



Chapter 9

Life at the Old Home

When Cecilia entered in 1856, the life of a novice was hard, demanding physical stamina rarely needed or experienced in the 21st century with its push buttons and automatic appliances. For three years, until she was sent to Davenport in the spring of 1859, it was Cecilia Dougherty's life. When she returned as novice mistress in 1881, it was the life she shared with her novices.

Not too much had changed in twenty years, except that after Father Donaghoe's death. Mother Clarke reduced much of the farm work done by novices. Donaghoe had considered hard work good for the young women, sometimes expecting too much physical labor from them. Instead of chores to train farm women, Mary Clark scheduled study time to prepare teachers.¹

Of course some work rotated throughout the weeks and months. The laundry routinely occupied the first two days of the week. All the wash for Father Donaghoe, the five Brothers, the farm hands, 27 or so boarders, and 20 Sisters fell to the lot of the Sisters and novices. Farm clothes were

scrubbed by hand on washboards. "Whites" rolled around in big tubs of boiling water and homemade soft soap. Laundry presented a busy scene.

Anyone visiting the laundry might have seen this scene. On the left, a novice with a sawed off broom handle stirred the whites from time to time so they wouldn't burn. On the right, pairs of novices wrung out clothes or put them through a wringer turned by hand. Novices carried basketsful of clothes to hang on lines in the yard or to spread out on the grass to dry in the sun. Sisters ironed "finewash" using heavy flatirons heated and reheated on wood burning stoves or in a fireplace. Mangles made of two large hollow cylinders filled with rocks flattened the sheets which were stretched and fed in by two novices at the back and pulled out by two others at the front.

In the winter, the wash froze stiff on outside lines so it was hung inside in any available space. Water turned to ice in the washtubs if left inside overnight, so these weren't filled the night before as in summer. Instead, some chosen souls from the novitiate rose at three, fetched water from the spring, heated it, and poured it into the large washtubs. Red woolen underwear and underskirts rubbed with snow lined the banks of the creek alongside the laundry to air.²

Woe to the novice who left her red woolens out overnight! The cows were let out early in the morning and more than one story tells of Bossy adding variety to her diet with a taste of red flannel in passing. One novice from a farm who caught a cow in the act of eating her woolens, fought her for them and won. She became immediately identified as a "boys' teacher."³



Besides doing the laundry, novices often helped in the fields, They milked, made butter and cheese in the dairy, planted and hoed the vegetable garden, fed the chickens, collected eggs, cleaned the yard and farm buildings, fashioned clothes for themselves and the boarders, mended and patched, cooked and baked, and taught in the nearby parish school or in the boarding school attached to the motherhouse. Food at

novice meals was abundant but simple.⁴ In addition, they attended classes and took music from Cecilia, who herself went into Dubuque for lessons.⁵

At regular hours the young women prayed with the rest of the Sisters in the little oratory. As for religious instruction, Donaghoe and, after his death, Fr. Hattenberger, the motherhouse chaplain, taught religion. Instruction in living the religious life they received from their novice mistress, Cecilia Dougherty.

Of physical activity there was God's plenty. During daily walks, postulants and novices gathered armloads of down timber to throw in the woodbox near the kitchen. Each of the two dormitories contained a large tub of water in the center of the room for morning and evening washing. Novices hauled water for these tubs from the spring behind the laundry, placed the full buckets in the sun to warm (or in winter near the stove), and emptied them into the tubs in the evening. Then each Sister poured a dipperful into her basin and, after washing, emptied it and poured another dipperful in for the morning. Many a gray winter morning started with the “ching” of ice breaking against the pressure of a reluctant novice hand.⁶



Snakes there were in plenty as the weather warmed, particularly near the spring behind the laundry. On one occasion, two Sisters were out filling pails with water when one felt something gently twining around her ankle under her long skirts. She called for help but the other Sister with her could think of nothing except prayer, fearing that any action might cause the snake to strike. Wisely, they stood quite still and prayed. In a few moments “the rattler uncoiled itself and ran (sic) away,” wrote Pulcheria.

Native Americans lived within 40 miles of the prairie motherhouse. After the 1857 Spirit Lake massacre in northwestern Iowa, there was some uneasiness about them. However, the Sisters were used to Indian girls as boarders—some for a few days, some for a few weeks, and an occasional one for a complete year. No schedule ruled their attendance. In the early 1850s, Joseph O'Reilly was walking with an Indian girl when the girl heard a whoop from a nearby ravine. Climbing a tree, the girl whooped in return

and disappeared that night. Pulcheria wrote, “She went back to wear the blanket,” i.e., to the customs of the tribe.⁸

In spite of early stories about snakes and Indians, the country around Dubuque when Cecilia entered the novitiate in 1856 was not the wilderness of Lewis and Clark. In fact, the prairie was five miles closer to Dubuque than Cecilia's own home of Garryowen AND it was a station on the railroad!

More and more people came daily on the new Illinois Central and Northwestern Railroads, lured by tales of lead mines—the fabulous Dubuque “mines of Spain”—and a romantic notion of lead pouring out of the Mississippi bluffs. Some moved on, enticed by similar stories of gold and silver in the California Sierras, by the lure of richer farmlands to the west, or a desire to see wilder country and different wonders.



In the early 1840s, Dubuque had been a rough town inhabited by darers and dreamers and dancers and drunks, if the forming of a temperance league by Bishop Loras is any sign.⁹ By the time Iowa became a state in 1846, the town could

boast more than a few mansions and a growing business community.

The BVM motherhouse, novitiate and farm lay about an hour or more from the city, depending on horse, rider and road. It covered several hundred acres bought under the Homestead Act just south of a winding and deeply rutted dirt road called Sullivan's Furrow. According to local legend, it was Sullivan's plow and oxen that made the path from Dubuque to Cascade—Sullivan just hanging on—after one of Sullivan's wild nights in early Dubuque. Anyone who drives the twisting road today could easily believe the story true.

During the 1850s and '60s the U.S. army widened the road, using it to move men and supplies west to the Indian Wars and food supplies to

Dubuque and the Mississippi for the Civil War. Because of army activity, it was renamed the Military Road and later posted as Highway 151.¹⁰

For almost 50 years the motherhouse remained on the farm south of Hwy. 151. During that time 80 postulants—about two a year—came by wagon, sleigh or horseback from the farms and towns on either side of the road. One of the 80 herself, Cecilia Dougherty brought from her farm home the health and endurance of a woman acclimated to cold and physical effort.

Cecilia made her first vows on December 8, 1858. That spring her Davenport experience began—an 18-year period which deepened her ability to lead, sharpened her talent at responding to the feelings of others, and added to her skill in music and her knowledge of other subjects. It would also invite her to love as Christ loved—without judgment, guile, or self-seeking. Years later one of the Sisters who had been a postulant under her said, “She had the gift of being all things to all men. Everyone counted with her, whether they were 14 or 40.”

After Cecilia’s death in 1919, an article in Our Herald¹¹ identified similar qualities, “... a simple heartfelt sympathy for any in distress, a straightforward Christ-like nobility of judgment, and a great love for God's Church and its representatives.” According to the Sisters in the infirmary, who shared with the author in 1954 and 1967, Mother Cecilia was the best-loved woman in the history of the community.



Notes to Chapter 9

1. Jane Coogan has more about novices doing farm work. Coogan1 281 n.3.
2. In the winter, no one minded wearing the thick woolens and layers of quilted petticoats since the corridors and storerooms usually lacked a stove or a good fire. Almost everyone envied novices with kitchen duty in winter. See “Laundry” in Appendix to Chapter 9.
3. The novice was Landaline Haragan, who did indeed become a famous boys' teacher. She has been described as large and strong with a deep voice.
4. “Food in the Novitiate” Chapter 9 Appendix
5. According to an article in the Dubuque Daily Herald and Express for July 1, 1858, St. Joseph Academy offered classes in English, German, French, history,

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geography, singing, music, dancing, astronomy, botany, chemistry, oratory, poetry, rhetoric and grammar. Some Sisters from Philadelphia or Ireland (like Gonzaga McLoskey) already had a good education. Many coming later entered from St. Joseph Academy (Dubuque) or Immaculate Conception (Davenport). For more on the examinations Coogan I 347-349.

6. Details on the novitiate are scattered throughout Pulcheria's Annals, and Lewine Enderle's Memoir. Some details are also from the 1954 Oral History tapes.

7. Pulcheria McGuire Annals 77.

8. Ibid

9. The 1839 Temperance Society. Coogan I 308.

10. Partly because of their proximity to the Military Road and its increased use by the army, the BVM novitiate moved to ICA (Davenport) from 1859-62. The three novices came from Davenport and Margaret Mann, superior at ICA, had just finished being novice mistress the year before. In 1859, St. Joseph Academy boarders joined the BVM day school on The Hill (14th St.) Dubuque.

11. Our Herald was a newsletter sent out to all BVM convents from the motherhouse press beginning in 1913 & ending in 1958. See Appendix Ch.9

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Appendix to Chapter 9.

Food in the Novitiate

From Lewine Enderle, Memoir

The first Christmas after I entered, Sister Mary Remi Wallace (418) died on Christmas day at Mt. St. Joseph. The day of the funeral many friends and relatives came and all were served dinner in our novitiate. As the food was the plainest of the plain, any of us novices who had received eatables in Christmas boxes from home were asked to give them for the table.

We never had candy. The only time I can remember having any was the day we were received. A tray of broken candy, the kind that came in buckets and was called cream candy, was served and we each received a couple of pieces. We never had oranges or other fresh fruit except what was grown on our grounds. (The sick, of course, were

well cared for in every line of food.) We had plenty of apples, rhubarb, tomatoes, and other vegetables grown in the garden. The novices helped in preparing onions and other things for pickling. Our mainstay in meat was pork ...

We did have plenty of wonderful bread and butter at dinner. On washdays we had tea to drink at dinner; on other days, just water. Our breakfast was chiefly oatmeal mush with molasses, and we loved it. For lunch every forenoon we had bread and molasses and plenty of milk. Although we had no dainties, it's needless to say that we all put on weight with that good wholesome food.

About November some of the novices went out to the fields to help husk the corn. Almost everything needed as food for the Sisters and also for the cattle and hogs was raised at dear old St. Joseph's. Memoir 22-23.

Laundry on the Prairie

The next important building was the laundry. That was a rock house in the opposite direction of the chapel, up past the novitiate. It, too, was two stories high and in vacation when the novices came home from the missions many slept on the upper floor there. As with the dairy work, only those who were strong and husky were appointed to go to the laundry. I happened to be one to go. There was nothing modern about the laundry. We used washtubs, washboards, and a washing machine, which we worked back and forth with a handle. Several buckets of soft soap sat in the center of the floor. This soap was made by the sisters from ashes, fat, and like ingredients. Sister Mary Martha, who was in charge of the Laundry, dealt out the soap, but Sister Mary Prisca Solon (207), who helped with the washing, sometimes stole an extra amount for the washing machine when Sister Mary Martha was not looking.

The stockings were all washed in a separate machine and Sister Mary Rosalita Whelan (749) and I took care of working the handle of that machine back and forth for half-an-hour or so at a time. The mangle, which had no heat in it, was made of rocks covered with boards and the rollers were turned by hand. Generally two Sisters worked together, one at each end. All the clothes were dried outside on lines or laid on the grass in the summer. In summer also, the folding and sorting was done on the grounds. There was a small stove on which we heated the irons; it had slanting sides on which we put the irons. Everything had to be ironed as there was no other way to do this, so the Sisters who could do this were sent to the laundry the day after washing. I always had a share in that. Sister Mary of Agreda Cauwley (764), novice, had charge of distributing to each one what she should iron. I had collars, hoods, and the postulants' white bonnets....

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Sister Mary Cecilia came over about “Visits” time, two o’clock, and gave out the “visits” while we ironed. She would sometimes go around pointing out things that needed correction, like ironing things to a finish, i.e., until perfectly dry.

There was a stone wall three or four feet high on the north side of the novitiate. On washdays in the summer, buckets filled with water, to which some salt had been added, were set there for the sun to warm. These were carried to the dormitories and each tin basin was filled so that we could take sponge baths before retiring. Those who did the washing and ironing always retired early on those days. Memoir 12-14.

Our Herald –

Our Herald was proposed by SM Crescentia Markey in 1912 when she was Council secretary under Mother Cecilia. In January 1913 she published the first issue from the congregation’s print shop at Mt. Carmel. This newsletter ran stories in columns with headlines on 8 1/2”X 11” pages and contained news, poetry, prayers, biographies, editorial comment and whatever SM Mechtilde, Reilly, the current editor, decided to print. It stopped publishing in 1956. BVM VISTA, a magazine, took its place from December 1957 until March 1968 when SALT, a quarterly, replaced it. Our Herald is fascinating reading for its unique background on the congregation. Back issues are archived at Mt. Carmel. Its last editor was SM Mechtilde Reilly whose writing was good if a bit flowery. The printing press at Mt. Carmel bought by Crescentia in 1929, printed the Community Prayer Book and the BVM Rule as well as Our Herald.

Sister Mary Mechtilde was an intelligent woman hampered by a hearing loss. She was kind, upbeat, laughed at her own miscues and corrected novices gently. Mechtilde walked with a slight limp so that every other step sounded like *whisk*. Our Herald was a useful communication organ. It was the first publication and the only one sent out to the entire Community during its life in addition to. “Letters from the Mother General,” (To be read to all the assembled Sisters.)

BVM Newsletter, at first restricted to the BVM congregation as an in-house forum for ideas, debate, concerns and news, began in fall 1966 and printed its final issue in January 2009. Its first editor was Rita Benz. Supported entirely by subscriptions

Doris Walsh edited its final issues from 1992 until 2009 when it became too expensive to print.

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