ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Sandwiching in History Tour
Immaculate Heart of Mary Church and School

7006 Jasna Gora Drive, North Little Rock

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Adapted and expanded by Ashley Sides from Rachel (Silva) Patton's 2008 script
Special thanks to: Fr. Rubén Quinteros, Joe Gubanski, Danielle Afsordeh

Welcome and Intro

Witamy na Jasnej Górze! Welcome to Jasna Góra!

Thank you for coming to our Sandwiching in History tour of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church and School. I want to thank the parish and especially Fr. Rubén Quinteros for permission to visit this site. I'm also grateful to local native Joe Gubanski and Butler Center archivist Danielle Afsordeh for their very helpful information.

There's a good chance that today's story will resonate with many in our group, because many of us are probably descended from fairly recent immigrants, some

of which I'm sure kept up their cultural traditions in communities of their people. My wife's ancestors were part of a Polish community up in the north that was a lot like this one, only urban. I think it's fascinating to learn about different people's different experiences in our country and state.

History of Marche and IHM Church

In the late eighteenth century, Poland (or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as it was then called) was divided among its more powerful neighbors—Russia, Prussia, and Austria. From 1795 until the end of World War I, there was no independent country called Poland. Even without a country, though, the Polish people never lost their sense of identity. Throughout the nineteenth century, Poles initiated several wars and uprisings against their oppressors in attempts to regain their freedom. The stronger countries consistently quashed the rebellions and tightened their grip on the former Polish commonwealth. Political and economic freedoms were taken away from Poles, and an effort was made to overwrite the traditional Polish language and customs.

Many of Poland's political and social elites fled the country between 1830 and 1870, resulting in what has been termed the "Great Emigration." Count Timothy von Choinski, a former Polish nobleman and refugee, came to the U.S. in 1869 and settled in Wisconsin. He was extremely well-educated and was able to maintain his lifestyle; however, he was an exception to the rule.

Many political refugees came to the United States with very little money and no knowledge of the English language, forcing them to live in inner city slums and work in unsanitary conditions at slaughterhouses, dockyards, and coal mines. Also, many of them found the northern climate too harsh. Count Choinski longed to escape the bitter Wisconsin winters and establish a Polish colony where his less fortunate former countrymen could farm the land and return to a more comfortable lifestyle away from the inner-city slums.

This was the era of great tracts of land being opened to settlement in sparsely populated states west of the Mississippi. The railroads were selling land along their rights-of-way in hopes of establishing towns, and they advertised and recruited heavily among immigrant populations.

After making several journeys into the southern states in the 1870s, Choinski decided that eastern Texas or western Arkansas would be ideal for his Polish settlement, but a Polish newspaper in Chicago drew his attention to central Arkansas. Choinski read the article and quickly wrote to the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* inquiring about 50,000 acres of land near both a river and a railroad. His letter to the editor caught the eye of W.D. Slack, who was the land agent for the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad. Soon Choinski was in Little Rock to discuss the terms of the transaction. He ended up purchasing two adjacent tracts of land about 10 miles northwest of Little Rock—11,000 acres from the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad and another 11,000 acres from the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad.

I also have to imagine that Count Choinski must have appreciated the fact that this new land was located in Pulaski County, named after his illustrious 18th-century Polish countryman who gained fame fighting for independence in both Poland and America.

Warren Station was included in Choinski's purchase and was selected as the headquarters of the Polish resettlement. The place had a name, but little else. Before being called Warren Station, Judge Liberty Bartlett had attempted to establish a town called Bartlett on the site, but it failed, and the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad renamed the site Warren Station and tried to develop the area as a recreation center for Little Rock residents. This idea failed as well, but the town site pleased Count Choinski, who traveled back to the North to recruit Polish settlers, promising them abundant water, land, forests, and wild game.

Trains began leaving Chicago and other northern cities with hundreds of Polish settlers bound for the settlement at Warren Station in 1877. In the meantime, Choinski went back to Wisconsin to get the rest of his family. To his surprise, by the time he returned to Warren Station, less than half of the initial immigrants remained. They were not prepared for what they found—or perhaps, didn't find. There was nowhere to live. Many of them did not expect to have to clear their own land and build their own homes. Some of them went back on the same train they came in on. Many others continued on and settled in Argenta—which was slightly more developed—or Little Rock, where they found work in shops, stores, and saloons.

With only 85 families remaining, times were tough at first. People slept in the pavilion and railroad depot that had been constructed by the railroad company as part of the proposed Warren Station recreation center. However, the railroad company soon furnished lumber for houses and each family received about 80 acres apiece. People began to farm the land, and the local general store extended credit to the farmers so they could buy their supplies, making the settlement of Marche a success. The name "Marche," which is French for "marketplace," was not officially given to the community until it received a post office in 1896; however, Marche was never formally incorporated as a town. Marche basically consisted of a train depot, a general store, post office, church and school, and farms.

Why did a Polish community in America give their settlement a French name? I wish I knew the answer. Was it a preexisting French place name, like others in the area: La Petite Roche or Maumelle or Petit Jean? Or did names like that inspire it? Probably not. One local legend holds that it came from the fact that the lowlands near the town are "marshy," and it sounds like the French word for "marketplace" ("marché"). At any rate, what we can say is there's been a strong link between the Polish and the French for centuries, and many Polish refugees were also settling in France at this time, including cultural leaders and intelligentsia in exile, who were influential in the worldwide Polish diaspora. I think Poles had a fond feeling for France.

Poles are famously religious, and their national faith is Roman Catholicism. One of the residents' first concerns was the establishment of a church, and by 1878, Reverend Anthony Jaworski arrived to oversee the church. With the help of the Holy Ghost Fathers, a Catholic mission newly established in Morrilton, they built a modest wood-frame chapel to house the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. A school soon followed, and we'll talk about it in a bit.

The church was located up on top of the hill behind the current church building. In a desire to keep close ties with their homeland, the Polish settlers named this church-topped hill "Jasna Gora" after the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, Poland, a pilgrimage site with great national significance to the Poles, which contains one of the most important icons of the Virgin Mary in Europe (the icon is

called the Black Madonna of Częstochowa or Our Lady of Częstochowa and a copy of it hangs in the church office).

Jasna Góra gets translated as “Blue Hill” in Marche, but as I understand, it more literally means “*Bright* Hill” or “Hill of Light” or “Clear Mountain” or “Bright Mount” … you get the idea. Then again, a “jasnoniebeska farba” is the color of a *clear sky*, meaning a sky *blue*. So I think that must be how Jasna Góra began to be translated as Sky-blue Mountain, and ultimately, as you see on the local map and street name now, Blue Hill. But that’s just my speculation.

This tiny wood-frame church on the hilltop was the first of three church buildings that this community has had, and it was dedicated in May 1880 by Bishop Edward Fitzgerald. When Bishop Fitzgerald’s carriage reached the road leading up to the church, he was surprised to see a crowd of men waiting for him in traditional Polish dress. The men unhitched his horses and proceeded to pull the carriage up the hill to the church, where he was greeted by even larger crowds with red and white ribbons in the Polish colors decorating their carriages. Already by 1890 it was showing a need for repairs. After it was damaged by wind, the decision was made to tear it down and replace it with a more up-to-date building better fit for its growing constituency.

A second, much larger wood-frame church building was constructed in 1896 downhill from the original site. It was located on the same spot as today’s church that we are in now. It was a simple but beautiful chapel in the Gothic Revival style with a steeply pitched roof and a tall, cross-topped tower in the center of the front façade. In fact, its steeple is reported to have been several feet taller than that of the current building. It was also dedicated by Bishop Fitzgerald, who was treated to the same ritual as before. A two-story rectory was built next to the church in 1906, and a convent was added in 1924.

In 1931 the church’s roof was being replaced. The workers were dipping the wood shingles into vats of chemicals—probably an oil that would protect the wood against the elements. Father Charles Hertel, the parish priest at the time, warned the workers not to smoke around the flammable materials. Did they heed his warnings? It’s not known what started the fire, but on November 7th, 1931, the wooden church burned down and took the rectory with it.

According to local resident Joe Gubanski, Father Hertel selected two designs for a replacement building: one in the style of St. Benedict's Abbey in Subiaco and one patterned after St. Andrews Cathedral in Little Rock. The parishioners voted for the St. Andrews design, and you can see some basic resemblance in this building to St. Andrews.

Funds were raised to construct the new building. It cost between $16,000 and $20,000 to construct in 1932 (I've seen different numbers), and half was reported to have been donated by one man. It was built—this time out of brick—on the same site as the previous church and was dedicated in 1933 by Bishop John B. Morris. Because horse-drawn carriages had given way to automobiles, Bishop Morris did not get to experience the same type of reception as Bishop Fitzgerald, but there were plenty of red and white ribbons to go around.

A new brick rectory was built at the same time to replace the wooden one that burned with the church. You can see it today behind the church building.

Architecture

But let's take a closer look at this building. The architectural firm hired to design it was Thompson, Sanders, and Ginocchio. You may very well have heard those names before. Charles L. Thompson and associates (there were different partners over the years) was the most prolific architectural firm practicing in Arkansas in the late 1800s and early 1900s, producing more than 2,000 buildings across a wide range of architectural styles. One hundred forty-three of those properties were nominated for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 under the Charles L. Thompson Design Collection. This is one of those historically significant buildings.

Frank Ginocchio and Theodore Sanders joined Thompson in partnership in the late 1920s, and their diverse talents and backgrounds enabled the firm to prosper during the Great Depression. Thompson was well-known and respected, Sanders was familiar with many architectural styles, and Ginocchio was a strong supervising architect. Because Thompson was an Episcopalian, Sanders a Jew, and Ginocchio a Catholic, the firm had an array of contacts in different social circles as well. Commissions to design religious structures like the Immaculate Heart of

Mary Church were welcome projects when private projects declined during the Depression.

The church is a toned-down example of the Gothic Revival style appropriate to its rural setting. It is faced with buff brick and sits on a native stone foundation. There is a small plaque identifying the cornerstone of the previous church, which was used in this building as well. The building features a traditional floorplan with a vestibule, nave, transept, and sanctuary (vestibule is entry area, nave is the approach to the altar, transept crosses the building to separate the nave from the sanctuary, and the sanctuary is the front portion of the church that is usually elevated and has the altar).

The entrance is located in the front-facing gable end, which has an adjoining tower supported by buttresses. The tower is topped by a slender metal spire crowned by a cross. Crosses are also situated on each of the tower's corners and at the roof's peak on the front and rear façades. The church has single stained-glass windows set into gothic arches as well as larger paired stained-glass windows with a tripartite division in the arched transom above. The two side elevations and the east elevation are each ornamented by a rose window.

The gothic arch above the front entrance is formed by two soldier courses topped with a thin line of stone coping. A stone keystone is centered at the top of the arch. The double doors in the entrance are not original. The old doors were solid-paneled cypress wood doors and were painted white. But they would expand and contract with the weather, sometimes making them hard to open and close. The current doors each have a single stained-glass panel. The image of the dove descending from heaven symbolizes the Holy Spirit as it descended upon Jesus. The doors are set into the gothic arched opening with a tripartite division in the wood tympanum and a cross outlined in relief.

The canopy that extends above the front entrance was added around 1985. Bathrooms were installed in the church at that time too. Prior to that, churchgoers would have to use restrooms in the school. Prior to *that*, they used outhouses that were located by the side of the church building. There were separate men's and women's outhouses.

Church Interior

Up until around 1965, before the Second Vatican Council, men and women were also separated while they worshiped. Immaculate Heart of Mary practiced the old tradition of having men sit in the pews on one side of the aisle while women sat in the pews on the other side. If you were here for the first time and didn't know which side to sit on, you only had to look at the statues and imagery. The altar on the right side has a statue of the Virgin Mary, so women sat on the right side. The statue over the altar on the left side is of Jesus, so men sat on the left.

You will have noticed the wood paneling on the walls of the church, and you may be thinking, "That can't be original." It was added in the 1970s. Underneath the paneling there are supposed to be painted murals featuring a whimsical outdoor scene. The walls and ceiling, I think, were painted by one of the nuns, Sr. Stanislaus (Stanisława?) Sczepaniak, who was an artist and an art teacher in the Immaculate Heart of Mary school. The current parish priest, Fr. Rubén Quinteros, hopes to remove the wood paneling to show the original painted walls, once he secures the funding.

These are the original pews, and although the floor has been carpeted along the aisle, the remainder of the wood floor is original to the building as well. The four lancet windows with the saints on them and the three rose windows are original to the building, but the rest of the stained-glass windows were added sometime in the 1940s or '50s. These windows were originally clear double-hung six-over-six windows.

The church had no air conditioning or heat when it was completed. In fact, it did not have electricity until the 1940s. People would open the windows in the summer and come to church with a coat on in the winter. Floor furnaces for heating were installed in the front of the pews in the late 1940s or early '50s. Air conditioning was installed in time for the parish's centennial celebration in 1978.

The loft above the vestibule was used as the choir loft, but it is only used for overflow seating now. The pipe organ was sold in the 1970s.

There are three bells in the belfry, and when they ring, you can hear them about a mile away. They ring regularly in the morning, midday, and in the evening. Before

everyone in Marche had a telephone, the church bells served as an important communication device. If the bells rang at an off time, then someone had died. The number of rings would tell you if it was a man or a woman who had died.

Nowadays, the bells are rung by an automated system. Formerly, there was a hole in the ceiling, where the ropes hung down from the bells. The boy students at the school got to toll the bells. They discovered that if they pulled vigorously enough, they could get the bell to flip on its axis. Then when that happened, they would have to take time out of class to climb up there and fix it. *It was an accident, teacher, I promise!*

The Stations of the Cross are statues that tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in chronological order. There are fourteen Stations of the Cross, and they serve as a visual meditation on the chief scenes of Christ's suffering and death. During Holy Week (week before Easter), people go to each station and say a prayer to reflect on Christ's journey to the cross. The stations were given as memorials by different families in the church. They were manufactured for this church in 1944 by Daprato Studios, which was a major religious statuary manufacturer. In the 19th century, the company set the standard for religious art around the world.

Restoration Work

Over time, several elements of the church's interior began to show their age. The Stations of the Cross were in very poor condition; they were peeling and missing entire pieces. Between 2003 and 2007, they and other objects were restored by art appraiser and restorer Jennifer Carman. She also worked on the altars, the statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary above the side altars, the angel statues on either side of the main altar, and she did some work on the ceiling to repair missing tiles and touch up the painted design.

IHM School

From the earliest days of settlement, the community also established a school—ranking right behind housing and the church in order of need. The first school was

a two-story log building with two classrooms on the ground floor and living quarters for the priest on the second floor, built by the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1878. The first school classes were taught by lay women of the community, but by 1891, the Benedictine Sisters from the St. Scholastica Convent in Fort Smith sent nuns to live here and teach in the school. Many of the nuns, like Sr. Stanislaus, were Polish.

The curriculum for eight school grades consisted of arithmetic, geography, Bible and catechism (set of questions about religious doctrine that are to be recited and memorized), and "letters." Morning classes were taught in Polish and afternoon classes were taught in English. Boys usually attended school until they took their First Communion and learned their catechism, while girls attended until they were old enough to work in their parents' fields. In fact, many students didn't even go all the way through to the 8th grade. They were needed to work the farm.

A Craftsman-style schoolhouse was constructed in 1925, and it served all eight grades until 1959 when the present school building was constructed. Its addition was added in 1991. The Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish Life Center was completed in 1999. Although the school no longer uses the 1925 building, it is still here and bears the name Hertel Hall, after the parish's long-serving priest Charles Hertel.

(We will go to look at this historic school building after the presentation is over. It's about 500 feet east of the church building, just down the drive. But since it's such a hot day, I'll tell you about it here in the comfort of the church building, and also that way you don't miss anything if you opt not to go out in the heat to see it yourself.)

The building has been altered very little since its construction and still has its original lap board siding, both inside and out. The building has two front classrooms and one large room in the back, which used to be one small classroom and the cafeteria. There were cloakrooms on either side of the front entrance, and there was a coal shed beside the schoolhouse to fuel the coal burning stove that heated the building. The building still has its original pressed tin ceiling, transoms above the interior paneled doors, the original wood floors, and blackboards on the walls. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary School was part of the Pulaski County Rural School District from 1927 until 1953, despite the fact that classes continued to be taught by nuns. The story goes that Fr. Hertel would post a watch at the end of Blue Hill Road to alert teachers if District personnel were coming; that way the nuns could safely get away with teaching religion classes in public school. Now it is a parochial school and goes from pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade.

Just like the church, the school was one of the places the community came together. For fundraisers they would often have "box suppers" in the school building. For a "box supper," girls would make a meal for two and put it in a box. The boxes were then randomly arranged and auctioned off to the boys. Once the boys opened their boxes, they had to find the girl who made the meal and go off somewhere to eat with her. Dances were also held in this school as well.

Societal changes accelerated in the mid-twentieth century and greatly affected the Marche community. The proliferation of cars and the expansion of better roadways helped connect this once-isolated enclave to the wider, English-speaking region. Young men went off to war and came back having seen the world; sometimes they didn't come back but chose to find their fortunes elsewhere. Previously, one did not marry outside the Polish community, but this began to be more common. Camp Robinson expanded during World War II at the expense of many Marche residents, who had to sell their land and homes to the Army base. (Ruins of some of those homes and farms can still be seen on the base's training grounds.) When I-40 was constructed in the 1950s, it further carved up the community. Also, during this era, more and more people were giving up farming to work in the cities. All these forces exerted pressure against keeping a traditional, closed, Polish community.

With the world opening up and old ways of life giving way to modern ones, the people of Marche gravitated away from the Polish language and increasingly embraced English. Joe Gubanski typifies the transition. He grew up speaking Polish at home, but by the time he entered school, instruction was in English only. Having to learn English in school set him back a year. While he and others of his generation can still speak Polish, the younger generations generally don't.

The community is still proud of its Polish heritage, of course, and we are in luck, because their big annual Polish harvest festival called Karnawal is just around the corner, in mid-September. So if you fancy some sausage and sauerkraut, polka and fun, you should think about getting tickets!

IHM Cemetery

Behind the school is the cemetery. We won't visit it, but we can see it from the school. There was originally a Main Cemetery higher on the hillside and a Lower Cemetery further down, but they have been combined into one cemetery. The earliest marked grave dates to 1878, and the first record of a burial is also from 1878. There are close to 1,000 people buried in this cemetery, but there are over 300 unmarked graves because people used wooden crosses, which have since rotted. A columbarium was added in 2018.

There's a trail running behind the cemetery that leads up the hill to the first church site, where they tell me the old church's foundation can still be seen. The trail is overgrown, but the church is working to clear it and develop it into a meditative "heritage trail" that people can stroll on. They hope to have it completed soon.

Conclusion

I wish we had time to dig deeper into the rich traditions and lifestyle of this community, but that's for another time. There are some especially colorful wedding customs recorded in articles if you're interested. And I'd like to mention that Danielle Afsordeh at the Central Arkansas Library System Butler Center is actively documenting and archiving the heritage of the Polish community at Marche. She can tell you a lot more about the history. Also, if you happen to have any historical images or documents related to this community that you're willing to share copies of for posterity and for the greater public good, she would appreciate that a lot!

Now, whoever wants to join us, we're going to walk down the road to see the old school and peek at the cemetery. I'll try not to keep us out long because of the

heat. But I've already given you the history of it, so you won't really be missing out on information if you choose to stay in the cool.

Other than that, our formal tour is over. But you're welcome to stick around and look at the church building and take in its beauty at your own pace. Then we can make our way over to the office building, where we are being invited to refreshments—drinks and cookies—in the cafeteria. There will also be the opportunity for Q&A with Fr. Rubén and other folks knowledgeable about the local history.

Thank you for coming. Our next tour is of the historic buildings of Fort Roots on September 1st. We will meet on the parade grounds. Pray for cooler weather!

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