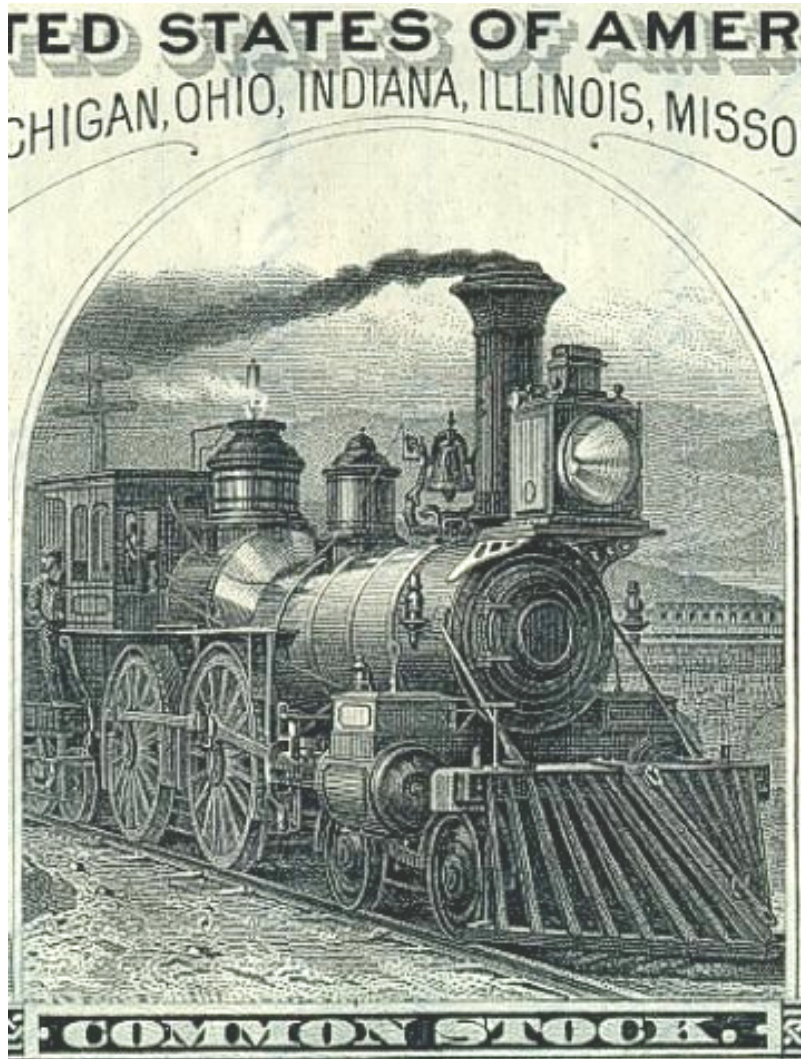


Chapter 27

Council Bluffs — Bootstrap Tutorial



Council Bluffs, where Cecilia moved as the new superior, had always been a puzzle. By 1903, the city had grown because of its position as the terminus for eastern trains. These connected with Pacific lines ending across the Missouri River in Omaha. Since there was no bridge, the Bluffs boasted 100 daily trains by 1906. These steamed into a huge passenger depot

to disgorge their passengers and departed again eastward while the latter took the ferry across to the Omaha station to catch trains for the west.

The Bluffs boasted 20 miles of paved streets, two Catholic hospitals, 28 churches, and St. Francis boarding academy conducted by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Illinois Central, Great Western, Wabash and Burlington used its station as a western junction. City streets blazed at night under carbon arcs mounted on seven 175-foot-high towers and adjusted each day. From 1879, the city had telephone service! ¹

In spite of these impressive figures, St. Francis Academy found itself in financial straits. Although its academic program surpassed that of other schools in the area and its students came from the best Catholic and Protestant families around, the boarding school garnered little money since the staff taught the ever growing parish school for FREE.

In 1897, Cecilia tried to close the boarding section at Council Bluffs and move it to St. Joseph Academy (Des Moines). However, the citizens of the Bluffs presented such a strong case for keeping their boarding school, together with assurance of financial help, that she reassessed the situation and let things be. Five years later, in 1902, the Academy began a new building with a chapel, auditorium, and five dormitories at a cost of \$30,000 and the further price of the pastor's goodwill over the loss of his son.²

When Cecilia arrived as the new superior in 1903, she inherited the debt of \$30,000, the smoldering pastor, and a scholastically excellent faculty under BVM Antonia Durkin (an educator for the future) as directress.³ According to Eileen Curran, a student at the time, the girls were well instructed by Antonia to call the new superior “Mother.” They were not told to love her, but this came naturally as they met her charity during the first semester epidemic.

In November and December, Cecilia and her faculty encountered a serious bout of scarlet fever which she wrote about in November 1903 to a Sister friend in Davenport,

“... Our sickness seems over, thank God. I miss the dear ICA more than any but God knows anything about. All are lovely and good to me here; but the care and anxiety and worry were hard on me. Tis mostly over now, thank God, and I am becoming used to the “busy life” again. Love to those who value it.”^{4a}

Cecilia had taken her turn nursing the sick during the illness, watching one November night as a young student died of pneumonia after weakening from scarlet fever. A December 1903 letter to two BVM Sisters indicates the epidemic has not subsided after all:

“It grieves me much to have left you both so long without a line—but—God help me! I cannot help it. You have both heard of our heavy cross here—well we are carrying it still—and I am left not a moment in my efforts to help out. And you both know how I love and enjoy the sick.”^{4b}

During her first term as Mother, Cecilia visited the first floor infirmary in the north wing of Mt. Carmel every night before going to bed. When doctors told her upper floors were better for the sick, she plastered and painted the top floors of the north wing and moved the patients into private rooms there.

In Council Bluffs, with the experience of a scarlet fever epidemic on her mind, it is no wonder she welcomed the Sisters of Mercy to the Bluffs during these three years (1903-06). Actually, they had intended to set up their hospital in Omaha, but their tickets read Council Bluffs. As a result, they found themselves on the wrong side of the Missouri river without supplies. Cecilia sent blankets, towels, gowns, sheets—whatever she could spare—until they completed their hospital, one of two in the city directory.⁵

The scarlet fever passed; the debt gradually shrank; and under Principal Antonia Durkin, the school prospered. Some time in the next two years, Cecilia fell again, this time on the short flight of steps connecting the new wing with the old. She suffered a badly twisted ankle and spent a few days in bed. To anxious inquiries from friends and Sisters who had been her novices, she answered:

“ . . . All those reports about my health were truly false. I'm not as young as I used to be—that's all. [Underlining Cecilia's] Things crowd upon me so here—that I appear to have lost all my manners—if I ever had any.” [She apologized for not writing].

Cecilia, in her mid-60s, with a busy existence as superior in the Bluffs still found time to learn from Antonia how Sisters could earn college credits at state universities. Antonia registered for correspondence courses from the University of Nebraska under her baptismal name. An apt pupil, Cecilia as Mother would urge others to take correspondence courses at state universities from 1908 until Sisters and women at last broke the gender barrier at many universities—in particular at Catholic universities.

And Cecilia succeeded in other ways as well. Though she always claimed she could not raise money, by the time she left Council Bluffs in 1906, she had cut the debt by a third to \$19,000. A benefit performance arranged by the Jesuits at Creighton University (Omaha) and given in the new auditorium by the Creighton Players put a few thousand more in the bank. Of course, the appearance of an all-male cast on the stage of an all-girl school shook the Victorian mores of some of the Sisters at the academy.

These few spoke of the impropriety to the pastor and wrote to Mother Gertrude as well.

The wind of their protest barely wrinkled the waters of the Missouri river. The pastor had by then succumbed to Cecilia's charm; and a reduced debt sanctified the program for Gertrude. The majority of the faculty quieted their misgivings after enjoying the show. These same Sisters served the all-male cast after the performance without a trace of anxiety.⁶

And what had become of the firestorm following Cecilia's attempt to return to the common life in 1900? When she went to Council Bluffs as superior, some Sisters who resented how she was treated at ICA were pacified, seeing this as an appropriate assignment for her. Others found it a further exile to the west—an even greater distance from meetings in Dubuque where they trusted her voice on the Council. Most of these may have belonged to the write-in vote organizers of the 1903 election who convinced 40% of the community to vote for her in an off-year election.

While Cecilia lived at St. Francis Academy, her distance from Dubuque did not make her voice harder to hear or prevent her from coming for meetings. Gertrude had learned from the recent upset following Cecilia's Davenport assignment. She now had a copy of Canon Law and knew most of its provisions. If Cecilia were prevented by weather or illness from attending Council meetings, she could be informed by phone or letter and asked her opinion. In important matters, the meeting might be moved or the time changed. A few times Cecilia traveled the width of the State of Iowa from Council Bluffs to Dubuque. If she could not attend, it was not necessary to appoint someone in her place. All business could be conducted by Gertrude and any Consultor who made up a quorum.

In 1902 Mother Gertrude began to use Cecilia as a contact with western Iowa, Nebraska and Colorado. Sisters from these areas came to the Bluffs as to a mini-motherhouse. The Academy turned into a busy workshop, a summer study center and a place for the annual retreat. Sisters attended Antonia Durkin's lecture series in St. Francis auditorium featuring Jesuits from the Creighton faculty as well as coming to Recollection Sunday talks by Creighton Jesuits. Gradually, Gertrude began to view her Council as a way to shift some of the load, placing the four women in strategic locations to handle area problems—Gonzaga, Davenport; Benedicta, Dubuque; Hilary, Chicago; Cecilia, the Bluffs and Isabella in Wichita.⁵

The results of the 1903 election with its heavy write-in vote for Cecilia made the outcome of the 1906 election nearly certain. A majority would return Cecilia to office as Mother. Not an odds-maker in the world would have bet against it. The question was by how many votes.

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Notes to Chapter 27

1. History of Council Bluffs Chamber of Commerce 2007. Internet.
2. RE 1902
3. Antonia Durkin. Cecilia valued Antonia's ideas so much that she brought her to Dubuque to set up the curriculum for the novitiate Normal school. By then, Antonia, one of six BVMs sent on to Catholic U. in 1910-11, had an MSc from that school.
4. Letters of Mother Cecilia—Nov. and Dec. 1903. Bluffs' epidemic of scarlet fever. Cecilia's letters, quoted in the text, are arranged by date in the BVM Archives.
5. Even later after moving the hospital to Omaha, the Mercy Sisters offered free hospital care to BVMs until the 1950s when the BVM congregation set up medical insurance for the community and joined Medicare.
6. Council Bluffs House Annals BVM Archives 1906.

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St. Francis
Academy as it
appeared in 1902
catalogue
BVM Archives

