

Introduction



Since a church exists not in a vacuum but in a particular area, this history makes reference to events in Winter Haven and the surrounding area which are not always a direct part of the history of St. Joseph Church, but it is hoped, these details may help the reader better appreciate the strength and courage of the early Catholics who were responsible for the foundation of the parish.

When did the history of St. Joseph parish begin? Was it in 1881 when the first Catholic moved to this area? Or was it in 1912 when 25 Catholic settlers signed a petition to the bishop for a regular Sunday Mass to be offered in Winter Haven, some 91 years ago? Or was it a year later in 1913 when a Sunday Mass was said more regularly in the homes of these Catholics? Or was it in 1914 when a church was purchased from the Methodists and the first mass was celebrated on Thanksgiving Day? By 1920 the church was still a mission church. It was not until 1923 that St. Joseph was assigned a resident priest.

Perhaps the answer to the basic question is not really important. For many years, Catholics in Winter Haven have banded together as a community and a church. He said “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (Jn 15:5) The branches at St. Joseph have been exceedingly fruitful.

It has been almost 30 years since a history of St. Joseph was written, so Fr. Bluett requested a brief history be prepared. Consequently, this booklet is an attempt to record the priests, sisters, and laity who have made St. Joseph Church a special church for more than 80 years. Many more people than are mentioned here have contributed to the spiritual and physical growth of the parish.

This present work exists because of the many parishioners who have contributed information, corrected copy and shared pictures and resources. Most notable are Kathleen Wiles, Lena Gutierrez, and Sara Ellen McNamee, who have devoted long hours to bring this history to completion.