



Agatha Hurley
BVM Archives

Chapter 10

Davenport and ICA

In the decade from 1850-60, Iowa's population tripled from just under 200,000 to almost 700,000.¹ As a result, the need for education, particularly the need for parish schools in Davenport, became so great that in 1855, priests and people asked the Sisters to return to Davenport. During the next few years, the people of Davenport rode a crest of prosperity and the school at St. Anthony succeeded.²



First ICA building, later sold to the Meriess for Mercy hospital.

The next year Father Donaghoe considered opening a boarding school in Davenport and finally accepted a gift of 10 acres from Antoine and Margaret Le Claire on Marquette Street, two miles outside of town. A financial panic during 1857 prevented his building until 1858, when he asked Agatha Hurley (above) to construct a three-storey brick building with a one storey adjoining chapel. (first ICA building.) Finally in the spring of 1859, Margaret Mann and 11 BVMs—one of them Cecilia Dougherty—journeyed down the Mississippi to Davenport to start Immaculate Conception Academy (ICA)³

The trip to Davenport could be hazardous and long. No train ran directly there from Dubuque. Spring was a bad time to travel, especially on trains. Tracks were poorly engineered and wrecks frequent—the result of mudslides, floods, washed out track, and poor maintenance of the roadbed. Sections of rail had more than once sprung loose, slashed through the floor of passenger

cars and derailed an entire train. BVM Joseph O'Reilly would be in one such wreck within the next 10 years.⁴

Nor were the roads any better—rutted, pock marked, and so muddy that wagons had a hard time staying upright. Going by buggy to check a convent in Clinton, the same Joseph O'Reilly—who seems to have had a penchant for exciting journeys—was tumbled violently into slush and mud. Looking up she saw the carriage wheels spinning above her head and commented dryly, “Ah, well, where there's muck, there's luck.” As one of the ICA faculty who traveled more than most, it's doubtful she'd ever vote for risking the roads of spring any more than the railroads.⁵

The safest and easiest way from Dubuque to Davenport was on a riverboat. Sternwheelers departed six times a day from the Dubuque levee and docked at Davenport six to eight hours later. River travel was clean, comfortable, respectable and available. Early community Custom Books specify that Sisters might wear a “house dress” on boats.⁶ On the other hand, boats did collide fairly often on the crowded river, but this seems to have been an acceptable hazard. Usually they limped on to the next port.⁷

Familiar with the cost and inconvenience of any way of travel in 1859, Donaghoe put the 12 Sisters on a riverboat. Arriving safely in Davenport they boarded a wagon hired for the ride to the new academy, two bruising miles through fields and wilderness over a muddy wagon track filled with sinkholes and potholes.

At the end of their 70-mile boat trip followed by a rough wagon ride, the weary women hoped to cook a hot meal and sleep in a good bed. Instead, they found a defective fireplace that filled the house with smoke. Worse still, the big empty building held only large crates packed with bedding. They unpacked, made their beds in the crates, and laughed. The crates would become table, chair, desk or bed until other furniture arrived.⁸

Luckily, Cecilia was a healthy 21. With the others she hauled water from the pond a third of a mile away, walked two miles to Mass on Sunday, experienced the disappointment of cleaning and polishing the academy for the July '59 opening, then waited all day without a single pupil showing up to register. Nicknamed “Poverty Point” by Donaghoe, from the very first it earned its alias. Without the frequent visits of Mrs. LeClaire and her baskets of food (particularly her Christmas dinner with all the trimmings) things might have been grim in the academy on Marquette road. Perhaps it was

here Cecilia first experienced something she often wrote in letters, “We are well kept only in God’s holy keeping.”

Immaculate Conception academy at “Poverty Point” could hardly be called a success during the next four years. It had seven boarders in 1860 and no day students. To make ends meet, the Sisters taught at St. Margaret or St. Anthony, two parish schools in Davenport. A music teacher, Cecilia probably spent time at all three places, though attached officially to the academy. Margaret Mann taught adult classes at St. Margaret parish.

Finally they gave it up. Donaghoe put the academy building up for rent or sale. In 1863 he settled the boarding school on the fringe of downtown Davenport in the rented Sargent House on Brady Street. Immediately the enrollment soared! So many students applied that the Sisters cleaned a large barn and fitted it for classes, keeping the house itself for dormitories, refectories, and parlors.⁹

The blessings of the boarding school in downtown Davenport included Mass every day instead of only three times a week. In contrast to their first Christmas, without a crust until Mrs. Le Claire’s basket arrived,¹⁰ Christmas at the house on Brady Street boasted a full meal prepared by their Sister cook. Music rosters filled rapidly. By 1875 there were 128 music pupils in class or practicing in the conservatory, the new St. Cecilia Hall, built by Gonzaga McLoskey with her family inheritance.



ICA, downtown Davenport
BVM Archives

In addition to teaching music, Cecilia served as prefect of studies, one of Margaret Mann's two able vice-principals. Years later, the superior of the Bettendorf Carmel outside Davenport, a former ICA student, wrote of Cecilia, her

prefect, “She was a dear mother to us all, combining discipline with affection.”

However, 1877 marked a year for change—indeed, for many changes for Cecilia. Her 18 years at ICA were about to end because of Mother Clarke’s need for help copying the BVM Rule for Roman Approbation.¹¹ Mary Clarke’s driving desire to obtain Rome’s approval had thrown a mounting volume of work on Gertrude Regan. Normally busy, Gertrude also kept the accounts and served as Mother’s secretary, leaving her little time to be novice mistress for those who came now in greater numbers to join the congregation.

In 1877, the BVM Rule gained a First Degree of Praise, the first step in its acceptance and community business increased to a point where Mary Clarke desired Gertrude Regan’s constant assistance. Mother Clarke was in her 70s and her health had for years been frail. The Matter of the Rule demanded more and more energy and time—with more expected in the future. First Approval must be renewed and a revision of the Rule sent to Rome by 1883. Mary Clarke was determined to accomplish the Final Approbation of the Rule before her death. To find more time for Gertrude Regan, her overworked assistant, Mother sent to ICA for Cecilia to take over the novitiate at the end of the 1877 school year. It was an early sign of Cecilia’s increased role in the general government of the congregation..

Cecilia Dougherty was 39, talented in relating to other people, a disciplined woman of integrity, and an interesting teacher with a readable hand. This last proved valuable in making multiple copies of the Rule.¹²

In addition, she had weathered the poverty of the early ICA and her years in a boarding school gave her a practical knowledge of organizing groups of girls and young women as well as clothes, bedding, duties, classes, hikes and activities. And she was a musician—a bonus for the novitiate. A woman of prayer and faith, Cecilia’s boarding school background helped her understand the girls and women now entering theMs.¹³

Her time with novices lasted less than a year, but it marked the beginning of Cecilia’s time as an administrator. From September of 1877 until her death at 81 in 1919, Cecilia Dougherty would hold some office in the congregation. She was in turn superior, novice mistress, secretary general, Council member, Mother, postulant mistress, and Mother again. Working with Mother Clarke on the Rule, Cecilia co-authored a Custom

Book in 1885. After Mother Clarke's death in 1887, she served on Gertrude's Council for six years and in 1894 the congregation chose her as their third Mother.

, , ,

Notes to Chapter 10

1. Actual population figures for Iowa are 192,214 in 1850 and 674,913 in 1860, (Farmers Almanac) more than triple. One explanation is the movement of settlers to the West, but Davenport was also a safe haven for many Southern families during the Civil War. Often they boarded their girls year round at ICA.

2. Five BVMs started St. Philomena Academy (Davenport) in 1844, five blocks from St. Anthony church. After futile attempts to live on the erratic payment of tuition (One month = \$1 in wood and \$1 in money), Mother Clarke sent for them. They packed and returned to Dubuque. Mary Clarke wrote to Bishop Loras on November 27, 1854, alluding to the small amount coming in as the reason for leaving St. Philomena. Coogan 195-6.

3. The 12 Sisters who began Immaculate Conception Academy are listed by Coogan with their areas of expertise. Margaret Mann, superior; Joseph O'Reilly, English; Xavier O'Reilly, English & Latin; Gabriel Eisenger, German; Cecilia Dougherty, music; Regis Colligan [Colgan], art; Clement Herron & Stella Reid, elementary; Isidora McCarthy, seamstress & housekeeper; and Bibiana Hynes, Mathias Connolly and Genevieve McNamee, (unknown), probably cared for the minims. Coogan 1 315-316.

After ICA moved into the Hill House in downtown Davenport, the Sisters of Mercy bought the first academy building on Marquette and built Mercy Hospital around it. The original ICA made up the central section of Mercy Hospital.

4. Train wrecks were frequent. Cows on the track, trees, buckled track and poorly banked curves accounted for most of them. According to the St. Joseph Academy (Des Moines) file in the Archives, in 1862 several Sisters on a train bound for Boone (IA) found themselves sitting in icy pond water shaking glass out of their skirts. The last car had whipped off the tracks and spun down the bank into the pond. One of the Sisters saw the leg of a baby sticking out of the muddy water and pulled the child out to safety. BVM Joseph O'Reilly happened to be in this group sitting in mud .

Coogan adds more hardships in her account of the rest of this train trip to Boone. Coogan1 366-367

5. Pulcheria McGuire (ANNALS) tells of the overturned buggy and Joseph O'Reilly sitting in mud again!

6. Father Donaghoe put the 12 Sisters on the boat and had them met at the other end by a man in wagon who drove them out to the new academy on the edge of town. What must impress those of us used to traveling alone is that the custom of the day dictated that women travel in the company of a man. Not only had the first five come across the ocean alone in 1833, the long trip to Dubuque in 1843 had been made without Father Donaghoe, as well as the three trips to Davenport in 1844, 1855, and 1859. In a few years, Mother Clarke would casually write Baptist Seeley, superior in Des Moines. to take a child and com to Dubuque with her as companion.

7. Father Donaghoe himself was in just such a steamboat collision. Both boats were damaged but made it to port. His boat even proceeded up river on its scheduled run after getting disentangled.

8. All ICA details in this section come from Jane Coogan 1 314-317. Her source is her own earlier book on ICA now in the BVM Archives. The original academy building on Marquette Road later became the center section of Mercy Hospital used by the Sisters of Mercy as their convent. It has since been torn down.

9. In 1867 there were 250 girls at ICA, many from the South. Because of the Civil War and its aftermath, their families sent them North for safety's sake.

10. Mrs. Le Claire, part Indian as was her husband Antoine, was one of the founders of Davenport. Christmas is not the only time Margaret LeClaire appeared at the door of ICA with an entire dinner. Coogan 1 296-297

11. After Father Donaghoe's death in 1869, Mother Clarke found again the resolution that enabled her to begin a school in Dublin when she was younger. By October 1869, less than a year after Donaghoe's death, she had incorporated the congregation under the laws of Iowa as a non-profit organization. In 1871, she completed a Rule that differed somewhat from Donaghoe's brief notes and sent it to Rome for First Approbation in 1873. By 1877, using Father Trevis as well as the Chicago Jesuits, she saw the revised Rule approved. During all this time her letters show her firmly in charge. On March 15, 1885, the Rule received Final Approbation from Rome.

12. In the congregation of the late 1870s all official correspondence was handwritten. Typewriters had not yet become standard in offices. During the 1890s when all documents were typeset, then printed or written by hand. The first copies of Pulcheria's ANNALS (1904) were typed, hectographed and distributed to all BVM convents as the first attempt at a historical account of the beginnings of the BVM

congregation. Cecilia's clear hand was a positive consideration in her being called back to the old motherhouse. She was to help copy Mother Clarke's Rule to send to Rome and to the various priests who needed a copy of the newest version.

13. An interesting letter from Baptist Seeley shows how Cecilia handled most problems. This one concerns a math problem and indicates Cecilia's approach to those she lived with as well. Baptist is a friend. The August 1864 letter below is to a Sister who learned her math from Baptist. The Miss Keith may have been teaching a class at ICA. The source of the letter: Coogan 1 340 - 341.

Dear Sister,

August 1864

You may remember that when I was putting down the fractions in your little book I called your attention to one particular example which I had never succeeded in working. Perhaps you have. I am just going to tell you how I happen to know it now.

The Sisters here had not seen the new edition till one of the young ladies brought it this summer. Of course she was using it during the day and we could not get a peep at it till the children went to bed. So one evening while we were on retreat, Sister Mary Cecilia came to me and said, "Sis, I have an example in the algebra that I can't do and Miss Keith is just up to it and I could not go near her tomorrow if I haven't it." When I looked at it I found it was my old customer & told her I did not think I could do it but would try; so I tried till I was convinced I could not & went to bed.

But Cecilia did not give up so easily. She went into the oratory and said the Memorare* and told the Blessed Virgin she might do it or let it alone whichever she pleased, but if she would do it, she would say the Salve* nine days in thanksgiving. She took the slate and worked it correctly without the least difficulty. When she told me she had it, I opened my eyes in astonishment and asked her how in the world she did it. She said, "I didn't do it. The Blessed Virgin did it for me." I thought it showed such a kind and sweet solicitude in our dear Mother (the Blessed Virgin) to give such prompt relief in such little things, that it would do you as much good to hear it as it did myself. I think there is room for it in the little book in its proper place so you'd better set it down.

Ex 9th Page 202. $x / a - x^2 = b + x^2$

Love to all and pray for your own
Sr. Mary Baptist

