Norton County History

A continuation of stories and photographs that appear in a special section inserted in today's newspaper

The two faces of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Norton are pictured here. Above is the structure as it looked when dedicated in 1904, and on the left after a complete remodeling in the 1950s. Father Vincent Thu Laing is the current pastor.

Norton Catholic church among earliest in county

By Tom Dreiling

You plant the seed and watch it grow.

Sometimes it produces the desired results.

Sometimes it doesn't.

The *seed* in this case produced not a commodity that ended up on the dining room table, but people of faith, people who, many years ago, built places of worship out here on the prairie as they settled in to make their way in times uncertain. Some of the earlier churches were nothing more than a room in a house.

As the years passed and these "home churches" were unable to accommodate worshippers, simple structures began to dot the landscape. And with this change came men of the cloth to spread the message, to organize the cause.

This humble beginning 100 years and more ago, produced the desired result, and for all practical purposes continues to do so.

Among the earliest churches in Norton is St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. The church building, the rectory and parish hall take up a half block on South Wabash between East Washington on the south and East Main on the north. The church dates back to the 1870s and over the years has been home to 26 pastors, the current being Rev. Vincent Thu Laing, who came on board in 2002, succeeding the Rev. John E. Walsh.

What we see today as St. Francis of Assisi parish had a very humble beginning, as described many years ago by the late James O'Toole of Norton.

He wrote that the beginning of the Norton parish reminded him of a ship upon the open sea which, after being buffeted by the waves, finally landed safe in the harbor. "This," he said, "has a resemblance to the history of our parish. We have finally landed safe in the harbor after being beaten up by hot winds, dust storms and the devastation of the crops for my years.

Yet, it brings consolation and gratification to me."

Mr. O'Toole talked about the first pastor, the Rev. Augustine Reichert (1878-1889), whom he described as "a man of past middle age." He said the priest gave up his "dear home back in Ohio and came here on these western plains to follow the eastern borders of Colorado and back down through the northwest."

"He traveled in Cheyenne, Rawlins, Decatur and Norton counties in search of a scattered flock, and his method of travel was slow," he wrote. "He had a one-horse buggy. He continued on his journeys for nearly 20 years until he became feeble with age and was taken back to his old home and placed in a hospital where he later died."

Norton began as a mission of Father Reichert, who was stationed at New Almelo for about 10 years.

Mr. O'Toole recalled that Father Richard Daly, a young, energetic priest who served Norton from 1901-1907, made it his goal to build a church.

And he did.

Despite the rigors of construction at that time, Father Daly's leadership moved the project to completion, much to the satisfaction and appreciation of the parish. The cornerstone was laid in 1903 and the church was dedicated in 1904.

The church underwent a major remodeling in the 1950s.

Today, St. Francis of Assisi Parish has an estimated 215 families, numbering 450-500 souls.

Its mission continues.

Fast Facts:
• 1870 — First Catholic services held in Norton.
• 1879 — First church building located at Woodsfield and First Street.
• 1888 — Purchased the Norton school, which had been built in 1882 and moved to the Woodsfield

location.
• 1899 — Purchased the Case property at E. Washington and S. Wabash.
• 1904 — Dedication of present church building.
• 1915 — Present rectory built.
• 1954 — Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto dedicated.
• 1960 — Parish Center built, dedicated in 1961.

St. Francis of Assisi is just one of many churches that claim the Norton County area home.

Others include the Norton First United Methodist; Edmond United Methodist; Trinity Episcopal, Norton; Crossroads, Norton; St. Francis of Assisi Catholic, Norton; Prairie View Reformed; Luctor Christian Reformed, northeast of Prairie View; Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran, Norton; Norton Christian; First Church of God, Norton; Immanuel Lutheran, Norton; Almena Congregational; St. John's Catholic, Logan; First Christian; Logan; Clayton United Methodist; Lenora Church of God; Faith Lutheran, Oberlin; Norton Seventh Day Adventist; Long Island United Methodist; Norton First Baptist; Living Hope Fellowship, south of Norton; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Phillipsburg Ward; Logan United Methodist; United Parish of Lenora; Lyle United Methodist; Maple Grove Church of the Brethren, northwest of Norton; St. Joseph Catholic, New Almelo; Almena United Methodist; Hendley/Wilsonville United Methodist; Wilsonville United Baptist Christian; Norcatur United Methodist; and the Norton Ministerial Alliance, Sunday services at the Andbe Home and Norton Manor.

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(We owe a debt of gratitude to Margaret Wetter and to Janie Urban for their assistance with this article.)

Billingsville suggested as county seat's name

By Veronica Monier

There was a fierce competition for the Norton County seat, though it never came to actual violence.

Norton County started out with the name "Oro," bestowed by the Legislature of 1859. It kept that name until 1867, when it was re-named in memory of Orloff Norton, a captain of the 15th Kansas Cavalry killed in Civil War action at Cane Hill, Ark., in 1865.

Preston B. Plumb, who was at the time the speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives, suggested the name.

N.H. Billings, another member of the Legislature, managed to get the name changed to Billings County in 1873, but that change was short lived. The Legislature changed it back to Norton County the next year.

Mr. Billings rushed the county into premature organization. He arrived from Cloud County in February of 1872 and by June had petitioned the governor, asking that the county be organized with Billingsville as the temporary county seat. The petition claimed that there were more than 600 inhabitants within the county, when in reality there were less than 100.

The petition was rejected, but that didn't stop Mr. Billings from trying again. He presented a second petition on July 3, 1872. The governor accepted that and issued

an order for a census to be taken. On Aug. 22, 1872, the governor declared Billingsville the temporary county seat.

But, once again, Mr. Billings didn't get his way, as the name was rejected. Before the governor proclaimed Billingsville as the county seat, the settlers of what is now the county set apart a townsite for the purpose of making it the county seat. It was to be called Norton by unanimous consent.

When the proclamation came calling the county seat Billingsville, a special board of county commissioners rejected it, an action that was approved by the settlers.

The contest for the county seat reached far and wide, but mainly centered on Norton and Leota, with Billingsville and Reedtown playing minor parts in the beginning.

The commissioners called an election at their first session and it was held on Sept. 24, 1872. Norton received 38 votes and was declared the permanent county seat.

However, the election didn't settle the issue. M.A. Morrison presented a second petition, signed by 149 county residents, asking that the county seat be moved.

By 1874, Leota had made considerable growth and had begun to aspire to the higher calling of be-

ing named the county seat. The years 1875 to 1878 saw a great deal of political maneuvering, with neither side losing an opportunity to gain the advantage.

On Feb. 23, 1875, a second election was held. Norton won 95 votes to 86 for Leota, known on the records as Weston.
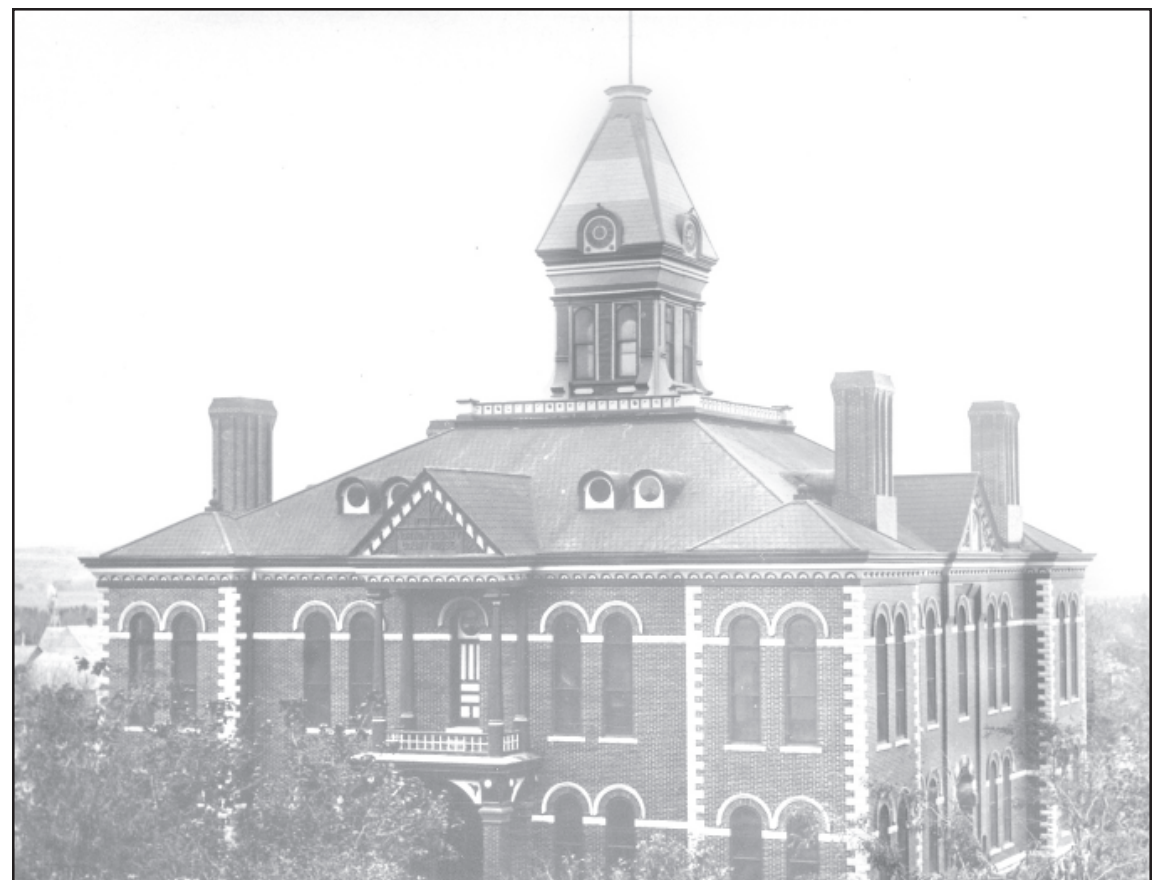
A third election was held on Oct. 30, 1875, but friends of Norton got an injunction forbidding the votes to be counted by the commissioners. The matter was taken to court, where the injunction was made permanent as it was found that the notices calling the election had not been posted in the legal manner.

"As nearly as can be determined, Weston (Leota) won the election by about 20 votes," said a witness.

The fourth attempt to relocate the county seat failed. M.W. Pettigrew presented a petition on April 25, 1878, but the matter was postponed until the May meeting. The commissioners spent several days striking names from the petition and hearing remonstrances.

People were getting tired of the struggle that had lasted for more than six years and the commissioners did not take up the petition again at their July meeting or ever again.

It still remains on record as unfinished business, but Norton has remained the county seat.

This is how the Norton County Courthouse looked before it was destroyed by fire on Dec. 1, 1926. Several attempts were made many years ago to call this Billings County. The county seat was proposed to be named Billingsville. The matter still remains on record as unfinished business, but Norton has remained the county seat.
— Photo courtesy Norton County Clerk's Office