

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7 (and 8)

Page 44

NAME: St. Mary's Catholic Church

LOCATION: Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
*010 U.S. 60*

OWNER: Most Rev. Leroy T. Matthiesen, D.D.  
 Catholic Diocese of Amarillo  
 P. O. Box 5644  
 Amarillo, Texas 79107

ARCHITECT: W. H. Lightfoot & Rabey Funk BUILDER: W. Frank Little  
 Construction Co.

INTERIOR CRAFTSMEN: Achille Cattanei Dino Gambetti  
 Leonida Gorlato Franco di Bello  
 Mario de Cristofaro Amedeo Maretto  
 Antonio Monetti Carlo Sanvito  
 Enrico Zorzi

SPECIFIC DATES: 1929-1930 (construction); 1945 (interior painting)

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA: Acreage of nominated property: less than one acre  
 UTM reference: 13/764100/3871850

Verbal boundary description: On Block XVI, shown on map:  
"Plat of Ubarger (sic) Tex. Being a part of Section No. 76"; nominated property includes the church, the property from the entrance facade to the street, and a 15' apron around the remainder of the structure (each long side and read (apse) facade).

DESCRIPTION:

St. Mary's Catholic Church is a modest brick structure erected in 1929 and 1930 on the Panhandle plains of West Texas to house the small congregation at Umbarger. A modified rectangle in plan, the building rises one story above a raised basement and is topped with a steeply-pitched roof. The church does not readily fit into any single style of architecture, and the simple detailing of its facades reflects the hard economic times during which it was constructed. While the rectangular form and



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steeply pitched roof recall Gothic Revival architecture, the rounded arches of the stained-glass windows suggest an influence of the later Renaissance Revival movement. The entrance facade is asymmetrically composed and features a truncated tower at its southwest corner, and an arched window with deep reveal above the double doors. In the 1960s, the entrance was modified when a covered porch and wheelchair ramp were added and the steps altered. Unlike many of the other Catholic churches documented in this nomination, St. Mary's has an interior altar space rather than a projecting apse.

When completed in 1930, the interior of the church was stark and utilitarian, decorated only with stained glass windows, the stations of the cross, and pews and altar pieces. Then in 1945, Italian prisoners of war being held captive in the U.S. military camp in nearby Hereford, decorated the interior of the church with elaborately detailed mural and stencil work painted directly on the plaster walls. These skilled painters used a sophisticated palette of low intensity hues of blues, yellow gold, grey, pink, and browns in the nave area, and employed somewhat richer hues around the altar. Vertical panels of thorny vines and foliage, and discs containing religious symbols are painted on the side walls between the windows. A chair rail with panels of grape vines above it encircles the nave. Squares and discs with images representing Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John enhance the low wall of the choir loft, while the window at the rear of the loft is flanked by two robed angels. An arched area infilled with the repeating pattern of a cross enclosed by an intricate border provides a backdrop for statues of St. Joseph and St. Mary at the side altars. The apse spandrel is graced with two robed angels, each holding a lily. A *trompe l'oeil* effect is achieved on the walls of the apse, which are visually divided into two sections. Vertical panels with arched insets indicate wainscoting in the dado area, with a broad stenciled chair rail above. The remaining wall space is infilled with an all-over diaper repeat pattern. Simply, boldly colored murals in perspective are painted on the side walls, one depicting the Visitation and the other depicting the Annunciation. Though quite stylized, they recall Early Italian Renaissance depictions of these subjects. The landscapes behind the scenes, which would have been of Central Italy in actual Italian representations, are here represented as the flat High Plains in which Umbarger is located. A third mural of the Assumption is now covered by the cloth draping the back wall of the apse. An extraordinary treatment given to the sacristy wall located on the east side of the apse is particularly interesting. An elaborate framework of three-dimensional shell niche and panels with Latin passages was painted around the bare lavatory fixture, suggesting its importance in church ritual.

In addition to the painting accomplished by the Italian P.O.W.'s, a low relief carving of the Last Supper was done on the side of the altar facing the congregation.



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**SIGNIFICANCE:**

St. Mary's Church at Umbarger, though a modest 1930 brick structure, represents one of the earliest German communities in West Texas and perhaps the most unusual ethnic association of all the churches. After several years of controversy over town and church sites, members of two separate Catholic congregations finally united and eventually constructed the present church. Although social and economic conditions of the time dictated a rather stark, utilitarian structure, it later achieved a rare aesthetic embellishment when Italian Prisoners of War were invited to paint the interior. The painted interior is less than fifty years old, but it is of major significance artistically and of some interest historically. In the context of rural Panhandle ecclesiastical artwork, the St. Mary's interiors are totally unexpected.

The permanent settlement of Umbarger, an agricultural community of the Texas Panhandle, is attributed to the unusual combination of a speculating land developer and a colonizing German priest. While some maverick pioneers are known to have inhabited parts of the Panhandle as early as the 1840s, it was not until the expanding railroads made these remote areas accessible at the turn of the century that settlers began arriving en masse. Father Joseph Reisdorf saw these vast expanses of affordable land as an opportunity for his fellow countrymen to acquire property. He was instrumental in the establishment of several German Catholic farming communities throughout west Texas. In 1908 Father Reisdorf came to the small community of Umbarger, named for an S. G. Umbarger who had farmed a large tract of land from 1845 to 1900. For a time Reisdorf worked closely with land speculator John Hutson in advertising the land to attract settlers, but the two had a disagreement and Reisdorf withdrew from Hutson completely. The two men began competing to attract residents to townsites platted on opposite sides of the railroad tracks. Subsequently, two Catholic churches were constructed, one by Reisdorf with borrowed funds and the other by Hutson with his personal capital. Reisdorf refused to celebrate Mass in Hutson's church. The bitter dispute grew to such proportion that the Bishop from Dallas was called in to settle it. He ruled in favor of Hutson's debt-free church and soon after, Reisdorf left Umbarger. Finally united, the congregation grew as more people settled in Umbarger. Eventually the need for a larger church became apparent, and Amarillo architects W. H. Lightfoot and Rabey Funk designed the present structure, which was built in 1930 by the W. Frank Little Construction Co., also of Amarillo. When completed, this stark, bare church reflected the depressed economic period during which it was built. Several years later, it was painted in a manner quite extraordinary for the rural Panhandle community. Italian prisoners of war being held captive at nearby Hereford were invited to paint the church. The prisoners painted a highly symbolic array of decorative panels, borders, murals, and infill on the walls. Meticulously planned and executed, the work is outstanding in its design and craftsmanship. It is also noteworthy because it includes scenes of the flat Panhandle landscape.



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Page 2 of 2

Multiple Resource Area  
Thematic Group

Name Churches with Decorative Interior Painting Thematic Resources  
State Texas

Nomination/Type of Review

Date/Signature

11. St. Mary's Catholic Church  
(306 W. San Antonio,  
Gillespie County) **Entered in the  
National Register** *for* Keeper Melous Byers 6/21/83  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

12. St. Mary's Catholic Church  
(Umbarger, Randall County) **Entered in the  
National Register** *for* Keeper Melous Byers 6/21/83  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

13. St. Mary's Church of the  
Assumption **Entered in the  
National Register** *for* Keeper Melous Byers 6/21/83  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>59</sup> 14. Wesley Brethren Church **Entered in the  
National Register** *for* Keeper Melous Byers 6/21/83  
<sub>7/18/83 Previous  
listing 1/18/79</sub> Attest \_\_\_\_\_

15. St. Peter's Catholic Church  
(Previously listed 5/25/79) Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

16. Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

17. Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

18. Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

19. Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_

20. Keeper \_\_\_\_\_  
Attest \_\_\_\_\_



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

St. Mary's Catholic Church (Churches with  
Decorative Interior Painting TR)  
Randall County  
TEXAS

Working No. MAY 9 1983

Fed. Reg. Date: 2-7-84

Date Due: 6/9/83 - 6/23/83

Action:  ACCEPT 6/21/83  
 RETURN  
Entered in the National Register  REJECT

Federal Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

- resubmission
- nomination by person or local government
- owner objection
- appeal

Substantive Review:  sample  request  appeal  NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Recom./Criteria \_\_\_\_\_  
Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_  
Discipline \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for:  technical corrections cited below  
 substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name

2. Location

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
	Public Acquisition	Accessible	

4. Owner of Property

5. Location of Legal Description

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- summary paragraph
- completeness
- clarity
- alterations/integrity
- dates
- boundary selection



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## **8. Significance**

Period \_\_\_\_\_ Areas of Significance—Check and justify below

Specific dates \_\_\_\_\_ Builder/Architect \_\_\_\_\_

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

- \_\_\_\_\_ summary paragraph
- \_\_\_\_\_ completeness
- \_\_\_\_\_ clarity
- \_\_\_\_\_ applicable criteria
- \_\_\_\_\_ justification of areas checked
- \_\_\_\_\_ relating significance to the resource -
- \_\_\_\_\_ context
- \_\_\_\_\_ relationship of integrity to significance
- \_\_\_\_\_ justification of exception
- \_\_\_\_\_ other

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## **9. Major Bibliographical References**

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## **10. Geographical Data**

Acres of nominated property \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle name \_\_\_\_\_

UMT Reference

Verbal boundary description and justification

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## **11. Form Prepared By**

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## **12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification**

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

\_\_\_\_ national    \_\_\_\_ state    \_\_\_\_ local

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **13. Other**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Maps
- \_\_\_\_\_ Photographs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other

Questions concerning this nomination may be directed to \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: 202 272 - 3504

Comments for any item may be continued on an attached sheet







St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Exterior, Southwest oblique  
(camera facing Northeast)  
Photo #91 of 98





237  
PSALM 13  
ALLELUIA  
245  
22  
30



St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, overall view facing altar

Photo #92 of 98







St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, side wall, facing rear

Photo #93 of 98







St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, apse detail

Photo #94 of 98







St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, choir loft detail

Photo #95 of 98







St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, detail of wall at side altar

Photo #96 of 98





St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative  
Interior Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission,  
Austin, Texas  
Interior, sacristy wall  
Photo #97 of 98





St. Mary's Catholic Church  
Churches in Texas with Decorative Interior  
Painting  
Umbarger, Randall County, Texas  
Linda C. Flory  
October, 1980  
Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas  
Interior, detail of apse and apse spandrel

Photo #98 of 98



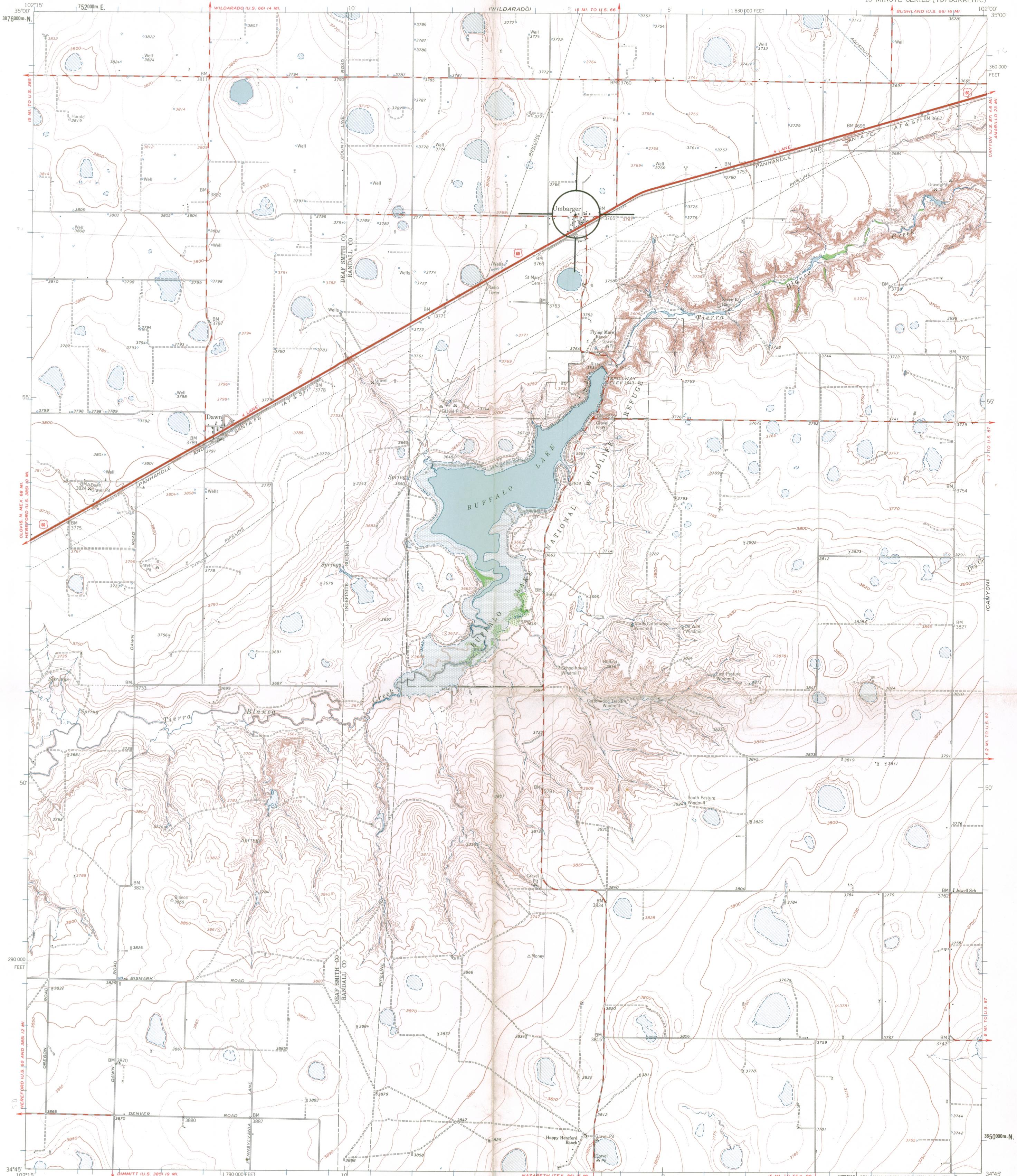
ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

UMBARGER, RANDALL CO., TEXAS  
UTM REFERENCE: 13/764100/3871850

BUFFALO LAKE QUADRANGLE  
TEXAS  
15 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

BUFFALO STADIUM  
1:24,000

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey

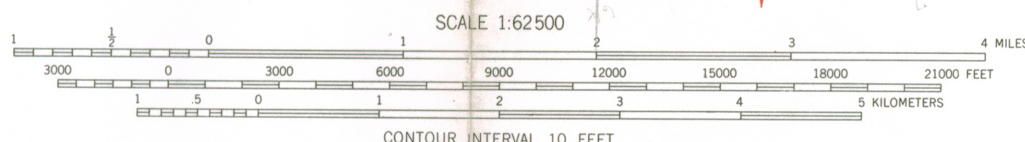
Control by USGS and USC&GS

Topography by photogrammetric methods from aerial photographs taken 1959. Field checked 1961

Polyconic projection. 1927 North American datum  
10,000-foot grid based on Texas coordinate system, north zone  
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid ticks,  
zone 13, shown in blue

Area covered by dashed light blue pattern is subject  
to controlled inundation

TRUE NORTH  
MAGNETIC NORTH  
APPROXIMATE MEAN  
DECLINATION, 1961



CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET  
DOTTED LINES REPRESENT 5 FOOT CONTOURS  
DATUM IS MEAN SEA LEVEL

ROAD CLASSIFICATION  
Heavy-duty ——— Light-duty ———  
Medium-duty ——— Unimproved dirt - - - - -  
U.S. Route



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

BUFFALO LAKE, TEX.  
N3445-W10200/15

1961

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS  
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, DENVER 25, COLORADO OR WASHINGTON 25, D.C.  
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

3402-440

UMBARGER Rand 3