

OLD ST. JOSEPH'S CEMETERY – A MID-TOWN REDDING SPIRITUAL & HISTORICAL TREASURE

Thursday, June 2, 1881

Redding Independent

“...the new Catholic burying ground was consecrated by Rev. Bishop Patrick Monogue of Marysville, assisted by Revs. Hunt of Red Bluff and Haupt of Yreka. McNevin and family and Gartland and family of French Gulch were present, as were also the families of (Bernard) Conroy, Chappel, Scamman, McNeill and others. The ceremony was quite impressive.”

Thursday, December 1, 1881

Redding Independent

“...Yesterday, in company with R.G. Dunn, we visited the new Catholic cemetery ... We understand to Messrs. Conroy and Dunn the Catholic portion of our community are indebted for this fine cemetery, as well as for the improvements made thereon.”

The foregoing news clips from an early Shasta County newspaper heralded the beginning of an historic resting place for families which played pioneering roles in the spreading of the Catholic faith in Northern California. A quick look at the “Redding 1874-1903” chapter of Veronica Satorius’ **“BETWEEN THE LINES – The Catholic Church in Shasta County, California 1853-1977”** provides a sober, yet romantic context into which Old St. Joseph’s Cemetery can be viewed. It certainly provides a context for understanding the cemetery’s location – three to four blocks away from St. Joseph’s Catholic Church on Court Street. Close to the railroad station. Close to downtown Redding. Close to a number of Catholic parishioners who’d settled nearby.

Beautifully sculpted grave monuments and tombstones, carved granite borders to family plots, poetically and ornately carved inscriptions detailing origins of family patriarchs and matriarchs. Stubbornly resilient and stately cypress trees and palm trees – reminders of another era when this site was visited frequently by pioneer family members. All this amid a harshly arid, iron-red clay ground surface, overgrown with seasonally revisiting weeds and wildflowers. This is the St. Joseph’s Cemetery where my father, Redding attorney Laurence Carr would bring his older children each Memorial Day, rakes and hoes in hand, to tend the resting places of his father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, and other members of the Francis Carr family.

My great grandfather, Francis Carr, was born in Killybegs, County Donegal, in 1833. His Irish immigrant experience first brought him to New York in the 1850’s, later to Shasta County (via ship voyage from New York, mule train across the Isthmus of Panama, an Independence Day arrival in San Francisco, and

a late summer trek up the Sacramento Valley) in 1874. When he left New York, he'd already suffered the losses of his first wife and four of his six children to smallpox and childbirth complications. He'd remarried and moved west with his second wife and two surviving children to become the Principal of the school at Shasta City. Once settled in Northern California, he and my great grandmother had two additional sons, one of whom was my grandfather, Judge Francis Carr. After two subsequent relocations to Millville (1875), then Redding in 1893, great grandfather Francis succumbed to stroke in 1896 and was buried at St. Joseph's Cemetery. His second wife, Mary Ann (McParland) Carr (originally an immigrant from County Armagh, Northern Ireland) died in the 1920's, and is buried beside him in the family plot. My grandparents, Judge Carr and his wife Mary Agnes (Kennedy) Carr are buried a few feet away, along with grandfather's older sister Theresa (Carr) Macomber, and two children she'd lost in childbirth. A few feet from them lie the remains of my father, and headstones memorializing his two younger brothers, both killed in World War II, whose remains lie far away from that site.

The plot itself has survived the ravages of intermittent vandalisms, as well as extreme weather swings which characterize this region. The family plot obelisk, however, which center-pieced the Carr family gravesite, has not fared so well. Weighing over 400 lbs., and sitting atop a broad rectangular base, this ornately-fashioned, marble column and crowning crucifix have fallen victim to vandals over the last 20 years. Only a small portion of the crucifix (inscribed with "IHS") remains. And the main column lay prone next to my great grandmother's grave for several years. We're now in the process of restoring and re-mounting the obelisk, and having a new crucifix fashioned to return to its proper place.

My childhood memories hearken to those days when we'd make our Memorial Day pilgrimage with Dad, cleaning up not only the family plot, but also attending other plots where Dad knew that no family members remained to honor their dead. But our cyclical visits to old St. Joseph's Cemetery were not isolated events. Other families would be there as well, attending to the weeds that had sprouted each Spring, sweeping the sidewalks which coursed their ways among the carved granite walls separating each family's resting places. And when we'd finished our work, we'd kneel with Dad in silence to honor our dead relatives in prayer. I was too young to appreciate what this exercise must have meant to Dad, himself a World War II veteran, having lost his two little brothers in the war.

When my wife and I returned this past Memorial Day to recapture the spiritual lift one derives from honoring and reflecting on his/her forebears, we were saddened at the condition of this pioneer resting place. Many gravestones were toppled, large family plot monuments lay prone or broken, a small family mausoleum had been broken into and vandalized. Along with vigilant members of St. Joseph's Knights of Columbus led by Mr. Tim Bambino, Rev. Father Benedict De Leon, pastor of St. Joseph's Parish, and representatives from the Sacramento Diocesan staff (Bishop Jaime Soto, Diocesan Director of Cemeteries, Phil Niederberger, and Diocesan Cemeteries Manager Frank Espinosa) a major restoration has since launched in conjunction with management from the Union Pacific Railroad, whose right of way borders the west expanse of the cemetery. This noble effort will likely go unnoticed by many local residents and civic leaders in the community. While the cemetery occupies a central location in the old downtown section of Redding, to a degree it's "off the beaten path." Most of the descendants of families buried there have all passed away, or moved away. But the current, noble efforts of

committed individuals from the parish and the diocese cause me to reflect on words that my father penned as a youth, during his studies at Santa Clara University:

“...I have watched at dusk.... The sun descend below the western hills in glory....painting the earth and sky in gorgeous hues of scintillating splendor.....and I have thrilled in the majesty of it all. But far more majestic than the grandeur of a richly painted sunset is the lasting radiance of a noble life....”

In the frenetic, fast track world in which we live, nobility of purpose and deed is often relegated to wishful notion – something we’d rather do if time would only allow. The efforts of those who are restoring this oft-forgotten landmark of our Catholic legacy are one of those special, “noble deed” achievements.

One day, when the Carr family plot , and those of other pioneer Catholic families who are buried at Old St. Joseph’s Cemetery, are restored to their original dignity, we hope to place an inscription of Dad’s reflection at his final resting place – “far more majestic than the grandeur of a richly painted sunset is the lasting radiance of a noble life.” It’s important for us as mortal beings to honor our dead, and to pause and reflect on their examples for us in this oft-times troubled world. The restoration and protection of this hallowed site serves us all to better understand and revere our relationship with our God.

Thank You, St. Joseph’s Parish and the Sacramento Diocese,

Pat and Kathie Carr, Marie Carr-Fitzgerald, and the rest of the Carr Family of Redding