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## Canute: A Long Catholic Heritage

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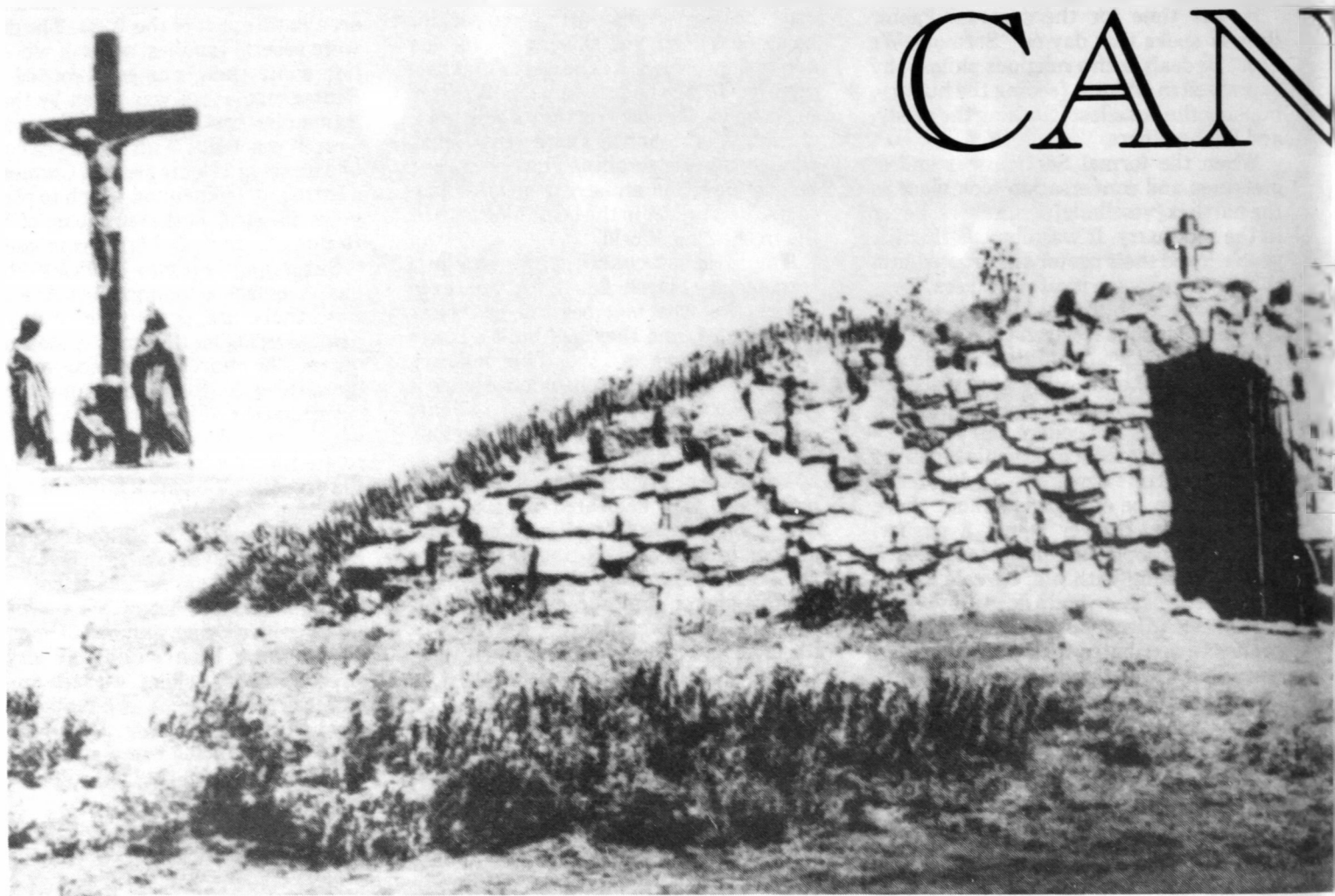
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# LANDMARKS



Along Interstate 40 in Western Oklahoma, halfway between Clinton and Elk City, lies a small community of 500 people which has a long and rich Catholic history. This town, Canute, and the surrounding area could quite well be called the center of Western Oklahoma's Catholic heritage.

This heritage was started in the late 1890's at a small settlement four miles southeast of present-day Canute. The community, known as Scheidel, was established in 1898 when a store and post office were built by Joe Scheidel.

Most of the people who lived around the Scheidel area were of the Roman Catholic faith. Since the country was very isolated, these people could not attend church regularly because the closest parish was in El Reno, almost 80 miles away.

In May 1898, a Catholic priest, Father Zenor Stebler, traveled from the Korn Valley (present-day Corn, Oklahoma) and visited the families of this area. He conducted the first Mass in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ed Tuck. Thereafter, he returned once a month to hold Mass in different homes of the area.

The next year in December, Father Stebler advised that the community should build a church nearby. The residents agreed, and Phillip Schones gave 5 acres of his homestead allotment for the new parish to be built upon. The lumber for the church was hauled from Weatherford and construction began immediately. In March 1900, the building was completed and later in December, Bishop Meersor blessed it with the name St. Francis. This church was also called "The Mother Parish of Western Oklahoma."

The congregation at St. Francis began to expand rapidly and in October 1906, a newer and larger building was erected. Later, in March 1927, a school and rectory were built and served the community until 1960.

From the time Canute was established in 1902 until the mid 1920's, the Catholics of this town traveled to St. Francis for Mass and sent their children there for education. In 1926, permission for a Catholic church in Canute was granted, and in September of that year Holy Family Parish was constructed with Father P. P. Schaeffer as its first pastor.

# UTE: A Long Catholic Heritage

by Randy Beutler

*The tomb and cross at Holy Family Cemetery.*



*Old Holy Family Church in Canute is now privately owned.*

The next year, Holy Family School was built and classes began that November. The church, school, rectory, and convent at Canute were dedicated by Bishop Campos, an exile from Mexico, in 1928.

In 1959, the grade school at Holy Family was combined with the school at the St. Joseph Parish in Elk City. The next year Bishop Reed dissolved the Catholic high school in Canute, and the education part of Holy Family ended.

December of 1970 saw the close of St. Francis, Holy Family, and St. Joseph churches. These three parishes were combined to form the St. Matthews Parish, which is today located on Interstate 40 just east of Elk City.

One of the most famous landmarks of the area is associated with the Holy Family Parish. It is the Grotto, which is located on the east side of Canute along old U.S. Highway 66. Here at the foot of a small knoll is a man-made, cave-like structure which holds a life-size figure of Jesus Christ encased in glass with two angels standing guard. Below this, inscribed in the wall with colored rock and glass, are the words

"Christ Died For All." Entombed inside the Grotto are the remains of Frank Flies, who financed the construction of the memorial.

At the top of the hill above the Grotto stand three statutory figures surrounded by cedar trees. These statues stand in somber silence of the crucifixion of Christ.

The Grotto was built with local labor in 1928. In 1954, the State of Oklahoma designated it as a tourist attraction because of its locality next to the nation's main thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66. Today, with Interstate 40 bypassing Canute, the Grotto is barely visible and fairly neglected by tourists.

In later years, the old Holy Family Church and surrounding buildings were sold. A monument, erected in 1983, is now all that stands at the location of the old St. Francis Church.

Gone are the buildings of the early-day Catholics of this area. But, there is a Catholic heritage that remains... a heritage that still endures.