

How Catholicism grew in Spud Valley



Irish potato famine spawned a church on East Lake Avenue

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

Watsonville's St. Patrick's Church, and its patron saint, tell us about the early roots of Roman Catholicism in the Pajaro Valley.

And it is only fitting that the dedication of the new St. Patrick's Church, designed after the beloved landmark destroyed in the 1989 quake, takes place Thursday, St. Patrick's Day.

To discover these roots, travel out of town on East Lake Avenue heading through fields of produce toward the fairgrounds. A scene out of the Italian countryside appears when coming upon the Romanesque "Valley Church" on a bushy knoll against a mountain vista. At one time this knoll overlooked the valley's largest lake, which has since been drained for farming. Here local Catholic worship began.

The valley was first settled by Spanish residents of Branciforte, with Irish settlers arriving after 1848 to form the second dominant ethnic group. This followed the Irish potato famine, with waves of immigrants arriving largely from the worst-hit southern Ireland, bringing their predominantly Catholic culture west. During the brief potato boom of the Spud Rush in 1852 and 1853, potato farmers filled the Pajaro Valley, until it was nicknamed Spud Valley.

Yet the valley had no churches until 1854, when the Methodist Church was constructed on what is now the Ford's lot. The Southern Methodist Church was built next door in 1855. Valley Catholics worshiped in far-off Santa Cruz until William White and Eugene Kelly donated 10 acres on their St. Mary's Farm for a church in 1854. The land overlooked the lake, Laguna Grande, which was already historic because when the Portola expedition camped there in 1769, the first Christian services in the county were held. Valley Catholic Church was built here in 1856.



SANTA CRUZ
Historic Perspective

Watsonville quickly became a major population

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The 1903 St. Patrick's, seen from the Moreland Academy gardens in Watsonville. ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION



PAJARO VALLEY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The interior of St. Patrick's, described in 1903 as one of the finest church buildings in the state.

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■ HISTORY

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center, so Valley Church priests began holding Catholic services in 1861 at Maher Hall, above the blacksmith's shop. This growing congregation soon made a Watsonville church an obvious necessity. Designed by local architect James Waters, the twin-towered, wood frame Gothic church was named for St. Patrick and built in 1865 at Main and Ford streets. Its bell came from the ruins of Mission San Antonio and was later returned when the mission was restored.

The building was partly financed with a loan from the Hibernian Bank of San Francisco. St. Patrick's was originally a mission of the Castroville parish under Father Michael Mahony with separate English and Spanish masses. Then on May 9, 1875, it was dedicated as a parochial church with Hibernian benevolent societies from Watsonville, Salinas and Santa Cruz present for the ceremonies. Irish songs were performed by the popular Boys Orphanage Band.

A girls orphanage had been established by the Santa Cruz church in 1862, and in 1869 Valley Church built a boys "orphan asylum" on 260 lakeside acres for boys up to age 14 from all creeds. In 20 years the compound grew to include dormitories, a school, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, tailor shop, steam laundry, dairy, hospital and graveyard. The boys had bathtubs large enough to

swim in. The orphanage was popularly known as "The College," which led to Laguna Grande being renamed "College Lake," as the dry lake is still listed on maps today.

The orphanage was operated by the Franciscan order until 1919, then taken over by Salesian monks from Turin, Italy. This may account for the look of the 1927 Romanesque "Valley Church" of today. A new orphanage school was constructed on the opposite side of the road in 1928 and was lost in the 1989 earthquake.

When Irish native Margaret (Loftus) Moreland was widowed in 1875, she leased her Trafton Road ranch and settled on four acres across the street from St. Patrick's Church. Her only daughter, Josephine, left to attend the College of Notre Dame in San Jose; then shortly before her graduation and homecoming in 1888, Josephine died of pneumonia. As a memorial, Margaret used Josephine's inheritance to found a school on her town acreage so that local children could continue their education closer to their families.

A year later in 1889 Moreland Notre Dame Academy opened, a magnificent structure designed by prolific Watsonville architect William Weeks. This gateway landmark on Main Street was a constant source of civic pride for the community. In 1901 it inspired the choice of William Weeks to design the new St. Patrick's Church.

The original wooden church was to be moved to the back of the lot facing Ford Street. But before it was, Father Mahony, who laid the cornerstone in 1864, died in his Castroville church and lay in state in the old St. Patrick's Church. Thus, both the building and its pastor passed from the scene at the same time.

In its place rose the 1903 English Gothic church of redbrick with buff accents, described at the time as one of the finest church buildings in the state. And with a 1927 rectory in the style of the church, St. Patrick's complemented Moreland Academy's gateway prominence as the entrance to Watsonville.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

A symbolic cornerstone will be placed in the front facade of the new St. Patrick's Church, 721 Main St., at 5:30 p.m. Thursday. Monsignor D. Declan Murphy, vicar general of the Diocese of Monterey, will bless the cornerstone. A parish party will follow at the Moreland Notre Dame School gym.