

# Fires plague early Padre of the Indians

*Editor's note: This is the 16th in a series of articles on famous firsts in El Cajon. The writer James H. Graves, is a local author and a correspondent from the El Cajon Historical Society.*

EL CAJON — Reverend Antonio Dominic Ubach arrived in this country from Spain in 1854, traveled to California in 1860, and began services in an old adobe chapel (now named Chapel of The Immaculate Conception) in Old San Diego in 1866. He was affectionately referred to as the "Last of the Padres."

As part of his varied duties, Father Ubach drove a horse and buggy to El Cajon, then called Knox's Corners, to celebrate Mass. The three hour trip took place monthly to the Green Hall on East Main Street. Thus began the first church services of any denomination in the small community.

When the Green Hall\* burned down, a room at The Corona Hotel was used for services, but this hotel also was destroyed by fire.

In 1903, Father Edmund La Pointe, a young priest from Quebec, Canada, asked his bishop to send him to California. Had it not have been for poor health and a slip of the pen on the application by Bishop Montgomery in California, Father La Pointe may never have arrived in California.

When a travel-weary Father La Pointe arrived in San Francisco and met Bishop Montgomery later in 1903, the latter said, "Father, I notified you that I have no place in my diocese for you."

Father La Pointe produced the Bishop's letter — "I have a place for you." As a result San Diego was sent a young priest, who was gladly received by an overworked Father Ubach.

As time passed, Father La Pointe accompanied Father Ubach on trips to the east county. Indians and white settlers in most of San Diego County were under their spiritual care. The area included El Cajon, Julian, Descanso, Lakeside, Ramona, Palm City, Escondido, and Santa Ysabel. Later in 1903, Father La Pointe became the first resident priest in El Cajon.

## FAMOUS FIRSTS

Previously in 1878-9, El Cajon had built its first real school building after a series of private homes had been utilized. This El Cajon School referred to in its early years as the Big School was located on North Magnolia near Park Avenue. This two-story building had become too small for its continued use as a school and so it was sold to the Catholic Church in 1903. It was named St. Mary's. Masses were held on the ground floor. Father La Pointe lived on the second.

Masses were still celebrated only once a month, both in Spanish and English so as to accommodate the local populace. It remained a small church sufficient to meet the needs of the ranchers, who grew citrus and raisin grapes for the coastal settlers to the west. Father La Pointe also commuted to other chapels on horseback, then by bus, and later by automobile. He was affectionately called "Padre of the

Indians" as various tribe representatives would meet him and take him to conduct Mass on their reservations.

It seems as if fires were a way of life, as this church burned down on Good Friday in 1917. All the church records were destroyed despite the efforts of Father La Pointe to save them. For the next few years, Mass was celebrated in a public hall and old classrooms on Magnolia Avenue as plans for a new building were made for a replacement. These plans included the holding of a large fiesta and barbecue at El Nido near Grossmont. William J. Collard was the chairman of the event. A special train came out from San Diego, Madam Ernestine Schuman-Heink sang favorite songs and arias, and the Indians featured their native games and dances.

Finally, in 1920, on a site located farther north on Magnolia Avenue at Wright Street (now East Park) another church was completed. A parish was officially organized and the new church was again named St. Mary's. The dedication services and ceremonies were held on the first Sunday of November and they "attracted one of the largest congregations ever assembled and one of the most important events in the history of the locality" according to the El Cajon Valley News. These services resulted in paying off the entire indebtedness of the church.

Weekly services were begun for the first time. He remained until his death in 1932 in the old Mercy Hospital in San Diego and he was buried as per his request at Santa Ysabel.

Other priests followed at St. Mary's until 1954, when a decision was made to move to a new location at Ballard and Redwood due to population growth and the resultant need for bigger facilities.

A rectory was built in 1956. St. Mary's was renamed (original church on Magnolia was razed for a shopping center) Holy Trinity as a new church was completed and dedicated in 1959. As a memory to its precious heritage, the cross from St. Mary's was buried under the altar at Holy Trinity.(jhg)