

Historic Churches of Chula Vista

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Chula Vista - The Early Years



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COMMUNITY CONGREGA- TIONAL CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, CHULA VISTA



Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Chula Vista, 1983.

The history of the Community Congregational Church of Chula Vista is in direct correlation with the history of Chula Vista. It was the very first church of Chula Vista and for many years the only church in the city.

The establishment of the church began in October of 1890 when a group of eleven people met, with a Reverend Ford as leader, to discuss the organization of a church. Chula Vista was then a new city, developed by the San Diego Land and Town Company.

A month later on November 18, 1890, the First Congregational Church was organized. Members met in the Chula Vista school house until a sanctuary could be constructed. The Articles of Incorporation were filed with the Secretary of State on March 26, 1892.

On May 1, 1894, Allison C. Crockett, C.A. Whittemore, and John T. Judkins met to discuss building a church. The San Diego Land and Town Company deeded a church site on F Street east of Third Avenue, next to the school, on May 24, 1894. Mr. George W. Roberts, who had property both in National City and Chula Vista, was instrumental in organizing the church. He was an active member of the the Congregational Church in National City and was eager to have a church of that denomination in Chula Vista.

A month later building commenced. Carpenters were hired at \$2.50 a day. The church building was dedicated on September 9, 1894. The official incorporated name was First

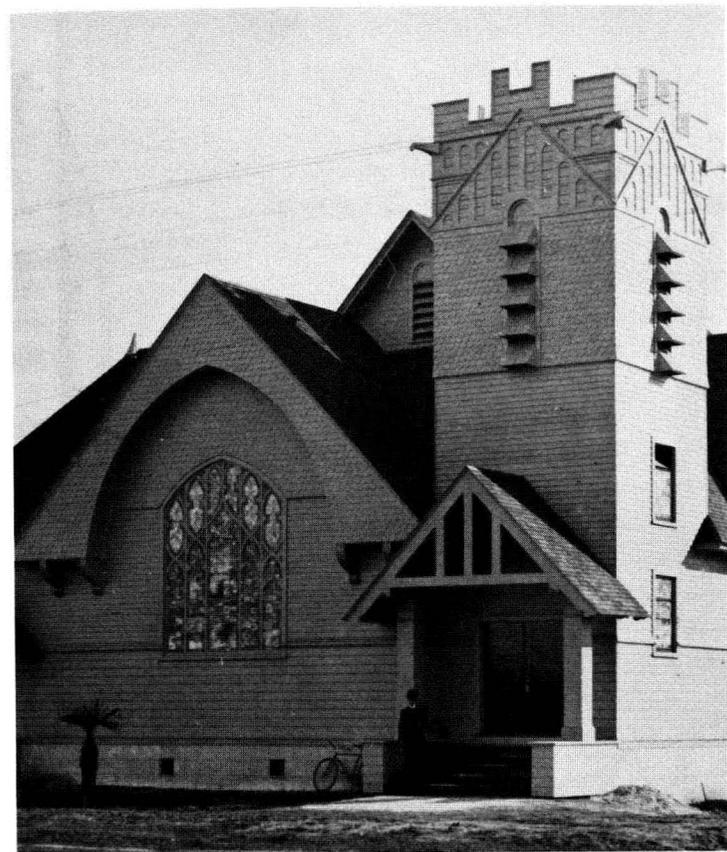
Congregational Church, but because of its location it became known as Community Congregational Church.

There was a dramatic name change in the Articles of Incorporation in 1983 when the official name became Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Chula Vista. This congregation had voted to become part of a larger denomination: the United Church of Christ, a merger of Congregational-Christian Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches.

The church has had a long history in Chula Vista and has made a great impact on the community and its citizens. Although the original church building was razed and a new sanctuary built in 1951, the Congregational Church has been designated as Historical Site Number 5 by the City of Chula Vista.



First Congregational Church, original church building, 1890.



Church Sanctuary, 1911, Community Congregational Church.

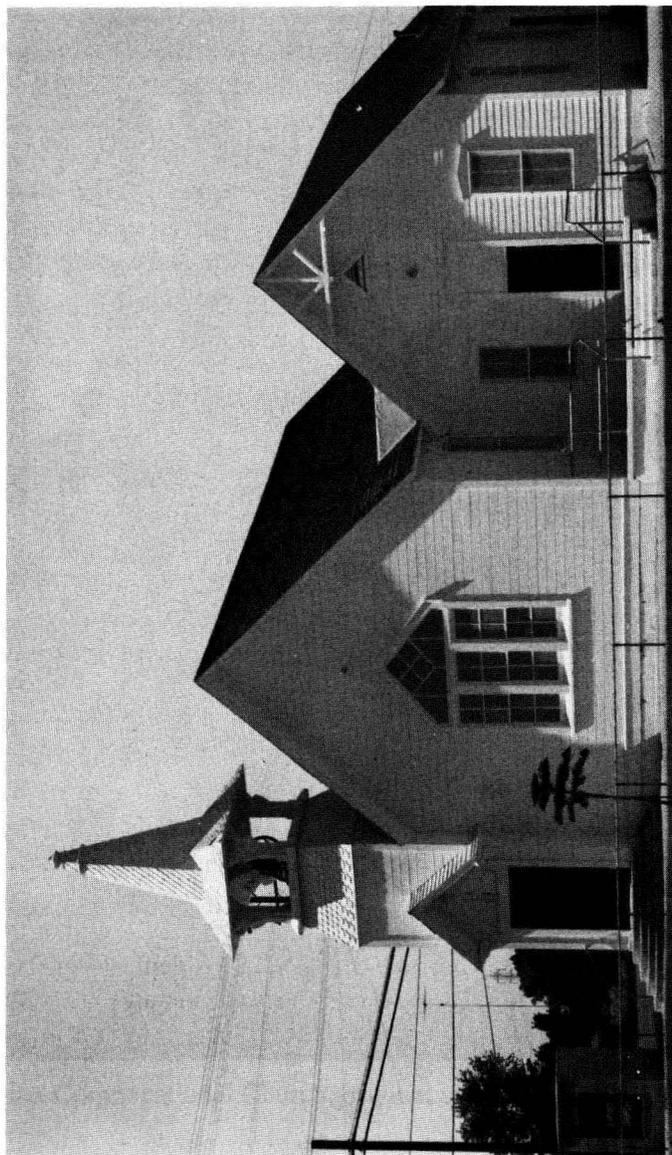
Otay Baptist Church

Otay Baptist is one of the oldest churches in San Diego County. It was called Beth Eden Baptist Church when it held its first service on Sunday, May 1, 1890. At that time, Otay was a growing town which showed signs of someday becoming a large city. It had a post office, newspaper, livery stables, lumber yards, stores, and a two-cell jail. It even had a railroad that contained its name—the National City and Otay Railroad.

Although its dreams of becoming a big city were yielded to Chula Vista eventually, Otay still has its old church, standing today, across the street from its original location on Third Avenue and Zenith Street, where it serves as a nursery for its successor church, Otay Baptist. It was moved after the 1916 flood (one of the few buildings not washed away), and its bell tower, which had warned residents of the flood waters, was removed to the new church at that time.

For fifty-five years, this Baptist church had no resident pastor, but relied on circuit riders for its services. Then, in 1945, the church membership voted to call a resident pastor, Reverend Charles Waters

On May 1, 1949, Reverend Arthur F. Robbins, a young Army veteran who had just graduated from the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, now BIOLA University answered the call to become the second resident pastor. He has been there ever since! Reverend Robbins and his wife Esther (who also taught in the San Diego Public School System for 32 years) have served the Otay Baptist Church for almost fifty years and have instilled a sense of commitment and faithfulness in the members of the congregation.



Otay Baptist Church, 1993.

This faithfulness is evident in many ways: ministering to the Christian Servicemen's Center in San Diego one evening a month for over forty years; furnishing the evening meal and gospel service one evening a month at the Rescue Mission of San Diego since 1955; presenting a gospel service at a local convalescent home each Saturday for over twelve years as well as being responsible for gospel services in two other area rest homes for three years; and establishing the San Diego Bible College & Seminary in 1970 and a Christian Jr./Sr. High School in 1971. In addition, the congregation regularly gives a minimum of one-tenth of the total church income to support missions and missionaries around the world.

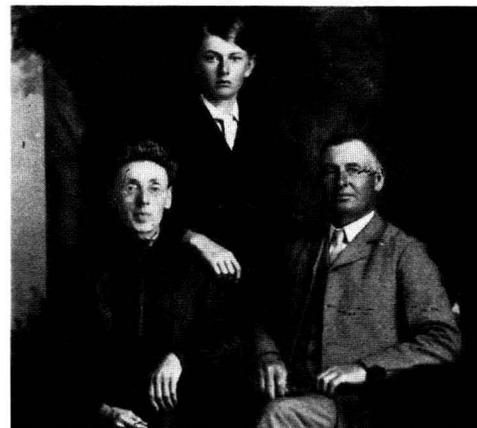
A new sanctuary was built in 1961 and has been debt free for several years. The original little white country church on the corner is named Davis Chapel in honor of Floyd Davis, whose father and grandfather helped to establish and build this 100-plus year old place of worship.



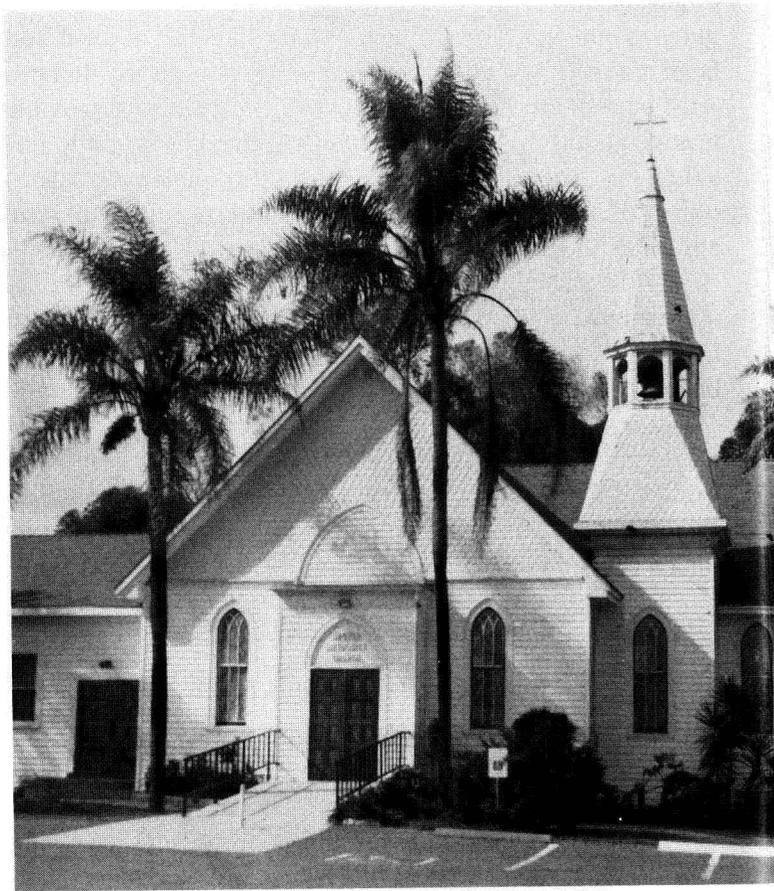
Otay Baptist Church in the 1940s.



Beth Eden Baptist Church, 1912.



Founding members George & Dora Davis, 1904. Nephew Floy Davis, standing.



Nestor United Methodist Church, 1997.

Nestor United Methodist Church

The laying of the cornerstone of the United Methodist Church on July 23, 1896 was such a big event that the National City and Otay Railroad ran an excursion train to the ceremony from San Diego. The railroad charged eight cents for the trip and then donated the money to the church.

Captain John Folks, a veteran of the Civil War, had donated a piece of land in the small community of Nestor, located about three miles south of San Diego Bay. It was named for Nestor A. Young, a California State Assemblyman and later Chief Wharfinger (Harbormaster) of the Port of San Diego. When someone asked where a person lived, he was told "over by Nestor's place." That is how the village got its name.

In the 1880s, the inhabitants of Nestor and other nearby farm villages had to travel by horse and buggy to attend church services in National City. Some of them organized a Sunday School, meeting in a small room in Tia Juana Valley. Soon outgrowing this meeting place, they organized the Tia Juana Valley Methodist church which met in an upstairs room of a school in the little town of Oneonta (later the site of Ream Field.) The minister of this congregation was Reverend A.A. Holder, who held services every Sunday and prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings. The congregation continued to meet at this location until the new church was built in 1896.

Reverend Charles J. Miller was the pastor of the new church, now renamed the Nestor United Methodist Church. The original structure of this new church consisted of the sanctuary, a belfry/entrance way, and a Sunday school room. This served the congregation and several pastors until 1928,

when the Fellowship Room (Recreation Hall) and kitchen were added. The Ladies' Aid Society paid many church bills by cooking dinner each month for the community. Since there were no restaurants in the area, the whole community looked forward to "Cook's Night Out."

The guests were met at the door by a host who led them to cloth-covered tables, decorated with vases of flowers. Donna Wallace, the present church secretary, remembers that the children brought the food to the table and then helped with the dishes. Her mother, Isabel Wallace, was the biscuit maker. From a small table in the kitchen, she rolled out her dough and fresh, hot biscuits were served with the dinners.

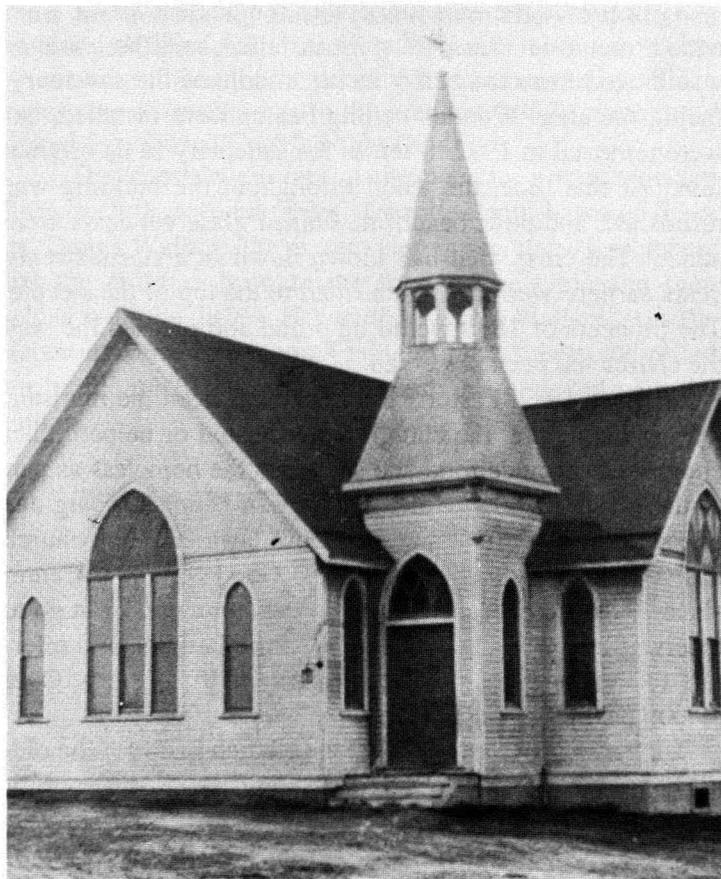


Reverend Charles J. Miller and wife, 1895.

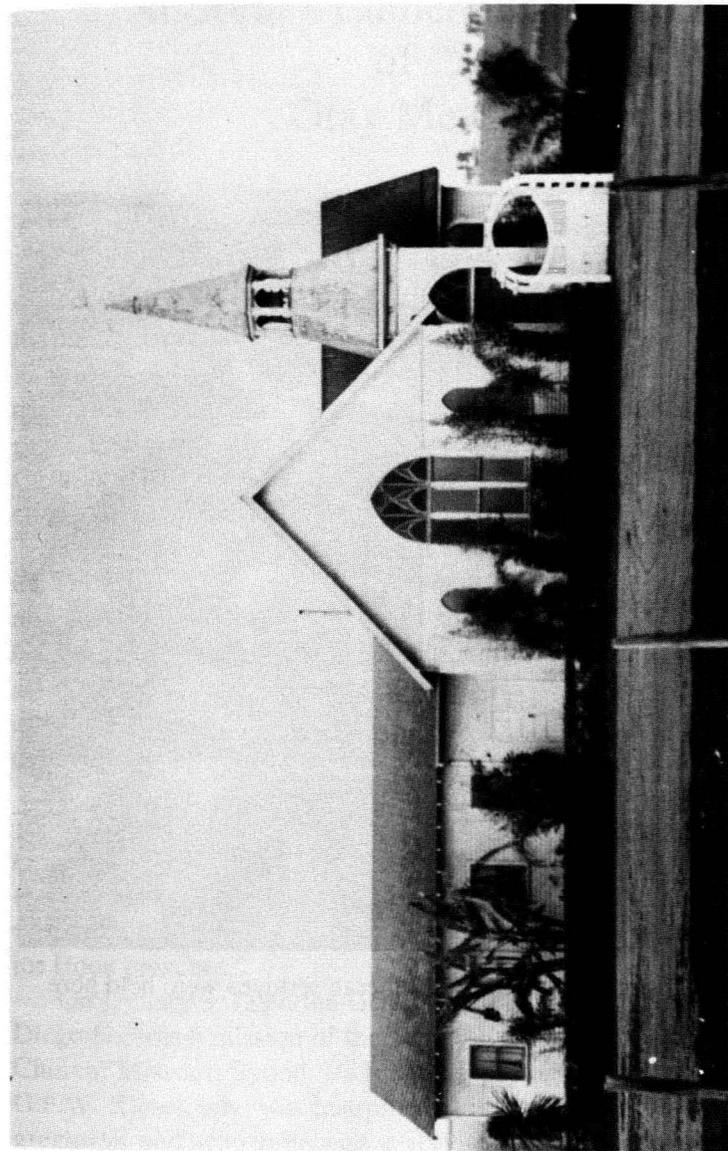
In 1942, the sanctuary was remodeled, pews were added, memorial windows were installed, and the entrance was moved from the belfry to the middle of the sanctuary, facing the altar. Wooden ceiling beams were installed, but were removed in 1992 to return the sanctuary to its original look. At this time, the wood throughout the building was refinished, and new, beautiful stained glass windows were added. The cross, that had blown down in a storm twenty years earlier, was once again fitted to the top of the steeple. The pioneers of 1888 would be proud and pleased the way the church has been preserved.

Since 1987, Pastor Russ Locke has been the minister. During his tenure, the church either hosted or helped other churches to provide food and shelter to the homeless as part of the Interfaith Shelter Network in San Diego, earning one of President Bush's "Point of Light" awards. The church has housed the South Bay Metro Good Neighbor Center since 1990, where needy people in the community can go to receive food, clothing, annual Christmas baskets, and referrals for housing and other community help agencies. Over 19,000 people were served in some way in 1995 alone.

The Nestor United Methodist Church is one of the oldest houses of worship in the South Bay still using the original sanctuary for church services.



Nestor United Methodist Church, 1890.



Nestor United Methodist Church, 1942.

St. John's Lutheran Church of Otay Mesa



Alta School, Otay Mesa. Lutheran services were held here until 1889.

The first Lutheran Church in the South Bay area was located on the Otay Mesa, one of the most isolated regions of San Diego County in those days. It was bordered by the Mexican-American boundary on the south, the Otay River Valley on the north, the San Ysidro Mountains on the east, and, as one early settler put it, "when you fall off the mesa, you've reached the western edge of Otay Mesa." The German Lutheran Church and cemetery lie beneath the corner of Otay Mesa and Brittainia.

This site was once the center of a thriving German farming community. Alta School was established in January 1886 and Lutheran services were held there until 1889 when the German Lutherans planned and built their own church. Construction began in September, and the church structure was completed in November. All labor, material, and land were donated.

A translation of minutes of a meeting held on March 31, 1895 stated "...railroad fare for Pastor Hook would be paid from San Diego to Otay and return in accordance with German custom. Mr. G.H. Lohmann should pass the Klingelbeutel [alms bag equipped with a bell] every Sunday when Pastor Hook preaches."

On January 3, 1897, the German Lutheran Church of San Diego became a mission of the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. Its founding pastor was Reverend G.F.W. Kiesel, who was instrumental in organizing the congregation and who preached a service in German once a month

St. John's Church was accepted in the Missouri Synod in February 1904. However, the higher than average rainfall of the late 1800s gave way in the twentieth century to a drought which brought a decline to the German community in Otay Mesa. According to John Wolfe, a lifetime resident of Otay Mesa, after World War I the church continued to decline, and about 1940 his brother-in-law, "Hop" Hoptonstahl, tore the church building down and used the wood to build a house.

St. John's Lutheran Church had established a cemetery association in 1898. In May 1970, personnel from the design department of the California Division of Highways found evidence that an abandoned cemetery was in the path of proposed Route 75. Further investigation determined that the cemetery belonged to the Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chula Vista.

After much searching, investigation, and legal work, a court order was obtained in September 1971 giving the State permission to disinter the remains, which were received by Glen Abbey Memorial Park in Bonita. The church land was given to the Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chula Vista. The once-thriving German community in Otay Mesa had, along with its church, disappeared almost without a trace.

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF CHULA VISTA

On March 19, 1911, thirty three citizens joined as charter members to form the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Chula Vista. In 1934 the term Episcopal was deleted from the official church name and it became the First Methodist Church of Chula Vista. A further name change became in effect in April of 1968 when the First Methodist Church of Chula Vista merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to become the First United Methodist Church of Chula Vista.

The story of the church started in 1910 when a few families met to worship in a rented hall on Third Avenue near F Street, and they voted to organize a Methodist Church in the city. The church was formally established on April 17, 1911, and the new church was given two lots at Church and Center streets by the San Diego Land and Town Company. W.J.S. Brown was elected president of the trustees and Ralph Sexauer was named secretary of the stewards.

The congregation held services in a pitched tent nearby and continued until the permanent church was completed. On January 21, 1912, the new church building costing nearly \$10,000 was completed and dedicated to serve the 4,000 residents of Chula Vista. The first pastor was Reverend L.A. Rice, and he remained until October 1914.

By the late 1940s the facilities were becoming increasingly overcrowded, so after much debate land was purchased at the southwest corner of Third and J streets for a new sanctuary. Worship services were conducted here from February



Church building at Church and Center Streets, 1915.

1952 until March 1957 and with construction of a newer sanctuary, the old one became Fellowship Hall.

In March 1957 the new sanctuary was completed and the first worship services were held on March 17, 1957 with church membership at 1,323. A 22 rank pipe organ with 1209 pipes was purchased and installed on December 1968 at the cost of \$35,000.

Again the church had plans to relocate to a new site, this being east of Interstate 805, and by a narrow margin the congregation voted for the new church facilities. The first services celebrated in the new sanctuary at East H street and Paseo Ranchero were held on May 8, 1995.

From 1910 to the present, the First United Methodist Church of Chula Vista has kept pace with the growth of Chula Vista.



St. Rose of Lima Church, H Street, 1997

St. Rose of Lima Church

In the second decade of this century, the seeds of Catholic faith were planted by Monsignor Henry Eummelin, who erected a chapel in the “dry” Otay River bottom near the railroad overpass of what is now Main Street and Hollister. Built in 1913 of sturdy concrete, the little chapel, which may have known as St. Francis of Assisi, fell to the rush of water which swept through Otay when the Lower Otay Dam collapsed in 1916.

One of the frequent guest pastors at the chapel had been Father Edmond LaPointe, who also served the Indians throughout the county, as well as establishing parishes for the pioneering families of emerging townships. He is lauded as a worthy successor to the padres who had established the missions. When the original chapel in Otay washed away, Father La Pointe built a new one on higher ground, in Palm City.

But the population was shifting from Otay, which once was considered to be the commercial center of the South Bay, to Chula Vista. Reverend Michael Egan, of St. Anthony’s parish in National City, arranged to have the Palm City structure moved to Third Avenue and Alvarado in Chula Vista, where it was renovated by L.C. Seltzer, who stuccoed the wooden building and built an accompanying pastoral residence. The new parish was dedicated on May 18, 1921, and was called St. Rose of Lima.

In 1941, the pastor, Father Michael J. Brown, purchased all of the property south of the rectory, and in 1944 the new pastor, Monsignor Patrick J. Kenny, who was to serve for

twenty years until his death, had plans drawn for a school and rectory. These buildings were completed and dedicated on October 10, 1948.

By this time, the parish growth had far exceeded the 120-seat church. A new church, with seating capacity of 400, was dedicated November 26, 1950, at the corner of Third Avenue and H Street. In the meantime, a school and a convent for the sisters had been built and dedicated.

Within two years, it became obvious that, even with six masses a day, the new church was again becoming too small to accommodate the increasing population of the parishioners. Property was purchased and plans drawn for a new sanctuary. This building, east of the corner of Third Avenue and H Street, was dedicated on December 20, 1965.

This new structure was patterned to resemble the tent that Moses and his people used to house the Ark of the Covenant. Above the main entrance is a ten-foot Italian mosaic of St. Rose of Lima, who was born in Lima, Peru, in 1586, and died after a lifetime of martyrdom in 1617. She took the name Rose during her confirmation in 1597 because it was said that her face was transformed by a rose.

Today St. Rose of Lima Church holds nineteen masses each week, nine on the weekends and two each week day. It is the oldest Catholic Church in the area and one of the largest churches in Chula Vista..



St. Rose of Lima Church, 3rd Avenue & H Street, 1950s.



St. Rose of Lima Church, Third & Alvarado, 1936.