

**St. Boniface, Scipio: Eden in Anderson County, Kansas
(1850-1900)**

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Regardless of religious affiliation or even lack thereof, one cannot deny the presence of a higher power than mortal man at St. Boniface church. You can feel it in the brooding stares of ancient statues, keeping silent vigil over their timeless domain. You can hear it in the tinkle of fountain-water permeating through the meditation garden, for “one is nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.”¹ It can be heard in the bird song welcoming spring to a nearby forest and even in the overpowering silence of the archaic limestone when a coming storm silences mother nature for a brief moment. This house of God has stood through world wars, epidemics, and drought. However, the scars left upon the people who experienced these tragedies have found no foothold upon this veritable garden of Eden.

The beauty of Scipio is carved in the very obscurity of this ancient sanctuary. Located in the center of Putnam Township in northern Anderson County, Kansas, St. Boniface is caught in a ‘sibling rivalry’ for prominence amongst the other Catholic churches in the county. This region of Kansas was settled by Catholics and Zelinsky’s Rule reaches fruition in the number of Catholic churches per capita to this day. The 2010 census shows Anderson County as having a population of only 8,102 while boasting five thriving Catholic churches.² St. Boniface is not found on a main street in a bustling town. It is found in the rolling countryside, on the summit of a ridge, overlooking the lush, green Pottawatomie valley. St. Boniface is two miles East of Highway 59, just off of 2350 road.

¹ Dorothy Frances Gurney. *God’s Garden* cited at <http://www.absolutewonder.com/grdnpoem003.html> (accessed April 26, 2011)

² U.S. Census Bureau. <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>

As you drive South along Highway 59, the panoramic Eastern horizon is broken by the dramatic steeple of St. Boniface reaching skyward, demonstrating the hinted access to heaven sought by those who built this monumental structure. But who were these ancient builders and what factors brought about St. Boniface church in the form it has taken today? This essay is a brief examination of these powers at work in the history of this beautiful community.

It seems to me that the best place to start a story is the beginning. Unfortunately we are not allowed that luxury since the story of the Pottawatomie river valley stretches farther back than the feeble written history of man can reach. Bearing that in mind, let us instead start with the arrival of Europeans to Scipio. The earliest record we have of Europeans in the Pottawatomie valley came in the form of Jesuit Missionaries Fr. John Shoemaker and Fr. Paul Ponziglione.³ These two men dedicated their lives to bringing their faith to the Native Americans of Kansas. They founded several missions in Eastern Kansas during the late 1840's; one of the most prominent being in the area near present day Scipio. The 1850's began to see a slow trickle of settlers coming to the Pottawatomie valley. The 1895 census for Putnam Township shows that many of these immigrants came from Missouri, the Midwest and Ireland; however, the vast majority of these settlers were from Germany.⁴

The variety in nationality of these settlers, especially in the days before the Native Americans were relocated, created a Frontier Mosaic community: people of diverse

³ Fr. Jerry Williams (editor) *St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008* (un-published 2008), 15.

⁴ State Board of Agriculture. <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-1895-state-census/10951> (accessed April 24, 2011)

backgrounds, united in a common faith, living in harmony with each other. Ed Fink's pictorial history of the county refers to many accounts of good relations between Native Americans and European settlers.⁵ These stories are considered to be folklore; however, the fact that settlers so emphasized them reflects a positive attitude towards Native Americans regardless of whether they are true or not.

A much more firm example of good settler/native relations can be found in Fr. Hieronymus Reichwein's "History of St. Boniface Parish", 1903.⁶ Written in old German and only recently translated, Fr. Reichwein's book reflects his empathy with the Native Americans. Fr. Reichwein did not approve of the government relocation of natives stating that they were:

"... robbed of their large area of land by the authority of President Pierce. They were pushed to the south, so that their territory, which according to the rights of natural law only belonged to them and no one else, could be left for white arrivals."⁷

Despite the apparent positive relations between natives and settlers, the government saw fit to relocate the Indians, destroying the frontier mosaic and leaving behind a large German Catholic community; a German Catholic community without a resident priest or church of its own. The unrelenting, unshakeable faith of these German Catholics simply would not allow their spiritual needs to go unattended.

As of 1855, Bishop Miede had taken up residence in Leavenworth, using it as his

⁵ Ed Fink. Pictorial History and Folklore of Anderson County, Kansas. (Iola Register Printing Company, Iola Kansas. 1990)

⁶ Fr. Hieronymus Reichwein O.C.C. "Fr. Reichwein's History of St. Boniface Parish," in St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008. Ed. Fr. Jerry Williams, 50-57. (Un-published 2008), 50.

⁷ "Fr. Reichwein's History of St. Boniface Parish," 50.

administrative center. Miede had a mere six priests at his disposal, all of whom were spread amongst the Jesuit missions in the Eastern part of the state. This was the status of the fledgling diocese for the bishop when he received a visit from John Wolken and Henry Feuerborn in 1856. Wolken and Feuerborn told Miede of a Catholic community near an old Indian mission in the Pottawatomie valley. They informed the bishop of their dire need for a priest and their hopes of beginning a parish in this community. The bishop dictated that one of his Jesuit missionaries would come to Scipio to say mass once a month. This did not appease the people for long and a second visit was made by Wolken and Feuerborn the following year (1857) entreating Miede to send a resident priest. This second visit so soon on the heels of the first intrigued Bishop Miede enough that he decided to visit Scipio himself in order to assess the situation in person. The bishop was impressed enough by the faith of the people that he acquiesced to their wishes and in 1858, Fr. Ivo Schacht was dispatched to Scipio, becoming the first resident priest.⁸ A parish was born.

The aforementioned John Wolken further demonstrated his devout faith by donating 20 acres to the new church. This land was complimented by a new log church and a small residence for Fr. Schacht. The church was dedicated on March 13, 1859.⁹ The German Catholics of Scipio fittingly christened the church after the patron saint of their homeland: St. Boniface. St. Boniface would remain the only Catholic church in Anderson County for 25 years.

St. Boniface parish was not to remain in the care of bishop Miede for long. In the

⁸ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 16.

⁹ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 16.

year 1865, Miede handed the parish over to the Carmelite order; more specifically, into the hands of Carmelite fathers Cyril Knoll and Xavier Huber.¹⁰ This transfer was beneficial for all involved. The Carmelites were a good fit with the German population of Scipio since this specific branch had roots in Straubing, Germany. A testament to this is evidenced in the fact that during mass at St. Boniface, the homily was being said in German as late as 1908.¹¹ The Carmelite presence in Scipio would aid St. Boniface in growth and help to bring education to the area. In fact, Scipio boasted the first parochial school in Anderson County by building a one-room schoolhouse in 1875.¹²

In the early years however, Scipio Kansas was still a very remote corner of the world. The closest avenue of transportation in those days would still have been the Ft. Scott - Ft. Gibson military road.¹³ It would still be another ten years before the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston (L.L. & G.) Railroad would reach Scipio in 1869.¹⁴ During this time period, the world was torn by war at home and abroad. America was in the throes of Civil War, while the German principalities fought for unification. The growing community of Scipio faced trials of its own during those years as detailed in Father Bernard Lickteig's personal memoirs: "Growing up on the South Pottawatomie." Father Lickteig references many hardships in this document including a drought

¹⁰ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 47.

¹¹ "Fr. Reichwein's History of St. Boniface Parish," 50.

¹² St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 27.

¹³ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. Historical Atlas of Kansas. (University of Oklahoma Press), 17.

¹⁴ Prairie Spirit Trail official website. <http://www.prairiespirittrail.org/rrhistory.htm> (accessed April 26, 2011)

(1859-1860), a plague of cinch bugs (1862) and a prairie fire (1869).¹⁵ The most terrifying of these tribulations however was surely the harassment from the ‘Missouri Border Ruffians’ which led to the formation of the Anderson County Riflemen for “mutual protection.”¹⁶ Despite all these hardships, St. Boniface parish continued to grow as more and more German settlers migrated to the area. By the 1870’s, the parish had outgrown the small log church and plans for new accommodations had begun.

In the year 1873, Fr. Albert Heimann had ordered the construction of a Carmelite Monastery to facilitate the growing number of Carmelite friars at St. Boniface.¹⁷ The site chosen for the monastery building was on higher ground, at the crest of the hill leading down into the Pottawatomie valley. Fr. Heimann also ordered the building of Mt. Carmel College directly West of the Monastery as seen in Figure 1.

¹⁵ Fr. Bernard Lickteig, “Growing up on the South Pottawatomie,” in St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008. Ed. Fr. Jerry Williams, 14. (Un-published 2008), 14.

¹⁶ “Growing up on the South Pottawatomie,” 14.

¹⁷ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 27.





Figure 1. St. Boniface Catholic Church, Scipio, Anderson County, Kansas. Pictured from the West side circa 1885. Courtesy of St. Boniface rectory (private collection).

The building with the cupola is the college and the building directly behind it is the monastery. The new church pictured on the left is the current church building; the cornerstone of this structure was put down in 1882. The moving of the church structures to this new location would become permanent.

At this time, the monastery was full of Carmelite friars leading a quiet, peaceful life of prayer. The original 20 acres given to the church by John Wolken had by now grown to approximately 600 acres.¹⁸ The friars living in the monastery practiced methods of subsistence farming on these extensive landholdings which included a 10 acre vineyard. This vineyard which was tended by brother Victor, occasionally donated some

¹⁸ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 27.

of the surplus wine to the celebration of mass.¹⁹

Our most intimate glimpse into life at the Monastery is provided by the visitation log of the ‘Prior Provincialis’. The regional prior would visit once every year or two in order to ensure that the brothers were leading a most pious and satisfactory existence at St. Boniface. The visitation of Prior Fr. Ambrosius F. Bruden on April 25, 1904²⁰ is unique not only in that it is the first visitation log recorded in English rather than German; but also in that it gives a detailed schedule of the daily routine at St. Boniface Monastery. The day began with ‘rising’ at 4:40am in ‘strict silence’. This ‘selentium strictum’ which had begun at bed time (8:40pm) the night before, was to be carried out through meditation (5am) and mass (5:30am). The majority of the day was devoted to work; characterized in the simple statement by Fr. Bruden of: “Work is Prayer.” During his visit in 1904, Fr. Ambrosius covered ground rules for all aspects of monastic life from limiting Fr. Adelbert to, “... a bottle of beer on Sundays, feast days and days of special work.” to ordering that, “A bath should be taken by everyone at least every two months and during [the] summer at least once a month.”²¹ These logs provide us with a comical yet beautiful picture of the blissful simplicity of life at St. Boniface during the golden years. These golden years however, were not to last.

As time passed, the number of Catholic clergy worldwide steadily dwindled. This pattern held true at St. Boniface as well. The college was the shortest lived of all these

¹⁹ St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 27.

²⁰ Fr. Ambrosius F. Bruden, Prior, Instructions for Visitations, St. Boniface Catholic Church, Scipio, Kansas. 1904.

²¹ “Instructions for Visitations”

institutions; it lasted a mere 2 years, closing in 1875.²² The one-room schoolhouse which opened the same year that the college closed is still in existence but is used as a photography studio. The students in the area are now transported by bus to the consolidated school in Garnett. The original wooden monastery was replaced by a stone structure in the same location, but Carmelite friars no longer tread those hallways in 'strict silence'. You will not see Carmelite friars in those fields, devoting their work to prayer; not today. In fact, much of the 600 acres owned by the Parish was sold recently to help pay for renovations to the newer stone monastery. The building was converted to a house of prayer and is now inhabited by two Carmelite priests. The railroad tracks were pulled up in the 1980's and the railway was converted into a 51 mile walking/biking trail named the Prairie Spirit Trail.²³ These dreary observations paint a bleak picture of St. Boniface today, but these 'hard facts' can be misleading.

Although Scipio was the first area of the county settled, the rest of Anderson County has grown up around it, leaving St. Boniface encased in the silent, serene tranquility that you will still find it in today; father time has no power here. But take a closer look; St. Boniface is far from dead. Easter and Christmas Eve mass are still a standing room only occasion and Sunday mass is often times full as well. Do not however let that deter you from stopping by; as long as you get there before 9am on Sunday, you can find a seat. Visitors are always welcome and encouraged to sign the guest book. Feel free to walk the grounds or take a trip down the lane to the cemetery. The exact spot where the original log church stood is marked by a beautiful statue depicting the

²² St. Boniface Parish 1858-2008, 27.

²³ <http://www.prairiespirittrail.org/>

crucifixion. You can see the neatly aligned graves of the founding fathers of St. Boniface; the priests and friars of the early years are united in death as they were in life. Look at the names on the tombstones, the names of the parishioners. You'll find many of the same names found in that 1895 census; Feuerborn, Wolken, Mader, Kueser and many others. These families have been here for generations, working the land and sharing their faith. They were there when your grandparents were children, and they will be there when your grandchildren have children. No matter what the world throws at them, they will persevere. The statues will continue their vigil through the changing seasons, keeping watch over baptisms, weddings and funerals as the cycle repeats itself for generation after generation.

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This essay is an in-depth study on the origins of St. Boniface Parish. I have attempted to bring to light the factors, both human and natural, which have played the most prominent roles in bringing St. Boniface about. In doing so, I have used plat maps, authentic, handwritten documents, and information volunteered by parishioners of St. Boniface. St. Boniface is located in Scipio, in the North of Anderson County, Kansas; just two miles East of highway 59 on 2350 road.



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