

St. Cajetan's: A Fascinating History



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On the corner of Ninth and Lawrence Streets — now a part of the Auraria Higher Education complex — stands St. Cajetan's Catholic Church. While it has been declared a Denver landmark, thus destined to remain with the Auraria complex, St. Cajetan's has an unusual and fascinating history all its own.

The church in its short 50 years has struggled its way through robbery after robbery, embezzlement, arson, and what some have termed a "grave scandal" to finally end in what one man felt was despair.

To begin, St. Cajetan's is the national church for the Spanish-speaking people of the area. Prior to 1922 and the

construction of the church, the Spanish-speaking people worshipped at St. Leo's, three blocks from St. Cajetan's.

St. Leo's was predominantly an Irish church, the Spanish-speaking residents were at that time without a church of their own.

In May 1922 the Reverend Bartholomew Caldentey, who later became superior General of the Theatine Order, came to Denver to preach a mission at St. Leo's for the Spanish-speaking Catholics.

The mission was a complete success, with nearly 1000 people turning out.

Soon with the consent of the then Denver Bishop Henry Tihen,

Father Caldentey began to formulate plans to establish a parish for Denver's Spanish-speaking residents. A fund drive was started and in the meantime Caldentey continued to hold services in the basement of St. Leo's.

John K. Mullen

In September 1922, Caldentey was called away to Rome. Father

Humphrey Martorelli, who had recently arrived from Spain, continued in Caldentey's duties.

Before he left for Rome, however, Caldentey paid a visit to Catholic multi-millionaire John K. Mullen.

Mullen had made his millions in the mill business. He bought his first mill in 1875 — the Star Flour Mills in North Denver — and within four years owned three more. In 1885 he founded the

Colorado Milling Elevator Co., which by 1911 had spread into four other states, totaling millions of acres of wheat-producing land. Mullen by 1922 owned more than 90 flour mills in five states. (Mullen had quit school at the age of 14 and gone to work in a flour mill for \$2 a week.)

Mullen also owned the patch of land at Ninth and Lawrence that would eventually be St. Cajetan's.



St. Cajetan's Catholic Church is one of three churches and one of 22 post-victorian buildings being preserved on the Auraria Campus. The other two churches are St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church, which will serve as a non-sectarian church for the campus, and Emanuel Shearith Israel Chapel, Denver's oldest and first synagogue.



Caldenty went to see Mullen with the hope that he could talk him into selling that piece of land.

Donate Land If...

Mullen approved of church-going people and was eager to help. He would not, however, consider selling the land. "You are doing God's work, Father," he was recorded as having said to Caldenty. "I shall therefore turn this property over to you as a donation if..."

Yes, there was one condition. The parish must show there good faith by raising \$5000.

The fund raising which had already begun was turned over to Father Martorell, when Caldenty left.

The parishioners managed to raise well over \$4000, but as fortune would have it, the bank in which they kept their money then suddenly went bankrupt. All their savings were lost.

Mullen, however, was satisfied with their show of faith. He donated the land as well as a small house to serve as a rectory for the priests. He also contributed money to help begin the construction of the new church.

In October 1924 they broke ground.

With the volunteer help of the parishioners-to-be, the foundation was soon laid and the basement completed. The church now found themselves \$15,000 in the hole and decided to hold services in the basement until they could pay off their debts.

Mullen, however, continued to show interest and wanted the church completed. In March 1925 Mrs. Mullen died. Two days later Mr. Mullen approached Bishop Tihen about completing the church. "Once they have begun to use the basement for services, they'll take years to get out of there," it was reported he told the Bishop. "Besides, my wife would never have permitted that they remain with only the basement."

Shortly after, Mullen signed contracts for more than \$47,000, and work on the church began immediately.

Church Consecrated

On June 11, 1925 the cornerstone was laid, and before the building was completed Mullen expressed his desire to see the church consecrated. He would pay whatever was needed to free the church of its debts.

On March 21, 1926 St.



Cajetan's was consecrated. Three years later Mullen died.

Robbery

But St. Cajetan's lived on in relative quiet until November 1953 when what once was held to be sacred became just another mark. The church was robbed.

The story lead in the Rocky Mountain News read: "Two armed thugs invaded a Denver church Wednesday and stole \$225 after terrorizing an expectant mother." The church was then identified as St. Cajetan's. The money had been taken from the church credit union.

The incident was so unusual at the time that the investigating officer was paraphrased as saying "it was the only armed robbery of a church he could remember in six years of investigating stickups in Denver."

And More Robbery

But this marked only the beginning of St. Cajetan's troubles to come. The unprecedented robbery would soon become the established norm.

In April 1958 a second armed robbery occurred. The News story on this one read: "Two



gunment held guns on a priest and four others in a \$762 stickup Saturday." The money was again stolen from the credit union.

The credit union was hit on two more occasions after that, according to Denver newspaper files, once in September 1961 for \$800, and the last time in July 1967 for \$195. Only the final robbery ended in police arrests.

Embezzlement

But it was soon discovered that not all the robbers were armed thugs. In between stickups an audit of the credit union's funds revealed that someone on the inside had had their hand in the pot for quite some time. It started off with a simple misplaced \$80 and before the investigation was through the figure had grown to

over \$14,000.

A bookkeeper at the credit union had been pocketing on the average of \$150 to \$180 a month form some time in 1959 to June 1964. She had also embezzled \$7000 by writing fictitious loans.

Needless to say, the bookkeeper quickly and quietly resigned.

One interesting coincidence about all the credit union thefts is that the church's patron saint — Cajetan — is credited with having developed the concept of the credit union.

Arson

So with theft no longer very successful — the last two cases having been solved — the thugs turned to another evil game —

arson. In March 1968 two fires were started in the church, causing "an unestimated amount of damage to a confessional booth and the altar curtain," according to a Rocky Mountain News story.

No arrests were ever made in connection with the fires.

To Be Continued...

Next Issue Part II of the story of St. Cajetan's:

The Auraria campus pushes in. The residents are forced out. A priest, disillusioned, leaves the order, marries. The "grave scandal." Despair. St. Cajetan's is slated for demolition.

