

CATHOLIC HISTORY

It was not practical in 1942 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the St. Peter Parish in Cripple Creek. Due to the second World War the district was folding then, and there were minds so troubled and anxious here, that rejoicing would have been incongruous.

The war is over; the flush of a new life is rising in Cripple Creek once again. There was gladness in the Catholic hearts of St. Peter's Parish in 1897, for in that year the foundation stone was laid for the church that still serves the community. It seems appropriate to us to make 1947 our Jubilee year. If doubt lingered in some peoples' minds in 1892 with regard to the future of the Cripple Creek district, there was no doubt in the mind of the Bishop of Denver, The Most Reverend N. C. Matz. In the summer of that year he sent the Reverend T. Volpe to take up permanent residence in Cripple Creek, to serve its people, to care for their spiritual needs. Father Volpe was advanced in years and sickly, but these handicaps did not dim his zeal for souls and for the work that had to be done. Father Volpe is still preaching to his people long after he has gone. As the site for the church, he selected the peak of the highest hill in the town, though he could have had, and was offered, more accessible locations. One sees old men and aged women set their shoulders to the hill on Sunday mornings now. They struggle a few steps, and they stop to puff, and you hear it: "Oh wisha, Father Volpe! You said we must always remember that to reach heaven is a constant climb. God rest you Father Volpe, and how can we ever forget that on this hill!"

A little frame building on Third Street, between East Eaton and Golden Avenues, on the site where the present rectory stands, was the first Catholic Church in Cripple Creek. In the earliest days the congregation was small, but it was soon evident that a larger building would be needed. The Butte Opera House was kept humming by the Catholic population. There were endless bazaars and dances, and the church fund grew, until in 1897 the venture of a new church seemed presumptuous no longer. The plans were drawn and the work started in that summer.

In the meantime, Father Volpe was kept busy. The towns close by had growing populations and had to be cared for also. He lived in the Palace Hotel at Second Street and Bennett Avenue until April 1893, when he acquired a house on East Eaton Avenue across from the first Sisters' Hospital. His horse and buggy were a familiar sight on the trails that led to Altman, Anaconda, and Gillette. He offered Mass twice a month in Altman, which at that time was the highest incorporated town in the world. Later Altman was taken over by Father Ed. Downey of Victor. At Gillette, by his own labor, Father Volpe constructed a little stone church. This building still stands, though all remnants of a town have disappeared long since. The furnishings of this church are now being used in St. Peter's; the building itself is a barn on the Vetter's property. The church building in Anaconda is only a memory. It was located to the east of the railroad tracks, but when fire reduced the town to ashes, the only landmark that was left to remind people that there had been a town was one of the cells of the jail. This has not crumbled completely away yet.

After five hard years, Father Volpe's health was completely spent. When his dream was about to be realized, he had to give up, and the Reverend William Morrin was given the charge of completing the building program. He set Easter Sunday 1898 as the deadline, and although the work was not actually finished by then,



REV. FRANCIS POTEPA



REV. JOHN J. DOHERTY



REV. ANTHONY G. ELZI

the first service in the new St. Peter's went on as scheduled. Thus did the *Morning Times* report the event: "The First Service in the new St. Peter's was held on Easter Sunday. The church was crowded. Standing room was at a premium. Half of the congregation were non-Catholic. Rev. Fr. Volpe celebrated the High Mass and the sermon was preached by Fr. Morrin. A children's choir of 60 voices had been trained by Mrs. Murphy for the occasion. The new church is a monument to the perseverance of the members, and is a credit alike to their taste and to the city."

Within a month after the first service St. Peter's was completed. On May 15, 1898 the church was solemnly dedicated by Bishop Matz, who was assisted by Frs. Morrin, McFadden, Malone, and Carr. The bishop preached at the Mass on the subject "Prayer," and the same evening Solemn Vespers were chanted in the church, at which service Fr. Malone, who at the time was the editor of the *Colorado Catholic*, preached on "Patriotism." Other guests at the Vesper service were Fr. Downey of Victor and Fr. Victor of Gillette. Fr. Victor, at this time, was caring for Gillette and Anaconda, and took care of both places well until they had outlived their usefulness. Fr. Victor did it the hard way. He was too poor to own a horse even. He trudged the hills, and is remembered for his faithfulness and kindness.

The Rev. Godfrey Raber succeeded Father Morrin as pastor soon after the dedication of the church.

An excerpt from the *Cripple Creek Times* of April 2, 1902 sums up his tenure of office briefly: "Fr. Raber, who has been in charge of St. Peter's Church in this city for several years, surprised his congregation last Sunday by preaching his farewell sermon.

"The Father goes to Colorado Springs where he will have charge of St. Mary's Church.

"Everybody who has ever met Father Raber personally will be sorry to hear of his removal, for he is a man with a personal magnetism which is felt as soon as his voice is heard.

"In his sermon last Sunday he mentioned the fact that when he came here the church was in debt about \$5000, and at the present time the debt is wholly swept away, and there is a nice little reserve in the treasury. A parish school has been established which taxes every bit of available room that the building affords, and is doing excellent work. The church membership has been increased several fold and is in a very healthy condition.

"In losing Fr. Raber the city loses an exemplary citizen and the church a most devout and conscientious leader and adviser."

The school which Fr. Raber started was a one story building on the lot closest to the church. It was opened in the fall of 1901 under the charge of three Sisters of Mercy. On the first morning approximately 100 children had to be turned away. The Sisters had their living quarters in the St. Nicholas Hospital across the street.

Father Raber constructed the rectory also on the site where the original church had stood.

In April 1902 the Reverend J. J. Donnelly succeeded Fr. Raber as pastor. Though he remained but one year, Fr. Donnelly added the second floor to the school building and saw an enrollment of 250 children in September 1902. The school was on its way, and remained to serve the community for a quarter of a century.

Under the next several pastors St. Peter's ran smoothly. Rev. C. J. Carr (1903-1907) completed the rectory building; Rev. J. B. White (1907-1909) improved the interior of the church, purchased the pews and built the confessional that still serves the church; Rev. Wm. O'Malley labored successfully from December 1909 until December 1911.

The Rev. Charles H. Hagus was appointed pastor to St. Peter's Parish in December 1911. He remained almost eight years during which time he endeared himself to everybody. During these years he had to face the realization that the parish had passed its peak and that it was on the down-hill slide. Where it would stop, God alone could foresee, for the first World War and the ravages of the influenza epidemic were in His Hands.

The St. Peter school was dear to the heart of Father Hagus. Efficiency in management and thoroughness in the curriculum were the outstanding features of the school, which was attended in those years by approximately 100 children. In 1912 the interest of the pastor and the charity of friends of the school were shown when free books were supplied to the pupils, a practice that remained during Fr. Hagus' time.

In 1914 the church was frescoed and redecorated throughout and a new lighting system was installed. The sanctuary was enlarged, and new side altars were added. These altars were the work of a local artist, W. E. Lalley, and were so constructed that they corresponded with the main altar in the minutest details.

Nor were the spiritual interests of the parishioners neglected. The records of the mission preached by Father Clarke O. P. in November 1915 show that 750 communions were received during the week.

Father Hagus was "all things to all men" during the flu epidemic. From building fires, through changing diapers on babies and heating their bottles, to running errands, he did every charity for Catholic and non-Catholic alike who were in need. He got the opportunity, and was, the "Alter Christus" in deed.

Rev. W. E. Larkin (1919-1920) and Rev. J. R. Kearney (1920-1921) could do very little to stem the decline in St. Peter's. The district had not revived after the shock of the war and flu. The Rev. Henry A. Geisert was appointed pastor in 1921. For four years

he labored. Missions in 1921 and 1922 kept the comparatively few families that remained fervent and faithful, but in 1924 Fr. Geisert had to make a decision that was gall. In September of that year the school did not reopen. There were not enough children to make it practical.

The Rev. J. N. Oldenberg succeeded Father Geisert. He was the last pastor of St. Peter's Parish as a single unit, for soon after the appointment of his successor, the Rev. J. Francis Dietz, on December 16, 1928, the parish of St. Victor was put under his care also. Father Dietz served St. Peter's from 1928 until 1934. In those years it was no longer feasible to keep the church opened during the winter months. He altered one of the classrooms in the school building to serve as a chapel, and this chapel is still used from November till June each year. On October 9, 1932 Father Dietz organized the Holy Name Society.

The Rev. Gerard Keeney, C.P. came to St. Peter's and St. Victor's parishes in 1934. Like Father Dietz, he continued to reside in Cripple Creek. In 1935 he was responsible for the following repairs on the St. Peter's property: a new roof on the church, a new furnace, a new electric system, repairs on the church windows, and he had the rectory stuccoed.

With the coming of the Rev. Father Potempa in 1937, because the greater number of Catholics lived in and around Victor, it became advisable to make Victor the parish residence. For the first time since 1892 the town of Cripple Creek was without a resident priest.

During Father Potempa's time the district felt the shock of war again and it barely survived it. In 1943 Fr. Potempa was transferred, and Victor and Cripple Creek were cared for from Corpus Christi Parish in Colorado Springs. For a year and a half, winter and summer, sunshine or snow, Father Anthony Elzi came to offer Mass in one or the other town on Wednesdays. It was during this time that the faith of the people of St. Peter's shone at its bright-

est. Sunday after Sunday they assembled, as if there were a priest there, and recited the rosary and the litanies together, and took up the collection.

Rev. John J. Doherty was appointed resident pastor in the district on June 29, 1944. He is neither hungry nor naked. The good people of Victor and Cripple Creek have proven their generosity and willingness to cooperate. They have gone through their darkest days, they hope. They are looking forward undaunted and with high hopes to happier, more plentiful days ahead.

St. Peter's Church Upon the Hill

St. Peter's stands upon a hill
And proudly lifts its cross on high,
A Symbol of God's Holy Will,
And Faith for which men live and die.
St. Peter's Hill is rough and high,
'Tis not an easy one to climb;
It seems to reach up to the sky
And stand — a sentinel of time.
How often in the long ago
I murmured at the stony way,
On days of storm and sleet and snow
Or even days of sunshine, gay.
And then, I heard within my heart
A still, small voice that called my name;
I felt the sudden teardrops start
And, bitterly, I wept for shame: