

Saint Canera Catholic Church 1876-2009

Two historic events mark the beginning of the first Catholic Parish in Neosho- the donation of land for a church site, and the arrival of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Switzerland and the eastern United States.

In 1871 the Atlantic and Pacific Railway deeded to Archbishop Peter R. Kenrick of Saint Louis a half-block of ground, crowning the hilltop on South Wood and Hill Streets, overlooking Neosho.

This site had traditional significance to the pioneer Catholics as it symbolized the mount where the patriarchs of old in their trials and tribulations, went to pray and offer supplications to God.

Owing to the difficulties of travel, when people had to journey long distances, by foot, horseback or carriage, to participate in divine services, the mission at Neosho and other southwest Missouri missions were served infrequently by two missionary priests with headquarters in Pierce City. Father Henry Hugh O'Reilly in 1876 and Father John Hennes in 1878 held services in the school house which stood near the site of the present Central School.

In 1876 building a church began to take tangible form with the excavating of a foundation. Native stone was prepared and laid by the pioneer Catholics. By the time the foundation was completed their church funds were exhausted and the construction work had to be suspended.

By 1880 a building fund of a few hundred dollars was raised with the help of friends (both Catholic and non-Catholic) and preparatory work was begun. The walls and the roof of the frame building were completed in 1884 at a cost of \$800, but it was months later before the altars, pews and choir loft were added. In the meantime boards on nail kegs served as pews.

The parish numbered 125 at this time. Among the names of pioneer Catholics were: Baurdick, Faules, McKnight, Murray, Normile, Osler and Zimmerman. In 1885 Father James Wood was appointed first resident priest and during his residency the interior church furnishings were completed. This same year the Seneca mission was attached to the Neosho parish with Father Wood as missionary priest. On May 23, 1889, Bishop John Hogan, first bishop of the Kansas City diocese, dedicated the church under the title Saint Canera, named after an Irish Virgin of the sixth century.

Another resident priest, Father Charles Scheel was assigned to the parish from 1895 to 1898. It is recorded that Father Scheel resided at the Gittings home some two miles from the church and every morning, whether the weather was fair or foul, he could be seen walking along the streets on his way to the hilltop church to offer Mass.

In 1940 Walter J. McGrane began his tenure in Neosho. Father McGrane was the first Catholic Chaplain at Camp Crowder, one of the nation's largest Signal Corps training centers. It was quite a shock to the townspeople on that first Sunday after the troops arrived. The town was full of soldiers looking for the Catholic Church.

Succeeding Fr. McGrane was Father Leo Nugent who arrived in 1948, another devoted priest and builder under whose leadership the present church, a structure of brick with Carthage stone facade, was constructed north of the little frame edifice and is based on various older styles with modified features of Romanesque, Gothic and New England architecture. A giant tree had presented an obstacle to building on the site favored for the new church, but this obstacle was removed on the night of June 9, 1950, when a tornado uprooted the great tree.

In 1958, a two story house was purchased to house three sisters who conducted religious classes for Catholic students attending public schools. This building later became the rectory for the resident priests. In 1967, an education building was built by the men of the parish. In 1970, the Catholic Church in Noel was attached to St. Canera. The same year the first Parish Council was elected to assist the priest in parish affairs. Later, the parish hall was renovated.

Records of the parish reflect these statistics for 1970: total households in the parish were 174 with almost 400 practicing members

In May, 1973, Sister Agnes Mueller, A. S. C., was hired and assumed duties as parish coordinator of Religious Education. Sr. Agnes was martyred in Monrovia, Liberia, Africa while doing missionary work for the church.

The church sponsored housing for a Vietnamese family who raised nine children there and became an important part of the parish. Later the house the Vietnamese had occupied was torn down, along with the rectory and was replaced by a new structure: the current rectory on the upper level and the church offices on the lower. The church also purchased the last home on the block which now is used as a meeting house.