

News of the Diocese of Baker

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THE DIOCESAN CHRONICLE

The History of our Cathedral

St. Francis de Sales
Baker City



The Early Years

In the middle of the 19th century, most of Eastern Oregon resembled a miniature Europe. The Belgians settled in the Baker Valley; the Irish, in Lake, Klamath and Morrow counties; the Germans, along the Columbia River; and the Basques, in Malheur County, especially in Jordan Valley. There were also many Chinese in the area digging for gold, especially in Canyon City.

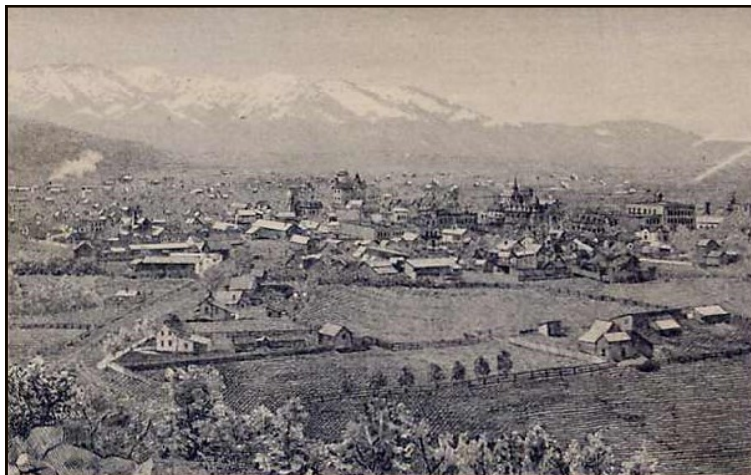
As early as 1862 Fr. Mesplie and later Fr. Dielman visited the Baker City area and offered Mass at Auburn, a mining settlement 12 miles southwest, where some 1,500 men were searching for gold. The so-called Virtue Mines were the sight of a strange 20th-century discovery that confirmed the presence of Catholic miners in the 1850's; a headless statue of The Blessed Virgin!

In 1867, Fr. Dielman was assigned to Baker City and made visits to a mission in La Grande. In 1873, he was replaced by another Belgian priest, Fr. Peter DeRoo, who was less than a year out of the American College in Louvain. Services were at first conducted in the residence of D. Mooney, but a year later, a frame structure was put up by W. H. Packwood, and John J. Dooley.

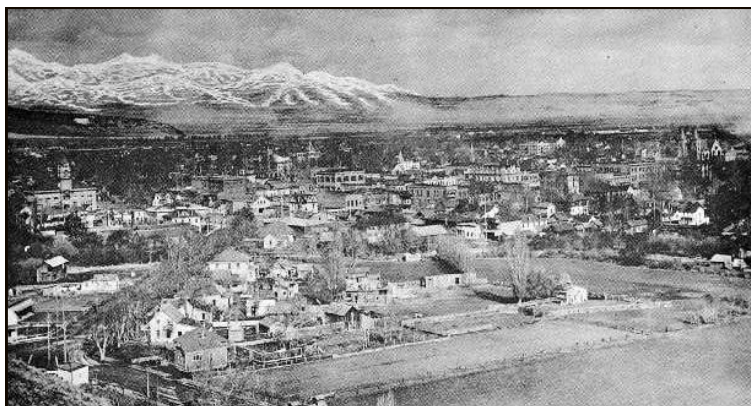
When the county seat moved to Baker City a large number of Auburn's inhabitants moved too and became the pioneers of Eastern Oregon's first metropolis. When Fr. Dielman was officially appointed resident pastor of St. Francis de Sales, the community was accustomed to gathering at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bowen, a pioneer editor and publisher of the local newspaper, *The Morning*

Democrat. Fr. Dielman made his home in Canyon City but he visited Baker City repeatedly, where the need of a church building was keenly felt. Dr. J. M. Boyd, made a considerable contribution by donating a tract of land comprising a whole block. J. W. Virtue, J. J. Dooley, I. B. Bowen and E. P. Cranston each made liberal donations of cash.

In April 1875, Fr. Peter DeRoo succeeded in obtaining four sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary from Portland to open a school. They were followed in 1885 by the sisters of St. Francis who opened a hospital and started the Academy. The building boom in Baker City was at its peak between 1890 and 1910, as is visible from the dates atop many historic buildings in town. So it was a question of time — not whether, but when — a new church would be built.



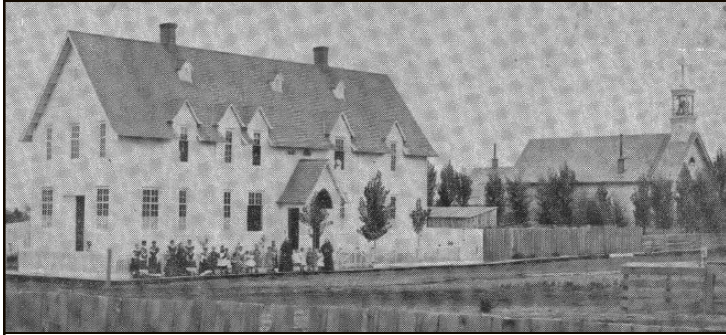
A general overview of Baker City in 1887, when the building boom started. Over the next 25 years, most of the old buildings that are still standing were built, including our Cathedral.



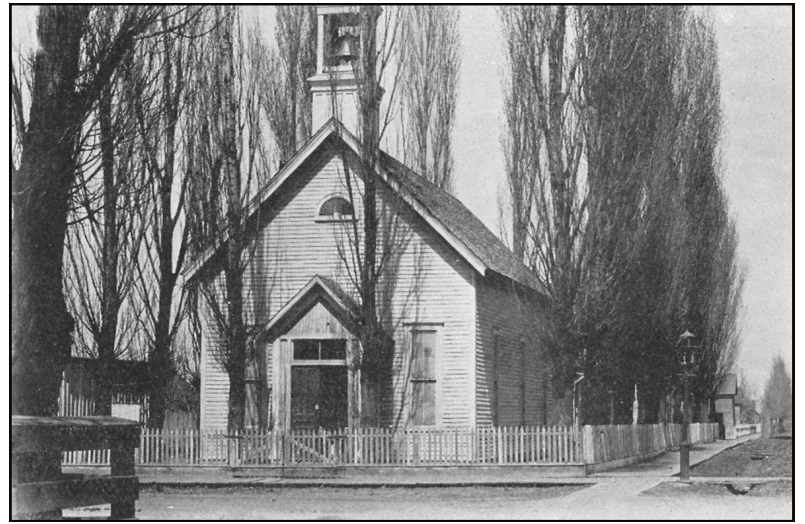
Baker City in 1917

The First Catholic Church

Eventually the first Church was built on the same city block as the present-day Cathedral. From the letters that Fr. Dielman wrote to Archbishop Blanchet, we can detect that the area was growing fast. "The geographical position and beautiful valley which surrounds it, together with the mines all around cannot fail to make this town a central and important place. The Catholics are grand but very few; only four Catholic families and two mixed marriages."



The first St. Francis Academy with the first church next to it in 1884.



On Sunday, May 14, 1905, Mass was celebrated for the last time in the old Mission Church of St. Francis de Sales. The original church (pictured above) built in 1871 is still in existence as a private residence on First Street, one block from the Cathedral.

A New Diocese Established

The Diocese of Baker City was officially established on June 19, 1903. A week later Bishop Charles O'Reilly, pastor of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Portland, was appointed the first Bishop of Baker.

At 66,800 square miles the new Diocese was one of the largest in area, but one of the smallest in numbers, with a Catholic population of 3,218, of whom 1,854 were practicing.



Bishop Charles O'Reilly, the first Bishop of the newly-established Baker Diocese. He also served as Pastor of the Cathedral for a few years.

A reception for the new bishop was held on August 31, 1903, with the civic community of Baker City helping out the parishioners. Bishop O'Reilly was installed on September 1st, but he was not made welcome by the priests of Eastern Oregon. Upon arriving in Baker City, four armed priests met him menacingly. Fr. Joseph Schell and Fr. L.P. Desmarais, discontented and rebellious, nonetheless remained active in various parishes. Fr. John Heinrich and Fr. Alphonse Bronsgeest amicably resolved their differences and remained loyal to the bishop.

In 1905, faraway in Chicago, the Catholic Extension Society was founded for the support of the "home missions." Between 1910 and 1970 this remarkable organization came to be the most significant single contributor to the material growth of the diocese.

Bishop O'Reilly soon became an itinerant Bishop. In quick succession he laid the cornerstone of the new St. Francis Academy in Baker City, dedicated St. Anthony's Hospital in Pendleton, and visited missions in Canyon city, Pendleton, The Dalles, Huntington, and La Grande.

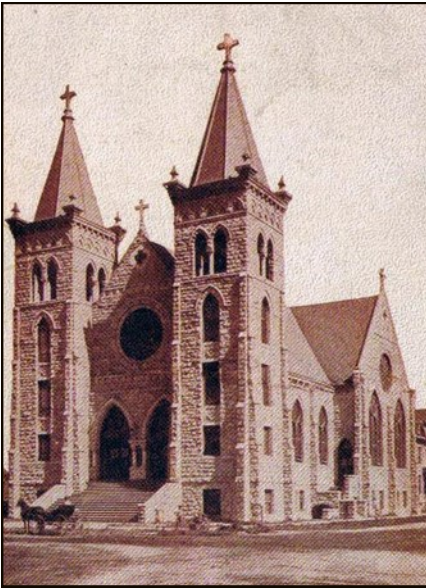
The time had come to replace the church in Baker City with an appropriate Cathedral. Prior to the erection of the new diocese, the Men's Club of St. Francis de Sales parish had initiated plans to solicit funds to build a new church. Bishop O'Reilly followed through on these plans with enthusiasm. The old church was removed from the site on May 20, 1905; ground was broken for the new building on May 24, 1905. The present-day Cathedral was built of stone native to the area. The foundation stone laid down in 1906 is still to be seen between the two main doors. The completed Cathedral was dedicated on April 9, 1908.



Bishop O'Reilly, 1908

Building the Cathedral

St. Francis de Sales Cathedral was designed by a local architect, M. P. White, and built by another local parishioner, Thomas E. Grant. *The Baker City Herald* called it "the finest church in Oregon, and one of the most imposing in the Northwest." The same newspaper also estimated that the church and the rectory (built at the same time) "will remain for years to come a monument to the untiring industry and zeal of



The finished Cathedral in 1908. Very little structural change was done on the outside over the past 100 years.

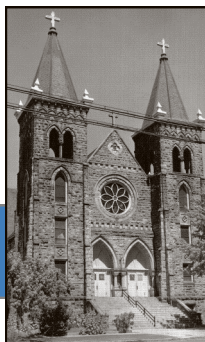
Bishop O'Reilly." The architect, M.P. White of Baker City, described the new Cathedral this way: "The style of the Cathedral is pure Gothic. The building proper is 144 feet from front steps to rear of balustrade wall. The front, including steps, towers, etc. is 68 feet wide and the nave is 48 feet. Two imposing towers rise superbly above the structure to a height of 112 feet from the ground. The entire building was built of Pleasant Valley local stone, known also as volcanic tuff. Stones were

lifted up by a pulley system powered by a horse positioned underneath the spires, which kept walking round and round. The original plan called for the length of the church to extend to the curb, but it had to be shortened for lack of funds.

The official dedication of the Cathedral took place on April 9, 1908, with many prelates, priests, and parishioners in attendance. The Bishop's house (the present Rectory) was completed and dedicated in September 1908. On January 14, 1912, the new pipe organ was solemnly blessed. During August and September 1920, the wooden steps were replaced with concrete. A concrete sidewalk was also put in.



The Rectory behind the Cathedral was built at the same time as the Cathedral and opened officially on September 29, 1908. The Rectory has three levels with a basement, although the attic is only used for storage. Like the Cathedral, it was built with volcanic tuff. The Rectory has many features that were common in houses built at the same time — in particular, pocket-doors.



The Cathedral in 1958 - notice that the rose window was still visible at this time, but was closed up in the early 60's.



The front page of the *Morning Democrat* of April 10, 1908, the day after the Cathedral was dedicated. According to the report, "the ceremony was grand and certainly impressive. The beautiful robes of the Archbishops and Bishops and the visiting clergy gave a brilliancy to the scene that will linger on in the memory of those whose pleasure it was to witness the ceremony."



The inside of the Cathedral underwent various renovations throughout the first 100 years, specifically in 1944, 1958, 1980 and 2007.

It's the mother church of the diocese. . . it belongs to you!

Fr. Julian Cassar compiled **The History of our Great Cathedral** while serving as Cathedral Rector 2005-2013.

Part 2: in our next Issue

A first-hand description of some areas of the Diocese from an April 1, 1925 article of the *Catholic Extension Magazine*.

Early Baker City and St. Francis de Sales Cathedral



**Fr. L. Dielman,
pastor from
1871 to 1874.**



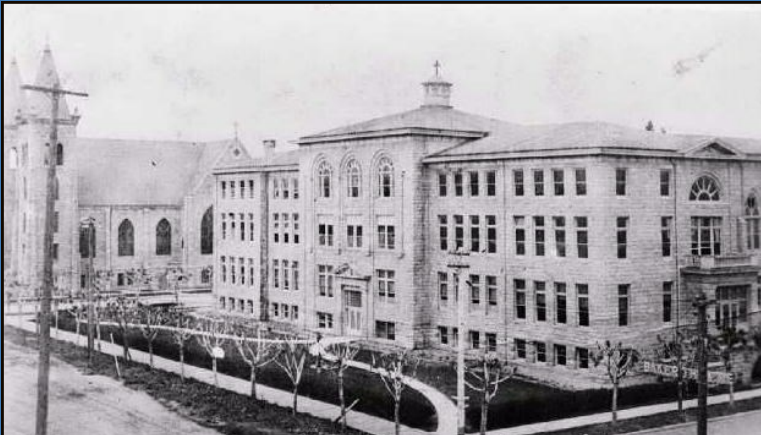
**Fr. Peter DeRoo,
pastor from 1873
to 1886.**



First Saint Francis Academy in 1885



1897 Academy Graduates



Academy and Cathedral in the 1920's



Rectory in 1930



1952 Knights of Columbus Convention



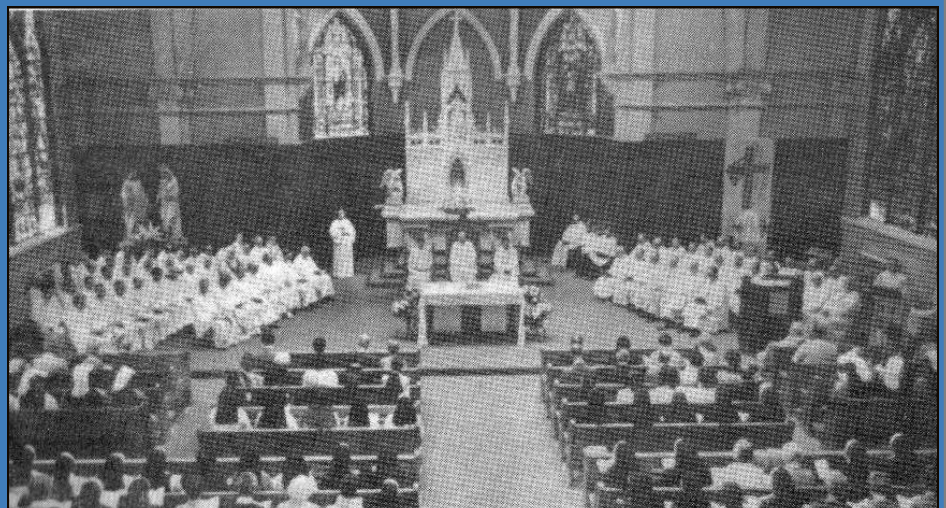
1953 Golden Jubilee with Bishop Francis Leipzig



Cathedral in 1954



Cathedral in 1968



70th Anniversary, 1978