

THE LIVERMORE VALLEY HISTORY CENTER

CHAPTERS OF LIVERMORE HISTORY

MOUNT CARMEL CATHOLIC CHURCH TESLA, CALIFORNIA

BY DAN L. MOSIER



Mount Carmel Catholic Church

Buildings in foreground (L-R) Company Store, Hospital, Mine Office

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Published by the Livermore Heritage Guild in honor of the
Centennial of St. Michael's Church, Livermore, Ca.

1978

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MOUNT CARMEL CATHOLIC CHURCH, TESLA

Nestled in a pretty canyon surrounded by high, green hills was once situated the town of Tesla. Coal, sand and clay were produced here from the deep underground tunnels first opened up by Edward B. Carrell and John O'Brien in 1857. When John and James Treadwell took over operations in 1890, Tesla became the number one producer of coal in the State, even surpassing the coal mines of Mount Diablo which had long dominated the coal business in California. Tesla quickly grew to a population of some 1,500 people, and along with it, a variety of social clubs and organizations were formed. The Teslites were fun-loving, socially active people who never missed a chance to organize a club or throw a party. But, perhaps, the most important and most active of all the organizations were the religious cliques. Only one, however, had its very own place of worship. Their little white chapel stood high on a hill overlooking the rest of the town. Here is the story of that little chapel and the Catholics of Tesla, Alameda County, California.

THE FIRST SERVICE

Catholic services at Tesla began when Reverend Father Whibbs of Tracy¹ commenced a missionary program there in September of 1899. Father Whibbs held the first mass on Sunday, September 10, at 8:00 a.m. in Tesla Hall. Thereafter, mass was held for the Catholic congregation every second Sunday at 8:00 a.m.

1 Tesla was in Alameda County and it was affiliated politically with the town of Livermore. Tracy is in San Joaquin County.

In October of 1899, the Catholic women organized an Altar Society with Miss Dell Leary as President, Mrs. Burke as Financial Secretary, and Mrs. Leimeux as Treasurer. Meetings of the society were held on the fourth Sunday of each month at 1:00 p.m. Benefits, picnics and other church activities were made possible for the Catholics through the arrangements of the society. Catechism for the youngsters was also organized during the same month. Students met every Sunday at 2:00 p.m. and were taught in the Hall. The initial teachers were Mrs. McCormick, Mrs. Leimeux, Miss Dell Leary, Miss Kate Leary and Mrs. Colford. Sunday School picnics were frequently held for the youngsters in the beautiful little canyon behind Tesla.¹ Here is a pleasant description of one of their outings as described by a correspondent for the Livermore Herald of May 26, 1900:

A pleasant outing was held in the beautiful canyon back of Tesla Sunday last by the Catholic Sunday school children. The teachers, Mrs. Chas. Donahue and Miss Kate Leary, were ably assisted by the Catholic ladies. The little folks enjoyed themselves swinging, playing games and bathing in the cool stream, which runs through the canyon. As it was a very warm day all appreciated the ice-cream furnished by Mrs. Paul Hubener. At 4 p.m. all started for home tired but well satisfied with the day's outing.

THE NEW PARISH

A new Catholic parish was established in November, 1899, consisting of Tracy, Lathrop and Tesla. Father Whibbs, whose residence was located in Tracy, had charge of the parish up until April, 1900. At this time his health forced him to resign as pastor of the parish, so services at Tesla were temporarily officiated by Father O'Connor of St. Mary's Church in Stockton. One month later, Father Lacey of Tracy became

1 This little canyon is what historian Earle E. Williams refers to as Little Corral Hollow, as noted from the diaries of Edward B. Carrell.

the pastor of the parish and remained so until August when he decided to take up residence in Stockton. Father Lacey was succeeded by Father O'Connor as the new head pastor in August, 1900.

Commencement of the new parish at Tesla began on Sunday, December 3, 1899, at 9:00 a.m. Mass was said at each of the three places every third Sunday. When Father O'Connor became the head pastor, meetings were held every second Sunday at Tesla. To help defray the expenses incurred through the organization of the new parish, a fair was held at Tracy on November 29, 1899. A beautiful gold watch was raffled off for the benefit of the fair.

Every New Year's Eve the Altar Society gave a "Christmas Tree" celebration which was one of the most exciting events looked forward to especially by the youngsters. The Livermore Herald of January 6, 1900, describes the first "Christmas Tree" celebration put on by the Catholics:

On New Year's eve the town was posted with numerous notices announcing Catholic services in the hall at 9:30 in the morning and an entertainment and Christmas tree at 8 in the evening to which all the people of Tesla were courteously invited. A large congregation assembled at the morning mass, which was celebrated by Rev. Father Whibbs of Tracy. Exquisite vocal and instrumental music was rendered by a talented choir from Stockton, consisting of Miss Laura Rolland, Miss Annie Burns, Miss Daisy O'Brien, Miss Annie Cobral and Wm. Kuferdorf. Miss Burns performed on the organ and Wm. Kuferdorf played an accompaniment on the violin. The same choir and music was a leading feature of the Christmas tree and entertainment which was patronized by a crowded house. The program was an elaborate one....

The children's friend, hoary-headed old Santa Claus in the person of Pat Peters soon arrived to enhance the young people's happiness by a generous shower of gifts on every youngster in the hall. The decoration of the Christmas tree was an artistic piece of work and displayed much patient labor and good taste on the part of the ladies in charge. At the close of the entertainment the young folks prevailed on Father Whibbs to give his consent to let them have a little dance, to which he agreed on condition that it last not over two hours. By 12 o'clock the crowd had dispersed to their homes, highly pleased and hoping at some future time to again be visited by the talented choir.

The music during the services was rendered by a choir from Tracy with Miss Annie Burns of Stockton as organist. The Catholics of Tesla thought that they should have a choir of their own. By March 3, 1900, a seven-member choir had been put together by the Altar Society and was enthusiastically rehearsing for its first performance, which was given on Palm Sunday, April 15, 1900.

MOUNT CARMEL

Tesla Hall, the center of Tesla's social life, could barely spare a free hour for any special event. Such were the demands on the little hall--which saw everything from wild Saturday night parties to serious religious worship on Sundays--that conflicts were almost unavoidable. In order that the various religious services be accommodated, it was necessary to stagger the times and dates on Sundays.

Due to the conflicting schedule of the Hall, the Catholics of Tesla decided to construct a separate building in which nothing but their own planning would interfere with their religious activities. During the summer months of 1900, plans were drawn for the construction of the first church to be built in Tesla, and a piece of land was generously donated for the chapel by the coal company.

September 16, 1900, was the initial date on which the cornerstone of the Catholic Church was to be laid by Archbishop Riordan, assisted by Rev. Power of Livermore, and a number of clergymen from San Francisco; however, due to incomplete arrangements, work on the new church was delayed for almost a year.

In July and August of 1901, a neat 24'x44' frame building with a steeple and bell was built. The church stood on a hill beside the stage road a short distance between the superintendent's office and the hospital building. The bell was donated by Father Patrick Power of Livermore. It was the one he had purchased for the first St. Michael's Church in Livermore that had been replaced by a new bell in 1890. The entire

cost of construction amounted to about \$400, which was raised entirely by subscriptions through the efforts of the Altar Society. The new church was christened "Mount Carmel."

THE DEDICATION OF MOUNT CARMEL

August 25, 1901, was the initial date set for the dedication, but for some unknown reason it was postponed until September 22, 1901. Many people outside of Tesla were quite excited about the dedication, especially those people who were former residents of the mining town. The Stockton Independent of September 21, 1901, printed this announcement the day before the big occasion:

On Sunday, the 22nd, an excursion to Tesla will be given on the occasion of the dedication of the Catholic church by Archbishop Riordan, assisted by Rev. Father Wyman of San Francisco. Train leaves at 8:30 from Hazelton Avenue. Dedication services on arrival of the train, followed by high mass. Music by St. Mary's choir, under the leadership of Karl C. Brueck. Excursion rate, \$1 for round-trip. Children under 12, half fare. Lunch will be served at the hotel for 50 cents. Tickets can be secured of P.D.Campbell, corner of San Joaquin and Washington streets.

Mount Carmel Church, the first building erected at Tesla for religious worship, was dedicated Sunday, September 22, 1901. A special train of six cars came from Stockton packed with people anxiously awaiting to view the little chapel. People came from Livermore, Tracy and other neighboring communities to witness that eventful day. The Stockton Independent of September 24, 1901, describes the impressive Catholic ceremonies at Tesla:

The pretty little church recently built by the Catholics of Tesla was dedicated with impressive ceremonies last Sunday by Archbishop Riordan, assisted by Rev.W.B.O'Conner, pastor of the Stockton parish, Father Lacey of St. Mary's church and Father Moran, a member of the Paulist brotherhood stationed at San Francisco. Two hundred and fifty Stocktonians went out on a special train which was run to accommodate residents of Stockton and surrounding country, and several hundred persons assembled from the homes in the mining town and from neighboring

settlements. The day was perfect and the dedicatory ceremonies were witnessed with marked interest by as many as could crowd into the little church and look in at the opened windows.

The church is built on a high point just west of the principal buildings of the town and a short distance from the store and the home of the managing owners of the coal mines. The structure was built of wood and neatly finished in stained redwood, making a very pretty effect. The building was erected by the Catholics on ground donated for the purpose by the company. The entire cost was about \$400.

The dedicatory services were first in order and at the conclusion of the Archbishop's part of the ceremonies, high mass was celebrated by Rev. Father O'Connor of Stockton, the choir of St. Mary's church furnished the music.

At the conclusion of the services the announcement was made that Father Moran, the Paulist, would remain in Tesla several days to hold a mission in the new church.

After the services, luncheon was served at the hotel and the excursionists spent two hours in inspecting the large plant of the Tesla company, some of them venturing a short distance underground to see how mining is done in coal regions. Mining operations had been closed for the day and visitors were not invited into the great depths where coal is dug out, though opportunities were given the more venturesome to go down the inclines six or eight hundred feet. The method of mining for the various products of that rich section were explained and the opportunity was one of much interest to everybody.

The return trip was commenced at 4 o'clock and the run back to Stockton was made in good time. It is credible to the management of the company's affairs and to the persons in control of the excursion that none but ladies and gentlemen were in the large party and everybody showed respect for the Sabbath day and for the religious character of the outing. On the whole it was a very enjoyable affair and the day passed without a single unpleasant accident.

When the coal mines shut down around 1908, most of the people left to seek employment elsewhere. A town once filled with hope and prosperity never dreamed of the sad fate to be bestowed upon it. The busy meetings and activities of the Altar Society were soon dispensed with and along with them ended the traditional Sunday sermons. Like other deserted

buildings exposed to the elements, Mount Carmel Catholic Church, too, crumbled into oblivion. The bell was returned to Father Power in Livermore where it was placed in the belfry of the new school building at St. Michael's Church.

If you look upon the hill where the pretty little chapel once stood, you might hear the clanging of the bell or the hymns of the choir echoing from the past. For this was Tesla, and the Catholic church of a long-forgotten era.



MOUNT CARMEL CATHOLIC CHURCH

The two women (L-R) are May Law and Ella Hink