

Chapter 31

Trip Tik for a Peripatetic Mother

At the start of 1905, Mother Gertrude accepted four schools “if the pastors agreed to wait at least three years”--RE. The four priests looked on



Lake Street “L”, Chicago, 1900 (Gertrude’s stomping ground) shows horses, carts and buggies as well as the departing “L”.
Chicago Public Library

even this faint hope with gratitude. By now, the Council had fashioned an answer using their own desires to cool the ardor of city pastors. “If 20 enter,” a BVM would suggest, “in the same year, we could staff

your school in three years. Dear Father, pray for vocations.” Meanwhile, Gertrude and her Council (Gonzaga, Bertrand, Cecilia, Maurice) sent letters of refusal to Nebraska, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, South Dakota, and (with regret) to Port Albert, Canada.

The New Year welcomed a new school for the oldest Catholic parish in Dubuque. On January 29th students of St. Raphael grade school packed their books and walked across Cathedral Square to a new building alongside the Cathedral. Mother Gertrude and the Council posed for a picture with the student body outside the sturdy brick and stone entrance—boys and girls in separate groups—according to grades,¹ (as Rome desired). For the first time, all children and all grades occupied the same building.

Cathedral Square had changed during Gertrude's lifetime. The log house where the Sisters slept in 1843 had been razed. The old rectory where the Sisters lived and taught the parish girls after Bishop Loras moved out

had been torn down to make room for the new school. Of those who remembered the Square as it was, only Gertrude recalled the log cabin and the attic where the second group from Philadelphia slept in 1844.²

Their life in Dubuque had been hard, cold, physically challenging, full of “firsts” as the young community struggled to find its niche. Parish schools opened and closed rapidly in small towns around Dubuque. Then sadly, on Christmas 1845, the first death! The small group of Sisters watched as 18-year-old Francis O’Reilly (#9) weakened day by day before their eyes. Gertrude Regan and she had entered in Philadelphia and were close friends.

“Consumption,” pronounced the doctor at Thanksgiving at her bed. “Tuberculosis,” whispered Catherine Byrne from her nursing days in Dublin.

These early Dubuque days were as clear as yesterday to Gertrude. She suspected that even Mary Clarke and Margaret Mann wondered had they made a foolish choice coming to Loras’ diocese? And the people with their prejudice against Loras, their French bishop, and their unkindness to “all a’ them Philly ladies!”— as they called the BVMs. Had the people made it so hard it became a badge of loyalty to God to stay, she wondered; so difficult it became hard to leave and give the whole enterprise up?

Half a century later, looking out of the new motherhouse in 1893 at the sinuous sweep of the Mississippi, Gertrude revisited the years behind her—seeing them time by time, challenge by challenge, hardship by hardship, and at last success by success—like the river she looked down at. It flowed with its dark shadows and bright water, its safe, easy, deep water, treacherous currents, sunset beauty, rain and rainbows. Today’s river, white with ice, ran to the bleak horizon at the turn downstream. Life had been different because of her choice in Philadelphia to go this 50-year journey from three-year vows to three-year vows, from young novice to old mother.

“I would cast myself into the Mississippi,” she had written to the Sisters, “sooner than bring any trouble now or in the future on the Community.” (Letter to the Sisters after Bishop Hennessy asked for BVM volunteers to begin his own congregation). She watched the river a few minutes as she did many times. It was January 1902 and snowing. The river was a white path to the end of the world.

Mother Gertrude preferred the train to reach western Iowa. During a similar January snowstorm, she took two Sisters to Ft. Dodge and Council

Bluffs in a drafty railway coach heated by a potbellied wood stove. On another cold, clear day, she and Pulcheria boarded a similar train with a similar stove for a February 1905 trip to Chicago to change a young Sister from Holy Cross (6500 south) to Holy Family (1200 south). In turn-of-the-century Chicago, this simple change met with unexpected opposition from the Sister's mother at having her daughter "so far away—clear across town," the mother mourned. The BVM daughter sided with her mother and refused to go. [Can this be 1905?]

At last Gertrude sent an unwilling Pulcheria back to Mt. Carmel for a novice to fill in at Holy Family instead of the recalcitrant young Sister. But between Pulcheria's departure for Dubuque and her return with the novice, the young Sister changed her mind, pacified her mother ("It's a promotion, mom."), and (to Pulcheria's disgust³) went docilely to Holy Family.

Train rides to Chicago did not end for Gertrude with this short trip that winter. Agatha Hurley lay dying at St. Aloysius. Mother would be called back to her bedside between March 7-22. Agatha had handled most of the visiting and personnel changes in Chicago and Milwaukee. For three years after her death in 1905, Gertrude kept her own hands on the two cities, appointing no one in her place.

Again Gertrude visited hospitals where Sisters were ill. A novice sick from fasting was told bluntly to "eat or give up the idea of taking vows." At Sacred Heart parish on Chicago's near south side, she gathered the Sisters and the pastor together (to make sure they heard the same thing) to explain the division of duties between the temporary superior and the substitute principal in charge until their superior recovered her health.⁴

The most personally heartbreaking part of her extended March stay was her failure to help the Sister she had visited so frequently and now believed to be mentally ill. Sister X had been a member for 24 years. During the last few years, Gertrude had watched her grow more and more demanding—her latest ultimatum that the superior of the house must be changed or she herself would leave the community. She offered to send her to teach wherever X wished, but refused to move the superior.

On March 17th, X left, going to Bishop Muldoon with her problems. Muldoon listened to her story and praised the community for its patience, judging her trouble to be pride and neglect of prayer. Gertrude found this diagnosis too simple. Time after time she had stopped at Mercy hospital to

encourage Sister X. What she sensed was not pride, but evidence of a severe mental break. How else explain her unusual request that the superior be removed or her refusal to go before the Blessed Sacrament?

To the suggestion she try a sanitarium before she left, X said that she would, but not as a Sister. To pay for her treatment, Gertrude gave her the money from the sale of the mother's house as well as additional funds. She was disappointed but not greatly surprised when X took the money and laughed at the idea of needing help. But the experience wearied Gertrude. She immediately asked her secretary to type a letter to the congregation begging prayers for the Sister and explaining what had happened.

Most RE entries by Pulcheria show a Gertrude who is steady and sure. The secretary records few mistakes. However, one atypical event on a trip through Iowa reveals her in error about which direction she is going. Even then, Pulcheria says they took *a train going in the wrong direction*.⁶ The two boarded the wrong-way train at 9 a.m. in Riverside (IA). A few miles later they discovered its direction error, got off at the next station, hired a carriage for the nine miles back to Riverside in time to catch a sloooooow freight for the 31 miles to Iowa City. They arrived at 4 p.m.

Gertrude and her secretary continued to Council Bluffs where the pastor inclined to “go in the wrong direction” still presented a problem. As Gertrude had hoped, he mellowed under the influence of Cecilia, but he never seemed happy without his sun-porch. For another look at Bluffs finances, Gertrude called on Gonzaga, one of her business experts on the Council, and left the Dubuque depot on a bright May day at 11:05 a.m. for a four-day conference with Cecilia. The trip succeeded. Remaining open, St. Francis Academy arranged for a new mortgage.⁶ Like most of Gertrude’s journeys, the trip combined business with personal diplomacy—in this case, some slight concession to an old and eccentric pastor. To his relief, she continued the arrangement for teaching the parish school free in the academy, meaning that the boarding school tuition supported both boarding and his parish school. She knew the old man had only a short time to live. When Cecilia closed down St. Francis Academy a few years later, the bells tolled for his funeral as they left a place they could no longer afford to keep.⁷

In 1905, Gertrude’s schedule ran to people. On June 1st she changed plans for a trip to Milwaukee and hurried instead in the opposite direction, northwest to Emmetsburg (IA) where the Sisters feared their superior was

dying. By now, she had seen all stages of tuberculosis and concluded rightly that death was not close so she arranged for the superior to spend the rest of the summer in the pure air of Boulder and returned the next day to Dubuque.

On June 7th she traveled to Milwaukee and three days later quietly descended on Chicago, visited seven convents. At 1:15 the next afternoon she was back at her desk in Dubuque, quietly folding up her last year.

Almost every month from June until January, Gertrude spent some time traveling, saying goodbye and making sure everything was in order for her successor. In July she stopped at Lyons and Clinton (IA) and then continued into Chicago, taking more time than usual at Holy Name to see the pastor. No surprise! Msgr. Fitzsimmons asked for five Sisters to begin a high school at Holy Name. Her past experience of the tenacity of the man as well as the success of his grade school dictated her response. She would be happy to supply them. Blessed Sacrament and Annunciation reported a Sister seriously ill and she stopped at both on her way to her train.

After the August Council meeting to elect new superiors, Gertrude was able to change two in Des Moines and Burlington, going with the replacements in case pastors objected. RE notes that neither one did. On the way back she stopped at ICA for dinner, talked to Davenport Bishop Cosgrove, then caught the train north for Mt. Carmel.

Gertrude's relationships with the clergy were amiable, kept so by frequent calls at parish rectories and bishop's residences to inform them about community policy and decisions. These short stops gave pastors a chance to air grievances before they built up pressure. It proved a successful strategy! Even priests she had differences with remained friends of the community. But it was also energy draining and time consuming and, as the world grew more complex, less and less possible to continue.

In the fall of 1905, Gertrude kept winding down the year—making rounds, tending to usual business, getting ready for her report on the state of the congregation, readying her books for the new Mother. In September she checked arrangements in Chicago schools and made the circuit—this trip an affectionate farewell. October she filled with community accounts, immediate financial problems, and final plans for the annual Superiors' Institute and Retreat at the end of the month.

During this Institute and Retreat, Gertrude examined the Customs, talked to superiors concerning schools and convents and asked their opinion

on adding or dropping some outmoded Customs. In November, she issued a directive in the form of a letter to the community updating Customs following suggestions by Institute participants.

Her report showed that Sister teachers continued to be overworked, and illness on the missions taxed community resources. Toward the end of November, Gertrude boarded the Illinois/Central for Chicago intending to bring the superior at Lourdes to the infirmary. She found her too ill to move and regretfully returned without her, leaving the Sisters at Lourdes to fit in Christmas plays and sick trays as best they could. In December, she shuffled a Sister from Davenport to OLA (Clinton) to replace a sick Sister, then returned to Davenport to arrange for grading the ICA grounds near the new \$25,000 auditorium. Superior Adora Caverly had begun work on the auditorium in April, so it would be ready for spring plays and graduation.

Routing her final trip from Dubuque through Cedar Rapids to take Mount St. Joseph superior Bertrand Foley to the doctor, Gertrude headed for Chicago for three days of visiting convents. Her last year (though she had told no one 1905 would be her last in office) was nearly over. She thanked the Sisters for their support and especially for her Feast Day gift, a monstrance engraved, "*To our beloved Mother Gertrude from her devoted children, Nov. 15, 1905*" which had arrived at Mt. Carmel.

In December 1905, Gertrude's frequent and sudden short visits came to an end, as did her raids on personnel and bank accounts, much to the relief of superiors. She operated within a concept of apostolate so unrestricted that she considered any school and any position one in which a Sister would find people needing her. What the Sister taught or where, appeared not to concern this Mother of the lightning changes.

Though Sisters throughout the congregation laughingly referred to her selection of Sisters to teach music or start schools as arbitrary and inexplicable, Gertrude must have picked her women carefully for the sudden change or for the harp or violin. For example, Chionia Cavanaugh, first superior at Holy Name, Chicago, succeeded with little money and four novices on her staff of eight including herself. The ninth Sister was the cook. The four novices, identified by Chionia as the "cream of the novitiate," froze without complaint in the Chicago cold when the heat failed, accepted the sparse furnishings at Holy Name in good humor, and seemed delighted with classes of over 100 students.

Nor did Gertrude send out every novice. She kept little Cordelia Hayes in the motherhouse sewing room and, when Cordelia's love of flowers appeared, encouraged her to plant beds of pink and white asters for use on the altar. Celerina King she sent to teach music and once changed her between arriving and departing trains. (Celerina's name fit such an action well. The root for "Celerina" is *celer*, Latin for *swift*).

Celerina later became superior of The Round, the first infirmary building, and built Philomena Hall, the 1936 infirmary addition. Cordelia stayed at Mt. Carmel in the sewing room, planted her flowers, cleaned Mother Gertrude's clothes and cared for her when she was ill. Either Gertrude Regan was a canny judge of people and talent, or a lucky gambler.

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Notes for Chapter 31

1. Though all the children now had class in the same building instead of in two, both parents and children were used to the separation of boys and girls and expected it to continue in the new school with rooms of all boys or all girls.

2. See Chapter 2 and 7 in this book. See also Pulcheria ANNALS, XI.

3. The Sister whose mother didn't want her changed clear across town was Urbana Ashley. She is buried in the Mt. Carmel cemetery. Story: RE February 5, 1905.

4. SM Cypriana Domey and Isadore Eilers were ill in the same hospital as Sister X. Crescentia Markey, St. Mary High; Rosina Harrigan, St. Charles; and a novice are those named in RE as also ill.

5. RE March 17, 1905. The case of Sister X may relate to an incident told by postulant mistress Angelice Sullivan to her charges a dozen years later. It was Angelice's duty to clean the chapel and she was polishing the floor around a holy water font in the entrance when she heard the patter of Mother Gertrude's feet. Little Gertrude meant just another old Sister to the young novice, and she smiled up at her as Gertrude rounded the corner and dipped her hand into the font. The old face peered down at Angelice and said gently, "Thithy dear, do you ever pray for pertheveranth?" "Oh, no, Mother!" said Angelice cheerfully. "I do—every time I use holy water," whispered Gertrude, pattering over to the last pew. An astonished Angelice wondered why anyone celebrating her 75th

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jubilee still prayed for the grace to persevere. (Angelice Sullivan, Story about Mother Gertrude to Doris Walsh's Set in 1946.)

6. RE May 8, 1905. It took seven hours to cover the 31 miles to Iowa City.
7. Eileen Curran to Doris Walsh. Interview Summer 1967.
8. RE May 14, 1905. Cecilia closed the boarding section at the Bluffs. When Apostolic Delegate, Cardinal Falconio, ordered that BVM novices on the missions return for a full year's novitiate, she needed Sisters to fill contracts at parishes and also closed boarding schools in Iowa City (IA) and Holden (MO) to staff parish schools.

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