

FROM THE ARCHIVES by Robin Rudderow

An Irish Surveyor and an Italian Priest join together to build a “jewel in the crown of our county” St. Teresa of Avila, the Catholic Church in Bodega.

This is the story of two men born two hundred years ago. And how their life paths came together to build St. Teresa of Avila, our local Catholic Church in Bodega -- a jewel in the crown of our County. Jasper O’Farrell, a surveyor from Ireland and Father Louis Rossi, a Catholic priest from Italy.

Finding life in British-ruled Ireland difficult, **Jasper O’Farrell** left his home country in 1840 and traveled by ship to Chile. Three years later at the age of 26, he traveled northward as a cooper on an American whaling ship where in Sausalito he jumped ship and began his life in Alta California.

Having studied civil engineering in Dublin, O’Farrell became a surveyor. Setting the boundaries for Mexican land grants, he became the official government land surveyor. Within 2 years of his arrival he plotted 24 land grants for 18 clients.

Not everyone was happy with O’Farrell when he corrected the lot lines bounded by Post, Leavenworth, Francisco Streets and the Bay by 2 ½ degrees because some people lost land with the correction. But the City was off to a good start so that in 1847, when San Francisco’s total population was 500, O’Farrell added another 444 new lots in “Happy Valley,” now downtown San Francisco. He chose street names based on prominent settlers and he named Valparaiso Street to honor that Chilean port where he used to live. (Editor’s note: I wonder if he had anything to do with naming of O’Farrell St. in San Francisco? Author Answers: No, I don’t think so, but it was named in his honor.)

Like many, gold fever struck O’Farrell in 1849 and he went to Bidwell’s Bar and Oroville to mine gold. Having only moderate success, he returned to Sonoma County and married Mary McChristian (whose last name may sound familiar to folks living in Salmon Creek). Jasper and Mary settled at Rancho Jonive located between Sebastopol and Freestone, naming their ranch “Analy” after O’Farrell’s ancestral home in Annaly, Ireland.

By then, nearby Bodega Port was one of the most active and important shipping points along the Pacific Coast. The lands all around were filling up with farms and ranches. Produce was shipped to feed the fast-growing population of San Francisco. O’Farrell capitalized on the boom as a farmer and land speculator continuing his operations through the purchase of Rancho Estero Americano in 1851. The 8,849-acre rancho encompassed the burgeoning town of “Bodega Corners” now called “Bodega.”



St. Teresa of Avila, Bodega

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In Italy, **Father Louis Rossi** was born Jewish and converted to Catholicism. As a young man he entered the priesthood. In 1856, after being assigned to various European posts, the Church directed Father Rossi to accompany Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet on the long journey from Belgium to faraway Fort Vancouver (in what is now Oregon).

Father Rossi and the Catholic Bishop began their trip in Brussels, heading first to London. Their travels became arduous right away. Father Rossi described London as “perpetually under a cloud of smoke and filled with noxious exhalations.” They took an overnight train north west to Liverpool, where they boarded the ship “*Anglo-Saxon*.” At sea, Father Rossi spent the first four days “in [his] cabin ... in such a pitiful state of dejection that [he] wouldn’t have lifted a finger against death itself.”

The trip from Liverpool to the East Coast of Canada took about 10 days. (Underscoring the danger of this mode of transportation, several years after Father Rossi’s trip, the *Anglo-Saxon* sank off the coast of Newfoundland. 237 out of the 445 passengers died.)

Father Rossi and the Bishop remained on the *Anglo-Saxon* as she sailed up the Saint Lawrence River to Quebec. In Montreal they recruited five Sisters of Charity to be nurses and to accompany them to their destination on today’s Oregon Coast, Fort Vancouver. They traveled to New York and boarded the steamer “*Illinois*” for the long journey to Panama. The conditions must have been dreadful on this ship with accommodations for only 400 people that carried 975 not including the crew.

Next was a train journey that crossed the narrow Isthmus of Panama, “*in pouring rain and in heat that would have taken your breath away.*” Fortunately it was only two and a half hours to arrive on the Pacific side. Luxury was finally afforded the traveling clerics and nuns aboard the “*Golden Age*.” The three-story ship was roomy and comfortable and the service was good. They arrived in the bustling city of San Francisco in the fall of 1856.



Jasper O'Farrell 1843

By 1856 when Father Rossi arrived in San Francisco, O'Farrell was already well-settled in his Analy Ranch. But their acquaintance was not yet to be made as Father Rossi continued his journey with the Bishop and nuns to Fort Vancouver. They traveled by steamer in December up the coast to the Columbia River. A treacherous storm, described by Father Rossi as a hurricane, made traveling conditions terrifying. Relieved to find the safety of the Columbia River, they

finally reached their destination in Fort Vancouver just north of where Portland, Oregon is today.

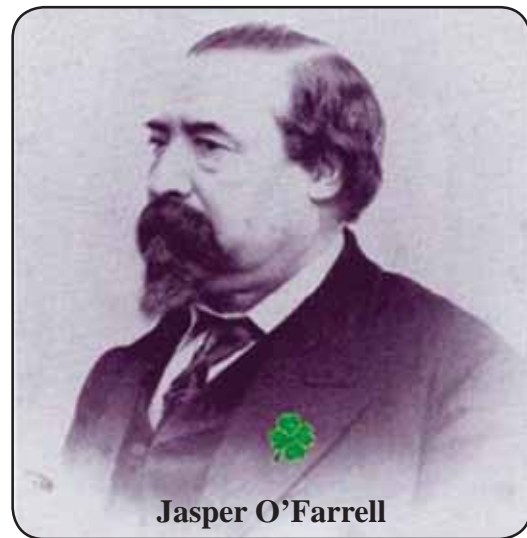
After improving the ramshackle “Bishop’s Palace” Father Rossi turned his attention to learning English well enough to deliver a 30-minute sermon. With Port Townsend as his base he became the priest for the 300 Catholics in the Washington Territory. But he was frequently ill suffering from recurrent severe stomach cramps, chest and joint pains, high fever and likely afflicted with “Mediterranean Familial Fever,” a hereditary condition. After surgeries, probably to remove his appendix and gall bladder, did not improve his condition, Father Rossi asked to return to Europe. Bishop Blanchet granted his request but while waiting for a ship south to Panama, San Francisco’s Bishop Joseph Alemany asked Father Rossi to remain in California because there were so few priests. Father Rossi agreed and took responsibility for Catholics in the area from Crescent City to Santa Rosa. Traveling on the road in his Northern California territory, Father Rossi tended to his far-flung flock.

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Building an Icon. Meanwhile, Jasper O'Farrell had become well-known and well-liked in Sonoma County. In 1858 he was elected to the State Senate to represent Sonoma County. He was known for generosity and abundant hospitality, taking in any traveler who needed a place to rest, and sending the traveler off with cash in his pocket and food for his journey.

When in the Bodega area, Father Rossi stayed with the O'Farrells. As a respected Catholic home, O'Farrell's was the natural spot for the two men's lives to come together. They became great friends. Father Rossi wrote of the O'Farrell family, "I am anxious to declare now -- with inexpressible satisfaction and as an eternal monument of my gratitude -- that during the twenty-eight months I enjoyed his hospitality, I was always treated by him and his family as though I had been respectively father, brother, and most intimate friend. I take pleasure in thinking that they are sure of my friendship, my devotion, and my everlasting gratitude."

Father Rossi wanted to build Catholic Churches in Sonoma County and O'Farrell wanted a Catholic Church in Bodega Corners, so a plan was made. O'Farrell donated the redwood lumber, cash to pay the laborers and land from his Rancho Estero Americano to build St. Teresa's Church in 1859 / 1860. The church was named to honor Saint Teresa, the patron saint of Jasper O'Farrell's sister Theresa. Another gift to the Church was the 17th Century crucifix brought to California in 1843 by Peruvian Manuela Torres Smith, the wife of Grantee Captain Stephen Smith in neighboring Rancho Bodega. The crucifix remains beautifully displayed on St. Teresa's alter.



Jasper O'Farrell

Continuing poor health forced Father Rossi to ask Bishop Alemany for permission to return to Europe. On November 19, 1862 Father Rossi arrived in Brussels, Belgium -- an arrival celebrated after six years in the Wild West. He was encouraged to write his memoir, published in 1863. Later he moved to Paris where he lived until his death on September 9, 1871 at the age of 54. He is buried in Paris.

O'Farrell struggled financially in his later years. Rancho Jonive foreclosed in 1872. O'Farrell then became a State Harbor Commissioner with a large salary of \$175 a month, only to be forced to resign after being swept into a scandalous fraud allegation against a fellow board member. Then, when he thought he had found his mother lode in the Nevada silver mines, they were destroyed by fire in October 1875. Soon after on November 16, at the age of 58, O'Farrell died. His wife Mary, the mother of his eight children, preceded him in death in 1871. They are buried together at Calvary Cemetery in Bodega, remaining as members of the parish that built the church made famous by Ansel Adams iconic photo and somewhat erroneously by Alfred Hitchcock in his movie, *The Birds*.

The primary sources for this article were two books in the RBHS library. *Six Years on the West Coast of America* 1856-1862 is Father Rossi's memoir. It was translated and republished in 1983 by Ye Galleon Press. *Jasper O'Farrell: Surveyor, Farmer, & Politician* was originally the 1970 master's thesis of Geoffrey P. Mawn, This well-researched, delightfully written paper was rescued from obscurity by the Book Club of California, which published the thesis in book form in 2001.

These and many other stories await you in the archives of the Rancho Bodega Historical Society. If you would like to make an appointment to explore the archives, please contact: Robin Rudderow, RBHS Archivist - RBHS@BodegaMoon.net