

HISTORY OF ST. PAUL CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Fred Howe

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On the morning of July 6, 1963, parishoners of Sacred Heart Church were stunned by the announcement that Sacred Heart Parish was to be divided. All members living east of Bayou Texar and east of 12th Avenue as far north as Riverview would, by the designation of the Bishop, compose the new parish.

The announcement was made by Father Frank Giri, newly appointed pastor of the new church. Father Giri, a native of Pensacola, had grown up in St. Michael's Parish. After entering the priesthood, he had spent a number of years in Rome. Later he had returned to America to do mission work in Alabama. Immediately before he was assigned to establish St. Paul Parish, he had served as pastor of a church in Anniston, Alabama. When someone asked him how he liked coming back to Pensacola, he answered, "I think I'm in Heaven."

The congregation of the new church assembled for the first time in the community house at East Pensacola Heights. It was a very warm morning, July 14, 1963. Mass was said from a portable altar. Parishoners sat in chairs and knelt on the floor.

Father Giri passed out census cards. Later various parish members were assigned districts and a complete census of the parish was made. Every person in the parish - Protestants, atheists and fallen-away Catholics were called upon. Father, himself, called upon every member of the parish and every fallen-away Catholic.

Several weeks later Father Giri announced that the Cordova Park School had been secured for Sunday Mass. Daily Mass was said in Father's house on Bayou Boulevard.

A committee was formed to estimate the financial resources of the parish and Father asked that each wage earner in the parish contribute five percent of his or her earnings toward building a church and school. The amount of each Sunday's collection was published in the Bulletin.

In August of 1963, the Women's Altar Society was organized. Mrs. Jack Kohl was the first president.

The Men's Club of the church was also organized and the men of the church kept an all night vigil one Sunday out of each month.

Land for the new church and school was given by Bishop T. J. Toolen of the Birmingham-Mobile diocese. This land was located between Scenic Highway and Bayou Boulevard - Hyde Park Road was just a cow path and many people called St. Paul's "the hidden church" because there were no paved roads leading to the site.

For many years the people of East Pensacola had wanted a church of their own. Over fifty years ago, housewives in the East Pensacola Heights had held gumbo suppers and rummage sales to try to get some land for a church. Mrs. T. R. Harvey, Mrs. John Carroll and Mrs. Gomez were some of these devoted ladies. Eventually, they had made enough money to buy a lot on what is now Cervantes Street - near the Gulf station. They presented this lot to the Bishop. At that time, however, the Bishop did not feel that East Pensacola was ready to support a church. Eventually, the lot was sold for a filling station, but the proceeds from the sale went toward the purchase of the land for St. Paul's at its present location.