

Saint Ann Parish Centennial  
Butte, Montana  
Bishop George Leo Thomas  
Bishop of Helena

July 13, 2017

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917, Bishop John Patrick Carroll dedicated St. Ann Church in south Butte, and assigned Father F.X. Lechner as St. Ann's first pastor.

The year that St. Ann's Parish was founded was a year marked by tumult, hardship, and uncertainty, not only for the people of Butte, but also on the national or international fronts.

A close examination of that period reveals particular factors that affected Butte residents deeply, and helped to form the unique Butte psyche. Those factors molded a population that was tough, tenacious, territorial and not infrequently temperamental.

They also created a town that marked by love of family and friends, support for the underdog, suspicion of people in authority, loyal to the Church, and deeply reliant on the Providence of God.

The first of three factors that I identify was the outbreak of World War I.

From 1914-1916, war swept over Western Europe like a plague.

President Woodrow Wilson tried valiantly to keep the United States from entering the spiraling conflict.

But German aggression escalated on the open sea, targeting both armed and civilian ships. On February 3, 1917, German submarines fired on a neutral US steam liner, the SS Housatonic, carrying an innocuous cargo of grain and flour.

Wilson was quickly out of diplomatic options. On April 6, 1917, he declared war on Germany.

Just three months before St. Ann's was dedicated, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, conscripting all males from age 21-30 into the Armed Services. The Butte community paid a heavy price as her own sons were sent into battle.

40,500 Montana boys were drafted or enlisted. 939 returned home in coffins. It was one of the highest losses per capita in the United States, as attested to by row after row of white crosses that mark our local cemeteries.

The second factor at play as the Parish prepared to open is found on the industrial front. By 1917, industrial demand for Butte copper was already at all-time high. As World War One escalated, demand for copper accelerated to a fevered pitch.

The world-wide appetite for copper was accompanied by a strident demand for laborers, and unrelenting pressure to dig more and deeper mines.

The frenzy translated into riskier mining operations being executed by a young, foreign, eager, but often untrained labor force operating around the clock.

In 1916 alone, there were 3,084 mining accidents in a single calendar year.

Between May of 1914 and December of 1920, 239 men lost their lives in the Butte mines, 16 dying in the Granite Mountain's Speculator tragedy alone.

In Butte America, this infusion of inexperienced laborers, and the pressure cooker mining conditions, long hours and inadequate wages escalated into conflict between labor and management, and boiled over into violent confrontations, labor strikes, and occasional riots.

And if all of that were not enough, a third factor emerged, and introduced still more hardship upon the people of Butte. Without warning, they were plunged into still another silent war—the outbreak of the Spanish influenza epidemic that decimated whole families, leaving Butte children orphaned, and parents and grandparents fighting for their lives. The graves of young adults and children at each Butte's cemeteries stand as silent witnesses to the virulence of the flu pandemic.

In 1917, census records indicated that the population of Butte spiked to 93,000 residents.

Demand for housing was high, and the town population was pushed to Butte's south side, nicknamed "the Flats" by uptown dwellers.

The first St. Ann Church was a humble stucco building, already at full capacity the day it opened. Parish census records show that 75% of the parish were first generation Irish, and the remainder largely Slovenian and Croatian immigrants.

Bishop John Patrick Carroll hailed from Dubuque, Iowa, and was educated by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Raphael's Parochial School in Dubuque. He was unabashed at using his connections and influence to recruit a small cadre of BVM sisters to open a school for the families residing on Butte's growing south side.

On September 17, 1917, St. Ann School doors opened for 143 elementary school students, with three Sisters residing at St. Joseph's Convent and commuting by rail car to the new St. Ann School. A fourth Sister joined them later in the school year.

By 1961, the school enrollment spiked to 656 students, with double grades averaging 55 students per class.

If I may digress for a brief moment, I am a proud and grateful product of a BVM education, one of the thousands of children in the diocese educated by this gifted community.

The BVM Sisters formed children by their goodness, infused them with knowledge, and inspired them by their faithfulness and care. Names like Sr. Mary St. Reginald, Sr. Mary Alonso, Sister Mary Magdalene, Sr. Paul Joseph, Sr. Mary Vivian, Sr. Mary St. Camilus, Sr. Mary Saint Emily and so many more looms so large in my memory, and all have our collective and individual affection, gratitude, and prayers.

The people Saint Ann Parish were also the beneficiaries of gifted and visionary pastors, familiar names, with a preponderance of Irish surnames—Fathers Nolan, O'Kennedy, O'Maley, O'Connor, Harrington, Burns, Gilmore, Dowdall, and Burke, just to name a few.

Each used his ample gifts and talents to set a firm foundation in the faith, preach the gospel, celebrate the Sacraments, and ensure affordable Catholic education for the children of the parish, so often at considerable personal sacrifice.

In 1942, Msgr. John O'Conner raised money to build the second St. Ann Church, where I served Mass in Latin throughout my school days. He also expanded the school, built that ugly Quonset hut gymnasium, where I can still hear Bert Van Meel barking out military commands as our first PE teacher.

In 1950, the second St. Ann's Church was built with largely volunteer labor, an arrangement secured by Fr. O'Conner and blessed by the highly protective Butte Labor Unions.

This second building, presently the social hall, served the worship and educational needs of the community for another quarter century until the arrival of the inimitable Fr. J. Bruce Plummer.

In very lean times, Fr. Plummer both envisioned and brought to fruition this present Church, the product of a Renaissance man who was well ahead of his time. Fr. Plummer, who was gruff and solemn on the outside, was a man who dreamed big, and who helped incarnate the vision of the Second Vatican Council into this community in real and concrete ways.

The reredos behind as well as the great bronze doors reflects a Genesis theme, "invoking the wonder of creation" generated by "ruah", in Hebrew, the very breath of God.

The stain glass windows reflect Fr Plummer's familial connection ordinary people and his affection for the ordinary blessings of Montana life -- agriculture, the arts, medicine, entertainment, homemaking, education, transportation, construction, symbols of the state of Montana, the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and the mining industry on the Richest Hill on Earth.

Father Plummer's legacy of leadership was continued by men whose ministry is etched in our minds and hearts--Fathers Dowdell, Ernie Burns, Ray Gilmore, Gregory Burke, pastors who touched our lives deeply and profoundly.

Another great pastor, Father Gary Reller, who is present with us today, brought with him a deep commitment to lay ecclesial ministry, a keen business mind, and a capacity for calling forth the gifts and talents of women and men in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. The legacy continues into today, through the ministry of gifted lay people like Denise Kagey, Matt Matich, Jean Dennehy, Jo Ann Lewis, Gary Staudinger, Rosie Richards and Kristina Larson, and families like the Drinans, the McGrees, and the McLeods, to name a few.

When we think of St. Ann's legacy, we think of selfless and dedicated individuals like Sister Mary Jo McDonald, whose business acumen and deep sense of social justice kept this parish on its toes in good times and in bad for a remarkable 34 years.

In 1998, the Bishop of Helena sent to this community one of the finest priests I have ever known -- our own beloved Father Tom Haffey. He is a man whose love knows no borders, and who unceasingly pours out his life in faith filled, humorous, loving service, giving his all to you, and never counting the cost. If only I could clone Father Tom Haffey!

In the old and new St. Ann's churches, members of our families have been baptized and confirmed. Around this altar we have received the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. Here, in this holy place, marriages have been celebrated, and souls unburdened of sin.

In this place, our beloved dead have been laid to rest, and mourners comforted with Easter hope. In this place, we have gathered in good times and in bad, to celebrate and rejoice, to laugh and to mourn, and to commemorate important events in the lives of our families and in this community.

Here, in this place, you have been formed as a pilgrim people, a parish community, a faith filled family marked by hope and imperfection, but always a community that is "one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic."

The history of St. Ann Parish has shadowed of the ups and downs of the wider community, with its economic stress, its booms and bust, its waves optimism and pessimism, fear and trembling, joy and jubilation.

Like Butte America itself, Saint Ann is the classic comeback kid.

100 years is a momentous time, a time for holy remembering, or in the words of the Psalmist, "Remember the marvels the Lord has done."

This a time to give thanks and praise of the living God. It is a time to ask our Lord to bless and reward all those whose pioneering efforts built-up this community and handed on a precious legacy to us, who gather this day in the name of the Lord.

It's also a time for us to rededicate ourselves to be a strong community of missionary disciples, so that the faith that we have received will thrive and endure in season and out of season, and remain unencumbered by the present and complex challenges of the day.

Ad multos annos and blessings as we celebrate 100 years of pastoral life and ministry to the people of Butte, Montana.

Congratulations, St. Ann Parish, and Happy Anniversary!