

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH

PILOT POINT, TEXAS

Historical Narrative researched and written by William E. Hilz for Texas Historical Commission Subject Marker Application. Denton County. 2007

## **ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH**

### **I. CONTEXT**

Pilot Point, Denton County, Texas officially became a town on June 28, 1854. James Pierson, who held deed to the area, ordered a survey to be done and upon completion, was recorded in Denton County records on that date. Pilot Point is the oldest town in Denton County<sup>1</sup> It is located in the northeast corner of Denton County on the eastern edge of the “Cross Timbers” section of the state<sup>2</sup>. It is one mile southwest of Grayson County, one mile southeast of Cooke County, and about six miles west of Collin County.

Numerous immigrant German farmers had been attracted to the Pilot Point, Texas area by the rich black land prairies to the east and the wooded sandy land to the west. The German Catholics who settled in the vicinity of Pilot Point were compelled to leave the overcrowded settlements of the north and Middle West in order that they might insure their material welfare. The agricultural parishes in the frigid northern states had reached a saturation point causing the price of land to become exorbitant. This condition made it necessary for newly-weds and others to look at the virgin land of Denton County, where the milder climate and cheaper land afforded opportunities that they were seeking.

### **II. OVERVIEW**

Prior to the establishment of St. Thomas Aquinas Church in 1891, there were several Catholic families living in the vicinity of Pilot Point. Among these were John R. Burger, William, Ryan, Joseph Riney, John Riney, Patrick Robinson and the Swartz and Heath families<sup>3</sup>. The practice of their faith demanded of them many heroic sacrifices. The nearest churches with resident priests were in Sherman and Gainesville some forty

miles distant. In order to attend mass and receive the sacraments they were obliged to travel for two days, by wagon or by horseback. Mr. Clem Riney while still alive spoke of these hardships and tells of the time he traveled by horseback to have his baby, the late Mrs. George Lubbers, baptized<sup>4</sup>.

The following accounts are from the Pilot Point Post Mirror Newspaper:

Jan. 17, 1891 – J.M. Sullivan has formed a partnership with the Flusche brothers. The name of the firm is Flusche Brothers and Sullivan with offices in Gainesville and Pilot Point. The object of the company is to relocate immigrants in and around Pilot Point and Gainesville. Pilot Point has depth and fertility of soil, health, fruit lands, canning factory already established, and a high grade of society<sup>5</sup>.

March 28, 1891 – Messrs. Flusche and Sullivan managers of the new German colony established the start of the new German colony by the sale of the 270 acre farm of J.W. Erwin, three miles southeast of town to Mr. Herman Boerner of New Braunfels, Texas. Other sales are expected soon<sup>6</sup>.

The Flusche-Sullivan firms through their advertising soon were receiving daily large numbers of letters from many different states inquiring about the Catholic community. One of Flusche's Pamphlets was found at the University of North Texas Willis Library rare book room. It was written in German gothic script and was translated and found to be an advertisement for the German Colony in Pilot Point<sup>7</sup>.

In early 1891 Bishop Thomas J. Brennan of the Diocese of Dallas sent his Chancellor, Fr. John F. Coffey, to Pilot Point to investigate the spiritual needs of the Catholics living there. Thus on Nov. 4, 1891 the first mass was said in Pilot Point in a public hall<sup>8</sup> for the 63 members of the Catholic community and for a large number of

visitors and local people. During Fr. Coffey's visits here, plans to build a church were finalized at the home of Emil Flusche. The meeting was attended by a representation of businessmen among them was Mr. A.H. Gee, cashier of Pilot Point Nation Bank. Mr. Gee generously offered four acres northeast of town and also contributed \$500.00 to the building of the new church<sup>9</sup>. Mr. Gee's offer was accepted by Bishop Brennan who noted the fine spirit of cooperation from the non-Catholic community.

The church, a two story structure, 28 feet wide, 60 feet long and 24 feet high was built at the total cost of \$1,682.00. On March 7, 1892, the Feast Day of St. Thomas and the Name Day of Bishop Brennan, the building was consecrated as St. Thomas Aquinas Church<sup>10</sup>.

On Easter Monday of 1893, the Parochial School was opened with an enrollment of 50 children. The teaching staff was comprised of two teaching nuns from the Sisters of Divine Providence Order whose motherhouse was located in San Antonio<sup>11</sup>.

On Jan. 27, 1893, the Pastor Father Hugo Bardenhewer secured 3½ acres north of the church for St. Thomas Cemetery<sup>12</sup>.

By 1904 the congregation had grown rapidly and a new larger church was built. In July 1917 a fire destroyed the school building and the nun's residence<sup>13</sup>. In early 1918 the new school and nuns residence was completed and dedicated.

The Parish continued to grow and prosper until the early years of The Depression when economics conditions worsened and the Parish fell into debt. By providence, on Aug. 14, 1936 a dynamic young Priest who grew up in Chicago, Fr. Paul Charcut (1908-1968) was assigned as Pastor to St. Thomas Parish. His enthusiasm and zeal proved to be contagious and shortly after his coming, the Parish community pulled itself out of the

doldrums and again became a vibrant part of the community and diocese. Fr. Charcut was a capable builder but also an innovator and leader. He founded the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) and brought it into the Catholic State League. He was one of the organizers of the Pilot Point Community Council, Chairman of the Advancement Committee of Pilot Point Boy Scouts of America and an active member of the Pilot Point Booster Club. In May 1945, Fr. Charcut was appointed State Chaplain of The Texas Knights of Columbus<sup>14</sup>.

At midnight mass Dec. 25, 1949, Fr. Charcut announced that the old church built in 1904 would be torn down and replaced by a new and larger church which was dedicated Sept. 23, 1950. The membership of the church at this time was over 200 families. In recognition of Fr. Charcut's civic contributions, the City of Pilot Point named, in his honor, a street running North-South west of the present church, Charcut Street.

The church has continued to grow and thrive until today it has some 1453 members. There have been many additions to the church complex of approximately 7.75 acres<sup>15</sup>. A new Rectory and new Parish Center have been built and the school has been renovated to accommodate the church office, Religious Education classrooms, and various other meeting rooms. The Parish still recognizes its responsibility to the less fortunate and is one of the largest contributors to the Pilot Point area Shepherd's Store House which distributes food, clothing and offers financial assistance to the poor of the area. Also some of the volunteer workers at the Shepherd's Store House are parishioners.

The church has attracted many Spanish families who have moved into this area. Cognizant of their heritage and spiritual need, the church offers a Spanish language mass

each Sunday for Spanish families coming from Pilot Point, Tioga, Gunter, Collinsville, Aubrey and Little Elm. Also their children are enrolled and attend religious education classes. The church leadership anticipated continued growth and is now taking steps to accommodate that growth.

Over the years, St. Thomas Aquinas members have integrated themselves into the Pilot Point community. One member served as mayor for twelve years, the second longest term served by any mayor. Many have served as City Council Members, Presidents of the Chamber of Commerce and Kiwanis Club. Also one has served as President and CEO of the original Pilot Point National Bank for twenty two years. The relationship with other churches in Pilot Point can be described as harmonious, cooperative and positive.

### **III. SIGNIFICANCE**

St. Thomas Aquinas was the first catholic parish in Denton County. Its' establishment contributed to the growth of the Catholic Church in north central Texas. On October 21, 1969 the Diocese of Callas was split in two, thus creating the new Diocese of Fort Worth. St. Thomas Aquinas became a parish on the eastern border of the newly created Fort Worth Diocese.

The members of St. Thomas Aquinas demonstrated their allegiance to the United States of America when some thirty one of its' young men served in the armed forces during World War I. One member, Joseph C. Riney was killed in action. Again in World War II seventy one members, men and women came to their country's defense and again one member, Alois Strittmatter was killed in action<sup>16</sup>.

There have been numerous religious vocations spawned in the parish. Most notable was a young priest Father Thomas Ambrose Tschoepe (December 15, 1915 to present), ordained on May 30, 1943 who later on March 23, 1966 became the second Bishop of San Angelo Diocese<sup>17</sup>. He served that Diocese until October 22, 1969. At that time he was installed as Bishop of the Dallas Diocese<sup>18</sup>.

The St. Thomas Aquinas members are very active in community affairs. There are ongoing food, clothing and money drives for the local Shepherd's Storehouse and donation of baby items, diapers, clothing, food, etc to the Denton Crisis Pregnancy Center.

Also, each year the congregation sponsors a Fall Festival which is open to the public. A meal is served and various activities including an auction, arts and crafts, a sweet shop of pies, cakes, and cookies, and outdoor games and booths are included.

#### **IV. DOCUMENTATION**

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<sup>1</sup> *Pilot Point Post Signal*, Sesquicentennial Issue of Pilot Point, June 25, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Golden Jubilee History of St. Thomas Church*, published by St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Pilot Point, printed by *Pilot Point Post Signal*, 1941; research and writing committee members: Dr. L.W. MacKenna, Frances MacKenna, Alois Berend. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Golden Jubilee History of St. Thomas Church*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, published by St. Thomas Aquinas Church, printed by Gainesville Printing Company, 1991; Elaine Tischler, principal researcher; Elizabeth Pels, Barbara Schon, B.J. Henzler, Marilyn Weber, Cecilia Bartel, and Jeanette Jones, committee members. P. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Pilot Point Post Mirror*, January 17, 1891, (copy of clipping in church files).

<sup>6</sup> *Pilot Point Post Mirror*, March 28, 1891, (copy of clipping in church files).

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<sup>7</sup> “Pamphlet’s Goal Was to Attract Immigrants to Pilot Point,” Nita Thurman, *Denton Record-Chronicle*, April 20, 2005, p. 3-A.

<sup>8</sup> *Golden Jubilee History of St. Thomas Church*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, p. 16.  
Denton County Deed Records, Vol 46, p. 3, January 14, 1892, Denton County Clerk Records, Denton County Courts Building.

<sup>10</sup> *Golden Jubilee History of St. Thomas Church*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Golden Jubilee History of St. Thomas Church*, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Deed Records,  
Vol. 54, p. 460, June 11, 1895.  
Vol. 56, p. 92, September 16, 1895.  
Vol. 58, p. 361, May 18, 1896.  
Vol. 79, p. 505, March 19, 1901.  
Vol. 190, p. 520, April 24, 1924.  
Vol. 343, p. 602, April 21, 1948.

<sup>16</sup> *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church*, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> *Texas Concho Register*, Supplement, Vol. 3, No. 9, March 25, 1966.

<sup>18</sup> *Texas Catholic*, Vol. XXX, No. 1, September 11, 1981, p. 14.