

Restoration of an Old Catholic Cemetery

By Tim Bambino Committee member of "Save the Old St. Joseph Cemetery" project



Bishop Jamie Soto visiting the restored St. Joseph Cemetery

On this sunny summer day, May 25, 1881, Bishop Manogue, of Marysville, set out for a long trip to Redding in his custom buggy pulled by a single well taken care of stallion. The trip would take a solid 8 hrs on the dusty roads, that's if all went well and no spokes on the buggy broke, or two days if he stopped at Red Bluff parish along the way. The purpose of the trip was to concentrate the holy ground of the new St Joseph Cemetery in Redding.

That's not the way it was, as we know, but it could have been. .

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 Haults 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."

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 .

This was the cemetery that I first visited when I was a kid. In the decades following, the cemetery had fallen in to neglect and despair. Vegetation, vandals, and weather had taken it's toll. Several years ago the place looked like a fenced off weed patch in which vagrants were entering through the damaged fence and using it as a camp ground and to party which caused destruction of headstones and markers. The small family mausoleum was broken into and signs of a camp fire were noticeable.

The "Save the Old St. Joseph Cemetery" project has returned the cemetery to as close to its original state as it has been in probably many years.

The committee of Pat Carr, Sharon Babcock, Richard Foxx, Jake Mangas, Mike Baker and myself, with the support of St. Joseph Church , Sacramento Diocese, the Knights of Columbus and the City of Redding, have made great progress.

We first had a couple of general cleanup days in which all the unwanted vegetation was removed. We fixed the fence where vagrants were getting in and vandalizing the monuments. We contacted the Union Pacific railroad (which took 10 months to find the person to talk to) about helping to contain the erosion problem on the west bank next to the tracks.

In May of 2007 Oregon Memorials came down and repaired and reset all the headstones, obelisks and markers that were damaged ... that was about 80 percent of them. After the headstones were reset, the cemetery started to look better, but there were some other projects to be done.

A wonderful young man, Ben Brown, contacted me after seeing an article in the newspaper about the restoration project. He needed a project to do for his Eagle Scout badge. After meeting with him at the cemetery, Ben agreed to gravel the walkways of the cemetery for us. We walked the grounds and laid out where we figured the walkways were at one time. He, his Scout troop and a number of volunteers - 300 hours' worth - put crushed granite throughout the cemetery to make the walkways stand out and give the cemetery a lot more character. After Ben did his Eagle Scout project, the cemetery began to look like the cemetery of the past.

The next step was to have the cemetery taken care of on a regular basis. The two maintenance personal at St. Joseph parish can only designate about 16 hours a month to the old cemetery, and that is usually to spray weed killer and remove fallen limbs and rubbish.

After a lot of research and meetings, we came up with the Adopt-a-Plot program. This program has helped resurrect cemeteries around the world for years. The Adopt-a-Plot Program is an innovative concept in cemetery restoration, beautification and preservation. It offers individuals, groups, organizations, societies and companies the opportunity to play a vital role in saving and preserving the historic St. Joseph Cemetery. The concept is simply people getting involved in efforts to revitalize a community resource, restore its past dignity and beauty, and preserve it for generations to come - that they might point with pride to the results of a community endeavor. By adopting a pioneer family's plot and caring for it, people become a part of the cemetery's restoration and preservation program. A few hours of time each month and a little imagination can make up for the years of neglect that frequently plagues our old cemeteries.

(The Adopt-A-Plot is not a new idea. This concept is done in many countries to preserve the history and their monuments.) This program has taken off with super support. We had two different Sundays were people could come out to the cemetery and pick out the plot they would like to care for. We would explain the program to them and give them some guidelines. After those two days, the committee was really impressed by the support we received from not just parishioners but many non-Catholics of the community. Out of approximately 40 sections of the cemetery that we mapped out, all but eight were adopted.

The sign-up days were September 2008. Since then, many people have acted on their commitments. Adopters have put their own personal touches their adopted plots following guidelines from the committee. Many have put American flags around headstones and one plot, that contains the remains four infants from the early 20's, was decorated with a Christmas theme for the holidays.

Fundraisers have been done to offset the cost of the restoration project. The Knights of Columbus Redding Council sold Religious Christmas cards and “Keep ‘CHRIST’ in Christmas’ car magnets, a stuffed baked potato dinner was put on by the Knights and donations from the community have helped with funds.

If you would like to view a partial list of names of the deceased you can log on to: shastahistorical.org/ - go to county records and click on Shasta County cemeteries and scroll down to St. Joseph Cemetery- Old

Soon to be on St Joseph Parish in Redding website.

Tim Bambino, after being born in Siskiyou county, is a life long resident of Redding and a parishioner at St. Joseph Parish. I attended St. Joseph elementary school and a 25 yr member of the Knights Of Columbus, Redding Council.