The Story of St. Martha's Catholic Parish: Sarasota, Florida, 1912-1977. Compiled by the Parish History Committee

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collecting the cattle herds for branding and shipment to markets. Much of the livestock was exported to Cuba via schooners and, later, steamships sailing from Manatee River landings.

Illustrative of the magnitude of cow hunts is the fact that by 1878 more than 53,000 head of cattle roamed the fenceless County, and 1,036 individual brands were on record.

_Biscuits and 'Taters_ is an entertaining amalgam of Warner’s personal experiences, his many conversations and reminiscences with veteran ranchers, and information gleaned from oral history recordings and extensive researching of Manatee County’s early cattle shipping records. His book also includes rare photographs of early cowhunters in action, plus facsimiles of the cattle brands used in pioneer times.

Oscar Elder


St. Martha’s, Sarasota, became the church the circus built. This book unfolds that story and is dedicated to Monsignor Charles L. Eslander, founding pastor. In the telling, Catholic history is traced there from 1847 through the present pastorate of Father Jerome A. Carosella. Credit is given to early pioneer people and their priests, from circuit-riding Jesuits until the Bishop of St. Augustine, Florida, gave Sarasota County, in Father Eslander, its first resident diocesan priest. He served at St. Martha’s from 1927 to 1968, and died in retirement, February 16, 1977.

Martha in the New Testament is the patron saint whose name was given to Sarasota’s first Catholic church, honoring Martha Ann Burns, the donor of the lot. Her son, Owen Burns, and John Ringling of the circus business, were developers of modern Sarasota. Since May 31, 1911, the Burns’ lot belonged to the Catholic Church. However, Jesuits kept the Sarasota County registers of Catholic births and marriages in Tampa until Father Eslander came to town in Sarasota to serve there and for a short time as pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Bradenton.

This book documents that during the Thirties, the building of St. Martha Church was helped along significantly by management and performers of the Ringling Brothers Circus. (Some night on the late movies on TV, keen-eyed viewers may still see Father Eslander and his altar boys blessing the circus as its train pulls out of winter quarters in “The Greatest Show on Earth.” He was really the circus’ priest, so it was a bit of real life on film when he and the acolytes, fully vested, joined the famous movie stars in the cast of that 1951 movie.)

I suppose it is difficult to achieve a completely smooth writing of a history compiled by a committee. Readability is flawed by more names in the text than the reader cares to know, but it is evident that the authors of this parish history did their homework. One would hope that other Catholic churches in the St. Petersburg diocese would attempt to document their own “roots” in the Florida communities, and this book is the best I have seen of the genre.
It is a valuable addition to history in the Tampa Bay area, told in terms that make one see Catholicity as it was before the Second Vatican Council, and as it is today. The pastor today, Father Carosella, is “vicar forane” or dean of the Southwest region comprised of Hardee, Manatee and Sarasota Counties. He is one of the best liturgists in Florida and the book reflects this. This text includes some heretofore unpublished material and is therefore a welcome volume on the local history shelf.

Jane Quinn