

History of St. Joseph Parish, continued

1923 – 2003

The Early Church in Winter Haven



In 1894, Florian Reinhart, A Catholic, visited the Winter Haven area and stayed with Dr. F.W. Inman, whose home would later become the Florence Villa Hotel. The Inman home was located on the shores of Lake Spring on land that is now the Spring Lake Shopping Center. Since many of the early settlers who came to the area stayed at the Inman's home, it became a stopping off place. Consequently, in 1905, Dr. Inman added forty-three rooms to what was becoming a hotel. He sold it the next year with 695 acres to the Florence Villa Hotel Company who would enlarge it further. (The park just north of St. Joseph is named for the Inmans, and contains their graves.)

The next year, Reinhart returned with his wife to a small home he built on Lake Hartridge. He purchased all the land between Lake Hartridge and Lake Mirror. This land was then leased for citrus nursery use. The first Mass in the winter Haven area was celebrated in the Reinhardt's home by Father Ybarrechevea S.J. Whenever a Jesuit priest could get to the area, a Mass was celebrated in the home of either the Reinhardt's or the Hibbse's, other early Catholic settlers.

The Reinhardt's daughter, Mrs. Frank Senn, and her family soon moved to the area to improve her health. Her son, Ed Senn, recalls creating an altar for Mass by putting planks over two sawhorses and covering the lumber with a clean sheet. These celebrations were also attended by the servants, mostly African American, who worked in the Florence Villa Hotel. One of the waitresses, who noticed the worn

condition of Father Ybarrechevea's shoes, gave him the money to have them soled. Whether the Bannons attended these Masses is not known, though presumably they did. Mass was celebrated on alternate Sundays in Winter Haven and Bartow. When the Mass was held in Bartow, the Winter Haven Catholics would travel by train to Bartow. The train, named Peggy, which ran between Lake Alfred and Bartow, passed through what is now Central Park in Winter Haven. At each end of the run, the passengers would load the engine on a turntable to set the engine in place for the return trip.

By 1906, Catholics in Lakeland had built a small wooden church. The Jesuits served both Lakeland and Winter Haven as missions until 1920. An early settler writes of this time in the *Tampa Sunland Tribune*: "The prairies are beautiful, grand and picturesque. They extend over many townships, almost perfectly level, without a tree or shrub save the saw palmetto. In some portions they are interspread with groves of timber, cabbage palmetto and live oak hammocks. These prairies, covered with green grass as far as the eye can reach and dotted over with herds of cattle, afford a pleasing sight. During a ride of a summer evening, after a gentle, refreshing shower, we cannot help admiring nature, clothed in her most beautiful garb. The deer, turkey and fowls of the air---all the animal and vegetable kingdoms join in one harmonious jubilee of praise to their Creator. How grateful man should be in the enjoyment of such inestimable blessings."

Winter Haven area Catholics in 1910 petitioned Bishop Michael J. Curley of St. Augustine asking for a regular Sunday Mass to be celebrated here. (St. Augustine was, for many years, the only diocese for this vast area). In 1912 again, 25 Catholics signed a similar petition. Represented in signing were members of the following families: Reinhart, Pearson, Senn, Keefe, Duggan, Liesegang, Hockinsmith, Schwedland, Bassing and Smith. On March 27 in 1913 in response to this petition, Fr. Alfred Latiolas S.J., a

Jesuit from Tampa, offered Mass in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pearson. From that time on, Sunday Mass was offered more regularly, usually by Fr. Latiolas, in the homes of one or the other of the early



settlers. Sometimes the living room of the Keefe hotel was the site for Mass, and later the Bonita Theatre building was used. Fr. Latiolas has been called “much traveled, tangibly fruitful in his pastoral care, resourceful, self-sacrificial [and] shrewd.”

Fr. Latiolas, SSJ