

The Founding of St. Louis Catholic Church: A Historical View of the Early Years

When Father Louis Hagus said the first Mass for St. Louis Parish on July 11, 1911, the city of Englewood, the State of Colorado and even the world was a much different place. The U.S. Highway system had yet to exist, Broadway and the surrounding streets were still unpaved and there were no traffic lights to be found anywhere in the U.S. The city of Denver was founded just 53 years earlier and Colorado had only been a state for 35 years. The anguish and suffering of a World War had yet to be experienced and it was a simpler time for America, especially in the newly settled West.

Construction of the church itself didn't begin until June 1912, so the first Mass for the parish was held in Biven's Hall, a loud and boisterous dance hall located on the northwest corner of Broadway and Cornell Avenue. As they would do for later masses held there, the women of the parish did their best to clean up so that reminders of the Saturday night dances were out of sight before churchgoers arrived Sunday morning. Unfortunately, the pungent odor of cigars and whiskey clung to the hall despite the ladies best efforts, so the newly formed parish of about 70 families moved to the more sedate setting of Billy Broad's Undertaking Parlor at 3535 South Broadway. It was said that often "the remains were present" during Mass at the funeral parlor.

The area surrounding our present day church was originally part of the old Orchard Place settlement and was named Englewood, which means "wooded nook" when a few early settlements officially incorporated as a city in 1903. Englewood settled down to some degree after becoming a city, however it was still a wild and rowdy place when Father Hagus was sent by Bishop Nicholas C. Matz to form a new parish in an area home to raucous dancing, drinking and gambling halls as well as dog races and cockfights. Shootings and knife fights in the streets were not uncommon and soldiers from nearby Fort Logan were known to frequent the many local roadhouses while "painting the town."

A popular beer garden known as Fiske Gardens was once located in the 3400 block of South Broadway near the corner of Girard Avenue, only blocks from where St. Louis Catholic Church would later be built. In 1906, the old Fiske Gardens was turned into the famous Tuileries Amusement Park.

The Tuileries grounds included apple orchards, a lake and popular amusements including a roller-rink, a Japanese Tea Garden, a ballpark and two motorcycle tracks. There was also a dance pavillion and theater featuring Vaudeville shows. The Tuileries was well known for their Sunday afternoon balloon ascensions and it was quite an attraction to see Jennie Hall lift off and then parachute back down. Jennie would later become one of the oldest members of the St. Louis Parish.

Despite the popularity of the Tuileries, it shut down in 1912, the same year the cornerstone for the new St. Louis Church was laid. Five years later the National Film Company purchased the property and used the dance floor as a movie studio. The once flourishing park was the perfect place to film movies and with Englewood being centrally located and serviced by several railroads, it was easy to deliver film shipments.



Around the time that St. Louis Parish was founded in 1911, electric streetcars made their debut. Until then, the horse car was a big part of everyday life for residents in Englewood. The horse car was referred to as the "Gravity and Bronco Railroad" since it was the only gravity powered streetcar to be found anywhere at the time. The horse pulled the car up the steep one mile long hill on Broadway between Hampden and Quincy. At the top of the hill, the horse was loaded onto the rear platform and then the driver gave the car a push, sending the horse car and its passengers (including the horse) coasting back down the hill to Hampden.

History (cont)

Father Hagus said Mass on Sundays and then spent most of his time during the week raising money to build a church along with several women who were appointed to canvass the parish for funds. Card parties and socials were held at Bivens Hall as well as picnics at the nearby Tuilleries to help in fundraising efforts. The cornerstone for the new church was laid on June 23, 1912 and the following year on October 5, 1913 Bishop Matz dedicated the new \$10,000 church.



Snow drifts in the city reached 20 feet and businesses and transportation were shut down for days. Thousands of people could not make it home and took refuge in auditoriums and public schools. Unlike today with the proliferation of cell phones and computers, communications ground to a halt and many could not notify family of their whereabouts. The photo at right shows men clearing snow from the street car line on Broadway in Englewood.

Only 2 months later, much of the state was paralyzed by the Great Blizzard of 1913 which left over 45 inches of snow in Denver and a whopping 7 feet just 45 miles to the west in Georgetown. The construction of St. Louis Church proved to be solid and withstood its first test of many against Mother Nature as many roofs collapsed under the weight of snow and even entire buildings were brought down in some areas of town.



In 1917, America entered World War I and many Coloradans including St. Louis parishioners volunteered to serve. By 1919, the Treaty of Versailles officially ended the War and America became the most highly industrialized country in the world. Mass production of cars changed the local landscape in Englewood and all over the world, people were listening to American jazz, wearing our fashions and dancing our 1920's dance crazes. Englewood saw major progress during the 1920s and a Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1921.

The 1920s was an era of great economic growth and widespread prosperity. It was a time when new technologies especially automobiles, moving pictures and radio brought a new level of modernization to the masses. Many Americans were enjoying the "good life" associated with the Roaring Twenties, but for the 126,000 Catholics in Colorado, the early 1920s brought a different type of hardship delivered by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Many think of the KKK as a Southern institution targeting only blacks, but the Colorado KKK was second in power in terms of per-capita membership only to Indiana. By 1924, there was an estimated 17,000 members in Denver and 25,000 statewide. Secret meetings were held at the Brown Palace Hotel and soon Catholics would become the KKK's "Public Enemy #1" in Colorado. In fact, the KKK had representation in both major parties in Colorado with Klan members elected as Governor and U.S. Senator. Even Denver Mayor Ben Stapleton was a KKK member and appointed many Klansmen to government positions including Chief of Police. Crosses were burned in the middle of South Broadway with men in sheets and white spiked hoods marching and shouting their hatred for blacks, Jews and Catholics. In Englewood, this persecution was targeted mainly at the Mayor of the city who was Jewish along with the growing number of Catholics including those within the St. Louis Parish. Catholic businesses were often boycotted and one popular Denver restaurant posted a sign saying "Fish served every day - except Friday" as an affront to those of the Catholic faith. By 1926, the KKK nightmare in Colorado was largely over, bringing a sigh of relief to many.

The first 15 years of the parish saw both great joy and accomplishment as well as strife and difficulty. As our church celebrates 100 years, it is evident that the people of St. Louis have forged on through many ups and downs throughout history to build a strong community that is now poised and ready to enter into the next 100 years.

Written by Barb Rigel

Coming Next: The Church and its Architectural History