

The Lost Irish Catholic Communities of Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas: Lillis,  
Blaine, and Holy Cross

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This study of an Irish settlement area that included parts of two counties is based on field work,  
photographs, original church sources, and an investigation of cultural traditions.

It is 1845. Ireland's potato plants are rotting in the fields, their withered stalks disintegrating into black bile that covers the Irish countryside in reeking slime. With their staple crop wiped out almost literally overnight, Ireland's people are starving by the thousands. Disease and homelessness are rampant, and the country's people are faced with no other choice than to leave the land they love by any means they can afford. The famine lasts for seven years, a time of unprecedented devastation that the Irish refer to as "The Great Hunger," or in Gaelic, "An Gorta Mor." By the time it is over, nearly a million people are dead and a million more have left Ireland forever, reducing the country's population by a third.<sup>1</sup>

Among the thousands of Irish refugees who would find their way to America's shores and become the country's first "huddled masses," a surprising number, small but traceable, emigrated westward, eventually founding colony towns on the bluestem prairies of northeast Kansas. Three of these towns, Lillis in Marshall County and Blaine and Holy Cross in Pottawatomie County, were all stamped by their first Irish settlers with cultural and religious traditions that endured throughout the lifespans of the towns. The enduring Irish Catholic influence seen in these towns is an example of Zelinsky's Rule of First Effective Settlement, a principle established by cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky that states that the first ethnic group to settle an area will stamp it with characteristics that will endure.<sup>2</sup>

All three of these communities are located in the glaciated region of northeast Kansas. The primary feature of this region is rolling hills covered with bluestem prairie grass.<sup>3</sup> In the days before modern settlement, this region would have been relatively devoid of vegetation besides prairie grass, except for in low-lying stream, creek, and riverbed areas, where cottonwoods are the primary trees. Glacial deposits left here during the last glacial advance have contributed to very fertile soil that is well-suited to the diversified agriculture that would be key in sustaining the settlers who came to this part of Kansas.<sup>4</sup> Eastern Kansas is located in the humid continental zone of North America.<sup>5</sup> This means that it gets sufficient moisture for

cropland agriculture, but also that it can experience climactic extremes. The summers in this part of Kansas are very hot and the average temperature throughout the winter months is below freezing. The major natural water sources of Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties are the Big Blue and Little Blue Rivers which run south through Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties to their confluence with the Kansas River. The Kansas flows which runs east towards Missouri and forms the southern boundary of Pottawatomie County.<sup>6</sup>

### **Lillis (Irish Creek)**

Between 1856 and 1860, a group of approximately 20 Irish settlers made their homes along a small stream in Cleveland Township in Southeastern Marshall County in northeast Kansas.<sup>7</sup> The present location of their settlement is approximately six miles east of Kansas Highway 99 and just south of 27<sup>th</sup> Road, between Bobcat and Cyclone Lanes.<sup>8</sup> They settled along the south fork of the Black Vermillion River and named the stream, along with the cluster of log cabins they built on its banks, Irish Creek.<sup>9</sup> Around their homesteads, they planted trees that would welcome travelers to their settlement “like a dream after passing over many miles of uninhabited prairie, seeing no one.”<sup>10</sup> The new arrivals to Irish Creek had carried with them over the prairie a strong Catholic faith. In the earliest days of the settlement, the spiritual needs of the settlers were served by traveling Jesuit and Benedictine priests from the nearby towns of St. Marys and Atchison.<sup>11</sup>

The residents of Irish Creek did not immediately build a church building, so Mass was celebrated in settlers’ homes. It is believed that the first Mass at Irish Creek was celebrated in 1858 in the home of Hubert Burke, one of the first settlers, and officiated by Father DuMortier, a Jesuit.<sup>12</sup> The first resident priest to arrive in Irish Creek was Father William Fitzgerald, a native of County Limerick, Ireland, in 1865.<sup>13</sup> In 1872, Father Fitzgerald oversaw the construction of a

church in the northeast quarter of section 20 in Cleveland Township, which the parishioners named for St. Joseph.<sup>14</sup> The residents of Irish Creek provided many of the rather primitive amenities for this first church themselves, demonstrating how committed they were to establishing a central place of worship in their settlement. The altar was an old dry goods box, and the settlers brought seats from their wagons in to use as makeshift pews.<sup>15</sup> In 1866, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Colwell deeded four acres of land to St. Joseph's to be used for the cemetery. This original parcel of land is still part of St. Joseph's cemetery today, and the oldest tombstones there note the birthplaces in Ireland of some of the town's first settlers, as seen below in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** A photograph of the tombstone of Peter and Catherine Brannan, some of the first settlers in Irish Creek, in St. Joseph's cemetery, Lillis, KS. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 15, 2013. The tombstone states the Brannans were native of Roscommon, Ireland. Tombstones noting the home counties in Ireland of Irish Creek's first residents are very common in St. Joseph's cemetery.

Irish Creek quickly became an increasingly important religious center in southern Marshall and northern Pottawatomie Counties, with two circuit rider priests establishing their

headquarters at the parish from the early 1870's to early 1880's.<sup>16</sup> St. Joseph's had a parish membership of 80 families by 1888, and by 1903, the parish had also built a church hall for hosting social functions.<sup>17</sup> On October 29, 1906, the town of Lillis was established. It had sprung up around a new line of the Union Pacific Railroad that ran from Topeka to Marysville and was platted a half mile north and a mile east of Irish Creek.<sup>18</sup> The Irish Creek council of the Knights of Columbus was also established in that year.<sup>19</sup> By about 1911, the St. Joseph's church building was decaying and the need for a new church was apparent. Lillis was a thriving community by this time, and it was a hot debate whether the new church would be built in the new town or remain at the original Irish Creek settlement site. The parishioners eventually decided by vote to leave the new church at the original site. Construction for the new church began in 1912, but hard times prevented it from being finished until 1916.<sup>20</sup> St. Joseph's church at the original Irish Creek town site, as it looks today, can be seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** A photograph of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Lillis, KS, 2013. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 15, 2013. The church was completed at the original Irish Creek town site in 1916.

Though Lillis was established as a railroad town, it quickly absorbed the Irish Catholic customs brought by the first settlers to Irish Creek. The school in Lillis was taught by

Benedictine nuns and offered a half hour of religious instruction each day.<sup>21</sup> As Lillis grew, it more or less absorbed the Irish Creek settlement, and today the area that made up both towns is usually referred to simply as Lillis. Several German families joined the original Irish settlers in the area about 1890, and more German settlers followed throughout the 1900's. By 1965 the membership of St. Joseph's Parish was about 50 percent Irish and 50 percent German heritage, though a few descendants of the first Irish settlers of Irish Creek did remain.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 3.** A photograph of the sign welcoming visitors to Lillis, KS, 2013. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 15, 2013. Though the town is almost completely gone, this sign is an example of how the influence of the original Irish settlers has remained strong in Lillis.

In 2010, St. Joseph's Parish closed and its members dispersed to churches in Frankfort, Blue Rapids, and Blaine, but the Irish Catholic heritage of the area is still prominent. A stone sign welcoming visitors to the almost-vanished town of Lillis, as seen below in Figure 3, features a shamrock accompanied by a leprechaun, and the town's claim to fame now is an annual St. Patrick's Day parade held on the Saturday closest to St. Patrick's Day each year. The parade can be counted on to draw a sizeable and raucous crowd.

It is in this annual celebration that the influence of the first Irish settlers to this community is most prominent. Anyone who sits on the tailgate of a truck (probably holding a

canned beverage securely wrapped in a coozie proclaiming, “I spent St. Patrick’s Day at the Lillis Tavern”) watching the parade of golf carts, tractors, horses, and even a few alpacas repeatedly circling the one block that makes up Lillis today would be hard-pressed to deny that the first Irish settlers of the town have had an enduring influence.

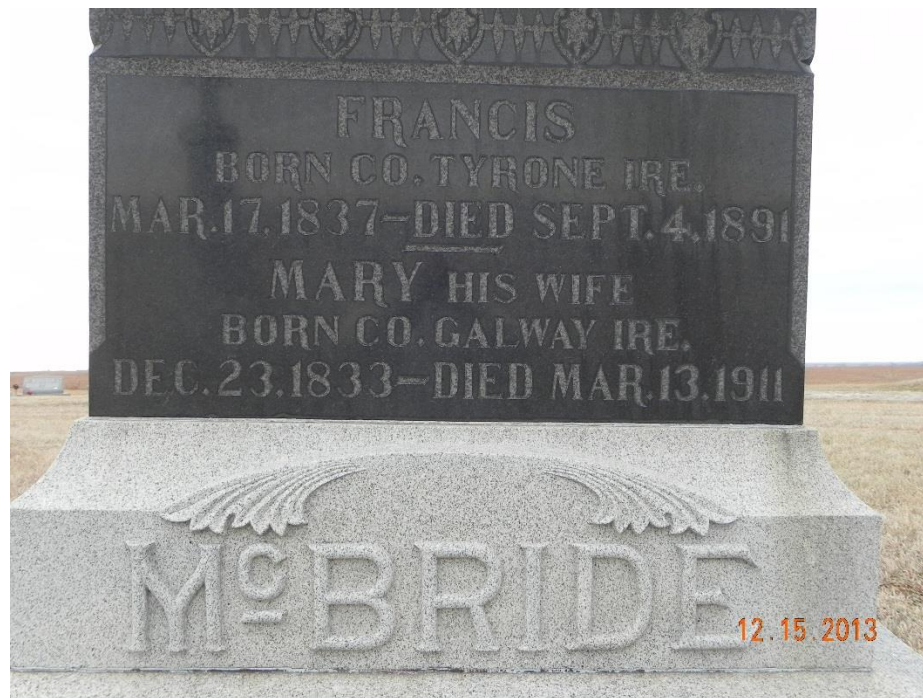
### **Blaine (Butler City)**

Blaine is located at the intersections of Kansas Highways 16 and 99 in the southern part of Clear Creek Township in northern Pottawatomie County.<sup>23</sup> Like Lillis, Blaine was settled initially by Irish Catholics. The town was founded by a colony of Irish emigrants from a poor Irish neighborhood of St. Louis known as the “Kerry Patch.”<sup>24</sup> Many of these people or their family members had originally immigrated to America during the potato famine and then slowly moved westward. Blaine was officially platted at tier 6 south, ranges 9 and 10 east on October 14, 1879.<sup>25</sup> The community was originally named Butler City after Father T. Ambrose Butler, an Irish-born Catholic priest who conceived the idea for a colony project after witnessing the impoverished squalor his countrymen were living in, back in St. Louis.<sup>26</sup> Bluff Creek, a small stream that runs east and west through the town, would have been the main source of water for the first inhabitants. The town’s name was changed because another town called Butler City already existed in Kansas, which resulted in frequent mix-ups with the postal service.<sup>27</sup>

The first Irish settlers in Blaine arrived penniless and largely uneducated, a plight they shared with the majority of America’s urban Irish, but they brought with them a tradition of strong Catholic faith. One of the first orders of business the settlers attended to was building a church. A resident priest, Father Bernard Hudson, arrived in Blaine in 1880, and the first church was completed in 1881.<sup>28</sup> Father Hudson was serving St. Joseph’s in Lillis by 1881 as well.<sup>29</sup> The Church was named St. Columbkille’s, and an accompanying cemetery, Mount Calvary,



opened in 1885.<sup>30</sup> As in St. Joseph's cemetery, some of the oldest gravestones in Mount Calvary are for Blaine's first settlers. Note that they were born in various counties in Ireland, as seen below in Figure 4. A Catholic school where the children of Blaine could be educated in the faith opened in 1919.<sup>31</sup>



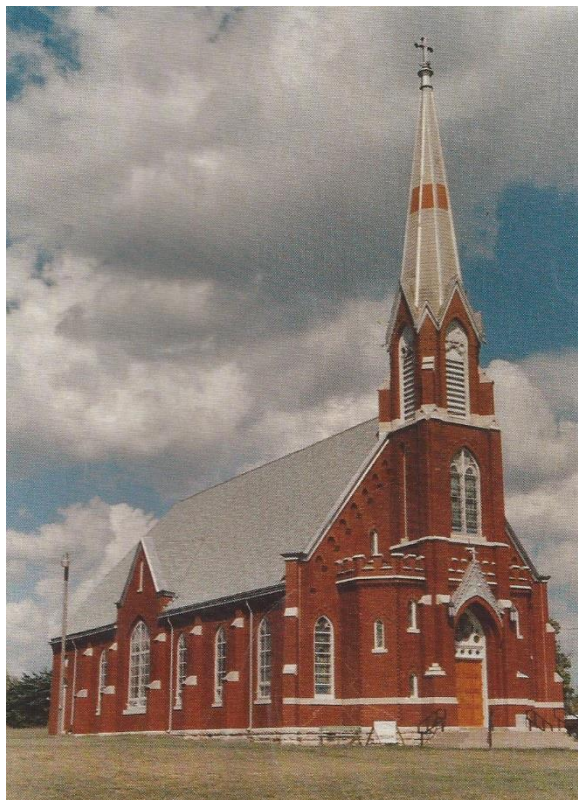
**Figure 4.** A photograph of the tombstone of Francis and Mary McBride, early residents of Blaine, Kansas in Mount Calvary Cemetery, Blaine, KS. 2013. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 15, 2013. The tombstone lists the McBrides as natives of County Tyrone and County Galway, Ireland. As in Lillis, it was common for early Irish residents of Blaine to list their hometowns on their tombstones.

A 1905 plat map of Clear Creek Township shows landowners with names like Donnelly, Ryan, McDonald, and McBride.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that though Irish Catholics made up the majority of Blaine and the surrounding area, these people did not exist in cultural isolation. Like their neighbors in Lillis, the original Irish settlers in Blaine were joined by a few German families throughout the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although there were fewer German settlers



around Blaine than Lillis, the 1905 plat map does show landowners in the area with names such as Eisenbeis and Moerke.<sup>33</sup>

The Church was the cultural, religious, and educational center of Blaine at its founding, and remains so today. The parishioners of St. Columbkille's were very proud of the new red brick, gothic-style church that was completed in 1908. This building is the church used today, and can be seen below in Figure 5. Blaine's Knights of Columbus Council was chartered in 1921, and remains active today.<sup>34</sup> St. Columbkille's has remained open through the parish consolidation that has occurred so after in rural areas and was the demise of St. Joseph's. Here, weekly Mass still is celebrated, although instead of a resident priest, the parish shares a priest with several other churches in the area.



**Figure 5.**  
A photograph of St. Columbkille's Catholic Church, Blaine, Kansas. 1981. SOURCE: 1981 St. Columbkille's Church Directory. Private collection of Tim and Lori Murray. Wheaton, KS. This church building is still used for weekly Mass in Blaine, and still looks much the same today.

The last Catholic school in Blaine was closed in 1966, but religious education classes are still taught once a week in the church hall. The church holds a baked potato feed every year for St. Patrick's Day, and reverence for the first Irish settlers in Blaine is a prominent feature in all of the Church's anniversary celebrations. In 2008, St. Columbkille's held a mass to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the currently-existing church building, which was dedicated to "our Irish ancestors, who, because of persecution and struggles in their homeland, came to America, bringing their strong and vibrant faith to live, love and inspire future generations."<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 6.**

A photograph of a Celtic-style cross on a gravestone erected in Mount Calvary Cemetery, Blaine, KS in 2012.

SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 15, 2013. The Irish symbolism of the cross is a clear sign that the influence of Blaine's first settlers has persisted today.

Today, the population of Blaine has dwindled to around 30, but most of the remaining citizens are descendants of the first settlers and have names like Finan, O'Connor, and McCormick. A gravestone erected in Mount Calvary Cemetery in 2012, pictured in Figure 6 above, features a large and ornate Celtic-style cross, a testament to the connection to their ancestors that the people in Blaine still feel. The persistence of Irish customs and the prevalence

of the Catholic faith that have remained in Blaine as the town has struggled to survive are clear evidence that the first settlers to Blaine indeed left a mark on the town.

## **Holy Cross**

The settlement of Holy Cross, Kansas is located in Emmet Township in southeastern Pottawatomie County, about a mile east of Highway 63 down Holy Cross Road. All that remains of the town today is a small cemetery, though it was once a vibrant, albeit short-lived, community. Like Lillis and Blaine, Holy Cross was settled initially by Irish Catholic immigrants, and the settlers' religious heritage was of primary importance in this town as well. Holy Cross Parish was established on August 26, 1881.<sup>36</sup> As in Lillis, Mass was said in the homes of the town's settlers before a church was built. The early residents of Holy Cross frequently celebrated Mass in the homes of the McNeive and Reilly families, two families whose influence on the town is obvious given the numerous tombstones bearing their names in the town's cemetery.<sup>37</sup> The people of Holy Cross had a completed church building by 1888, and in its heyday, the town had a post office, grocery store, butcher shop, school, general store, blacksmith shop, and saloon, in addition to the church and parish house.<sup>38</sup> A reproduction of how Holy Cross looked in its early days can be seen below in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.**

A photograph of a sign depicting how the town of Holy Cross looked in its early, prosperous days, 2013. Holy Cross, Kansas. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 16, 2013. Though the town once boasted a school, church, and several places of business, nothing remains of Holy Cross today except a cemetery.

Despite these early signs that Holy Cross would be prosperous, the settlement's decline had begun by about 1903. The Union Pacific Railroad built a line through Emmett and Delia to the north of Holy Cross, and the Holy Cross parish was soon split between those two towns.<sup>39</sup> The church was demolished in 1913; construction of a new one was begun a few years later. Though this building never functioned as a church, it now serves as a church hall.<sup>40</sup> The Irish inhabitants of Holy Cross were also joined by another ethnic group: Bohemians. An 1891 map of foreign settlement in Kansas clearly shows a small Bohemian settlement directly adjoining a larger Irish one in southern Pottawatomie County near St. Marys.<sup>41</sup>

A 1905 plat map of Emmet Township also illustrates the Bohemian influence in the area. Settlers with names like Rezac and Trezise are scattered among the Reillys, Joyces, and Mulligans.<sup>42</sup> Today, a few gravestones in the Holy Cross cemetery bear names such as Spacek, Kabamce, and Zhayuwnd. Several of the tombstones of the Bohemian residents of Holy Cross

bear death dates of 1887, so it is a reasonable assumption that the Bohemians arrived within a few years of the town's Irish founders. One of these stones can be seen in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** A photograph of a tombstone of a Bohemian resident of Holy Cross, Kansas, 2013. Holy Cross cemetery. Holy Cross, Kansas. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 16, 2013. The death date on this stone, 1887, indicates that Bohemian settlers arrived to Holy Cross soon after the town was founded.

Interestingly, while almost all of the tombstones of Irish settlers who were born in Ireland make a point of including the person's home county, there is no mention of the deceased person's home town or country on any of the Bohemian settlers' tombstones. It is impossible to know for sure why this is, but it could be that the Bohemian residents of Holy Cross had less of a desire to hold on to their original culture than their Irish Catholic counterparts.

Many tombstones of Irish residents of Holy Cross with death dates in the late 19-teens are engraved with harps, a well-known symbol of Ireland. One of these tombstones can be seen below. This illustrates that the people of Holy Cross felt a connection to their homeland through the last days of the settlement. While the communities of Lillis, Blaine, and Holy Cross are all but gone today, town histories paint a picture of the pattern of Irish Catholic settlement in Marshall and Pottawatomie Counties. Throughout these communities, the cultural and religious heritage of the first Irish Catholic settlers is apparent everywhere. While the towns these pioneers



established are no longer the bustling centers their founders once envisioned, the first Europeans left indelible stamps on the landscape, traces that endure today.



**Figure 9.**

A photograph of a gravestone in Holy Cross cemetery, Holy Cross, Kansas. 2013. SOURCE: Photograph by author. Dec. 16, 2013. The harp on this stone is a symbol of Ireland, and illustrates that the influence of the first Irish settlers to Holy Cross was still strong into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/introduction.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky. "Doctrine of First Effective Settlement." The Cultural Geography of the United States. Foundations of Cultural Geography. (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973.)

<sup>3</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas.* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Map 3, "Landforms of Kansas." Map 5, "Native Flora of Kansas." (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. "Landforms of Kansas."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Map 4, "Precipitation in Kansas."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Map 6, "Principle Surface Water Resources in Kansas."

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209410/page/11>

<sup>8</sup> "St. Joseph's Church and the Town of Lillis." *Marshall County Kansas.* (Published by Marshall County, KS. c. 2010) 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Centennial: St. Joseph Parish, Lillis, 1865-1965.* (Published by St. Joseph's Parish, 1965.) 3. Private collection of Lisa Moser. Wheaton, KS.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/3>

<sup>24</sup> *St. Columbkille's Catholic Church, Blaine, KS 1881-1981.* (Published by St. Columbkille's, 1981.) 3. Private collection of Bernice Murray. Blaine, KS.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Centennial: St. Joseph Parish, Lillis, 1865-1965.* 4.

<sup>30</sup> *St. Columbkille's Catholic Church, Blaine, KS 1881-1981.* 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/7>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *St. Columbkille's Catholic Church, Blaine, KS, 1881-1981.* 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Centennial Celebration of the St. Columbkille's Church Building, 1908-2008.* (Published by St. Columbkille's, 2008.) 6. Private collection of Bernice Murray. Blaine, KS.

<sup>36</sup> Memorial sign, Holy Cross Cemetery. Holy Cross, KS.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/220778/page/1>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/16>

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Memorial sign, Holy Cross Cemetery. Holy Cross, KS.

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/220778/page/1>

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/3>

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/7>

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209410/page/11>

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