

## Chapter I

### The Earliest Beginnings

The story of St. Joseph's Church begins in a particular time and place--in the distant past in the wilderness along the Mississippi River. The first white man, and the first Catholic presence, to set foot in what is now Marion County, Missouri, was Father Louis Hennepin, a French Franciscan priest, who accompanied Robert La Salle to America in 1678. In an expedition of exploration and discovery, Hennepin began a voyage to the headwaters of the Mississippi. After a two month ice-strewn journey from Fort Creve Coeur near Peoria, Illinois, the young priest and his party reached a bay of the river. It was here about 200 yards from its mouth, they landed and stayed two days making boat repairs and resting. Hennepin raised a crucifix and celebrated mass on the banks of the Mississippi waters, which he named Bay de Charles, claiming the land for France. He and his party moved on up the Mississippi. It would be much longer before settlers would arrive.

For a hundred years longer, the land now called Marion County was occupied by the Northern Indians, the Sacs or Saukees, the Foxes, Iowas, Pottawatomies, and the Missouris. For years these Indians fished in the streams, drank from the springs, and hunted the wooded hills over the county. Many of the tribes were nomadic and would move into the area for a time and then push on to other locations. And ages before, the Mound Builders occupied the region, leaving behind mounds, pottery fragments, stone axes, and flint arrow points (History 125-127). Several little tumuli or mounds were built by the Mound Builders on the hill between the Palmyra spring and the old Co-op grain terminal (Sequicentennial 1, 3).

It was 1819 before any permanent settlers moved into the newly founded town. Benjamin Vanlandingham was the first white settler to build a home in what is now Palmyra (Sesquicentennial 1). The founders of Palmyra at first proposed to call it Springfield, from the big spring, and a little field nearby which had been cleared, but it was finally decided to call the town "Palmyra" in honor of the famous ancient city of Syria built by King Solomon, "in the wilderness" (History 830-831).

The first Palmyra settlers came from Kentucky and Tennessee ( Little 81). Few were Catholic and most were emigrants from the east. From 1824 until some time in the year 1825, a band of 200-300 Sac Indians moved into the area and stayed for a time on the site now occupied by the Marion County Courthouse. They were friendly and shared the sweet spring water with the white settlers. They wandered around the streets and cabins of the village of the white man, and the whites wandered "unrestrained about the lodges and wigwams of the Indians. The curiosity to see and know more of each other was mutual. The Indians were under a leader whom the whites called 'King John.' He was a large warrior and bore a powerful tomahawk, which seemed as much a symbol of authority as a weapon." The Indians later moved down to the bottoms on the Mississippi River sometime in 1825 (History 830-831).

One of the streets laid in the original plat of the town was Lane Street (named for Henry C. Lane), the future location of St. Joseph Church. The town boasted a store selling powder, lead, coffee, pepper, salt, coarse muslins, woolens, cutlery, and "notions" (Sesquicentennial 3), a

cabinet shop where spinning wheels and looms were also made, a hotel/tavern, and a frame house along with log houses (History 828). It was truly a frontier place.

In 1821 Missouri became a state, and the town of Palmyra boasted an increase in population. By 1824 the town had grown to a population of 250. A land office was established here attracting many settlers who wished to obtain land in northeast Missouri. Progress was being made: a first post office, courthouse, and a newspaper. Human suffering, however, raged when cholera struck Palmyra in 1833 with estimates of 100-150 of the 600 people of Palmyra dying. This epidemic of Asiatic cholera struck St. Louis first the year before. So rapid and terrible were the deaths that citizens panicked and fled to the country where many of them died and helped spread disease to yet more communities. Palmyra was said to look like a ghost town. Wagons, mostly driven by slaves, picked up the dead, hauled them to a site to be buried without ceremony. Most of them were buried in unmarked sites on the western edge of town off of the old Philadelphia Road, believed to lie on what is today the north side of the 1100 block of Sloan Street (Sesquicentennial 6-7).

Father Lefevere, who served the mission of St. Paul's Church, Salt River, and attended the settlement at Palmyra, wrote to Father Rosati on July 12, 1833, about the terrible plague he witnessed in the area.

The cholera has been more fatal in Palmyra than in any other place I have ever heard of. Out of the population of six hundred and odd souls 109 persons have fallen victims to that disease. It has also been in New London and throughout the country round about. Several persons have been swept away; and I attribute it to a special favor of God that I have escaped the disease; for during eighteen days I have been continually exposed to all that wet spell of weather, which caused every creek and water-course to be past fording, being wet to the skin every day by a hard beating rain, or by swimming or high fording. All this, however, has brought on a daily fever and ague for these three weeks, whose severity, together with the repeated doses of calomel, tartar emetic and other medicines, has weakened and exhausted me so much that I was not able to walk around the house. The fever now begins to abate, so that I have been able to say mass today for the first time, not, however, without great difficulty and fatigue and I hope now, that little by little I shall gather my strength so as to be able after a few days, to attend to my former duties (Rothensteiner 570).

Cholera again hit Palmyra in 1835 with twenty more victims. In 1849 a cholera "scare" occurred with Hannibal severely hit, but Palmyra spared. As a result, strict sanitation standards were set up with "no filth of any kind" allowed to remain in the town, a quarantine set up against any person coming in from another infected area, and the first Friday in August was declared a day of fasting and prayer so that the "Almighty might be pleased to order that the plague would pass Palmyra—and go somewhere else, if it had to exist at all (Sesquicentennial 7)."

The expansion of the Church in Northeast Missouri followed a westward course along with that of the country. From the Missouri River settlements, a northward pattern of movement

occurred. As the large expanse of prairie lands adjoining the counties of Clark, Lewis, Marion, Ralls, Pike, and Lincoln were claimed from the wilderness; little villages sprang up, forming the center of new Catholic congregations. In Marion County two early Catholic centers were Palmyra and Hannibal, both of them missionary stations of Father Cusack of Indian Creek and Arrow Rock since 1845. Before that, Palmyra was visited by the Jesuit Father Van Lommel from St. Louis in 1831. During all this time, Catholics in the town had no church building or regular priest. They had to rely on each other, private family prayer, and the occasional visit by a traveling priest (Rothensteiner 333).

Father John O'Hanlon was in charge of the Salt River district, 1848-1850 and celebrated Mass in Palmyra on the second Sunday of each month. From that time until 1867 when the Franciscans from Quincy IL took charge, the priests from Hannibal visited Palmyra and celebrated Mass for the settlers (Little 82). In 1846, a Mrs. Green (nee Elder) was the first recorded baptism by Rev. Thomas Cusack, probably an itinerant priest who seems to have been the first priest to visit the Palmyra Catholics. There were several others baptized before her. For some time, priests from Hannibal and Quincy visited Palmyra and recorded the baptisms in their records (St. Francis 185).

The 1860's were a time of grave trouble for the nation and Palmyra. It was the Great War Between the States, the Civil War, where brothers were pitted against brothers, neighbors against neighbors. Missouri, being a border state was in the midst of it and tensions were high. In 1862 ten men were executed by Union troops in Palmyra in what has been called "the darkest day of the Civil War, the "Palmyra Massacre." The execution was done in retaliation for the disappearance of a Union sympathizer. The men were forced to sit on their coffins as they were taken to their point of execution at the old fairgrounds north of the present day Warren Head home (Sesquicentennial 20). Large numbers of men from the area were conscripted by the Union army to serve during 1863-1864. In 1863, Palmyra was a hot bed of war activity with families divided. Fear became an everyday part of the lives of most of its citizens. In these troubled times of the Civil War, St. Joseph Catholic Parish was organized with 50 members. Masses were celebrated every second Tuesday at various homes including those of the Jacobi, Elder, and Helbing families, and in the rock house, the home of the Greenwood Cemetery caretaker. Surely, this little band of worshippers found needed solace in the sacred liturgy and communion of believers. For the first two years after its organization, the services continued to be held in private homes.

With the Civil War over, a two-story wagon shop belonging to Price and Jackson was purchased in 1866 for \$800.00 and converted into a church. Located on the southwest corner of Lane and Church Streets, services were held there until October, 1899 (St. Francis 185).

Rev. Anselm Mueller, O.F.M., who came to Quincy in September, 1863, seems to have been the first regular pastor of St. Joseph's Church beginning February, 1865. With the War at an end, the church recorded growth. The baptismal records of St. Francis Solanus Church, Quincy, show fourteen entries from Palmyra and several from Shelbyville, Missouri, from 1865. The first baptism in the parish was that of Carolina Anna Jacobi born February 6, 1865, and

baptized February 9, 1865. Her parents were Ignatius Jacobi and Josephina (Wagener) Jacobi. Anna Hirner and Christian Wand were her godparents.



### **FIRST REGULAR PASTOR 1865-1869**

The first First Communion and Confirmation class was held in 1865. At that time the two sacraments were celebrated together. Henry Hirner, John Starkel, Catherine Starkel, Mary Pigot, Mary Harigan, Alice Meager, and Margaret Kitzans were members of that class.

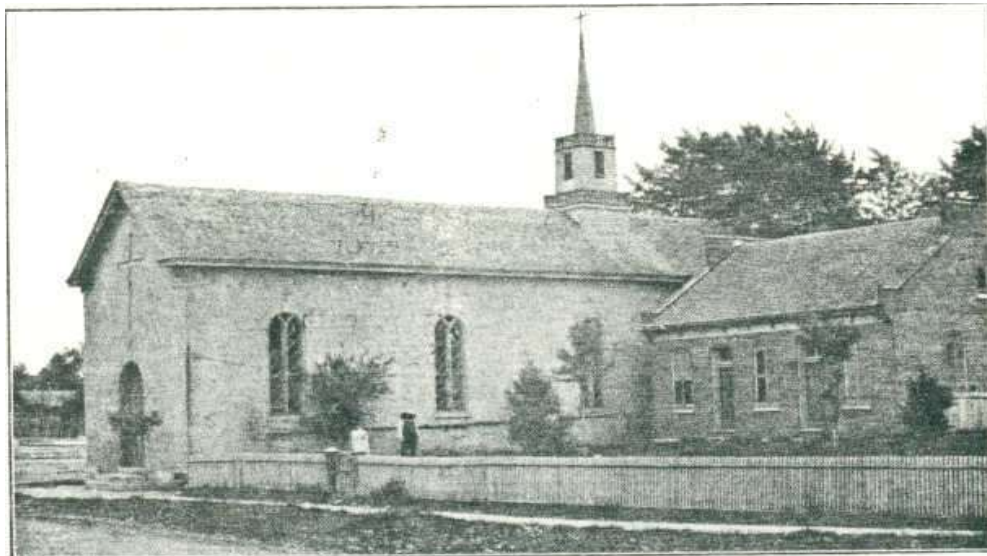
In 1867 the Franciscan Fathers of Quincy accepted the charge of Palmyra as an out mission. It was Father Mueller who rebuilt and refitted the wagon shop for church use at the cost of approximately \$3,000 (Rothensteiner 383) Fr. Mueller was born in 1838 in Bonn, Germany. He was Rector of Quincy College for 36 years and was highly esteemed as an energetic, sincere religious, a wise counselor, a skillful educator, and a firm disciplinarian.

An article in the Palmyra Spectator July 24, 1868, recorded a bit of excitement connected with the church property. A group of young girls had been sitting at the church door at night when a young public school lady teacher requested they not sit there. The girls spoke very impudently to her, and the teacher ejected them by force. The next day, the insulted girls had the town justice, Justice Knighton, draw up a warrant for her arrest. The justice and deputy attempted to enter her room at the old Southern hotel only to be warned off by her. The two officers, afraid to face the indignant teacher, called upon a posse of men and boys to confront her. All refused. The next morning the teacher's newly hired lawyer paid a small fine and the action was dismissed.

In 1869 Father Theodore Kussman of the diocesan clergy, was made resident pastor of Palmyra. Father Kussman came to America from Schallern, diocese of Paderhorn in 1847 and was ordained in St. Louis on May 27, 1866, by Archbishop Kenrick. In that converted wagon shop there were blessings abundant for the fledging parish with many firsts: weddings, baptisms,

and funerals. [See Appendix II] A number of priests served this young church and the parish prospered. In 1870 Rev. Kussman built a parochial building for about \$1,500 which was used for a school (St. Francis 185). The residence was built just north of the church, sat back from the sidewalk, and surrounded by a picket fence. And a school began at an early date (probably about 1870). The students were instructed by lay teachers: Mrs. Andrew (Katie) Gebhardt, Mrs. Flittner, Mrs. Simon Hirner (Josephine West), and Mrs. August Weyand. Father Kussman was appointed to a church in Springfield, Missouri in 1873. At that time, the Franciscan order in Quincy again assumed charge of the parish after a five year period of other priests (Little 82). In 1877 the Franciscan nuns from Dubuque, Iowa took charge of the school. Their names were Otilia, Veronica, Pacifica, Angeline, Agnes, and Teresa.

There were a succession of priests after Rev. Kussman. Rev. Engelbert Blume, 1872-1873; Rev. Paulinus Weiss O.F.M, 1873-1875; Rev. Fidelis Koercher, O.F.M. 1875; Rev. P. Paullinus Weiss, O.F.M. 1875-1876; Rev. Victor Aertker, O.F.M., 1877-1880; Rev. Paul Teroerde, 1881, and Rev. Nolte came in 1881. In 1883 the number of parishioners was 300 (History 852). Rev. Leonard Neukirchen, a native of Remagen on the Rhine also served the parish for six years and then was called to Rome. In 1894 P. Ulric Petri, O.S.F. became pastor of Palmyra. P. Ulric was succeeded in 1903 by his Franciscan brother, Marcelline Kollmeyer (Rothensteiner 383).



**Old St. Joseph's Church and Parochial Building**

The parish continued to be blessed with the purchase in 1878 of a portion of Greenwood Cemetery to serve as the church's sacred burial ground. Then in 1879, a two story brick building was erected by Fr. Kussman. A board fence was built along the alley to separate the children from the Washington Public School and the church's property. By 1883 the parish membership had grown to 300. In 1884 Fr. Nolte erected a Stations of the Cross. It is assumed these Stations were for outdoor devotions.



**Old St. Joseph's School – Built in 1879  
Remodeled into rectory 1919.**

In 1895 the Most Rev. Archbishop Kain, D.D. of St. Louis, in whose jurisdiction Palmyra belonged, visited the parish and found the church in a dilapidated condition and much too small for the growing congregation. He, therefore, gave orders to raise funds for a new structure. The parish had on hand a sum of \$3,000. Plans soon began for this massive undertaking of faith (Yates 5).