

SACRED HEART ACADEMY AT VINITA
ESTABLISHED 1897

By Velma Nieberding

Vinita had its beginning in 1869, when the Government authorized an east and west and north and south railroad through the Indian Territory under the Indian Treaties of 1866, the charter promised to the road that first reached the border.

That the Missouri, Kansas and Texas ("Katy") won the race, entering the Territory on June 6, 1870, is well known. Less known, perhaps, is the efforts of the Atlantic and Pacific (now the 'Frisco) to establish its station at Downingsville, located three miles north of the present Vinita.

The struggle of the two railroads, settled after some bloodshed and a court action, resulted in a new townsite which Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee Lawyer and member of the Cherokee National Council, named "Vinita" in honor of Vinnie Ream, the noted Washington sculptress who had befriended him.¹

The history of Boudinot's manipulations between the "Katy" and the A. & P.; notes from newspapers about his "change of face" from Masterson's work are interesting sidelights in Cherokee history.

Vinnie Ream was the artist who did the famous statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Rotunda of the National Capitol in Washington, D.C. She had an interesting life and many friends of political note in Washington. She is noted in history for many of her beautiful sculptured pieces, a collection of books and photographs of these now on exhibit in the Museum of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The builders of the railroad, called "The Irish Brigade" were for the most part Catholic. Following them into the Indian Territory, Jesuit priests from the Osage mission in Kansas, came intermittently to serve their spiritual needs. The Reverend J. L. Setters, Phillip Collerton, John Schoenmaker and Paul Ponzigilione, said Mass in the home of Frank Sheehan, a section foreman, or in box cars where the section hands lived.

After the establishment of Sacred Heart Monastery on the Potawatomi reservation in 1877, by Benedictines, priests from this center visited Vinita on their trips to the Quapaw reservation. Not until 1892, when the Reverend William H. Ketcham

¹ An Eastern-schooled, university-bred lawyer, Boudinot was a man who had done more than any other of his race to bring the railroad into Indian Territory. Before the opposition of a great majority of his people had been broken down he had been practically exiled by his tribe.—V. V. Masterson. *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), p. 105.

was placed in charge of all the Catholic missionary work in the northeastern part of Indian Territory, was there any permanent Catholic establishment in Vinita. Father Ketcham visited Vinita regularly, beginning the "Vinita Mission Baptismal Record" on June 3, 1892.²

In 1894, Father Ketcham built a small church in Vinita, and it was dedicated by Bishop Theophile Meerschaert on April 28, 1895. The Church had cost \$1,500 and its donor was not known but the bronze bell hanging in the steeple was inscribed, "Cherokee to the Catholic Church at Vinita, I.T. 1895."

The Reverend Arthur Versavel, who had been sent to Vinita in 1894, was the first resident pastor of the church, which had been dedicated as "Holy Ghost Catholic Church." The priest was born in Belgium in 1871 and had come to the Indian Territory as a missionary. He died in Denver, Colorado in 1952.

In 1897, a school built by funds furnished by Mother Katharine Drexel of Philadelphia, had opened with an enrollment of thirty pupils. It was staffed by the Benedictine Sisters of Shoal Creek, Arkansas.³

The year 1894 marked not only the establishment of a church but it was likewise an important occasion in the life of the Cherokee Indians. This was the year when a wagonload of silver came to Vinita—when members of the Cherokee tribe drew \$6,640,000 "strip money" or payment for the "Cherokee Strip" which the tribe had sold to the Government. J. C. Harris was the principal chief at the time and J. Caleb Starr was the treasurer. U.S. Marshals were on hand to keep the crowd of more than 5,000 people moving as pitchmen, gamblers and gyp artists had their day. One writer reported "Peace disturbers were merely tied to a tree until they were willing to behave."

Soon after the Catholic school opened in 1897, the *Vinita Indian Chieftain* reported in its columns of January 1, 1898: "This number (30) of pupils has doubled besides the numerous music and art pupils who take special lessons in these branches. Though Sacred Heart is a Catholic School it admits pupils of

² William Ketcham was the first priest ordained for the Indian Territory by Oklahoma's first Bishop, The Rt. Reverend Theophile Meerschaert.—Diocesan records.

³ Mother Mary Katharine Drexel died March 3, 1955 at the age of 96. She was the foundress and first Superior General of the Sisters of The Blessed Sacrament for Indian and Colored people. The organization which she founded has carried her missionary work to 24 archdioceses and dioceses in 21 states and operates Xavier University, New Orleans (Catholic University for Negroes). She helped to build every Catholic Indian mission in Oklahoma. Velma Nieberding, "The Richest Nun," in *Southwest Courier*, March 19, 1955.

any denomination within its walls and no attempt is ever made to influence the religious convictions of any of them."

The next year (1899) the Sisters of Mount Carmel of New Orleans took over the school and taught until the end of the school year, 1903.⁴

In 1904, the Sisters of Divine Providence of San Antonio, Texas, assumed charge of the school and have continued its operation to this day. The school and the land on which it is situated were deeded to the Sisters, by the Cherokee Indians, as an inducement for them to assume responsibility for the isolated mission school. Sister M. Elizabeth was the first principal.

The boarding school was originally for Indian girls but a day school was maintained for both boys and girls. No record of Indian students attending has been found in Catholic directories for the period, but in 1904 the total enrollment of the school was 80 students. Attendance reports before statehood do not designate the number of Indian pupils. In 1907-08 no report is extant in these directories but in 1909 and 1910 the attendance was 145; no breakdown in the figures as to Indian or White or boys or girls. In 1911, for some reason, the total enrollment is reported as 30. In 1913 it was 80.

The fluctuations in enrollment figures may have resulted from the fact that Indian appropriations for supplies had been withdrawn by the Government where children attended mission schools. In 1907, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs had drafted an item that children in mission schools would be entitled to funds under treaty stipulations, although it was reported that in only three mission schools in the United States had they been received.

The last church record entry by Father Versavel was made on November 30, 1902. He left the Indian Territory to join the Jesuit Order, and was soon thereafter sent on foreign mission work in British Honduras.

During much of his pastorate he was the only priest in the whole northeastern section of the Indian Territory. He was constantly on the move by horseback or buggy to care for both Catholics and non-Catholics who saw a priest but infrequently. He often slept along the trail with only the sky as his roof and the howls of prairie animals as his companions. Vinita

⁴ The Sisters teaching in Sacred Heart Academy at the close of the year 1903, were M. Clare; Mechtilda; Maurice and Laurence. ("A Trip to Quapaw in 1903" by Sister M. Laurence), *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2 (Summer, 1953).

⁵ *The Indian Sentinel*, a publication of the Catholic Bureau of Indian Missions, Annual number, 1907.

was a wide-open "cow town" and it was not unusual for the cowboys to celebrate on pay day. One incident is reported by the Reverend T. F. Kramer: One night Father Versavel was sitting at his desk by an open window when cowboys began to shoot up the town. As the bullets ricocheted around the parish house the priest dived under a table. A lamp on his desk was smashed to pieces by the bullets.

In 1900, Father Versavel had received as his assistant, his cousin from Belgium, the Reverend Maurice D'Haenens (later shortened to "Dannis" because his name was too difficult for the Indians to pronounce). Father D'Haenens stayed in Vinita but one year, going then to St. Mary's of the Quapaws to work among that tribe in 1901.

Charles Van Hulse succeeded Father Versavel in 1903 and ministered to the Vinita parish for fifteen years. In 1909, he built St. Ann's church at Welch, and remodeled the original Vinita church increasing its seating capacity to two hundred. His last baptismal entry was made in 1917.

During this interval of fifteen years, other priests either visited the parish or served it and the school, because the following names are listed on baptismal registers: Eldephonse Elissalde, O. S. B.; P. Casser, Raymond O'Keiffe, C. P.; L. S. Wiersma, W. Huffer, Philip B. Gordon, and Anthony Redinger, O. S. B.

Father J. F. Davlin, whose first baptismal entry is dated March 25, 1917 was the next resident pastor. During this year the Sinclair Oil Company located a refinery at Vinita and the city grew to over 5,000 inhabitants. The church built by Mathias Splitlog at Cayuga, over which the Vinita parish had had jurisdiction for many years, was abandoned as a mission church.⁶

Father Davlin was succeeded by Father F. D. McCreedy who served until 1925. After his service Father T. F. Kramer, a scholarly priest, writer and lecturer had the charge at Vinita. Father Kramer worked to build up the parish and school until his transfer in 1947 to Merrill, Wisconsin.

Father Rupert Landoll was the next priest, serving until 1955 when he was succeeded by Father Joseph Beigler, the present pastor.

The Sisters of Divine Providence have been in charge of the academy since 1904. During these years a constant series of improvements have been made to keep the school a foremost educational institution. In 1917 the first building was replaced

⁶ Velma Nieberding, "Chief Splitlog and the Cayuga Mission Church" *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 (Spring, 1954).

by a new frame structure and in 1922 a wing of brick was added to the school. In 1927 a gymnasium was built.

In 1944, a grotto to "Our Lady of Lourdes" was erected on the school grounds and recently a more modern gymnasium and auditorium have been completed.

The Academy is both a grade and high school with a boarding school for girls. It is accredited to the University of Oklahoma and Our Lady of the Lake College, San Antonio and through it to the Catholic University of America. It draws many of its students from surrounding communities.

But the colorful days before statehood when little boys and girls from many Indian tribes learned to study together, are gone. The school today is of predominantly white enrollment.

Mrs. Blanche Evans Freeman, a granddaughter of Mathias Splitlog, the builder of Cayuga mission, has vivid memories of two great pioneer church leaders: Father Ketcham and Bishop Meerschaert. Now some seventy years old, Mrs. Freeman recalls that once as a small child she objected angrily to being introduced to the Bishop as "Matt Splitlog's granddaughter."

"My name is Blanche Evans," she insisted staunchly. Several of the Splitlog grandchildren attended the school, as did the late John Jordan of Cherokee, Cherokee Nation. Jordan, a grandnephew of General Stand Watie and a grandson of Col. William Bell of Confederate Army fame, recalled that the Sisters would commend him for his good grades, but deplore his low marks in "deportment."

The Vinita parish has a new church dedicated on June 28, 1952 by the late Bishop Eugene J. McGuinness. The original church is used as a parish hall. At the present writing the academy has an enrollment of 169 which includes boarding students. The principal is Sister M. Stansia.

The Sisters of Divine Providence and their students celebrated the Golden Jubilee of Sacred Heart Academy on October 30, 1953.