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FATHER MICHAEL WALRATH The Flying Dutchman

This article was written by Stephen G Hust in his book, *This is my Own, My Native Land*, with additions and revisions made by the Diocesan Archivist



Father Michael Walrath

As one drives south along Highway 45 that leads to Grimes in Colusa County, just beyond the town of Meridian, there stands a strange small brick structure with a cross adjacent to it. Many travelers have wondered what prompted its erection in this isolated spot and what purpose it serves. This structure has an interesting history and is, in a way, a monument to the memory of a very great man, Father Michael Walrath, who built it.

Father Walrath was a German who was born in Bochum, Prussia on January 17, 1841. At the age of 25, he fled Prussia to avoid being forced to serve in the Prussian army. He escaped to London where, as he expressed it, "I vas a bum." But he was not the type to remain a bum for long; he was above all a worker. He earned enough money to sail to New York and from there he made his way to Cincinnati where he entered a Catholic seminary. From Cincinnati he journeyed to Eureka, California to continue his studies with the Precious Blood Fathers. He began classes at Saint Joseph College in Rohnerville which was established by Father Patrick Henneberry, CPPS. Michael completed his theological training in Rohnerville and was ordained a priest by Bishop Eugene O'Connell on September 24, 1871 in the Marysville Cathedral.

From the first, Father Walrath was a missionary to the Native Americans. He was highly successful with them and they were most zealous converts, though their religion became a strange mixture of Catholic ritual and Native American pageantry. They recited the rosary in their own peculiar fashion, ending with an Indian dance. All over their huts they pinned crosses and religious pictures. But Father Walrath's ministry to the Native Americans was a great success and was mutually helpful both to the Native Americans and to the recently arrived immigrants.

Father Walrath's work took him all over Del Norte's trails over which he traveled by mule. When one looks at the dangerous trails he traveled, he must have been guided by divine intervention.

One of his missions was a church on Table Bluff which was built on a windy promontory where wild gales from the Pacific Ocean howled so loudly the preacher could not be heard. One Sunday afternoon in 1872, he and his congregation took the church apart and moved it to a less exposed spot. The reconstruction was done so well that the church served for another 45 years.

When he was the pastor of the mining town of Weaverville, in addition to his parish ministry, Father Walrath also printed a newspaper for the town. In 1877 he was sent to Colusa where he served faithfully for 35 years. Father Walrath's way of life was focused on work as if salvation were achieved through it. He was a great builder of churches and built churches all over Glenn County.

In the 1880s, this tireless priest, in order that all his parishioners could attend Mass on Sundays, convinced the railroad company officials to lend him a handcar so he could travel throughout his parish. He operated the handcar personally, often mounting a sail on it to help him gain speed. It might seem a funny sight to see a priest with robes fluttering in the wind pumping a hand car, but somehow, Father Walrath was bigger than life and no one made fun of his tactics to be

present to his people. After several near accidents and disruption of schedules, railroad officials convinced Father Walrath to give up traveling by handcar.

About this time in Colusa County, Charles Tiang, a man from China, murdered another Chinese man. He was condemned to hang on January 30, 1880. Father Walrath made it his business to give the doomed man spiritual comfort. On the morning of his execution he baptized Charley Tiang and stood with him on the scaffold while he was hanged.

The first Catholic Mass in Colusa County was celebrated in May 1856 by Father Peter Magagnotto of Saint Joseph Church, Marysville. About the time Colusa was founded, it was expected that the little settlement of Grand Island near Sycamore would develop into a large town. A series of missions were held in Colusa and Grand Island and on September 15, 1864 Father Lefaubre erected a large wooden cross at the site to commemorate that event. For many years thereafter, the annual feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross was celebrated at this site.

During the pastorate of Father Michael Walrath, a tract of land on Dry Slough was donated by Mrs Anna Myers for a future church and a large cross 27 feet high was erected there. Although Grand Island never became a town, Father Walrath constructed a small shrine 8' X 10' with an altar where Mass could be celebrated. The shrine was made from local hand kilned bricks. Father Walrath dedicated the shrine to honor Our Lady of Sorrows on September 18, 1886. Since then, Catholics have continued to come to this spot on pilgrimage and a Mass is celebrated at the shrine on the first Sunday of May each year.



The wooden cross was destroyed by a summer grass fire and the shrine gradually fell into a state of disrepair. In 1922 the shrine was repaired and the present large white concrete cross was erected by the Knights of Columbus from the Colusa Council.

In 1979, a few members of the Colusa parish worked diligently to restore the shrine which had become overgrown with weeds. They sandblasted the shrine's outside walls, added a cement foundation around the shrine, re-mortared and sealed the bricks, repaired the roof and painted the crosses and wood fixtures. The plaster on the inside walls of the shrine was removed to expose the original bricks. The altar was painted, the crucifix restored and a metal alms box was attached to the chapel wall.

A bronze plaque outlining the history of the shrine was attached to a brick pillar at the entrance of the shrine. Running water was made available to the shrine by the generosity of a nearby company and in 1978 twenty orange trees were planted near the shrine in memory of Monsignor John J McGarry who loved the shrine.

This Shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows is a familiar landmark in the Grimes area and a grand memorial to Father Walrath who built many churches and served many people in the Sacramento Valley.



Photo by John E Boll 2016

Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows on Highway 45 near Grimes



Plaque about history about the Shrine

After 35 years of service in Colusa County, Father Walrath was sent to Woodland in Yolo County where he built his last church, Holy Rosary Church. He died as pastor of Woodland on August 25, 1917 and was buried in the Priests' Circle at Saint Joseph Cemetery in Woodland.

Father Walrath was a man who believed in the importance of work. He rose daily at 6 am and labored until 10 pm. Any time he had left over after doing his pastoral work, he turned his hand to whatever needed to be done. He was a carpenter, a plumber, a hostler and gardener. To him a full life was a busy life, and wherever he went he built for the glory of God and the service of people. Above all, a rule he never broke was that no one who hungered for food or for things spiritual, ever left his presence still hungry.

We honor Father Michael Walrath for his life dedicated to the people of the Sacramento Valley and give thanks to God for such a great minister and herald of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in those beginning days of the Diocese of Sacramento.



**Headstone of Father Walrath
Saint Joseph Cemetery, Woodland**



Photo by John E Boll 2016

Grimes Area with the Sutter Buttes in the background