

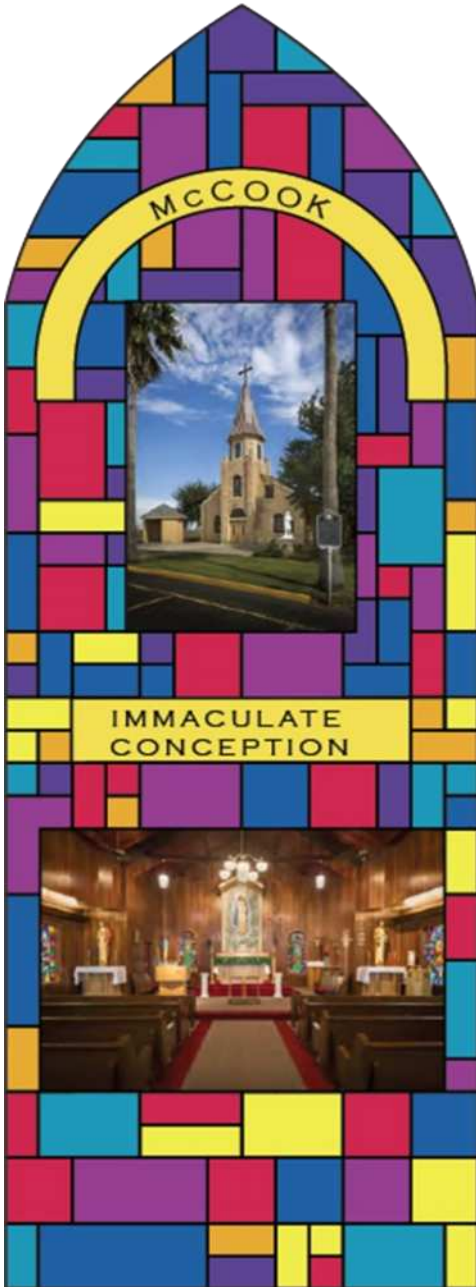


Polish Heritage Center



Visitor Experience, #22 in Series Immaculate Conception Church, McCook, Texas

*By: Mary Ann Moczygamba Watson
and Bernadine Moczygamba Kotzur*



In Hidalgo County, a small community named McCook is located at the crossroads of FM 681 and 490 in the lower Rio Grande Valley. McCook was named for a local storekeeper but by the mid-1930s was populated with Polish-Silesian Texans, many whose ancestors had originally settled in Panna Maria.

Neighbors in Kosciusko, **Urban Kotzur** and **Frank Prukop** had traveled to South Texas in 1925 and purchased land in McCook. Urban moved his family to this new settlement in 1926, and **Frank Prukop** followed with his wife and children in 1927.



Gertrude Maron and Frank Prukop, Sr. with daughter, Hedwig. Photograph courtesy of Hedwig Prukop Kotara, McCook, Texas



Urban Kotzur and Frances Pawelek. Photograph courtesy of granddaughter, Frances Kotzur, McCook, Texas

Soon others joined the **Kotzurs** and **Prukops**, and by 1935, a survey indicated that 17 Catholic families were living in the McCook community: **L. Doybrava, Isidor Gawlik, Ben Kolodziej, Leon Kotzur, Nick Kotzur, Tom Kotzur, Vincent Kotzur, Mrs. Urban Kotzur (Urban died in 1933), Richard A. Kremel, Adam Lyssy, Joseph Lyssy, Theodore Machac, Alois B. Moczygamba, Alois J. Moczygamba, Isidor Moczygamba, Charles Pollock, and Frank Prukop.**

They traveled 25 miles to St. Paul Catholic Church in Mission, Texas, to attend Mass and receive the Sacraments.



Wedding of Evelyn Machac and Albert Kotara, September 21, 1948, pictured in front of St. Paul Catholic Church, Mission, Texas, with their parents. LR: Felix Kotara and Margaret Richter; Lillie Kremel and T.F. Machac. Photograph courtesy Evelyn Machac Kotara, Frisco, Texas.

The planning for a church in McCook officially began on December 18, 1935, with a meeting in the home of **Frank Prukop**. The purpose of the gathering was to organize and discuss purchase of about four acres of land for a church. Many community socials were held to raise money. Some of the most popular fund raisers were barbecues, dances, and auctioning of box lunches.

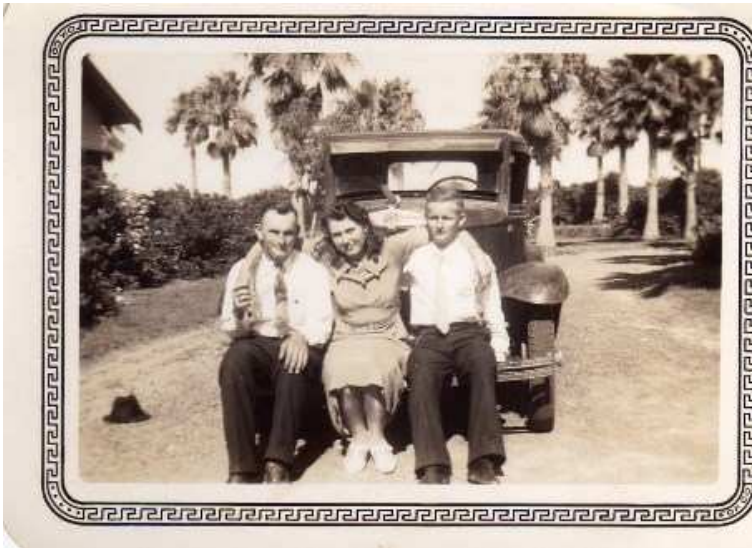
The tradition was that the young ladies would prepare box lunches, and the young men would “bid” for their choice of box lunch - usually the box prepared by a young maiden whose attention he hoped to gain! These socials not only brought forth ideas and needed revenue but also bonded the parishioners.

A one-room school house served the community for its many functions. **Alice Sekula Keller** and **Helen Moczygamba Titzman** recall their teacher being a redheaded lady named **Mrs. Perry**. The ever popular dances were held in the little school house. The school also served as a Sunday meeting place for prayer service and singing of Polish hymns when circumstances kept the families from making the long trek to Mission for Sunday Mass.



The one-room school house.

Photograph courtesy of: Alice Sekula Keller



Isidore Krnavek, Susanna Kotzur, and Thomas Moczygamba, making the long journey to Mission. Photograph courtesy of John P. Martine, Bellville, Texas

World War II slowed plans for a church. However, nine years later in September 1948, the members voted to start construction. In January 1950, a name was chosen. With great devotion to our Blessed Mother, Immaculate Conception was the unanimous choice. The contract was awarded with a bid for \$20,926.00 with the ground breaking on March 9, 1950.



Immaculate Conception Church, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Lyssy Skloss, McCook, Texas

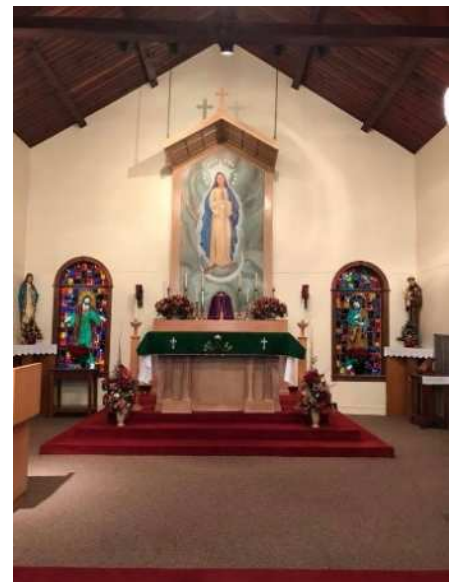


Immaculate Conception Church, Current. Photograph courtesy of Theresa Skloss Allen and Virginia Skloss Phillips, Mission, Texas

Finally the long awaited day, October 15, 1950, arrived. God rewarded the hard work and prayers with a beautiful day. Nearly 3,000 people arrived at the new church for the 10:00 AM Mass and dedication service. The **Most Reverend M.S. Garriga**, Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi presided. **Monsignor Dan Laning**, pastor from St. Paul Church in Mission sang the High Mass accompanied by novices from St. Peter’s novitiate. **Reverend Peter Crulley** and **Reverend Leo Moczygamba** concelebrated the Mass. The young McCook altar boys, wearing their new, bright red cassocks were: **Felix and Albert Keller; Frank, Vincent, Gabriel and Albert Kotzur; Fred and Walter Lyssy; Gilbert and James Skloss; and Stanley and Tom Pawelek.**



Immaculate Conception Altar, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas



Immaculate Conception Altar, Christmas 2017. Photograph courtesy of Sheila Kotzur Wilson, McCook, Texas

An estimated 4,000 people attended the barbecue and festivities afterward.

Representative Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr. was the guest speaker.



October 15, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas.

The first Baptism took place immediately. **Theresa Rose Skloss**, daughter of **August** and **Sylvia Skloss**, was baptized. On October 24, 1950, **Jerome Moy** and **Mary Teresa Lyssy** were the first to receive the sacrament of Matrimony in the newly dedicated church.

Father Peter Crulley, traveling from the St. Paul Parish in Mission, served as assistant pastor to McCook. In January of 1951, **Bishop Garriga** announced that the Immaculate Conception Church in McCook would become an independent parish. **Monsignor Dan Laning**, pastor of the parish in Mission, reported that the bishop was convinced the devoted and hardworking people of McCook could support their own pastor. **Father William Kelley** was appointed as the first priest to serve the new Immaculate Conception Church.

Soon afterward, a heating system was installed in the church, and the task of locating a good used organ was assigned to **Felix Keller** and **Alois J. Moczygemba**. An organ was purchased for \$75 but needed cleaning and minor repairs, and that chore was also completed by the two men. A choir was established, and **Alois J. Moczygemba** became the first church organist.



Blessing of the Bell. Photograph courtesy of Hedwig Prukop Kotara, McCook, Texas

Father Kelley was very popular with his congregation, organizing and participating in youth activities as well as ministering the needs of the parish. He immediately began preparing a group for their First Holy Communion. This first group was: **Virginia Keller, Bernice Moczygemba, Tom Pawelek, Jeanette Prukop, and Tom Trautner.**

Later that same year, **Frank Hilcher, Albert and Virginia Keller, Bernice and Mary Ann Moczygemba, Tom Pawelek, Jeanette Prukop, Geraldine and Rose Mary Sekula, and James Skloss** received the Sacrament of Confirmation.

It was during **Father Kelley's** tenure that the decision was made to build a rectory. A bell for the church, gifted by **Leon and Elizabeth Korzekwa Kotzur**, was blessed and installed.

Property for a cemetery was donated by **August Skloss**. The tragic accidental death of **Nancy Prukop**, 6-year-old daughter of **Tillie** and **Frank Prukop Jr.**, was the first interment. Generous benefactors for the cemetery altar were **Tom Sekula** and **Lucian Pilarczyk**. Land for a parish hall was granted by **Henry Goedrich**. In 1972, new climate control was added in the church, and beautiful stained glass windows were sponsored by parishioners in memory of loved ones.

Other priests followed **Father Kelley**: **Rev. Stanley Brach, Rev. Sylvester P. Stout, Rev. Vincent Herbert Howley, and Rev. Peter Smith**. After **Father Smith's** retirement, **Rev. Michael Annunziato** from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Edinburg looked after the parish affairs for a brief period; then **Rev. Marti Zuber** was assigned to McCook and later followed by **Rev. Thomas Kulleck, Rev. Willy Verboomen, Rev. Honecimo Figueroa, and Rev. Jose Rene Angel**. Since 2013, Immaculate Conception has been served by **Father Joaquin Zermeno**.

Father Gregory Labus who was ordained to the priesthood on May 27, 2006, is the great-grandson of two of the earliest settlers of McCook. His parents are **Cecilia Kotzur** and **Emil John Labus**. **Rev. Gregory Labus** is presently the pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Edinburg, Texas.

Some traditions are still recalled by the older generation in McCook. **Sylvia Skloss** recollected that before a wedding took place, the groom came to the bride's home, the couple knelt on the floor, and both sets of parents gave their blessing. **Sylvia** reminisced about this tradition before her marriage to **August Skloss** and said that **Alois J. Moczygemba** played the violin and sang *Serdeczna Matko* at their blessing. The couple with their families and guests would then make the long journey to the St. Paul Church in Mission for the marriage ceremony and return to the bride's home for an all-day reception concluded by a dance. In the earliest days, the dance took place in the one-room school house.

Though some of those traditions may no longer be practiced, two specific ones are repeated every year: a special service in February to bless the seeds for planting and another in April to celebrate the feast of **St. Isidore**, the patron saint of farmers. The church is closely tied to the needs of the rural farming community. Additionally with the community's devotion to the Blessed Mother, a Coronation Ceremony is held each year in the month of May.



Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary by Nancy Kotzur.

Photograph courtesy of Bernadine and Albert Kotzur, McCook, Texas

In the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, McCook was a thriving community with a population of around 300. A larger elementary school at this time existed in McCook, part of the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District, and grades 1 through 6 were taught, with its peak at about 70 students. **Joe Perales** who was the principal of the school for a time described it as “one of the most beautiful experiences of my life.” He added, “I even learned how to make Polish sausage and picked up a little Polish language.” The school closed in the mid-1980s, and elementary students are also now bussed to Edinburg.

Andrew Prukop, grandson of the original settler, **Frank Prukop**, recalls, “Many who lived here were related to each other or were longtime friends. Farm life, livestock, hard work, church, riding the school bus [to Edinburg for the older grades, 28 miles away]... sometimes it was pretty tough, but McCook was a very tight-knit community. Church and school were more than functions residents had to attend. They were a social core, gathering places to touch base with friends and neighbors.”



Lyssy Farm, McCook, Texas. Photograph courtesy of Chelsea Lyssy, Edinburg, Texas



Ben Keller. Photograph courtesy of Proxy Keller Prukop, McCook, Texas

Though many of the earliest generation have passed away, and most of the second and third generation have moved away for higher education, marriage, and better jobs, the loyalty to their roots in McCook has remained. They return for church celebrations, marriages, funerals, and family gatherings. On April 13, 2013, **Joyce Skloss** and **Walter Lyssy** coordinated *A Tribute to the Patriots of McCook*. **Rev. Rene Angel** began the ceremony with Holy Mass concelebrated by **Rev. Gregory Labus**. World War II veteran, **Vincent L. Keller**, 94-years-old, presented the flag for blessing. Those attending then moved to the Immaculate Conception Cemetery where a flagpole dedication and blessing ceremony was held with a “Roll Call” of the service men and women of McCook recognizing their sacrifices in defending our country in all wars. A reception was held in the church hall following the event.



Tribute to the Patriots of McCook. Photographs courtesy of Walter Lyssy, San Antonio, Texas

With modern and convenient transportation today, Mission 25 miles, and Edinburg 28 miles away are not so distant anymore. The cotton gin has closed, but two granaries still exist, HiStarr and Southwest Grain. The **Pilarczyk** brothers now operate two stores in McCook. **Eugene Pilarczyk** manages the original Red & White, and **Carl Pilarczyk** has re-opened a more recently built store, McCook Trading Post, across the road with gas pumps.

In 2014, The Texas Historical Commission recognized the Immaculate Conception Cemetery as a significant part of Texas history by awarding it an Official Texas Historical Marker. The designation honors the Silesian Texan pioneers who settled the area as farmers, an important and educational part of local history.



Urban Keller, Clem Moczygamba, Louis Keller, Stanley Keller, and Domin Keller.

Photograph courtesy of John P. Martine, Bellville, Texas

The marker was proudly erected and landscaped at the gates of the cemetery by **Lawrence Skloss** and the **Sklarz Farms, Inc.** The Immaculate Conception Church had been recognized with an Official Texas Historical Marker installed in 1978 in front of the church.

Ninety-three years have elapsed since **Urban Kotzur** and **Frank Prukop** first purchased land in McCook, and 68 years have gone by since the dedication of the Immaculate Conception Church, but the ties still bind. This is most evident at the anniversary celebrations when the church is filled leaving standing room only, and the reception hall overflows to outdoor seating. Many have passed before us, but they are remembered. Others who were too young to participate in 1950 or were born afterward take part in the Mass and ceremony preparations. The Immaculate Conception Church choir is magnificent.

Even though **Felix** and **Albert Keller**, **Gilbert Skloss**, **Gabriel Kotzur**, **Stanley** and **Tom Pawelek** are now deceased, it is most heartwarming that the original altar boys who served at the first dedication Mass in 1950, return to serve again. When **Bishop Daniel Flores** celebrated the 60th anniversary Mass in 2010, he remarked that it was the first time his altar servers were taller than him! In 2015, McCook was honored to have **Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta** as the main celebrant of the High Mass at the 65-year commemoration.



Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta, celebrating the 65th Anniversary Mass at McCook, Texas. Altar servers: LR: Walter Lyssy, Albert Kotzur, Fred Lyssy, Vincent Kotzur, and Frank Kotzur. Photograph courtesy of Bernadine Moczygemba Kotzur.

“This is our home, we were born and raised here, and our parents taught us to be good stewards of this land that our folks passed on to us” (**Albert Kotzur**, grandson of **Urban Kotzur**).

“Our Catholic farming community in McCook has seen many hardships in its years of existence, but our faith in God has never wavered. All of our church traditions, religious ceremonies, and beautiful singing has continued as it was in the beginning of our parish. I’m tied to this land; this is my home. I love it here” (**Sylvia Gawlik Lyssy Skloss**, widow of **August Moczygemba Skloss**).

Sources:

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God’s Country, Polish Settlers Reaping Harvest of Tradition, Prukop,
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Immaculate Conception Celebrates 60th Anniversary, *The Monitor*
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A Tribute to the Patriots of McCook [Lyssy, Walter; Skloss, Joyce,
13 April 2013]

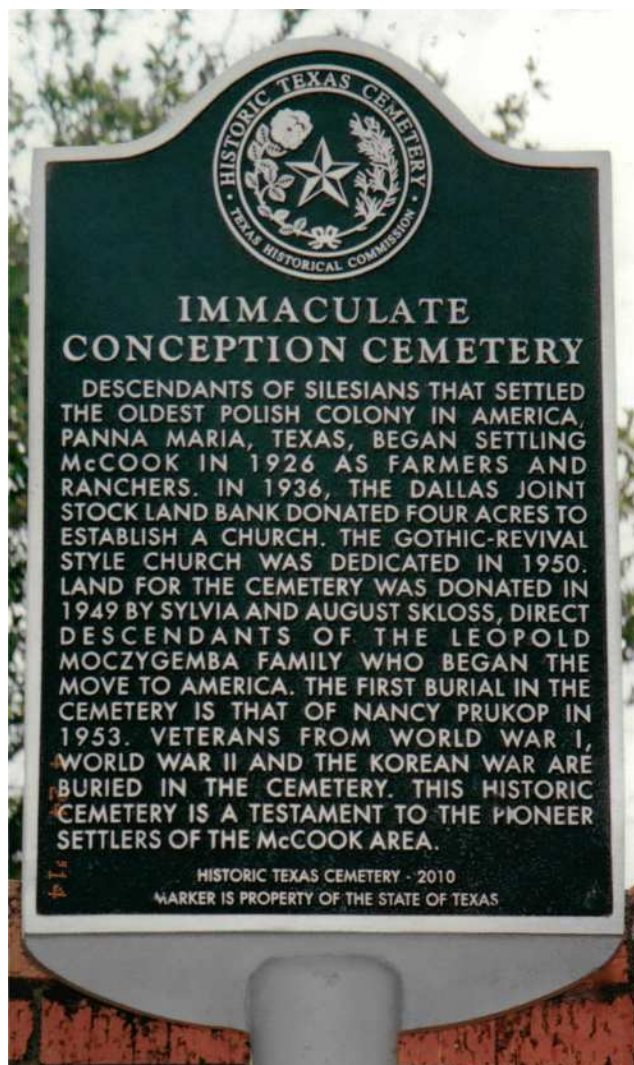
Then and Now – Kotzur, Albert

Then and Now – Gawlik Lyssy Skloss, Sylvia

Contributors:

Margaret Moczygemba Gambill

Vincent L. Keller



Design update by Al Notzon And Steve Harding

Update on Exhibits

On March 6, **Steve Harding** facilitated a work session in Panna Maria to further develop the audio and visual support of the exhibits in the Polish Heritage Center. Contributors to the work session were: **Fr. Wieslaw Iwaniec, Maggie Opiela Jarzombek, Al Notzon, Susan Moczygemba McKinsey, Maureen Brown, Elaine Moczygemba, Joyce Rives, Judy Jarzombek Scheffler, Robin Raquet** and **John Wojtasczyk**. Education by the sisters was discussed along with the teaching aids that were used to teach Polish to the students after school hours. **Fr. Wieslaw** was helpful in explaining how the written symbol was pronounced. In addition, certain phrases will be spoken by local Polish, German, English, and Silesian speakers. Music audio will include songs played by **Elaine Moczygemba** and sung by the choir as background for some of the exhibits. The exhibits will include a listing of vocations to the priesthood and religious life from the original Catholic parishes as well as the Polish priests who have served those parishes. It is exciting to see and hear the kind of planning and forethought are going into the Polish Heritage Center exhibit design.



Preparing for the future by preserving the past!

Pictured on this page is the group that met with **Steve Harding** in the Panna Maria School to begin working on a key aspect that will be part of the Heritage Center in providing an audio presentation. Those of us with little or no working knowledge of our Polish Silesian dialect were drawn in when **Elaine Moczygomba** and **Maggie Opiela Jarzombek (pictured in the top right)** began to not only speak some basic words and phrases in the old tongue but also, at one point, sang a song that was once commonly sung in the community. **Fr. Wiesław** helped many of us with a little teaching aid, show cards which depict the letter(s) for a certain sound, its use in the spelling of a word that is pictured, and application in a simple sentence. Of particular interest is how like all languages, including our dialect has evolved over time and how certain sounds from one hundred years ago are pronounced differently today. One of the key aspects for the Polish Heritage Center is to have an example of the distinctiveness of our particular Polish tongue. Having been influenced by the nearby Czechs and German cultures, our Polish Silesian dialect has its own special flavor. Here, we gathered to immerse ourselves, albeit just a little, and began an appreciation for how our forebears spoke. We hope, perhaps, to try and save this special and dwindling legacy of our ancestors.



With thanks, we would like to acknowledge these donors from February 2nd through March 12th

Gretchen & Shelby Dupnik
Karl P. & Stephanie Gager
Wanda Gorman
Wayne L. & Charlene Hierholzer
Judy L. Hilbig
Michael & Velma Janysek
Beatrice S. Kalka
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Gabe & Bertha Korzekwa
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Carolyn Weston
Bernice M. Wiatrek
Jim & Jayma Wood
Sandra K. Yanta
Weston & Caressa Yanta
Bishop John W. Yanta

In this past month, I received this note from a dear friend that I have known for many years. Although neither are Polish, they believe in our undertaking. Here is what they wrote:

Father -

God bless you all and the wonderful work in Panna Maria. I wish we could do more. When we can, we certainly will.

Patsy (and John) Picacio

Notes such as these are always a source of encouragement and hope as we persevere in our noble work!



PHASE 2, THE BUILDING OF THE SHELL IS ALMOST COMPLETED!

Wesołych Świąt Wielkanocnych

(Happy Easter)



Bishop Yanta and the Monday “Kitchen Cabinet” meeting!

Architect Robert Morkovsky discussing with Bishop John Yanta, Al Notzon, Joe Yanta, and John Cebrowski aspects of the interior of the building, which is the next phase of our project, Phase 3! Phase 3 is preparing and finishing the inside of the Heritage Center so that the exhibits can be installed (Phase 4) and the Center opened! We may be nearing the half way point, there is actually so much more work to do! In Phase 3, all of the electrical, AC, lighting, fire suppression, plumbing, and such must all be exactly in place and ready so that the exhibits can be installed with no problems! I ask that you continue praying and supporting our project. Continue sharing and passing the word so everyone can learn and have a chance to be part of this amazing journey and have a share in preserving our heritage. †Bishop John W. Yanta

MAY GOD BLESS YOU AND YOURS,