

# St. Leo, Florida: A Catholic Anomaly in Protestant “Cracker” Country

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Located in west central Florida, St. Leo, the town, and St. Leo, the College lie approximately 25 miles north of the Tampa Bay metropolitan area and 65 miles west of Orlando. Both are located in the San Antonio area and are historically part of the original district settlement plan. Remote from the urban environment, St. Leo captures the calm and serenity of rural Florida. In an area of rolling hills, wooded countryside, and spring-fed lakes, an interesting religious community took root a century ago. St. Leo: the Abbey, College, Priory and Town, was recently designated a National Catholic Historic Site (Figures 1 and 2).

On February 15, 1881, the Feast of St. Jovita (a second century Italian martyr about whom very little is known), Judge Edmund F. Dunne, a former Chief Justice of the Arizona Territory, and his cousin Captain Hugh, rode on horseback to a hill overlooking the lush wilderness of an area in west central Florida. Judge Dunne had been commissioned by Hamilton Disston, owner of four million acres in Florida, to represent him with the state authorities in the choice of lands for development. For his efforts on behalf of Disston, Dunne, an Irish Catholic, was to receive 50,000 acres of land upon which he intended to establish a Catholic colony. Upon his arrival, and following the acquisition of a resident priest, the settlement began to attract Irish Catholic families. His efforts earned him the nickname “O’Dunne.”



Figure 1



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Osburns, Platts, Tuckers, Wischers; and these generally accepted the newly-arrived Catholics. Many even attended church with the Catholics since there was no established Protestant church in the area. Until the late 1880's, San Antonio was isolated, the only means of transportation being an oxcart or wagon. It was located in what was then known as Hernando County, later to become Pasco County. The nearest port was Tampa, 30 miles distant, and the closest railroad connection was 40 miles from San Antonio in Wildwood, Florida.

The census of the colony by June 16, 1883, was 130 and grew to 500 by 1885. There were no blacks except at a mission for blacks in St. Thomas. At the time approximately 800 Catholic blacks lived in all of Florida (Dayton, 1978, 2).

By 1883, San Antonio was well established with several stores, a barn-like church, and a school. By 1884, Dunne had created a newspaper called *The San Antonio Herald*. The wealthy, well educated physician, Dr. Joseph Corrigan owned a palatial home that he had constructed himself. Although the house was completely destroyed by fire in 1915, the palm trees lining Dr. Corrigan's driveway still stand intact. A Justice of the Peace, Judge John Flannagan, lived in a huge Victorian-style home, which still stands today. Judge Dunne resided in a book-filled cabin on the hill at the present site of the St. Leo Abbey.

Alfred Mame and his sons described, in *Un Francais Dans la Florida, 1890*, their trip through remote wild, areas of the state. The descriptions of poverty and primitive conditions surrounding the San Antonio enclave and the colonists' attempts to form an oasis of civilization in the midst of the wilderness provide a background of knowledge about the early years of the colony. According to Mame, the only church then serving the colony was a barn with a crude cross, a lantern, and a bell attached to its roof. Mame was amazed that his host, Judge Dunne, had an excellent library and was an extremely well-educated gentleman who was fluent in French, Italian, and Greek--although "weak" in German, such weakness being "in common with us French, (and) one more reason to like him." Mame notes that the population in 1890 consisted of twenty Frenchmen, one hundred Germans, and two hundred Irishmen. Land sold for \$2.50 an acre and was available within the enclave only to the Catholics, but

the land surrounding the octagon could be purchased for a higher price by the Protestants (Mame, 1975, 2).

The year 1887 brought further changes to the colony. Pasco County was formed from Hernando County. The South Florida Railway was constructed to pass through Dade City enroute to St. Petersburg for connections with the Orange Belt Railway, thereby enabling the shipment of citrus from San Antonio to northern markets. The town of St. Leo was founded when Judge Dunne donated his land to the Order of St. Benedict in 1889. A small group of monks led by Father Charles Mohr, O.S.B. from Belmont Abbey in the Carolinas arrived to establish a monastery and a Catholic school to serve immigrants who settled in Central Florida. A large building designed to house the monastery, school, and church was built, and the groves that had been planted by Dunne were supplemented. With the advent of the railway to San Antonio, new settlers continued to arrive. In 1889, a bank was established in San Antonio, with the citrus industry providing the principal source of revenue for the young colony. At this time, the Benedictine Sisters arrived to establish a private girls school. Their convent, Holy Name, was in the Sultenfuss Hotel (located on the north end of the town square) before the building was moved by mule train to the hilltop where the Holy Name Priory now stands.

In 1891, St. Leo became the first incorporated city in Pasco County. In 1894, St. Leo became independent from its Mother House in Pennsylvania and, by consent of Pope Pius IX, all missions in Florida were turned over to the Benedictine Order. The education that St. Leo students received during the early days was at the level that would be designated now as "high school" and "junior college." The school was fully accredited and provided the degree of "Masters of Accounts." Although initially a military school to instill discipline and train the youth of the area for protection of the colony, St. Leo gradually abandoned its military aspects during the early twentieth century, as it evolved from preparatory school to an independent Catholic college.

While St. Leo was being formed, the Barthle family led some Catholic immigrants from the German Empire to the area and founded the village of St. Joseph. Here a small board-and-batten church was built and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Because of the economic hardships at home in Europe, many German Catholics were attracted to this new Catholic colony in America. As new settlers arrived in

increasing numbers, the name of the local newspaper was changed in 1896 to the *Florida Staats Zeitung* (Dayton, 1977, 13). As St. Leo received more German settlers, the ethnic composition changed from its original predominantly Irish character.

A severe freeze in 1895 caused citrus damage of immense proportions, killing many small Florida towns that had been dependent upon the citrus industry. As citrus was the main source of income for St. Leo, it behooved the German settlers to experiment with a wide variety of other crops. They had limited success in growing strawberries. The area became a strawberry center, but the citrus industry was resumed and flourished in spite of later freezes, superseding the strawberry industry in that area.

The Pope raised the status of St. Leo to that of Benedictine Abbey in 1906. At the time, three Catholic orders existed in Florida--the Josephites, the Jesuits, and the Benedictines. By 1912, St. Scholastica Hall at the Holy Name Convent was completed with Brother Anthony Poiger as the architect of both the convent and the Abbey. Both buildings still exist today.

The Abbey Church, Lombardic-Romanesque in design and focal point of the college campus, is often referred to as "the church that was built with orange juice" because it was financed partially by profits from the Abbey citrus groves. It was built over a 12-year period (1936-1948) and incorporates many wooden appointments of red cedar from the Abbey grounds, as well as numerous locally fired, stained glass windows adorned with illustrations and figures of religious significance. Constructed of handmade limestone bricks, the structure culminates in a sturdy square tower capped by red-tile roof, and dominates the hill-studded lake landscape of Pasco County.

Before World War I the enclave retained its German character. Florida, like many other areas of the United States, harbored strong anti-German sentiment during the war. The anti-Catholic movement in Florida, led by former Baptist minister, Governor Sidney Catts, also caused many settlers to move to more friendly areas. A rumor attributed to Governor Catts was that the German monks of St. Leo had an arsenal and were plotting to arm local blacks in order to stage a revolt in support of Kaiser Wilhelm II. After the insurrection, according to the rumor, the Pope would take over Florida, move the Vatican to San Antonio, and close all Protestant churches. Abbot

Charles, then in charge of St. Leo, published a rebuttal to this rumor in the form of a volume entitled *Those Murderous Monks of Pasco County, Florida* and slyly listed the author as being *one of them*.

In 1926, during the Florida land boom, San Antonio was reorganized as the "City of Lake Jovita," and its boundaries were extended. Judge Dunne's street names were changed: e.g., Sacred Heart became Rhode Island Avenue; Pope Pius IX Avenue was now called Curley Street. Later, during the Depression years, the town reverted to its original name of San Antonio and withdrew its city limits to the section lines of Dunne's 1881 plan, where the boundaries have remained to the present day.

St. Leo continued to operate as a college preparatory school for approximately 800 boys until the 1960's. Approximately 400 girls were enrolled in the Holy Name Academy. The institution gradually became a coeducational liberal arts college during the 1960's, operating on a non-profit basis. St. Leo College then was operated by a lay board of trustees, and by 1965 employed only three monks in the entire college. Today, the Catholic college serves nearly 6,000 students in resident and off-campus programs (*Tampa Tribune*, September 4, 1977).

The Abbey's accomplishments are many and varied. The Fathers of St. Leo began missionary activity prior to 1900, establishing the Isle of Pines Mission in Cuba. The Priory Printing Company, later called the Abbey Printing Company and today known as the Abbey Press, evolved from the newspaper, *Florida Staats Zeitung*. Other projects of the colony include an on-campus carpentry shop, a ceramics shop, an art studio, a saw mill, a power house, and a branch station of the Weather Bureau which was operated by the brothers until the late 1970's. A packing house for the citrus products is also located on the campus. Many visitors to the area enjoy the "Grotto of Lourdes" shrine created by a local Tampa sculptor.

The first stage of St. Leo's twenty-year building was a monastic wing, a library, a dormitory, and classrooms. In 1962, the second stage--the William P. Mc.Donald Center, a \$500,000 building housing a cafeteria, a student lounge, service offices, a barbershop, a snack bar, and a post office was built. A third dormitory, an administration building, and a gymnasium have been added, financed by the citrus industry and other projects of St. Leo.

The campus today is relatively compact with modern functional architecture most prevalent. The science building and gift shop/security offices structures flank the gateway entrance with the Theater Building at the far end of a tree-lined drive. The men's dormitories are centrally located on campus, but the women's housing is more remote and closer to the Abbey Church area. Across the main highway is the St. Leo Golf Course.

Of the 900 acres owned by the Catholic Church, 240 acres comprise the college, pastures, and related structures and recreational facilities, such as the swimming pool, tennis courts, and ball diamonds. A substantial portion of St. Leo's present income is derived from its "Pilgrim Center," a retreat founded in 1975 for use by both the Catholics and non-Catholics. Over 50 acres of woods, lakefront, and scenic walkways create an atmosphere where modern pilgrims can meditate, relax, and enjoy the peace and tranquility of nature and their faith. Retreats, seminars, workshops, and pastoral conferences are conducted all year to meet the needs of groups and individuals. Group marriage encounters are also held on the site.

Over half the present community of St. Leo are more than fifty-seven years old; many are retired Brothers who are physically unable to contribute the labor necessary to maintain the ground and groves. Few young men of today are interested in leading the monastic life and therefore the enclave is undergoing a "shrinking" process with future status uncertain. According to Brother Bernard, a cigar-smoking, jovial sixty-five-year-old monk wearing "cut-offs" (*Tampa Tribune*, September 4, 1977), the population of St. Leo at that time was 1300. By 1985, the population was listed in the *Florida Statistical Abstract* as 955. Father Fidelis Dunlap, the fourth Abbot to lead St. Leo since its inception, was still presiding.

The most prestigious member of the St. Leo colony has probably been Father Jerome who was born March 18, 1885. Father Jerome was a scholar, a poet, a researcher, a horticulturalist and authority on tropical plants, an author, a Florida historian, and a collector of rare books. He received the State Historical Award on August 30, 1966, just prior to his death in September of that same year, for his book *La Floride* which is considered to be the most scholarly work on early Spanish Florida History. According to an article in the *Tampa Tribune* on June 23, 1963, Father Jerome was a ninety-eight pound, five-and-a-half foot "pint-sized package of piety," with a feisty

manner and a thoroughly delightful sense of humor and personality. Father Jerome was responsible for introducing many varieties of citrus to St. Leo. The Abbey Library houses his Floridiana, including copies of all Florida books published within the past 200 years, recordings of eminent singers during the 1890's, and a collection of marine mollusks. This library also now includes several examples of early Seminole Indian pottery.

Today, the annual highlight in nearby San Antonio is the "San Antonio Rattlesnake Roundup," whereby the reptiles are removed from the area but are not harmed. Thousands of visitors from the urban Tampa Bay area arrive for this festival and participate in "mud slings" and square dancing. The San Antonio community is still the local area's largest and has a city commission of three members and a police force totalling five (*Tampa Tribune*, January 15, 1978).

A community with strong agricultural ties, Judge Dunne's Catholic Colony is now an enclave comprising the cities of San Antonio, St. Leo, the unincorporated village of St. Joseph, and miles of orange trees and pastureland. The Catholic church still plays a central role in the life of the community, as was envisioned in 1881 by Judge Dunne, its architect and founder. A successful combination of geography and history, St. Leo is today an interesting educational oasis amid a prosperous rural countryside.

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