

Introduction to Chapter 7

Bricks and Stones

The account below was handwritten by someone on the Council, probably by Council secretary Cecilia Dougherty. It is information sent to the Dubuque paper and subsequently published. This newspaper urged its readers to be proud of such a grand \$300,000 structure in the city.

The point on which the Convent is built is about 160 feet high. (Note added in pencil—"more than 700 feet above sea level"). The building is within 600 feet of the river. The building consists of three parts, the main building and two wings. The main building, northeast front, is 245 x 76 ft. The Chapel wing, or southeast front, is 220 x 75 ft. The cell wing, or northwest front, is 150 x 40 ft., and the same height as the Chapel wing. The work was started in the spring of 1891, and the foundation, including the first floor joists, was the amount done that year.

The work of putting in this foundation was done by Ald. Byrne of this city, at the cost of \$36,000. The foundation is 7 feet thick at the bottom and three feet at the top. The foundation extends to the height of 9 feet above the ground and this 9 feet is faced with Indiana Bedford stone in the "Ashler" style of facing. The water tables on the foundations are 2 feet 2 inches high and 1 inch thick with heavy moulding drip and extend around the entire building. All the gutters of the deck roof are of the best quality galvanized iron.

The annex is 20 x 22 feet and 4 stories high, and is approached from the platform of the stairs from each floor of the main building. The annex is to be used as a lavatory which will have bathrooms on each floor, and supplied with hot and cold water and steam heating. There are 502 windows in the building and 400 doors. There are over one and one-half miles of sewer and water pipe in the building. The sewerage system extends down into the river.

The Chapel is 130 x 35 ft. high. The cistern with a capacity of 300 barrels of water cost \$480. A boiler house with two boiler...(the page breaks off.) *** **

If I have told you these details about the asteroid, and made a note of its number for you, it

is on account of the grown-ups and their ways. Grown-ups love figures. When you tell them that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say, "What does his voice sound like? What games does he



love best? Does he collect butterflies?" Instead they demand; "How old is he? How much does he weigh? How many brothers has he? How much money does his father make?" Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.

From *THE LITTLE PRINCE* by Antoine de St. Exuperay.

On account of the grown-ups and their ways, the writer jotted the dimensions of the new Motherhouse for the Dubuque paper instead of telling about the two corner towers and the loggia from which people could see a five-mile stretch of river. Practical people would not care about that or about the little mulberry tree Gertrude planted in the circle at the head of the Pine Walk to the cemetery. "I like to see the birds eating the berries," she admitted to Pulcheria, "and enjoy its umbrella shape."

Chapter 7

For everything there is a season. A time to build . . .

Had Mother Gertrude waited another year to face the challenge of financing the motherhouse and the academy in Boulder, she might have attempted neither. In the spring of 1893, the United States was enjoying a surge of prosperity; by August it was experiencing one of the worst panics in its history. Fortunately, she had completed all financial arrangements for the new motherhouse before money became tight.

Contractors promised the building could be occupied by winter. Still unfinished were the chapel and the plastering on the third floor and up, but enough was completed to accommodate the Sisters living at St. Joseph prairie since most of the novices were out on the missions. That winter the new building could easily house the 40 who were old or ill and the five or six members of the general administration—some, like Agatha and Gonzaga, came and went as meetings demanded.

For reasons of necessity as well as sentiment, novices on the missions were shuttled to the prairie in July and August of 1893. Cecilia Dougherty, their novice mistress, wanted as many as possible there for the last summer at the “old home.” Much hauling and cleaning waited for young arms and hands to do. Gertrude met the expense of their fares in a variety of ways. A July letter to Kansas City novices indicates that her railroad pass provided transportation for more than one bright young “Mother Gertrude and Companion.”

July 16, 1893

My dear Sister,

Your letter just received. S.M. Cecilia wants you all home. The returns from the missions are irregular but it cannot be avoided—so she must only be patient. You and S.M. Melitta Fleming come on Tuesday morning on The Kansas City—it leaves at eight in the morning—be sure you are both on time. S.M. Melitta has my pass you can come on it without paying anything. I hope Sister will get it again from the conductor and bring it safe home. S.M. Loretta Halpin will come with S.M. Eugenia Brennan who is detained a couple of days longer... Tell S.M. Loretta to come at the same hour as you do in the morning. I don't like night travel if it can be avoided. God bless my little one and make her all his own. Tell S.M. Loretta to write to me when she thinks she can get through.

Yr old

S.M. Gertrude

The year of the move from the “old home” to the new (1893) marked the 50th anniversary of another great move, much farther than nine miles—that of 1843 when the first members of the congregation from Philadelphia landed in Dubuque. The Council had hoped to open the new motherhouse officially on a day with some historic community significance, but with each week the last touches on paint, woodwork, plastering, and water connections

stretched out past September 8th (Birth of Our Lady), October 4th (Mother Clarke's feast day), closer and closer to November 1st, “the birthday of the community.”

Gertrude and Loyola spent that November 1st together at Mt. Carmel surrounded by the sound of workmen's hammers, saws and loud voices. The big boots of the men resounded through the building, magnified by the great empty spaces and open stair wells. A spur of the moment trip, they had brought no water and the motherhouse had none yet, but after the workmen went home, they found a forgotten container of cold coffee and drank it.

During October and November, sporadic trips from the prairie to Grandview gradually emptied the old stone motherhouse and filled a small part of the great new brick one. At last toward the end of November, the Sisters themselves moved. Each novice carried a small object handed to her as she left the front door of the “old home” and received instructions from Cecilia on where to place it in the “new.”

Carriages drove off with the older Sisters, then with the younger professed, and at last the funeral hearse pulled up for the novices, who rode facing each other along either side—clocks, lamps, boots, umbrella stands, pitchers, and miscellaneous dishware protruding at odd angles from under folds of aprons and skirts.¹



Novices went in the hearse to move articles from the old motherhouse to the new.

The old building they left could claim the comfort of use and the discomfort of overcrowding. Prairie dormitory accommodations were primitive—a bed, a chair and a commode for each novice. On long benches down the middle of the room between the two rows of beds sat a washbasin for each novice. A stove occupied the center of the room. When its heat proved inadequate in winter, the young women hung blankets over the windows, but even then the basins of water froze overnight.

The novitiate (common room for novices) at the prairie was rudimentary. Boards on sawhorses served as tables. At night, grease lamps (a wick in a saucer of grease) threw a dim light for sewing. An occasional kerosene lamp-glow marked a visitor's presence in parlor or office. The rest of the old motherhouse lay dark at night. Until the late 1930s there was no electricity or gaslight sent out to houses in the rural countryside. St. Joseph's prairie kept kerosene lights ready for guests. A few candles lit the rooms of Mother or a Council member. The rest of the Sisters made do with grease lights.²

In the new motherhouse, Gertrude Regan had included as many modern conveniences as she could afford—indoor plumbing (most houses still used privies), steam heat (homes, stores, and railway stations were heated with wood or coal stoves), hot water for baths furnished by a huge water tank (most families heated water on the kitchen stove) and gaslight (electricity had not reached Dubuque as yet). But the novices put a positive spin on the experience by saying to each other, “No more trips to the woodbox!... No more hauling water from the spring!.. No more baths from a basin!... No more hanging blankets in winter!... No more . . . (Um, Ah??? no more?)

As it happened, there would be a few more years of all of the above. When the novices and most of the professed Sisters came to the new motherhouse on November 29, 1893, they found NO WATER! Only one small well supplied the huge house. Without sufficient water to fill the boiler, not enough steam could be generated for steam heat.

According to Ernesta Lacy, novice mistress during the first quarter of the 20th century, water was so scarce the first year, weekly laundry was taken out to the old motherhouse. Novices went with several Sisters on the wagon with the loads of wash.³ Laundry was a lark for the novices. The trip

to the prairie, an all day/overnight affair, became a break in the usual routine.

A glowing newspaper article based on the quote at the beginning of this chapter accurately reported that the new motherhouse "had over one and one-half miles of sewer and water pipe and a cistern with a capacity of 300 barrels of water." All true! But the cistern had as yet collected only a fraction of its water capacity, pipes stayed unconnected, and the small well pumped only enough for the day's cooking and the evening's sponge baths.⁴

As for heat, various small stoves scattered throughout the house warmed the rooms they occupied if the Sisters closed the door. Most of the first floor and some rooms on the second had been built with beautiful, large fireplaces and these were used even later whenever the steam heat failed.⁵

During that first week, the lack of water hardly dulled the excitement of the move. All problems seemed so temporary! Administrators, novices, and Sisters once stationed at "the prairie" spent their second Thanksgiving in a building still smelling of paint, varnish and new wood. The Sisters ate their turkey dinner seated on chairs purchased from the 1893 Chicago Colombian Exposition.⁶

Whatever time they had left after cleaning and setting to rights the finished rooms, everyone spent exploring parts as yet unused, anticipating their purpose, projecting themselves into a time when the fourth floor studio would have paintings on its walls; the loggia be a place regularly visited for its view of the Great River; the chapel—they never quite dreamed that reality. It would take another 10 years and \$30,000 to transform the chapel on the second floor of the large, empty south wing.

Next to water, the most important lack was the chapel. Its unfinished state forced the immediate conversion of the three east dormitories on the second floor into an oratory and the room across the hall (later named St. Gertrude) into a sacristy where the priest could vest for Mass.⁷

Hopeful as Mother Gertrude and her Council may have been about completing the interior of the chapel, it remained untouched until May 1901. In 1893, it was awesomely empty, the stained glass windows blocking out patterns of light on the wooden floor. It was, as the newspaper duly reported, larger than any church in Dubuque. It was also unplastered, unpainted and unvarnished.

Once she had provided the oratory and seen her household settled in, Mother Gertrude turned to the business of the coming general elections. In December 1893, she mailed the list of candidates nominated by the Council. The balloting in January would end her second and final term of three years. According to provisions in the Rule, Gertrude could not be elected again without a three-year interim.

Lambertina Doran wrote that some Sisters, convinced that no one could manage the finances like Mother Gertrude, tried to engineer the extension of her term. Their plan aimed to keep her in office until the motherhouse was completed and outstanding debts reduced. Ignatia Pyne, superior of St. Pius, Chicago, described to Lambertina the meeting of superiors called by this group. According to her account, the superiors were brought into Mother Clarke's room at the old motherhouse. They had been summoned from Chicago, Davenport, Des Moines and other missions close enough for the trip. After a brief prayer Gonzaga announced, "Sister Mary Baptist will tell you the object of this meeting."

To which Baptist Seeley retorted, "You tell them yourself!"

Then Gonzaga, who was the prime mover, explained that, because of the new building and for other reasons, it was considered best to have Mother Gertrude's time extended. She asked for the opinion of those present.

"With one voice," writes Ignatia Pyne, "they said 'No!' Then they opened the door and went out."⁸

There are some obvious reasons for that no. First, the three-year term with the option of re-election for three more had never been tested. Mother Clarke was named superior for life by petition to Rome in 1884. No one knew whether the term of office of the mother was adequate for good administration or whether the community would benefit by having many women in office for short periods. But they wanted to try it and see.

Some felt that if the practice of extending terms became the usual thing it would deprive the community of choice and give power instead to whatever Sister the aging Mother selected as her aid and confidante. Gertrude had been Mother Clarke's assistant before her own election. She was 68 and most of her life read like a list of official jobs. Younger members may have thought it time for someone with school experience.

Second, the new motherhouse was imposing (“our mansion on the Mississippi,” the Sisters joked), but it had cost more than many thought necessary. Superiors carried wry memories of little black-cloaked Mother Gertrude pirating their bank accounts to pay bills for Mt. Carmel and the boarding school additions, and leaving them to face current expenses with an empty purse. They had no desire to continue the experience for another three years. They wanted a change, and most of them (Ignatia Pyne among them) knew which direction the change would probably take.

In the January 1894 balloting, Cecilia Dougherty won easily. She had been novice mistress since 1881, elected to the Council by the Sisters since 1884. However, she had worked in a boarding school, made and met a budget for that school and had children around her. The Sister teachers elected Cecilia, not the power brokers. They chose one of their own. At their first meeting on February 2nd, Cecilia’s Council selected Gertrude Regan as novice mistress, keeping her at the new motherhouse to oversee the remaining construction.⁹

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Notes to Chapter 7

1. Information on the move to the new motherhouse taken from an account by BVM Urban Birmingham. 1954 Oral History tapes Archives. Urban entered in the last group of postulants at Old St. Joseph's in 1893. BVM Carlino Guyton, who entered October 15, 1893, told the same story of the move.

2. Information on the old motherhouse Lewine Enderle Memoir Oral History Tapes Archives.

3. Details from Urban Birmingham who also mentions novena after novena to St. Anthony to find an artesian well. Water found about mid-June of 1894.

4. As late as February 1913, CM entries show the Council requesting a geological survey of the rock formation at Mt. Carmel and an estimate of how far down a new well must go to reach water. The geologist thought that below 283 feet, they would hit a 58 ft. strata of St. Peter's sandstone which would supply good water. Eventually, the city water main reached the end of Grandview and connected to the motherhouse system.

5. Mt. Carmel fireplaces are now blocked at the top. The best examples decorate the first floor parlors of the motherhouse near the front door.

6. Information about the dining room chairs from Realmo Sullivan, treasurer general in 1954. Interview 1954 Doris Walsh.

7. BVM Robertine Welch identified the oratory as St. Frances dormitory over the front door on the second floor. It served until completion of the main chapel. “The chapel was not finished—just rafters in the ceiling,” interjected Electa Cavanaugh. Robertine—full of good anecdotes—describes the scene after novice Harold Kinsella mixed up all the white bonnets. (“Like Shaker bonnets,” said Scholastica McLaughlin.) Continued Robertine, “When everyone hurriedly took the bonnets down from their hooks, put them on and went in to prayers, they looked at each other and burst into laughter. Some with large heads had small bonnets perched on top. Small heads disappeared inside a large bonnet. Mother Gertrude was disgusted with us.”

There are contradictory ideas about where these rooms were. All say that the oratory was on the second floor above the front door and that one of the smaller rooms on the west side of the corridor was the sacristy. Not all agree on which room. Robertine is also a source about the 1906 earthquake. Oral History 1954 tapes BVM Archives

8. Gonzaga was not a member of the Council at this time. She asked Baptist Seeley, second in command as Gertrude’s vicar and sister visitor, to call the unusual meeting. Baptist’s refusal to introduce the proposal itself indicates her decision to remain separate from Gonzaga’s scheme. Her action freed the group assembled to say NO. Ignatia Pyne identified Arcadia Haugh as also present. Lambertina Doran Diary 83.

9. Gertrude had last been novice mistress in 1878. In 1894, she was 68; Cecilia 56. Members of the Council, ranked according to the number of votes they received in the 1894 election: Basil Healy, #1, visitor; Sebastian Courtney, #2; Maurice Duffy, #3; Rosalia Ryan, #4. The Council elected Crescentia Markey, secretary; Loyola Rutherford, assistant to Cecilia, treasurer and motherhouse superior. Since Loyola oversaw the motherhouse construction, she supplied that information to Cecilia and the Council. When Rosalia Ryan died later that year, the Council selected Gertrude Regan to fill out her term, securing Gertrude’s presence at Council meetings.



Old infirmary front porch with bridge to the left



The Round, old infirmary.



Mount Carmel Motherhouse 1894