

First Mass in Eureka celebrated by Fr. Paul Ponziglione in 1872

By Father Michael Peltzer
Diocesan historian

The first Mass in the Eureka community was celebrated in 1872 in a stone house on the corner of Seventh and Elm streets, a block north of the present parish site, by a Jesuit missionary from the Osage mission, now St. Paul, in Southeast Kansas. His name was Father Paul Ponziglione who is remembered as laying the foundation of many parishes in this area during those early years.

It was in 1881 when a small, wooden log cabin structure was



Sacred Heart Church in Eureka, dedicated in 1902, was destroyed by fire in 1964. (Photo courtesy Greenwood Co. Historical Society)

erected as the first church on the southeast corner of Sixth and Elm streets where the current Sacred Heart Church stands today. The Franciscan priest from Emporia served the community until 1901, when the former Saint Paul Church became a mission attached to St. Mary's in Moline, following the transfer of Greenwood County from the Leavenworth diocese (now the Kansas City diocese) to the Diocese of Wichita.

A second church, a large Gothic-style frame building with a bell tower, was completed and dedicated on Nov. 16, 1902, and was renamed Sacred Heart Catholic Church by Bishop John J. Hennessy. The original log cabin St. Paul Church was then moved to another site in Eureka and remodeled into a private home. Priests from Moline assigned to both Eureka and Hamilton included Fathers Patrick McCullough, Timothy O'Sullivan, Thomas Meehan, Dennis Healey, A.J. Speybroeck, Joseph Bogner, and David Egan.

In October of 1921 Father Edward Gunning was appointed as the first resident pastor of the community with St. John in Hamilton as mission. Oil was discovered in the area and the number of parishioners grew rapidly. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from

Mount Carmel Academy and the Adorers of the Blood of Christ from Saint John Academy, both in Wichita, conducted summer vacation schools for the children in Eureka and Hamilton. During those early years, a house south of Sacred Heart Church was purchased and used as a rectory and then converted into a small hall after the present two-story rectory was completed at 514 N. Elm in 1927.

Until 1953 the parish was served by Fathers Leo Kelty, Daniel Lynch and LeRoy Downs who purchased some property east of the church and built a school with a basement social hall in 1952. The Adorers of the Blood of Christ staffed the school until it closed in 1966. Father William Cremin was pastor of the parish from 1953 until the arrival of Father David O'Leary in 1960. During Father Cremin's stay, the small parish hall was remodeled into a convent for the sisters teaching in the parish school.

The sad news came on the night before Thanksgiving in 1964 when the large wooden church built in 1902 was severely damaged by fire. The parishioners launched a building project right away under Father O'Leary's direction. The present stone church was completed by Christmas of 1965 and dedicated March 13,



Some of the stones in Sacred Heart's walls are from the Holy Land. (Courtesy photo)



A bell tower was added under Father Stephen Gronert's pastorage earlier this year. The parochial administrator of the parish is now Father Dominic Potnuru. (Courtesy photo)

1966, by Bishop Leo C. Byrne. This modified Spanish style worship space is unique because of the scripture quotes on the ceiling beams and the several stones from the Holy Land incorporated into the stone walls as arranged by Father O'Leary.

Following Father O'Leary were recent pastors, Fathers Francis Hay, George Kruzick, Eugene Grabner, Eugene Komer, Harold McCormick, Michael Peltzer, Leo Kerschen, Michael Klag, and Stephen Gronert.

Saint Teresa of Avila Parish in Madison became a mission to Eureka in 1976 during Father Kruzick's time as pastor. Father Peltzer directed the planning and building of a much needed parish

hall in 1992. It was dedicated by Bishop Eugene J. Gerber on Valentine's Day in 1993. Father Gronert was instrumental in the building of the bell tower in front of the church, which was blessed by Bishop Carl A. Kemme on Sept. 15, 2019. Succeeding Father Gronert this year is Father Dominic Potnuru from India who was named parochial administrator of the parish.

Four young women from Eureka, became members of religious congregations. Sister Carolyn Teter, Sisters of St. Joseph in Concordia; Sister Callista Schadegg and Sister Patrice Kennedy, Adorers of the Blood of Christ; and Sister Madeleine Harper, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother.