

Access Strategies for Catholic Records: The Catholic Archives of Texas and the Recovery of Texas History

—by Kinga Perzynska

Archivist of the Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas

Beginnings

Horrified by the destruction of the Spanish Mission of Ysleta near El Paso in 1907,¹ as well as determined to fight against anti-Catholic forces marshaled by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and seeking to preserve the Catholic heritage in Texas, the Texas Knights of Columbus in 1923 formed their Historical Commission.² The

Commission set as its goal the writing of a well-researched and academically sound history of the Catholic Church in Texas. The gathering of research material for the written history was greatly facilitated by several historians led by Dr. Carlos E. Castañeda, Historical Commission chair, Rev. Dr. Paul J. Foik, C.S.C., and a few bishops of Texas and correspondents: Rev.



Nuestra Señora del Carmen Mission at Ysleta (Ysleta Mission). El Paso, Texas. Photograph taken prior to fire of 1907.

Raymond J. Clancy; Joseph I. Driscoll; Bishop Lawrence J. FitzSimon; Bishop Mariano S. Garriga; Rev. James P. Gibbons, C.S.C.; Bishop Emmanuel B. Ledvina; Rev. Joseph S. Murphy; Monsignor William H. Oberste; Adina de Zavala; Kathryn S. O'Connor; Dr. Peter Guilday and Rev. Joseph G. O'Donohoe. The resulting seven-volume series, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936*,³ exceeded their goal. Simultaneous with the writing of *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*, the Texas Knights of Columbus Historical Commission established the *Catholic Archives of Texas* (CAT) in 1923 to house collected materials relating to the history of Catholics in the State. The CAT, now housed in the Chancery building of the Diocese of Austin, includes among its holdings the original and photostatically reproduced records gathered by the Historical Commission for the writing of *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*. These records form the bulk of the Spanish and Mexican Manuscript Collection. Prior to its move to the Chancery building in Austin, the Catholic Archives of Texas was located at St. Edward's University in

Austin, with Dr. Paul J. Foik, C.S.C. serving as archivist. After Fr. Foik's death in 1941, all records collected for writing *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*—some 70,000 pages—and other Historical Commission records were stored in the basement of St. Edward's University in Austin. In 1948, the Archives came under the custody of Bishop Lawrence J. FitzSimon of Amarillo and were moved to that city. From 1947 until his death in 1958, Bishop FitzSimon, a collector of documents and historian of the Church in the Southwest, increased the holdings of the archives with documents and photographs garnered from the various parishes and chancery offices in Texas. With Bishop FitzSimon's having passed away, the seven bishops in Texas were at a loss concerning the disposition of the burgeoning archives. Providentially, Bishop Louis J. Reicher, first bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Austin, had recently finished building the Chancery office. In June 1959 the Archives were moved from Amarillo to Austin, into the basement of the Chancery. In 1961, Dominican Sister M. Claude Lane, O.P., known well to the archival community today, completed a preliminary inventory of all CAT's holdings.⁴ The centrally located repository in Austin was quickly noticed in the 1960s by researchers interested in records related to Southwestern American history. Conditions in the Austin Chancery's building, however, were far below those required to provide archival services—no air and humidity control, no proper light and no money to develop archival access programs. Sr. Lane's guide to the archives' collections was a typed manuscript with only a few copies and did not provide detailed descriptions of collections. Sr. Dolores Kasner, O.P., was helping Sr. Lane, and both Dominicans strived almost 30 years to collect as much documentation as possible concerning Texas Catholic history. Stories circulated widely about “dim dungeons” and some important Texas history papers stored in Bishop Reicher's fallout shelter.

Institutional and Community Support

From 1947 onward, the bishops of Texas supported the archives under the charter of the Texas Catholic Historical Society, formed in 1928, and designated one “curator-bishop” from among their number. The situation changed in 1986, when CAT was taken under the auspices of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, which had been formed in 1964.⁵ The Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) facilitates an exchange of ideas and recommendations among all of the diocese of Texas. Texas bishops committed themselves to renovate the Archives and establish one of the best equipped small repositories and research facilities for Catholic historical research in the country. The Archives also became the official repository for the Texas Catholic Conference records and those departments under its administration. The archivist became an official staff member of the TCC and received annually an approved budget for CAT. Most. Rev. John E. McCarthy, present Bishop of Austin, previous executive director of the TCC, was

the one who initiated a renovation and promotion of the Archives. He recommended to all bishops of Texas to take care of this repository containing material relating not only to the Southwest but generally to the rich history of Catholics in the United States and Mexico. Presently, the Catholic Archives of Texas is the only repository of its kind in the country, servicing one religion for an entire state. The Archives' collections have come a long way to become today's repository with open access, professional staff, and ambitious future outreach goals.



*Researchers at the
Catholic Archives of Texas, 1994.*

Since its opening after the renovation in 1987, the archives have gained more researchers and recognition through the efforts of the Texas Catholic Historical Society (re-chartered in Galveston in 1976 and restructured through 1980s). The Society publishes a newsletter and the annual scholarly journal, *The Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture*, now called *Catholic Southwest: A Journal of History and Culture*, the first volume of which was published in 1990.⁶ The networking of Catholic repositories, archivists, history departments, and the historical society provides the foundation for a truly successful endeavor in the field of scholarly Catholic history. This publishing venture also raises the status and importance of both the local and regional Catholic archives in Texas as sources for historical research. With its rich documentation about Texas and Southwestern Catholic history, CAT serves as the primary outlet for the publication of Catholic historical and cultural material.

Recent Access Plans

Future development plans aiming toward full access to the repository's collections include publishing a new guide to the Catholic Archives of Texas that will describe the main record groups and provide a comprehensive index to the names of creators, key functions, events and topics of known research interests.

In 1990, the Texas Knights of Columbus was approached with a grant proposal to fund its records storage and processing at the CAT. The on-going yearly funding was granted, and it was a big step toward the Archives' access development. An archives assistant was hired to help with the Knights' records processing and various other archival duties. As of February 1996, the Archives Assistant had processed approximately 150 linear feet of Knights' records and prepared six major exhibits related to these records for display at the archives and at Knights' conventions.

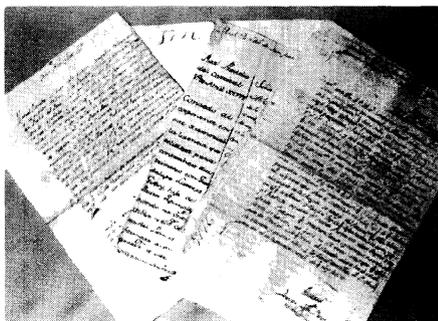
At the same time, the CAT Advisory Board was reestablished with participation of the executive director of the TCC, the Knights of Columbus State Secretary, and three professional archivists and historians. The Board holds meet-

ings at least twice a year and advises and guides the archivist to fulfill the Archives' plans and objectives. Finally, the Board members are essential supporters in searching and applying for future funding.

The second major step in access improvement to the Archives' collections was receiving a one year grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) in Washington, DC. in 1993, making possible the processing of the *Spanish and Mexican Manuscript Collection, 1519-1890* and the publication of a guide to the collection.⁷ Three hundred fifty copies of the guide were sent to institutions and sold to individuals. Besides publishing the guide to the collection, 35 sub-group descriptions of this collection and others were sent to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* in the Library of Congress. Presently, most of the Archives' collections are accessible through the national on-line computer systems RLIN and OCLC.

The recognition by a federal supporting agency of the importance to describe and publicize the Catholic history records collected by Carlos E. Castañeda and the Texas Knights of Columbus Historical Commission for publishing *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936* is a great advance in CAT's development. Many repositories in Texas and the Southwestern United States collect records related to early Spanish, Mexican, and later, American Catholic history in the territory of today's Texas and Southwest. However, there is still a lack of printed guides to improve access to their collections. Availability of a detailed guide to the CAT's core collection has produced a tremendous increase in research requests at the Archives. *The Spanish and Mexican Manuscript Collection* includes photostatic or microfilmed copies and originals of documents from the Archivo General de México in Mexico City, the Archivo de la Secretaria de Gobierno del Estado de Coahuila at Saltillo, and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain. These documents, because of their convenient location at CAT and, in many cases, the physical destruction of or lack of access to the originals have become the primary resources for researchers in the United States.

Federal funding also brought other possibilities to reach local money sources. Just recently CAT obtained the first part of two-year funding from the Scanlan Foundation in Houston, Texas for a new project to arrange, preserve, publish a guide, and establish a records management program for the Texas Catholic Conference Records, 1964 onward. A Project Archivist was hired to arrange at



Diligencia Matrimoniales from Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del Paso del Norte, Juárez, Mexico, 1776. *Spanish and Mexican Manuscript Collection, Catholic Archives of Texas.*

least 200 linear feet of TCC records. Access to these more contemporary records will provide very valuable primary documentation to study the last thirty years of history of the Catholic church in Texas and the United States, a period encompassing the changes of Vatican II.

Promotion of small repositories and their treasures buried in basements around the country through forums such as the Society of American Archivists, the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists, and the American Catholic Historical Association is required in order to result in better funding for these small institutions. In the CAT's final project report to the NHPRC it was recommended that NHPRC give more attention and consideration to small repositories' applications and their lesser known but important collections. On the other hand, the task of obtaining funding also requires patience, perseverance, and the supporting recommendations from the local community and researchers promoting history resources. The NHPRC grant proposals go through a regional board and the decision made on that level largely determines the funding. Very often historians and history researchers are members of these regional commissions. Previous outreach programs, like exhibits and promotional articles for the collection, are helpful in the groundwork for such applications. The repository needs to show that collections are not only important intellectually but also that the archive provides an important service to the institution for local supervisors and institutional authorities.

The Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists (ACDA) has served the archival community since its creation at the Society of American Archivists meeting in 1981. Since then the ACDA has grown into a strong organization of 183 members. In the early 1960s, a national survey of archival resources of all types could identify only four archives in American Catholic dioceses. Today Catholic dioceses are represented in the ACDA by 162 members. The ACDA, has focused on the development and growth of professional diocesan archives in the country and has developed a series of publications regarding archives' organization and procedures.⁸ Existence of this organization makes a real difference in guiding diocesan archivists and other personnel working for the Catholic church and other small repositories. An especially important role of the ACDA is in promoting the change toward professionally trained archival personnel within Catholic church repositories. One can only wish that this organization will continue to influence other dioceses and help to recognize archival records as a vital part of each diocese. Cooperation and exchange of information among archivists and researchers should result in better attendance in regional and professional meetings. We hope that this cooperation will also support the archivists of these repositories in future grant applications as well as by access to their records through national on-line computer systems.

In conclusion, the recovery of access to Texas history at the Catholic Archives of Texas took intensive work during the last few years and it is far from being fin-

ished. Archivists themselves can organize outreach programs and search for new funds to increase access to their records. In addition to archivists, researchers, and, most of all, Catholic historians have their own role to play. Rather than acting solely as users, and requesting material for research, they need to help lone arrangers and basement keepers to promote Catholic repositories and become their advocates. They need to acknowledge more visibly the repositories' existence and assistance in their research and publications. They also need to participate in regional bodies advising on grant distribution and, as in the case of the Catholic Archives of Texas, participate as an active member in archives' boards or repository's presentations and exhibits. Voices of archivists should be expressed not only through professional archival newsletters and publications but also through professional historical newsletters and journals. The promotion of the CAT by the Texas Knights of Columbus, the Texas bishops, like John McCarthy, or Richard Daly, C.S.C., present executive director of Texas Catholic Conference, show visible evidence of support. Their interest in Texas Catholic history and their motivation to preserve it for the future has helped the Catholic Archives of Texas to move to the forefront of Catholic repositories in this country.

A unique entity, the Catholic Archives of Texas, besides the above listed records, holds the records of Religious Associations, Societies and Catholic Clubs in Texas; the private papers of Rev. Paul J. Foik, Monsignor William H. Oberste, Sam Houston, Charles S. Taylor, Rev. Francis Bouchu; the personal papers and biographical files of the bishops and clergy in Texas; diocesan and parish collection records; documents dealing with various religious congregations formed or stationed in the state; an extensive collection of Catholic periodicals from around the state; sacramental records on microfilm; a large collection of photographs; an artifact collection; and a sizable research library.

Notes

1. Ysleta Mission in El Paso, Texas was destroyed by fire on May 14, 1907. The roof and bell tower collapsed but the walls were stored. Rev. Ernest J. Burrus, S.J., *Outstanding Historical Dates and Events of the Towns, Missions and Churches in the El Paso Valley* (El Paso: The Historical Cultural Commission of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso, Texas, n.d.)

2. Resolution made at the Twentieth Annual Convention of the Texas State Council of the Knights of Columbus held at Austin on May 15 and 16, 1923. *The Texas Knights of Columbus Historical Commission, Report of the Proceedings of the Meeting held at St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas, November 23 and 24, 1926*. Catholic Archives of Texas, Texas Knights of Columbus Historical

Commission Records, 1915-1961.

3. Carlos E. Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas in Seven Volumes, 1519-1936*. Prepared under the auspices of *The Knights of Columbus of Texas*, Paul J. Foik, C.S.C., ed., (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, 1936-1958, Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1976).

4. Sr. M. Claude Lane, O.P., A.B., *Catholic Archives of Texas: History and Preliminary Inventory. Thesis*. Austin: University of Texas, 1961.

5. Preamble of the *Texas Catholic Conference Constitution & By Laws* (with amendments approved through 1983) proclaimed “the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church having ordinary jurisdiction in the State of Texas...and established the Texas Catholic Conference.” The purpose and structure of the organization were formalized in 1964 in *Articles of Administration* adopted by the Ordinaries of Texas.

6. *The Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* will change its name with the 1996 issue to *Catholic Southwest: A Journal of History and Culture*.

7. Guide to the *Spanish and Mexican Manuscript Collection at the Catholic Archives of Texas*. Compiled by Dedra S. McDonald, ed., Kinga Perzynska (Austin: Catholic Archives of Texas, 1994).

8. James O’Toole, *Basic Standards for Diocesan Archives: A Guide for Bishops, Chancellors and Archivists* (Chicago: ACDA, 1992). Other ACDA publications: *Guidelines for Access to Diocesan Archives*. Drafted by Standard Access Policy Committee Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists. Adopted by the ACDA Executive Board, January, 1991. Proceedings of 1989, 1990, and 1992 conferences sponsored by Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists.