

Chapter 28



Turn of the Century Marvels

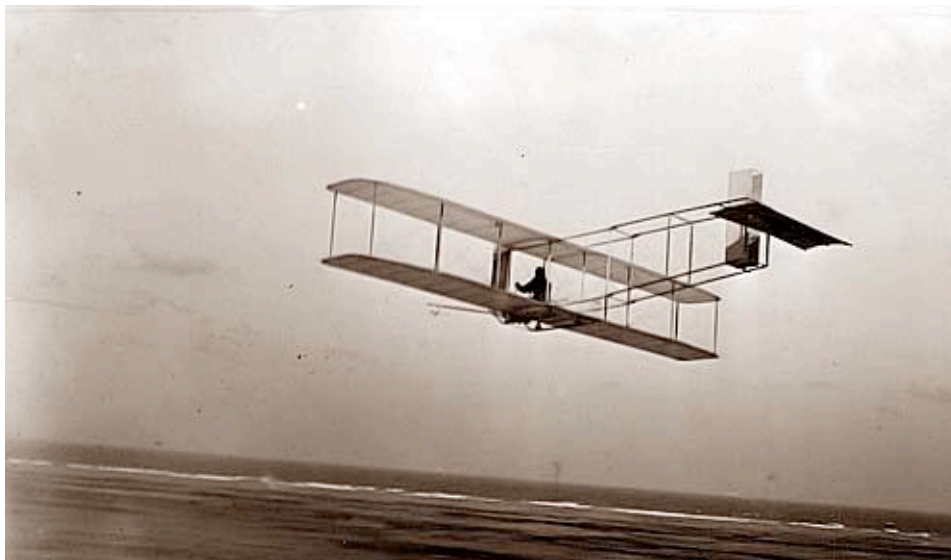
Occasionally the wider world threw a disturbing stone into the relatively placid waters of Dubuque (IA). All the bells had rung out in August 1903 to celebrate the election of Pope Pius X. What this would mean for religious orders no one knew, but Archbishop John Keane on his return from Rome strongly encouraged Mother Gertrude to keep the novices home for the full term of their novitiate. Unfortunately, autumn sickness on the missions and increased enrollments in the schools forced her to dip into the reserve of young and eager Sisters—reluctantly, gradually, she had sent them all out.

And joyfully welcomed them home for Christmas! Nineteen novices traveled back to unchanging Mt. Carmel to profess their vows, then returned to their missions in a different world. It was dawning on many religious—including Cecilia and her group of educational innovators—that things moved faster every year.

New inventions sprang up overnight! The Sisters marveled at President Theodore Roosevelt's Christmas message, sent by wireless from Nova Scotia to King Edward in England. They were amused and a bit startled at the appearance of a few cars, noisy horseless carriages, in small

town Dubuque and a great many more in big city Chicago. Alas! These were forever breaking down and proving useless in the mud or snow. It never occurred to Gertrude that one day her Sisters would drive one. Most people agreed they would never replace a good team of horses. Nosiree!

Word that someone had finally flown a contraption of wire and canvas powered by a gas motor and called an aeroplane caused anxious gasps at human daring. “If God a meant us to fly He’d a given us wings,” some folks said. Crescentia Markey noted in her Diary she had prayed earnestly that the aviator flying his small plane over Mt. Carmel would land safely.



None of these inventions was likely to touch the train, Mother Gertrude's usual mode of travel. Trains clattered and screeched along the IC, Santa Fe, Burlington, Union Pacific, North Shore, South Shore, and Rock Island tracks—dust rising through the wooden coach floors, soot choking passengers, leaving Gertrude's face and headdress grimy. Chicagoans journeyed around their streets on electric streetcars and the “EL” (elevated) swayed two floors up on tracks suspended in the alley. Gertrude used the “EL” only occasionally. She preferred to save time in a horse cab. The thought of BVMs someday driving “gas buggies” around Chicago never entered her mind; nor did the wireless suggest news without newspapers or the “flying machine” present itself as a future means of visiting California schools. Her mind was taken up with Sisters for classrooms on earth.

Most schools in 1904 were still preparing students for a world of muscle power. Msgr. Conaty of Catholic U.¹ informed the Sisters each time

he lectured at Mt. Carmel that an education sufficient for 25 years ago would no longer do. The schools must change! Their teachers must know more about the new technology. Electric lights instead of gas in Holy Family church suggested vast new areas of knowledge. Most Chicago BVMs and even many in Dubuque had visited the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and been amazed at what was already available—gaspd at what was planned! The entire student body of Holy Family’s six schools (over 1,000) rode to the exposition in a train.

“A special train was chartered over the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, to convey the children to the grounds. The pupils came in ranks from the six schools to the depot at Sixteenth and Blue Island Avenue. They had rehearsed the national airs and popular songs for the occasion and rendered them delightfully on the way to and from the grounds...Each pupil wore a red, white and blue badge bearing the inscription ‘Holy Family Parish.’ ...It was the largest excursion for children ever made from Holy Family Parish.”²

Many BVMs read widely. Crescentia Markey wrote with understanding of Roentgen and Pasteur. An 1896 entry in her Diary, catalogued Pasteur's discoveries and quoted from his works. In another 10 years, it would not be enough for teachers merely to read widely like Crescentia. The world was becoming a hands-on world—a flick of a switch, a turn of a key, fingers dancing over a keyboard that printed words on paper, a crystal set that captured voices. “I made it myself!” boys and girls in physics class would say. Magic at their fingertips!

Whether Mother Gertrude or any teachers walking into the 20th century (for the most part looking backward) really recognized the implications in society's growing complexity is debatable. Some BVMs did. At work raising the curriculum of Mt. St. Joseph to college level, registering some of her teachers in correspondence courses at state universities,³ and caring for the embryo college that later became Clarke, Bertrand Foley certainly knew.

In Council Bluffs, Antonia Durkin knew as she registered for courses from the University of Nebraska and invited Jesuit teachers from Creighton [Omaha] to speak to her faculty on chemistry, scripture, physics, and whatever else they could add. Antonia and Cecilia Dougherty believed that teachers must expand their course work. In less than eight years these women would successfully skirt the prejudice keeping women out of

Catholic U.⁴ Yet during this same period, superiors screened newspapers and magazines before Sisters read them, and censored science books as well.



Iroquois theater after the fire
Chicago Tribune

One paper all the Sisters surely read—the December 31, 1903, Chicago Tribune. The new “fireproof” Iroquois theater in Chicago burst into flames during a children's matinee. It had not been fireproofed after all. Instead the owners advertised that it was fireproof, but economized on treatment of the stage curtains.

Among the dead were women and children from Holy Family parish, students from St. Mary High and one from Mt. St. Joseph (Clarke), home for the holidays. One of the owners of the theater, BVM Cherubina Powers' brother Harry, received a note of sympathy from Crescentia. Newly professed young Sisters returned from making their vows at Mt. Carmel to grieve with Chicago families. It would be their ability to comfort rather than their educational preparation that Gertrude Regan trusted in. Yet the 20th century already demanded that Sisters in Catholic schools add the head to the heart and guarantee competence with certificates and degrees.

In response to Bishop Muldoon's request for Sisters to teach catechism to Catholic boys at the nearby John Worthy reform school, Gertrude accidentally sent Sisters with just such a combination of head and heart. She selected not the grade school Sisters at St. Charles but the highly educated Sisters from St. Mary across the street. These, she reasoned, had no parish duties and therefore more time. Many of the reform school boys hadn't finished fourth grade: most of the Catholics had been baptized and

no more. In May 1904, 109 boys received First Communion; 115 were confirmed; three baptized.⁵

While St. Mary's master teachers conned reform school boys into learning catechism, in February 1904, Mother Gertrude packed her bag and looked up her Great Western railroad pass. Though she had visited the Chicago houses as late as November 23rd, she appeared in February for short visits at convents on the south and west sides beginning at St. Charles and ending at St. Bridget.

Ten parishes often listed in Gertrude's Chicago circuits on the near west side roughly surrounded St. Mary High and served as feeder schools. She needed their funding for a high school often in financial straits during its first 10 years of building and growth. By now pastors were used to her brief visits. They grew accustomed to seeing this bright old Mother with her news of the successes of St. Mary and/or its girls. Pastors felt closer to the school after her quick descents on their rectories. She always mentioned girls from the parish and named the parents as well, supplying something for Father to talk about to the family after Mass.

This time, Gertrude stopped first at St. Charles and may have asked Bishop Muldoon's advice about approaching pastors for help with needed science equipment at St. Mary. She certainly thanked him for what he had already done. Being across the street from St. Charles, St. Mary made up part of his school system. Muldoon worked hard for its good reputation.

There existed a climate of mutual respect between Gertrude and the bishop. She would be free to mention in passing a recent rumor saying the Bishop of Sioux City (Garrigan) was thinking of replacing BVMs with other Sisters. Had he heard anything? In reply Muldoon certainly suggested more parishes in Chicago in case she withdrew from Sioux City. Since the Council had recently decided to inquire into the matter of a Cardinal Protector⁶ to represent the congregation in Rome, part of the conversation between the two might have examined this matter. She intended to consult the Jesuit provincial in Milwaukee about a Cardinal Protector, but she knew and trusted Muldoon enough for a second opinion.

Another topic for the bishop and other Chicago pastors would be the question of teaching boys. It had lately become an issue again with the disappearance of a Sister who taught music in Cedar Rapids. One day she simply walked out. No one knew why or where she had gone. Since she

entered from Chicago eight years previous, Gertrude wondered if she might have contacted any Chicago priests.

A few days before this Chicago trip, Bishop John Keane of Dubuque received a letter from the Sister asking that he dispense her from her vows. Because it was postmarked Burlington, he referred her to the bishop in Davenport. There was a hint of scandal to the story in some newspapers. Sister had given private lessons to high school boys. What could the congregation do to protect itself from a similar occurrence? Would Chicago pastors support restricting the teaching of boys in music?

Of course, Gertrude may have mentioned none of the above, much as she respected Muldoon. Her journey to Chicago is most logically explained by the building program at St. Mary. It would not be the last Chicago visit for Gertrude that year. She came again April 16-18 and 20-22, July 29, and August 26, 27. The April dates were really two trips. She arrived in Chicago, made her routine stops at each house, visited two Sisters in the hospital, and then broke the trip with a one-day journey to Milwaukee to see Father Grimmelsmann, Jesuit Provincial, about a Cardinal Protector. Numbers alone made the trips feasible: Holy Family, 44 ; St. Mary High and St. Charles together almost 40. Visits in person suited Gertrude's style.

As was her custom, in April she checked both Milwaukee houses on finances, personnel, and general health. Spring was a good time to assess needs for next autumn. Perhaps she took the opportunity to straighten out the gossip on the "missing music teacher." According to Pulcheria in RE, the story had been distorted by a March news account in a small Iowa paper. It had probably also been embellished by the community grapevine. Both the Sister and the congregation denied any wrongdoing. Pulcheria wrote: "She left. That is all," but rumor made gossip more interesting than fact. It was the publicity rather than the Sister's act of leaving that prompted Council action. In addition, Gertrude prepared both pastors and principals for the decision on boys by a BVM Council looking for damage control.

At the start of the Chicago-Milwaukee trip, Pulcheria painted her usual picture of Gertrude Regan as a woman of extraordinary energy except for the night they reached Milwaukee. That night, Gertrude was so exhausted by constant travel and worry "she was sick all night." In spite of that, the next day she went about her business briskly, and at four o'clock caught the afternoon train from Milwaukee to Chicago. Quite a performance

for a little 77-year-old lady who had no intention of slowing down. But Gertrude may have suspected that the community had outgrown the customs of its past and her mode of travel. Another way of communicating had to be found—even for her.

In Chicago Mother stretched her itinerary. Before the trip to Milwaukee, she had visited the seven south side convents. On the last two days she managed five schools and their Sisters each day, plus interviews with three pastors. Again she managed to postpone a high school in Presentation parish (west side Chicago) though the pastor pressed mightily for it. Her last day ended in a discussion with Father Curran, pastor of Holy Family, on combining some of his schools to reduce the number of Sisters needed at Holy Family parish.⁷

The next morning Gertrude wound up the Chicago visit with a call at the rectory of Our Lady of Angels to see about opening that school in September. Father Hynes was not at home, so she returned to Holy Family, picked up her luggage and caught the 3:45 train for Dubuque. At midnight, she reached Mt. Carmel. “Sister Mary Agnes Burke is dying,” murmured the Sister who opened the door. Two days later, Agnes Burke passed away. At her side were all three of her BVM nieces—Mother Cecilia, Davida and Dominica Burke.

With the Council members coming for the funeral, Gertrude seized the opportunity to settle community business, especially the issue of music teachers and boys in music. On the day after Agnes Burke's funeral, she called a Council meeting.

There is recorded only the decision of this meeting, but it's unlikely any of the Council members objected. All were aware of the unfortunate publicity and possible scandal following the departure of the Cedar Falls music teacher. The entry in CM states: “The Community will not teach boys over 14 years of age nor past the eighth grade. Bishops will be notified before the close of school so that there is no misunderstanding.”

The “missing music teacher” and the subsequent publicity were not the only reasons for this decision on boys. For years the congregation had been trying to cut back on small parish high schools where one or two Sisters taught all subjects to a school totaling 40 students or less. Generally speaking, boys were not the most willing students after eighth grade. Their friends were working in factories, in stores and on farms or were apprenticed in one of the trades. These had money in their pockets and a new adult status. The number of boys who went on to parish high schools was small

and under the circumstances, the decision seemed reasonable to the women debating it at Mt. Carmel.

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Note to Chapter 28

1. Msgr. Conaty spoke at The Mount and at Mt. Carmel in September 1899 and also on April 23, 1900, at the invitation of Mother Cecilia. RE gives the subject.

2. Brother Thomas M. Mulkerins, SJ, Holy Family Parish “Chicago Priests and People” Universal Press 1923 439

3. Written as part of her degree work, Lambertina Doran published In the Early Days in 1911. Coogan2 414-429 443 on degree work.

4. A student at the Council Bluffs academy at the turn of the century, BVM Eileen Curran, is the source on talks by Council Bluffs Jesuits. Interview: DMW, 1967.

5. The St. Mary Sisters taught at John Worthy for a few more years. A Dec. 1906 entry in Crescentia’s Diary says 35 boys received Communion, seven for the first time.

6. A Cardinal Protector represented congregations in Rome. He was useful to American Sisters without a Roman house. The Cardinal presented the Sisters’ views to the Curia, to assure that both side were heard. The Council wanted a Cardinal Protector to avoid being dictated to by local bishops. Mother Cecilia asked Falconio to find one for the congregation. In 1911, Cardinal Merry del Val, papal secretary of state, accepted.

Archbishop John J. Keane of Dubuque held a more cynical opinion. Pulcheria sums up his words on Cardinal Protectors: “Doesn’t see why BVMs would need a cardinal protector. Mother would just have to write a sweet letter once or twice a year and enclose a stipend with it. It’s how they make their money.” RE and Coogan2 284

7. One of these schools was St. Callistus, the Italian parish near Holy Family. Finances there were so uncertain that the BVM community gave two of the four BVMs free and the Jesuits at Holy Family paid for the other two.

8. Sister Mary Agnes (Letitia) Burke was the first to enter from Dubuque when the congregation moved from Philadelphia. A respected teacher and the superior of St. Agatha Academy, Iowa City, she functioned from 1881- 84 as Sister Visitor. In 1891, she served as secretary of the council and superior in Emmetsburg. A member of the first Superiors Institute (1894), Agnes was the first to suggest summer school workshops and classes for Sisters.

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