numbers of immigrants coming into the coalfields were arriving from the Little Balkans Region of Europe¹⁹. Within this number was the inclusion a hundreds of Roman

¹⁵ Alex G. Stremel, *Diamond Jubilee: Our Lady of Lourdes*. Pittsburg, Ks: St. Mary's Parish, 1956.

¹⁶ McNally, "Priests Established Mission."

¹⁷ McNally, "Priests Established Mission."

¹⁸ McNally, "Priests Established Mission."

¹⁹ Powel, "European Settlement"

Catholic Italian immigrants. Indeed, in the period of 1880 to 1915 the Catholic Church in Kansas had a population explosion that has seldom been seen in any state before or since. From this information we are able to come to many theories about the growth of the church, the first of which is that the church began to grow at the same time that increased immigration from the Balkans began to pour in the region, especially those from Italy.²⁰ Next one can make an assumption that Italy being a traditional heavy Roman Catholic country many if not all of these immigrants may be Catholic. Therefore, what we have is a case of one hand washing the other, as the Catholic immigrants come to the coalfields the church increases its presence in the mining camps and towns and the miners give patronage to the churches allowing them to continue to flourish. This can also lend credence to why many of the immigrants helped to become normalized in the country. In many ways, the church encouraged all of its members to become U.S. citizens.

Now the reason for this could be one of two things, one the church leaders knew that the miners would have a better life if the miners were to learn English and become Americanized, and thus earn better wages. The second possible reason is that the Catholic Church at this time was facing a very heavy anti catholic movement from anti immigrant sentiments, at this time there was an overwhelming majority of Catholics who were immigrants to this county; in fact, many of the priests for these churches were from many of the same countries as the miners themselves. Therefore, this resulted in the church being stigmatized as an "immigrant" church instead of an American Church.²¹ Research has also shown a growing anti-clericalism from within some of the Italian immigrants in the area. Many came to the area with these feelings others developed it while working. According to Powell the Italians who brought this anti-clericalism with them was brought on by the heavy taxes that were levied by the Catholic Church

²⁰ Powel, "European Settlement"

²¹ Powel, "European Settlement"

in Italy.²² Powell also makes it a point that because of this many of the former Catholics became Protestants, and help to found many of the other churches in the area. This why in local Protestant churches you may see Italian names on the register. It is also stated that many Italians who left the church simply did not join another.²³

In addition to the immigrants finding a sense of community in the church, the church also helped to give them a stronger political identity. What is unusual about the Italian immigrants' political affiliation in this part of the state is that, bucking the normal trend of Catholics nationwide favoring the Democratic Party, the miners favored the Republicans.²⁴ Various conclusions can be made as to why the miners joined the Republicans over the Democrats. The first, is that Kansas overall has always heavily favored the Republicans. Second, during the 1890's the progressive movement in Kansas started to gain a foothold, with the republicans having a progressive, Theodore Roosevelt, who was well liked by the common man, this would help the miners to identify with the republicans. This is significant because this is a major difference from what during the time would have been a social norm. In several of the bigger cities and towns across the county the members of the Democratic party would protect and help educate the catholic immigrants, in the coalfields the democratic party was not needed due to the fact that the Catholic church was here and already fulfilling that role. Also during this time, the Catholic churches in the area were trying to dampen the efforts of the local socialist rabble coming out of nearby Girard.²⁵ The church for some reason did not feel that the socialists had the best intentions for the members of the miners at heart.

²² Powel, "European Settlement"

²³ Powel, "Italia on Kansas Prairie"

²⁴ Purgatoria, "Italians in Crawford County."

²⁵ Stremel, *Diamond Jubilee: Our Lady of Lourdes*.

The church new that if its members were to become not just citizens from another land, but shining examples of what an immigrant could be it would benefit both. As stated before, the church had a deep desire for all of its foreign parishioners to become fluent in English, become United States citizens, and embrace their new country; to do this St. Mary's began to hold classes after services and at nights. The teachers were the same Sisters of St Joseph who taught the miners' children during the day. Powell stated that the children and the parents would be learning the same lessons from the same teachers in almost the exact same manner.²⁶ For many of the immigrants, learning English was not just a way to assimilate in to the culture of the United States but also a way for the miners to become a part of what they called the American dream. Loren Minckley, who was the superintendent of Frontenac public schools at the turn of the 19th century, makes mention of Sacred Heart Catholic church in nearby Frontenac. He sates the number of students in 1892 when the school was first opened it had sixty pupils in 1915 the number had grew to two hundred and six.²⁷ These numbers correspond with the number of Italian immigrants with children who would have been coming to the coalfields in this time period.

What the church managed to accomplish in this area is nothing short of astounding. In the city of Pittsburg, it can be seen that the names of the owners of many local business are of there Italian ancestors. This fact can lead back to their ancestors who came to this area as poor immigrants, were able to send their children and themselves to school, and were able to become citizens at the urging, and through the charity of the church.

Today the church founded by Fr. Bononcini has one of the most dedicated and passionate followings in the state, the school that was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph, is one of the best

²⁶ Powel,. "An Italian family tree."

²⁷ Minckley, Loren Stiles. *Americanization Through Education*.

schools in the area in both athletics and academics. Because of the church, the catholic population in Pittsburg has become a political, economic, and cultural force that cannot be seen elsewhere in the state. In view of the fact of the church giving its time power, dedication, and guidance to its Italian immigrants it helped to become the driving force behind the Italian culture of southeast Kansas.

From the missionaries who came from the Osage Mission that held masses in the homes of the miners in camps, to others who built log cabins that had the only purpose of holding the celebration of the sacred sacraments. To Catholic nuns who gave their lives in service to the lord, who would educate both the miners and their children, gave them not only an education that would help them to become adjusted to their new surroundings, but become the living embodiment of the American dream.

The catholic church's presence in the coal fields was one that was felt by many, and seen by all. Overall, one can see that the church provided many vital services to the Catholics in the area both immigrant and native. In the 1860's to the 1880's, thanks to the church, the miners had willing, and dedicated organization behind them who spoke the same language, and had the same customs as themselves. Starting in 1884 the miners had a more constant stream of priests who built, added on and helped to enlarge the places of worship and study the miners would use. In the 1900's many of the new immigrants were able to find a home and kindred spirits in the church who were there to help them adjust to the new nation, to learn English, and to become American citizens. The impact of the church in this area from its start in the 1830's at the Osage mission, through which mission stations were founded in the homes of the miners. To the 1870's were permanent structures were built, and to the 1900's when the church began to make its permanent homes. The church had been there for the miners willing to help, and give support to

miners. The history of the church in this region runs as deep as the veins of coal that the miners would bring to the surface.

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