

## Early Polish History of St. Joseph Catholic Church, Bryan, Texas

By Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz

3-23-2023

St. Joseph Catholic Church was established in Bryan, Texas in 1873 and is in the northern part of the colony established by Stephen F. Austin with Old San Antonio Road (OSR) as the northern boundary. By 1870, Bryan had replaced Millican and Boonville as Brazos County's center of commerce due to the first train steamed into Bryan on August 19, 1867, bringing new business and immigrants to the region.



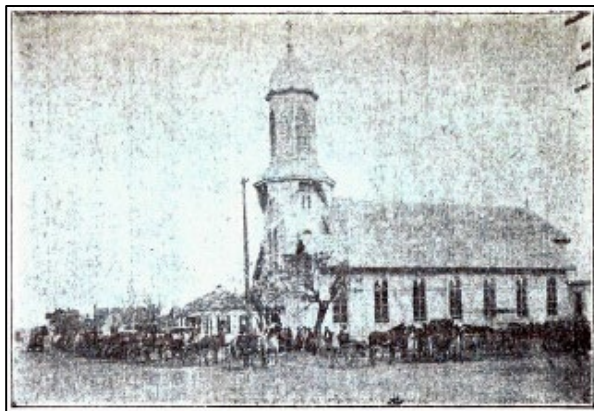
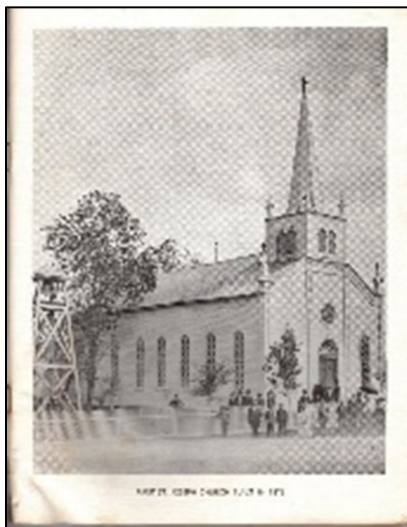
**Downtown Bryan, Texas circa 1870**

The history of the Polish immigrants coming to Texas dates to 1818 at Champ d' Alise (Field of Asylum) near Liberty, Texas and the second filibuster expedition to Spanish Texas in 1821. During the Polish immigrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish people from Europe were an ethnic people with no country. On August 5, 1772, the three dominant empires of Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary signed a treaty that partitioned Poland. Most of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish immigrants to Texas were from the Prussian partition of Poland from the regions of Wielkopolska and Silesia. Larger delegations of Poles began arriving in 1854 from the Prussian (German) partition and continued until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because of the suppressed Polish national identity, Bismark's offensive against the Catholic Church, the fight for supremacy of German culture, loss of the Polish language in the courts and institutions by 1830, expelling Poles from their lands to settle Germans and over population in Europe. The Germanization of Polish-Prussia began under Frederick II in 1772 and continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Bismark's Kulturkampf of anti-Catholicism, anti-Polish Culture and redistributing Polish lands to German landowners displacing many Polish farmers. To this day, many ethnic Polish descendants do not know their ancestors were ethnic Poles because their immigration papers said, "Citizen of the Emperor of Prussia (Germany)", "Citizen of the Czar of Russia" or "Citizen of the Emperor of Austria-Hungary". In

addition, many anglicized and changed their Polish last names to be more accepted by the Texas/US ruling class. Poland did not re-emerge as a republic until November 1918 after more than a century of partitions and its independence was confirmed by the Treaty of Versailles in June of 1919.

However, Poles began coming singly, in small groups before or as refugees after the 1830/31 November Warsaw uprising. Many refugees came to Texas and were absorbed into the communities where they settled. There were hundreds of Polish military refugees after 1831 that immigrated to the US during this time and 43 came to Texas. Austria, Prussia, and France offered refuge for a while, but only France allowed them to remain; Austria and Prussia deported them to the United States. However, they were welcomed to Texas as “freedom fighters”. When the Texas revolution broke out in 1835, many volunteered to win glory in the only vocation they knew, the military.

Polish immigrants of the Brazos Valley began arriving to Walker County in the mid-1860’s. Vincenty Radkiewitz arrived at Galveston on September 15, 1860, and went north out of Galveston to find work. A few Polish families came to Walker County in 1866 to work the Lamkin Plantation on the trinity River. Later that year, plantation owners worried about their cotton harvest, a small group of Walker County planters met with Meyer Levy, a Polish Jew from Kcynia (Prussian, Poland). Mr. Meyer was the major cotton marketer for the owners of the Texas plantations. After the Civil War, emancipation proclamation was enforced and there was a shortage of labor. Meyer Levy was commissioned by 12 Texas plantation owners to recruit labor from Prussian Poland. Thus, the Cradle of East Texas/Brazos Valley Polonia began on April 23, 1867 arriving in Galveston with the first immigration of 30 Polish families (150 people) from Kcynia, Szubin and Smogulec Wies. They were recruited from the current Provinces of Kujawsko-Pomorskiego and Wielkopolska to New Waverly, Texas. This was the beginning of the major wave of Poles to the Brazos Valley who were recruited to work the cotton farms after the Civil War as indentured servants. The plantations were in Walker and Austin Counties, but today these counties look different. Poles wrote letters home of the opportunities to buy cheap land in Texas and more families from Prussian Poland began to come. A few years later, an influx of Polish families from Galicia (Austrian-Hungarian participation) began to arrive in the Brazos Valley settling mostly in New Waverly, Bryan and Bremond, Texas.



**Early churches of St. Joseph Parish**

Bishop Claude Marie Dubuis of Galveston, the second bishop to serve in this capacity, traveled to Europe in 1866 to seek money and priests for the frontier of Texas. He met with the Congregation of Resurrection, a Polish order and he recruited three young Polish priests to minister to the Poles in South Texas. When they arrived, it is said, "With a rifle in one hand and a rosary in the other."

According to the Catholic Directory for 1870, there were two priests located in Millican in 1869 servicing the missions of Anderson, Brenham, Independence, Navasota and Plantersville, areas of heavy Polish settlements. However, Plantersville was German and Polish.

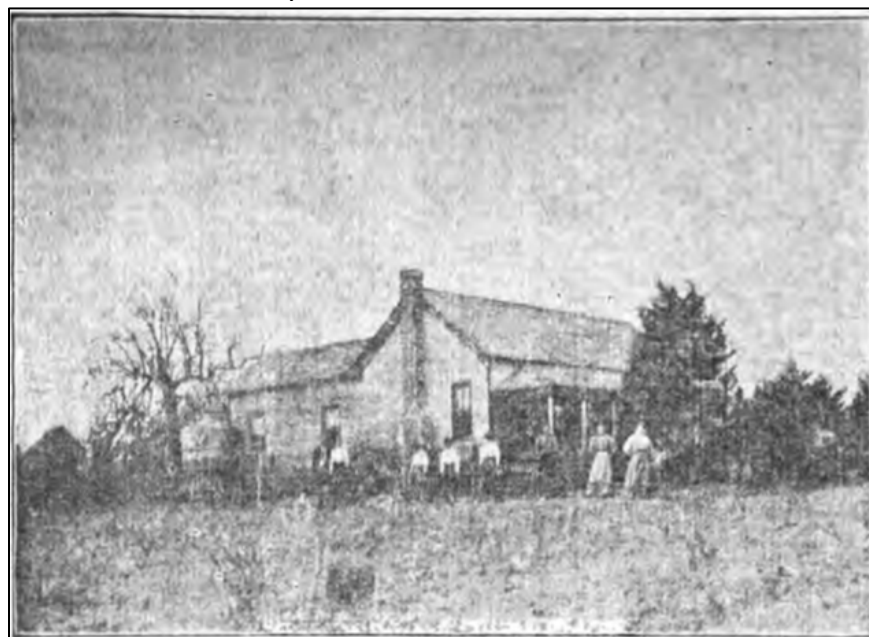
Later, additional Polish resurrectionist priests were recruited to serve the Polish immigrants in the Brazos Valley. Reverend Victor Lisicki served as pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church from January 6, 1878, until August 22, 1881, at which time he was assigned to Panna Maria, Texas for one year. During his absence, the church was served by Reverend Joseph Mosiewicz for one year, and then by visiting priests. He was born in 1831 in Poland and ordained a priest on March 12, 1875, in Galveston, Texas. Father Mosiewicz returned to Marlin and served there until his death on February 9, 1883. He is buried in Bryan City Cemetery. Reverend Lisicki returned to St. Joseph's on September 4, 1882, and served until his death on May 13, 1884. Born in 1835 in Poland (Prussian Partition) – Father Lisicki, born a Polish nobleman is also buried in Bryan City Cemetery.

Other pastors to serve St. Joseph's Church include Reverend Adam Laski, who served from June 22, 1884, until January 29, 1888. He was born in the Diocese of Studziannia, Poland (Russian Partition) and ordained a priest on November 23, 1879, in Galveston, Texas. Fr. Laski returned to Poland with a promise to the bishop of Galveston-Houston that he would return. However, in Fr. Laski's letter dated January 31, 1898, he regretted that he was not able to return. The government would not release him and upon his return to Poland, he became pastor in Smardzewice, near Tomaszow Masowiecki, of which was under the Russian occupation. He died a martyr in prison by the Russians.

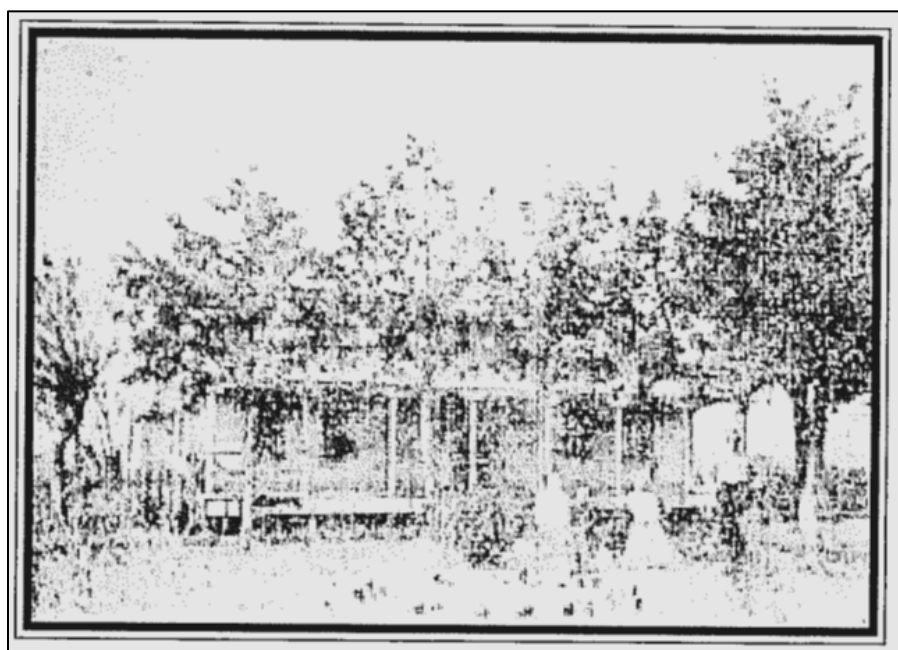
Reverend James Grabinger and Reverend Peter Litwora, visiting priests from Bremond, attended to St. Joseph parish as there was no pastor assigned from May 10, 1888, until January 13, 1889; Reverend Jacob Dunn was the pastor from March 22, 1889, until November 4, 1889 (during his pastorate, a rectory for the pastor was built); Reverend Peter Litwora from Bremond visited from November 24, 1889, until July 13, 1890. Father Litwora was born in 1857 in Poland and ordained a priest on July 25, 1881, in Tarnow, Poland (Austrian-Hungarian Partition). Many of the ancestors of the Polish parishioners in Bryan and Bremond came from the Polish Austrian-Hungarian Partition and this makes one conclude why a Polish priest from this area was assigned to Bremond. Antoni Krzesinski from Tarnow was the first Pole to settle in Bryan in 1873 and he would have encouraged others from his homeland to come to Texas. Also, this leads one to believe that Father Litwora was also responsible for encouraging more Polish families from this region of Poland to immigrate to Bremond, Bryan, and New Waverly. This fits the timeline of the late 1880's immigration of many from this region of southeast Poland (Austria-Hungary Partition) coming to Texas, especially this area.

Listed are the first Polish immigrants who arrived to Bryan in the early 1870's: Antoni Krzesinski (1873), Wincenty Kapczynsky (1873), Jozef Bulmanski (1873) and Franciszek Bulmanski (1873), Piotr Chmielewski (1874), Ludwik Staszewski (1874), J. Andrzej Grabowski (1874), Thomas

Kempinski (1875), Victor Kochanowicz "Kotch" (1880), Jan Borucki (Boriskie 1882), Piotr Dominik (1884), John Koś (Kosh - 1885), Frank Koś (Kosh- 1885) and Florian Steć (Stetz) (1887). Additional surnames of early Polish immigrants were Mortisky, Stugcharzki, Stolowsky, Dzieglewicz, Katulski, Bukowski, Debalski, Matacki, Star, Lisicki, Rutkowski, Debalski, Stychorski, Nowak, Zulkowski, Polusk, Matacki, Rypinski, Wiloski, Kapchinski, Wellunski, Banach, Piniazek, Sikorski, Zulkoski, Bennard, Horetsky, White (Wensienski), Pinski, Shmilewski and Waggoner. By 1909, there were 70 Polish families living in Brazos County. Most of these first Polish families were farmers with a few business owners such as the Koś (Kosh) Saloon on main street and later the Braczyk/Kosh Store in downtown Bryan.



**Home of Jan Borucki (Boriskie), Bryan, Texas circa 1909  
Photo by Stefan Nesterowicz**



**Home of Antoni Krzesinski, Bryan, Texas circa 1909  
Photo by Stefan Nesterowicz**



The following are personal interviews with Polish immigrants living in Bryan and around Bryan in 1909 conducted by Stefan Nesterowicz and published in a book "Travel Notes" in 1910.

"There are quite a number of wealthy Polish farmers. Thrifty and hard-working Galician Mazurians, used to the tough battle with nature, have good results here and everywhere else in the shortest time. They came to America a bit later, preceded by their countrymen from the Prussian partition. From them, the Galicians (Austrian-Hungarian partition) received advice which the Prussians gained from their own experiences.

The first pioneers of immigration did not know the language nor the local customs. They had to progress in the dark and such a road is usually filled with thorns. A. (Antoni) Krzesinski from Tarnow (Austrian-Hungarian Empire) is the first Pole who settled here in 1873. He has owned two hundred fifty acres of land for many years, long paid for. A year after Antoni Krzesinski settled in the Bryan area, others followed: P. (Piotr) Chmielewski, L. (Ludwik) Staszewski, J. (Andrzej) Grabowski, J. (Jozef) and F. (Franciszek) Bulmanski. J. (Jan) Borucki came here from the Grand Duchy of Poznan in 1882. He owns four hundred fifty acres. F. (Florian) Steć (Stetz), a Galician, who lived for two years up north before coming to Bryan twenty-two years ago (1887). He paid twenty-five dollars per acre and has two hundred acres. Currently the value is fifty dollars an acre. He cultivates one hundred fifty acres: the rest is pastureland. Part of Mr. Stec's (Stetz) fields are located near the river which floods sometimes. If this does not happen, he produces one to one & one-fourth bales of cotton per acre. "



**Downtown Bryan, Texas circa 1900**

The early Polish immigrants as well as the Germans and Czech families came to Texas through the Port of Galveston and many of the descendants of these first families are still members of St. Joseph parish today. Following the industrial revolution, the first World War and the Second World War, we have seen a change in our agrarian society from 97% of our citizens living on the farm in 1890 to less than 1.5% in 2023. Our ancestors were farmers seeking a better life and the dream of land ownership, but with economies of scale, our farm families began to sell their small farms and seek employment in the cities. Over the past 150 years, we have seen Polish and other ethnic families move to Bryan/College Station from surrounding parishes to St. Joseph. There are over 2,250 families within the parish, and we continue to celebrate our faith thanking God for the gift of this great country, the United States of America. There is no doubt that our diversity is what makes us strong, and we are all better for this.

St. Joseph Catholic Parish is multi-ethnic today and our Sesquicentennial slogan reminds us, we are “Many Cultures – One Faith”.

References:

History of Bryan, Texas <https://www.bryantx.gov/history-of-bryan-texas/>

Partitions of Poland <https://www.britannica.com/event/Partitions-of-Poland>

Kulturkampf <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kulturkampf>

Travel Notes by Stefan Nesterowicz - 1910

PGST Research by Joanne Dominik Glowinski - 1992

The Polish Texans by T. Lindsay Baker

Mount Calvary Cemetery Gravestones

Updated: 3-23-23 at 11:52 a.m.