

McCook, Texas and the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church

by Mary Ann Moczygemba Watson and Bernadine Moczygemba Kotzur

In Hidalgo County, a small community named McCook is located at the crossroads of FM 681 and 490 in the lower Rio Grande Valley. McCook was named for a local storekeeper but by the mid-1930s was populated with Silesian Texans, many whose ancestors had originally settled in Panna Maria.

Neighbors in Kosciusko, Urban Kotzur and Frank Prukop had traveled to South Texas in 1925 and purchased land in McCook. Urban moved his family to this new settlement in 1926, and Frank Prukop followed with his wife and children in 1927.



Urban Kotzur and Frances Pawelek
*Photograph courtesy of: granddaughter,
Frances Kotzur, McCook, Texas*



Gertrude Maron and Frank Prukop, Sr. with
daughter, Hedwig. *Photograph courtesy of:
Hedwig Prukop Kotara, McCook, Texas*

Soon others joined the Kozurs and Prukops, and by 1935, a survey indicated that 17 Catholic families were living in the McCook community: L. Doybrava, Isidor Gawlik, Ben Kolodziej, Leon Kotzur, Nick Kotzur, Tom Kotzur, Vincent Kotzur, Mrs. Urban Kotzur (Urban died in 1933), Richard A. Kremel, Adam Lyssy, Joseph Lyssy, Theodore Machac, Alois B. Moczygemba, Alois J. Moczygemba, Isidor Moczygemba, Charles Pollock, and Frank Prukop.

They traveled 25 miles to St. Paul Catholic Church in Mission, Texas, to attend Mass and receive the Sacraments.



Wedding of Evelyn Machac and Albert Kotara, September 21, 1948, pictured in front of St. Paul Catholic Church, Mission, Texas, with their parents.
LR: Felix Kotara and Margaret Richter;
Lillie Kremel and T. F. Machac
Photograph courtesy of: Evelyn Machac Kotara, Frisco, Texas

The planning for a church in McCook officially began on December 18, 1935, with a meeting in the home of Frank Prukop. The purpose of the gathering was to organize and discuss purchase of about four acres of land for a church. Many community socials were held to raise money. Some of the most popular fund raisers were barbecues, dances, and auctioning of box lunches. The tradition was that the young ladies would prepare box lunches, and the young men would “bid” for their choice of box lunch - usually the box prepared by a young maiden whose attention he hoped to gain! These socials not only brought forth ideas and needed revenue but also bonded the parishioners.



Isidore Krnavek, Susanna Kotzur, and Thomas Moczygamba,
making the long journey to Mission
Photograph courtesy of: John P. Martine, Bellville, Texas



A one-room schoolhouse served the community for its many functions. Alice Sekula Keller and Helen Moczygemba Titzman recall their teacher being a redheaded lady named Mrs. Perry. The ever popular dances were held in the little schoolhouse. The school also served as a Sunday meeting place for prayer service and singing of Polish hymns when circumstances kept the families from making the long trek to Mission for Sunday Mass.

The one-room schoolhouse
Photograph courtesy of: Alice Sekula Keller, McAllen, Texas

World War II slowed plans for a church. However, nine years later in September 1948, the members voted to start construction. In January 1950, a name was chosen. With great devotion to our Blessed Mother, Immaculate Conception was the unanimous choice. The contract was awarded with a bid for \$20,926.00 with the ground breaking on March 9, 1950.

Finally the long awaited day, October 15, 1950, arrived. God rewarded the hard work and prayers with a beautiful day. Nearly 3,000 people arrived at the new church for the 10:00 AM Mass and dedication service. The Most Reverend M.S. Garriga, Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi presided. Monsignor Dan Laning, pastor from St. Paul Church in Mission sang the High Mass accompanied by novices from St. Peter's novitiate. Reverend Peter Crulley and Reverend Leo Moczygemba concelebrated the Mass. The young McCook altar boys, wearing their new, bright red cassocks were: Felix and Albert Keller; Frank, Vincent, Gabriel and Albert Kotzur; Fred and Walter Lyssy; Gilbert and James Skloss; and Stanley and Tom Pawelek.



Immaculate Conception Church, 1950
Photograph courtesy of: Sylvia Lyssy Skloss, McCook, Texas

An estimated 4,000 people attended the barbecue and festivities afterward. Representative Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr. was the guest speaker.



October 15, 1950

Photograph courtesy of: Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas



The first Baptism took place immediately. Theresa Rose Skloss, daughter of August and Sylvia Skloss, was baptized. On October 24, 1950, Jerome Moy and Mary Teresa Lyssy were the first to receive the sacrament of Matrimony in the newly dedicated church.

Immaculate Conception Altar, 1950
Photograph courtesy of: Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas

Father Peter Crulley, traveling from the St. Paul Parish in Mission, served as assistant pastor to McCook. In January of 1951, Bishop Garriga announced that the Immaculate Conception Church in McCook would become an independent parish. Monsignor Dan Laning, pastor of the parish in Mission, reported that the bishop was convinced the devoted and

hardworking people of McCook could support their own pastor. Father William Kelley was appointed as the first priest to serve the new Immaculate Conception Church.

Soon afterward, a heating system was installed in the church, and the task of locating a good used organ was assigned to Felix Keller and Alois J. Moczygemba. An organ was purchased for \$75 but needed cleaning and minor repairs, and that chore was also completed by the two men. A choir was established, and Alois J. Moczygemba became the first church organist.

Father Kelley was very popular with his congregation, organizing and participating in youth activities as well as ministering the needs of the parish. He immediately began preparing a group for their First Holy Communion.

This first group was: Virginia Keller, Bernice Moczygemba, Tom Pawelek, Jeanette Prukop, and Tom Trautner. Later that same year, Frank Hilcher, Albert and Virginia Keller, Bernice and Mary Ann Moczygemba, Tom Pawelek, Jeanette Prukop, Geraldine and Rose Mary Sekula, and James Skloss received the Sacrament of Confirmation.



LR: Jeanette Prukop, Virginia Keller, Bernice Moczygemba, Tom Pawelek, and Tom Trautner
Photograph courtesy of: Bernice Moczygemba Dube, Marble Falls, Texas

It was during Father Kelley's tenure that the decision was made to build a rectory. A bell for the church, gifted by Leon and Elizabeth Korzekwa Kotzur, was blessed and installed. Property for a cemetery was donated by August Skloss. The tragic accidental death of Nancy Prukop, 6-year-old daughter of Tillie and Frank Prukop Jr., was the first interment. Generous benefactors for the cemetery altar were Tom Sekula and Lucian Pilarczyk. Land for a parish hall was granted by Henry Goedrich.



Blessing of the Bell

Photograph courtesy of: Hedwig Prukop Kotara, McCook, Texas



At the altar after the Crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Back row, LR: Dorothy and Geraldine Moczygemba, Rosie Lee Machac, Elizabeth Skloss, Gladys Sekula, Mary Ann Moczygemba, Frances Kotzur and Alice Kotara

Front row, LR: Rosemary Sekula, Virginia Keller, Geraldine and Caroline Sekula, Margaret Moczygemba, Virginia Skloss, Cathy Keller, Bernice Moczygemba and Jeanette Prukop

*Photograph courtesy of:
Margaret Moczygemba Gambill, Liberty, Texas*

In 1972, new climate control was added in the church, and beautiful stained glass windows were sponsored by parishioners in memory of loved ones.

Other priests followed Father Kelley: Rev. Stanley Brach, Rev. Sylvester P. Stout, Rev. Vincent Herbert Howley, and Rev. Peter Smith. After Father Smith's retirement, Rev. Michael Annunziato from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Edinburg looked after the parish affairs for a brief period; then Rev. Marti Zuber was assigned to McCook and later followed by Rev. Thomas Kulleck, Rev. Willy Verboom, Rev. Honecimo Figueroa, Rev. Jose Rene Angel and Rev. Joaquin Zermeno. Since March of 2020, the Immaculate Conception Church parish has been served by Father Juan Manuel Salazar.

Father Gregory Labus who was ordained to the priesthood on May 27, 2006, is the great-grandson of two of the earliest settlers of McCook. His parents are Cecilia Kotzur and Emil John Labus. Rev. Gregory Labus is presently the pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Edinburg, Texas.



Immaculate Conception Altar, Christmas 2017
Photograph courtesy of: Sheila Kotzur Wilson,
McCook, Texas

Some traditions are still recalled by the older generation in McCook. Sylvia Skloss recollected that before a wedding took place, the groom came to the bride's home, the couple knelt on the floor, and both sets of parents gave their blessing. Sylvia reminisced about this tradition before her marriage to August Skloss and said that Alois J. Moczygamba played the violin and sang *Serdeczna Matko* at their blessing. The couple with their families and guests would then make the long journey to the St. Paul Church in Mission for the marriage ceremony and return to the bride's home for an all-day reception concluded by a dance. In the earliest days, the dance took place in the one-room schoolhouse.

Though some of those traditions may no longer be practiced, two specific ones are repeated every year: a special service in February to bless the seeds for planting and another in April to celebrate the feast of St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers. The church is closely tied to the needs of the rural farming community. Additionally with the community's devotion to the Blessed Mother, a Coronation Ceremony is held each year in the month of May.



Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary by Nancy Kotzur
Photograph courtesy of: Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas

In the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, McCook was a thriving community with a population of around 300. A larger elementary school at this time existed in McCook, part of the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District, and grades 1 through 6 were taught, with its peak at about 70 students. Joe Perales who was the principal of the school for a time described it as “one of the most beautiful experiences of my life.” He added, “I even learned how to make Polish sausage and picked up a little Polish language.” The school closed in the mid-1980s, and elementary students are also now bussed to Edinburg.

Andrew Prukop, grandson of the original settler, Frank Prukop, recalls, “Many who lived here were related to each other or were longtime friends. Farm life, livestock, hard work, church, riding the school bus [to Edinburg for the older grades, 28 miles away]... sometimes it was pretty tough, but McCook was a very tight-knit community. Church and school were more than functions residents had to attend. They were a social core, gathering places to touch base with friends and neighbors.”



Lyssy Farm, McCook, Texas
*Photograph courtesy of: Chelsea Lyssy,
Edinburg, Texas*



Ben Keller
*Photograph courtesy of: Proxy Keller Prukop,
McCook, Texas*



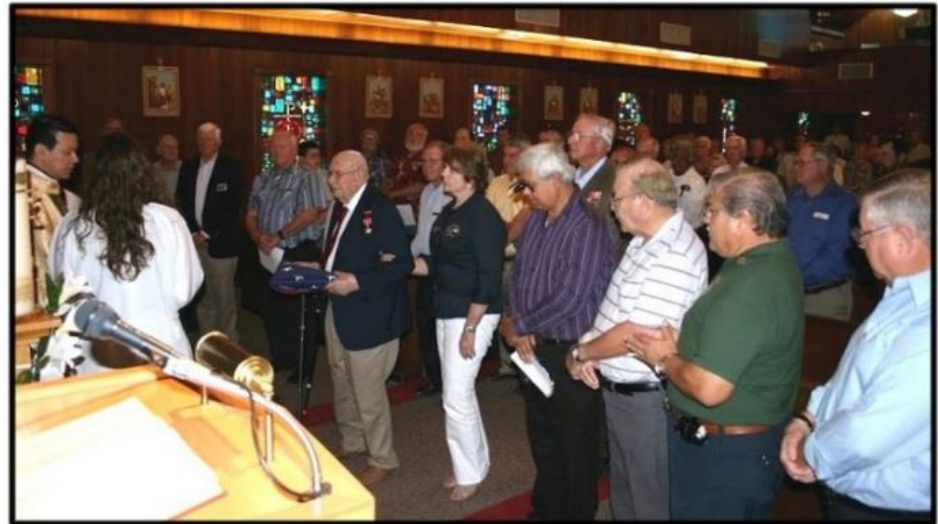
Urban Keller, Clem Moczygemba, Louis Keller, Stanley Keller, and Domin Keller
Photograph courtesy of: John P. Martine, Bellville, Texas

Though many of the earliest generation have passed away, and most of the second and third generation have moved away for higher education, marriage, and better jobs, the loyalty to their roots in McCook has remained. They return for church celebrations, marriages, funerals, and family gatherings.

On April 13, 2013, Joyce Skloss and Walter Lyssy coordinated *A Tribute to the Patriots of McCook*. Rev. Rene Angel began the ceremony with Holy Mass concelebrated by Rev. Gregory Labus. World War II veteran, Vincent L. Keller, 94-years-old, presented the flag for blessing. Those attending then moved to the Immaculate Conception Cemetery where a

flagpole dedication and blessing ceremony was held with a “Roll Call” of the service men and women of McCook recognizing their sacrifices in defending our country in all wars. A reception was held in the church hall following the event.

World War II veteran, Vincent L. Keller, 94-years-old, presented the flag for blessing.



A Tribute to the Patriots of McCook

A flagpole dedication and blessing ceremony was held at the Immaculate Conception Cemetery.

*Photographs courtesy of: Walter Lyssy,
San Antonio, Texas*

With modern and convenient transportation today, Mission 25 miles, and Edinburg 28 miles away are not so distant anymore. The cotton gin has closed, but two granaries still exist, HiStarr and Southwest Grain. The Pilarczyk brothers now operate two stores in McCook. Eugene Pilarczyk manages the original Red & White, and Carl Pilarczyk has re-opened a more recently built store, McCook Trading Post, across the road with gas pumps.

In 2014, The Texas Historical Commission recognized the Immaculate Conception Cemetery as a significant part of Texas history by awarding it an Official Texas Historical Marker. The designation honors the Silesian Texan pioneers who settled the area as farmers, an important and educational part of local history. The marker was proudly erected and landscaped at the gates of the cemetery by Lawrence Skloss and the Sklarz Farms, Inc. The Immaculate Conception Church had been recognized with an Official Texas Historical Marker installed in 1978 in front of the church.

Ninety-five years have elapsed since Urban Kotzur and Frank Prukop first purchased land in McCook, and 70 years have gone by since the dedication of the Immaculate Conception Church, but the ties still bind. This is most evident at the anniversary celebrations when the church is filled leaving standing room only, and the reception hall overflows to outdoor seating. Many have passed before us, but they are remembered. Others who were too young to participate in 1950 or were born afterward take part in the Mass and ceremony preparations. The Immaculate Conception Church choir is splendid.



Immaculate Conception Church, Current
Photograph courtesy of: Theresa Skloss Allen and Virginia Skloss Phillips, Mission, Texas

Though Felix and Albert Keller, Gilbert Skloss, Gabriel Kotzur, Stanley and Tom Pawelek are now deceased, it is most heartwarming that the original altar boys who served at the first dedication Mass in 1950, return to serve again. When Bishop Daniel Flores celebrated the 60th anniversary Mass in 2010, he remarked that it was the first time his altar servers were taller than him! In 2015, McCook was honored to have Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta as the main celebrant of the High Mass at the 65-year commemoration.



Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta, celebrating the 65th Anniversary Mass at McCook, Texas

Altar servers, LR: Walter Lyssy, Albert Kotzur, Fred Lyssy, Vincent Kotzur and Frank Kotzur

Photograph courtesy of: Bernadine Moczygamba Kotzur, McCook, Texas

“This is our home, we were born and raised here, and our parents taught us to be good stewards of this land that our folks passed on to us” (Albert Kotzur, grandson of Urban Kotzur).

“Our Catholic farming community in McCook has seen many hardships in its years of existence, but our faith in God has never wavered. All of our church traditions, religious ceremonies, and beautiful singing has continued as it was in the beginning of our parish. I’m tied to this land; this is my home. I love it here” (Sylvia Gawlik Lyssy Skloss, widow of August Moczygemba Skloss).

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Then and Now – Kotzur, Albert

Then and Now – Gawlik Lyssy Skloss, Sylvia

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