

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CEMETERY

I. CONTEXT

The Immaculate Conception Cemetery was designated a historic cemetery by the Texas Historical Commission on January 22, 2016 (NA-C164). The cemetery is located in the Moral community on County Road 724, about a half-mile southwest of State Highway 7 West in Nacogdoches County, Texas. The first two sections of the cemetery are a part of a five-acre tract of land received in an exchange between Bennett Blake, Sr. and the Rev. Bishop N. A. Gallagher of the Catholic Diocese of Galveston on November 25, 1885.¹ A handwritten note along the side of the deed says “Moral Church Deed.” The cemetery expanded in 2010, and today the church and cemetery cover a total of 6.057 acres. The cemetery has three distinct sections numbered I, II, and III. It is fenced, well maintained, has 511 marked graves, and is about four acres of the entire property.

In “Pioneers and Builders, Centenary Chronicles of the Sisters of the Holy Cross,” the people of Moral Community are referred to as “descendants of the pioneers who had helped to establish the missions in East Texas and who were stranded after the Texas Revolution.”² Richard Huzeler, a professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, called the people the “Old Spanish” in a study he did in the communities of Moral and Chireno in the summer of 1985. From his study, he learned that “through two centuries they evolved from a powerful majority to a forgotten minority.”³ He noticed that often distance and the scarcity of priests in the area isolated them from their mother church, but over the years they remained faithful to the ancient church of their ancestors. They quietly built homes, raised their children, and lived their lives in their faith communities with a “beautiful sense of pride and identity.”⁴

According to church records, the first Catholic Church at Moral was dedicated on the eighth day of April 1877 by Reverend James L. Chaland as the Church of the Immaculate Conception.⁵ This little log church, used only ten years, was built on a site located one and a half miles southeast of the present church on what is now County Road 615.⁶ The church members’ devotion was rewarded when a French nun named Sister Josephine came to live in a little log house next to the church in Moral. Through her

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dedication, love, teachings, and devotion, she is credited with keeping their faith alive as the Catholic Church struggled in a predominant Protestant East Texas.⁷

Sister Josephine was born Renée Ernestine Françoise Potard on February 25, 1822 in Barthelme, France. A brilliant and accomplished French woman of noble birth, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross in LeMans, France in 1846, and came to America with the resolution to devote her life to doing God's work. She made her perpetual vows as Sister Joseph on August 6, 1857 at Notre Dame, Indiana. (Note: She later changed her name to the more feminine Sister Josephine). During Reconstruction in 1870, she and three other Holy Cross Sisters volunteered for missionary work in Texas, and they were sent from Notre Dame to reopen the Nacogdoches University. In 1874 after three years in Nacogdoches, the small convent of nuns was reassigned to the Convent in Clarksville, Texas. After many hours of prayer, Sister Josephine asked her superiors to remain with the poor children who were the descendants of the valiant Spanish pioneers who helped settle Nacogdoches.⁸ She realized if she left, it would sever the last real tie they had with their church.⁹

In 1885 when the land was bought at the present site, a new church was built. The first little log church was then abandoned, and Sister Josephine moved to a small bare room in the rear of the new church building. In this harsh and sometimes hostile country, not only was she a shepherd of faith, she was a school teacher, nurse, and sometimes a sitter for the children. She was often seen, with her religious habit billowing in the wind, riding a mustang pony from farm to farm administering to needs of the families. From her little room, she spent many lonely hours, and often wrote letters back to her friends and superiors at Notre Dame telling of her activities with her "poor Mexicans." Her letters, some written in French, may be found in the Edward Sorin Papers in the Notre Dame University Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana.¹⁰

In 1893, after years of harsh living, she developed pneumonia. The men of the community lovingly put her in a wagon padded with quilts, and transported her to Nacogdoches. She was boarded onto a train and taken to St. Joseph's Infirmary in Houston, where she died a week later on April 27, 1893. Her mortal remains were then taken to Saint Edward's University in Austin where she was buried in the nearby

Assumption Cemetery.¹¹ A simple cross erected by the Sisters of St. Mary's Academy marks her final resting place.

All that remains of the beloved French nun today are the stories of her fortitude, loneliness and hardship as she served the people of the Moral Community, and her old letters in the Notre Dame archives.¹²

II. OVERVIEW

In the winter of 1911, about 18 years after Sister Josephine passed away, the men of the Immaculate Conception Church cleared a section of land on the north side of the five-acre tract and just behind the church for a cemetery. Today this is known as Section I. Prior to this date, all rites of Christian burial were held at the church by visiting priests from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Nacogdoches, with the internment of the remains at the Lazarine Cemetery which is located about three miles closer to the town. The great advantage to the newly added cemetery was that it gave the people their own cemetery, in their own community, and much closer to the church.

Margarita Luna Pena, 47, the wife of the late Juan Pedro Pena, was the first person buried in the Section I on March 11, 1912. Her husband Juan who had died in 1906 was buried in the Lazarine Cemetery.¹³ Margarita was the daughter of Jose Eugenio Luna and Maria Conception Manchaca, both born in Louisiana in the 1820's.

In January 1937, Bishop C. E. Byrne of Galveston wrote a letter to the Nacogdoches County Historical Society to inform them that the old Sacred Heart Church located in downtown Nacogdoches on Pecan Street was to be moved to the "Moral area" (actually to Fern Lake on Highway 59 South, but the children of Moral attended the school), and was to be used by the Catholics in that community.¹⁴ Immediately, the historical society met to discuss what arrangements could be made with the church leaders to purchase the property and building for future use as a museum. The society had previously expressed, to the local priests, their interest in buying the property and old church if the church officials "could see their way clear to sell them." An earlier Daily Sentinel article noted the two priests who were buried in the church yard at the downtown location had been already been removed to Moral.¹⁵ In an impassioned plea, R. B. Blake wrote, "Father J. C. Bottet gave his life for Sacred Heart Church on August 3, 1857, and Written by Peggy Arriola Jasso, October 2018 for a 2019 THC marker application

now his eighty year sleep has been disturbed – his remains removed from their peaceful sleep in the old churchyard.... Only the stately cedars remain, with their hands raised to the sky, and they too, will soon be gone.”¹⁶ The society’s attempt failed. The church was moved and renamed the Shrine of St. Anne in a dedication ceremony by Bishop C. E. Byrne on Monday, July 26, 1937.¹⁷

The two priests were Reverend William McSweeney and Reverend John Peter Bottet. Their deaths are recorded, along with two other priests who had served the parish, on the page before the recording of deaths in Volume I of the Church records.¹⁸ The records read:

On the 7th day of March 1874 Reverend Father Wm. McSweeney died at Nacogdoches and was buried near the church on the 2nd of March 1874. He was born in Dundee, Scotland AD. Feby. 3rd 1844 came to this country in Jan. 1869 was ordained priest by B (Bishop) Revd. Dubuis on the 27th of Feb. 1869 and was sent to Nacogdoches in November 1871.

On the 23rd of August 1857 Reverend John Peter Bottet died at Nacogdoches and was buried near the church on the 24th day of August. He was born at Anse Dept. of Rhine, France in 1830, and came into this country in June 1856 and was ordained priest by the B. (Bishop) Revd. Odin and then sent to Nacogdoches in April 1857.

According to Lonnie Luna, 90, he remembers being told by family members that Moral resident Pete Pena, who had the best wagon and mules in the community, was the one who went to the old downtown church and dug up the two priests to rebury them at Moral Cemetery.¹⁹ Another story was told by E. L. Luna that Mr. Baker, the president of Commercial National Bank in 1937, said the men who dug up the priests later came into the bank and told him that when they dug into the graves there was nothing left except the metal hinges and latches from their wooden caskets. A large monument for Fathers McSweeney and Bottet marks Section I of the Immaculate Conception Cemetery. Their two original headstones are affixed to the brick base of the monument.

On Memorial Day 1965, Reverend Father Egidio A. Vecchio, a member of the Missionaries of our Lady of LaSalette, began a campaign to add Section II next to the first section.²⁰ Father Vecchio, stationed in Nacogdoches from 1959 to 1966, was one of the more memorable La Salette priests who served the area during the years the order

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ministered to the people at Nacogdoches, 1933 to 1972. Of strong Italian ancestors, Father Vecchio was talented and tireless. He led many projects for the church. One of these was an effort to expand the cemetery at Moral. He personally contacted each family to ask for the money necessary to clear the land, erect a hurricane fence, purchase a large monument, and provide landscaping for the new Section II. It took him one year to accomplish the task at a rate of \$10 per family. He collected \$1,391, and kept meticulous records of every family who donated. On May 29, 1966, Pentecost Sunday, he solemnly blessed and consecrated Section II under the name of Our Lady of La Salette, dedicated to the Mother of Christ. While in Nacogdoches, Father Vecchio also established the first Catholic campus ministry at Stephen F. Austin University, and was elected president of the first rural electric co-op in the Moral community.²¹ Father Vecchio, born in Syracuse, New York on March 13, 1927, entered the La Salette Novitiate on July 1, 1947 in Bloomfield, Connecticut, and took his first vows on July 2, 1948. On May 25, 2017, he died at the age of 90 in a Houston retirement home for priests; he served the church faithfully for over seventy years. His final obituary stated “Father Vecchio shared his gifts and talents with the La Salette Community in various administrative positions over the years,” and “he served with great enthusiasm the mission churches of Nacogdoches, especially in Moral.”²² After a Mass of Christian Burial at Our Lady of Prompt Succor Parish in Sulphur, LA., where he had served for twenty years, he was laid to rest at the Mimosa-Pines Cemetery North in Sulphur, Calcasieu Parish, LA.

The first tract of land for Section III was obtained on February 19, 2010 when a .06 acre tract of land was gifted to Bishop Alvaro Corrada by Jana Ryan and Michael Poskey, the children of C. T. Poskey.²³ Then on October 25 of the same year, an additional .457 acre tract was purchased from the children of Margaret Montes.²⁴ The wooded tract was cleared with donations from the Bennett Montes family, and the hurricane fence was extended to surround the one acre tract. On April 26, 2014, Section III was dedicated by the Rev. Monsignor. James E. Young. It was dedicated to the Dominican Sisters of Moral in honor of four young ladies who grew up in the Moral community, and who entered the Dominican Order of Preachers as teenagers. The order is a religious order founded by the Spanish priest Dominic of Caleruega in France, and approved by Pope Honorius III December 22, 1216. The ladies made their commitment

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during their teenage years, and served the order for more than seventy years of their lives. Each lady was influenced by the teachings and works of the dedicated French nun Sister Josephine who taught their parents in the late 1800's.

The first young lady Margaret Simone Pena, 19, entered the Dominican Sisters of Houston on October 13, 1933, and took the name Sister Emerita.²⁵ As long as she could remember, she wanted to be of service to children. She taught in Riverside, CA; Galveston; Port Arthur; Port Neches; Houston; and was the principal at St. Ann's School in Nacogdoches from 1964 to 1966. After seventy-six years of preaching and teaching the gospel, Sister Emerita died on July 7, 2009.

Louise Emerita Pena, the younger sister of Margaret Simone Pena, was 17 at the time she entered the Dominican Sisters of Houston on August 24, 1935.²⁶ She took the name Sister Mary Celestine after her mother Celestine Cordova. She received her final vows on August 15, 1942. For over 20 years, she cared for Bishop Wendelin Nold during his 18 years of blindness. He called her his "angel of mercy." She died May 3, 2009, after seventy-four years of devoted service.

The third Moral community teenager was Rita Inez Poskey, 16, who entered the cloistered Monastery of Infant Jesus in Lufkin on June 19, 1946. The Monastery had been founded the year before, and she became their first postulate. She made her first vows on June 4, 1948 and vowed to remain in the same monastery throughout her life, to never leave except in extraordinary circumstances which had to be approved by her superiors, and to mark her days by silence and continuous prayer. In the seventy-two years at the Monastery, Sister Veronica has kept that promise, and still serves God as a cloistered praying nun in Lufkin, Texas.

The last young lady from the Moral community was Olivia Gertrude Pena who was 18 when she entered the Sacred Heart Convent in Houston in June 1946. She says she was influenced by the devotion of her two older cousins Emerita and Celestine. In 1949, she made her first vows as Sister Mary Gertrude. While in Galveston, she fell in love with teaching young people. After making her final profession of faith in 1953, she began a lifelong teaching career. She traveled to California where she spent twenty years as a teacher in the Catholic schools in Whittier, San Bernardino, and San Diego, California. While there, she discovered her artistic ability and became an art teacher. Her

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love of art was brought back to Texas where she continued teaching little children for the next twelve years. She says, “I had the time of my life teaching art to little children, teaching them to appreciate themselves and what they could do with those tiny little fingers.”²⁷ Still very active in 2014, she designed the granite monument for Section III of the cemetery. Currently she is 91, retired, and living in St. Dominic Villa in Houston.

The Immaculate Conception Cemetery consists of a total of 511 marked graves of which 87 are veterans. These veterans fought in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, while others served during more peaceful times. As a tribute to these men, their photos are prominently displayed in the church fellowship hall, and the church takes great care in making sure all veterans’ graves are marked with either a private headstone or government supplied military headstone. Also, they are remembered in special ceremonies held annually on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Immaculate Conception Cemetery is significant because it is the first of the five recorded Catholic cemeteries in Nacogdoches County that is well documented. The earliest cemetery was the Spanish graveyard believed to have been located next to the original Spanish mission in Nacogdoches. Its exact location has never been located. The second was near Washington Square, and it has also not been found. Although the early church recorded burials in the Lazarine Cemetery, it remained privately owned until February 21, 1936 when it was deeded to Bishop C. E. Byrne by Antonio Garcia and his wife.²⁸

The fourth church cemetery was the Old Spanish Cemetery acquired in 1858 in a deed transfer from Haden H. Edwards to Bishop Jean-Marie Odin for the purpose of burial grounds.²⁹ It is a one acre tract located next to the Oak Grove Cemetery and was often called the city cemetery near the town in the old church records beginning in 1858. Some historians believe, but it has never been documented, many of the graves from the first cemetery were dug up in 1912 when a new courthouse was being built and reinterred at this cemetery. However no documentation of this event exists. Most of the burials in this cemetery are recorded in church records.

The Sacred Heart Catholic Church records, located at the Diocese of Tyler, began in 1847 when the first Sacred Heart church was built after the Texas Revolution. However, the church death records do not reflect the names of the cemeteries until 1858 in Volume II.

The burials at Immaculate Conception Cemetery are documented in the records of Sacred Heart Church. In these records, many names are easily recognized as those of the early settlers of Nacogdoches. Names like Y'Barbo, Montes, Luna, Arriola, Cortines, Cordova, Solise, Pena, and Procela are predominant. Most notably, Policarpo Y'Barbo, born on January 26, 1953, was the great-great-grandson of Captain Antonio Gil Y'Barbo, Spanish lieutenant governor and commander of the militia in Nacogdoches in the late eighteenth century.³⁰ Another is Alcario "A. L." Cordova, born in January 12, 1860, who was the grandson of Vicente Cordova a Nacogdoches official during the Mexican period and the leader of the Cordova Rebellion in 1838.³¹

This very peaceful country cemetery, with hints from the past, reflects the continuum of the area's history with clearly discernable pioneer and modern sections. It is surrounded by land still owned by the early families and descendants of the Cordova, Rodrigues, Montes and Poskey families. An official Texas Historical Marker for Immaculate Conception Cemetery would provide important historical interpretations of the Spanish era and would serve to educate young people about the names and events of the past.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Nacogdoches County Land Records, Vol. X, p. 176, deed from Bennet Blake Sr. to Bishop Gallagher, 25 November 1885, Nacogdoches, Texas.

² Pioneers and Builders, Centenary Chronicles of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1841-1941, "A Texas Missionary," Vol. VI, Notre Dame, Holy Cross, Indiana, 1941.

³ Richard Hurzeler, "People of the Faith: The Old Spanish of East Texas," Summer of 1989, p. 1, Stephen F. Austin University, Nacogdoches, Texas.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Galveston Diocese, "Parish Records, 1847-1890," Film # 007858928, image #157, El Paso, Texas : Filmed by Golightly Co., 1957, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7C-NBHB?cat=245256> (last accessed 22 October 2018.)

⁶ Sacred Heart Catholic Church, "Celebrating 150 Years as a Parish, 1847-1997," 1997, On page for Immaculate Conception Mission-Moral, Yearbook in personal collection of Peggy A. Jasso, Nacogdoches, TX.

⁷ Daily Sentinel, "Preservation of Old Sacred Heart Church Outlined," April 21, 1937, p. 1 & 6, personal collection of Peggy A. Jasso, Nacogdoches, TX.

⁸ Handbook of Texas Online, Carolyn Reeves Ericson, "Potard, Renee Ernestine Francoise [Sister Josephine]," accessed November 15, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fpo55>. Uploaded on June 15, 2010, Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁹ Ericson, Carolyn Reeves, "Women in Early Texas," "Sister M. Josephine (Ernestine Potard, 1822-1893), Texas State Historical Association, Austin, TX, (1994), p. 134-139.

¹⁰ Edward Sorin Papers, CSOR 2/57.001, University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, IN., <http://archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/display.pl?SOR008.HTM+94>, (last accessed 22 October 2018)

¹¹ Gray, Mary Lee, "In 1880's, Nun living alone kept Faith alive in Nacogdoches area," *The Texas Catholic Herald*, Houston, TX, June 3, 1965, p. 5.

¹² Oral History of Ruby Rodrigues, recorded and transcribed by Peggy A. Jasso on March 9, 2003.

¹³ Catholic Church Death Records, Vol. II, first entry for 1912, Nacogdoches, TX.

¹⁴ Daily Sentinel, "Old Church Will be Moved Moral," 23 April 1937, p.1, microfilm, East Texas Research Center, Nacogdoches, Texas.

¹⁵ Daily Sentinel, "Preservation of Old Sacred Heart Church Outlined," April 23, 1937, p.1-3, microfilm, East Texas Research Center, Nacogdoches, Texas.

¹⁶ R. B. Blake, Robert Bruce Blake Research Collection, Vol. LXIV, p. 102-103, East Texas Research Center, Nacogdoches, Texas.

¹⁷ Daily Sentinel, "Restoration Sacred Heart Church at Fern Lake be Dedicated Monday," July 22, 1937, p. 1&4, microfilm, East Texas Research Center, Nacogdoches, Texas.

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¹⁸ Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Galveston Diocese, "Parish Records, 1847-1890," Film # 007858928, image #154, El Paso, Texas : Filmed by Golightly Co., 1957, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7C-NBHB?cat=245256> (last accessed 22 October 2018.)

¹⁹ Peggy A. Jasso files, Oral history of Lonnie Luna as told to Peggy Arriola Jasso on October 27, 2018; also in early 2000 when Peggy Jasso worked at Commercial Bank of Texas, E. L. Luna told her the story of Mr. Baker talking to the two men.

²⁰ Immaculate Conception Church files, "Pastoral notes of Fr. Egidio Vecchio," dated May 1965 and May 1966, Nacogdoches, Texas, copy of report in files of Peggy A. Jasso.

²¹ Rev. James Vanderholt, "History of the Catholic Church of Nacogdoches, TX," March, 2, held at the Archives, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, p. 72.

²² Johnson and Robison Funeral Home, Sulphur, LA, "Obituary of Egidio A. Vecchio, M.S. (2017)," <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/egidio-vecchio-obituary?pid=185646798>, (last accessed 22 October 2018).

²³ Nacogdoches County Land Records, gift deed from Jana Ryan & Michael Poskey to Bishop Alvaro Corrada, Vol. 3338, p. 62, February 19, 2010, Nacogdoches, Texas.

²⁴ Nacogdoches County Land Records, warranty deed from Margaret Reeves, Delton Monte and Carol Ann Morrison to Bishop Alvaro Corrada, Vol. 3374, p. 188, October 25, 2010, Nacogdoches, Texas.

²⁵ The Houston Chronicle, "Obituary of Sister Emerita Pena, (2009)," <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/houstonchronicle/obituary.aspx?n=emerita-pea&pid=129455998>(last accessed 22 October 2018.)

²⁶The Houston Chronicle, "Obituary of Sister Celestine Pena, (2009)," <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/houstonchronicle/obituary.aspx?n=celestine-pena&pid=126962141> (last accessed 22 October 2018.)

²⁷ Dominican of Sisters of Houston, "Our Sisters," <http://www.domhou.org/default.aspx?act=profiledetail.aspx&pid=23&menugroup=Public%20Home> (last accessed 22 October 2018)

²⁸ Nacogdoches County Land Records, deed from Antonio Garcia, et ux to Bishop Byrne, Vol. 140, p. 204, dated 21 April 1936, Nacogdoches, Texas.

²⁹ Nacogdoches County Land Records, deed #215, Vol. N, p. 198, recorded 19 August 1858, from H. H. Edwards to Rev. J. M. Odin, Nacogdoches, Texas.

³⁰ Handbook of Texas Online, Robert Bruce Blake, "IBARVO, ANTONIO GIL," accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fib01>.

³¹ Handbook of Texas Online, Robert Bruce Blake, "CORDOVA, VICENTE," accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fco71>.

Section I Marker dedicated to Rev. McSweeney & Rev. Bottet



(Taken early 1960s)



(Taken in 2018)

Section II Dedication on May 29, 1966



Consecration of cemetery ground and dedication of Our Lady of La Salette marker.
Servers - Richard and Robert Hancock and Eli Montes. Fr. Vecchio and Fr. McMahan M.S. - 1966

Section III Dedication – April 26, 2017



Sister Mary Gertrude Pena, whose birth name was Olivia Gertrude Pena, attended the dedication of Section III of the Immaculate Conception Cemetery on April 26, 2014. She was 18 when she entered the Sacred Heart Convent in Houston in June 1946. She designed the monument in honor of the Dominican Sisters of Moral: Sister Mary Emerita Pena, Sister Mary Celestine Pena, Sister Mary Gertrude Pena and Sister Mary Veronica Poskey.

Sister Josephine (left), a Sister of the Holy Cross, with her very good friend Sister Flavienne, a Sister of Divine Providence, from Palestine, TX. Often Sister Josephine rode her mustang pony to Palestine to visit her.

(Photo Courtesy of The Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana.)

