

The Irish in Atchison County

Recently St. Patrick's Catholic Church in southeast Atchison County was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Sister Marie Louise Krenner, St. Benedict's Abbey's archivist, did a wonderful job researching and writing the application. A National Register application requires a great deal of research and usually takes considerable time.

While the history of the church building itself is interesting, the development of an Irish settlement in Atchison County has shaped our county in numerous ways.

Mount Pleasant

St. Patrick's Church is located near the old village of Mount Pleasant or Locust Grove. Settlement in this area began immediately after Kansas was opened in 1854.

Thomas L. Fortune, the original proprietor, located in 1854, opened the first store in the township, and then when the post-office was established in 1855, he was appointed Postmaster. In August, 1862, the name was changed to Locust Grove . . . The very first settlers of the township were Michael Wilkins and James Laird, who located August 20, 1854."

—Andreas History of Kansas, 1883, pg. 403

According to some sources, Atchison County's first settlers arrived in the Oak Mills area in June 1854. The City of Atchison's founders didn't arrive for another month.

Years ago nearby Potter passed up Mount Pleasant as the main town of that area.

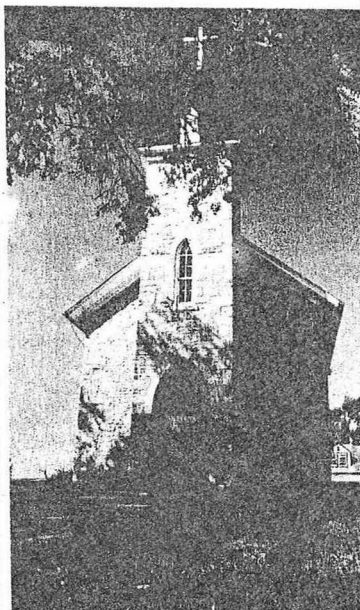
The Irish

Early in the county's history the Mount Pleasant neighborhood grew quickly. The Irish settlers made up a large part of that growth.

The settlement of St. Patrick's and Mount Pleasant occurred roughly at the same time as waves of Irish immigrants were arriving in the United States. The potato famines from 1845 through 1849 caused many to leave Ireland. The Catholic Church boomed with the new members. Even in Kansas the fledgling Catholic Church worked at ministering to the new immigrants.

Both Bishop Miede (vicar apostolic of the territory that included Kansas) and Prior Augustine Wirth (of St. Benedict's Abbey) began to notice an increased immigration of Catholics into Kansas after 1857. The panic of 1857 forced many to seek new opportunities, and it deflated the fancy prices that speculators had pinned on Kansas lands. But at the same time the panic moved a great deal of the land into the hands of speculating mortgage holders. Sol Miller wrote that the hard times were not felt much in Kansas until the spring of 1858. He attributed these hard times to the prevalent fever of speculation and its consequence, the failure to cultivate land held for a speculative rise, and also to the common complaint of the frontier, "the scarcity of mechanical branches" or industry . . .

... Whatever the cause, noticeable numbers of Catholics began to move into Kansas by 1858. During that year Prior Augustine directed the building of churches at Atchison and at St. Patrick's, a few miles south of Atchison. St. Patrick's in 1858 was an Irish settlement of about thirty families,



St. Patrick's Catholic Church

—Photo by Don Martin

but they were expecting more of their friends from Philadelphia and Baltimore to join them soon. Their first church was destroyed by a cyclone in the summer of 1860 but was promptly replaced by another frame or log church. The present stone church was built in 1866 and is consequently the oldest Catholic church still in use in Kansas.

—Kansas Monks, pgs. 116-117

Father Wirth was familiar with the religious needs of St. Patrick's residents. In 1857, he was the first priest to visit the area. The trip was not easy since Wirth had to walk fourteen miles from Doniphan. The abbey had not yet relocated to Atchison. Wirth said the first mass in John Knowles' home. According to a historical sketch of St. Patrick's Parish, the Catholic settlers bought Wirth a horse, saddle and bridle so he would not have to walk the distance again.

Wirth continues to visit the area. Since there was no church building, services were held in settlers' homes. Many churches in Atchison County had early services in members' homes.

The first of three churches at the St. Patrick's site was built in 1859.

As stated earlier, some of the Irish settlers came to Atchison after residing on the East Coast principally Baltimore and Philadelphia.

John and Michael Clancy fit that description. Both were born in Ireland, emigrated to America in 1849 and located near Philadelphia. Both moved to Atchison County in 1857.

Many settlers were not immigrants themselves but first generation descendants. These settlers still had strong ties to the native country.

The Catholic settlers who had come into Kansas in the fifties and sixties were rarely direct immigrants. The majority had farmed or had done other work in more eastern parts of the United States or Canada before coming to Kansas. After 1870 greater numbers of Catholic immigrants came to

the State, and a considerable portion of them came directly from Europe.

—Beckman, Kansas Monks, pg. 183

The new Catholic immigrants of the seventies and eighties could be found moving farther west to areas like Great Bend rather than locating in Atchison. Nemaha County grew from this immigration. In 1888, two-thirds of the Catholic families who attended parishes in Seneca and Wildcat were headed by parents who were immigrants from Europe.

But St. Patrick's was already settled by 1880. Throughout the Civil War, settlers moved to St. Patrick's - Mount Pleasant. In St. Patrick's historical sketch, Father Lawrence Theis wrote:

More Catholic settlers were coming into the parish and by the fall of 1865 the little community had more than doubled its memberships.

Sister Kenner noted:

The early settlers had been educated in Europe or in one of the eastern states where they had resided before settling in St. Patrick's. By profession they were principally farmers and stock raisers.

—National Register Application, pg. 25

During the settlement of the region, families averaged six children per family. John Glancy had six children and Michael Glancy had five children with two daughters becoming nuns.

While the Irish were the majority of St. Patrick's members, "A smattering of Germans was also among them (the Irish), namely Penning, Greiner, Weber, Corpstein, Wagner, Weinmann, and Handke." (National Register Application, pg. 24)

A Catholic Colony

What was developing at St. Patrick's - Mount Pleasant was a colony. Among missionary churches, a national colony is desirable since it overcomes many barriers in church management.

Concentration of the Catholics in colonies had always been the hope of the over-worked missionaries. Bishop Fink considered this a solution to his principal difficulties. Scattered, as they usually were, the Catholics could only form small, widely separated congregations, so that the missionary's time was spent in travel. Under such circumstances many churches were needed; each of which was built with difficulty by a small number of poor settlers who found difficulty in supporting the missionary. Furthermore, living as a minority among Protestants and unbelievers, Catholics were deprived from larger numbers. Bishop Fink also favored national colonies, which would give cohesion and make a knowledge of several languages unnecessary for satisfactory pastors.

—The Catholic Church on the Kansas Frontier, pg. 134

Not only could St. Patrick's be considered a colony but Atchison County may have qualified as a national colony. Irish immigrants and their descendants were locating in other areas.

A group of Irish settlers lived northwest of Atchison near Good Intent. The ethnic makeup of the region is demonstrated by the name "Irish Point" for School #67. Irish descendants also moved to the City of Atchison.

Descendants of St. Patrick's Irish settlers are common in Atchison County. As Sister Krenner pointed out in St. Patrick's National Register Application, "Thirty-one of the families on the 1990 list of parishioners had a total of 15 different surnames from the 1866 list."

—Atchison County Historical Society newsletter, Atchison