

Kansas State University

The Church Bell of St. Francis Xavier Church in Seward, Kansas: A Demonstration of
Ecumenical Collaboration and Catholic Resilience

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Drawing from Timothy F. Wenzl's work "A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: Seward, Kansas," various documents located at the Stafford County Museum, and interviews with proud Seward, Kansas (and area) residents, this document highlights a church bell that demonstrates the *ecumenical collaboration*, and *Catholic resilience* of early Seward, Kansas and St. Francis Xavier Church.

A special thanks to Timothy F. Wenzl and his first-rate work in *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*; the Stafford County Historical Museum and Marie and John J. Keenan for their generosity; and to Mike McGuinty and Father Guesnier for insightfully escorting me around the Seward area.

Under the Kansas sun, sweltered figures toil on dry, flat, sandy earth. The air is oppressively heavy today. Suddenly, bearing a moment of consolation, a southerly breeze brushes by. Letting it wipe the sweat from her sullied face, a figure pauses. Bbru—nng. Bbru—nng. Bbru—nng. The toiling figures sink in rest and in prayer—it's finally noon ... Bru—nng. Bru—nng. Bru—nng. A second time, barring one, the sweltered figures pray in a moment of respite ... Bru—nng. Bru—nng. Bru—nng. Another breeze brushes by, and for a third time, they, barring one, pray ... Then thirty-three more times, the bell rings out—*De Angelus*...¹ After breaking for bread, re-invigorated, the figures—en masse—labor on assiduously.

Seward, Kansas, located in Stafford County and found in the lower left-hand corner of North Seward Township, is home to a beautiful Catholic Church: St. Francis Xavier Church. This church, at one time, housed a bell that powerfully demonstrates the *ecumenical collaboration*, and *Catholic resilience* of early Seward, Kansas. Of course, in order to appreciate what this bell demonstrates, you must first explore the early history of Seward, Kansas and St. Francis Xavier Church.

Before we begin, it would be beneficial to examine the Seward area as it appeared to early settlers. Since early Seward was primarily an agricultural community, we will examine the area through focusing on two important agricultural factors: soil and water.

¹ De Angelus is a common Catholic observance.

Stafford County, sitting 1912 feet above sea level, within the Great Bend Prairie of the larger Great Plains region, is markedly flat, with light, conspicuously sandy soil.² The county is covered in shallowly rising, short sand-elevations (aggregates of sand), the crowns of which are unfavorable for cultivation; nonetheless, the county's long, flat valleys—also of a sandy composition—are readily available for the cultivation of crops like wheat, oat, rye, and sorghum.³ (Stafford County has an average growing season of 185 days.⁴) Early Stafford County settlers would have found the area's sandy soil blanketed under treeless waves of Buffalo Grass with Bluestem and Sand-sage scattered in patches.⁵

The only major above ground water source in Stafford County is Rattlesnake Creek, a tributary to the Arkansas River that runs diagonally across the county from the southwest to the northeast.⁶ For reference, the Arkansas River runs approximately 10 miles to the north of Seward and Rattlesnake creek runs approximately 10 miles to the south.⁷ Alongside the lack of an above ground water source, the average precipitation for Stafford County is only 25 inches a year, including an average 20 inches of snow per year (approximately 1-10 inches of rain).⁸ Despite these ostensibly arid conditions, early Seward Township settlers should have had no difficulty finding ample amounts of water, for virtually all of Stafford County lies above the Ogallala

² Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990; Socolofsky, Homer and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Second Edition. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. pg. 3-5.

³ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas: Stafford County*. Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883. <www.kancoll.org>

⁴ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990.

⁵ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas: Stafford County*. Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883. <www.kancoll.org>

⁶ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas: Stafford County*. Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883. <www.kancoll.org>

⁷ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society, *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990.

⁸ USGS. *Rain and Precipitation*. <<http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/earthrain.html>>

Aquifer System, which was capable of producing 500 thousand gallons of water per minute in spots.⁹ Vitaly, early Stafford settlers could find water at depths of ten to thirty feet functionally anywhere in the county.¹⁰ Below, there is an illustration of early Stafford County, and on the next page there is a map of Stafford County.

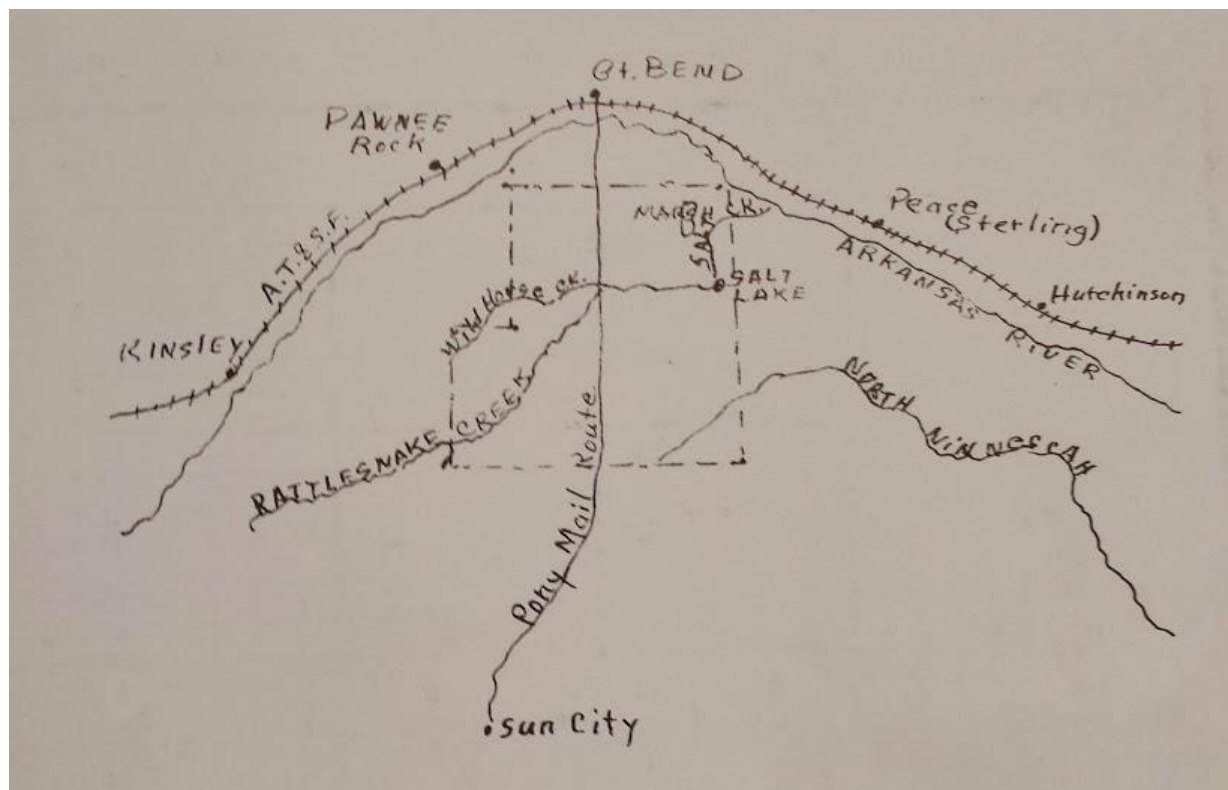


Figure 1. An illustration of early Stafford County drawn by Frank L. Steele, C. 1950. Source: Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. Stafford County History 1870-1990, Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990.

⁹ Socolofsky, Homer, and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas, Second Edition*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. pg, 51, 62.

¹⁰ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas: Stafford County*. Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883. <www.kancoll.org.>



Figure 2: A map of Stafford County. C. 1983 Source: Source: Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. Stafford County History 1870-1990, Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990.

Now that we have a feel for the Seward area as it would have appeared to settlers, we are free to explore the early history of Seward and St. Francis Xavier Church. As we have seen, Stafford's valley land was readily available for cultivation, containing fertile soil and accessible water. Yet it is likely that at least one significant Seward-area settler didn't think so—at first anyways. He would later discover, though, that his first impressions were mistaken. This is his story:

Presumably in the pursuit of better opportunities, Edward William Dewey, born on September 29th in Collinsville, Connecticut, came with a colony of 60 from Wisconsin to Fossell, Kansas (later named Russell, Ks?) on April 15, 1871, to be received by nothing but Kansas soil, a Kansas Pacific Railroad section house, and a water tank.¹¹ The colony was sold its location by the Arizona Valley Stock Company of Barton County, who advertised for the railway and offered “low rates” to settlers for “the new lands to be had in Kansas.”¹² In the colony, each individual was offered one residential and one business lot; it had cost Dewey twenty dollars to join the colony.¹³ During their time residing in Fossell, Ed Dewey and a small party of men caught wind of “what a fine valley there was on the Arkansas River,” so they set out to see for themselves.¹⁴ On their expedition, the men encountered two settlers living near Walnut Creek in Barton County who delivered significant news: A.T. & S.F. Railroad surveyors were coming west, laying railway.¹⁵ These settlers told the small party of men the section number in which the Railroad surveyors could be located; hopeful, the party of men then set out to stake their claim on the potential railroad land near Walnut Creek.¹⁶ As a result, Dewey settled near Walnut Creek; unfortunately, the settlement would prove difficult and unsuccessful.

After experiencing in 1871 what Dewey referred to as the “coldest [winter] I have ever experienced in this country,” “almost freezing to death,” “close encounters with wolves,” a

¹¹ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹² Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹³ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹⁴ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹⁵ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹⁶ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

“major crop failure” in 1872, and living on “buffalo” and “garden,” Dewey abandoned his settlement near Walnut Creek and moved to Great Bend, Kansas, where he worked as a printer for the *Great Bend Register*.¹⁷

In Great Bend, Dewey conversed with a man who would greatly impact the course of his life: Joe Walter.¹⁸ While Ed Dewey was in Great Bend working for Great Bend Register, Joe Walter convinced Ed to become interested in the Seward Land Company, which was south of the Arkansas River.¹⁹ Be that as it may, Dewey—cognizant of his first failure—was inferably not easily convinced because the land south of the Arkansas River was considered unfavorable. As Ed put it, “[the] Land south of [the] Arkansas [River] was called the ‘Great American Desert’ and was not considered fit for farming.”²⁰ Nevertheless, conceivably after some convincing, Dewey bought a quarter section of land in the spring of 1877 and moved to a claim located on Twp. 21, Sec. 20, Range 13 in the Seward Township of Stafford County, a move that greatly impacted the rest of Ed’s life.²¹

Settlement in the Seward area was difficult, but Dewey, unlike his first attempt at settlement in Kansas, would faithfully persist to see the area grow. Exhibiting profound wisdom in the following passage, Dewey encapsulates the faithful resilience of his early Seward-area peers, the arduousness of their shared experiences, and their appreciation for the opportunity of a better life:

¹⁷ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹⁸ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

¹⁹ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

²⁰ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

²¹ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

They brought their few worldly belongings in lumbering wagons, pulled by faithful horses, or plodding oxen.[sic] They faced the heat and wind, trackless prairie, blizzards, and cruel drouth.[sic] They lived through sickness without doctors, hunger without food, bitter cold without adequate fuel, they built homes and they stayed. From the loneliness of the plains, they developed a depth of character and faith for strength in time of need and a deep appreciation of the glory of a free life.²²

The following statement delivered by John Keenan, a descendant of early Seward-area settlers who was born in Seward in 1939, resembles Dewey's sentiments: "People [early Seward residents] needed faith to get by.... Life was difficult."²³ Despite the hardships of early settlement life, Dewey remained to see the population of Stafford county rise from two in 1872 to 446 in 1885 in the Seward township area alone.²⁴ But Dewey would do more than just faithfully persist to see growth: Ed along with others would soon play a key role in the collaboration for a town site.

I'll say more about this collaboration in a moment. For the time being, we should glimpse into the story of an influential early Seward-area family: a family that played a significant role in priming the Seward area for development through the provision of trade, mail services, and, albeit tenably less significant, a name.²⁵

The Martin Winslow Gates settled a farm two miles east of present day Seward from Vermont in the spring of 1877, desiring to give his children "more and better opportunities"; his wife and children joined him later in the fall.²⁶ Taking advantage of their opportunities, the Gates farm, located about 12 miles south of Great Bend and about 12 miles north of St. John, served as

²² Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*. Stafford County Historical Museum.

²³ John Keenan, *Interview*.

²⁴ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History 1870-1990*, Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990. pg. 140-141.

²⁵ Perhaps Seward's name played a more significant role in its development than I'm aware of; I don't, however, want to say that the name 'Seward' wasn't significant to the community.

²⁶ The Gates, Document. Stafford County Historical Museum

a “halfway station”; that is, they provided food, clothing, lodging and care for animals to the trade carriers of a trail approximating today’s highway 281.²⁷ The haulers on this route took two trips a week, and significantly the Gates’ station was no doubt drawing resources into the Seward area.²⁸ Also significantly, due to its opportune location, the first Post Office in northern Stafford County opened in a sod house on the Gates’ farm during the April of 1878. With mail already coming from Great Bend twice a week, Martin Gates served as the first Postmaster officially on the 20th day of September, 1878.²⁹

The provision of trade and mail services was a key component in the development of early Kansas communities.³⁰ So with help from the Gates family, the Seward area was further primed for growth.

Less significantly, the Gates’ played an influential role in the naming of Seward. Proximate to the opening of the Post Office, Gates wrote Washington D.C. with a request to name the Post Office, which reportedly Gates named after Seward, the Secretary of State in President Lincoln’s cabinet.³¹ Washington apparently granted the request and subsequently, the

²⁷ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 140; Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 141.

²⁸ The Gates, Document. Stafford County Historical Museum

²⁹ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 140; The Gates Document. Stafford County Historical Museum.

³⁰ Dr. M.J. Morgan. *History 533: Class Lecture*. Kansas State University. Fall, 2013.

³¹ Charles, Keller, Document. Stafford County Historical Museum; Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost--Found--Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 2. "Seward"*. The Print Schop 1710 M. Street, Belleville, Kansas 66935-3045, 2010; You may have noticed that Ed Dewey bought land from the *Seward* Land Company in the spring of 1877, and that this is about a year before Gates opened the Post Office. These might look like two conflicting accounts regarding the origin of the name ‘Seward’ with respect to the naming of the Post Office, and subsequently Seward Township and Seward. However, it’s conceivable that Gates influenced the naming of the Seward Land Company when he first arrived in the spring of 1877. Thus, there’s no obvious reason to think that these two accounts are incompatible.

township of Seward was named after the Gates' Post Office.³² (Tragically, Martin Gates died in 1882 of Pneumonia; he was buried in St. John cemetery. A month before he died he wrote to an uncle back in Vermont saying “I still think the future of this country will be all I ever expected of it and more.” Eventually, George Wetig bought the Post Office and relocated it within the town of Seward.³³)

Keeping the Gates’ significant contributions in mind, let’s return to the collaboration for a town site. It starts with demand.

Possessing “marvelous soil, a healthful climate, pure water,” and “a wonderful future in store,” the once unprepossessing Seward area was becoming recognized as an attractive location for flocking Kansas immigrants in the 1880’s.³⁴ And with an increasing population, no train, and many area members forced to travel 14 to 20 miles for trade and supplies, the need for a town site began to escalate.³⁵ Yet after a near-decade of growth in the Seward area—a decade bringing trade, a Post Office and many settlers from the east—the Seward area continued to lack a town site, but not for long.³⁶ The Seward area was ripe for the birth of a town, and its desire for one would soon be answered.

Relieving pressure, the catalysts for a town came in the forms of a conversation and a railway. In the spring of 1886, railway construction entered the southeast corner of Stafford

³² Seward Independent News: excerpt, Thursday, April 4, 1940. Stafford County Historical Museum.

³³ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990. pg. 140.

³⁴ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 143.

³⁵ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 143.

³⁶ Seward Independent News excerpt, Thursday, April 4, 1940.

County, coming from Conway Springs, Kansas and heading northwest towards Larned, Kansas.³⁷

Listen to the story bound to ensue:

The demand for a town in the north part of Stafford County assumed practical form on the 5th, of July, 1886, when several of the citizens of Seward, Lincoln and Douglas townships were at St. John celebrating the nation holiday. There they were interviewed by Mr. Frank Cox, who informed them that if the people of the northern part of the county [Stafford] would go to work earnestly, they could procure a railway through their section. The result was the calling of a meeting at the Eden Valley Schoolhouse, in Seward Township, July 9, 1886. At this meeting it was decided to locate the depot on section 31, township 21, range 13, owned by George Wetig.³⁸

The stage was set.

Collaboratively and earnestly, work they did. It appears that the area had been eagerly waiting for the Denver, Memphis, and Atlantic Railway to come, and that the location of the townsite would depend on the location of the railway and “the cooperation” of neighboring townships.³⁹ Yielding a tentative location for the town and the collaboration of the community, on April 26, 1887, Ed Dewey, Joe Walter, and George Wetig could finally begin drafting a plat map for Seward, Kansas; the plat was drawn for land that George Wetig donated.⁴⁰ The Seward Company Town promptly organized on May 7, 1887, with George Wetig serving as president; E.W. Dewey serving as vice president; W.R. Gray serving as Secretary; Joseph A. Walter serving as treasurer; and J.J. Burns, D.J. Thayer, S.H. Malory, and C.C. Black serving as directors.⁴¹

³⁷ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*. Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 28.

³⁸ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 143.

³⁹ Timothy F. Wenzl. *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*. Seward, Kansas, 2011, pg. 28.

⁴⁰ Dewey Family. *Antecedents of Edward W. Dewey of Seward, Kansas*”, Stafford County Historical Museum.

⁴¹ Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost--Found--Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 2. "Seward"*. The Print Schop 1710 M. Street, Belleville, Kansas 66935-3045, 2010.

Forthwith, on May 12, 1887, a day after printing advertisements for the sale of lots, the Seward Town Company opened for sale.⁴² Three thousand dollars' worth of lots was sold on the opening day and 1,995 dollars' worth was given away—George Wetig and the Seward Town Company charitably donated block 7 to the St. Francis Xavier Church parish.⁴³ (The city of Seward wouldn't be incorporated until 1928).⁴⁴ In what I'm sure was an awesome site for the company town, the first railway tracks were laid through Seward on June 18, 1887 by the Denver, Memphis, and Atlantic Railway division of the Missouri Pacific Railway.⁴⁵ The community surrounding the Seward Town Company had worked earnestly, collaborated in designating a favorable location for the train depot (a location that drew in trade from a 12 mile radius), and together they actualized their desire for a town.⁴⁶

It might be worth briefly noting that company towns were known for cheap housing—in both cost and quality—and a strong sense of community.⁴⁷ Below are a photo of early Seward and a photo of a plat of early Seward, respectively.

⁴² Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost--Found--Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 2.* "Seward". The Print Schop 1710 M. Street, Belleville, Kansas 66935-3045, 2010.

⁴³ Seward Independent News excerpt, "Thursday, April 4, 1940", Stafford County Historical Museum, 1940.

⁴⁴ Seward Independent News excerpt, "Thursday, April 4, 1940", Stafford County Historical Museum, 1940.

⁴⁵ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 145.

⁴⁶ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 144; Timothy F. Wenzl. *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 28.

⁴⁷ Dr. M.J. Morgan. *History 533: Class Lecture*. Kansas State University. Fall, 2013.



Figure 3: Seward, Kansas, C. 1889. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.

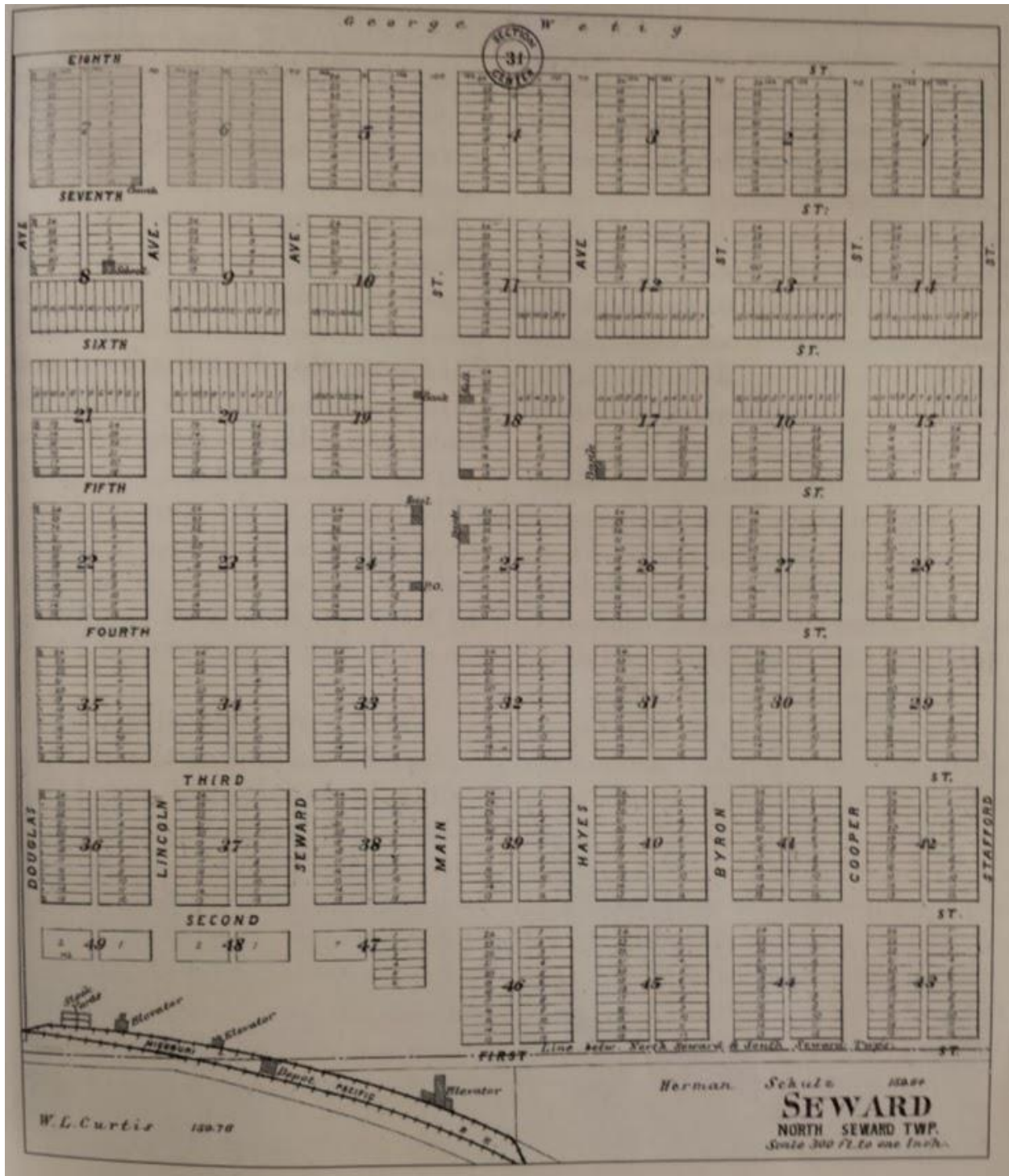


Figure 4: Plat of Seward, from the Standard Atlas of Stafford County, Published by Geo. A. Ogle and Co., Chicago, C. 1904. Source: *Timothy F. Wenzl, A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 27.*

As the nascent company town continued to coalesce, the first train rolled through almost a year after the catalyzing conversation with Mr. Cox, on July 4, 1887—undoubtedly a cause for celebration.⁴⁸ Success would continue for Seward; look at the following business directory taken from the Seward Independent on December 18, 1887, which reveals a vibrant, young economy: a bank, a livery and sale stable, a three dry goods and grocery stores, a blacksmith shop, two real estate shops, a lumber yard, two contractors, a plasterer, a physician, a newspaper, a drugstore, a billiard hall, a barber shop, a shoe shop, a coal yard, a flour and feed shop, a grain dealer, and a Missouri-Pacific depot, pictured below.⁴⁹ Seward appeared to have a promising future, probably particularly so while in the 1910's.⁵⁰ On the next couple pages are a photograph of the Missouri-Pacific train depot, a photograph of Seward's Main Street in 1900, a mule-powered harvester, and the McGuinty house build in 1917, respectively.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Seward Independent News excerpt. "Thursday, April 4, 1940", Stafford County Historical Museum, 1940.

⁴⁹ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 146.

⁵⁰ M.J. Morgan. *Kansas History 533: class lecture notes*. Fall, 2013.

⁵¹ I had the wonderful opportunity to visit the McGuinty house thanks to Mike McGuinty, who still occupies the house, and it is an impressive house—to say the least.



Figure 5: Train Depot, C. 1910. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 6: Main Street Seward, Kansas, C. 1900. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 7: Mule-powered harvester, C.1903. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 8: A photograph of the McGuinty home, c. 1917. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.

The train depot, demonstrating the collaborative power and resilience of the community, furnished a location for the company town. Still, there is another structure that seemingly furnished the town's identity, this time more specifically demonstrating ecumenical collaboration and Catholic resilience of the community: St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. In order to understand what I claim the church bell demonstrates, we must now investigate the early story of the Church. And similarly, it starts with need.

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, much like the town site of Seward, was deeply desired by its surrounding community; in fact, the story of the church's actualization unsurprisingly parallels Seward's. Listen to this excerpt: "The growth and development of the Catholic Church in Stafford County coincided with the influx of Catholic settlers who moved into the area between 1876-1885."⁵² During this influx of Catholics, the need for a church increased also, so much like the Seward area desired a town, they desired a Catholic Church.

The constituency who would later form St. Francis Xavier parish first started celebrating Mass in 1884; they met in schools and homes under Father Epp of Ellinwood.⁵³ By 1885, the congregation made a push towards establishing a Catholic church building and a cemetery.⁵⁴ With hopes to construct the proposed church building, the fledgling congregation began to fundraise through community picnics and "several events."⁵⁵ Subsequently, on October 1, 1885, George Wetig courteously sold Bishop Louis M. Fink, O.S.B of Leavenworth, five acres of land

⁵² Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 27.

⁵³ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*, 1990. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, pg. 148.

⁵⁴ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*, 1990. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, pg. 149.

⁵⁵ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 27-28.

for 75 dollars; there were 34 Catholic families that the parish drew in at the time.⁵⁶ On March 14, 1886, the congregation of Catholics in Stafford County collaborated and agreed to contribute to support a priest, with the caveat that Mass be celebrated in Seward once a month.⁵⁷ At this point, St. Francis Xavier Church considered itself a parish.⁵⁸ Yet troublingly they still lacked a church building; that is, they still lacked a symbol of their Catholic faith. (The Parish wouldn't officially take the name St. Francis Xavier Church until December 2, 1916, after George Wetig passed.⁵⁹)

The new parish resiliently met in houses and schools for three fruitful years. At the onset of this period, the parishioners were imaginably much like everyone else in the area, eagerly waiting for the railway to come to town. After the train did arrive in 1887, the Catholic congregation in 1888 grew in numbers from about 34 families—both Irish and German—to 80 families, and was rapidly on the rise through immigration from eastern states.⁶⁰ Considering that many early families in Seward came from Illinois (including the McGintys in 1878 and the Keenans in 1883) and Iowa (including A.J. Sears in 1876, the Chadds in 1882, Kellers in 1883 and Huffords in 1885), this increase in Catholic congregants may have been the result of chain migration, in which families—especially families from Iowa or Illinois—migrated to a new location to join friends and family.⁶¹ One can imagine that many of new Seward residents were

⁵⁶ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 27-28.

⁵⁷ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 29.

⁵⁸ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 29.

⁵⁹ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 29.

⁶⁰ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 29-30.

⁶¹ Carol K Coburn. *Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868-1945*. University Press of Kansas, 1992, pg. 14; Ella Chadd. *Seward, News: Thursday April 4, 1940*. Stafford County Historical Museum, 1940.

coming for the opportunity of a better life with friends and family. Still, with an increasing number of Catholics in the area, the desire for a church building surely deepened. The following is a picture of the Keenan youth in 1950.



Figure 9: A photograph of the Keenan Youth, c. 1950. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.

After years of waiting, and with much support from the community, the parish ultimately received the church they had hoped for. When the plat map for Seward was set through the collaboration of the surrounding community, George Wetig and the Seward Town Company donated block seven to Bishop John. H. Hennessey of Wichita on October 15, 1889 for the building of a Catholic church (the land previously donated would be used as a cemetery for the Church).⁶² A few months later, the church was built, with the community collaborating in a

⁶² Timothy F. Wenzl., *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 29.

notably ecumenical fashion—perhaps a trait of a company town.⁶³ This section from the Seward Independent on December 26, 1889 grabs the excitement and ecumenical tone of the moment:

The first Catholic Church building in Seward was dedicated by father M.J Walsh of Kingman. This speaks well for Seward and vicinity; there being quite a number of Catholics here, they concluded to put up a house of their own, and right well have they succeeded; we now have a nice church building that would be an honour to many an older and larger place and our people are justly proud of it, both Catholics and non-Catholics. Everybody is invited to come out Sunday and listen to the services.⁶⁴

The wood-frame church was dedicated on the Sunday December 29, in 1889, and measured 22 feet by 42 feet with a steeple 21 feet high; worth marking, both Catholics and non-Catholics helped with labor and finances.⁶⁵ Exemplifying the ecumenical spirit of the event, Ed Dewey was one of those who helped build that church building; Ed was not a member of the parish.⁶⁶ The wooden-frame church served the parish and the community for 27 years before it was replaced with the currently standing brick church building, which was dedicated on Tuesday, March 14th, 1916.⁶⁷ On the following page, there is a picture of the original wood-frame church, and then on the next page there is a picture of a congregation in front of the new brick St. Francis Xavier Church and a picture of the original wood-frame church alongside the new brick church, respectively.

⁶³ M.J. Morgan. *Kansas History 533: class lecture notes*. Fall, 2013.

⁶⁴ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 31.

⁶⁵ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 31.

⁶⁶ Ed Dewey, Document. Stafford County Historical Museum.

⁶⁷ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 35.



Figure 10: The original wood-building church, C 1889. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 11: Congregants in front of the new St. Francis Xavier Church, C.1916. Source: John Keenan.



Figure 12: The old, wood-frame Church alongside the new, brick Church, C. 1920 Source: Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011, pg. 61.

Now climactically, we are approaching the part of the story we have been preparing for: the story of St. Francis Xavier Church's bell. In a manner I could not hope to replicate, this letter from George Wetig to the 'Kansas Catholic' on January 9th, 1890 paints a detailed portrait of St. Xavier Francis parish's early story and introduces us to the bell, telling a story that powerfully demonstrates the ecumenical collaboration and Catholic resilience of the early Seward community:

...We settled her about six or seven years ago, and made up our minds to stay her for better or for worse. One thing of course troubled us very much like the rest of our Catholic friends, and that was the great want of the consolation of our old religion. We have the attendance of a priest occasionally, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered up for us. We have had several different priests sent to us during the last six or seven years, but still there was something wanting; no church, no proper place for a priest to celebrate Mass and instruct us or our dear children. Many an attempt each of our different

pastors made at building a church; but failed to do so. Finally we gave up all hopes of ever seeing a church amongst us, and so did our pastors.

About four months ago it pleased our Bishop, the Rt. Rev. J.J. Hennessey (sic), to take the priest we then had away, and give us the attendance of another, the Rev. Father Walsh, of Kingman. He made his first visit to us on a weekday and celebrated Mass for us in a storeroom. After Mass, we listened to one of the finest lectures from this good priest that we have heard for many a year. He told us not to be discouraged; that everything was alright so long as the faith was with us; and that if we had not sufficient means at present to build a church, that God would give it to us before long, and told us that God's ways are wonderful. He told us that he would have us worshipping in a church of our own before that day two months and to our great astonishment his word was verified.

He set about the building. He set about the building of a church without delay, visiting everyone throughout the county; he spend many a wearisome day and night and now, today he has the happiness to offer up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in one of the finest little churches in the diocese of Wichita. He finished it inside and out in less than two months, built a beautiful altar, railing and organ gallery, and a steeple twenty-one feet high. On the last Sunday of December, (December 29, 1889), he offered up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in it for the first time, which was a High Mass, having brought with him from Kingman members of the choir to assist at services. The church was crowded that morning, not only with overjoyed Catholics, but with people of all the different religious denominations. At the recent visit of his Bishop the RT. Rev. J.J. Hennessey, to Kingman, he consecrated for him [Father Walsh] the finest and largest bell at present in the Wichita diocese. This new bell we understood is by far superior to any yet in the diocese, and was made at the of the McShane foundry, Baltimore. It can be heard at a distance of ten miles on a summer day. The great part of the price of this magnificent bell was given to father Walsh by his non-Catholic friends. It weighs 1000 pounds.⁶⁸

At this point, we can properly appreciate the church bell of St. Francis Xavier Church. As I have attempted to portray in this document, the development of Seward has demonstrated the community's collaborative capability, and resilience; within this town, the development of St. Francis Xavier Church has demonstrated, more specifically, the ecumenical collaboration and Catholic resilience of the community; and within this Church, there was placed a bell that

⁶⁸ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 31-32.

powerfully captures it all. One can only imagine what it meant to the early Seward Community to hear that bell ringing for miles—*De Angelus*.⁶⁹

Seward's story does not end here, needless to say. What becomes of Seward, Kansas, St. Francis Xavier Church and the bell? It had not been easy for the community up to this point, and it would not always be easy in the future.

The company town continued to grow, and somewhere along the line, develop a distinctly Irish Catholic identity; sadly though, this growth would not last.⁷⁰ During its approximate peak in 1920, Seward contained three grocery stores, two hotels, a bank, a butcher, a hardware store, woodman hall, a dance hall over Curtis barber grocery (with dances held once a week), two churches (one Methodist), a ballpark (located on George Wetig's pasture), a baseball team, a public school, three grain elevators, a bowling alley, pool hall (where the men played pool and cards; the women stayed in the store to take care of the children), a garage, a Post Office, the Farmers Telephone Company, and a livery barn.⁷¹ Notwithstanding, as the 1920's progressed, difficulties arose. Being an agricultural community in Kansas, Seward odds-on peaked around 1920 before the challenges of the 1920's—namely, a post-war agricultural depression, rapid social change, motor vehicles and population shifts; then came the 1930's with the Great Depression (1929-41) and the Dust Bowl (1933-37).⁷²

⁶⁹ “V. Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.”

⁷⁰ Father Rene Guesnier, *Interview*; John Keenan, *Interview*.

⁷¹ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 146.

⁷² United States Department of the Interior National Park Service. *National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form: Historic Agriculture-Related Resources of Kansas*. pg.21-31, March 1992. 11/2013

<http://www.kshs.org/resource/national_register/MPS/HistoricAgricultureRelatedResourcesofKSDraft_mps.pdf>; M.J. Morgan. *Kansas History 533: class lecture notes*. Fall, 2013.

Before we continue, I think it would be appropriate to highlight a few more-memorable moments for the maturing Seward community. One noteworthy event, of course, was the building of a stunning, new brick church building on March 16th, 1916—a church that to this day is used to serve the parish. Another highlight was the opening of a Catholic parochial school on January 18, 1922, which was operated by the sisters of St. Dominic from Great Bend; there were 28 students in the first classes; the school peaked at 63 students in 1935 but closed at the end of the school year of 1964-1965 with 48 students.⁷³ Still, another highlight was when the city of Seward was incorporated in 1928.⁷⁴ Certainly, a series of memorable events was the popular yearly Seward picnic. This is a brief description of the picnics:

One of the major fund raisers for the parish for many years was the Seward Picnic. The picnics started in 1911 as ice cream socials. They grew in popularity and drew thousands. In 1941, the ladies prepared: 500 chickens, 7 gallons of beans, 70 quarts of slaw, 100 pounds of baked ham, and 285 pies.⁷⁵

The picnics, traditionally scheduled on the first Wednesday of August, were held at various sites on the maple grove picnic grounds, which were owned by Frank McGinity.⁷⁶ These picnics included a dance pavilion, games, food, and drinks.⁷⁷ (The last picnic was held in 1954, as “the

⁷³ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 46; Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 148.

⁷⁴ Seward Independent News excerpt, “Thursday, April 4, 1940”, Stafford County Historical Museum, 1940.

⁷⁵ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 52.

⁷⁶ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 52.

⁷⁷ Father Rene Guesnier, Interview.

parish could no longer handle” the large gatherings.⁷⁸) And another series of memorable highlights had to have been the Seward Baseball team games. Fun picnic games being played are pictured below on the next page. On the next page there are a picture of the Baseball team and a picture of the Catholic School, respectively.



Figure 13: Women playing a game at the first Seward, Kansas Picnic, C. 1911. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.

⁷⁸ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 52.



Figure 14: Men playing a game at the first Seward, Kansas Picnic, C. 1911. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 15: The Seward Baseball team C. 1930. Source: *Stafford County Historical Museum*.



Figure 16: The Seward Catholic school. C. 1930. Source Source: Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, with rain shortages, crop failures, and damaged farm land due to wind erosion, were particularly hard on agricultural communities like Seward.⁷⁹

John Keenan's remark gives us a glance into the challenging time: "I remember in the early 1930's money was very scarce, so the parishioners of St. Francis Parish decided they could save money by burning wood instead of all coal."⁸⁰ Clearly times had been better in Seward.

Verisimilarly, a third contributor influencing Seward's economic decline was the motor vehicle; as suggested by Charles Keller, "Seward had big dreams in its early history, but as cars became more plentiful it faded until you see what is left of it today."⁸¹ The motor vehicle was a common cause of economic and populational decline in rural Kansas communities.⁸²

⁷⁹ James R. Shortridge. *The WPA guide to 1930's Kansas*. University Press of Kansas (Lawrence, original copyright 1939 by the Kansas Department of Education), 1984, pg. 16-17.

⁸⁰ John Keenan, *Interview*.

⁸¹ Charles, Keller, Document. Stafford County Historical Community.

⁸² M.J. Morgan. *Kansas History 533: class lecture notes*. Fall, 2013.

In spite of the challenges of the 20's and 30's, Seward resiliently persisted throughout the remainder of the 20th century. A plausible economic factor assisting Seward residents during the 1920's and 30's was oil; Stafford county land is rich in oil, and by 1929 much of North Seward Township was taken up in block leasing for oil companies.⁸³ Despite how, Seward maintained a population of around 100 people throughout most of the 20th century, and it hasn't been until the second part of the century that the population has seen a drastic decline.⁸⁴ There were 805 people living in the Seward Township in 1920, the large majority being rural-farm population; in 1930, there were 747 living in the Seward Township—616 of which were rural-farm population—and 127 living in Seward; in 1950, Seward had a population of 130; in 1960, Seward had a population of 92, with 280 living in the N. Seward Township; in 1980, there were 88 living in Seward, with 224 living in the N. Seward Township; Seward had a population of 64 in 2010, with 183 living in the N. Seward Township.⁸⁵

A Seward business directory from 1988 reveals persisting cornerstones of economic life: a grain elevator, G and A service station, Vickie's corner Cafe, a liquor store, Wayne's shop, Dave's automotive service, a Post Office, a Mayor (Bill Reddick), and a rural mail carrier (Nancy Ginest).⁸⁶ On July 20th, 1986, a centennial celebration of thanksgiving was held; it brought, "hundreds of friends and kin back home," and it was a "day never to be forgotten—a glorious break in a week of hot, humid weather—found all enjoying a delightfully cool day for

⁸³ Socolofsky, Homer and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Second Edition. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. pg. 48; Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 151.

⁸⁴ Father Rene Guesnier, *Interview*.

⁸⁵ United States Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing*. <<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>>; The census records appear to distinguish between North and South Seward Townships after the 1930 census, but not before.

⁸⁶ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 147.

the outdoor celebration.”⁸⁷ In the winter of 2013, Seward contained an operational grain elevator and a restaurant by the name of Mom’s Bar and Grill, which—as the locals will tell you—is worth a visit.⁸⁸

Then what about St. Francis Xaveri Church and the bell? As of today, December, 20th, 2013, St. Francis Xavier Parish continues to persist under the care of Father Guesnier, the resident Catholic priest. Father Rene Guesnier, O.S.B has served the parish in semi-retirement since 1995 and resides in the family home where he was born and raised—he was born in Seward, Kansas on April 18th, 1933.⁸⁹ Father Guesnier relays the current condition of St. Francis Xavier Church parish: “We now have a stable little *coetus fidelium* (group of faithful)...It is the only such one in our diocese and is the only regularly celebrated Latin Mass between Wichita and Denver.”⁹⁰ The church interior has recently been remodeled in 2008, and continues to look stunning; below is a picture of the newly renovated Church interior.⁹¹ The resilient little parish saw its 125th anniversary in 2011 and will continue to persist as long as Father Guesnier is able to serve.⁹² While the original bell donated to the St. Francis Xavier Church in 1890 has since been replaced (its whereabouts are unknown), during funerals and on Sundays, the bells in the belfry of St. Francis Xavier Church can still be heard ringing in Seward, Kansas.⁹³

⁸⁷ Stafford County Historical and Genealogical Society. *Stafford County History: 1870-1990*. Stafford County Museum Library, P.O. Box 249, Stafford KS, 67578, 1990, pg. 149.

⁸⁸ Anonymous Seward, Kansas residents, Interview

⁸⁹ Father Rene Guesnier, *Interview*; Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 58.

⁹⁰ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 25.

⁹¹ Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasquicentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 36.

⁹² Father Rene Guesnier, *Interview*.

⁹³ Father Rene Guesnier, *Interview*; Anonymous Seward, Kansas resident, *Interview*.

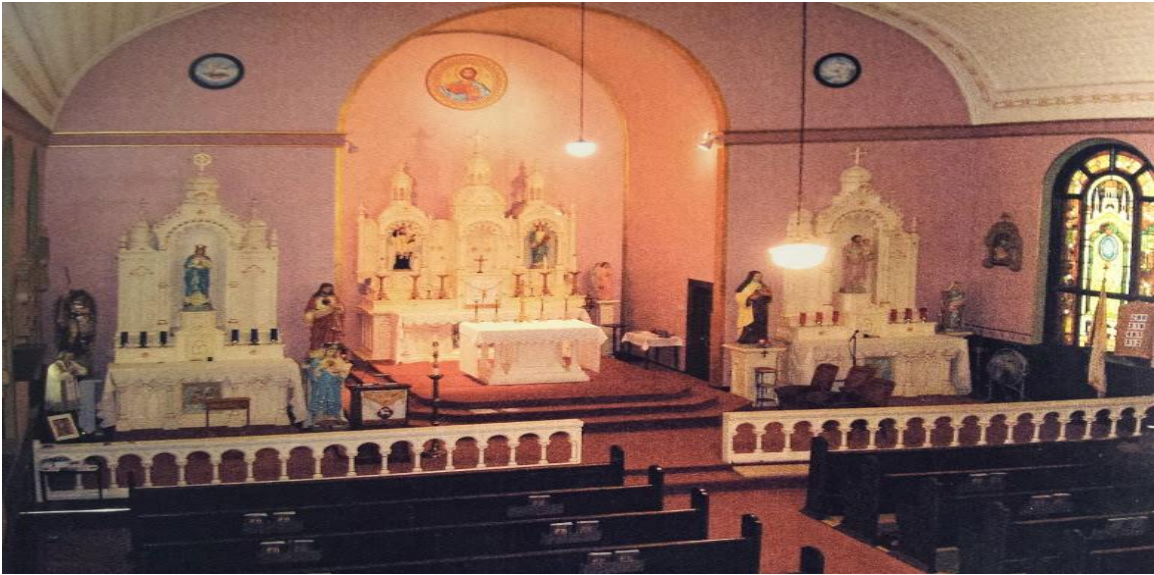


Figure 17: A picture of the remodeled church building, C. 2008. Source: Timothy F. Wenzl, *A Quasiqucentennial History of St. Francis Xavier Parish: 1886-2011*, Seward, Kansas. 2011 pg. 38.

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