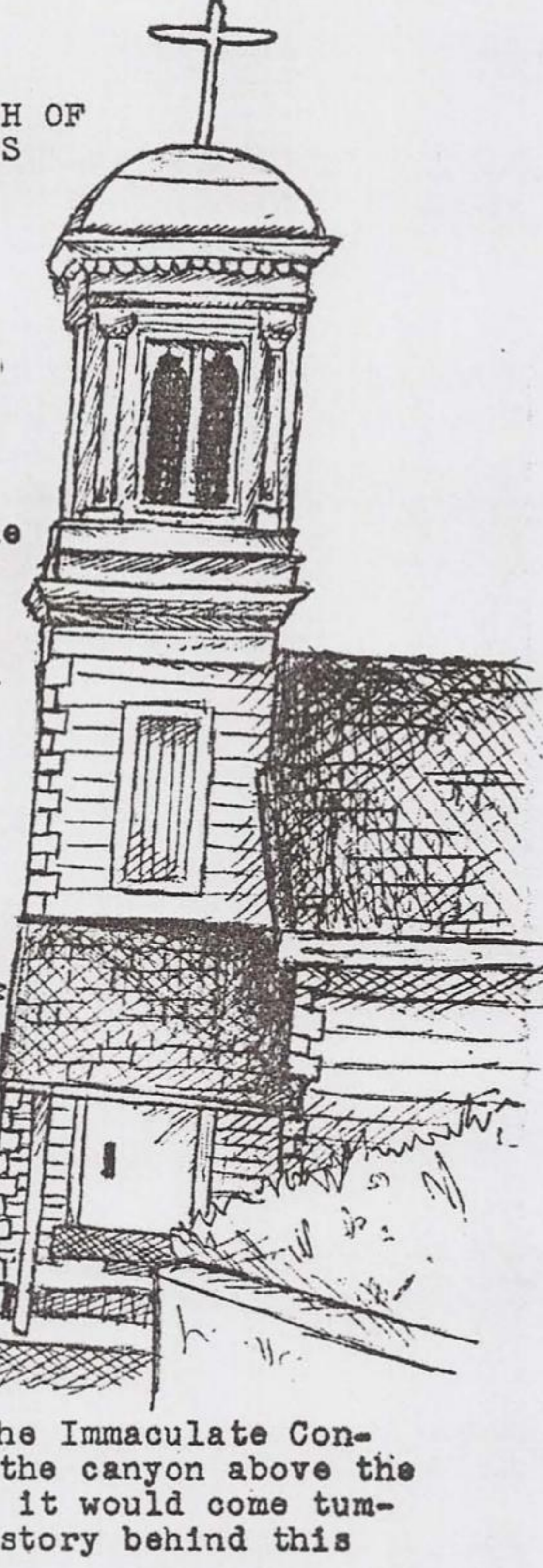


A HISTORY OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND OF ITS PASTORS IN DOWNIEVILLE, CALIFORNIA

High in the mountains of Sierra County, nestled in a narrow and steep canyon through which the North Fork of the Yuba River flows, is the quaint old mining town of Downieville, which is the county seat of Sierra County, California. Just how many millions of dollars worth of gold was taken out of near-by diggings during the boom days is hard to say, but today practically no mining is done in the area, and fabulous strikes remain only in the memories of the few old timers that are left. As one drives through the narrow streets, he would never suspect that this small town with a population of some two hundred people was once inhabited by over five thousand people during the gold rush days. It has been estimated that many thousands more lived in nearby diggings.



During the course of years, there have been many changes in Downieville, but there are still several buildings that date back to the very early days of the town. On the main street the visitor will see a small stone building which was built in 1852. The fact that it was built of stone is the reason that it was able to survive the two great fires which the town suffered in 1852 and 1858. In 1932 the Native Sons and Daughters burned this building into a museum. Another old building is the old Methodist Church which dates back to 1853. However, the building to which we will direct our attention is the old Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception. It is perched on the north side of the canyon above the town, and one would expect that at any moment it would come tumbling down the steep hill side. What is the story behind this little church and its pastors?

In 1849 a party led by Goodyear and Anderson found their way to a point near the present town of Downieville, and today there is a small town a few miles south of Downieville called Goodyears Bar. (See Vol. 1, No.1, April 25, 1969 for a detailed history of Miles Goodyear and the town of Goodyears Bar.) But it took a

determined man named to blaze a trail into high mountains, deep ests. The party was protesting. The coverly brought the April, 1850, the town habited by more than five thousand people. On April 16, 1852, the town was made the County Seat of the newly organized Sierra County. It was at this time that missionaries began to appear on the scene. As yet there was no wagon road, so in the summer of that year a certain Father Acker made his way in on a mule. There are no records of what he did, but in 1853, Father Shanahan came up from Nevada City where he was pastor, with the intention of organizing the Church in Downieville.



Downie, and his party, this rugged country of canyons and dense for-very successful in its word of the new dis-usual stampede, and by of Downieville was in-

The town had been destroyed by a fire on February 19, 1852, Of course the inhabitants were very busy at the time rebuilding homes, business places, etc., but Father Shanahan managed to get a committee together which promised to do what they could about building a church. Soon a piece of land was purchased. It was bought from the Baptists. Their church had been destroyed in the late fire, and they had no intention of rebuilding. It is not known when the building was started, and if one examines the building closely, it appears to have been added on to several different times.

Father Peter Deyaert, who replaced the aging Father Shanahan on December 19, 1853, made regular visits to Downieville from Nevada City until March 1855. Father Thomas Dalton took over the mining camps then and replaced Father Deyaert at Nevada City on May 7th of that same year. Father Dalton (1826-1891) was an extremely vigorous man and toured over many miles of the mining country. He built churches at many of the mining camps, including one at St. Louis and one at Goodyear's Bar in Sierra County, and several in Nevada and Placer counties. Tradition has it that he completed the building of the Church at Downieville in 1855.

In 1856 Downieville got its first pastor who was to remain there any length of time. He was Father Cornelius Delahunty. He established residence in Downieville and visited the mining camps in Sierra and Plumas Counties. The Church in Downieville narrowly escaped being destroyed by a New Years Day fire in 1858; this fire destroyed a large part of the business district.

In 1860 Sierra County became part of a Vicariate Apostolic with its seat at Marysville, and with Eugene O'Connell as its first Bishop. Father Delahunty was called to Virginia City,

Nevada, in October 1861, one to replace him. given the task of taking Nevada City. Father assistant,wished to and was finally able May of 1862, when in Marysville. But, Francisco, and from return.



and the new Bishop had no Father Dalton was again care of the mining area from Bernard Morris, the Bishop's have the Downieville parish, to establish himself there in several new priests arrived in 1861 he departed for San there to Ireland, never to

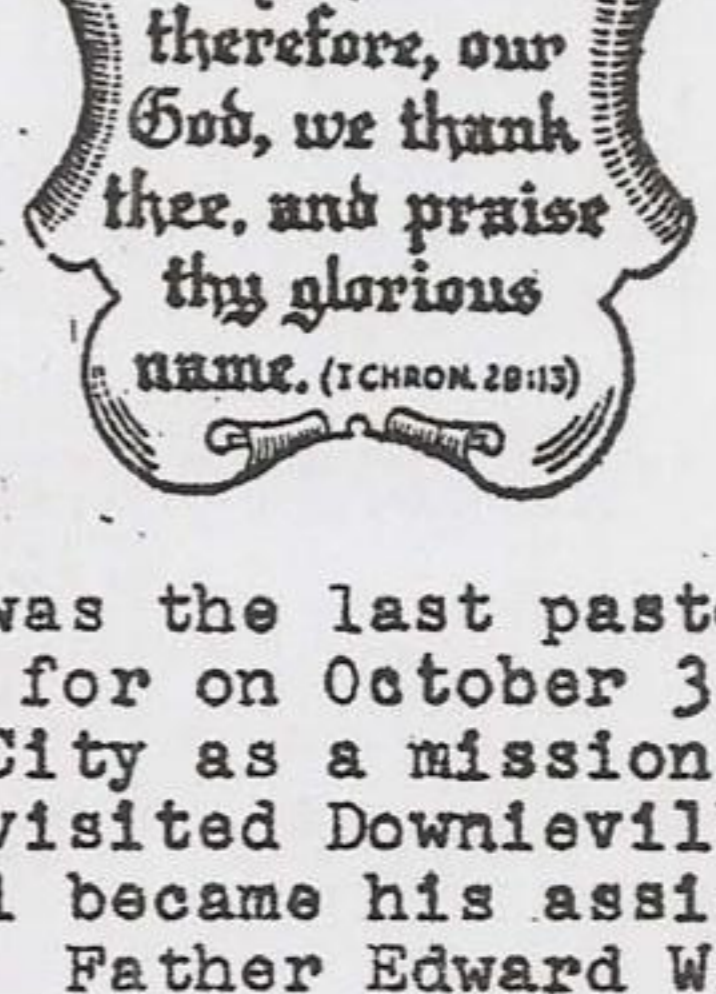
The next pastor to come to Downieville was Father Charles Lynch. He had come from Ireland in 1864, at the request of Father Dalton, who was visiting Ireland at the time, recruiting priests and sisters for the Bishop. He was a robust young man of twenty three, but the combination of hard, long traveling and the cold winters broke down his health. In 1869, Fathers Edward Kelly and James Callan from Marysville, and Father Lawrence Kennedy from Grass Valley had to assist him. Father William Maloney finally had to take his place temporarily while he went to the hospital. Father Lynch came back in 1870 and remained until 1877, at which time he was sent to Eureka. This ended the pastorate of one of the most beloved priests ever stationed at Downieville. He was a man who truly loved and understood the rough and ready miners.

The population in Downieville had dropped to around fifteen hundred by this time. The mining boom was over for the most part, and the whole mining area began a slow decline, hastened by the passing of a law which prohibited hydraulic and placer mining. These types of mining were cutting deep scars into the terrain, scars which can still be seen today, and they were clogging the rivers with silt.

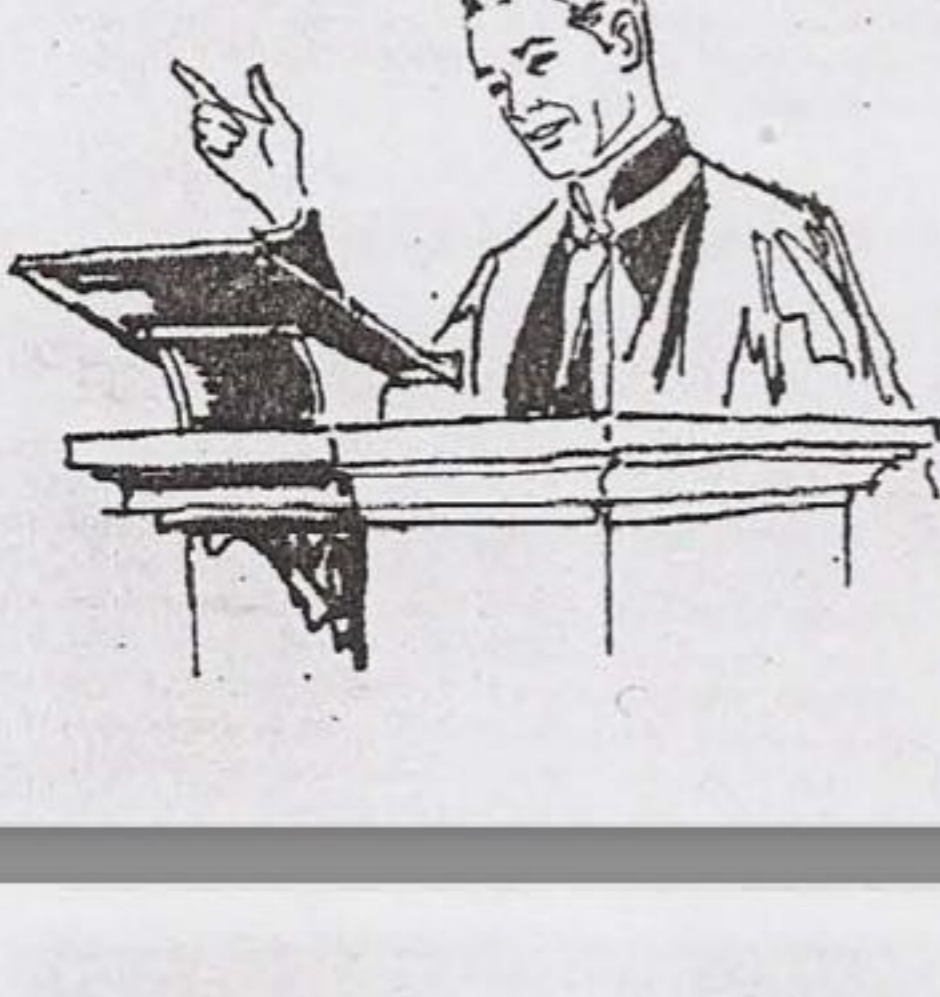
Downieville continued to have a resident pastor most of the time until 1928. In May of 1877 Father G. Meiler came and remained only until August of that year. Father T. Sheridan came for a short time in January 1878, when Father Andrew O'Donald took over until August 1879. Father P. Kirley made his stay a little longer. He stayed until November 1882. Father M. Dill was the pastor until July 1884. It was in this year that Father Patrick J. Monogue became the Bishop of Grass Valley. Later, in 1886, the See was moved to Sacramento and the Diocese of Sacramento was established. Father J. Claire came in August 1884, and remained for almost ten years, departing in July 1893. Father Patrick J. O'Kane was the pastor of this now declined mining town



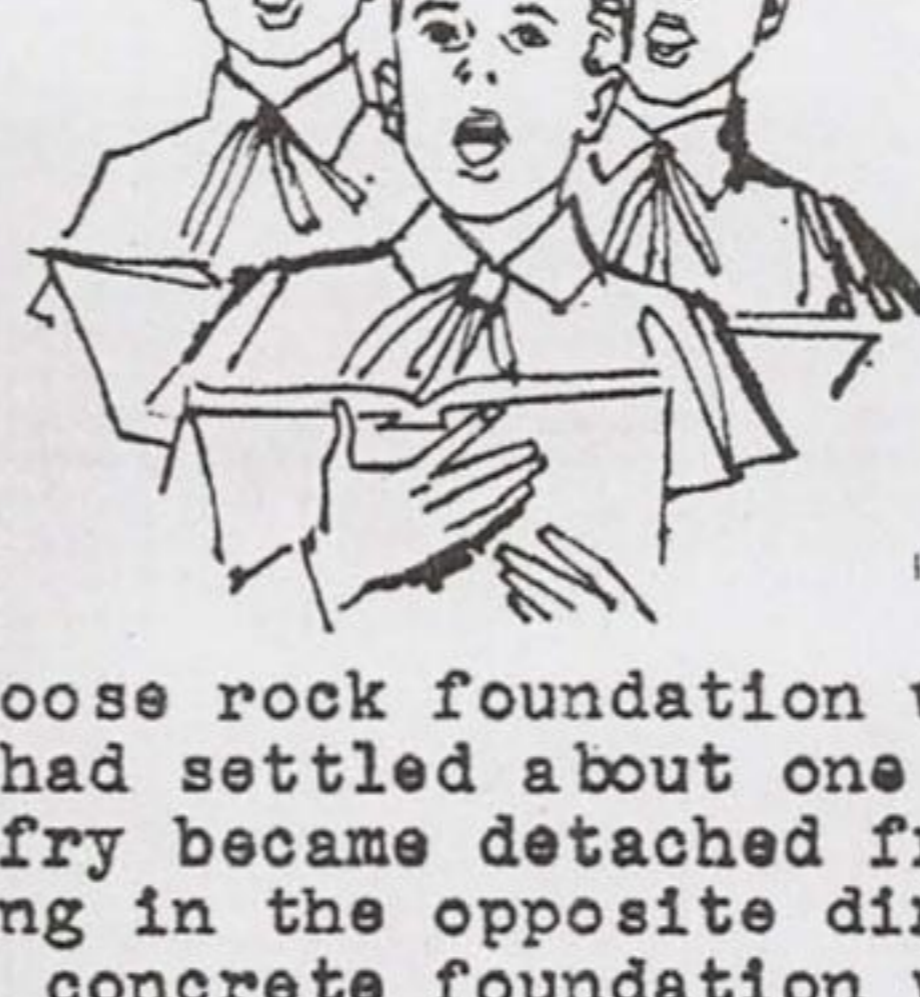
until the fall of 1897, at which time Fr. John Dermity took over until the fall of 1903. In the fall of 1903 Father G. Laf-ran arrived and remained for four years. In 1907 Father Patrick O'Reilly arrived. He was a man who was to spend many years working in the gold country. Father James Flanagan came in 1911 and stayed until 1915 at which time Father John McGarry arrived on Christmas Day and remained until 1926. The next pastor, Father William J. Donavan was the last pastor that Downieville was to have for some time, for on October 3, 1928, the parish was again turned over to Nevada City as a mission, where Father Patrick O'Reilly was now pastor. He visited Downieville occasionally until 1939, when Father Michael became his assistant, and as such, served the Downieville parish. Father Edward Williams, another assistant, also attended Downieville during 1940. Father James Enright was made administrator in September of that year and served as such until Easter Sunday, April 5, 1942. He had a stroke while saying Mass that morning, and was never well after that, and died on August 5, 1947.



In 1942, Father Virgil Gabrielli took over as an assistant, and on July 8, 1948, he was made pastor of the reestablished Downieville parish. New boundaries were established at this time. The North San Juan ridge country was now to be included. North San Juan, Camptonville, Cherokee, Challenge, and Birchville are all within the area of the Downieville parish. The territory around Johnsville and La Porte was excluded because there were practically no people living in that area. Living quarters were maintained in both Downieville and North San Juan. Father Gabrielli certainly followed in the foot steps of some of his early predecessors. He built St. Anthony's Church in Challenge, which was dedicated on September 28, 1949. He also built St. Francis Church in Camptonville, which was dedicated on December 9, 1949. He finished the church in North San Juan, the Church of St. John Bosco, which was dedicated on June 29, 1947. Restoration work was done on the old St. Patrick's Church at Forrest City. No work that amounted to anything had been done on the church in Downieville for many years. In 1944 Father Gabrielli decided to make some changes and repairs on the interior. The confessional was moved from the front near the altar rail to the back near the door. The old wood burning stove which was up in front was removed and a new gas heater was installed over the door in the rear. Within the sanctuary new green carpeting was put down, and two small side altars were erected. The Church had no sacristy, but a door near the gospel side of the altar opened into



the living room of the in the rear. This door new one was put in the opens into what was at bedrooms and is now one



priest's quarters was closed, and a epistle side. It one time two small large sacristy.

In the fall of 1950 done on the church. The its years, and its loose rock foundation was in danger of giving away. The building had settled about one half foot on the down hill side. The belfry became detached from the main part of the church and was listing in the opposite direction. The Building was blocked up and a concrete foundation was poured under it. The belfry was secured to the main part of the building with heavy bolts. New siding was placed on the outside of the building, and the belfry was roofed with aluminum. The old wooden cross was replaced with a stainless steel one. For the most part, the lines of the church were kept the same, but there were several definite changes. Old St. Patrick's Church in Grass Valley was being torn down and a new church was being built. There were three large stained glass windows that were not going to be reused. Father Patrick O'Reilly, pastor at Grass Valley and one time pastor at Downieville, was more than happy to give the windows to Father Gabrielli. Nine windows were cut from the three large ones. Before the church had four windows on each side of the main part of the church; now it has only three on each side. Two new small windows were put in the sanctuary. The other major change was the position of the front door. Formerly it was on the left side of the belfry, facing the town. It was moved to the right side (opposite from where it was) to eliminate the stairs which were formerly necessary.

Notes on the Author: David Lonergan was born in Arizona and moved to Loyalton, California, while in the fifth grade. He completed both elementary and high school in Loyalton. After a three year tour of duty in the U.S. Army, he attended and graduated from the University of San Francisco. He presently works for the State of California and resides in Los Angeles.



A HISTORY OF ALL THE POST OFFICES THAT HAVE EXISTED OR STILL EXIST IN SIERRA COUNTY!

The information concerning post offices in Sierra County is taken from a more inclusive study of post offices in the Mother Lode area done by Mrs. Gladys M. Skinner.

