It all started with the Irish Immigrants

By Bobby Poston

It stands alone now, towering over the forgotten town of Adair, Missouri, watching decades pass, bringing change and loneliness. The St. Mary’s Church is the last of the surviving pioneers and landmarks of Adair. And to someone who has ever attended mass in St. Mary’s in earlier years, the feeling is definitely of loneliness.

But Adair has a history dating back before the church that stands now was built. It dates back to the 1840’s. The first Catholic settlers in the area were Irish people who fled from Ireland due to the Potato Famine in the 1840’s. These Irish people settled in Perry County, Ohio. Later they moved into the Edina, Missouri, area. From here they started moving north and west into the area that is now Adair, located 12 miles east on Highway 11. After the Civil War, an Irish lawyer named Clancy started sending back editorials to the newspapers in Ohio, urging settlers to move to this new area.

The first Catholic service was held in Adair by Father McNamee in 1844. He traveled by horseback from Edina and carried a portable altar with him. The Daniel McGonigle house served as the church until 1869, when the first log cabin church was built. It was at this time they were assigned their first residing priest, Father Ryan, who served until 1880.

Father O’Shea was stationed in Adair in 1880 and it was here he stayed for 26 years. He came from the village of Limerick, Ireland, in a county called Adare, and this was the only parish he served in after arriving in America from Ireland, to start his priesthood in a new country. The twenty-six years he served were called the “Golden Era” of the parish because it was at this time that the present church was built. This church was built on the same design as the church Father O’Shea came from in Ireland. He was a famed fox hunter and had about ten foxhounds around the rectory at Adair.

The cemetery of Adair was laid out in the late 1860’s. This land (a total of five acres) was donated by Michael C. Cody, who played an active role in the settlement of Adair. Mr. Cody plotted the village of Adair in 1879, and Thomas J. Dockery surveyed it. The original obituary of Michael Cody reads as follows:

Obituary
Cody—At his home in Adair on October 30, 1901, Michael C. Cody aged 70 years, 5 months, 29 days.

In the death of Mr. Cody, Adair County lost another of its pioneer settlers, one of the men who settled here when the country was almost a wilderness, and one who did his full

share toward making improvements that would invite other settlers to come among them.

Mr. Cody was born in Fairfield County, Ohio, May 1st, 1831. He followed steamboats between St. Louis and New Orleans until 1853, when he went overland to California. In 1855 he returned to Missouri and located in Adair County. For forty-six years he lived on the land, he at the time entered. In 1857 he was married to Mary E. Cook. His wife, four daughters, and four sons survive him. He was a consistent member of the Catholic church, and took an active part in founding the large Catholic settlement around Adair, and in building and improving the church property at that place. He was a good man and a good neighbor. He will be mourned by many outside of his family.

One by one these old fathers are laying down their burdens on the shore of the silent river. The veil is drawn, but we know they have gone to their reward.

The remains were interred in St. Mary’s cemetery at Adair, Rev. Fr. O’Shea conducting the services.

This is the tombstone of Michael C. Cody, the plotter of the town of Adair.
The church of present day was built by John Bartwarth of Edina. It was constructed in 1904-1905 at a cost of $10,000. The lumber was hauled in by railroad to Baring, and from Baring by wagons and buggies to Adair. The church stands on a limestone and brick foundation, and the framework is constructed of pine wood. The original roofing material was wooden shake, but later replaced by asphalt shingles. It has since been replaced by the original wooden shingles. The bell tower is 50 feet in height shaped in a rectangular form. This tower used to stand 90 feet in height but was destroyed in a severe storm many years ago. The bell is located in the northwest tower. The following inscription is found on this bell:

Cast by H. Stucksiede and Co.
St. Louis
To the Blessed Virgin
By the People of
St. Mary's Congregation
Adair, Mo.
May 1891

The interior of this unique church is just that: “unique.” The woodwork on the inside is of pine and the floor is of yellow pine, with the wainscotting being of the same material. The inside walls are of galvanized tin, hammered into Florentine design. The stained glass windows are another attraction to St. Mary's since they were made in an old method long since passed into oblivion. The frames in which these windows are set are handmade pine arches. The choir loft is located to the back of the church and is entered by stairs at the side entrance. The loft is supported by four pillars.

Another amazing feature found in this “little country church” is that the lighting fixtures are of Tiffany design. And still the most beautiful attraction in the church is one of the many statues in it. The statue is called “The Sorrowful Mother” and is most impressive due to its rarity. Only three were every reproduced from the original, which is located in Rome, Italy. This particular statue was donated by Mrs. W.L. Leonard, of Denver, Colorado, in 1904 or 1905. (This lady was an aunt of one of the residents of Adair.) Every one of

Tiffany light fixtures, rare statues and handmade pine window frames decorated the interior of St. Mary's Catholic Church. The inside walls are of galvanized tin hammered into Florentine design.
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the statues, windows, etc., were donated by people of the parish.

After the completion of the church the parish enjoyed a time of prosperity and stability for the next ten to fifteen years. It was at this time the town of Adair was at its climax; several commercial establishments had sprang up, the population numbered well over 400, a Catholic school was built, and by now several missions had branched off from St. Mary's including Kirksville and Baring. But when World War I hit, a major recession followed. At this time there was a general out-migration from rural communities and a general decline in the economic health of the nation. St. Mary's was similarly affected by this recession and the parish population began to decline.

The Adair baseball team was organized in the late 1940's. Kneeling, left to right, are Gerald Crow, center field; Kenneth James, third base; Boyd James, catcher; Eddy Cowen, utility man; and Max Richardson, left field. Standing are Buddy Allen, second base; Jack Breen, shortstop; John Poston, first base; Richard Poston, pitcher; and Ray Ambrosia, right field.

The business circle of the 1880's consisted of the following: Dr. J. M. Morah, druggist and physician; Clark Brothers, general store; Poncelot & Co., sawmill; Miss Kate Welch, millinery; N. D. Smith, flouring mill; McClanahan Brothers, game dealers; Charles McGonigle, stock dealer; J. Moran, livery; Michael Moran, shoemaker; Patrick O'Donnell, notary; J. Poncelot, wagonmaker; Rogerson and Poncelot, contractors; B. F. Wilson, hoop maker; N. H. Tupper, hotel keeper, and D. W. Clark, postmaster.

Some of the local landowners of Adair and the adjoining area were listed in this following paper clipping:


Of the old settlers, there are only one or two living. It might be said that there was never a more noble set of men and women than resided in the Adair settlement, ever ready to help in sickness and misfortune.

Adair started out as a diocese of St. Louis, then became part of the St. Joseph diocese, then part of the Jefferson City diocese. Father O'Shea rode horseback from Adair to Kirksville and held services in the home of Dr. Quinn until the parish of Kirksville was founded. The original parish extended from Macon County to the Iowa State Line, and from the Chariton River east to the Clark and Lewis County lines and bordered the Edina parish on the southwest.

The coming of the Sante Fe Railroad and the development of the town of Baring, Mo., divided the town of Adair and its parish. The declining agriculture population in Adair was the cause of losing the school in 1925. In 1942 under Father Newman, there were 30 people in the parish. In 1958, St. Mary's became a mission of Mary Immaculate in Kirksville.

Every town has to have a baseball team and Adair wasn't to be left out. In 1947 John and Richard Poston, residents of Adair, organized the first team. The suits were made of wool and the baseball field was located in an open field south of the cemetery. The Adair team visited surrounding towns like Brashear, Hurdland, etc. and also hosted games. The expenses were met by passing a collection basket through the crowd at each home game.

In 1949 the team diminished as a result of the town's population decline.

Located 15 miles east of Kirksville, St. Mary's Catholic Church provides an interesting blend of architectural styles. The church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.
In 1971 Father Buchanan, priest in Kirksville, sent an ultimatum for the survival of St. Mary’s Church. The following is one of the paragraphs that appeared in the letter Father Buchanan sent to Adair:

It has become impossible for Kirksville to serve Adair on Sundays for the following reasons:
1. The income in Adair has been steadily dropping for the past four years.
2. There is a need for five masses in Kirksville now. The two priests can serve the five masses and one at Noverger, but can say no more than three apiece on any one day.
3. The income at Adair has become so little that the church cannot be kept in shape for the proper worship of God and the necessary income for the service of the church.
4. There has been a tremendous scarcity of priests which will continue for a long time.

In December 1972, the announcement was made that masses would discontinue for the winter, but were never held again. At this time the congregation consisted of five couples of retiring age, seven men and women whose mates were deceased or who had never married, and four children. In 1973 the rectory was sold for $3,000.

On December 16, 1974, St. Mary’s Church was placed on the National Register of Historical Places due to its significant architectural design. A nonprofit corporation was formed and received its charter on May 9, 1975, from the State of Missouri under the name of “Friends of St. Mary’s Church of Adair, Missouri, Inc.”

On July 12, 1976, Bishop Michael McAuliffe of the diocese of Jefferson City deeded the church to the Friends of St. Mary’s. If the church is not maintained it will be removed from the National Historic Register and will revert back to the Catholic Diocese.

It has stood too long and has seen too much time pass to let this unique piece of architecture die. It stands now, waiting for the day when its doors will be reopened and services can be held again.

This is one of the earlier priests at St. Mary’s Catholic Church. His identity is unknown. Note the style of robes worn by the priests in this time period.

The following is a list of priests stationed in Adair:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>Father Daly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Father Madden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878-1880</td>
<td>Father Ryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880-1906</td>
<td>Father O’Shea</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906-1913</td>
<td>Father McGovern</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Father Kearful</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914-1919</td>
<td>Father Connolly</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Father Vawter</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920-1922</td>
<td>Father McNeil</td>
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<tr>
<td>1923-1925</td>
<td>Father Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925-1929</td>
<td>Father Carew</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Father Coughlin</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>Father Barrett</td>
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<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Father Mallen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934-1936</td>
<td>Father McEvory</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936-1939</td>
<td>Father Carew (Baring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-1942</td>
<td>Father Donovan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942-1956</td>
<td>Father Newman</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Father O’Rourke (Mission of Kirksville)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957-1958</td>
<td>Father Aldeman</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Father Kenney</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Father Yehle</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Father Bobay</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Father Bestgen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father Buchanan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Left, Father O'Shea kept these foxhounds during his years in Adair. He was a famed fox hunter and kept about 10 hounds. The map below is the town plat from an Adair County Atlas showing the location of the church, parsonage and cemetery in relation to the rest of the settlement.