

St. Anthony's Catholic Church
& the Catholic Community in Brookside
By Sue Cochran

Due to the ethnic make-up of the Brookside coal camp, the Catholic faith has always been of great importance in this community. In fact, I believe that St. Anthony's Catholic Church is the only church to ever be located in the Town of Brookside.

In the early days, when Brookside was a booming coal camp, it was listed as a Mission of Canon City's St. Michael's Catholic Church. Father Michael Carmody included Brookside's religious needs in his duties at Canon City as far back as the 1880s. Visits were sporadic and often based on a specific need: babies needed baptized, couples wished to be married, etc.

By 1904, Father Chrysostom Lochschmidt, O.S.B., also of Canon City, said Mass in Brookside about once a month. Services might be held at the school house or wherever room could be found. Early histories refer to an old two-story building somewhere in town that was used for a while.

When the priest couldn't be there, some families drove their horse and buggy to Canon City or to Florence for Mass. Sometimes the women of the community kept Brookside religious by gathering the people together to recite the Rosary and other prayers. An early history of religion in the area says that they always remembered to pray for a church of their own and promised to dedicate it, if their intention was granted, to their patron saint, St. Anthony.

In 1920, Father Edmund Butz, O.S.B., who was ministering to the Catholic communities of both Canon City and Brookside at that time, learned that the school building at Brewster was to be replaced and that the old school could be purchased and moved. He appointed a committee of Joseph Vezzetti, Mariana Zontine, Louie Merlino and Paul De Noble to pursue the idea. They eventually raised about \$500.00 toward the project. Mrs. Charles Vezzetti sold them an acre of land for \$30.00. They bought the building, hired Frank Tisone to move it, and began the process of converting it into a church.

Donations poured in: a church bell from Francesca Merlino, a statue of St. Anthony from Frank Tisone and Rocco Moschetti; Stations of the Cross from Father Pecorelli of La Junta. Church pews made by Tony Fazzino were purchased by each parish family; other statues were provided by the Berta and Vezzetti families.

The church was, indeed, named to honor St. Anthony, patron saint of the lost, the poor, and travelers. June 13th, the feast day dedicated to St. Anthony, soon became an annual celebration of some importance to the little community. A Sunday near June 13th was chosen, and a committee led by Frank Tisone was responsible for planning this event in the early days.

In 1928, the event opened with a dance on Saturday night, June 23rd. High Mass was held by Father Justin, OSB, at 9:30 Sunday morning, followed by the procession through town. A baseball game at 2:30 featured the Knights of Columbus against a team from Rockvale. The Knights of Columbus also provided a band to lead the procession and to play a concert Sunday evening. Rockvale won the ballgame 14 to 13. Events worth special mention that year included the greased pig competition. Somehow the pig got loose and ran into the well-dressed crowd, causing quite a wave of excitement.

In 1933, the baseball game between Brookside and Canon City came to an abrupt end in the eighth inning when a disputed umpire's decision caused both teams to leave the field with the score tied at five-all.

St. Rocco's Day in August was another day of celebration for the people of St. Anthony's. News reports from 1933 refer to St. Rocco's Day as an "annual day of feast and celebration for residents of Fremont County's coal camps". St. Rocco's day also started with Mass celebrated at St. Anthony's. The procession that followed was led by the priests and acolytes with music provided by the Canon City Municipal Band. Races and contests were enjoyed until time for the ball games between Brookside and Williamsburg (Brookside won 11 to 6) and between Canon City and Chandler (Canon City won 13 to 1). There was dancing both Saturday and Sunday nights, but the highlight of the celebration was the mammoth fireworks display launched on top of the bluff above the town. It was estimated that as many as 5000 people crowded the roads and hills in the area to see the fireworks.

Both St. Anthony's Day and St. Rocco's Day were important enough within the community that local families named little boys Anthony or Rocco hoping that they might hold a special role in the festivities. These elaborate celebrations started to fade with the dwindling population and the beginning of World War II. St. Rocco's Day was the first to disappear entirely.

St. Anthony's Day survived much longer. In 1975, 180 members and guests attended Mass on St. Anthony's Day. The traditional procession through the town followed, with Father Justin McKernan leading the Rosary. By then, and in years to come, the Mass and procession were followed by coffee, conversation, and companionship at the church. Gone were the dances, races, ballgames and fireworks. But the local members of the church held on as long as they could.

Despite World War II, a complete renovation of the interior of the church took place in 1943/44. Rev. Justin McKernan and Rev. Edward Vollmer worked very hard with members of the congregation to raise \$2500.00 to perform the needed work inside, as well as repairs to the tower and new shingles for the roof.

Church records show that around 1900, an estimated 200 Catholic families lived in the general vicinity of the Brookside mine. By 1945, that number had dropped to 95 families, less than half the original population. A clipping from 1973 reported that membership had dropped to about 60 families. By 1980, the congregation was described as "struggling".

Eventually, regular services at the little white church stopped completely, and the building stood vacant for a number of years. Recently, this old historic structure has been acquired by the Town of Brookside. It is hoped that a much-needed new roof can be put on the building very soon and that it can be used again for various functions, including weddings and anniversaries.

We are planning to have St. Anthony's open and available for viewing on the day of Brookside's Centennial for those who would like to walk through the old church.

If you have questions or comments regarding these history articles, please contact Sue Cochran at 276-0577 or Renee at Town Hall.