

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

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## THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE OF RENO

### Mining–Boom Catholicism

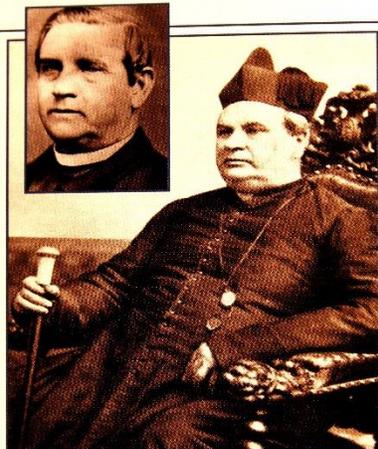
1858 – 1931

By Father Steven M. Avella

In preparation for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Reno, Bishop Phillip F. Straling, Bishop of Reno, asked Father Steven Avella to write the history of the Diocese of Reno. What follows is the first chapter of that diocesan history in the book entitled: *“That All May Be One” A celebration of the History of the Church in Northern Nevada*, written by Father Avella.

*The story begins long before Rome created the Diocese of Reno* in March 1931. The evolution of Catholicism in Nevada is linked to the erratic patterns of population growth on the Great Basin frontier. First inhabited by native peoples who practiced their own religious rituals, Nevada was the land white settlers—from the Spanish through the Americans—only passed through on their way to somewhere else (for example, forty-niners en route to the gold fields of northern California). Even the doughty Mormons, who had carved a garden out of the Utah salt flats, had come to the future site of Las Vegas and abandoned it.

With the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1858, thousands of miners descended on the eastern Sierras. Virginia City, the hub of the early mining frontier, quickly grew to 15,000 and rocketed to nearly 20,000 during the days of the “Big Bonanza” in the early 1870’s. Nearby Gold Hill also benefited from the Comstock rush. Carson City became the headquarters for a territorial government (1861). In 1864, Congress waived the 60,000-person population requirement for statehood and hastily admitted Nevada to the Union. Smaller strikes in the central Nevada towns of Austin (1862), Hamilton (1866), Belmont (1867), Eureka and Pioche (1870) created pockets of settlement all over the state.

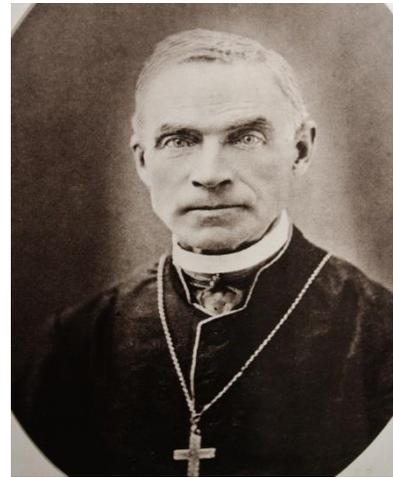


*Father Joseph Gallagher was sent to Nevada by Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany in 1858. His brother Hugh built the first church in Virginia City in 1860.*  
*(Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco)*

American Catholicism followed the mining frontier in Nevada as it had in California. After the end of Mexican rule, most of the state of Nevada fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Diocese of Monterey (1850-53) and then San Francisco (1883-60) with a small portion of its southern tip remaining under the jurisdiction of the Vicariate Apostolic of New Mexico (1850) and then the Diocese of Monterey/Los Angeles (1860-90). Since the northern part of the territory attracted the first

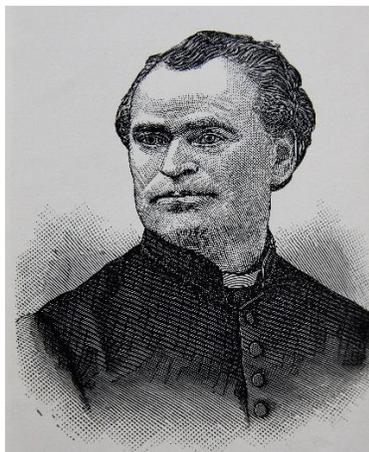
sizeable population, it was San Francisco's first bishop, Dominican Joseph Sadoc Alemany, who sent Father Joseph Gallagher into Nevada in 1858. Like other missionaries, Gallagher rode the circuit providing ministry to scattered Catholics and taking notes for further development. In 1860, Gallagher's brother Hugh appeared in Nevada and actually established Catholic communities in Carson City, and also in the mining district of the Washoe at Genoa and Virginia City.

In 1860 further ecclesiastical subdivisions handed over the care of Nevada north of the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel to Bishop Eugene O'Connell, former dean of All Hallows Seminary in Ireland, a training center for missionaries. O'Connell first headed a vicariate headquartered at Marysville, California. In 1868, Rome created a new diocese at the mining town of Grass Valley, California, and O'Connell became its residential bishop. At that point, O'Connell had jurisdiction for Nevada and California north of the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel (this line runs through the southern shore of Lake Tahoe). San Francisco and Monterey/Los Angeles retained authority south of that line.



**Bishop Eugene O'Connell**

At O'Connell's direction, but with considerable lay initiative, three kinds of ecclesiastical establishments were created in Nevada. The first was a series of churches with permanent facilities and residential pastors. O'Connell recruited priests from Ireland (some of them, his former students from All Hallows) to serve in these locations. Where population density or resources were limited, O'Connell established missions, which were buildings tended occasionally by traveling clergy. The third kind of Catholic outpost was more transient and known as stations, that is, local homes, taverns, or public houses borrowed for the occasional sacramental celebration. The unpredictability of the mining economy dictated the status of church establishments. Sometimes booms would bring so many people to an area that a mission would become a parish, while at other times, declining populations reversed the status of a parish to a mission. Sometimes, a church, a mission, or a station would go out of existence altogether. Virginia City provides one example of these boom and bust dynamics.



**Father Patrick Manogue**

In 1862, O'Connell dispatched newly ordained, Irish-born Father Patrick Manogue to take over St. Mary's in the Mountains (depicted in the cathedral window) in Virginia City and its attendant missions. Boyed by the city's rising population and affluence, the young priest took advantage of the concentrations of people and wealth to build and improve several churches, a school, orphanages for boys and girls, and a hospital. By the time the mining boom petered out in the 1880s, Manogue had moved on to become bishop of the northern California diocese of Grass Valley and later Sacramento. The Virginia City church became a mission of Reno in 1922. The schools and orphanages that Mano-

gue founded disappeared by 1897. In 1935, the church had its residential pastor restored.

The pattern reflected in the Virginia City story is more or less true of other mining-boom communities. Catholic churches rose and fell, and sometimes rose again in places like Austin Eureka, Hamilton, Pioche, and elsewhere. Later booms in the twentieth century in Tonopah and Ely crated the economic stability for churches to sustain themselves.

The demonetization of silver in 1873 dealt the state a blow from which it barely recovered. Mining rushes virtually ceased, and the small industries and businesses dependent on them faltered. By 1890, the state's population plummeted from 62,000 to 42,000. Those who remained eked out an existence in the declining mines; others engaged in ranching and agriculture where the land and climate could sustain it (e.g., Basque sheep-herders). However, once the earth could give no more, people simply

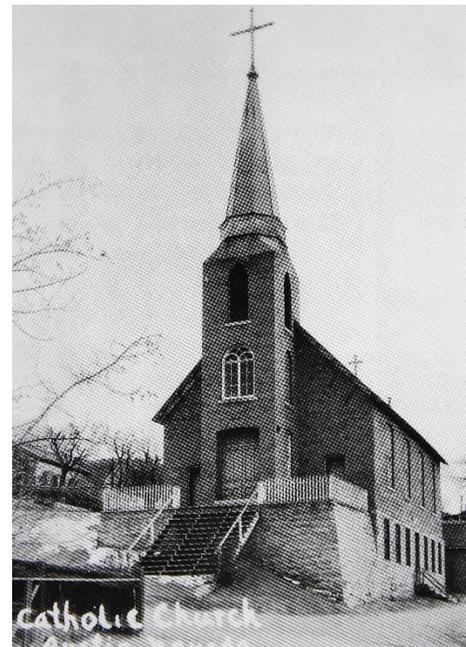
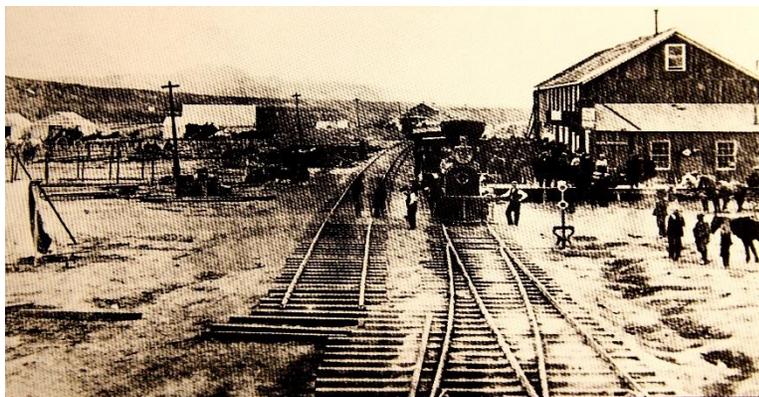


Photo from Nevada Historical Society

#### **St Augustine Church, Austin, Nevada**

walked away—leaving hollow mine shafts, rusting equipment, and empty schools, theaters, stores, saloons, and churches.

The end of the mining frontier dovetailed with a redrawing of ecclesiastical jurisdictions. Two priests who had formerly served in different parts of Nevada were appointed bishops in California and Utah respectively and soon had oversight over their former domains. In 1886, Patrick Manogue relocated his California diocese of Grass Valley to Sacramento. In 1887, Bishop Lawrence Scanlan, who had founded the Catholic parish in Pioche, became the head of a new vicariate apostolic headquartered in Salt Lake City. In 1891 this vicariate was elevated to the status of a diocese. Until the creation of the Diocese of Reno, these two centers were responsible for Catholic life in Nevada. Sacramento exercised jurisdiction over the northern and western parts of Nevada: Humboldt, Washoe, Storey, Ormsby, Douglas, Churchill, Lyon, Mineral, Esmeralda, and Pershing counties; Salt Lake claimed the eastern and southern counties of Elko, Lander, Eureka, White Pine, Nye, Lincoln and in 1909 Clark.



#### **Railroad Stop, Elko, Nevada**

**When the Central Pacific railroad moved into Nevada in the 1860s it opened up new population centers and locations for church growth. Priests traveling along the rail-lines visited scattered families and communities. Elko, Nevada did not have a permanent parish until 1918, but Catholic efforts in the area stretched back to the 1870s.**

(Photo from Nevada Historical Society)

Even before the decline of mining, the railroad had already begun to reshape Nevada's economy and demographics. Indeed, as historian James Hulse has noted, "Contemporary Nevada owes more to its railroads than it does to its mines." Chugging over the Sierra Nevada mountains from California, the Central Pacific ran through the heart of the state, creating a series of railroad towns including Reno, Sparks, Winnemucca, Lovelock, and Elko. These small communities in turn became the regional hubs for continuing mining operations and the transshipment centers for scattered agricultural enterprises. Other lines linked Nevada with Los Angeles and Salt Lake City and created new communities in eastern Nevada like Las Vegas and Caliente.

State population, and hence the bulk of the Catholic presence, shifted from Virginia City to Reno. Founded in 1808, Reno had 3,500 residents by 1890. It had a well-watered location along the Truckee River, but also a strategic position along the Central Pacific line. This meant stable local industries, professional life and a steady flow of visitors (and a need for hotels and entertainment). With the creation of a stable city government, Reno soon loomed large as a social, intellectual, and cultural center of Nevada, even dwarfing the state capital of Carson City. The University of Nevada was transferred from Elko to Reno in 1886, and an array of churches and social welfare institutions flourished there as well. Various ethnic groups, many of whom had come during the heyday of the mining era also moved to town.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

### **Father Thomas Tubman**

Reno's new prominence was advanced during the vigorous pastorate of Father Thomas Tubman who was transferred from Virginia City in 1904. Reno's first parish, St. Mary's, had been founded in 1871. One property at Second and Chestnut (Arlington) Tubman built another church in 1905, which he renamed for his patron, St. Thomas Aquinas. When this church burned, he built another, the present Reno cathedral, which was completed in 1910. Its twin towers and elegant design made it a symbol of the growing presence and prominence of Catholics in Reno.

Tubman was the leading Catholic figure in Reno for many years. Among his confidants were city and state officials and local businessmen. Although technically under the control of the bishop of Sacramento, Tubman acted autonomously at times. For example, when he received complaints from the apostolic delegate that he was not tending to the city's Italians or Germans, Tubman steadfastly refused to create separate churches for these two prominent ethnic groups. For his own purposes, he also kept at length the city's other Catholic institution, Mount St. Mary's Academy. This boarding school had been founded in 1879 by a group of Dominican Sisters from Kentucky led by Mother Dolores O'Neale. The school flourished until 1892 when the general decline of Nevada's population and its accumulated debts forced it to be shuttered. Mother Dolores retired in defeat, but two of her sisters attempted to re-start the school. The school floundered even though the small community of sisters grew, largely with recruits from Ireland. In 1908, the sisters founded St. Mary's Hospital, and in 1912 the community joined itself to the

San Rafael Dominicans. The hospital soon grew and expanded and became an important part of Reno's urban development.

Tubman died soon after the new diocese was created in 1931. While his loss was lamented, it was no doubt fortuitous for the newly appointed bishop, who might have found the popular and respected Tubman a rival to his authority.

### CREATING A NEW DIOCESE

No doubt many clerics and lay people hoped for a creation of a diocese based in Nevada. As early as 1905, press accounts in the *Nevada State Journal* suggested that the new diocese at Reno was imminent. The idea of a diocese in Nevada was also bandied about by the bishops of the region. A May 1915 letter to Apostolic Delegate Diomedo Falconio from Archbishop James J. Keane of the Dubuque, a former bishop of Cheyenne, suggested:

*I am persuaded that Nevada ought to have a bishop perhaps at Reno. This would seem an opportune time to consider the matter when the see of Salt Lake City is vacant. I do not want to appear meddlesome, but I fear that there are few in that country outside the laity who know the actual needs of religion there. Earnest and influential men of the faith spoke to me of the matter long since."*

So why did it take so long? Simply put, Nevada was poor and its Catholic population was small (only 8,000 in 1931) and scattered. It had only a handful of priests willing to work in its sometimes-desolate conditions. For many years it remained under the jurisdiction of dioceses headquartered in California and Utah. Sacramento's bishop, Thomas Grace (1896-1922), a pioneer priest long accustomed to traveling, eventually could no longer make the lengthy trips into the desert to administer confirmation or bless new chapels and churches.



*Lawrence Scanlan (1843-1915), native of County Tipperary, came to America in 1868 after completing his studies at All Hallows Seminary. In 1869 he was sent to Pioche, Nevada where he built a simple frame church, residence, and hospital. In 1887 he was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Utah and in 1891 became the first bishop of Salt Lake. (Seventy-Five Years of Catholic Life in Nevada)*

Bishop Lawrence Scanlan in Salt Lake City, himself a former pastor in Pioche, Nevada, also complained to Apostolic Delegate John Bonzano in 1913, "Traveling through my extensive diocese, which is the largest in the U.S. is very severe on me." Grace's successor, Bishop Patrick Keane (1922-28) also grew weary of the extended sojourns to

Nevada, which came on top of rigorous trips to remote mountainous regions in northern California. When Robert Armstrong of Yakima accepted an appointment as bishop to Sacramento in late 1928, he pressed hard to detach the Nevada portion of his See as quickly as possible. Years later Archbishop John Joseph Mitty of San Francisco recalled, "Bishop Armstrong and I had requested the establishment of a diocese to care for Nevada. It was the only state without a resident bishop, and we were firmly of the opinion that the welfare and prosperity of the church in Nevada warranted the establishment of a new diocese in Nevada with Reno as its See city."

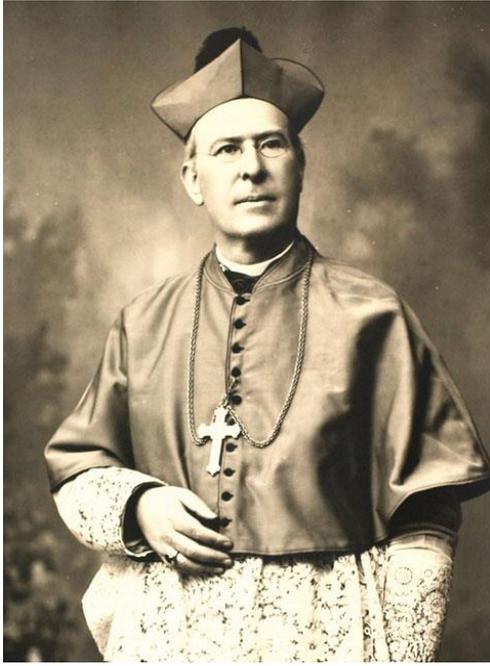


Photo from the Internet

### **Bishop Thomas Gorman**

Rome selected a scholarly newspaper editor, Father Thomas K. Gorman of Los Angeles, to head the diocese. Bishop John Joseph Cantwell of Los Angeles consecrated Gorman in St. Vibiana's Cathedral in Los Angeles on July 22. His co-consecrators were Bishops Mitty of Salt Lake City and Armstrong of Sacramento<sup>9</sup>. Gorman then took the train to Reno, where he was installed in St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral.

An oft-repeated story attributes the immediate origins of the Reno diocese to the desire of Cardinal George William Mundelein of Chicago, who took his sobriquet "first Cardinal of the West" quite seriously. Traveling through Nevada sometime in the 1920s, Mundelein discovered that it was the only state of the union that had no See city. The Chicago cardinal then suggested to someone, perhaps the apostolic delegate, that his wealthy and priest-rich archdiocese might provide priests and financial resources to help the Church in Nevada get off the ground. This may have been all it took. On the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1931 the Holy See formally created the Diocese of Reno. The diocese covered all of Nevada's 17 counties and included 11 parishes, a school, a hospital, and an array of missions and stations, all with varying degrees of vitality.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

### **Cathedral of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Reno**