

ROCKY FORD, Colo - In the fall of 1888, while still part of the Catholic parish in Pueblo, Mass was celebrated for the first time by Father Tomassing in Rocky Ford in a school house, a 15 square foot building which stood on the present site of Liberty School.

The first Catholic priest in the immediate area was Father Pitival, who moved to La Junta in 1889, and for several years Mass was at irregular intervals in Rocky Ford on weekdays.

James J. Guthrie, his wife and nine children, who had come to Rocky Ford from Iowa in April of 1888, were the leading Catholic family in the community. Guthrie, who prized his faith highly, went with his wife and children twice every month to La Junta for Mass. The long journey, traveled in a wagon, took three hours each way. The road was poor and it meandered far south of the present highway 50, making the distance much longer than it is today.

Guthrie had his heart set on having a church in Rocky Ford, feeling that it would attract Catholics to the district in sufficient numbers to have a pastor and Mass every Sunday. His proposition met with little encouragement, but his persistence finally won out. In September, 1892, commendations for the Catholic Church were received from the local business men, with the list of donors headed by George W. Swink, then mayor of Rocky Ford.

Although not a member of the church, Swink donated the lots for the parish buildings. Forty-nine of the community's 500 persons donated money, labor or material to the new church.

The first Sunday Mass was celebrated June 3, 1894, by Father Faber from La Junta. However, many years passed before Mass was to be said on Sunday more frequently than once a month.

A few years later, Catholics in Rocky Ford decided to build a rectory and ask for a resident priest. Bishop Matz of Denver gave permission, and in 1910, Father F. X. Henegan moved into the new rectory and St. Peter's became an independent parish, no longer dependent on the priests from other areas. The rectory is still standing, and is the oldest building on the property. Father Henegan, having an advanced case of tuberculosis, stayed only one year.

A succession of priests came and left Rocky Ford for the next twenty years until the arrival of Father Patrick Conway. He arrived in 1920, and for 34 years administered the affairs of the parish. When he came to the parish, there were only 40 English-speaking families in membership. By his humble, kindly ways and his untiring work, he more than tripled the membership during his pastorate.

When he came to the parish, only a few Hispanics were coming to Mass. He encouraged them to attend Mass and started the missions of Manzanola and Fowler for their convenience.

During the years of Father Conway's pastorate, the increased attendance indicated that a new and larger church building was a necessity. After World War II, Father Conway decided on the chapel at the La Junta Air Base, which was listed for sale, for a limited time, at \$1,500. On the final day, the deal was closed. In 1948, the new church was disassembled, moved from the Air Base, rebuilt on the site of the old church and dedicated.

In 1956, during the pastorate of Father Ed Pettit, an additional lot was purchased next to the rectory as the site for the Parish Hall and Catechetical Center.