Walks through History
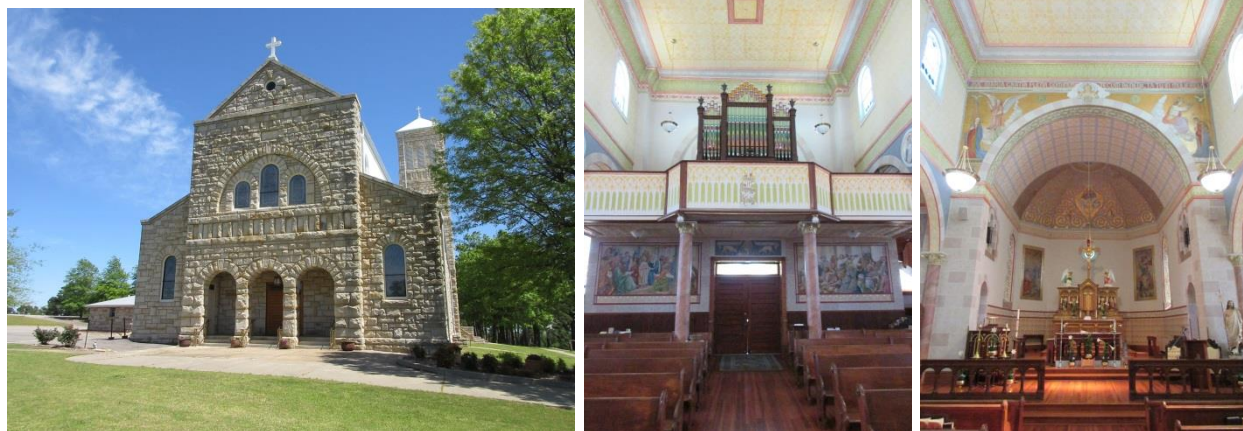**St. Mary's Catholic Church and Cemetery**
5118 St. Mary's Lane, Altus
May 14, 2016
By Rachel Silva

Intro

Good morning, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the "Walks through History" tour of St. Mary's Catholic Church and Cemetery. I'd like to thank St. Mary's for allowing us to visit the church today and the Altus Sunset Rotary Club for co-sponsoring the tour. And special thanks go to Fr. Hugh Assenmacher, the current minister at St. Mary's, for his help!

This tour is worth two hours of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you're interested.

St. Mary's Catholic Church was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 for its Romanesque Revival-style architecture and ornate interior decoration as well as its association with the history of central and Eastern European immigration in the Arkansas River Valley.

Early History of Altus

Franklin County was created by an act of the Arkansas Legislature on December 19, 1837, from part of Crawford County. Franklin County was named in honor of diplomat and inventor Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States. Beginning in 1870, the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad began laying track from Argenta (North Little Rock) to Fort Smith. By 1874, a railhead had been established at Altus, so named because it was the highest point along the line between Little Rock and Fort Smith. Altus is the Latin word for "high."

The arrival of the railroad prompted growth in the River Valley's coal-mining industry, as coal became easier to ship. Coal mining in Franklin County was an important industry from the 1880s until the mid-twentieth century.

In the 1870s and 1880s, a significant number of central and Eastern European immigrants came to Arkansas. Many of these people were German Catholics who fled their native land in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and to escape Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*. The German word *Kulturkampf* ("culture struggle") refers to the legally sanctioned discrimination and harassment of Catholics in the German Empire carried out by Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck from 1871 to 1878. Bismarck's anti-Catholic policies were enacted in response to a perceived political threat from the Pope and an increasing number of Catholic converts. Fleeing persecution, these immigrants were actively drawn to Arkansas by railroad companies and the Catholic Church. The Arkansas state government also beckoned these hard-working immigrants.

For example, the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway worked closely with Bishop Edward Fitzgerald to advertise land in the Arkansas River Valley between Little Rock and Fort Smith to German and Swiss Catholics. The railroad company (and state government) wanted people to settle along the route, thereby establishing a market for its services. St. Benedict's Colony, located near Paris in Logan County, was founded in 1877 on land donated by the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway. The colony was created after Bishop Fitzgerald encouraged Benedictines from St.

Meinrad's Abbey in southern Indiana to establish a mission on the western frontier. In 1891 St. Benedict's Colony became an independent monastery and was renamed New Subiaco Abbey. The presence of New Subiaco Abbey further enticed Catholics to move to the area.

Central and Eastern European immigrants were attracted to the Altus area because of the availability of cheap land as well as jobs with the railroad and coal mines. The region's moderate climate, sandy soil, and hilly terrain also turned out to be ideal for growing grapes. Swiss and German immigrants like Johann Wiederkehr and Jacob Post knew how to make wine when they arrived at Altus, initially using native berries and fruits to make it. Wiederkehr and Post soon planted grapes and expanded their operations. Other immigrants followed suit, turning Altus into Arkansas's Wine Country. Altus was incorporated on August 31, 1888, with a population of about 450.

St. Mary's Catholic Church

St. Mary's parish was officially founded at Altus on November 21, 1879, when Rev. Beatus Maria Ziswyler performed the marriage ceremony of August Reimann and Magdalena Huber. Rev. Ziswyler, a Swiss immigrant who had been involved in mission work in Indiana and Missouri, was sent by the second Bishop of Little Rock, Edward Fitzgerald, to minister to the German-speaking Catholics in Franklin and Johnson counties. Rev. Ziswyler chose to build his home and later, the first church, on forty acres donated by the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad atop what was then called Pond Creek Mountain (now St. Mary's Mountain).

Church services were initially held on the second floor of the rectory until a large gathering of people challenged the integrity of the floor. A separate church building was necessary. A wood-frame church with an onion-shaped steeple was completed in 1881. The 1881 church sat just south of the present church and faced west. A parochial school was started shortly thereafter.

Rev. Ziswyler died on July 27, 1887, and was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery. After the death of Rev. Ziswyler, Bishop Fitzgerald put St. Mary's parish under the care of the German-speaking monks at St. Benedict's Priory (became Subiaco Abbey in 1891). The Benedictines of Subiaco continue to serve St. Mary's today.

Construction of Present Church, 1901-1902

During the late 1890s, the coal mine at Denning, a town just south of Altus, provided work for many Eastern European immigrants. As the area continued to grow, it became apparent that a larger Catholic church was necessary. Parishioners at St. Mary's began saving money for the construction of a new church in July 1899. Although there was talk of building the new church closer to the business district of Altus, the parish voted to construct its new church on the mountain just north of the 1881 church. The construction of the present church was overseen by Fr. Placidus Oeschle, OSB, who served as pastor from 1898 until his death in 1935. In 1897 Fr. Placidus was brought to Altus to regain his health, which he did. He is largely responsible for the current appearance of the church.

Plans for the church were drafted by Brother Hadrian, OFM (Order of Friars Minor; Franciscan), of Quincy, Illinois, who drew a Roman-style Basilica with a large sanctuary/apse, nave, two side aisles, and a substantial tower. However, because of other obligations and miscommunication, Brother Hadrian never completed the detailed blueprints for the church. This task was left to Fr. Placidus, stone mason John Riedt of St. Louis, and carpenter Rudolph Metzger of Fort Smith. On January 2, 1901, a quarry was opened on the side of the mountain just below the present church site, and excavation for the foundation stones began. About a month and a half later, on February 18, 1901, the first stone was blessed and laid at the northwest corner of the church. Foundation work continued, going east for 117 ½ feet and then south for 56 feet. It was necessary to dig ten feet down to hit solid rock along the south wall, which somehow ended up being eight inches longer than the north wall. The cornerstone was laid at the southwest corner on May 24, 1901, during the feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians. The cornerstone, which measures 25" x 18" x 27", bears a Latin inscription meaning,

"Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians," as well as the date, "on the 24th day of May, in the year of our Lord 1901." A hole was cut in the bottom of the cornerstone to hold a copper box containing church documents, contemporary newspapers, and coins.

The present church, known officially as the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (or Our Lady, Help of Christians), was dedicated on September 2, 1902. The church was designed in the Romanesque Revival style, which became popular in the United States during the late 19th century and sought to revive or imitate characteristics of Romanesque era (AD 800-1150) buildings in Europe. The use of rough-cut sandstone blocks, rounded arch window openings, arcades of arches, and the massive corner bell tower are all characteristics of the Romanesque Revival style.

In addition to their architectural significance, the tripartite arches of the porch arcade and the grouping of three arched windows in the western gable end (front façade) symbolize the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The gold letters on the upper façade are an abbreviation for Latin words meaning, "God, most good, most great" and "the Blessed Virgin Mary." [DOM et BMV = Deo Optimo Maximo et Beatae Mariae Virginae]

The stained glass transom window above the front doors includes a Bible verse in German: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28 [This window is made to be read from outside as you enter the church.]

Windows

Initially, all 29 window openings were filled with "heavy storm glass," but stained glass windows were purchased with the help of donations from parishioners, Christian societies, and community organizations. The stained glass windows, which arrived at the end of April 1903, were made by Emil Frei Art Glass of St. Louis and the Art Glass Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. The total cost for the

windows was about $1,650 (equal to almost $44,000 today). They were installed by Jacob Barens, who donated part of his wages to the church.

- Ocular window above the high altar: Cross of St. Andrew, patron saint of the first Catholic Bishop of Little Rock, Andrew Byrne, and of the Diocese of Little Rock, which includes all Catholics in Arkansas. Paid for by the parishioners of St. Mary's.
- Windows on either side of the high altar:
  - North side: St. Benedict, in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the New Subiaco Abbey.
  - South side: St. Meinrad, in memory of the Very Rev. P. Gallus D'Aujourd'hui, OSB, a Swiss immigrant who served as Prior of the New Subiaco Abbey at the time of his death in May 1902. He visited St. Mary's on May 15, 1902, to observe the progress of construction on the new church. On his way home to Subiaco that evening, the Reverend attempted to cross Short Mountain Creek after heavy rains, and his buggy was swept away. His body was found at the bottom of the creek the next day. He was only 47 years old.
- Windows above sacristy and bell tower doors: seal of St. Benedict.
- Clerestory windows: 10 of them; feature patterned designs; each window cost $20. Two of the donors for these windows were Frank and John Rinke of Coal Hill.
- North side aisle windows, from front of church to rear:
  - St. Michael, Archangel: given by the First Catholic Yednota, a benevolent society of the church's Polish-speaking members (Denning, AR).
  - St. Agnes, virgin and martyr: given by the Young Ladies' Sodality.
  - John the Baptist: given by John Schriver (cost $85).
  - St. Anna (Mary's mother) and the Blessed Virgin Mary as a child: given by the Christian Mothers' Society.
  - St. Mathew, Apostle: given by St. Mathew's Branch, No. 816, Catholic Knights of America.

- Window behind stairs to choir loft (west wall of church): Immaculate Heart of Mary.
- Grouping of three windows in front (west) gable: donated by members of the choir.
    - Central window: St. Cecilia, patron saint of music
    - Two windows on either side: patterned designs
- Window behind confessional (west wall of church): Sacred Heart of Jesus.
- South side aisle windows, from rear to front of church:
    - St. Andrew, Apostle: in honor of the president of the St. Joseph's Farmers Club, Andrew Buergler.
    - St. Joachim, patriarch and father of the Blessed Virgin Mary: given by the St. Joseph Benevolent Society.
    - St. Joseph: given by Joseph Post (cost $85).
    - St. Barbara, virgin and martyr: given by St. Barbara Society of Catholic Coal Miners (composed mostly of Slavic peoples).
    - St. Raphael, Archangel: patron of the Young Men's Sodality.

Interior Painted Decoration

In February 1914 German artist Fridolin Fuchs came to the United States to see the World's Fair at San Francisco. He planned to finance his trip with money he was paid to paint a church at Lindsay, Texas (northwest of Dallas; near Gainesville, TX). Fr. Placidus, who was himself a talented artist, made two trips to Lindsay, Texas, to watch Mr. Fuchs and try to learn his painting technique so that he could paint the interior of St. Mary's. At that time, the interior walls, ceiling, and columns at St. Mary's were painted white. [The pressed tin was already in place.]

The start of World War I during the summer of 1914 made it impossible for Fuchs to return to Germany as planned, so he offered his services to St. Mary's for $600 plus room and board. He was later paid an additional $150 for the Stations of the Cross. St. Mary's had to provide the paint, which was made with French and German dyes that were difficult to obtain during wartime. After consulting with

Fr. Placidus, Mr. Fuchs started to paint the church on January 2, 1915, and finished in April 1916.

Descriptions of paintings: Many of the scenes were modeled after existing art in the Catholic churches of Europe. They were drawn by Fr. Placidus and painted by Fuchs. For example, the Stations of the Cross were smaller versions of the life-sized Stations at St. Mary's Church in Stuttgart, Germany.

APSE/SANCTUARY
- Ceiling in the apse (or sanctuary)
  - Immaculate Conception: The hand of God dispensing the Word of God (blue streak with Greek letters "LOGOS," Jesus as the Word of God) working through the Holy Spirit to shield Mary from the sin of Adam and Eve.
- Translation of "the Sanctus" painted around the apse (behind the high altar):
  Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
  heaven and earth are full of your glory.
  Hosanna in the highest.
  Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
- North side of the high altar:
  - Melchizedek offering bread and wine to Abraham
- South side of high altar:
  - Abraham ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac

WALL ABOVE ARCH
- Center:
  - Angel holding a keystone that says "PAX," which means "Peace."
- Left:
  - The Annunciation: when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus, the son of God.

- o Bottom left corner: family crest with an ox on it for Fr. Placidus Oeschle
- Right:
  - o The Coronation: Christ the King crowning his mother, Mary, as the Queen of Heaven.
  - o Bottom right corner: family crest with a fox on it for Fridolin Fuchs
- Frieze:
  - o Translation of "Ave Maria" painted above the arch:
    Hail Mary, full of grace,
    the Lord is with thee;
    blessed art thou amongst women.

PAINTING ABOVE THE NORTH SIDE ALTAR (VIRGIN MARY)

- The Virgin Mary presenting her Son to mankind: Symbolizes authority, showing Pope Benedict XV, Bishop John Baptist Morris, Abbot Ignatius Conrad of New Subiaco Abbey, Fr. Placidus Oeschle, and Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph on the right side. There is also a model of St. Mary's Church on the lower right. The people on the left side follow by example and take refuge in the Lord.

PAINTING ABOVE THE SOUTH SIDE ALTAR (ST. JOSEPH)

- Joseph with Jesus: Symbolizes the blessing of labor and trades, showing people in various lines of work as well as the floor plan of St. Mary's Church. Parishioners served as models for this painting.

PAINTINGS UNDER THE CHOIR LOFT

- North side: Jesus cleansing the Temple of money changers. There were several local models in the paintings under the choir loft. Notice the self-portrait of the artist, Fridolin Fuchs, in the bottom right corner with his palette and paint brushes.
- South side: Mary and Joseph find the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple amongst the scholars. Several local models used.

- Center, above the doors: Two deer drinking from a fountain. Reference to Psalm 42: "As a deer longs for streams of water, my soul longs for you, O God." The seven streams of the fountain represent the seven sacraments (rituals performed in the Catholic Church)—Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

Columns

The interior columns are made out of cedar wood and were painted by Fuchs to look like pink granite with gilded Corinthian capitals.

Medallions

Eight medallions were painted above the columns in the nave. Men are on the south side, and women are on the north side. The parishioners had a special devotion to these saints.
South side, front to rear: St. Gregory the Great, St. Boniface, St. Henry, and St. Placidus.
North side, front to rear: St. Agatha, St. Gertrude the Great, St. Elizabeth, and St. Rosa of Lima.

Stations of the Cross

The 14 Stations of the Cross are a series of images depicting the suffering and passion of Jesus Christ. The first station is located toward the front of the church on the south side (near the St. Joseph altar). A 15th scene was added on the north wall depicting the Resurrection ("It is the master!"). The text below the images was originally done in German. But in 1963, during the Second Vatican Council, some changes were made to the interior of the church, including the Stations of the Cross. At that time, the text was repainted in English. But when the interior of the church was restored in 1999 by Conrad Schmitt Studios of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Stations of the Cross were changed back to German. Notice that the bottom right corner of Station 14 is signed by Fridolin Fuchs.

Altars

High Altar—The High Altar was built about 1885 for St. Edward's Catholic Church in Little Rock. St. Edward's completed its current church in 1904 and gradually decorated the interior. When the parishioners had raised enough money for a new high altar, the church donated its 1885 altar to St. Mary's. Based on historical photos, the Crucifix and angel statues came from St. Edward's with the altar. Note the four Evangelists (left to right) on the altar: Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Tabernacle on the high altar holds the Blessed Sacrement, or the Body of Christ.

Central Altar—A central altar was added in 1966 after Vatican II, so the priest could face the congregation while saying Mass. In the 1990s, Fr. Hilary Filiatreau repurposed the gates from the old communion rail to enhance the appearance of the central altar.

Side Altars—The side altars were built between 1918 and 1920 by Urban Sprug. Mrs. Anna Heitmann-Meiger paid $400 toward the total cost of $500. Fr. Placidus paid the remaining balance. Ten different kinds of wood were used in the construction of the side altars, including yellow pine, red oak, white oak (main body), cherry, black walnut, butternut (capitals), red cedar (columns), mahogany, white maple, and cottonwood.

Communion rail

Although Holy Communion is no longer served to parishioners at the Communion rail, St. Mary's decided to keep it in place because it is a beautiful, handmade piece of woodwork. It was built out of cherry and walnut by Andrew Buerglar using a horse-powered lathe to turn the spindles. There was a double gate in the center and single gates on either side (those now form the base of the central altar).

Pulpit

The pulpit was built in 1912 by Andrew Buergler. It is solid walnut. In order to amplify the voice of the priest, the pulpit was originally elevated. It was attached to the first column on the north side of the church (closest to the altar of the Blessed Virgin). A curved staircase provided access to the pulpit, which was about six feet in the air. In 1968 Fr. Lawrence Miller moved the pulpit to its present location (a public address system was installed in 1968, so it was no longer necessary to be elevated to address the congregation).

Organ

The organ was built in 1897 by St. Louis organ manufacturer J. G. Pfeffer. It was originally installed at the St. Francis de Sales Oratory in St. Louis and was sold to St. Mary's in 1925 for $500. The organ was beautifully restored by Redman Pipe Organs of Dallas, Texas, in 1986 at a cost of more than $100,000.

Bells

St. Mary's Church has four large bells in its tower. The bells were cast by Stuckstede & Bros. of St. Louis. The bells were purchased with donations.
1. Regina Coeli (2,713 pounds; note of D)--$649 donated by Henry and Catherine Schmedes of Little Rock, who had donated land for St. Edward's Church in that city.
2. Mary Magdalene (1,750 pounds; note of F)--$450 donated by Mr. and Mrs. Mathias Droll.
3. Holy Apostles (1,180 pounds; note of G)--$230 donated by 11 men of the congregation.
4. Holy Angels (750 pounds, note of A)--$100 donated by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Joerger and the remainder collected during the dedication.

The bells arrived on a flatcar a few days before Thanksgiving 1902. Because of their weight, it was quite difficult getting them up the hill to St. Mary's Church. In

fact, some of the mules used to pull the wagon were injured. The bells were installed and dedicated on Thanksgiving day 1902.

Sanctuary lamp (red candle)—reminder that the Eucharist is present. The candle moves up and down and is changed every two weeks.

Point out sacristy (vestments and Communion supplies) and entrance to bell tower.

Confessional—Current confessional was installed in 1966.

Light fixtures/pews—The light fixtures have been replaced since the 1970s. The pews are original.

Holy oils—one for sick, one for baptism, one for confirmation. In the Cathedral, one is for ordination.

Closing info—Fr. Hugh, who taught at Subiaco for 46 years, has been sacramental minister at St. Mary's for about two years (he does all of the church services). St. Mary's has Mass every morning of the week, except for Wednesday and Saturday, when Mass is in the evening. The congregation now consists of about 150 families, who fill the church twice each weekend.

Extra: Church roof was replaced in 2010 with similar pressed-metal shingle roof.

School

A parochial school started at St. Mary's in the early 1880s. In 1891 a new school was constructed to replace the first building, which had been destroyed by a tornado. Also in 1891, the Benedictine sisters at St. Scholastica's Monastery at Shoal Creek in Logan County (moved to Fort Smith in 1925) agreed to serve as teachers in St. Mary's School. After the present church was completed in 1902, parishioners attempted to move the old wood-frame church to another location

for use as a school building. Unfortunately, the old church started to come apart and was dismantled. The lumber from the old church was then salvaged and used to construct a school.

A new school was built in 1973 (what is now the northern half of Lawrence Hall). The old wooden school sat just south of the 1973 school until 1979, when the old school was demolished to make way for a new parish hall. The bell tower from the old school building, which was built out of lumber salvaged from the 1881 church, was saved and is now mounted on sandstone blocks by the entrance to the church property. The parish hall was later named in honor of Fr. Lawrence Miller, who pastored St. Mary's Church from 1968 until a few months before his death on April 28, 1980 (he had cancer). For much of the twentieth century, St. Mary's School taught students in the first through eighth grades.

**The school closed 8 or 9 years ago. Maybe due to low enrollment and financial burden?

Convent

A sisters' home was built around the turn of the 20th century. It was replaced in 1966 with the present sandstone house. After the school closed, the sisters' house became an office and Sunday School classrooms.

Rectory

A 2 ½-story, wood-frame rectory designed in the Second Empire style of architecture was built in 1895 to house the minister at St. Mary's, as well as clergy traveling to Subiaco Abbey, which is about 13 miles southeast of here (as the crow flies). The old rectory was replaced in 1966 with the present sandstone, Ranch-style house.

Cemetery

St. Mary's Cemetery is reserved for parish members and their relatives.

The southwest corner of the cemetery is primarily composed of the graves of infants and children. Historically, there was a high child mortality rate.

Cast-iron markers, some locally made, probably by the local blacksmith.

Inscriptions in German:
"Hier Ruht In Gott" = "Here Rests In God"
"Zum Andenken An" = "In Remembrance of"

Beatus Maria Ziswyler marker:
> Swiss immigrant; first pastor and founder of St. Mary's parish
> Died 26 (or was it the 27th?) July 1887
> Cup and host—symbol of Communion
> His mother, Annie Mary Ziswyler, is also buried here and listed on the other side of the marker. She died on Sept. 7, 1888.

Row 6—August and Magdalena Reimann, their marriage on Nov. 21, 1879, marked the official founding of St. Mary's parish.

Rev. Fr. Patrick McCormack:
> Came to Subiaco and St. Mary's to get well. He suffered from consumption (tuberculosis) and also contracted malaria. He was staying at Subiaco on the night the monastery burned—December 15-16, 1901. He had to make the trip to St. Mary's in the bitter cold that night. Rev. McCormack died on January 7, 1902, from complications due to tuberculosis, malaria, and typhoid.

Woodmen of the World marker:

WOW started in the late 19th century. It was a fraternal benefit society founded by Joseph C. Root after he heard a sermon about "pioneer woodsmen clearing away the forest to provide for families." He wanted to clear away financial problems for the society's members.

Schmidt marker:

Born near Altus, Charles "Boss" Schmidt grew up working in a coal mine. He later played for the Detroit Tigers (1906-1911). He died destitute in 1932 and was buried in an unmarked grave at St. Mary's Cemetery. After locals informed the Detroit Tigers that Schmidt's grave was unmarked, in 1970 the team paid to install a marker.