

St. Mary's Catholic School in Brenham, Texas (Washington County)

by Michael Addicks

Fr. Ignatius Joseph Szymanski arrived in Brenham in 1902 and established the first parish school. Prior to that time, local oral history states that the parish provided teachers who traveled from farm to farm providing lessons in catechism and the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. The school was housed in the first church building and employed laymen as teachers. In 1908, Fr. William John Skocek came to Brenham and stayed for a year or so. He was followed by Fr. Marcus Dombrowski.

Fr. Dombrowski was greeted with a bit of a problem. In 1909, the non-Polish Catholics established their own school and chapel, refusing to worship or attend school with the immigrants. Led by Mary Dwyer Ross, the group engaged the Dominican Sisters to teach in their school, St. Agnes-Sacred Heart Academy, which ultimately closed due to low attendance and financial difficulties. It is interesting to note that the school was housed in the same building which had housed the first public high school in the State of Texas. It is furthermore interesting to note that oral history states that when attendance levels began falling, Mrs. Dwyer-Ross began recruiting Polish children to augment the school's census.

In 1910, Fr. Michael Joseph Tabor arrived. During his pastorate, he began planning the expansion of St. Mary's facility. He purchased property for the establishment of a wagon-yard for families to park their buggies, wagons, and horses during church attendance. On January 17, 1915, he requested the Sisters of Divine Providence in San Antonio to take charge of the parish school.

In October of 1915, Sr. Mary Conrad and Sr. Mary Edward arrived in Brenham and began teaching 42 pupils. By the end of the first school term, enrollment has reached 104 students. Sr. Mary Edward was replaced by Sr. Mary Laurentia, and, in August of 1916, St. Mary Annette arrived in Brenham, raising the total number of teaching sister to three. The school was, at that time, expanded to seven grades.

On July 1, 1917, Fr. Leonard Dykal became pastor. His 1920 Annual Report to the diocese states that there were 138 Polish families in the parish, as well as one Mexican family and one Bohemian family. There were 8 boys and 17 girls making their First Holy Communion; 33 boys, 52 girls and 1 gentleman received the sacrament of Confirmation, five children and three adults were buried, 12 couples were married and none of them were "mixed" ...meaning that no Poles had married non-Poles, not that Catholics had married non-Catholics.



Photo Above taken in 1940 courtesy of Laura Bilski Grocholski who is in the photo as one of the first communicants.