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WHAT HATH OKARCHE TO DO WITH JERUSALEM? GERMAN CATHOLICISM &
OKARCHE, OKLAHOMA, 1892-1948

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WHAT HATH OKARCHE TO DO WITH JERUSALEM? GERMAN CATHOLICISM &
OKARCHE, OKLAHOMA, 1892-1948

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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For my parents, Ruben Hernandez, Sr., and Maria Cristina Rangel Vaquera; my brother, Rogelio
Guadalupe Hernandez; my grandparents, Manuel Rangel Ybarra and Maria Santos Vaquera
Moreno de Rangel; and my grandparents, Rogelio Hernandez Ramos and Ana Maria Hernandez
Escalera.

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Abstract

My thesis focuses on German Catholic settlement in the Oklahoma town of Okarche following the 1892 Cheyenne-Arapaho land run. Okarche is today recognized as a German Catholic town, however during the initial period of settlement that was not a certain outcome for the town. German Catholics were a distinct minority in Okarche with a very small presence within the town, however from 1892-1902 the rural regions surrounding Okarche attracted greater quantities of Germans, Lutheran and Catholic, through chain migration. The insular, parochial, and staunchly traditional nature of German Catholics then facilitated German Catholics to build up their own institutions in the town and eventually come to dominate Okarche in both the town and the rural regions. My thesis makes the case that the German Catholics of Okarche were rare because they were at the end of a long pattern of German migration, which provided all-or-nothing stakes to develop an insular community to preserve a perceived erosion and eventual loss of their culture, language, and religion.

I cover this history in four chapters. The first describes German Catholicism in Germany and the motivations for migration to the United States. It also examines German migration trends to show that before Okarche was settled, an eighty-year-long tradition of German Catholic settlement across the United States had already concentrated around the midwest. The chapter concludes with the arrival of Germans into Okarche and how German Catholics settled around the town and built their own churches and schools. The second chapter focuses on the German Catholic struggle to obtain a German-speaking priest and the subsequent conflicts between the German Catholics of Okarche and the bishop of the Vicariate of Oklahoma, Theophile Meerschaert. The third chapter focuses on the long era of Monsignor Zenon Steber, who led Okarche's Catholic community for over forty

years. The fourth and final chapter is broken up into two sections: anti-Catholicism in Oklahoma and how the German Catholics from Oklahoma managed to insulate themselves from the rampant anti-Catholic bigotry dominating the state.

Introduction

On the border of Oklahoma City and Moore, just west of Interstate 35, is a large structure reminiscent of the architecture of a mosque or Spanish building. With off-white brick walls, red clay tiled roof, two large domed bell towers, and a large dome just above the church's sanctuary, it is an imposing structure that dominates the local landscape of southern Oklahoma City and northern Moore. This building is a Catholic Shrine commemorating a missionary priest who was martyred in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala.¹ Why is there a Catholic Shrine in the Bible Belt dedicated to a priest who was killed in Guatemala? The shrine is dedicated to Blessed Stanley Rother, an Oklahoma priest who was killed by government paramilitaries in the highlands of Guatemala. Rother was not the only Catholic priest to be killed during the thirty-six-year-long Guatemalan Civil War, however the nature of his death holds great significance to the people of Oklahoma and the United States.

Rother was told he and other priests were on lists to be killed by the Guatemalan government by mid-January. After little more than two weeks of waiting, Rother and his associate then escaped to the United States, accompanied by other members of Oklahoma's Catholic community also on mission. He arrived in Oklahoma on January 29, 1981, being reunited with his family. Yet, Rother was tormented by the continued suffering of his people, those left in Santiago Atitlán. His conviction to serve his people extended well beyond his own scruples for his life, and after meeting with Oklahoma's Catholic authorities decided to return to Guatemala. Rother explained: "The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger."² Rother returned to Guatemala in May 1981. When the government got wind of Rother's return on July

¹ "About Blessed Stanley Rother: The Shepherd Who Didn't Run," Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://rothershrine.org/about-blessed-stanley-rother>.

² Ibid. David Monahan, ed. *The Shepherd Cannot Run: Letters of Stanley Rother, Missionary and Martyr* (Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, 1984), 1-11.

28, 1981, right-wing aligned assassins tracked down Rother, entered his church, found him in his rectory, and after a scuffle where Rother refused to be taken alive, the priest was shot dead.³

Rother was only back in Santiago Atitlán for just under two months before his assassination.

Many writers and scholars have studied Rother's life, including David Monahan's edited collection *The Shepherd Cannot Run: Letters of Stanley Rother, Missionary and Martyr*, María Ruiz Scaperlanda's *The Shepherd Who Didn't Run: Fr. Stanley Rother, Martyr from Oklahoma*, Henri Nouwen's *Love in a Fearful Land: A Guatemalan Story*, and an upcoming documentary narrated by actor Martin Sheen. Few scholars have examined the Oklahoma Catholic Church or the local communities that produced Stanley Rother and other important religious figures.⁴

Rother's death echoed across the state of Oklahoma, but nowhere was it felt more than in the town of Okarche. Rother was born and raised in the town of Okarche, a town founded in the midst of the Cheyenne-Arapaho land run, but became dominated by German Catholics by the early twentieth century. Okarche is quite a special town as it is the only place in the whole of Oklahoma that boasts a majority Catholic population. Compared to most experiences of Oklahoma Catholics, Okarche is the exception to almost every rule.⁵

While Oklahoma is by no means a majority Catholic state, it has a pronounced Catholic presence both in the state's impact on American Catholicism and Catholicism's impact on the state of Oklahoma. For example, two of Oklahoma's governors, Dewey F. Bartlett and Frank Keating, came from Catholic backgrounds. Furthermore, governors Jack Walton and Martin E. Trapp, both Protestant, had Catholic wives.⁶ Oklahoma also produced several important Catholic

³ Ibid., 91-94.

⁴ "American Martyr: The Stanley Rother Story." American Martyr: The Stanley Rother Story. 2026. <https://www.rotherdoc.com/film>.

⁵ Thomas Elton Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism: A History of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma, 1905-1945* (United States Catholic Historical Society, 1977), 10.

⁶ Bob Burke, "Bartlett, Dewey Follett," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=BA029>. Dianna Everett, "Keating, Francis Anthony II," *The*

figures, such as Fr. William H. Ketcham and the first American-born martyr Blessed Stanley Rother.⁷

While Oklahoma's Catholic population maintained a steady eight percent of Oklahoma's total population, it remains a diverse group of people with international reach and social and economic differences.⁸ That range has remained one of Oklahoma Catholicism's immutable characteristics since the Church got a foothold following the Land Runs and when the Church evolved from being a Vicariate to the Diocese of Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Catholic Church descends from the first Catholic settlers, including the Irish, Poles, Germans, Czechs, and Italians. Towns like Prague, Krebs, and Corn owe much of their ethnic heritage to these Catholic settlers, who played an important role in the development of the pioneer Church's institutionalization. Most of Oklahoma's first priests were European-born, such as the Belgian Bishop and his ample number of Belgian priests. Even in the early twenty-first century, the Catholic identity continues to be an international one with large populations of Vietnamese and Hispanic Catholics who are now pillars of the Oklahoma Catholic community, evidenced by the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City's tri-lingual website that offers services in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.⁹

Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=KE001>. Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 112.

⁷ Father William H. Ketcham was the Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indians Missions and Commissioner of the U.S. Board of Indian Commissioners and close friend of St. Katharine Drexel. For more information visit Amanda Bresie, "Mother Katharine Drexel's Benevolent Empire: The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and the Education of Native Americans, 1885–1935." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32, no. 3 (2014): 1–24. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/24584723>.

⁸ Pew Research Center. 2025. "2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database." doi: 10.58094/3zs9-jc14.

⁹ To learn more about the Vietnamese in Oklahoma see Charles C. Muzny, *The Vietnamese in Oklahoma City: A study in Ethnic Change* (AMS Press, 1989). For evidence of ethnic diversity in Oklahoma Catholicism see "Archdiocese of Oklahoma City," Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, accessed April 28, 2026, <https://archoke.org/>. For a general overview of Catholicism in Oklahoma see James D. White, "Catholic Church," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CA072>.

The Catholic Church in Oklahoma included both immigrants and settlers, constantly being re-constituted by a new influx of people. The Church was a ready home to a diverse array of people, including Germans, the Irish, and Italians. In addition, in more recent times, Hispanic populations have also grown, with Salvadorans and Guatemalans reconstituting Oklahoma City's older Mexican and Mexican-American communities. The diversity inherent in the Oklahoma Church, its status as a perpetual minority, and the few exceptions to the rule make Oklahoma an important place to study the development of Catholicism. Furthermore, the nature of Oklahoma's founding, because the state of Oklahoma emerged so late in the frontier era, provides a distinctive story. One of the last regions of the domestic frontier, Oklahoma, provides an effective window to understand how a tiny Catholic presence once limited to the very few Catholics living in pre-Land Run Oklahoma evolved into an international body with foreign priests, foreign bishops, and foreign religious adherents.

Historiography

The study of Oklahoma's Catholic Church is a small field with a handful of historical pieces written predominantly by local religious-affiliated historians and some secular historians, however it does not enjoy a pronounced presence in the academy. Yet, Oklahoma is unlike other prior histories for the United States. It was Indian Territory, then opened as the last piece of the frontier, with a lot of chaos as white people rushed to grab the last free land, invading the older Indian Territory. The Catholic Church in Oklahoma also has a distinctive story, only possible in Oklahoma. The fame and death of Blessed Stanley Rother has facilitated further study of Oklahoma. Aside from some dedicated early historians, who were mostly religious and employed in the Church, little attention has been devoted to the study of early Oklahoma's Catholic Church.

The first contribution to the history of the Catholic Church in Oklahoma was made by historian and Benedictine Monk John Laracy's 1927 article "Sacred Heart Mission and Abbey." As the name indicates, a history of the mission, the Benedictines, and Father Isidore Robot's impact on the local Pottawatomie and Shawnee Tribes.¹⁰ The article, and many other articles written during the first half of the twentieth century, were developed to establish that the Catholic Church had a presence in the early area of the American southwest. Furthermore, they focused on describing Oklahoma's early Catholic Indian Missions. An example in the intentionality of these early histories was Sister M. Ursula's article "Sources for the Study of Oklahoma Catholic Missions: A Critical Bibliography."¹¹ Sister M. Ursula's intended to describe the "part played by the Catholic Church in the development of the Far West in the nineteenth century."¹² It was an underdeveloped field, and Sister M. Ursula sought to facilitate further histories of the long presence of the Church in the Southwest, particularly Oklahoma. Another potent example of the religiously affiliated nature of the scholarship surrounding the early Oklahoma Catholic Church was Sister Mary Urban Kehoe's "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Catholic Missionaries Among the Five Civilized Tribes."¹³ These early Oklahoma Catholic scholars worked to bring attention to the Catholics who were part of Oklahoma's early history.

By 1947, more secular works of history relating to Catholics in Oklahoma began to develop. Historian Carolyn Thomas Foreman, a prominent historian of early Oklahoma and

¹⁰ John Laracy, "Sacred Heart Mission and Abbey," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 5, no. 2 (1927) 234-238. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2191626/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

¹¹ Sister M. Ursula, "Sources for the Study of Oklahoma Catholic Missions: A Critical Bibliography," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 16, no. 3 (1939) 346-378. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2192100/m1/1/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ Mary Urban Kehoe, "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Catholic Missionaries Among the Five Civilized Tribes," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 24, no. 2 (1946) 166-182. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2192372/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

Native Americans, released “Education Among the Quapaws: 1829-1875.”¹⁴ The article describes many of the early mission schools and, unlike other historians, references the contributions of the Catholic Church to the missionary project surrounding the Quapaws. While not an explicit history of Catholic contributions, it served as a beginning bridge where the Catholic contributions were being recognized in early statehood. In the mid-twentieth century, histories of early Oklahoma laid out a rapidly developing Church, with a significant presence in many Oklahoma towns. Catholics were recognized as a part of Oklahoma’s framework, but not as a group worthy of close study. Studying the history of the Catholic religion for itself remained a generally insular Catholic affair. For example, Klaris Molder’s article “McLoud, 1895 to 1949,” mentions the Catholic Church and its presence in McLoud, yet misses an in-depth study of the Church’s presence.¹⁵ Studying the history of the Catholic religion for itself remained a generally insular Catholic affair. In the 1950s, local Oklahoma historian Velma Nieberding made substantial contributions to the historiography of the Oklahoma Catholic Church through the exploration of the Catholic Church’s involvement with the indigenous tribes settled in Oklahoma, such as the Quapaw tribe, through missions, education, and institution building. Furthermore, she provided a biography of Father Urban de Hasque, one of the Belgian priests who was an early leader in the Oklahoma Church.¹⁶

Historian Velma Nierberding’s work was among the large influx of more detailed Catholic histories that emphasized pioneer priests, Catholic Indian missions, and controversies

¹⁴ Carolyn Thomas Foreman, “Education Among the Quapaws: 1829-1875,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 25, no. 1 (1947) 15-29. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2192397/>. The Oklahoma Gateway.

¹⁵ Klaris Molder, “McLoud, 1895 to 1949,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 28, no. 1 (1950) 89-94. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123370/>. The Oklahoma Gateway.

¹⁶ Velma Nieberding, “St. Mary’s of the Quapaws,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 31, no.1 (1953) 2-14. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123488/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History. Velma Nieberding, “The Very Reverend Urban de Hasque, S. T. D., L. L. D., Pioneer Priest of Indian Territory,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 38, no.1 (1960) 35-42. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123745/>. The Gateway Oklahoma.

that were encountered by the Catholic Church. By the 1970s, major contributions to the history of Oklahoma's Catholic Church had appeared. Historians like Thomas Elton Brown, James D. White, Joseph P. Murphy, Francis Paul Prucha, and James P. Gaffey provided more complete and holistic histories of the Oklahoma Catholic Church. The most significant contribution was Brown's *Bible Belt Catholicism: A History of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma, 1905-1945*, the first comprehensive history of Oklahoma's Catholic Church. Many other histories provided more concise narratives that documented specific roles that the Church served in Oklahoma. Examples being Murphy's *Tenacious Monks: The Oklahoma Benedictines, 1875-1975: Indian Missionaries, Catholic Founders, Educators, Agriculturists*, and Prucha's *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912*, published 1974 and 1979 respectively. White ushered in another large round of significant publications in the 1980s with the contributions of *Diary of a Frontier Bishop: The Journals of Theophile Meerschaert* and *This Far by Faith, 1875-2000: 125 Years of Catholic Life in Oklahoma*. The publications were dedicated to bringing further attention to the Catholic Church's presence in Oklahoma.¹⁷

Along with focused Catholic histories came studies of specific ethnic communities in Oklahoma. The history of German American settlement in Oklahoma is one with a small but detailed number of publications that provide a thorough history of the region. While more general than this thesis, they paint a vivid picture of the various cultural, religious, and contextual factors that Germans contributed to Oklahoma.

¹⁷ Thomas Elton Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism: A History of the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma, 1905-1945* (United States Catholic Historical Society, 1977). Joseph P. Murphy, O.S.B., *Tenacious Monks: The Oklahoma Benedictines, 1875-1975: Indian Missionaries, Catholic Founders, Educators, Agriculturists* (Shawnee, Okla.: Benedictine Color Press, 1974). Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). James D. White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop: The Journals of Theophile Meerschaert* (Tulsa, Okla.: The Sarto Press, 1994). James D. White, *This Far by Faith, 1875-2000: 125 Years of Catholic Life in Oklahoma*, (Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, 2001).

The first significant contribution to the German-American settlement patterns was that of W.A. Willibrand in his 1950 and 1951 articles “German in Okarche, 1892-1902” and “In Bilingual Old Okarche,” both published through the Oklahoma Historical Society’s journal, the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*. Willibrand paints a vivid picture of the early German and non-German settlers of the Okarche region, the most pronounced instance in Oklahoma of German-American settlement. In addition, he describes the heavily religious aspect of settlement, however it was not the focus of his work, as his priority is providing a general overview of the history of the whole town and its settlers.¹⁸

The next substantial contribution was Richard C. Rohrs’s 1980 book *The Germans in Oklahoma*. Rohrs first explains the contextual impetus for German settlement across the whole of the United States, then details who eventually wound up in Oklahoma. Rohrs is rather general, and while he does make mention of Okarche, his concern is German settlement patterns all across the state. His piece is not strictly confessional, however, he alludes to the importance of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and other German variations of Protestantism to settlement within the region. Rohr's book was part of a larger series titled “Newcomers to a New Land,” which described the importance of small but significant immigrant communities who settled and carved out a chunk of Oklahoma to develop their own lives. Examples include Richard M. Bernard’s *The Poles in Oklahoma*, Patrick Blessing’s *The British and Irish in Oklahoma*, Douglas Hale’s *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma*, and Michael M. Smith’s *The Mexicans in Oklahoma*. Rohrs was part of a larger wave of interest in the early ethnic communities of Oklahoma that often fell through the cracks in previous histories, Germans being among them.¹⁹

¹⁸ W.A. Willibrand, “German In Okarche, 1892-1902,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 28, No. 3, (1950): 284-291. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123385/m1/9/?q=%22~1~1%22~1>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History. W.A. Willibrand, “In Bilingual Old Okarche,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 29, No. 3, (1951): 337-354. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123429/>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

¹⁹ Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Richard M. Bernard, *The Poles in Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Patrick J. Blessing, *The British and Irish in Oklahoma*

Following Rohrs was Terry J. Prewitt's *German-American Settlement in an Oklahoma Town: Ecologic, Ethnic and Cultural Change*, published in 1989, which was focused primarily on Okarche. Interestingly, Prewitt provided a history of Okarche, but his main interest was exploring Okarche from an anthropological and sociological perspective. Prewitt leaned heavily into studying the ecological, demographic, cultural, and economic parts that leaned into Okarche's development as a thoroughly German town before its assimilation into a more general Anglo-American culture. Prewitt stressed how unique it was that a single ethnicity came to visibly dominate an Oklahoma town. Okarche was a visible example of ethnic identity attaining a place of cultural staying power that many attributed to Okarche's relative prosperity. While Prewitt argues that the reason Okarche developed into a German-majority town was largely due to the resource sharing kin-ship networks facilitated by the confessional nature of German identity, either being German Catholic, German Lutheran, or German Mennonite, and he acknowledges the exceptional importance of religion in shaping this German identity, he does not provide an in depth history of either religion, as that was not his aim.²⁰

Willibrand, Rohrs, and Prewitt all describe German-Americans, each stressing the importance of religion to the community. However, Okarche has defined itself as an exceptionally Catholic town, with a Catholic majority, and producing a surprising number of people with vocations to Catholic religious life, including nuns, sisters, and priests. Okarche provides an excellent opportunity to expand the conversation of the intersections of ethnicity and religion when discussing the question of settlement that can be applied to other examples in Oklahoma. Furthermore, even among German Catholics, Okarche stands out. The time period

(University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Douglas Hale, *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Michael M. Smith, *The Mexicans in Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

²⁰ Terry J. Prewitt, *German-American Settlement in an Oklahoma Town: Ecologic, Ethnic and Cultural Exchange* (AMS Press, 1989).

that Okarche was operating in, the 1890s and onwards, begins much later than most examples of German Catholic insular towns and operates in a different context. By 1900, the German Catholics of Okarche were on the threshold of losing everything. Many residents had watched generational shifts slowly erode their culture in other German Catholic communities. They knew if they did not jealously cling to their own culture in Okarche, it would eventually be lost. Okarche, a town of nearly total German-Catholic descent and one that always leaned heavily into that ethnic heritage, has glaring demographic significance. To understand that place and time requires a descriptive religious and institutional history of the town. Then, we can better see the significance of these intersecting subjects of religion and ethnicity in application to Oklahoma.

To develop a frame of reference to this end, a substantial model for application to Okarche is historian Kathleen Conzen's work on German-Catholic identity and insularity. Kathleen Conzen has engaged with German-American settlement all across the United States, but she also has produced lots of work that explains the lasting significance of German-Catholic identity to the institutions, customs, and norms that have long outlived the German language. While Conzen has many different arguments about the ways German-Americans have in the United States, whether through their insular customs or engagement with the nation as a whole, her arguments concerning German-Catholicism and the rural characteristics of parochial German communities have particular bearing on understanding Okarche. Conzen's essays "German Catholic Communalism and the American Civil War," "Immigrant Religion and the Public Sphere: The German Catholic Milieu in America," and "Immigrant Religion and the Republic: German Catholics in Nineteenth-Century America" were influential pieces that established German-Catholicism was insular, fiercely defensive of their traditions, and only engaged with American politics to defend their interests and for the most part was completely unengaged with

the broader trends of American politics. In exploring Okarche's dogged defense of their language, which they perceived as intrinsic to their faith, and the earnest development of domestic institutions in the form of their school and local societies, Conzen's arguments shine through. Conzen describes how German Catholics in the United States were a sizable minority within a minority. Unlike their fellow Germans in the United States, they were Catholic, and unlike their fellow Catholics in the Irish and Italians, they were German-speaking. In addition, they were much more communal and insular, prioritizing rural living over urban, while they did settle in urban regions in large quantities. German-Catholics palpably felt their status as minorities, and Conzen uses this to illustrate the anti-government and nuanced place that German Catholics filled within the broader United States, all important contextual information and insights to understand the exceptional and fiercely confessional character of Okarche.²¹

Chapter Outline

The first chapter is concerned with presenting the necessary context to understand why it was that the German-Catholics who eventually settled in Oklahoma developed into such an insular body. It discusses German migration patterns, the history of conflict in Germany between Catholic and anti-Catholic forces, and the general impetus for German migration to the United States. Afterwards, the first chapter provides the settling of Okarche and the gradual Germanification of the town and the surrounding regions. The first chapter then concludes with the Catholic presence in Okarche developing, concluding with the construction of their first church.

²¹ Kathleen Neils Conzen, "German Catholic Communalism and the American Civil War: Exploring the Dilemmas of Transatlantic Political Integration," in *Bridging the Atlantic: The Question of American Exceptionalism in Perspective*, ed. Elisabeth Glaser and Hermann Wellenreuther (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Immigrant Religion and the Public Sphere: The German Catholic Milieu in America," In *German-American Immigration and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner, 69-114. (Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004). Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Immigrant Religion and the Republic: German Catholics in Nineteenth-Century America," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London* 26, no. 1 (2004).

The second chapter details the German Catholic population's struggle to obtain a German-speaking priest. The struggle culminated in an open conflict between members of Okarche's German Catholic community and the Vicariate's bishop, escalating to the point that officials of the Vatican got involved to investigate the conflict and settle the matter. The third chapter is about Rev. Zenon Steber, who began with an introduction to the priest as a missionary before his subsequent placement as the reverend and spiritual leader of Okarche. Zenon Steber is a large and looming figure who stood at the center of Okarche's development and played a pivotal role in allowing Okarche's distinctive and insular characteristics to bloom into a German Catholic-dominated town. Chapter four presents a history of Anti-Catholicism in Oklahoma and the various hurdles the Oklahoma Church faced when attempting to practice its faith, including a fight to preserve Catholic liturgical worship and Catholic parochial schools. After the history of anti-Catholicism, the chapter then explains how Okarche was the only Catholic community in Oklahoma able to emerge largely insulated from the vicious anti-Catholic bigotry that was the norm elsewhere in Oklahoma.

Chapter 1 - Germans in a Strange Land: Germans, Catholics, and Okarche

Part 1: German Migration and the State of German Catholicism

Okarche is not the only example of German or German Catholic migration and settlement within the continental United States. Okarche appeared in Oklahoma at the end of a long cycle of large-scale German migration that brought a wide breadth of settlers from Bavaria, Prussia, the Central German states, and even German settlers from Russia who had settled along the Volga River. The impetus for German immigration is as varied as the dialects spoken by these settlers; what cannot be denied is the sheer scale of these population movements. According to Stefan

Manz: “Between 1816 and 1914, about 5.5 million Germans migrated to the United States.”²²

Manz observes that the periods of peak emigration for Germans were “1846 to 1857, 1864 to 1873 (each just over a million, and 1880 to 1893 (1.8 million).”²³

The massive influx of Germans to the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia completely rewrote different localities and created vast ethnic enclaves in foreign nations.²⁴ A particular example is Milwaukee, in which Kathleen Conzen, in her book *Immigrant Milwaukee*, says how the frontier town came to be predominantly understood “as a preeminently German City.”²⁵ Various scholars propose different reasons for the large exodus of German settlers to the United States and other regions around the world. Manz, for example, proposes that the principal impetus for German emigration was economic, brought about by the “transition from the predominantly agrarian to industrial societal structures, causing rifts in the labour market which could not absorb a population which doubled in the course of the century.”²⁶ Manz notes further that the religious and political impetus, though present, was the primary reason Germans sought opportunity elsewhere.²⁷ Many Germans, seeking more gainful opportunities in the United States, sought to create for themselves an idealized Germany in the United States on the frontier. The thought of “This is what Germany should have been, had it been more cooperative” pervaded dialogue.²⁸ Scholar Richard C. Rohrs described one Otto Koeltzow, who

²² Stefan Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora: The “Greater German Empire,” 1871-1914* (Routledge, 2014), 26.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kathleen Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City* (Harvard University Press, 1976), 7.

²⁶ Manz, *German Diaspora*, 26-27.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.,

²⁸ Elliott Shore “Introduction: A New View of the Nineteenth Century,” In *The German American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures*, ed. Frank Trommler and Elliott Shore (Bergham Books, 2001), 3-4.

claimed that even tenant farming in the United States was preferable to the conditions in Germany, where “one-half of his harvest went to pay taxes.”²⁹

Beginning in the 1820s, large swaths of Germans settled on the frontiers, preferring to create insular communities immune from foreign interference, especially in the Midwest and Texas, but Germans also settled in larger metropolises. An example are the Germans of New York, especially Catholics, who settled alongside their Irish coreligionists. Historian Jay P. Dolan says about the New York City Roman Catholic Church, “But within this polyglot community the two most significant ethnic groups in ante-bellum New York were the Irish and German immigrants.”³⁰ Germans in urban environs, like other immigrant communities, established their own communities and dominated certain neighborhoods, while they sometimes also clustered around certain churches that made it easier to practice their religions.

Germans who did not seek out urban environs, especially the Catholics, sought to create for themselves relatively independent and insular communities, enabling them to follow their ideals of agriculture, without the more centralized authority of the political elite found in the more settled regions near the eastern United States. Kathleen Conzen reasons that for these German Catholic settlers: “Their departure from Germany was in good part a flight from nationalization — not only from the consequences of a nationalizing economy but from the impositions of nationalizing states, from state efforts to constrain communal self-governance, collect taxes, oversee the use of fields and forests, control their marriages, conscript their sons, and reshape their religious practices.”³¹

²⁹ Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 9-10.

³⁰ Jay P. Dolan, “Immigrants in the City: New York’s Irish and German Catholics,” in *Church History* (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 354.

³¹ Kathleen Neils Conzen, “German Catholic Communalism and the American Civil War: Exploring the Dilemmas of Transatlantic Political Integration,” in *Bridging the Atlantic: The Question of American Exceptionalism in Perspective*, ed. Elisabeth Glaser and Hermann Wellenreuther (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 124.

German Catholics, a very distinctive group because of their dedication to German and Catholicism, saw great appeal in the rural regions where they could construct their own places of belonging. Historian Conzen laid out how German Catholic communities operated in the midwest and Texas in the 1830s and 1840s, developing insulated communities free from the contaminants of the outside world. The communities were established based on “family, farming and faith” that reinforced one another to guard against outside influence and interference from non-German Catholics and centralizing governments.³² These continuous waves of immigration, beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century, created large and robust German communities across the country, such as the Midwest and Texas, that through chain-migration provided a positive feedback loop through which increasingly large German populations would follow their family into the New World.³³ German settlers who sought out rural locations rather than urban ones, of all creeds, sought to create their own insular communities, a point Conzen and other historians take great pains to stress, such as Manz, places where Germans could eke out their agricultural ideal and escape the particularly daunting threat of centralizing governments.

Ambitious German settlers, following kinship networks, laid the ground for family or sought better land. People who settled in Oklahoma often started on the East Coast, traveled thousands of miles, and tested a number of communities.³⁴ German settlers, like other frontier settlers of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States, did not settle until they founded or created an established ethnic community. “Many of those who contributed to the ‘quite noticeable’ influx of Germans in the following year reportedly were young bachelors who came to look over the settlement [Milwaukee] and claim land before leaving either temporarily

³² Ibid., 125-126.

³³ Rohrs, *Germans in Oklahoma*, 10-11.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

or permanently, but others remained to form the tiny nucleus of a German community.”³⁵ The continuous movement was often a long drive to find kinfolk, search for hospitable communities, or find suitable housing and employment. Another key issue was finding places that felt familiar: language and co-religionists.

German Catholics also joined those immigrating from Germany to the Americas. Conzen notes that Gerald Shaughnessy claims that Catholics accounted for roughly “a third of America’s roughly 5.5 million German immigrants...”³⁶ Such a number makes sense because it is proportionate to numbers in Germany where, like in the United States, German Catholics accounted for roughly a third of the population and in some regions an outright majority, such as Bavaria, Austria and much of the southern Rhineland. For German Catholics, like all German settlers, it appears that the primary impetus for emigration was most definitely economic.³⁷ Younger sons sought new opportunities or families fleeing some sort of nationalization of the state, the consolidation of land and economic materials by the state, and a more industrialized economy. Many of the millions of Germans who sought out new opportunities in the United States and abroad, akin to other European migrants to the Americas, were economic refugees. However, German Catholics also emigrated for religious reasons. German Catholics, in most regions, were a pronounced minority often subject to the arbitrary whims of their Protestant rulers. The importance of religious security depended, of course, on individual or family experience. That context influenced how German Catholics developed their communities and participated (or not) with the American nation.

³⁵ Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee*, 17.

³⁶ Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Immigrant Religion and the Republic: German Catholics in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London* 26, no. 1 (2004), 45.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

The history of German Catholicism is one fraught with conflict and division. Whether that conflict be between Catholics and Arians, Catholics and emperors, Catholics and Catholics, Catholics and Protestants, or Catholics and a secular government, Catholics in Germany appear to be more familiar with constant strife than peace.³⁸ The testimony of German Catholicism is no doubt one of perennial crises. German Catholics, especially those crossing the Atlantic during the latter portion of the nineteenth century, were intimately familiar with this conflict and anti-Catholic prejudice. One example of such bigotry looms larger than most in the back of their mind: the *Kulturkampf*.

The *Kulturkampf* was from 1871 to 1878, following the 1870 unification of the German principalities into the German Empire. In an effort to consolidate power, the German Empire under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck launched a concerted campaign of persecution against the Roman Catholic Church in Germany to break its institutional power and sway over the German Catholics. The worst persecution was in the Prussian territories, the proverbial heartlands of the German Empire, but it affected Catholics all across the Empire, German and Polish alike.³⁹ Anti-Catholicism had also developed into a cornerstone of the tradition of nineteenth and twentieth-century European Protestants, particularly the British and German, and European liberals of all stripes and creeds.

³⁸ For a general history of Catholicism in Germany see James Hitchcock, *History of the Catholic Church: From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium* (Ignatius Press, 2012). Concerning the history of Arian Christianity and the German people see Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher ed., *Arianism: Roman History and Barbarian Creed* (Ashgate, 2014). Concerning the history of Catholics and Protestants in Germany and the Thirty Years War see Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). Concerning the conflict between Baroque and Liberal Catholicism in Germany see Michael Printy, *Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Concerning anti-Catholicism in Germany and the *Kulturkampf* see both Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1984) and Michael B. Gross, *The War against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (The University of Michigan Press, 2004).

³⁹ Ronald J. Ross, *The failure of Bismarck's Kulturkampf: Catholicism and state power in imperial Germany, 1871-1887* (Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 2-5.

The United States was no different concerning Protestant and liberal manifestations of Anti-Catholicism, yet took a thoroughly more republican element to the language in contrast to the persecution facilitated by Great Britain and the German State's state-mandated religion.⁴⁰ Catholics in the United States defended themselves by insulating themselves within their own independent institutions and concerted efforts toward assimilation to appear as ideal American citizens. American Catholics of all ethnic origins warded off the worst of the American varieties of bigotry, but their situation depended on the era in which they came about.⁴¹ The tradition of anti-Catholicism, especially that in Germany, was not merely an incident concerning the *Kulturkampf*, but rather a longstanding development that found its roots in the Thirty Years War and the Enlightenment, especially in Germany, yet rebounded with belligerent zeal as a reaction to the Catholic religious and the Ultramontane revival of the mid-nineteenth century.⁴²

The German Church encountered such hostility and blatant oppression as a direct consequence of the Catholic Church's growing influence and revitalization. After the 1848 Revolutions, the Roman Catholic Church—and specifically the papacy—endured two decades of marginalization, which ended with the Italian Monarchy seizing Rome and the Papal States in 1870. Although the Church was stripped of its temporal dominion, this period of dispossession prompted a strategic shift toward consolidating spiritual power. The Church rejected Gallicanism—the idea that state authority over national churches superseded that of the Pope—and instead established the papacy as the supreme spiritual voice. This process of ecclesiastical centralization was formally cemented through the declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council. Following the Revolutions of 1848, the Roman Catholic Church,

⁴⁰ Marjule Anne Drury, "Anti-Catholicism in Germany, Britain, and the United States: A Review and Critique of Recent Scholarship," *Church History* 70, no. 1 (2001): 98–131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3654412>, 98–99.

⁴¹ Thomas Stefaniuk, "Joseph Jessing, German-American Catholics, and National Myth-Making in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Catholic Studies*, 126, no. 1 (2015), 1–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44195702>, 2.

⁴² Drury, "Anti-Catholicism: Recent Scholarship," 111.

and the office of the papacy in particular, experienced nearly twenty years of humiliation that culminated in the papacy's forceful dispossession of Rome and the remaining papal states by the Italian Monarchy in 1870.⁴³ The Catholic Church had lost its temporal power in the form of the Italian-based Papal States. However, during the process of being forcefully dispossessed of its temporal possessions, the papacy and the Church as a whole reentrenched themselves on the matter of spiritual authority. They rebuked Gallican-style religious governance, the notion that the monarch or state's power over the Catholic Church within their borders was comparable or superior to the Pope's, and asserted themselves as the undisputed authority concerning spiritual matters, finalizing the centralization of the Church with the promulgation of papal infallibility during the First Vatican Council.⁴⁴ The declaration of the Ultramontane position, that of Papal Infallibility, combined with a popular religious resurgence that increasingly fell under the auspices of a fusion of lay and clerical authority, created a more spiritually and politically robust Catholic Church, heralded by the image of the persecuted Pope Pius IX.⁴⁵ The Church's successful centralization and the creation of the German Center Party facilitated the development of the natural antipathy for Catholicism among Protestant and Liberal German leaders into outright persecution. The Catholic Church, resisting the government's nationalization and secularization of religion, became a natural aspect of the Protestant government's opposition and a visible demarcator of disunity.

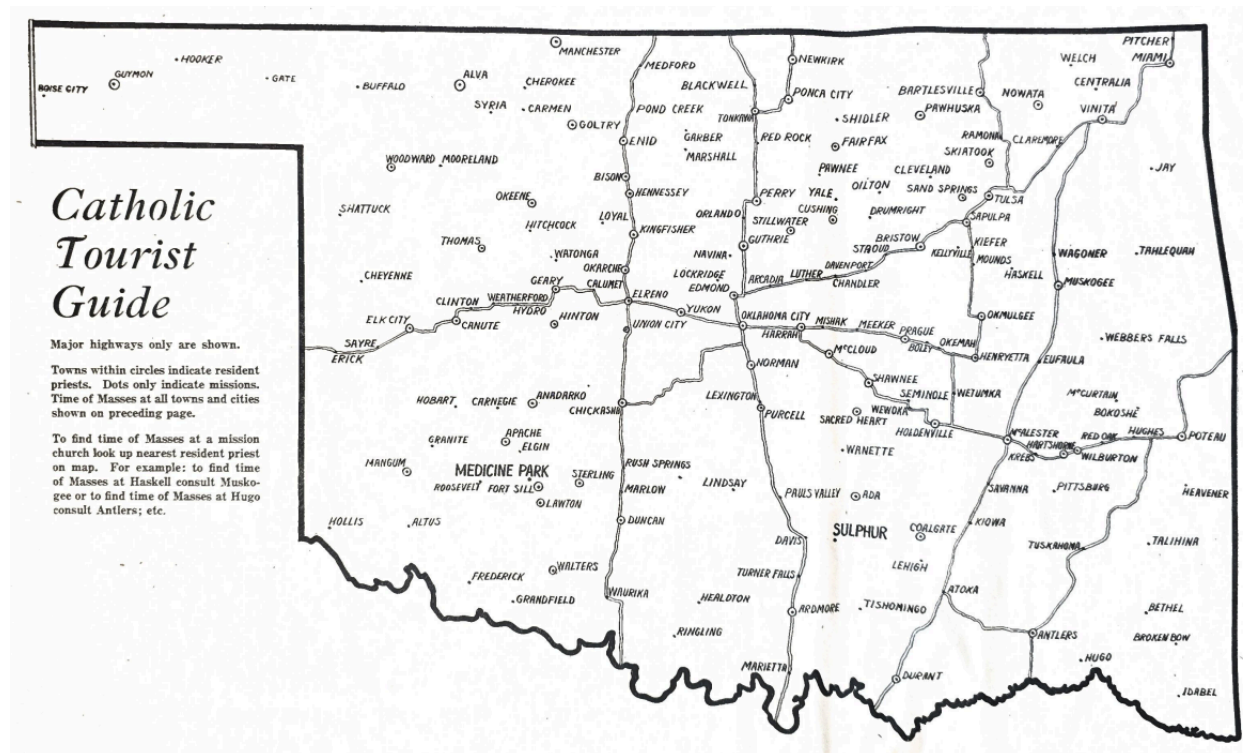
German Catholics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries felt themselves under siege. The political upheaval brought about by the Revolution of 1848, as well as German Unification

⁴³ Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 185-188.

⁴⁴ Jotham Parsons, "Introduction." In *The Church in the Republic: Gallicanism and Political Ideology in Renaissance France*. (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 3 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284wq3.5>. For more about the history of Gallicanism, in contrast to Ultramontaniam, see Jotham Parsons's *The Church in the Republic: Gallicanism and political ideology in Renaissance France* (Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

in the 1870s, the economic uncertainty that followed the Industrial Revolution, the rigorous execution of anti-Catholicism, and the centralization of the German state created a raucous and chaotic environment that posed an existential threat to the very way of life of German Catholics.⁴⁶ Under constant strain and duress, it is reasonable to presume that German Catholics dreamed of superior conditions.⁴⁷ If a German Catholic decided to leave the fatherland, especially following German Unification, no doubt there was a religious factor to their decision to carve out a new life in the United States.



Catholic Tourist Guide, A map depicting all the Catholic churches in the state, courtesy of Holy Trinity.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8-9.

⁴⁷ Ellen Lovell Evans, *The German Center Party, 1870-1933: A Study in Political Catholicism* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), ix.

Part 2: Oklahoma, Arapaho & Cheyenne

In the wake of the opening of the Indian and Oklahoma territories to non-Native American settlement, newcomers created instant towns all across the territory. This rapid influx culminated in a severe lack of federal and territory-level regulation, in a sense, a near-complete absence of oversight of any sort of authority. Land was distributed in runs, raffles, and through direct purchases, a relatively inexpensive commodity that seemed to be done at the drop of a hat. The rapid expansion overburdened federal authorities responsible for the proliferation of land, creating a great sense of local autonomy in all settlements. The all-black towns of Boley and Langston are prime examples of the opportunities provided by the deregulated nature of settlement, and so was Okarche.

The town of Okarche originated in 1890, when the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railway Company constructed a depot. Built within what originally was the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, the community was then christened with the name Okarche, incorporating OK from Oklahoma, -AR from Arapaho, and -CHE from Cheyenne. Yet, despite acquiring a small community, it was not until 1892, when the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation was opened for non-Native American settlement, that Okarche became a proper town. In a fascinating chance of fortune as well, the borders of Canadian and Kingfisher Counties were moved “six miles south, with the result that the town straddled the county lines.”⁴⁸ Okarche was thus firmly divided by the Canadian and Kingfisher border. Subsequent censuses accounted for the town as being divided between the two counties.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Cynthia Savage, “Okarche,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK001>.

⁴⁹ United States Census Bureau, TABLE 5.-POPULATION OF INCORPORATED PLACES: 1940 AND 1930-Continued. Data.Census.

Local historian Terry J. Prewitt lays out key demographic information on German settlement in Oklahoma. He notes that the 1892 land run had an especially high proportion of foreign-born persons, with 35 percent being German-speaking.⁵⁰ Prewitt observes that the settlers of Oklahoma were from nearly every part of North America and Europe, but most had a strong prior association with the United States.⁵¹ This was no different for the town of Okarche, German and not. Prewitt says Okarche's settlement patterns resembled patterns in the Midwest. Prewitt shows us that the older population of the 1889 run into the Okarche area had midwestern roots. Prewitt concludes that most families had considerable "first-hand pioneer and settled experience with farming communities in the prairie-woodland belt of Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas" but also "a relatively small number... from Kentucky..."⁵² This is not a surprise, considering that the settlement of Oklahoma predominantly came from the regions immediately to the north and south of the final frontier, those being the Midwest and the South, principally that of Texas.⁵³

Yet, the high proportion of German speakers in Okarche was a peculiar tendency more congruent with the settlement patterns of the Midwest, rather than Oklahoma. Point in case, the German population of Oklahoma as a whole was quite small. Rohrs concludes that the southwest central region of the United States, which includes Oklahoma, never attracted as many German immigrants as other sections of the country. The southwest was hard-pressed to compete against the older and more entrenched German communities found in the Midwest. Rohrs notes that in 1910, the zenith of German settlement in Oklahoma, "the percentage of Germans in the total population of the West South Central states was less than one percent."⁵⁴ Thus, the high proportion found in Okarche, as well as the neighboring regions such as Canadian, Kingfisher,

⁵⁰ Terry J. Prewitt, *German-American Settlement in an Oklahoma Town: Ecologic, Ethnic and Cultural Exchange* (AMS Press, 1989), 39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁴ Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma*, 1.

and Oklahoma counties, was large in comparison to Oklahoma, yet remained a minuscule number by proportion of the total population, especially considering the number of Germans that settled in the Midwest. As a comparison, Rohrs notes: “The number of Germans in Ramsey County, Minnesota, in 1880 alone, exceeded the entire German population of Oklahoma territory in 1900.”⁵⁵

An additional tendency among Okarche’s early settlers, also observed by Prewitt, was the high turnover rate. Many newcomers, principally comprising young single men, came for the land, but later sold off their lands and immigrated to new regions easier to farm.⁵⁶ High turnover rates among settler populations are not an isolated phenomenon. Germans, Anglo-Americans, and every variety and mix of individuals passed through Okarche, like most of Oklahoma, and to a lesser extent, the entirety of the American Midwestern Frontier, in search of greener pastures. Prewitt points out: “In the first ten years after settlement, 377 of the original 552 people in the 1890 census either left the community or died.”⁵⁷ Thus, Okarche was no different than any other Oklahoma settler town. However, according to W.A. Willibrand, “The uniqueness of the Okarche community lies in the fact that it became a predominantly German settlement during the decade that followed the opening of the Cheyenne and Arapahoe country, in 1892.”⁵⁸

The rapid change in land ownership, inherent in most frontier settlements, turned Okarche into a predominantly German town. With individuals selling off their lands to find more favorable conditions, Germans became an industrious bunch who actively sought to expand their

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 62. Daniel Henry Mueggenborg, “Brief History of Bernard Henry (Heinrich) Mueggenborg” (2005), 2-4. Sourced from a familial history written by Daniel H. Mueggenborg to commemorate the life of his grandfather, the “Brief History” has proven an invaluable source in detailing aspects of the different parts of the settler experience.

⁵⁷ Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 85.

⁵⁸ W.A. Willibrand, “In Bilingual Old Okarche,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 29, No. 3, (1951): 337-354.

(<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123429/>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 337.

T.F. Hensley and D.W. Perry, *The El Reno Democrat and Courier-Tribune* (El Reno, Okla. Terr.), Vol. 4, No. 47, January 4, 1894. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc159820/>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

population by inviting their own relatives.⁵⁹ While a gradual process increased German settlement, at first in the countryside around Okarche, that process affected the town as well. Julius Loosen, a German Catholic who had previously lived in Nebraska, “established the First Bank of Okarche on October 28, 1892.”⁶⁰

By 1894, the German presence, especially in the rural land regions surrounding Okarche, had intensified considerably. According to an Anglo-American paper out of El Reno: “Okarche is enjoying a boom and will have something in the way of genuine surprise for the public in a few days. The country west of Okarche is being filled up with first class German families who not only know how but have the will to develop a new country.”⁶¹ The Germans had Germanized Okarche by purchasing many acres of land from departing Anglo populations. Prewitt notes: “Very few such reported transfers of claim of title show Germans leaving the Okarche area and most involve German buyers either entering the rural sector from the town, or extending their holdings of agricultural land.”⁶²

Initially, those German settlers who gradually populated the Okarche countryside were perceived as a boon to the local community. Despite good-natured and less well-intentioned ribbing by the locals of Okarche, the German language had grown in prestige and acclaim in the 1890s, according to local scholar Willibrand. He noted, among other such moves toward a more multicultural and bilingual Okarche: “At the closing exercises of the public school in 1898 pieces were spoken in both German and English.”⁶³ Willibrand saw that as evidence that “It seemed important to some people to learn the language of a comparatively prosperous section of the

⁵⁹ W.A. Willibrand, “German In Okarche, 1892-1902,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 28, No. 3, (1950): 284-291. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123385/m1/9/?q=%22~1~1%22~1>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 285-286.

⁶⁰ “About the First Bank of Okarche,” First Bank of Okarche, <https://www.firstbankokarche.com/about.html>.

⁶¹ T.F. Hensley and D.W. Perry, *The El Reno Democrat And Courier-Tribune* (El Reno, Okla. Terr.), Vol. 4, No. 47, January 4, 1894, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc159820/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

⁶² Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 185.

⁶³ Willibrand, “German in Okarche,” 289-290

community.⁶⁴ While Willibrand's statement likewise is not a damning indication that every Anglo in Okarche was quite pleased with their German neighbors, clearly, some people in Okarche recognized that as a whole, these Germans rapidly populating the countryside were an increasingly important part of the community, one that should be accommodated for the mutual prosperity of their home.

Why is that the case? Why was it the case that Germans were perceived with amiable sentiments? Prewitt explains that the prosperity of German farmers was perceived due to their industrious and moral character. These characteristics attributed to Germans were the source of much respect from the non-German population.⁶⁵ Prewitt later on describes that the Germans shared many values with the Anglo population within and surrounding Okarche, including close family settlement and being church goers that provided Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites all access “to large resource-sharing organizations.”⁶⁶ Religious commitments were some of the most visible demarcations of their German identity, especially considering that their church services, with the exclusion of the Latin liturgy of the Catholics, were all conducted in German.⁶⁷ An important indicator of German identity in Okarche was a religious commitment.

According to the census data compiled by Prewitt, the German population as of 1889 in and around Okarche was comprised of only nine households. By 1892, the German population in Okarche rose to twenty households. Later on in 1895, there were roughly sixty German households, and by 1900 that number exploded to one hundred and sixty-seven households, for a total population of eight hundred and fifty people of German heritage living around or within Okarche.⁶⁸ In addition, Prewitt includes modules from 1889 to 1895, manually mapping out the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 182.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 182-183.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 113-115.

countryside of Okarche, detailing the growing clusters of German homesteads, indicating the heavy groupings next to one another, evident of preference of neighbor, kinship networks, and expansion of local estates.⁶⁹ The Germanification of the region was a gradual process that saw humble growth, proportionally growing with the regional population. However, the Germans carved out for themselves a more pronounced and visible aspect of the regional population every year, doing so with relative impunity in spite of Mennonite, Lutheran, and Catholic confessional associations, in contrast to the more divided nature of celebrated Anglo-religion with the town and region of Okarche.

At the very least, in the circumstance of Okarche, they were greeted warmly and even catered to, relying on the kinship networks facilitated by ethnic and religious cooperation that enabled them to grow in notable ways and become more pronounced in the region surrounding Okarche. This was the experience of the German settlers of Okarche and the surrounding country, but not the experience of many other non-Anglo settler populations. David G. Loconto relates: “In the 1870s, when people from southern and eastern Europe began entering the mines, there were problems with discrimination in the mining profession.”⁷⁰ Loconto identifies that: “The results were struggles between southern and eastern European immigrants on one side, and American and western and northern European immigrants on the other.”⁷¹ In Okarche, the German settlers were met with greater acceptance and even outright tolerance for their Central European heritage, despite their different language and, in the case of a slight majority of the population, Catholicism. Yet, Italians and other eastern and southern Europeans were not afforded this same privilege. While anti-Catholic sentiment on the macro scale eventually

⁶⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁰ David G. Loconto, "Discrimination Against and Adaptation of Italians in the Coal Counties of Oklahoma" (2004). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 213. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/213>, 251.

⁷¹ Ibid., 249.

affected many Oklahomans, for the time being, it appears that German Catholics, especially those of Okarche, were largely excluded from the worst of the persecutions, a welcome change considering their experiences back in their homeland.

Part 3: Erecting a Catholic Okarche

According to *The Orphans' Record*, the official organ of the Diocese of Oklahoma, the first mass said in Okarche occurred in June of 1892: "Rev. Father J. Beck came from Kingfisher to say Mass in the farmhouse of John B. Bogner."⁷² Bogner and Julius Loosen, the owner of the First Bank of Okarche, through tremendous effort on their own and with the help of the twenty or so Catholic families of Okarche, managed to construct and dedicate their church on the 26th of April, 1894. Father Beck continued to say the occasional mass for the Catholics of Okarche, often in a barn, before the church's erection, and afterwards served elsewhere in the vicariate.

As an example of the "large resource-sharing institution" that made Germans good settlers, the Oklahoma Catholic Church had a bishop. Bishop Theophile Meerschaert, a Belgian-born cleric, was the first Bishop of what is now the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, at the time the Vicariate of Oklahoma and Indian Territory. An indefatigable and constant figure in the early lives of many Catholic settlers in the territory, his ministry was defined by a perpetual life on the road, carrying himself with all the pomp and circumstance afforded to a

European-style vicar. According to Meerschaert's diary:

Solemn Dedication of the holy Trinity Church (1st church) in Okarche. 9 priests present. On the 25[th, the] evening before, [there was a] grand reception at the depot. The Bishop taken in procession to the church. Address delivered by Mr. Loosen. Deeds and keys of the Church presented to the Bishop. The Church out of debt and completed. The Bishop responds and thanks the people, giving his

⁷² "Holy Trinity Parish, Okarche," *The Orphans' Record: Official Organ of the Diocese of Oklahoma* Vol. 4, No.7, July 1918. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 4.

Blessing. At 10:00 Solemn dedication and Pontifical Mass. Sermon of dedication by the Bishop.⁷³

Meerschaert describes a very common scene in his accounting of the day he dedicated the Holy Trinity Catholic Church. Yet from this very general recounting, much can be discerned about the people of Okarche. Mr. Loosen is, without a doubt, one of the leaders of his community, as indicated by Meerschaert's remark, and no doubt it involves either the considerable resources at hand in Okarche, considering his noting that debt is absent. The people of Okarche, with only twenty families or so, managed to fund the construction of their Church.

Later in the day, Meerschaert noted: "24 who have to be confirmed go to Holy Communion during Mass... Confirmation after Mass."⁷⁴ The parish of Holy Trinity Catholic Church was growing, presenting 24 people to be confirmed. In addition, Meerschaert revealed: "The church crowded and the people moved to tears at the sight of the nice new church and the beauty of the Ceremonies. At night, lecture by the Bishop. The church overcrowded. A great many non-Catholics present."⁷⁵ The German Catholic people of Okarche, in contrast to other locations, seemed to continue to enjoy the general goodwill of the non-Catholic populace in Okarche, a possible indication of the peculiarly hospitable climate, or instead merely a privilege afforded to the overwhelmingly German quality of these Catholics.

When Meerschaert visited many towns, he often indicated in his diary a surprisingly large number of non-Catholics, not always friendly. For example during an 1891 visit to Atoka most of the people he preached to were Protestants, while the reception was not near as warm as the one he received in Okarche, concluding that the people in Atoka were rather anti-Catholic.⁷⁶ Thus

⁷³ James D. White eds, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop: The Journals of Theophile Meerschaert*, (Tulsa, OK: The Sarto Press, 1994), 153.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

were the risks of preaching as a minority presence. James D. White, the principal Catholic historian of Oklahoma, notes: “The second factor working in the bishop’s favor was the need among Territory settlers to relieve the crushing monotony of their frontier lives.”⁷⁷ Whenever Meerschaert rolled into a town, it was an occasion that simply could not be missed, regardless of denominational differences in those early days of settlement in the Territory.

Anti-Catholic sentiments certainly existed in Oklahoma. However, as James D. White points out, and Meerschaert frequently explained, the curiosity of non-Catholic Anglo settlers facilitated a degree of toleration. White presumes that in a frontier setting, the settlers need to rely on one another for

mutual prosperity. Thus, to him, it is natural to presume a degree of charity. While that seemed to be the case in Okarche, perhaps a privilege afforded by the Germanic nature of the Catholic population, anti-Catholic sentiments elsewhere were not so easily dispelled. Regardless, during the dedication of Holy Trinity, when Meerschaert delivered one of his iconic lectures with his Flemish accent, he commanded a large and eager audience, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, who left him with a favorable impression of the town.



The Old Church at Okarche, 1893, courtesy of the Holy Trinity Catholic Church

⁷⁷ James D. White, “Essay: The Life of Theophile Meerschaert,” In James D. White eds, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop: The Journals of Theophile Meerschaert*, (Tulsa, OK: The Sarto Press, 1994), 16.

Yet, the greatest indication of the quality of the people of Okarche is Meerschaert's closing remark concerning the town: "The people deserve a great deal of credit for their zeal in building such a fine church, especially since they were so few families at the time."⁷⁸ The some twenty to twenty-five families settled within Okarche were a particularly small number to build a church, such as Holy Trinity Catholic Church, without accruing any lasting debt. Meerschaert broaches a topic that is indicated by the earlier *The El Reno Democrat*, that these were first-rate settlers. The settlers of Okarche were experienced, many having once lived in settlements all across the United States, had considerable and extensive connections to other German Catholic settlements across the United States, and were extremely industrious in building their own institutions. While Prewitt earlier did caution us that they were not uniquely better than any other. They were uniquely suited to facilitate the rapid development of the Catholic community in Okarche, as the sources indicate.

The people of Okarche contrasted with other Oklahoma settlers, many of whom were disruptive and unlikely to stay. *The Purcell Register* in their 1894 issue describes census official Special Agent Lane as saying: "Many of the whites in the mining districts and lumber camps and the farmers scattered through here have little regard for the moral law, and show but little refinement."⁷⁹ Lane disparages the whites of Choctaw Country as "illiterate, roving, ragged and profligate."⁸⁰ Hardly like the industrious people of Okarche, who so zealously built their own nice little Church in the span of only a year through organized labor and sourcing of funds. That same spring that saw the erection of Holy Trinity, the Lutherans of Okarche also constructed St. John's Lutheran Church, with a resident pastor, Rev. von der Au, who conducted religious

⁷⁸ Ibid. and White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 153.

⁷⁹ W.H. Walker, *The Purcell Register* (Purcell, Indian Terr.), Vol. 7, no. 48, October 26, 1894. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2363616/m1/1/?q=%22poor%20whites%22>, The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

services only in German and later opened a small school that taught the children in German and English.⁸¹

Okarche, like many other European immigrant communities in Oklahoma, was part of a wave of church building in Oklahoma. From 1891 to 1924, under the direction of Bishop Theophile Meerschaert, the Catholic churches in Oklahoma grew “from 21 to 169.”⁸² This huge expansion and construction boom was largely a grassroots effort developed by communities eager and keen to sustain the practice of their faith. Holy Trinity in Okarche was one such example of a community-led initiative to facilitate the practice of their faith. For example, according to Meerschaert’s diary concerning the people of Conception, Oklahoma: “The people of Conception deserve great praise for their efforts in building this Church... They did nearly all the work themselves and paid for the material.”⁸³ Okarche and Holy Trinity reflected the deep desires of German settlers. They desperately sought to preserve their religion and suffered greatly to make it happen, including pooling considerable resources to construct their churches. *The Orphans’ Record* recounted: “Twenty-five years ago... the pioneers of the now splendid parish of Okarche assembled for the first time in their new church, erected at the cost of much hard labor and heroic self-denial...”⁸⁴ In 1893, land was cheap, no one faced any barriers to construction on unclaimed land, but importing building materials was hugely expensive.

The Holy Trinity Catholic Church was truly the work of the parishioners who took it upon themselves to build their own place of worship and belonging. Faced one big problem. Like most churches in the west there was a noticeable drought of priests. Francis Clement Kelley, the second Bishop of Oklahoma and founder of the Catholic Church Extension Society, mused: “In

⁸¹ Willibrand, *German in Okarche*, 285-287.

⁸² White, “Essay: The Life of Theophile Meerschaert,” 2.

⁸³ White, *Frontier Bishop*, 108.

⁸⁴ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 4.

the West and South I ran into small groups of Catholics threatened with being swallowed up by indifference, pastorless people as well as churchless people.”⁸⁵ The Roman Catholic Faith requires more for worship than a Church; it also requires a priest and an altar to perform the liturgy of the Eucharist, an ancient Christian ritual that participates in Christ’s Last Supper and miraculously transforms the bread into the Body of Christ.⁸⁶ The Orthodox and High Church Protestants likewise have similar liturgies, which is in stark contrast to low Church and Evangelical Protestant traditions, whose worship does not include the Liturgy of the Word or similar traditions. The absence of a priest did not preclude the parishioners from using the Church for Sunday prayer services, the carrying out of vespers and other such reverential Catholic practices of devotion made possible and facilitated by such a building. In 1925, these traditions were codified by the priests serving in Oklahoma’s Panhandle, where a lay leader, in the absence of a priest, would lead a communal rosary in the chapel. This was followed by a reading of the gospel and epistle, then concluded with a short sermon.⁸⁷

Following the construction and dedication of the Church, the first resident pastor, Rev. A.G. Borremans, replaced Father Beck as the principal officiant attending to the spiritual needs of Okarche.⁸⁸ Father Arthur Gustave Borremans was one of the Flemish priests recruited from Belgium by Meerschaert during his fundraising trip to Belgium in 1892. He arrived in Okarche during the spring of 1893 and stayed until Christmas of 1897.⁸⁹ In February of 1895, Okarche received yet another contribution from the Loosen family of Okarche, that being a bell that was then blessed by Bishop Meerschaert, the proverbial godchild of Mr. Frank Loosen and Miss Irene

⁸⁵ Francis Clement Kelley, “The Origins of the Catholic Church Extension Society, October 18, 1905,” in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987), 561.

⁸⁶ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), n. 1187-1199.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 217.

⁸⁸ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 4. Conception, Oklahoma, was a short lived township that later merged with the city Mustang, Oklahoma.

⁸⁹ White, *Frontier Bishop*, 109.

Loosen.⁹⁰ In the same year, “The parcel of land, five acres, two miles south and a half mile east of Okarche, donated to the congregation by Mr. Wm. Knecht about 1895, is the Catholic cemetery.”⁹¹ Loosen, Knecht, and Bogner, names strongly associated with Okarche’s Catholic church, were all German names. Catholicism in Okarche took on a thoroughly German ethnic quality, as it did in other parts of Oklahoma, such as the Italian Catholics of Krebs and the great number of Irish Catholics across the state, including a lasting minority in Okarche, such as the Hennessey family of Okarche, with eleven members thus far in the Holy Trinity Catholic Cemetery of Okarche.⁹²

In 1897, the parish made yet another large shift, the establishment of Holy Trinity Catholic School, facilitated by the purchase of “a two-story frame store building.”⁹³ In short order, the building was remodeled into a school, and the Benedictine Sisters from Guthrie came over as the teachers. A groundbreaking achievement that allowed the school to move out of the two-bedroom home that had acted as the previous schoolhouse.⁹⁴ The parish of Holy Trinity accomplished an impressive feat by building their own church, school, and cemetery. Not only that, but members of their community emerged as leaders within the town, such as the Loosens and their bank. Yet 1897 ended as a bittersweet year for the people of Okarche because, following the Christmas of the same year, Father Borremans departed from the parish, being replaced instead by Rev. Frederick Van der Aa, another Flemish priest brought over by Bishop Meerschaert.⁹⁵ Van der Aa’s tenure at Okarche lasted from January 1898 to the fall of 1900.

⁹⁰ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 5. Historically, bells have shared a deep-rooted bond with divine worship. This connection led to the tradition of “baptizing” new bells, a ceremony where they are assigned patron saints and godparents. Once blessed, these bells are consecrated for sacred use and elevated to the status of sacramentals within the life of the Church.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² James J. Hennessey, Headstone, Holy Trinity Cemetery, Okarche, Canadian County, Oklahoma.

⁹³ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

From 1900 to 1901, Okarche relied on a visiting priest who came twice a month. The visiting priest was also a Flemish missionary priest.⁹⁶ The people of Okarche, ethnic Germans and Irish, were all ministered to by Flemish-speaking Belgian priests, all European-born, funneled into the vicariate by Bishop Meerschaert. It spoke to the immigrant nature of Oklahoma's resident Catholic Church and the transnational and multicultural Church as a whole, the faith a constant source of unity, capable of experiencing great internal division brought about by competing ethnicities.

Not everyone was happy about this fact. Many German-speaking Catholics of Okarche felt terribly neglected. While they were happy to have a priest minister to them, just why was it that they could not have a Catholic priest who spoke their language? Who attended them in their language? Why did they have Flemish speakers force English onto them? *The Orphans' Record* described the period from 1898 through 1902: "The parish, during this time, had passed through the usual vicissitudes and struggles..."⁹⁷ Most of these struggles around finding a German-speaking priest were quite unusual. These "vicissitudes and struggles" swirled around a conflict between the bishop and a few loud German-speaking Catholics within the vicariate.⁹⁸

Chapter 2 - Unusual Vicissitudes: Okarche's Struggle for a German-Speaking Priest

The Orphan's Record relates the struggles from 1898 through 1902 as a period of the "usual vicissitudes." However, it was anything but. In a dramatic story involving upstarts, Washington D.C., a bishop, and the Vatican itself, Okarche was embroiled in a four-year drama that brought together the interests of people from all across the northern Atlantic world. Bishop Meerschaert, at the beginning of his ministry to the non-Amerindian settlers of Oklahoma and Indian territory, was responsible for approximately 69,899 square miles of land and the disparate

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Willibrand, "German in Okarche," 287.

group of Catholics scattered across it. Facing down this animal with only a few priests and not the requisite funds, he was forced to make tough decisions over the distribution of said resources. Yet, how does one explain this to a community that feels neglected and isolated on account of either their language or faith?

The German Catholics of Okarche sought to preserve their traditions, namely their German Catholic faith practiced in German. Building a church and school was not enough when they still felt their language and culture imperiled by the Americanizing trends of the Irish Catholic bishops. They remained adamant in the need for a priest who could minister to them in the tongue of the fatherland. St. John's Lutheran Church had a German-speaking priest. The danger was truly felt as a later reflection by Monsignor Don Wolf of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City: "Well, that would have been the concern all over—finding a priest who speaks the language. The Czech community for the most part fell away from the church because they had no Czech-speaking priests."⁹⁹ Many Germans in Okarche, and Oklahoma City as a whole, began to entrench and preserve the use of the German language in their communities, chief among these was having a priest who could minister to them in their native tongue.¹⁰⁰ They needed a German-speaking priest. While the desire for said priest was unanimous among the German-speaking majority of the Catholics of Okarche, some were willing to move beyond mere petitions in the struggle to obtain said priest, a decision that turned Okarche from the usual to the unusual, bringing the German Catholics of Okarche into a dispute with their bishop.

From the inception of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in 1893, the Germans of Okarche petitioned constantly for a German-speaking priest. Evidently, word of these petitions found their

⁹⁹ Don Wolf, Interview at the rectory of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, OKC, February 28, 2026. Monsignor Don Wolf is a Catholic priest serving in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. He currently is the pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church and the rector of the Shrine of Blessed Stanley Rother.

¹⁰⁰ Willibrand, "German in Okarche," 287.

way to the Papal Legate in Washington, D.C. sometime before June 15, 1898. On the same day, the Directors of the Church Parish School of Okarche wrote a letter to Bishop Meerschaert, where they petitioned him for a German-speaking priest. Written by the German Catholic fathers of Okarche, they explained that they required a priest proficient in their language, making the case that they were “an almost purely German congregation, absolutely not proficient in the English language.” Next, they claimed that their children suffered because “the holy religion” was being “taught to our children and us in a foreign language.”¹⁰¹ The parish was responding to Bishop Meerschaert’s regular claim that the Germans of Okarche were proficient enough in English to get by with an English-speaking priest.

The same letter insisted that any belief that the Germans of Okarche were proficient in English in any capacity was incorrect. They pushed further, saying the bishop and even the papal legate had been falsely informed. “Your Noble Eminence must indisputably have been falsely informed, otherwise the Most Reverend Legate in Washington could not have been convinced that we all understood English perfectly.” Indignant, they closed the letter with “we do not wish that we should be portrayed as liars.”¹⁰² This letter shows us the papal legate in Washington, D.C. was already apprised of the happenings in little old Okarche. The struggle for the German-speaking priest had already broken out of the confines of Oklahoma by the year 1898, and the persistence of German Catholic Okarcheans had brought the legate to investigate the situation in the vicariate.

The Okarcheans were adamant in their commitments to the Catholic faith and the clergy themselves, defending against the accusation that they were incapable of providing a comfortable

¹⁰¹ "Petition to Bishop Meerschaert for a German-speaking priest," Petition, 1898, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives (original in German; translation by Ruben Hernandez with assistance from Google Gemini), 1.

¹⁰² Ibid.

standard of living to both their clergy and the institutions of their town. They employ harrowing language describing their hardships. “Most Reverend Bishop, you are a witness; you know what sacrifices we have made. Our families did not only go half-clothed but went truly naked; parents have sold their best, the food away from the table, to maintain the priest, the church, and the school.”¹⁰³ The language employed by the fathers of the parish could be a bit hyperbolic, but they were clear in their intent. The Okarcheans were bewildered and defensive about the implication that they failed to provide for the common welfare of any clerics, in fact, they claimed they skimmed on their families to provide for the parish.

The Germans couched their argument for the persistence of the German language in Okarche as one of spiritual obligation. They argued that for their children to be raised as devout Catholics, it must be done so using the German language. “Most Reverend Bishop, we do not want to rest; we only want to stand up for the duty that we as parents have toward our youth; to this certainly belongs the language that we understand, mainly in religion.”¹⁰⁴ The elders of the parish, in conjunction, explained that their obligation to the German language and its instruction to their young, for the sake of religious observance, is in no way a hostility to the English language. They described that in their schools, English was taught alongside German. They then insisted: “It is, however, impossible for us to give up our mother tongue, which is so intimately connected with our religion. Most Reverend Lord Bishop, we are all convinced that many who have fallen away would have remained true to the old faith if they had had their mother tongue.”¹⁰⁵ Between the lines it could be read, “would it not be a grave failing on the part of his bishop to lose people over something as simple as language?”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Continuing the letter also details an interesting bit concerning the mutual relationship between character, ethnicity, and religiosity. The elders of Holy Trinity lay out that “those who disown their language belong only to superficial people.”¹⁰⁶ Perhaps a subtle slight against the Irish Catholics of the United States, who during this period of the late 1890s were heavily pushing for the assimilation of the ethnic minorities into a singular English-speaking American Church.¹⁰⁷ They continue to belabor the point that the language is a pivotal aspect of their religion and way of life by saying: “Faith and song in our language will not hinder us in any success in life. We elders show it clearly enough; whether the young will also be able to do so? We want to hope so. It is certainly easier to teach the priest the language of the congregation than the congregation the language of the priest.”¹⁰⁸ Neither their faith nor their language had been a detriment, and they highlighted their incipient prosperity. Relatively speaking, in the context of Oklahoma, they appeared, as a community, to be doing remarkably well. Well enough to build a church and school entirely from their own resources. In addition, they were correct that it is much easier for the priest to learn the language of the people he is serving rather than making all his people adopt the priest's language. Missionary priests, especially many later produced by Okarche, had the imperative of learning the language of their congregations. In the grand scheme of things, with priests serving the Christian role of fishers of men, it was not a presumptuous ask, but instead quite a natural one.

The language of the letter also rings of desperation, not merely the desperation to preserve their language, but also to avoid any reprisal for complaining. This letter is one of many, as indicated in the letters beginning: “We, the Catholic German fathers of families from

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Stefaniuk, “Joseph Jessing, German-American Catholics, and National Myth-Making in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Catholic Studies*, 126, no. 1 (2015), 1–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44195702>, 2.

¹⁰⁸ “Petition to Bishop Meerschaert,” 1.

Okarche, venture once more with the above-stated request to Your Noble Birth.”¹⁰⁹ The line indicates that the German Catholics of Holy Trinity were indefatigable in their petitions for a German-speaking priest. The parishioners of Holy Trinity, especially the elders of the community, perceived that an inability to save the language of their faith would imperil their spirits. “We beg you once more, Most Reverend Bishop, hear our plea, save our language and the soul of our youth; send us a German-speaking priest.”¹¹⁰ In a struggle that seemed to the people of Okarche, particularly the elders writing this very letter, one between spiritual life or death, they were immensely aware of the ways it could be perceived that they slighted their bishop and sought to ameliorate this, as well as addressing their own grievances. “We beg you, do not forbid German-speaking priests who come here from preaching to us in the church, and do not allow the resident priest, Mr. Van der Velden, to forbid the School Sisters from praying in German with our children in church and school.”¹¹¹ It is not known if the denial of German prayer in the school or German services by visiting priests was ever an effective policy at Holy Trinity. By all accounts, it was not, as if there was a policy of overt banning of the use of German spirituality in Okarche, it would have likely have caused an even greater uproar, there was a genuine fear among these community leaders of possible reprisals against them for deigning to demand of their bishop.

Meerschaert was an old-fashioned European-style bishop who saw himself as the highest authority in Okarche’s spiritual life. In the pre-Vatican II Catholic world, he was, hence the closing remarks of the letter. “That does not lead to peace; preserve us and strengthen the peace which, unfortunately, until now is still very imperfect. And you will have a congregation here that will return joyfully and gladly to the work begun, and what is yet to be accomplished, to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

fulfill with childlike obedience the paternal will of Your Eminence. Our childlike plea to be heard very soon by you, our beloved father.”¹¹² The letter appears like the earnest plea of a child to a father, defending and justifying their action, but also supplicative and aware of authority at bed. The analogy, in the spiritual sense, was the case. Parish leaders in Okarche insisted the community’s peace was actively imperiled. The letters’ effusive acknowledgement of the bishop’s station, the imagery of a father-child relationship, and the ready description of genuine desire to be obedient and submissive to their spiritual sovereign could very well be platitudes, yet the piety of the Germans of Okarche was genuine. For if it were not, why did they persist in being Catholics and enduring the troublesome burden of not having a priest who knew their language? To them, a life outside the Church was unfathomable. All parties involved sought reconciliation, and the letter is an indication of the presence of an active dialogue in which the Okarcheans were earnestly pursuing whatever avenues available to them for the preservation of their culture.

To protect that culture, only a year later, the members of the parish established the “St. Bonifacius Lese- und Erziehungs-Verein.” Translated as the St. Boniface Reading and Education Association. On the 18th of June, 1899, the parish, believing that there was no other alternative, moved to establish for themselves a society dedicated to the preservation of the German language within their community and Church. The stated purpose of the association goes as follows:

The purpose is the cultivation of the German mother tongue in the family; securing a German education and training of our youth in our parish school, and where this is not possible, to replace this training through domestic instruction. The members pledge themselves to work with all their strength toward the goal that the German language enjoys at least equal consideration and equal rights with English in church and school. Further purpose is the cultivation of social intercourse and friendly feelings among the members; promotion of German

¹¹² Ibid.

customs and German character; procurement of good, edifying, instructive, and entertaining reading matter.¹¹³

A thoroughly Catholic organization, to be a member, it was a requirement to be a practicing Catholic and donate to the Church. Meetings, per the guidelines, ended with the Hail Mary and the Our Father. There were provisions to list the local parish priest as the spiritual president of the association, and included clauses for mutual aid to guarantee the collective welfare and care for members of the association and communities as a whole.

The Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Order of Foresters are both religious mutual aid societies founded in the late nineteenth century to care for Catholic families who experienced death and financial hardship, an effort to preserve a family's Catholic identity.¹¹⁴ Evidently, the association was never intended to be a source of resistance or even aggression against the Church in Oklahoma, especially with clauses of members being practicing Catholics and the inclusion of the parish priest in the running of the association.¹¹⁵ Even so, the St. Boniface Reading and Education Association became a point of contention between the bishop and the people of Okarche. The Association was embroiled in an organized effort to pressure the bishop to provide German-speaking priests for the German communities of Oklahoma, principally Okarche. A document detailing the head of the school and the church had the following people listed: Christian Gassen, Johan R. Schmitz, Joseph Ottis, Baptist Bogner, Peter Alig, Wilhelm Knecht, and Frank Rother.¹¹⁶ These same individuals were surely among the "father's of the parish" who

¹¹³ "Statutes of the St. Boniface Reading and Education Association," Statutes, 1898, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives (original in German; translation by Ruben Hernandez with assistance from Google Gemini), 1.

¹¹⁴ "About the Catholic Order of Foresters," The Catholic Order of Foresters, accessed April 7, 2026, <https://www.catholicforester.org/about/>. "The History of the Knights of Columbus," The Knights of Columbus, accessed April 7, 2026, <https://www.kofc.org/who-we-are/our-history/>.

¹¹⁵ "St. Boniface Reading and Education Association," 1-4.

¹¹⁶ "Head of the School. Beach of the Church," List, 1898, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives (original in German; translation by Ruben Hernandez with assistance from Google Gemini), 1.

wrote Bishop Meerschaert following the involvement of the Papal Legate out of Washington, D.C.

Willibrand describes how “In 1899 members of the parish at Okarche assumed a sort of leadership in the struggle for the German language. A meeting was called in Oklahoma City ‘for the purpose of appealing to the Pope for the privilege of holding services’ in German.”¹¹⁷ Those from Okarche who attended the meeting were: “F.J. Waldmann, Mr. Kroener, F. Rother, William Knecht, B. Bogner, John Eck and S. Schneeberger.”¹¹⁸ All leaders of Okarche’s Catholic institutions had pressured the bishop to provide said German-speaking priest. Knecht donated land to provide the church with a cemetery, and Bogner was heavily involved in the construction of the church. No doubt they would not attend such a meeting unless they felt there was a grave need. With Holy Trinity’s petition to Bishop Meerschaert in mind: “It is, however, impossible for us to give up our mother tongue, which is so intimately connected with our religion.”¹¹⁹ Willibrand says: “Some of them [Okarcheans] spoke only a few words of English, and while their dialects were adequate to their material environment, the vocabulary of their inner life, their religious experience, was that of standard German, to which they had been accustomed by the schools and the pulpits of their native communities. This was the only language they could use adequately in going to the sacraments. They found priests in Oklahoma spoke other languages.”¹²⁰ The German Catholics of Oklahoma believed that practicing their faith using their mother tongue was absolutely fundamental to a genuine religious experience. The lack of a religious leader who could minister to them in their own language robbed their children and themselves of an authentic practice of their religion.

¹¹⁷ Willibrand, “German in Okarche,” 287.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 287-288.

¹¹⁹ “Petition to Bishop Meerschaert,” 1.

¹²⁰ Willibrand, “German in Okarche,” 287.

Regardless of intent, this gathering and the ongoing movement for German-speaking priests became a hot interstate topic of conversation for the German and Catholic communities surrounding Oklahoma. Willibrand found a handful of newspapers actively engaged by throwing in their opinions and observations, with three being explicitly quoted. *The Okarche Times*, *The St. Louis Catholic Review*, and the *Western Watchman*. Quoting from *The St. Louis Catholic Review*:

The German Catholics of Oklahoma recently held a convention in Oklahoma City, in which they renewed the assurance and promise of their fidelity to the Catholic faith and their loyalty to the Holy Father, but complained bitterly in a series of strong resolutions against the policy of Bishop Meerschaert, who they assert, denies them pastors able to speak their mother tongue, sends the few German priests in his diocese to non-German parishes, and gives the German congregations Belgian and Irish pastors, who either speak no German at all or very little. They intend to take a census of the German Catholics resident in the Territory and request the Catholic press to assist them in their battle for equal rights.¹²¹

The article, coming from the Missouri German Catholic crowd, reveals how interconnected German settlements were across the United States, with them holding to one another in proximity and the happenings of one another's relations an important piece in the day-to-day lives of these Germans.

However, *The St. Louis Catholic Review* also reminded its readers that lay and clerical authorities have a long history in the Roman Catholic Church of being at odds. Starting with Theodosius, the Roman Emperor, being excommunicated by St. Ambrose of Milan, or in America, with German Catholics acting in defiance of their bishop. Thus, the *St. Louis Catholic Review* cautions their statement by saying: "We have not sufficient knowledge of the actual conditions in Oklahoma to be able to say whether their complaints are well-founded. If they are the bishop ought to be compelled by higher authority to do his duty; if they are not, the kickers

¹²¹ Ibid.

should be publicly exposed and silenced.”¹²² The *Catholic Review* reminded modern audiences of the fact that public internal squabbling, no matter how severe or minute, runs the risk of inflicting genuine harm on the Catholic Church in America. The American Catholic Church in the nineteenth century was in a precarious situation brought about by overt and genuine hostility toward them; they were a church of minorities, immigrants, and one deeply divided by ethnicity. Such episodes ran the risk of validating Anglo-Protestant sentiments in denying Catholics opportunities and hampering their development.

The St. Louis Catholic Review article dates to 1901, after a second meeting held in 1900, which included Rother, Waldmann, Knecht, Bogner, and new individuals Henry Hoschler, John Heinen, Mr. Hau, Sr., Anton Weber, J. Jacobs, and R. Bruggen.¹²³ *The Okarche Times*, an Anglo-American newspaper, came down sympathetically on the side of the German-Catholics and the Kickers, the leaders of the German-Catholics, the more vocal proponents, saying: “Some claim it is also a detriment to the Territory in keeping away a thrifty law-abiding class of farmers, as the Germans are generally conceded to be, and wealthy merchants who are welcomed everywhere. and who have helped to build up the great west. We wish our German Catholic friends success in their struggle, which seems to be endorsed by the English press of their own faith.”¹²⁴

Waldmann chaired the Oklahoma City German-Catholic meeting in 1900, assuming a leadership role in the struggle for a German-speaking priest to minister to the German community of Okarche. Rapidly, he transitioned into the principal agitator, who escalated tensions between the German-Catholics of Oklahoma and the bishop. His continued disobedience against his bishop alienated him from his community and singled him out as the

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 288.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 288-289.

bishop's principal detractor. Willibrand notes that opposition to the bishop was not uniform in the community, and many did not have the stomach to persist or to support those who did persist. "It should be observed that while some English-speaking Okarcheans favored German as a language of worship, not all German-speaking citizens were sympathetic with the continued opposition to the Bishop's policy. The large majority however wanted a pastor with a fluent command of German; it didn't matter particularly whether such a pastor was of German or of non-German birth."¹²⁵ By 1900, the continued resistance against the bishop was waning, and many of the Catholics found it unseemly to make an enemy of one's religious leader and the vicar of their community, in spite of their ardent and uniform desire for a German-speaking priest. The Okarcheans' leaders likely worried the situation was getting away from them and stepped away from the struggle, preferring less confrontational forms of petition.

From the outset, the German-Catholics of Okarche were divided concerning opposition to the bishop. In addition to this, Meerschaert himself observed this in his own letters and maintained a ready observance and attendance to the people of Okarche. Personal communications between the German Catholics of Okarche and the bishop communicate this same reality. In a letter written on January 5th, 1899, a member of the parish attempted to arrange for the reconciliation of the Kickers with the bishop in an act of apology.

Does your lordship approve of the following idea under the present circumstances. I propose to your lordship to have a triduum (3 days preaching) in Okarche. Father Lanolots to preach in English and Father Adelbert to preach in German in order to prepare the Kickers for a good confession and communion, now when you allow them to receive the Sacraments on account of the jubilee year. I have to ask Father Adelbert yet if he will wishes come for this; if you know somebody better...

I am satisfied, but it should be somebody who had not in the least anything to do with the past troubles and who is not known by Okarche people.

I am satisfied with whatever your lordship thinks in this matter if you disapprove of my idea. I have no intention to say anything in regard to the society, and I wish

¹²⁵ Ibid.

it could be broken up without starting one in opposition to the Kickers. In the mean time I will get ready for a society of the good people if necessity would require this. We have now 41 children and I hope there will be some more gradually.¹²⁶

The individual was attempting to provide the Kickers with an opportunity to reconcile with their pastoral authority, likewise illustrating an additional reality to the bishop, that their sacramental well-being was restricted to the German language. The Germans were unrelenting in their message that the German language was fundamental to regular communion with the sacraments, regardless of being deferential or opposed to their bishop. It is not clear whether this mass came to pass. In James D. White's edited collection of Meerschaert's diary, as well as the excerpts published by *The Catholic Home*, there is a glaring gap during the Lenten and easter season of 1899, which leaves the question of whether or not the Kickers were spiritually reconciled up to assumption.

By 1900, word of the upheaval in Oklahoma went beyond the papal legate to the United States, centered in Washington, D.C., and Waldmann's uproar found its way to the Vatican itself. On November 30th, 1900, Cardinal Mieczysław Halka-Ledóchowski wrote to Bishop Meerschaert, essentially asking the bishop for an explanation as to the many petitions he received concerning the suffering of the German Catholics in his territory.¹²⁷

Certain Catholics of German origin, who live in Okarche, Oklahoma, a place in that Apostolic Vicariate, have sent a petition to His Holiness, in which they say they lack spiritual assistance because, as they do not understand the English language, they do not have a priest who speaks German language in their direction. They add that they have asked many times for such a priest, but it has always been denied to them, while, on the contrary, immigrants of other various nationalities have been given a priest of their own nationality. This petition is called into examination, [I

¹²⁶ "Letter to the Bishop about reconciling the Kickers," Letter, 1899, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives, 1.

¹²⁷ Cardinal Mieczysław Halka-Ledóchowski was a Polish national hero and Cardinal Bishop who suffered at the consequence of Bismarck's Kulturkampf. Halka-Ledóchowski served as the Prefect of Propaganda from 1892 until his death in 1902. For more about Cardinal Halka-Ledóchowski see M. Ott, "Miecislav Halka Ledochowski," In *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09111b.htm>.

ask] your [Right Reverence] that regarding this... [to] Theophile Meerschaert, Vicar Apostolic of the Indian Territory... provide information to me.¹²⁸

His “Illustrious and Right Reverend Lord” Meerschaert was surely annoyed to discover a letter from the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in his mailbox one frigid winter Oklahoma morning. Regardless, it was the natural escalation of circumstances.

Meerschaert, in his response to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, presents a timeline describing how, after investigations from the Catholic American officials in Washington, he was found to be in satisfactory order and not guilty of any gross abuses against the German population of his vicariate.

I recently received the letter from Your Eminence dated the 30th of last month (Protocol No. 41625) concerning the petition of certain German Catholics of the place commonly called Okarche in my Vicariate, and I respond most willingly to them according to my duty. The aforementioned Catholics—few in number indeed—have often appealed in these last years to the Apostolic Delegation in Washington for the same reason; however, the Delegation itself, after everything was diligently weighed, constantly judged that my way of acting should be approved.

Since Your Eminence truly desires fuller information regarding the petition offered by the praised Germans to the Holy See, I will clearly set forth those things which I had long ago offered to the Apostolic Delegation, although they seemed to the Delegation to be of such a nature that they declared nothing should be changed.¹²⁹

Meerschaert, while explaining his case, however, does dismiss many of the points of consternation expressed by the parishioners of Holy Trinity. He denies they are German, saying: “...the people of the place of Okarche are by no means to be called ‘Germans’ as if they had come from Germany; rather, they are from various states of the Republic.”¹³⁰ In addition, he

¹²⁸ “Letter from Card. Ledóchowski to B. Meerschaert about Germans Catholics,” Letter, 1900, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives (original in Latin; translation by Ruben Hernandez with assistance from Google Gemini), 1.

¹²⁹ “B. Meerschaert’s Reply to the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*,” Letter, 1900, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives (original in Latin; translation by Ruben Hernandez with assistance from Google Gemini), 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid. Meerschaert means the United States of America when describing the “Republic.”

outright rejects the notion that they have no means of using the English language to access the sacraments, stating: “Out of 400 or 500 of them, all—if perhaps you except the elderly—know the English language. This is evidenced by the fact that they are satisfied when the Word of God is announced to them in the English language.”¹³¹ While Meerschaert was not entirely wrong because local expert Willibrand earlier clarified, they did speak a little English, crucial to getting by in the U.S., but they still required the German language to fully participate in the Catholic sacraments.

Meerschaert’s dismissal of this genuine expression of spiritual need seems callous. Of course, the Catholic liturgy of the time was carried out in Latin, and Meerschaert, a bishop who resolved to be a priest as young as twelve, perhaps did not see the need for the use of the vernacular as a dire necessity when the conferment of the sacraments themselves almost completely happened in Latin. Yet, this did not prevent him from further deriding his detractors who had gone over his head to petition Washington and the Vatican. Meerschaert communicated: “It is important to observe that these Germans, being farmers, limit their education; the younger generation understands the elementary English language better than German.”¹³² Meerschaert continues with his response, describing how he clearly communicated that he had few priests to spare, they would have irregular masses and access to the sacraments, in addition, he had no German priests on hand, especially none that he was able to spare for them. “When, a few years ago, the Catholics of the place of Okarche asked me for a chapel... I clearly stated that a priest would come once a month, since I then had only 12 priests in the whole Vicariate. When they asked for a German priest, I promised I would send one as soon as I could, always working to have a priest who could hear confessions in the German language.”¹³³ It seemed he did not feel a

¹³¹ Ibid., 2.

¹³² Ibid., 2-3.

¹³³ Ibid., 3.

tremendous need to teach his priests German either, which is interesting considering Belgium's own proximity to Germany. Yet, in this response, Meerschaert does betray his own knowledge of the spiritual place of his people, that for them to fully participate in the sacrament of reconciliation (confession), they required a German-speaking priest. Their spiritual well-being was grounded on the need for German-speaking clerics.

Meerschaert then describes the opposition he faced and the chaos and headache stirred up by bad actors within and outside of Okarche and Oklahoma. "Furthermore, some few—who had lived elsewhere—incited the people against priests of another language, so that they themselves might rule the temporal affairs of the church. When the priest whom I sent did not please them, I sent one of the best... but they did not submit to the priest I sent."¹³⁴ Meerschaert's response is in direct reference to one of the newspapers that Willibrand addressed, the St. Louis-based Baptist newspaper, the *Western Watchman*. The *Western Watchman's* language was rather inflammatory, and it stands to reason that many of the detractors backed away from Waldmann's cause at this critical juncture. The *Western Watchman* declared: "We are with the Germans in this fight. We sternly oppose any interference with the parish organizations. and the obtrusion of a foreign tongue in their services."¹³⁵

Meerschaert, however, does not get angry at the Okarcheans. As a matter of fact, as his earlier letter went on when describing the triumph of building their Church, he acknowledges them for a particular and ardent piety. "The inhabitants of Okarche are not bad, but religious to such a degree that, with very few exceptions, all attend the sacraments and do not fail in their duties."¹³⁶ He likely collated their piety with their bullheaded nature, a self-assurance of a kind in the righteousness of their own flock. Yet, an aside must be made to acknowledge the radicality of

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

¹³⁵ Willibrand, "German in Okarche," 288.

¹³⁶ "B. Meerschaert's Reply," 3.

the fact that nearly every able member of the community readily and eagerly participated in the sacraments, something that Meerschaert felt the need to note to the Cardinal. While the period following 1850 is noted for being a general Catholic revival around the world, especially in the European world, the regular consumption and nearly full participation in the sacraments was an indication of an exceptional sort of piety that went well beyond the expected norms of the working-class Catholics of the era, even in this period of intense revival.¹³⁷ Meerschaert apprised that the Catholics of Holy Trinity's parish were not the issue, but rather bad actors who use Okarche's institutions as a springboard for their own ends. "However, there are a few who openly oppose the Bishop and the Catholic schools, handing their sons over to public schools and using the Catholic school only for two or three months before First Communion."¹³⁸ It is important to then look back on the statutes used to govern the St. Boniface Reading and Education Association, looking at the rules of membership in Article III.

Anyone who is Catholic can become a member under the following conditions: a) He must be a practicing Catholic, i.e., keep his Easter and contribute to the maintenance of the church; b) send his children to a Catholic school for at least two years before First Communion, unless important reasons excuse it; c) pay his entrance fees of 1 dollar and monthly dues of 5 cents.¹³⁹

The St. Boniface Association made explicit reasons that, unless there are exceptional circumstances, the children must be sent to a Catholic school for at least two years before First Communion. These bad actors were already in blatant violation of community diktats and expectations. It was one thing to make a headache for the town priest; it is quite another to flagrantly violate local custom as a show of force in rigid rebellion against the spiritual vicar of your home. Especially considering that Holy Trinity's school and church were a product of the town's own cumulative efforts. Of the same community. In a sense, this continued resistance was

¹³⁷ Sperber, *Popular Catholicism*, 90-99.

¹³⁸ "B. Meerschaert's Reply," 3.

¹³⁹ "Statutes of the St. Boniface," 1.

not merely an act of defiance against the bishop and his authority, whether wielded incorrectly or correctly, but against the town itself.

The Bishop of the Vicariate of Oklahoma Territory then continued to elaborate on the nuance inherent in the situation and the difficulties posed not by the authority of Okarche itself, but by troublesome individuals that were earlier recognized as the Kickers:

Furthermore, since the priest manages the temporalities of the church with a council of laymen, and since these disturbers are not on the council, they wish to interfere in the temporal administration. These people have called themselves "The Catholics of Oklahoma". One of them is called Waldman, who sent a cable to our Lord Leo XIII for a blessing, and having received a response from Cardinal Rampolla, had it printed in the newspapers.¹⁴⁰

Meerschaert recognized Waldmann as one of the principal leaders of the Kickers, mentioning how he reached out to the pope and Vatican to assume legitimacy in his struggle against his bishop, using Rampolla's response as a rallying cry against his reverend sovereign. Meerschaert closes the letter by explaining that he is doing right by Okarche, they "have been better served than many others in the Vicariate."¹⁴¹

Meerschaert afterwards remarks that if Cardinal Halka-Ledóchowski was not content with his accounting of events, he was welcome to speak with the "Apostolic Delegation in Washington" to essentially hear the same story. In Meerschaert's closing remark, he, however, makes the quite comical assertion, one that rings true to the character of the Okarcheans concerning their interaction with their current priest, that their incessant independence was cause for the current priest to carry out his duties in "a spirit of mortification."¹⁴² Meerschaert asserted that the people of Okarche were ornery enough that any pastor who dealt with them surely need

¹⁴⁰ "B. Meerschaert's Reply," 3-4. While passing through the Holy Trinity Catholic Cemetery in Okarche there were no headstones with the name F.J. Waldmann, indicating that he left the Okarche community sometime after the struggle. In the January 24, 1907 issue of *The Lawton Constitution*, it appears that a F.J. Waldmann started a wheat farm in Lawton. The name Waldmann continued to appear in Lawton papers until the 1950s.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴² Ibid., 4.

not worry about acts of service. The inability to practice the sacraments, particularly confession, in the way they required led some Catholics to leave Okarche. “The repeated failure to get a German-speaking priest may have had an influence on the decision of John Bogner and his step-father to leave Oklahoma territory in 1901.”¹⁴³ This drama in Okarche, nonetheless, was not without very real consequences for the people involved in the struggle for a German-speaking priest. While passing through the Holy Trinity Catholic Cemetery in Okarche, there were no headstones with the name F.J. Waldmann, indicating that he left the Okarche community sometime after the struggle. In the January 24, 1907, issue of *The Lawton Constitution*, it appears that F.J. Waldmann started a wheat farm in Lawton. The name Waldmann continued to appear in Lawton papers until the 1950s. Waldmann had made himself an exile, whether he was forced out or left voluntarily, the debacle with the bishop was one many people were eager to forget, hence the brushing aside of this dramatic ordeal with the phrase “usual vicissitudes.”

Meerschaert, when dealing with the people of Okarche, encountered a pleasant headache. They were devout, ardent, and quite industrious. Later remarks on Okarche constantly referred to them as industrious, pious, and noble. A town of continuous year-round prosperity, it has been called the “Most Catholic town in Oklahoma.” However, the people of Okarche are also apparently quite pushy, stubborn, and in some ways bullheaded. With such ardent self-assurance, they no doubt could be quite the headache to deal with. Monsignor Wolf, when reflecting on his family and their relationship to Monsignor Steber, puts it: “But I know enough of my relatives in Okarche to know that they don’t give you respect unless you earn it. And I know he had to be a pretty tough character because they would really push. And so he had to push back, I know. So

¹⁴³ “Holy Trinity, 15 Years 1893-1968,” 1969, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 1. Of particular significance as Bogner was the primary builder of the original Church and recorded leader of the community in multiple different records.

he was no slouch when it came to that, apparently.”¹⁴⁴ For such tough people as those from Okarche, it was only natural that an equally, if not more tough man would come to be the Prince of Okarche. With the arrival of Rev. Zenon Steber into Okarche, much of the troubles dissipated as the primary point of contention between the Germans and the bishop, a German-speaking priest, was set aside, and with Steber, a new era began in Okarche.

Chapter 3 - The Reign of the Prince of Okarche: Zenon Steber

Part 1: “The Pioneer Catholic Priest of Western Oklahoma”

“The Parish during this time, had passed through the usual vicissitudes and struggles, but the arrival of the present pastor, Rev. Zenon Steber, on November 12, 1902, was the beginning of a new life.”¹⁴⁵ Under Steber, Okarche transitioned from a community plagued by the unusual, namely their conflict with their bishop, to one that was demarcated as Catholic, Oklahoma’s city on a hill. Just who was the man who breathed new life into the Parish of Holy Trinity and revitalized the struggling community of rural German Catholics? That person was Cowboy Priest Rev. Zenon Steber, an Alsatian Missionary Priest who had served as circuit riding priest in western Oklahoma for six years before arriving in Okarche.¹⁴⁶

Monsignor Rev. Father Zenon Steber was born on October 21, 1872, in Pfaffenheim of the Haut-Rhin Department of France.¹⁴⁷ Steber was the eldest son of a family of seven children. He was educated at La Chapelle and St. Joseph’s College at Clermont. Steber and his younger brother then went into seminary, attending the Grand Seminary at Lyons, France. Ordained by

¹⁴⁴ Don Wolf Interview. Monsignor Z. Steber had passed away in 1948 before Monsignor D. Wolf was born around 1955, seven or eight years after Steber's passing. However, Wolf discusses that Steber's memory was very vivid in his youth.

¹⁴⁵ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Alsations were the German-speaking French of Alsace-Lorraine.

¹⁴⁷ “Curtain Falls on Career of Pioneer Priest,” *The Southwest Courier*, April 3, 1948, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 4. “Okarche Parish and Pastor Both Mark Their Golden Jubilee Thursday,” *The Southwest Courier*, July 10, 1943, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 6.

Rt. Rev. C. M. Dubuis in St. John's Cathedral, Lyons, France, July 9, 1893. On an interesting note, Bishop Dubuis, before becoming the Bishop of Lyons, was the Bishop of Galveston in the United States, revealing the transnational nature of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁴⁸

Shortly after Steber's ordination, he was sent to Africa, where he was stationed at the Gold Coast. Steber endured the work for "two years as missionary among the Ashantees."¹⁴⁹ However, his constitution was ill-suited for the task as he caught malaria, and according to *The Southwest Courier*, Steber was "ordered out of the 'White Man's Grave' by doctors."¹⁵⁰ Steber then found himself sent to the United States and wandered around until he arrived in Guthrie, Oklahoma, and was eagerly received by Bishop Meerschaert. Meerschaert's diary and *The Daily Oklahoma State Capital* record the instance of his arrival. *The Daily Oklahoma* notes on August 28th, 1896: "Father Steber, a Catholic priest, arrived from Europe yesterday and will be stationed at Arapahoe, having the Cheyenne country and Greer county under his charge."¹⁵¹ Bishop Meerschaert's diary, dated August 26th, 1896, reflects on the first meeting of Steber: "I was anxious to send a priest to that part of the country. Poverty and the want of priests prevented me from doing so. About that time I received the application of Father Steber who had been in the African Missions Gold coast but after a severe illness had to leave that climate. I received him at once for these new missions."¹⁵² Apparently, just as Steber was a godsend to the people of Okarche, he, too, had been a godsend to Bishop Meerschaert.

Although a German-speaking priest, Steber was not appointed as the minister for the Germans of Okarche. From 1896 until 1902, Steber was sent as a priest to various locations,

¹⁴⁸ "Pioneer Priest," 4. "Okarche Parish," 6.

¹⁴⁹ Frank H. Greer, *The Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 8, no. 9, August 28, 1896, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc104027/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 3.

¹⁵⁰ "Pioneer Priest," 4.

¹⁵¹ Greer, *The Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 8, no. 9, August 28, 1896, 3.

¹⁵² "Interesting Excerpts from the Diary of Late Bishop Meerschaert," *The Catholic Home*, March 1, 1924, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 6.

starting parishes, building churches, and ministering to a multitude of forlorn and disparate souls, carving out spaces for the Catholic community and worship where others dared not venture. Steber was thus given over to be a missionary with three other priests over the entirety of western Oklahoma.¹⁵³ The territory he oversaw, that being Cheyenne country and Greer county, was “more than 25,000 square miles. These he covered on horseback and in buggy.”¹⁵⁴ From his headquarters in Korn, he travelled all across his parish, attending to the needs of his parishioners across this 25,000 square mile expanse. Steber endured all sorts of tribulations and obstacles in his ministry to the Catholics in western Oklahoma. “He stayed overnight in dugouts, even slept under the stars. In his travels he met outlaws, including ‘Red’ Dalton but they never harmed the young missionary. With meager means he built churches at Korn, Scheidel and Independence.”¹⁵⁵

One could not fault Meerschaert in using one of his few German-speaking priests to attend to the needs of countless others rather than placing him in Okarche to minister to such a small population of the many other thousands that Meerschaert was responsible for. The bishop was carrying out his pastoral responsibilities, unable to concern himself with the frankly meager cries of his most able and capable children. While not to diminish their genuine pastoral needs of a German-speaking priest, especially concerning the sacrament of reconciliation, Meerschaert commented their zeal, piety, and constant reception of the sacrament, which was more readily available to them considering that before Steber Holy Trinity had regular attendance by resident priests or those of El Reno and Hennessey while Steber and two others were required to cover an area comprising over 25,000 square miles. Steber was needed elsewhere; this is most especially apparent considering the poverty and state of disrepair Steber found western Oklahoma in during the beginning of his ministry. Bishop Meerschaert’s diary remarked:

¹⁵³ “Pioneer Priest,” 1.

¹⁵⁴ “Okarche Parish,” 6.

¹⁵⁵ “Pioneer Priest,” 4.

I sent him to Greer county, gave him a buggy and two ponies. He finds that the poverty of that county is awful and that his blacks of Africa were living as princes compared with these people. I had to give him his support until the people could help him. With the help of the Bishop and the work of the people he has been building a little church and room which serves at the same time as a sacristy.¹⁵⁶

While most definitely a frontier society, Steber was struck by the degree of poverty that afflicted the people of Greer County and the rest of the state. Steber's presence was one to ameliorate a tremendous degree of neglect brought about by the sheer scale of the vastness of the territory that Meerschaert was responsible for. Therefore, Meerschaert's explanation to the Cardinal that he did not have access to a German-speaking priest was not entirely true; he had access to one, but did not have the requisite number of priests to justify moving the missionary to minister to the parishioners of Okarche.

By 1896, Bishop Meerschaert had nearly 26 or so priests at his disposal. A number of them were the Flemish priests he had either recruited from his homeland or one of the Flemish colonies established in the United States, whom he poached for ministry in the vicariate of Oklahoma and Indian territory. Of course, Steber was among them, but in addition were important names that went on to become important figures in the history of religious and indigenous relations in the United States, for example, Fr. William H. Ketcham.¹⁵⁷ While stationed at Korn, anglicized to Corn following the World Wars, Steber offered two masses a month on the first and third Sundays of said month.¹⁵⁸ The few offered services testify to the divided attention of Steber while responsible for the ministry of various other parishes.

¹⁵⁶ "Interesting Excerpts," *The Catholic Home*, 6.

¹⁵⁷ Leslie G. Niblack, *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 8, No. 149, November 24, 1896, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc73787/m1/1/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 4. Father William H. Ketcham later went on to be the Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, and Commissioner of the U.S. Board of Indian Commissioners, working in close collaboration with St. Catherine Drexel.

¹⁵⁸ *The Herald-Sentinel*. (Cloud Chief, Okla. Terr.), Vol. 6, no. 24, May 14, 1897, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc168794/m1/1/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

In addition, it appears that Steber was quite industrious in his time as a missionary. Beyond building churches, he seemed a proactive minister who made great headway in personally affecting the people of his vast and disparate parish. Before Steber was synonymous with Okarche, he was synonymous with the concept of the pioneering cowboy priest.

Father Zenen Steber, the pioneer Catholic priest of western Oklahoma, is going to give a fair at Kom [sic] Valley, O. T., Easter Monday, April 11. Father Steber has been a missionary among the cowboys and Indians for a number of years and is beloved by them all, on account of his gentleness and prompt attention to them when they are in trouble. The fair promises to be a grand success. The Korn Valley is ten miles north of Cloud Chief.¹⁵⁹

Steber, while a missionary in the outskirts of Oklahoma civilization, cultivated a reputation as capable, eager, gentle, and learned. He was indefatigable in his service to his parishioners, much in the way James D. White describes Meerschaert's tenure as the Bishop of Oklahoma. However, his ardent ministry did not prevent him from attending to personal matters; by February 12, 1901, Steber had completed a pilgrimage to the old country. While Steber may have been participating in a pilgrimage, it is also likely he returned home to his native Alsace to attend the funeral of his younger brother, with records indicating his younger brother, who followed him into the priesthood, died at the age of twenty-four after contracting malaria while doing missionary work in Africa.¹⁶⁰ While the information is not clear, by 1901 Steber had returned from Europe and was to be moved from his beloved Greer County. In March of 1901, it seemed quite likely that Steber, after serving as a substitute priest in Edmond, was to make way for establishing a church in Weatherford, Custer County, much to the excitement of Weatherford's *The Weekly Chronicle*. They called him the "Cowboy Priest."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Frank H. Greer, *The Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 8, no. 99, August 28, 1896, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc104027/m1/3/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 4.

¹⁶⁰ Leslie G. Niblack, *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 17, no. 65, February 12, 1901, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc75049/m1/5/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 5. "Pioneer Priest," 4. "Okarche Parish," 6.

¹⁶¹ N. J. Baker, *The Weekly Chronicle* (Weatherford, Okla. Terr.), Vol. 2, no. 43, March 8, 1901, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2307780/m1/1/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

From 1901 until 1902 Rev. Fr. Steber was then stationed at St. Benedict's Catholic Church in Shawnee Oklahoma, the first secular priest to pastor the location in the church's history, breaking the chain of Benedictine ministry that spanned ten years, following Steber's removal to Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church down in Lawton St. Benedict's subsequently reverted to the ministry of the Benedictine monks at Sacred Heart Abbey, then St. Gregory's following the relocation.¹⁶² Steber was at Blessed Sacrament for less than a year, and it appears the uproar started by the parishioners of Holy Trinity and the increasing access to the priests forced Meerschaert's hand when he made the fortuitous decision to place Steber in Okarche, where he served as their principal minister until 1948, only concluding with his death.

Part 2: The Prince of Okarche

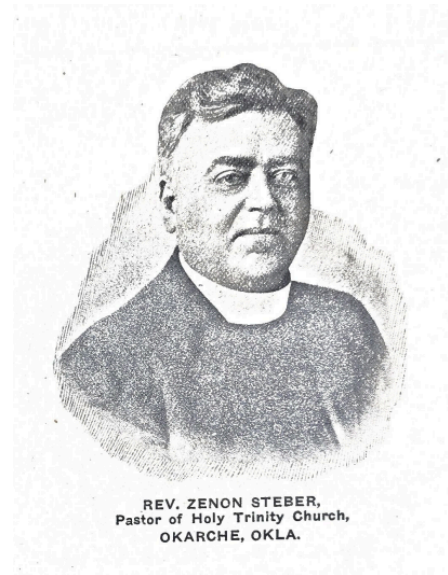
The Okarche that received Rev. Fr. Zenon Steber, especially the Catholic contingent of the population, was one that was drastically changed. Holy Trinity, on the northeastern section of Okarche, was only a nine-minute walk away from St. John's Lutheran Church on the southwestern portion of town. Likewise, Steber's arrival in Okarche encountered a town that had grown tremendously from Holy Trinity's founding in 1893. The families ballooned from twenty or so families to over one hundred and twenty families. Okarche's total population as of the 1907 Oklahoma census listed Okarche as having 414 people.¹⁶³ In addition, the number of Catholic-owned businesses in the town had only grown, the most lasting examples of this Catholic rural ingenuity being the Loosen-owned First Bank of Okarche and the storied, famous, and illustrious Eischen's Bar. Owned by the German Catholic Eischens family, the bar, like the First Bank of Okarche, enjoys the privilege of being the oldest bar in the entire state of

¹⁶² Alex Lee, "St. Benedict Catholic Church celebrates 125 years," Article, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, November 3, 2021, <https://archokc.org/news/st-benedict-catholic-church-celebrates-125-years>. Jolene Schonchin, "Bl. Sacrament Catholic Church celebrates 120 years," Article, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, June 16, 2022, <https://archokc.org/news/bl-sacrament-catholic-church-celebrates-120-years>.

¹⁶³ United States Census Bureau, FOURTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1920 BULLETIN. Data.Census.

Oklahoma. It enjoys a continuous existence, with some interruption due to prohibition, from 1896 until the present day.¹⁶⁴ Eischen's Bar predated Oklahoma's initial efforts to regulate and tax the distribution of liquor, spirits, and other alcoholic beverages, as they point their origins to their 1896 founding by Peter Eischen, and the *El Reno Democrat* mentions how in 1901, the same Peter Eischen sought out a license for permission to distribute said alcoholic substances.¹⁶⁵

Once at Okarche, Rev. Fr. Zenon Steber hit the ground running, was received with much fanfare, and immediately set to work establishing his presence within Okarche. There is no doubt that the parishioners of Holy Trinity received him graciously, for finally their pastor could address them in their mother tongue, no longer did they struggle with the sacraments, of course, that never prevented them from attending them. Steber's ministry in Greer County and the area west of Okarche and El Reno was difficult, and Steber developed into a tough man. Rev. D.I. Lanslots recounted "Fr. Steber... had to take care of the



Zenon Steber in 1918, courtesy of Holy Trinity Catholic Church

whole western part; hard work changed one with T.B. inclinations into the healthy pastor of Okarche now."¹⁶⁶ The work in the west changed him into a hardened man with a robust constitution to balance an authoritative personality, as frontier life among outlaws would do. The parish had since outgrown the original church, and Steber, recognizing the opportunity inherent

¹⁶⁴ "Rich in history. Rich in tradition," Eischen's Bar, accessed, April 8, 2026 at <https://eischensbar.com/>.

¹⁶⁵ T. F. Hensley, *The El Reno Democrat* Vol. 7, no. 31 (El Reno, Okla. Terr.), August 29, 1901, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc112245/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 4.

¹⁶⁶ D.I. Lanslots, "The Church In Oklahoma City In the Early Days," *The Southwest Courier: Oklahoma Catholic Annual Edition* 8, no. 26 (1929), 6.

in such an industrious people, went to work immediately in the breaking of ground and construction of a new and grander church.¹⁶⁷

Described by the *Sooner Catholic* as a benevolent dictator, Steber was the strong leader and heart of Okarche, and it was under his direction, in collaboration with his parishioners, that rapid development came underway.¹⁶⁸ It is presumptuous to assume that Steber, with his arrival, demanded the complete subservience of his parish. While striking a tough persona, it appears he transitioned into the role of this benevolent dictator, his natural intellect, tough character, and tireless efforts toward the development of the Catholic community of Okarche no doubt endeared the people toward their pastor. On July 9, 1903, the ground was broken for the new church in a well-attended public ceremony where Bishop Meerschaert laid down the first cornerstone of the building.¹⁶⁹ “The \$25,000 church building project was financed entirely by donations from parishioners...”¹⁷⁰ Likewise, it was the parishioners who constructed the church, being completed by October, and the first mass was celebrated on the “first Sunday of October 1903.”¹⁷¹

The church was built in the Gothic style, fifty by one hundred and thirty feet, made of brick and stone, and dominating the landscape of Okarche as the most impressive structure in the town. Over the course of the next twenty years the church was beautified by contributions made by the parishioners as well as the priest, including stained glass windows, pipe organ, bronze doors, a 2,000-pound church bell christened “Boniface,” beautiful and grandiose high altars,

¹⁶⁷ “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ “A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish, Okarche: People Knew Who They Were and Where They Are,” *The Sooner Catholic*, April 4, 1976, Newspaper, 1900, Okarche Parish Records, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City Archives, 6.

¹⁶⁹ “Holy Trinity Church, Okarche, Oklahoma 1903-2003: 100 Years of Worship and Family,” magazine, 2003, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 2.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

statues, and frescoes.¹⁷² With the erection of a larger church, Steber was not content to rest on his laurels. As early as 1903, Steber had put out numerous ads in German papers across the United States, as far as Breda, Iowa, even, to attract more German settlers, beginning another large influx of German Catholics to the town. It was with one of these ads that German immigrant Bernard Heinrich “Henry” Mueggenborg and his family made their arrival in Okarche. The Mueggenborgs later went on to be major members of the German-Catholic community in Okarche.¹⁷³

From 1903 onwards, Okarche continued to grow, no doubt due to Steber’s efforts. According to the diary of Bishop Meerschaert, 1903 until 1915, over two hundred and twenty parishioners received the sacraments of either confirmation or communion, with at a minimum thirteen being converts. More were likely confirmed in this time, but there are large gaps in the bishop’s diary.¹⁷⁴

By 1904, papers across the state, such as Oklahoma City’s *The Oklahoman* and El Reno’s *The Daily Democrat*, recognized Steber as “pastor of one of the largest Catholic congregations in Oklahoma.”¹⁷⁵ Okarche grew into one of the largest Catholic parishes in the state, and the posting, including Steber, developed enough prestige that political candidates and papers invoked their names to garner political clout, for example, being the issue with Frank Matthews. Matthews was a Democratic candidate for the elected position of non-voting delegate to the 1904 Congress, challenging Republican incumbent Bird S. McGuire. In an earlier speech the same year, Matthews so terribly insulted the Oklahoma Catholic Church that he and *The Oklahoman*

¹⁷² Ibid., 4-5. “Holy Trinity Parish,” *The Orphans’ Record*, 5.

¹⁷³ Daniel Henry Mueggenborg, “Brief History of Bernard Henry (Heinrich) Mueggenborg, 1875-1939,” Family History, 2005, <https://our-kin.com/Nieland/History/History/HenryMueggenborgFamilyHistory.pdf>,

¹⁷⁴ White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 306, 332, 365, & 451.

¹⁷⁵ T.F. Hensley, *The Daily Democrat* (El Reno, Okla.), Vol. 4, no. 192, November 3, 1904, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc159582/m1/1/?q=%22Steber%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

invoked Steber, hoping his name would ameliorate Catholic voters and appease their outrage. Instead, Matthews failed to understand Steber, who instead wrote to *The Oklahoman*, insisting he had no involvement with Matthews or politics whatsoever. In congruence, many skeptical Catholics wrote to *The Oklahoman* demanding that the error be rectified. *The Oklahoman* tried to alter the facts to avoid worsening their or Matthews' situation. Papers such as *The Daily Democrat* and Republican aligned papers attacked *The Oklahoman*, revealing their plot, and clearing Steber's name from involvement in local politics.¹⁷⁶



Holy Trinity Church, new church as of 1968, courtesy of Holy Trinity Catholic Church

While still a young priest in 1906, being only around thirty-eight or so years old, his fellow priests elected him to the bishop's advisory board, assuming greater responsibilities and positions of significance in Oklahoma to match the growing importance of Okarche, Oklahoma.¹⁷⁷ This recognition within the church of Steber and Okarche's importance was further reflected by non-Catholic recognition of the significance of Steber leading Okarche. The 1909 issue of the *El Reno Daily American* recognized Steber "as one of the most enterprising and progressive priests in the state."¹⁷⁸ The paper gestured to the fact that before Steber arrived in 1903, the Catholic Church in Okarche had little save for the old church and the school, and in only seven years, he

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie, Okla.), Vol. 26, no. 136, January 20, 1906, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc76361/m1/4/?q=%22Steber%22>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 4.

¹⁷⁸ *El Reno Daily American* (El Reno, Okla.), Vol. 16, no. 265, May 20, 1909, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc166476/m1/9/?q=%22Steber%22>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 9

built one of the finest churches in the whole of the state.¹⁷⁹ The prosperity and reputation of Okarche were only growing. This was in addition demarcated by the local accomplishments of the parish. In the same year Holy Trinity numbered 150 families, and Steber joked. “If we count ten children to the family, it makes a congregation of 1500.”¹⁸⁰ Okarche was home to one of the largest and most bountiful Catholic communities in the state, deeply involved in every facet of Okarche’s social life. For example, German Catholic women from the Loosen and Eischen families were leading members of Okarche’s Culture Club while Peter J. Hommertzheim and Ludwig Bros operated a hardware business in Okarche.¹⁸¹

Steber was not idle with the new church as Holy Trinity’s new building went under constant development and care, being beautified gradually over the course of the years. In addition to the contribution to the church’s aesthetics, there were additional contributions made to the Catholic edifices within the town. By 1911, Steber had completed the construction of his new rectory for \$7,000.¹⁸² However, the town’s proudest accomplishment of the time was the construction of Okarche’s new \$13,000 school in 1916. Bishop Meerschaert’s diary recounts, “Blessing of the fine new School in Okarche, erected by the efforts of the Pastor Zenon Steber and the generous work and cooperation of the people. Great crowds and general rejoicing.”¹⁸³ Holy Trinity School was operated by the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood from Ruma, Illinois, continuing their administration of the school since their initial arrival in 1903. By 1918, the school taught one hundred and sixty-eight children.¹⁸⁴ Steber had come into the stability afforded to him by being stationed in Okarche with a great deal of reverence, revealing himself to be a

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ *The Okarche Times* (Okarche, Okla.), Vol. 18, no. 28, November 12, 1909, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc859141/m1/1/?q=%22Steber%22>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² *The Orphans’ Record*, 5.

¹⁸³ White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 463.

¹⁸⁴ *The Orphans’ Record*, 5-8.

scholar, he was heavily involved in the day to day life of all his parishioners, a vivacious lecturer in the school who personally oversaw the religious education classes, and personally married every new couple brought before the church within the halls of Holy Trinity's sanctuary, let alone the sheer amount of young he had baptised. The town adored him, and he adored them.¹⁸⁵

While Steber's completion of the school was a noteworthy accomplishment, he did not allow himself to grow content. Ever the indefatigable missionary who once ministered to the whole of western Oklahoma in the less orderly times of the 1890s, Steber assisted in cultivating a number of local societies to accompany the St. Boniface society, those being the Catholic Order of Foresters and the Association of Christian Mothers. By 1918, the Catholic Order of Foresters had eighty-four members, the Association of Christian Mothers had one hundred members, and the St. Boniface Society had twenty-eight members.¹⁸⁶ 1918 also marked a momentous occasion, a definite respite from the war-weary German Catholics of Okarche. It was the Silver Jubilee of both Father Zenon Steber and Holy Trinity Parish. Celebrated on July 9, 1918, a large gathering followed in Okarche, where Bishop Meerschaert, many of the diocese's priests, and the town came out for mass and celebration. The bishop in his diary says, "Silver Jubilee of Father Zenon Steber... A grand gathering of priests and a most harmonious meeting of all. Great demonstration of the people. The Bishop preached and spoke most feelingly about the work of Father Steber, and thanked him most heartily for the great good work he had done in the Diocese since his arrival. *Ad multos annos!*"¹⁸⁷ *The Orphans' Record* and a number of additional local papers recorded the celebration as a noteworthy occasion celebrating both Holy Trinity and Steber.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ "A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish," 6.

¹⁸⁶ *The Orphans' Record*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 495. *Ad Multos Annos* translates to "For Many More Years."

¹⁸⁸ *The Orphans' Record*, 8. E. S. Bronson, *The El Reno American* (El Reno, Okla.), Vol. 25, No. 32, July 18, 1918 (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1784236/m1/2/?q=Steber>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 2.

In due consideration, the United States's entry into the First World War was a difficult time for the people of Okarche, most especially because the people of Okarche had family fighting on both sides of the war. Okarche sent sons to fight in the First World War, an overwhelming majority of these men being of German heritage.¹⁸⁹ To further complicate the issue in Okarche, Steber was French. He must have been especially sensitive to the issues, feeling tremendous concern for both his family and the families of his parishioners. One particular example is with Bernard Henry Mueggenborg, who returned to Germany in 1911 and, while there, persuaded his younger brother Ben to abandon the Prussian army and flee to America. Bernard was unsuccessful in persuading John to flee to America. John fought in the First World War and was subsequently injured. John made it to the United States in 1922, fleeing the economic tumult of post-war Germany.¹⁹⁰ The Mueggenborgs were just one example of the emotional turmoil that affected German Catholic communities in the United States, especially one that values family as much as those in Okarche.

The German Catholics of Okarche and across Oklahoma were especially sensitive, unlike other Catholics or Americans, and found it difficult to celebrate any military achievements. They were often the subject of rumors of disloyalty, and on a handful of occasions, rumors were spread that Holy Trinity Church was either hoarding food or sponsoring armed disloyalty against the United States, a frankly outrageous claim considering Steber was French. Yet, the implausibility of Okarchean disloyalty did not prevent those of Holy Trinity from having their homes searched.¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, in an effort to avert negative attention, many of the German Catholics across Oklahoma, such as in Goltry, sponsored an event to express the strong patriotism and

¹⁸⁹ Holy Trinity Cemetery, Okarche, Canadian County, Oklahoma.

¹⁹⁰ Mueggenborg, "Brief History of Bernard Henry," 5.

¹⁹¹ Okarche Parish Records. "Holy Trinity: 100 Years: 1893-1993," bulletin, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 1993, 10.

loyalty to the United States, with the community publicly expressing their loyalty to the American flag “and to all it represents.”¹⁹²

A signifier of the great shift that overcame Okarche following the conclusion of the First World War was that the German language was no longer taught in any Okarche school. St. John’s and Holy Trinity’s schools both dropped the use of the language in an educational capacity.¹⁹³ Despite the loss of the German language in an educational environment, the German language was still used on Sundays in the church. Steber, a testament to his missionary spirit, refused to take away from his parishioners the language which they fought so strongly to retain. The language remained in use at Holy Trinity well into 1936, with the occasional liturgical use continuing from time to time well after.¹⁹⁴

By 1919, Okarche was a tremendously changed place. Once a home to a multitude of Anglo Protestant churches and German churches, it fell to only three represented denominations, the German Catholic-dominated Roman Catholic Church, the German Lutheran Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Anglo Protestant Federated Church.¹⁹⁵ Yet, Okarche had entered into a prosperous lull, insulated from the discord that was erupting across the state concerning anti-Catholic tendencies. There was no Klan activity in Okarche, and the firm Catholic majority in Okarche acted as enough of a deterrent to avert any efforts to establish anti-Catholic motives. Combine this with the general sense of anti-German paranoia, and it is unlikely that the German Lutherans felt any strong attachment to Oklahoma’s most populist sentiments.

Okarche was so stable that Steber felt comfortable leaving on a personal trip to Europe. On May 30, 1920, Steber departed from Okarche to return to France for a three-month trip,

¹⁹² Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 63-64.

¹⁹³ “A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish,” 7.

¹⁹⁴ Willibrand, *German in Okarche*, 285-287.

¹⁹⁵ *The Okarche Times* (Okarche, Okla.), Vol. 27, no. 38, January 10, 1919, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1745466/m1/4/?q=Steber>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 4.

departing with much fanfare as nearly every Catholic in Okarche saw him off.¹⁹⁶ The reasons for his visit were not indicated in any papers, Steber likely felt the need to visit and attend to his family, considering the tribulations of the prior war. Steber kept in regular communication with his parish, writing to them that by July 23, 1920, he arrived safely and was residing in his old family home.¹⁹⁷ By October 30, 1920, Steber returned to Okarche just in time to celebrate the mass for the fiftieth anniversary of the Okarche inhabitants, Mr. and Mrs. Schlect. It was a grand occasion that brought well over sixty people, which concluded with a lavish dinner.¹⁹⁸ In addition, Steber was so dearly missed by the parishioners that they purchased for him a brand new Buick, which they gifted him at the depot upon his return from France.¹⁹⁹ In 1923, Holy Trinity's school started offering high school classes, further insulating Okarche's Catholic culture from possible contamination.²⁰⁰

The next year, Bishop Theophile Meerschaert died. He died in St. Anthony's Hospital, a Catholic hospital and Oklahoma's first, on February 21, 1924, aged 76.²⁰¹ With Meerschaert's death, the Catholic Church in Oklahoma was placed in the care of his successor bishop, Francis Clement Kelley, the second bishop of Oklahoma and the first bishop of the reorganized Diocese of Oklahoma City-Tulsa.²⁰²

By 1929, Okarche was recognized as Oklahoma's Catholic City on a hill. Described as prosperous, fertile, and productive, observers attributed its success to the "zealous" Father Zenon

¹⁹⁶ *The Okarche Times* (Okarche, Okla.), Vol. 29, no. 7, June 4, 1920, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1745661/m1/5/?q=Steber>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

¹⁹⁷ *The Okarche Times* (Okarche, Okla.), Vol. 29, no. 14, July 23, 1920, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1745681/m1/5/?q=Steber>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 5.

¹⁹⁸ *The Okarche Times* (Okarche, Okla.), Vol. 29, no. 29, November 5, 1920, (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1745716/m1/5/?q=Steber>). The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 5.

¹⁹⁹ "A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish," 7.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ White, "Essay: The Life of Theophile Meerschaert," 25.

²⁰² *Ibid.* Kelley, "The Origins of the Catholic Church Extension Society," 560.

Steber and the industrious, pious people.²⁰³ As the Great Depression began, that striking praise came in the midst of economic tumult in the United States, but especially in Oklahoma. *The Southwest Courier*, a Catholic paper, says of Okarche, “Okarche, with its German settlement, is known throughout Oklahoma as a year-around prosperous community.”²⁰⁴ In addition, the paper recognized that Okarche was exceptional among the parishes of America’s Southwest, pointing to the vocations produced by the members of the community. “Okarche has given more than 25 members of its flock to the Church, either as nuns, brothers or priests.”²⁰⁵ The paper continues by belaboring the point that Okarche’s Catholics had given more of its people to the vocation of spiritual life “than from any other parish in Oklahoma.”²⁰⁶

Steber and the Okarcheans had cultivated a pious, productive, industrious community, modelling Catholic prosperity in Oklahoma and across the Southwest, including the University of Notre Dame’s alumni among their local business leaders. By 1929, the Catholic-owned businesses of the town were numerous, including: the Okarche Lumber Company, Eischen & Biller Chevrolet, The First Bank of Okarche, Heinen Motor Company, F.E. Cox Druggist, Ludwig & Weaver Hardware, etc.²⁰⁷ The German Catholics were no longer living in just the rural lands surrounding Okarche. They had made the town proper their home, establishing legacies that persist well into the present day.

Chapter 4 - Oklahoma at War: Okie Catholics and Religious Bigotry

Part I: Anti-Catholicism in Oklahoma

While it is true that the history of Catholicism in present-day Oklahoma dates back to the early European explorers, such as the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vásquez y Coronado, the

²⁰³ *The Southwest Courier, Oklahoma Catholic Annual and Official Diocesan Directory*, June 29, 1929, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 80.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

anti-Catholic sentiments in present-day Oklahoma are only as old as the land run settlements and the creation of the Oklahoma and Indian territories in the 1890s.²⁰⁸ Initially, anti-Catholicism was local. Yet, the anti-Catholic sentiment across the territory and later the state took on an increasingly belligerent and visible style, gradually building up just before the First World War, coming to a fever pitch in the 1920s with the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan in the state. The Oklahoma Catholic Church's response at first was disorganized and slow, yet when the overtly hostile and centralized threat that the Klan's introduction posed for the domestic Church, it mobilized and centralized in kind to respond to their declared enemy. The Church, when genuinely threatened, presented a potent enemy that defended its interests and repulsed the gross offenses of the Klan and like-minded anti-Catholic bigots.

Sporadic anti-Catholicism did not pose enough of a threat to rouse the Church into collective action. As early as 1892, anti-Catholicism did bubble up regularly. Bishop Theophile Meerschaert encountered such an instance during his second visit to Atoka, the home of the state's oldest Catholic Church, St. Patrick's, constructed by then missionary priest Father Michael Smyth in 1872 to minister to Irish rail workers. Meerschaert, during his second visit in October of 1892, Meerschaert described Atoka as being "a very bitter place and the few Catholics rather lukewarm."²⁰⁹ Now contrast this to Meerschaert's first visit to Atoka during October of the previous year, "Preached at Atoka to a good congregation, most being Protestant. A few Catholics in the place. A good church and rooms for a priest."²¹⁰ Meerschaert presents a much more inviting atmosphere in Atoka. Perhaps that is an indication of a sentiment of good feelings

²⁰⁸ James D. White, "Catholic Church," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CA072>.

²⁰⁹ White eds, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 100.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

in the immediacy of settlement, a sentiment that gradually soured as the Twin Territories became more settled and organized.

Historian James D. White claims that Oklahoma was largely devoid of these anti-Catholic sentiments, that the settlement period, especially one of pronounced boredom, induced a healthier curiosity that tempered anti-Catholic tendencies. For example, following the erection of Okarche's first church in 1894, there were "A great many non-Catholics present."²¹¹ White was not wrong in insinuating that the trials and boredom of the settler period of early Oklahoma facilitated an atmosphere of greater cooperation and toleration. Yet this period was not devoid of anti-Catholic rhetoric. Scholar David G. Loconto records how Italians and Eastern Europeans faced terrible discrimination in Southwestern Oklahoma for being non-Anglo and Catholic.²¹²

The former archivist of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, George Rigazzi, pushes back on some of the sentiment of White's claim of greater cooperation: "Anti-Catholic prejudice was certainly alive and well in the early years of the Church in Oklahoma. There were isolated incidents of cooperation between Catholicism and other Christian denominations, but it was not the norm by any means."²¹³ One particular example of this disdain of Catholics is from *The Daily Times-Journal* out of Oklahoma City, where the Congregational Church, a low-church Protestant denomination, advertised its preaching as "Popery in the Protestant Church."²¹⁴ Other papers such as the *Baptist Signal* persisted in their implicit anti-Catholic rhetoric, while not calling explicitly for harm to be done to Catholic they describe periods of Catholic hegemony as

²¹¹ Ibid., 154.

²¹² Loconto, "Discrimination Against and Adaptation of Italians in the Coal Counties of Oklahoma," 251.

²¹³ Rigazzi, "From the Archives," March 9, 2023.

²¹⁴ *The Daily Times-Journal* (Oklahoma City, Okla. Terr.), Vol. 7, no. 209, February 22, 1896, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc95200/m1/1/?q=%22Popery%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

“tyrannical” and “terrible.”²¹⁵ The anti-Catholic aspect of early Oklahoma implicitly manifested in the segregation of Catholics and Protestants, confining themselves to their own communities when possible, this was not always economically viable. Therefore, there was both a greater permissiveness of Catholics, which inversely correlated with the implicit anti-Catholic sentiments of the rural Anglo Protestant majority of settlers, that was unique to Oklahoma Territory’s infancy.

This permissiveness that defined the period before statehood gave way to increasing general bouts of bigotry toward many of the minorities calling Oklahoma home. For example, in 1906, G.A. Smith of the *Chandler Tribune* decried, “With the Republicans of Blaine and Logan counties sending delegates into the southern states to solicit negroes to come to Oklahoma, it gives the lie to the papers that have declared there is no danger from the negro in Oklahoma.”²¹⁶ The xenophobia and paranoia being instilled within Oklahoma, especially around the period leading up to statehood, at last began to coalesce into a more pronounced air of anti-Catholicism. No longer was it implicit in the day-to-day actions of people, but rather explicit with a number of anti-Catholic publications moving into the burgeoning state’s territory. However, what was unique to Oklahoma’s anti-Catholic experience was the diverse coalition that developed against Oklahoma’s Catholic Church, an alliance between Protestants and Socialists. Rigazzi explains: “From statehood until the mid-1920s, persecution of the Church was pronounced.”²¹⁷

The traditional enemy of the anti-Catholic sentiment and often the unwitting victims of the assaults of the anti-Catholic masses were the Knights of Columbus. Founded by Blessed Michael McGivney on the 2nd of October 1881, the child of Irish immigrants and a Catholic

²¹⁵ J.W. Black, *Baptist Signal* (Ardmore, Indian Terr.), Vol. 1, no. 6, January 19, 1898, ed. B.F. Stamps, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2026887/m1/6/?q=%22Popery%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 6.

²¹⁶ G.A. Smith, *The Chandler Tribune* (Chandler, Okla.), Vol. 6, no. 57, September 14, 1906, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc915388/m1/3/?q=Negro>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 3.

²¹⁷ Rigazzi, “From the Archives,” March 9, 2023.

priest, McGivney, recognizing the anti-Catholic prejudice of the United States and the high fatality rates for Catholic workers in the factories often left orphaned families destitute and scattered, generally to lose their Catholic faith in orphanages and Protestant institutions, saw a need for a mutual aid society. Beginning in New Haven, Connecticut, McGivney's organization developed into a life insurance program that sought to guarantee the lives and spiritual well-being of all members.²¹⁸ Only two decades after developing their institution, the Knights of Columbus arrived in what became the state of Oklahoma in 1903. As reported in the local paper, beginning at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in El Reno, the men of the parish, under the guidance of Fr. Constantine Pourcin, gathered together and selected their first Grand Knight, James W. Maney.²¹⁹ Apparently, the establishment was a relatively grand affair, with other knights from other councils out of the state arriving for the occasion. Grand Knight John J. Kinney and State Deputy R.J. Hayden of the Topeka Council. In addition, Judge William Teasdale of Missouri, W.P. Hayde of Kansas City, along with delegates from Wichita, Kansas, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Omaha.²²⁰ The Knights of Columbus, as the tides of anti-Catholicism grew across the nation and Oklahoma during the early twentieth century, found itself at the forefront of the war against bigotry.

Historian Thomas Elton Brown, on the topic of anti-Catholicism in Oklahoma, describes how the reorganization of the Vicariate into the Diocese of Oklahoma coincided with the development of the more intense expression of anti-Catholicism that "would blemish the state in the 1920's..." Brown details the Knights of Columbus seeing increasing reports of mounting

²¹⁸ "The History of the Knights of Columbus," The Knights of Columbus, accessed April 7, 2026, <https://www.kofc.org/who-we-are/our-history/>.

²¹⁹ "Knights of Columbus Council 767 History," Knights of Columbus, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://uknight.org/CouncilSite/about.asp?CNO=767>.

²²⁰ Charles F. Greer, *El Reno Daily American* (El Reno, Okla.), Vol. 3, no. 94, November 21, 1901, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc165331/m1/1/?q=%22Knights%20of%20Columbus%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

bigotry nationwide. He explains, “Paralleling this national trend [sic], Oklahoma experienced its own anti-Catholicism in the years immediately following statehood and witnessed its spread across the state by the advent of World War I.”²²¹ Brown and Rigazzi both describe the rhetorical devices employed in attacks on the minute and distinct Catholic minority within the state. The most common argument was that Catholics made poor and disloyal citizens because of their spiritual allegiance to the pope. Because they held divided loyalties to a perceived temporal sovereign, such as the Bishop of Rome, they could not be completely and entirely devoted to the United States.²²² While in no way the actual reality, such an assumption, among others, about the capacity of Catholics to be genuinely loyal, permeated the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the age.

The rhetoric employed by the Oklahoma Church’s enemies targeted Catholic educational tendencies. Brown and Rigazzi both indicate that the Roman Catholic preference for Catholic Parochial schools was in itself a position of great contention. “A prime example of this ‘disloyalty’ was the Catholic opposition to the public school system, which, with its citizenship training for the nation’s youth, appeared to many as the cornerstone of American democracy.”²²³ Brown references a 1909 issue of *The Indian Advocate*, which bemoans the incredulity of Protestants. In fact, the article noted, Catholics pay the education taxes, but do not send their children to school, thus saving the taxpayers thousands of dollars while maintaining their own institutions. “And yet we hear some of these people whose school bill the Catholics are helping to pay, we hear them abusing the Catholics as the great enemies of education [sic]. If a man paid your shoe bill as well as his own would you say that he hated shoes?”²²⁴ Brown also described the range of falsified documents and publications that went around the state, each more salacious

²²¹Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 45-46.

²²² Ibid., 45-47.

²²³ Ibid., 46.

²²⁴ *The Indian Advocate* (Sacred Heart, Okla.), Vol. 21, no. 5, May 1, 1909, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc69872/m1/16/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 191-192.

than the last. These tales accused the Church “of fathering and fostering political organizations pledged to subvert, either through violence or through the electoral process, the American government.” To accompany these rumors was a fake Knights of Columbus oath.²²⁵ While these accusations were a nationwide phenomenon, they circulated throughout the state, inflaming implicit grievances against the Catholics into an outpouring of explicit bigotry.

“The actions of the anti-Catholics also developed into a pattern which would repeat itself in years to come. Several touring lecturers appeared in the state’s towns and cities to denounce the Catholic religion in churches, public halls, and street-corner meetings.”²²⁶ Anti-Catholicism, as xenophobia and general bigotry increased in the nation, providing the Klan with the requisite ammunition to foment into a national force, obtained a greater degree of brazenness and public support. Anti-Catholic publications swept across the nation in the early 1910s, a variety of different kinds from a number of different publishers. It is quite fascinating that socialists and Protestants alike, traditional enemies, found common cause in the proliferation of attacks against Catholics. Brown mentions *The Menace*, a prominent anti-Catholic newspaper published from Aurora, Missouri.²²⁷ Another example of two anti-Catholic publications was the socialist paper, *Rogers County Voice* out of Collinsville, Oklahoma, and *The Crusader* out of Iola, Kansas, which referred to itself as “America’s Most Radical Anti-Catholic Paper.”²²⁸ *The Rogers County Voice* advertised the *Crusader* heavily in multiple issues, referring to itself as a bastion of liberty and defender of the American values of freedom. The anti-Catholics behind *The Crusader* and like-minded publications touted the delusion that if action was not immediately taken against Catholics, they would soon subject the United States to the pope’s rule.

²²⁵ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 46-47.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Grace Arnold, *Rogers County Voice* (Collinsville, Okla.), Vol. 1, no. 30, February 7, 1914, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1076788/m1/2/?q=%22Papist%22%20%22Catholic%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

These papers circulated in Oklahoma, pushing anti-Catholic propaganda and peddling rumors about the conniving and supernatural powers of these Catholics. Many of these rumors were old, indicating the staying power of these prejudices.²²⁹ Papers such as *The Headlight* and *The Sword of Truth*, in particular, carried forth messages from people such as Sister Mary Ethel, an anti-Catholic speaker claiming to be a former nun. *The Headlight*, published out of Sentinel, Oklahoma, balked at the Catholic rejection of the inspection of convents for suspicion of Catholic misconduct. They insinuated that if Catholics are doing wrong, then they have nothing to hide, yet cannot fathom the implication that the same standards ought to be applied to them concerning matters related to suspected treason.²³⁰ Brown shows how the Socialist owned publication *The Menace*, constantly fantasized of supposedly cruel and oppressive conditions in convents and about Catholic priests who were mystical and powerful seducers.²³¹ *The Menace* warned, “These priests want to catch women that they may make them slaves to an old pope—to make them nuns outside the convent and inside... There seems to be only two alternatives for Catholic women according to the priests—to be the mothers of nineteen priest-ridden children, or else be nuns sworn to secrecy in regard to the old bachelors of popery!”²³² Some groups demanded legislation aimed at opening up this scandalous world of nuns, but nothing ever came of it.

One of the greatest legitimizers of these speculations was a former nun, Anna M. Lowry, who referred to herself as Sister Justina. Lowry had left nine different convents in Europe before

²²⁹ David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960): 205–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1891707>.

²³⁰ Will W. Hornbeck, *Sword of Truth* (Sentinel, Okla.), Vol. 2, no. 9, November 5, 1913, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc181413/m1/2/?q=Papists>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

²³¹ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 49.

²³² *The Menace* (Aurora, MO) Vol. 3, no. 117, July 12, 1913. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn89066178/1913-07-12/ed-1/>.

arriving in Oklahoma. Lowry arrived in Oklahoma in 1904 and left her ninth convent in 1911.²³³ Lowry then ran a number of scams to solicit funds for herself under the pretenses of still being a nun, when the Church eventually stepped in to stop her, she turned to attacking her former employers, finding employment with *The Menace* and writing her own articles where “she attacked the Catholic Church and convent life with the vitriolic language typical of a repentant sinner.”²³⁴ Lowry eventually brought her former employers, the Benedictine sisters of Guthrie, to court in a suit in 1912 for reparation of damages and backpay during her time as a teacher for a grand sum of \$17,640. After a thorough investigation and the fact that Lowry’s story did not add up, the case was dismissed, and Lowry got nothing. *The Menace* decried the ruling as evidence of Catholicism’s infiltration into the Oklahoma courts.²³⁵ The case, however, turned Lowry into a celebrity, and Brown commented, “the publicity afforded ex-Sister Justina gave her the notoriety to become one of the state’s leading anti-Catholic lecturers.”²³⁶ Anti-Catholicism by the 1910s was a growing statewide phenomenon, offering a multitude of speakers with a bone to pick with the Church, baring their teeth and carrying out their verbal attacks.

Another potent example of this rabid anti-Catholicism and the diversity of the Church’s enemies was the socialist Roy Crane. Originally from Missouri, he settled in Holdenville and was heavily involved with local politics for Hughes County. Crane, after the governor’s race in 1914, turned his attention to anti-Catholic publications.²³⁷ One such publication of his was a booklet titled *Barbarous Catholicism*. Brown remarks that the booklet contained nothing original, save for two pages, among those reutilized pages was the “bogus Knights of Columbus oath...”²³⁸ Catholics responded to these anti-Catholic offensives, but were not very organized. In

²³³ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*., 49-50.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid., 51-52.

²³⁶ Ibid., 53.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

the case of Roy Crane, the Knights of Columbus did not take the slander lying down. “When his lecture tour for this book came through Oklahoma and El Reno, our council filed two charges against him in Canadian County Court.” They accused Crane of disseminating obscene and vile literature and of libeling them. In 1916, a guilty verdict was returned against him by a jury.”²³⁹ Unfortunately, Crane was not found guilty of the distribution or dissemination of obscene and vile literature, only for libel, and he was only given a token fine of \$1, as many of the jury found it distasteful to side with Catholics.²⁴⁰

In addition, when the First World War started, the Oklahoma Church was initially an avid supporter of American neutrality. They raised funds for wartorn Belgium, not surprising considering that the bishop and many leading priests were Belgian as well. The Church raised food, clothes, and money to send to Belgium. When the U.S. entered the war, the Church presented itself as the most patriotic of citizens in an effort to earn goodwill. Schools, churches, and public fairs, along with parades, were all laced with intense language of American Patriotism, with Catholics attempting to indicate that they were among the most loyal of citizens. Brown explains that their contributions were real and palpable, with many being inducted into state-wide war-related leadership positions, but it failed to ameliorate the mounting anti-Catholic sentiments brewing within the state.²⁴¹

The next serious challenge that impacted the entire Catholic Church in the state was the Bone-Dry Law of Oklahoma. Prohibition was not simply anti-Catholic, but the fight over that law traumatized the Catholic Church in Oklahoma. In most states, it was instead a general trend of hostility to alcohol and its pernicious effects, such as domestic violence, heightened instances of crime, and general vagrancy, which were particularly felt in a frontier society, dating back to

²³⁹ “Knights of Columbus Council 767 History.”

²⁴⁰ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 54.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59-65.

the days of statehood. Early on, Oklahoma toyed with implementing prohibition as an amendment to its constitution. However, fierce opposition by the Germans of the state meant that the amendment failed.²⁴² The mounting desire for prohibition in the state, following national trends, led to the 1917 legislation that turned Oklahoma into a dry state.

Oklahoma's foray into prohibition, at a moment when the Church was politically unengaged, came about on February 15, 1917. Senate Bill No. 55 made it illegal for anyone in the state of Oklahoma to sell or purchase alcohol, and also illegal for the possession of purchased alcohol, with an exemption made for specific versions of alcohol for medical and scientific facilities.²⁴³ "Known as Oklahoma's 'Bone-Dry Law,' it thus exempted liquor for medicinal purposes, but did not allow another traditional exception in Prohibition statutes, namely sacramental alcohol."²⁴⁴ With time, the Bone-Dry Law functionally made it illegal for Catholics to perform the Mass, as wine was a pivotal aspect of the sacramental sacrifice of the Mass.²⁴⁵

Historian Brown argues that the bill was not implemented to outlaw the Masses, it was an unfortunate byproduct of strict prohibition legislation and general Catholic political apathy. The one Catholic in the legislature approved the prohibition legislation at the same time that anti-Catholic legislation was struck down on various instances. The state intended to assure the strictest interpretation of the prohibition law and minimize potentialities for leaks.²⁴⁶ While exemptions for sacramental consumption of alcohol were toyed with, they were struck down with little fanfare, based on preventing the law from being proven ineffective. Yet, there is a distinct possibility that the ease with which the Anglo-Protestant majority of Oklahoma struck

²⁴² Ibid., 31-32, 64-66.

²⁴³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), n. 1357. We carry out this command of the Lord by celebrating the memorial of his sacrifice. In so doing, we offer to the Father what he has himself given us: the gifts of his creation, bread and wine which, by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the words of Christ, have become the body and blood of Christ. Christ is thus really and mysteriously made present.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 65-70.

down such exemptions implies an implicit disregard for Catholic interests. To Catholics, wine in the Mass was a matter of spiritual necessity. In a place like Oklahoma, that was already starved of liturgies and clerics, the loss of the one Mass a community may receive a month was devastating to the religious well-being of a Catholic community. As such, Catholics were denied the most intrinsic aspect of their Catholic identity. While sheer ignorance and moral zeal may be more than enough to explain away the passage of the legislation without religious exemptions, it showed ignorance toward Catholics who were being made the victims of despicable rumors and attacks. It is important to keep in mind that in Oklahoma, and across the nation, Catholics were already involved in several pan-denominational initiatives to raise money, funds, and support for Belgium and other war-related charitable endeavors. Come the war, they sent many of their young to fight and die on the nation's behalf.²⁴⁷

Meerschaert, a close acquaintance of the governor, did nothing to force a religious exemption into the law. Catholics across the state did not know to be on the lookout and frankly did not care. This apathy can be attributed to Meerschaert's apolitical personality, hence why de Hasque was placed in charge of the Sacramental Wine Case.²⁴⁸ In addition, Catholics and Episcopalians sent no people whatsoever to the Anti-Saloon League to petition for such an exemption. Catholics were incredibly unresponsive to the potential dangers of legislation that effectively outlawed the Catholic Mass. Generally speaking, the religious communities dependent on wine for sacramental uses simply did not know or believe that the Bone-Dry Law would impact them. The Oklahoma Church's inactivity was noted by outsiders such as *The Catholic Advance* of Wichita, Kansas, saying: "If the Catholic people were on the lookout, the

²⁴⁷ "Knights of Columbus Council 767 History."

²⁴⁸ James D. White, "Destined for Duty: The Life and Diary of Bishop Theophile Meerschaert," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 71, no. 1 (1993): 4-41.
<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc127488/m1/6/?q=%22Bone%20Dry%20Law%22%20%22Meerschaert%22>.

temporary annoyance to which they are put at the present might have been sidetracked.”²⁴⁹

Come August 1917, when St. Joseph’s Church in Norman attempted to procure wine, Monsignor John Metter was denied, his wine seized. The Church, realizing its situation, and that after the courts and state attorney general supported the Bone-Dry Law and the seizure of the wine, decided to engineer another incident to challenge the law.²⁵⁰ Now Meerschaert was outraged and denounced the ruling as evidence of anti-Catholic bigotry, declaring the ruling “Intolerable and outrageous.”²⁵¹ Catholics thought they were paying their taxes, raising money for the war effort, and working vigorously to demonstrate their patriotism and interdenominational cooperation. Yet, despite all this, now they were unable to carry out the mass. Naturally, it was a source of outrage and linked to bigotry, while, for once, the cause of their misfortune was not said to be bigotry.

Catholics were not the only denomination that was appalled by the fact that Oklahoma affirmed that the law did not provide for religious exemptions regarding the importation of wine for sacramental purposes. The Episcopalians of Oklahoma rallied with the Catholics and lent them moral support. They also required wine for their liturgy. The Lutherans and the Unitarians of Oklahoma fell in line beside the Catholics, also declaring that the Bone-Dry Law violated the First Amendment and was an affront to Christian ethos. However, the Catholics and their allies were not unopposed in arguing the justification of religious exemption. Many low church denominations, such as the Baptists, argued that the law was the law and opposed any effort to provide religious exemptions, making such statements as follows, ““The church I represent

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 67-71.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 69-71.

²⁵¹ C.W. McComas, *The Yukon Sun* (Yukon, Okla.), Vol. 25, no. 47, September 14, 1917, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc127488/m1/6/?q=%22Bone%20Dry%20Law%22%20%22Meerschaert%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 6.

believes there is no necessity for the introduction of wine for sacramental purposes. Sweet wine [grape juice] fulfills all the scriptural requirements.”²⁵²

Bishop Meerschaert placed his chancellor, Urban de Hasque, a Belgian priest and Meerschaert’s right-hand man, in charge of dismantling the Bone Dry Law. Seeking more favorable arrangements for a trial on October 4th, de Hasque arranged for a shipment of wine to Guthrie, facilitated by Father John Van Gastel, pastor of St. Mary’s Church, through the Santa Fe Railroad. The railroad denied the mandamus, and one week later, de Hasque filed a case and “petitioned the court to issue a writ of mandamus ordering the railroad to accept and deliver all shipments of altar wine.”²⁵³ de Hasque ordered that the mandamus was on the grounds of religious liberty, as wine was vital to Catholic worship. Therefore, the Bone-Dry Law violated the First Amendment.²⁵⁴

While the Catholics were confident, by Christmas Eve of 1917, District Court Judge George W. Clark reaffirmed the state law. The decision was appealed to the state Supreme Court. As said earlier, this case became one of national fame with many groups invested in quashing or instituting prohibition nationwide, observing Oklahoma’s religious battle as one of the validity and viability of prohibition going forward. Unsurprisingly, Brown explains: “The country’s Catholic newspapers became interested in the case, and according to *The Morning Star* of New Orleans, were united in condemning the district court decision.”²⁵⁵

The national attention to the case came in both suggestions of how to move forward, letters inquiring how prohibition would impact their locality, and calls for Catholics and Catholic

²⁵² Ibid., 73-76. R. E. Stafford, *Oklahoma City Times* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), Vol. 29, no. 140, September 10, 1917, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc170436/m1/1/?q=%22Bone%20Dry%20Law%22%20%22Meerschaert%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 1.

²⁵³ Ibid., 76-77.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 78.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

soldiers to boycott the military related endeavors until guarantees of worship were assured.²⁵⁶

Catholic and Protestant leaders of the Prohibition effort, such as John F. Cunneen, pressured the courts and Prohibition leaders in Oklahoma to guarantee religious exemptions, or they would lose pivotal votes out east, where Catholics were substantial enough parts of the electorate to kill Prohibition in states such as New York.²⁵⁷ The pressure forced the Oklahoma Anti-Saloon League to give in, and they conceded in the next electoral session in the winter of 1918 that they would implement amendments to guarantee wine for spiritual worship. Before the Oklahoma Anti-Saloon League was able to act, the Oklahoma Supreme Court in May 1918 ruled in favor of de Hasque and the Catholic Church, providing a legal exemption for the importation of sacramental wine. The court ruled off the bench, creating an exemption where the law made no room for one on the grounds of freedom of religion. Interestingly, the one Catholic in the court, Chief Justice M.J. Kane, recused himself from the ruling, yet the majority still ruled in favor of the Church.²⁵⁸

The news was met with cheers from all Catholics in Oklahoma. Bishop Meerschaert in his diary recalled: "Wine question. Altar wine. The Supreme Court in unanimity of 9 judges reversed the decision of Judge [George W.] Clark who had decided that altar wine could not be admitted or carried into the state of Oklahoma."²⁵⁹ Papers across the state recorded the instance, such as by the *Daily Ardmoreite*: "The Oklahoma bone dry statute of 1917 legislature does not prohibit common carriers transporting wine for sacramental purposes, according to a decision of the supreme court yesterday."²⁶⁰ Brown revealed that Catholic newspapers across the country,

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 81-83.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 83-85.

²⁵⁹ White, *Diary of a Frontier Bishop*, 489.

²⁶⁰ *Daily Ardmoreite* (Ardmore, Okla.), Vol. 25, no. 229, May 22, 1918, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc156451/m1/8/?q=%22Catholic%22%20%22Bone-Dry%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 8.

such as *The Orphan's Record*, *The Catholic Advance*, and *The Morning Star*, celebrated the victory, declaring it was a triumph of religious liberty across the nation. Advocates of Prohibition considered the ruling also a win, since it preserved Prohibition and provided a modus operandi of answering the Catholic question.²⁶¹ While a hard-won victory for the Catholic Church in Oklahoma, also presenting the image of a triumph over bigotry, the Church's struggles were not yet over, however the organization and victory obtained in the courts left Catholics with the mind to be more proactive when confronting potential dangers to the domestic Church.²⁶²

The Catholic Church having secured their first tangible victory in Oklahoma had to then contend with the growing power of their anti-Catholic adversaries, such as the Klan, who had not relented in their crusade against the Church. These enemies involved most principally the Klan and Klan adjacent nativistic and anti-Catholic organizations, however the Klan remained the largest and most potent of these organizations. Nativistic sentiments had reached a fever pitch across the state and the publications rolled out with additional fervor. The menacing of the Klan and their allies against the Church and other such regional minorities came to such a head that by the mid-1920s they had unveiled a desire and hope to undo the parochial school system and force all the children of Oklahoma into public schools, hoping to use it as a means to assimilate the children into a pro-American Anglo Protestant ethos.²⁶³

The 1920s was a time of heightened tensions following the conclusion of the First World War and the subsequent Red Scare. It was time for the Klan to take hold and manifest itself in Oklahoma. According to historian Larry O'Dell, "Social conditions in the early 1920s made Oklahoma appear to be a fertile field for a KKK membership drive. The young state's population

²⁶¹ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 85-86.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Rigazzi, "From the Archives," March 9, 2023.

had shifted from an almost completely rural composition in 1900 to 30 percent urban in 1920.”²⁶⁴ Just as the Oklahoma Catholic Church was increasingly centralizing its ability to respond as a statewide institution to upcoming issues, so too did the introduction of the Ku Klux Klan enable the escalating anti-Catholic demonstrations to obtain an increasingly centralized apparatus. It is important to note that the Klan by and large in Oklahoma did not prioritize violence, however it was perceived as a valid strategy to obtain their desired ends for the cultural and political situation in Oklahoma.²⁶⁵

The anti-Catholicism of the 1920s manifested in a few distinct ways, the first of which was the race for the Republican National Committeeman of Oklahoma. The race was between the two Oklahoma oil tycoons and millionaires: the Catholic James J. McGraw of Ponca City and the Protestant Col. Jake L. Hamon of Ardmore. McGraw was the frontrunner and the incumbent of the position who was challenged by Hamon. The race grew into a state-wide phenomenon where both formed different organizations and threw their personal fortunes into the race. At first, McGraw led in the polls and appeared to be assured of victory. Brown says, “In the political fight, McGraw had the power of the incumbency, the consequent support of the Republican National Committee, the backing of almost every Republican newspaper in the state, and the aid of the current county chairmen who were organizing the convention process. Against this impressive array of forces, Hamon had his millions, and McGraw’s religion.”²⁶⁶ Hamon employed vile anti-Catholic rhetoric, the Masons, and “the spurious Knights of Columbus Oath.” These attacks embittered the Democrat dailies against him, but they also won him the requisite support to emerge as the victor. McGraw realized that the race came down to religion and not

²⁶⁴ Larry O'Dell, “Ku Klux Klan,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=KU001>.

²⁶⁵ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 95.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

desiring for his faith to be insulted further, in this race withdrew to spare his correlative further harm. Anti-Catholicism became a potent political tool in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma became a hotbed of Anti-Catholic sentiment. While some observed a national decline in anti-Catholic sentiments, Oklahoma could not give any credence to this perception. Brown quotes Joseph J. Quinn, editor of Oklahoma's *Catholic Home* by sharing. "Deep-rooted prejudice has a hold on the Southwest in general and Oklahoma in particular."²⁶⁷ Quinn explored that anti-Catholicism was more robust than ever in Oklahoma and included a robust Klan, many prominent anti-Catholic lecturers, many prolific anti-Catholic newspapers, and religion-based job discrimination.²⁶⁸ This is further indicated with some reports listing that there were upwards of 70,000 Klansmen in Oklahoma.²⁶⁹

The Klan was the most robust of the anti-Catholic organizations in Oklahoma, they were by no means the only such organization. Groups such as the Evangelical Protestant Society and White American Protestant Study Club sought to criminalize Catholicism and persecute the people to the fullest extent of legal action and the law.²⁷⁰ From all corners of Oklahoma and all walks of life, including Roy Crane, OU professor Edwin DeBarr, Dr. John L. Brandt, and the fake nuns Mrs. Clifford Steepe and Helen Conroy, who went by Sister Mary Ethel, and numerous Klan-aligned editorials discredited and attacked the Catholic faith in every possible avenue.²⁷¹

Catholics were, in addition, denied employment opportunities across the state. In May 1922, two Catholic teachers were sacked from the Duncan public school system on account of their faith. Duncan was joined by Tulsa and Wilburton in sacking their Catholic teachers.²⁷² All

²⁶⁷ Joseph J. Quinn, *The Catholic Home* (Hartshorne, Okla.), Vol. 1, no. 21, May 27, 1922, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1782686/m1/10/?q=%22Anti-Catholic%22>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History, 6.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁶⁹ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 94-96..

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 95-96.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 95-100.

²⁷² Ibid., 99.

across the state, the Church was under siege and could not adequately launch a counter-offensive. Instead, they were forced into the position of reactionaries and genuinely felt hopeless. The Church was becoming desperate, and any effort they had engaged with thus far to counteract the torrent of misinformation was little. They published ads, literature, and lectured in an effort to explain their point, all that could be said about their efforts was that they were only partially effective, with some reactions coming to absolute naught, especially through libel cases.²⁷³

The anti-Catholic sentiment eventually came to a head when a petition was started to eradicate parochial schools, in part facilitated by Klansmen R.H. Wilson, worryingly, the state superintendent of public instruction.²⁷⁴ Catholics could tolerate much, but they would not stand for the concerted effort to revoke their schools. The Klan at this point was synonymous with anti-Catholicism, and the Catholics delighted in how, in December of 1921, Governor J.B.A. Robertson and his administration began an orchestrated campaign to diminish the influence and power of the Klan, forcing them out of the state militias, and also putting a no-mask law into effect. However, 1922 was a Gubernatorial election year, and at the time, the governor was not allowed to succeed himself.²⁷⁵ The election for the governor was essentially determined by the Democratic primary, and the people running against one another were Jack Walton, the mayor of Oklahoma City and a Klan-fighter, R.H. Wilson, and Thomas H. Owen, the justice who ruled in the Church's favor during the sacramental wine case. R.H. Wilson was the Klan's man, and that left Owen and Walton. The matter that moved in Walton's favor was that he was endorsed by the

²⁷³ Ibid., 101.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 104.

liberal wing of the Democratic party, the same people who endorsed the only two Catholics in elected office at the time in Oklahoma, and Walton had a Catholic wife.²⁷⁶

In this period, the Church could not afford to be docile and, for once, began the process of organizing the state's Church to enter the political fray. Under the leadership of another Belgian priest, Monsignor Gustave Depreitere, the Oklahoma Catholic Church began to organize the Catholic vote into a single monolithic entity to bring Walton into office. The priests all across the state gathered, plotted, and clandestinely met to ensure that Wilson, an enemy of the Catholic schools, was to be defeated. Days before the primary, they released sample ballots explaining who the ideal candidates were for Catholics to vote for. Priests and laymen were in lockstep with one another from July until August, fomenting the unbridled frustration of the Oklahoma Church into action. Clerics from the pulpit were encouraging every man and woman to register with the Democratic Party so that they may participate in the primary. The Klan backed Wilson, everyone else backed Walton, and the two went toe to toe in the primary. On election day, the votes came in. Jack Walton defeated Wilson and Owen with 119,248 votes. In addition, Lieutenant Governor M.E. Trapp won the vote with 47,717 votes. Brown noted that both Walton and Trapp had Catholic wives, and it was from there that the anxieties of the Church over their schools could be set to rest.²⁷⁷

Unfortunately, Walton found himself unsuited to the task of being governor as he descended into paranoid tyranny while chasing after the Klan and was thus impeached, replaced by Trapp, who governed ably. Yet, even when all turned their back on Walton the Catholics of the state did not abandon him.²⁷⁸ Brown and Rigazzi both reflected that the Catholic Church was never truly a monolithic entity like it was during the Democratic Primary of 1922 before or after

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 105.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 106-112.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 112-120.

in Oklahoma, however it was noticed that the collusion, plotting and influence in politics the Church supposedly had in politics was never before made manifest until the Klan threatened the Church's schools.²⁷⁹ The Klan had turned the Church into the very thing they had sworn they were working to oppose, in a sense, creating their own worst enemy.

Part 2: Okarchean Exceptionalism

While anti-Catholicism ran rampant across Oklahoma throughout the 1920s, it did not have a presence in Okarche. In a recent interview, Bishop Daniel Henry Mueggenborg of Reno, Nevada, whose mother was raised in Okarche, was asked about anti-Catholicism there. He said no one in his family discussed encountering anti-Catholicism or the Klan in Okarche.²⁸⁰ Now the absence of presence is not absence of occurrence, however Mueggenborg related that his father, from Stillwater, recalled witnessing that the Klan was quite active around Stillwater.²⁸¹ Furthermore, when Monsignor Don Wolf, present rector of the Shrine of Blessed Stanley Rother and pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church and relative of Mueggenborg, was asked about anti-Catholicism in Okarche he answered, "to be bigoted in Okarche against Catholics would have been pretty self-defeating."²⁸²

Wolf remembered that, "my father grew up pretty much inside of this little Catholic ghetto in south Oklahoma City and on farms that were mostly Catholic, mostly German and Czech. And so it was something that they [anti-Catholics] weren't in business, they didn't live in town and that kind of stuff, so it was the kind of thing they [Catholics] weren't bothered by."²⁸³ Like those small isolated communities Okarche was the exception to every rule about Catholicism in Oklahoma. In Okarche, German Catholics, unlike every other town and city in

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 120-124. Rigazzi, "From the Archives," March 9, 2023.

²⁸⁰ Daniel Henry Mueggenborg, Interview over Microsoft Teams, October 27, 2025.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Don Wolf, Interview at the rectory of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, OKC, February 28, 2026.

²⁸³ Ibid.

Oklahoma, were the majority. Yes, there were German Catholics scattered all across the state, however none were concentrated enough in a town to form a palpable or substantial majority anywhere else. Brown says about Catholicism in Oklahoma, “The obvious exception to this generalization that Catholics were scattered among Protestant majority in Okarche, was organized almost entirely by German Catholics.”²⁸⁴ The German Catholics of Okarche owned lots of businesses, including the town’s largest bank, and were overrepresented in local organizations. Okarche was, for all intents and purposes, their town.²⁸⁵

As discussed previously, it was a paramount matter of the German Catholic ethos, especially in the United States, to cultivate an exceptionally insular society, and Okarche was no different. The Germans of Okarche, while recognizably either Lutheran or Catholic, segregated themselves into their own independent and separate institutions. They had their own churches, their own schools, and they largely settled and lived near one another, a trend that persists into the modern day.²⁸⁶ Prewitt argues that the German ethnicity as commonly understood does not truly exist in Okarche, the ethnic identification is more so on the grounds of religious affiliation. They may both be German, however they were German Catholics or German Lutherans, not simply German.²⁸⁷ This functional, cultural, and religious segregation of the two communities was a viable option as both communities could turn to their coreligionists for assistance in the facilitation of informal kinship networks before blood-related kinship ties could be formed, which they did. Monsignor Steber, over the course of thirty-six or so years, married hundreds of families in Okarche: Mueggenborg married Rother, Rother married Baustert, Baustert married

²⁸⁴ Brown, *Bible Belt Catholicism*, 12-13.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 193.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 193-197.

Krittenbrink, Krittenbrink married Alig, and so forth. The kinship networks that first existed on matters of religious affiliation developed into genuine blood ties.²⁸⁸

The German Catholic character of Okarche was one carefully cultivated by the community from its inception. Being German and Catholic were the primary objectives for the founders of Holy Trinity. Their early actions were proof of that. First, they pooled together their meager resources to build their first church, afterwards they established the St. Boniface Society and the Holy Trinity school to safeguard their language and religion, and agitated against their bishop to receive a German-speaking priest. Everything was undertaken to develop their ideal insular community, free of unnecessary contaminants. German Catholics of Okarche's only real interaction with their Protestant neighbors, German and Anglo alike, was economic. Save for a creamery cooperative and the natural exchange of the town's commerce, considering that the Loosen family owned the bank, they kept to themselves.²⁸⁹ A zealous piety was carefully cultivated by those inhabitants of Okarche, one so potent it was often pointed to as an example of Catholic ideals.²⁹⁰ The very fact that the German Catholics of Okarche produced so many priests and nuns is a testament to the exceptional qualities of Okarche and what sets it apart from the rest of Oklahoma.

The insularity that further developed the distinctive German Catholic character of Okarche, most particularly the deeply felt piety that characterized the town before it had a German-speaking priest, was further cultivated by Rev. Zenon Steber. While Steber was a Frenchman by birth, his commitment to the German Catholics of Okarche was undisputed. Speaking German, he earned the love and respect of his parishioners, who in turn treated him

²⁸⁸ Holy Trinity Cemetery, Okarche, Canadian County, Oklahoma. *Okarche Times Marriage and Anniversary Notices, 1899-1918*, 1899/1918, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2179193/>. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

²⁸⁹ "Okarche Parish and Pastor Both Mark Their Golden Jubilee Thursday," 6-7. Prewitt, *German-American Settlement*, 158-160.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

with all the reverence he was due.²⁹¹ Even after two World Wars that pitted Germany against his homeland of France, Steber remained committed to the people of his congregation, continuing to preach and perform the mass in German until his health left him far too indisposed to carry out his duties as a priest.²⁹²

Okarche's already potent self-assurance coupled with Steber's capable guiding hand illuminated Okarche across the world to momentary global fame with papers as far as Australia pointing to Okarche as a beacon of morality and right order. With Oklahoma newspapers describing Okarche with headlines such as, "Catholic Town Sets High Moral Record For United States" it is not surprising to see the results of the unique atmosphere developed in Okarche. The *Southern Cross*, an Australian Catholic newspaper, described Okarche "has had no murder, no business failures in 25 years, no bank robberies or failures, no bonded indebtedness, no farms for sale, and only one divorce in 25 years."²⁹³ Keep in mind that these accomplishments were in 1931, the midsts of the Great Depression. The *Southern Cross* then addressed Okarche's lack of mixed-denominational marriages, the end result of Steber's rigid refusal to permit his Catholics to marry non-Catholics.²⁹⁴ It would be safe to assume that those conversions mentioned in Bishop Meerschaert's diary were likely non-Catholics converting so that they may marry into one of the town's Catholic families. The article then attributed the town's praiseworthy morality to Okarche being the only Catholic majority town in all of Oklahoma, composed of majority German Catholics. The *Southern Cross* then described how Okarche produced twenty-eight nuns and priests, remarking how it was a staggering number for a town of only four hundred Catholics. The impressive margin of vocations alone was described as making Okarche one of

²⁹¹ "A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish," 6.

²⁹² Ibid., 6-7.

²⁹³ *The Southern Cross* (Adelaide, South Australia, Australia), Vol. 43, no. 2163, September 4, 1931, 4.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

the most impressive towns in all of the nation.²⁹⁵ The *Southern Cross*'s proposed number of only four hundred Catholics in the town also revealed how the German Catholics had taken over the town, considering that the 1930 census revealed that Okarche was only a town of four hundred and eighty-two people.²⁹⁶ Including the additional factor that Holy Trinity's grade school and high school are among the best schools in the state, showing how tireless the German Catholics were in reinvesting their resources back into their own community.²⁹⁷

In 1933, Bishop Francis C. Kelley invested Rev. Zenon Steber with the position of Monsignor, recognition for the countless years of service he gave to Oklahoma.²⁹⁸ By the turn of the decade, Msgr. Steber was a recognizable figure in the Oklahoma Catholic Church. Leader of arguably the most prosperous and insulated Catholic community, such a community that anti-Catholic bigotry could not internally develop, and the last of an era of rugged trailblazing priests. By 1940, it was no longer the case that Steber travelled across the state via buggy or that he was ministering to outlaws and isolated Catholic families, rather, he was settled, and come 1943, he celebrated his Golden Jubilee, or fiftieth anniversary, as a priest along with the Golden Jubilee for Holy Trinity. It was a momentous occasion that received much fanfare. It was also a time to recollect and meditate on the long service of the German-speaking cowboy priest.²⁹⁹ Unfortunately, the current war that embroiled the United States and Europe dampened the spirits of Steber and the parishioners, and what had once been planned to be a large festive occasion involving people and priests from all over the country was reduced to one demarcated by a relatively modest, yet still large, celebration where Steber and the church were recognized for

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ United States Census Bureau, TABLE 5.-POPULATION OF INCORPORATED PLACES: 1940 AND 1930-Continued. Data.Census.

²⁹⁷ "Holy Trinity: 100 Years: 1893-1993," 14-15.

²⁹⁸ "A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish," 6.

²⁹⁹ *The Southwest Courier*, July 10, 1943, Holy Trinity Catholic Church Records. Holy Trinity Catholic Church Archives, 2026, 6-7.

their exceptional character. “Msgr. Steber is unique in many ways. He has built up one of the finest parishes in the southwest. One could pay tribute after tribute to the noted prelate...”³⁰⁰ By the Golden Jubilee, Okarche’s members who undertook the vocations of religious life grew to thirty-six in numbers. The vast majority of these vocations were nuns, yet it is an indication of the influence he had in guiding this community.³⁰¹ Okarche’s natural predisposition toward devout piety was just the environment for a zealous priest like Steber to thrive.

March 30, 1948, at the age of 77, Monsignor Zenon Steber breathed his last. When Steber died, Oklahomans of every creed recognized that it was truly the end of an era, for one of Oklahoma’s last pioneer priests died. Steber spent forty-six years as the pastor of Holy Trinity Catholic Church and committed himself entirely to his parish and the well-being of his parishioners, cultivating a deeply religious community that was recognized all over as a “model” for Catholic living. Remembered by friends as rigid, zealous, but fair and compassionate, his shadow truly loomed large, and his absence was more so felt.³⁰² His funeral was a large occasion and highly attended. “When he died in 1948 the funeral procession was three miles long.”³⁰³ Among those in attendance at his funeral were the priests he helped rear in his town, and twenty-eight sisters who were all taught their religion by Steber at Holy Trinity School.³⁰⁴

Okarche’s ability to avoid the anti-Catholic bigotry that swept across the state was in part thanks to Steber, but also the natural tendency of German Catholics to develop insular rural communities. The German Catholics of Okarche segregated themselves from much of Oklahoma, constructed their own largely autonomous institutions, and pursued whatever it was necessary to develop their deeply German Catholic community. Steber likewise worked to

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 6.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² “Curtain Falls on Career of Pioneer Priest,” 4.

³⁰³ “A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish,” 6.

³⁰⁴ “Curtain Falls on Career of Pioneer Priest,” 1.

expand the parish, invited more German Catholics to his town, and enforced a more stern segregation of the Catholics of Okarche from the non-Catholics of the town. The town of Okarche was a unique exception in the history of Oklahoma Catholicism, and its rigid German insularity and devout Catholicism are to thank for that.

Conclusion

Epilogue

Okarche's story did not end with the death of Msgr. Zenon Steber, it continued to make a name for itself as a model of Oklahoma Catholicism, the state over. In 1948, Holy Trinity built a high school building to house the students. It developed a thriving sports program and continued to grow in both vocations and infrastructure.³⁰⁵ However, that growth and prosperity were not seamless. Holy Trinity High School, which was constructed only twenty years prior, was forced to close its doors on May 12, 1968, unable to stay afloat with the constant new educational legislations and regulations coming out for accredited schools. In 1968 Oklahoma passed a law that accredited schools had to have a minimum number of students, something that Holy Trinity nor Okarche's public high school could meet if both remained open. Holy Trinity closed its doors, at last killed by Oklahoma's education department.³⁰⁶ In 1948, the Felician Sisters took over the Okarche Community hospital, inflaming tensions momentarily with Okarche's Lutheran minority.³⁰⁷ Furthermore, by 1986, the Felician Sisters had long lost administration of the hospital as it was then placed into Baptist Healthcare's network before being permanently closed in 1993, ending the hospital's forty or so year stint.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ "Holy Trinity: 100 Years: 1893-1993," 18-19.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

³⁰⁷ "A Sooner Catholic Study, Holy Trinity Parish," 7.

³⁰⁸ Ellie Sutter, "Okarche Hospital to Close Feb. 24," *The Oklahoman*, February 15, 1993, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/1993/02/15/okarche-hospital-to-close-feb-24/62467807007/>.

In addition, Okarche produced important figures whose influence reverberated not just across the Oklahoma Catholic world but also across the Catholic psyche of the entire United States. By 2018, Okarche produced nine priests and countless members of religious orders.³⁰⁹ However, these metrics do not include the various German Catholics who moved away from Okarche and settled in other regions of Oklahoma. Examples of these people descended from Okarche Catholics are Daniel Henry Mueggenborg, the Bishop of Reno, Nevada and Monsignor Don Wolf, pastor of Sacred Heart Parish and Rector of the Shrine of Blessed Stanley Rother. Wolf is a cousin of both Blessed Stanley Rother and Mueggenborg. Nonetheless, Blessed Stanley Francis Rother remained the foremost significant son of Okarche whose fame reverberated across the whole of Oklahoma.

Following Rother's death on July 28, 1981, Rother's memory was used to rally support in opposing President Ronald Reagan's support for the right-wing government which violently suppressed leftists opposition and guerilla organizations, orchestrating a concerted genocide of Guatemalan Mayans and attacking support organizations who sought to alleviate the suffering of the Guatemalan populace.³¹⁰ Rother's death awoke, especially Oklahomans, to Guatemala's plight and the vicissitudes endured by the Mayan people.

Shortly after the death of Rother he was already recognized by the people of Santiago Atitlán as a saint and his cause for canonization shortly afterwards followed. The cause failed in Guatemala and the Oklahoma Church then took responsibility for calling for Stanley Rother's canonization in 2007. June 2015 the Vatican formally recognized Rother as a martyr of the Church by Pope Francis.

³⁰⁹ Diane Clay, "Holy Trinity Celebrates 125 years in Okarche," *The Sooner Catholic*, December 19, 2018, <https://archokc.org/news/holy-trinity-celebrates-125-years-in-okarche#:~:text=Blessed%20Stanley%20is%20among%20nine,gifts%20God%20has%20given%20us.%E2%80%9D>.

³¹⁰ Monahan, ed. *The Shepherd Cannot Run*, 93.

On September 23, 2017, in downtown Oklahoma City at the now demolished Cox Convention Center more than 20,000 people from all over the world gathered as the Rite of Beatification was held, the second ever on U.S. soil, and first for an American born priest. Stanley Rother was then conferred with the title of “Blessed” and was moved one step further to obtaining the conferment of recognition of his canonization.³¹¹ His Beatification was followed by the Oklahoma Catholic Church arranging for the erection of a large shrine on the border of Oklahoma City and Moore along the western edge of Interstate Highway 35. Ground was broken on November 3, 2019, and the Shrine was dedicated on February 12, 2023.³¹²

While Blessed Stanley Rother looms large as the dominating presence around the Oklahoma Catholic Church, such a man was indeed produced by a place like Okarche. Okarche is a rare town that, like Conzen, argues about other German Catholic communities, where its rural and Catholic values are a legacy inherited by the insular character indicative of German-Catholic settlements. In Oklahoma, Okarche is the exception to the rule of the Oklahoma Catholic experience. It is that exceptional nature of Okarche that a town of only one thousand people was able to produce a saint.

Concluding Arguments

Okarche remains an important subject of study that is not only a ready example of the application of Conzen’s understanding of the unique characteristics that are endemic to German Catholic communities, but also expands the conversation of Oklahoma Catholicism and its intersection with ethnic Oklahoma communities, such as the Germans. Oklahoma, by virtue of being the forty-sixth state and one of the United States’ final frontier regions, is the subject of a

³¹¹ “Biography of Blessed Stanley Rother,” Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, accessed April 29, 2026, <https://archokc.org/stanleyrother>.

³¹² “History of the Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine,” Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine, accessed April 29, 2026, <https://rothershrine.org/history>.

fascinating history that encompasses various histories from all walks of life. The Catholic Church in Oklahoma was an immigrant Church, a mission Church, a frontier Church, and an exceptionally diverse Catholic body even to the present day.

Whether the stories that are told about Oklahoma Catholicism are about cowboy priests, immigrant settlers, rural insular communities, urban ethnic enclaves, Native Americans, African Americans and whatever else there is under the sun it remains a largely unexplored body of stories just waiting to be further developed. It provides insight into understanding modern day circumstances, such as the vibrant Vietnamese and Hispanic communities in Oklahoma, who do not differ much from the German, Czech, or Italian Catholics who themselves settled in Oklahoma and established developing ethnic communities orientated around expressions of their culture and religion.

The Oklahoma Catholic Church and Okarche's German Catholics present a fascinating story that is absolutely interrelated, but also diverges in substantial and potent ways. The majority of Oklahoma Catholics exist as a minority in their towns, communities, and livelihoods, which makes the insular parochial communities, such as Okarche, glaring exceptions to the norms. This is a process that American German-Catholics have been developing for the better part of eighty years before Okarche itself was opened up for settlement. German Catholics in the United States felt themselves the ultimate Catholic minority. The Irish dominated the American Church and generally eschewed ethnic religion, preferring to become more readily ingrained and accepted by American society. In addition, German Catholics differed from their Protestant kin on account of the jealous defense of their Catholic religion. To German Catholics, culture and religion were absolutely intertwined and could not be divorced, and while German Catholics knew that their language was numbered, as younger generations would hold the language less

jealously than their forefathers, they nonetheless clung to it fiercely, fighting bitterly to sustain their language, culture, and religion against fellow Catholics, fellow Germans, and the United States government. This history provides Okarche as the ultimate exception in the circumstance of Oklahoma's Catholic Church.

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