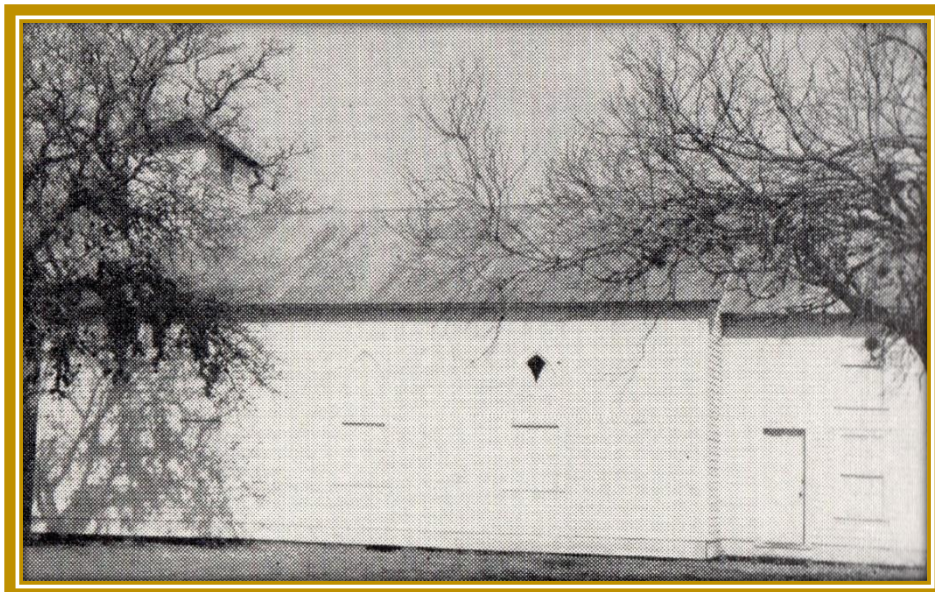


## Stockdale, Texas: St. Mary's Catholic Church on Richter Farm, Richter School, and Richter Cemetery

*By Janet Dawson Ebrom*

The original Catholic parishioners in the town of Stockdale, Wilson County, Texas, were mainly Irish immigrants, and their church, St. Mary's, was erected in 1877 on land donated by W. S. Palm. This small church of native stone was demolished by a severe storm in 1886. By that time, some Polish families had relocated into an area near the town of Stockdale. According to **T. Lindsay Baker**, "The last Polish colony founded in the Cibolo Valley was in Stockdale, a community already established by Americans years before Silesians began moving into the area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century" (page 43). Until a church could be built, Mass was offered in John Richter's home which was about three miles northwest of Stockdale. **John Richter**, an original immigrant to Texas from Stare Karmonki, Upper Silesia, in present-day Poland, deeded two acres for the church which was built on his farm in 1891, "...about 300 feet east of his house, close to the road and north of the railroad tracks" (Daniels, page 73; Wilson County Deeds, Volume Y, page 195). **John Richter** knew that his neighbors who were mostly second-generation Polish immigrants would join him in placing their Catholic faith and religious traditions first in their lives. Some of those who helped to build a church were from these families: **Bednorz, Dlugosch, Nieschwietz, Pilarczyk, Richter, Skrobarczyk, and Sowa**. Together they constructed the heart of their vibrant farming community, the *second* St. Mary's, which was both humble and holy.

"The church was a wood frame building about 25 feet wide and 50 feet long. It was a simply constructed building with the old type exposed metal bolt braces holding the structure together. There was a choir loft and a sacristy [in] back of the church altar. Above the sacristy there was a [second-floor] room where the priest might stay overnight. There was a small bell tower in which hung the bell to call the faithful to services" (Daniels, page 73). The bell tower is barely visible behind the branches in the upper left corner of the side-view photograph.



Photograph from:  
*Archdiocese of San  
Antonio Diamond  
Jubilee 1874 – 1949,*  
page 252

From St. Mary's inception until 1901, priests from Floresville traveled to Stockdale since it was a mission church without a resident pastor. From 1901 through 1928, St. Mary's on the Richter farm became a mission church of St. Ann's in Kosciusko. Afterwards, it was a mission of St. Joseph's in Nixon. The simple white church, called St. Mary's Immaculate Conception Church by the rural families, had benches for seating. Since there was no electricity, candles and oil lamps were used. **Pauline Richter Esparza** was the head of the choir, and she also took care of the altar. As a member of the Altar Society, **Albina Skrobarczyk Sowa** helped in cleaning the church. Usually Mass was offered only once a month by priests who traveled from their own parishes, so the Sowa family said the Rosary in Polish at home on the other Sundays. As devout Catholics, the Sows ensured that their children were well prepared to receive the sacraments. Two of the Sowa girls, **Mary** and **Apalonia**, attended Catechism classes in Nixon where **William Sowa** drove his daughters in his 1932 Chevrolet (Recollections of **Mary Sowa Petri O'Toole**; interview by **Janet Dawson Ebrom** on May 24, 2011).

### 1934 Holy Communion in Stockdale, Texas



*Photograph courtesy of: Apalonia Mae Sowa Dawson 1923 – 2010*

Rev. Edward Marco, in back of Communicants: **Ben Esparza, Bill Sowa, Mary Ellen Sowa, Eugenia Kravitz, Bernice Richter, Hedwig Richter, Albina Ramzinski, Apalonia Mae Sowa, Cecilia Richter, Fabian Richter, and Matthew Richter**



**William Sowa**, the father of eight children, was an altar server at St. Mary's Immaculate Conception Church. He would often take his family to the first Mass in the car, return home, saddle his white horse, and return to church to serve the second Mass. **William and Albina Sowa** extended an open invitation for visiting priests to share Sunday dinner with the Sowa family on their Stockdale farm.

In 1939, **Father Edward Marco** made the 12-mile trip from Nixon to Stockdale to celebrate the wedding Mass of the first Sowa daughter. On June 18, 1939, **Elizabeth Sowa** married **Vincent Krawczynski** from Lockhart, Texas, and even though their sacrament of matrimony took place at St. Mary's near Stockdale, it was registered in Nixon's St. Joseph Catholic Church Marriage records (page 46) when **Father Marco** returned home.

In the background is a rare glimpse of the small church with its arched windows. Left to right: **Joe Krawczynski** standing beside his brother, the groom, **Vincent Krawczynski**, and **Elizabeth Sowa**, the bride, with her younger sister, **Mary Ellen Sowa**, who recalled over seventy years later that she wore a "peach-colored formal" as the maid of honor.



*Photograph courtesy of:*  
Alice Kathryn Krawczynski Hansen, Boerne, Texas



**Nancy Louise Sowa**

*Photograph courtesy of: Apalonia Mae Sowa Dawson 1923 – 2010*

The Sowa grandchildren who spent summers in Stockdale had vivid recollections decades later about the little white church down the road from the family farmstead. William Sowa's first grandchild **Nancy** said she remembered the men and boys sitting on one side of the church and the ladies and girls on the other side of the center aisle. As a child, she wanted to be near her Grandpa, but she had to go to the other side and be seated with the women. She was disappointed because her younger brother **Harold** got to sit with Grandpa, and she didn't (Recollections of **Nancy Sowa Koenig**; interview by **Janet Dawson Ebrom** on July 30, 2011).

**Harold Sowa**, who enjoyed summers from 1942 until 1952 on his grandparents' Stockdale farm, was an altar server at the church when he was a boy. He and his younger cousin, **Gerald Krawczynski**, remembered that the windows were always open in the church, and they distinctly recalled the noise from the train during Mass (Recollections of **Harold Sowa** and **Gerald Krawczynski**; interview by **Janet Dawson Ebrom** on January 19, 2019).

By 1951, the parishioners of St. Mary's who lived in the town of Stockdale wanted a church more conveniently located and not three miles out in the country. The decision was made to build a new church, and the quaint church on Richter property was sadly dismantled. All that was left were special memories from its 60 years of worship by the nearby farming families. At least an effort was made to salvage the boards: "The lumber of St. Mary's Church was carefully taken down, cleaned and stacked. Today, that same lumber forms the sub floor of the present Church" (Daniels, page 97). In addition to the lumber being used in the third church, a statue of Our Blessed Mother, a statue of Our Lord, the church bell, and the organ were moved to the new church referred to as St. Mary's Church Number 3 (Daniels, page 97).

The location of the rural church on the Richter farm is now marked with only a cross.

## Richter School

In addition to the church on the Richter farm, a schoolhouse was built because education was valued, and the close proximity to farm families made it convenient. The schoolhouse was located off County Road 418 on property later owned by **Fabian Richter** (shown below) who was the son of **Pete Richter** and **Veronica Skrobarczyk**.



*Photograph courtesy of: Apalonia Mae Sowa Dawson 1923 – 2010*

Children who attended Richter School together circa 1932–1933:

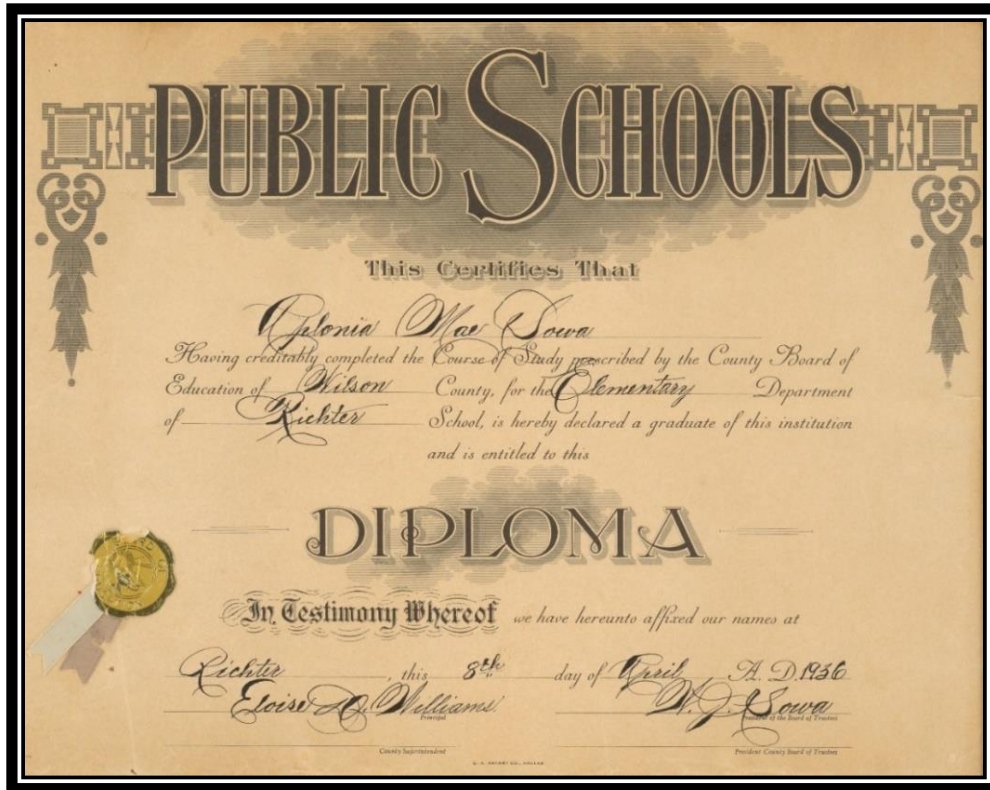
Front Row: **Florence Sowa, Alex Richter, Margaret Richter**

Second Row: **Margaret “Maggie” Skrobarczyk, Bill Sowa, Emmett Fayne Henry, Rudolph Richter, Heddie Richter**

Third Row: **Mary Ellen Sowa, Cecilia Richter, Apalonia Mae Sowa, Elizabeth Skrobarczyk, Marion Skrobarczyk, Fabian Richter**

Back: **Helen Skrobarczyk**





After attending Richter Elementary School for seven years, **Apalonia Mae Sowa** received her diploma on April 8, 1936. It was signed by the principal, **Eloise D. Williams**, and the President of the School Board of Trustees, **W. J. Sowa**, who was Apalonia's father.

The one-room schoolhouse opened the world of academics in a familiar setting where students walked to school. Raised in nearby farmhouses by parents who spoke literary Polish or the Silesian dialect of their ancestors, the children became fluent in English. All that remains of Richter School are the steps which led into this country schoolhouse.

*Photograph courtesy of: Eddie Skrobarcek, Orange Grove, Texas*



## Richter Cemetery

One of John Richter's sons, **Vincent Richter** who was married to **Martha Ploch**, deeded one acre of land for a Catholic cemetery about 200 feet from the church, and they were dedicated at the same time (Gilbert, page 253). **Vincent** was only five years old when he had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in 1855 with his parents and six siblings; they endured the loss of their mother, **Barbara Anders**, who died on the voyage according to family memoirs. Years later, it was a meaningful gesture by **Vincent Richter** to provide for a cemetery in his community. The Wilson County deed recorded on page 197 was dated May 25, 1892, a year after the dedication. Fittingly, it was named Richter Cemetery and is still in use today.



*Photograph courtesy of: Ed Ebrom, San Antonio, Texas*

The oldest grave in this pastoral cemetery on County Road 417 is that of **Johanna Graboń Skrobarczyk** who was born in Sollarnia, Upper Silesia, present-day Poland, on May 9, 1819, and died on July 15, 1894. The following year, the eldest person in the cemetery, **John Richter**, who was born on December 5, 1816, died on July 20, 1895.

Surnames from Upper Silesia are engraved on tombstones in this little country cemetery: **Dlugosch / Dlugosh / Dugosh, Felux, Ploch, Richter, Skrobarczyk / Skrobarcek, Sobeczyk / Sobcecek, Sowa, and Wiatrek.** Also, **Victor Ramzinski**, the son of original immigrants from the Poznań area in present-day Poland, is buried beside his wife, **Amelia Sowa.** The **Esparzas**, who spoke Polish handed down in their maternal lines, are buried here. By far, the Richter family has the most graves in this cemetery which bears their surname. **John Richter** was the father of eighteen children— seven children by his first wife and eleven children by his second wife, **Paulina Kiolbassa.** Joined by their Catholic heritage and devotion to family and farm life, they rest peacefully in the Stockdale countryside.



*Photograph courtesy of: Ed Ebrom, San Antonio, Texas*



**Sources:**

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