

## Chapter 48

### Old Mothers Fade Away



Aware that sentiment might elect her to a position which she considered herself too old and/or too ill to do well, Gertrude requested her name not be placed on the 1912 list of nominees. After that, she kept herself busy as local treasurer, wrote letters to former novices and prayed her rosary in “D”, her little room in the novice corridor.<sup>1</sup> By 1915, evident to all that she had failed in health, she was not sent as a delegate to the first Elective General Council nor elected to any office by it. She was 85.

But an active 85! She worked in the Mt. Carmel laundry as usual and “cut stamps” during recreation.<sup>2</sup> As econome, she received and recorded all the money coming in from the missions and served as local councilor until shortly before her death.<sup>3</sup> In addition, she made and sent out little “relic” cards to Sisters. A letter to SM Matilda Lahiff explains the project.<sup>4</sup>

. . . Should you, dear Sister, desire to get for yourself and your Sisters a little something of her [Mother Clarke] it will be a pleasure for me to procure a small piece of what was hers, poor as you know what belonged to her was and is.

Sisters who were novices in 1916 remembered Mother Gertrude as a tiny old Sister pattering along the novice corridor—the first floor of the

south wing at the motherhouse—and disappearing into “D” which she used as a bedroom/office.<sup>5</sup> She spoke often to the novices, asking in her husky lisp, “Thithy, dear, what ith your name?” and remembering the name weeks later to the delight of the young Sister.

Not only did these former novices agree that she was brisk and alert, they invariably presented an example of it. They remembered her characteristically abrupt appearance out of “D” and her immediate justice when anyone slammed a door—and the young always did! Gertrude emerged from her room to address the door slammer, “*A De Profundis*, Thithy. Kneel right down, Thithy.” And little Gertrude turned back into D, leaving the offender kneeling in some danger behind the door. Even in their own old age, those former novices closed doors very softly.<sup>6</sup>

Her sense of poverty remained strong in her old age. Instead of gaslight available in all rooms at Mt. Carmel, she burned old candle stubs from the chapel.<sup>7</sup> Once, when she saw one of the novices (St. Clara Sullivan)<sup>8</sup> briskly whipping a cloth across the bathroom fixtures to shine them, Gertrude protested, “Stop, Thithy! It will wear them out!” For a brief moment, the young St. Clara froze, paralyzed. The superior of the motherhouse, Basil Healy, had given instructions that the faucets should be kept shining. Now, caught in the usual novice dilemma between two conflicting authorities, St. Clara wisely obeyed the most immediate. And probably the most intimidating despite Gertrude’s size and age. “We loved her,” Rosanna Darragh recalls, “but when she was displeased she could look hard as a rock.” A brash novice indeed to risk that look simply to polish the bathroom brass!

Gertrude Regan's poverty was selective. Just as she had spent to make the chapel beautiful, so she reserved one article of beauty for herself—a paisley (multi-colored) shawl that hinted at her love of color. She wore it only when Communion was brought to her room in her last illness nor could it be found in evidence at any other time.<sup>9</sup> She also submitted to a few additions to her usual common diet, taking without protest the two raw eggs stirred into a glass of wine which little Sister Mary Cordelia brought each day in a vain attempt to “build her up.”<sup>10</sup>

As long as she could, she remained in touch with the postulants and novices. When a new group of postulants arrived, she slipped down the hall to the postulate, a little figure in a round, old-type hood to her elbow. Once

there, she would greet them in her hoarse whispery voice and smile, her wide mouth showing crooked little teeth. “Who,” thought the newest members of the community, “is this homely little old Sister?” How could they dream she had built the grand structure they were standing in?

The postulants noticed how novices jumped to help the little old Sister when she came out of “D” carrying a basin of water. Plainly she was important! Equally easy to see, she was determined to be independent. Something like a ritual grew up around the matter of the washbasin. First, Mother Gertrude opened the door, basin with wash water steady in her hands, and walked as far as the back stairs across from the postulant annex (lavatory).<sup>11</sup> Here she turned, handed her basin to the nearest novice following her and said, “Thank you, Thithy.” The novice carried the basin into the annex, emptied Mother’s wash water into the sink, rinsed the basin and wiped it dry. Then she turned and handed it back to its owner. Gertrude always took it back to her room herself.

Memories of the poverty and sickness at the Old Home on the prairie filled Mother Gertrude with genuine concern for the young Sisters at Mt. Carmel. Sisters gathered in an infirmary parlor in 1967 told about Gertrude giving her pie to a particularly thin novice, or coming around with the platter of meat from her own table to refill the plates of those she thought needed to eat more. It was the thin look of those with TB that Mother recalled. Occasionally the disease still returned, most often to the young, the bright, the talented.

As postulant mistress, Gertrude loved the sound of young voices, frequently appearing during recreation to enjoy the occasional singing or impromptu piano playing. Her room was a mere 20 feet down the hall. But the night the postulants waltzed, she entered the postulate, looked around, and departed. There was no word of reprimand, but everyone sensed her disapproval. When shortly the novice mistress likewise appeared in the doorway, their feeling was confirmed.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Sisters dancing, Gertrude differed from Mother Cecilia. After Bishop Garrigan's innocent remark in a letter to Cecilia saying how happy he was one evening to find the Sisters dancing in the school basement, she wrote the superior, Lambertina Doran, “Of course I must forbid it—unless the doors are locked!”

In 1916, two years before Mother Gertrude’s final illness, the entire community celebrated her 75<sup>th</sup> Jubilee—the first 75<sup>th</sup> in the congregation! It would be a “Year of Stories” told by everyone—a year in which everyone heard all the stories again and knew once more about this extraordinary clever woman. Gertrude had become Mother after Mother Clarke and grown the community like a gardener. The motherhouse Sisters knew her as a simple and humble old lady and found to their amazement she was a builder who dreamed a motherhouse and placed it on land she mortgaged for funds to build. By the time she celebrated her 75<sup>th</sup> Jubilee, many stories about her had already become part of community myth. The recollections, gathered from the memories of the Sisters, appear in this book as the result of many hours listening to the Sisters in the infirmary sharing their community memories.

The year 1916 also marked the first General Chapter with delegates elected by the Sisters—an added step in the voting. For the first time BVMs elected delegates who chose Mother and her Council of three. Since there were only 29 delegates, the presumption was that over half of 29 surely could agree on someone for Mother more easily than half of 1400.

But the halcyon days were over. Gertrude Regan was the last BVM financial genius to work free of Roman supervision, the last Mother to sign contracts without getting permission to build. A strong, tough little Irish woman with a lisp, she spoke softly as she pirated house accounts to keep two large building projects going at once. A juggler, she sometimes casually threw in the cost of a school addition or a conservatory at the same time as the price of the motherhouse and Mt. St. Gertrude (Boulder) —and kept them all in the air. To build what she needed next, she mortgaged what she had finished and paid for. It would never be that way again. And some said, “How sad.” And some said, “AMEN” to that.

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## Notes for Chapter 48

1. There is some question which room Mother Gertrude actually lived in “B,” “H,” or “D.” Many said it was “B.” No matter which you choose, it used to have a bolt that could be locked on the inside. They are all in Letter Wing under the chapel.

2. “Cutting stamps” often occupied Sisters at Mt. Carmel during recreation in the evening. Sisters on the missions sent in all the used stamps they received. These were piled in the middle of a library table, trimmed off the envelopes and sorted, then sold to stamp collectors. Motherhouse Sisters continued this until 1990.

3. Sister Francis Rose Urbanowski, Gertrude’s nurse, recalls the key to the safe being brought to Mother Gertrude’s room and placed on her table. According to the Custom Book, there were three keys to the house safe. One was given to the superior and each of her two consultors after the safe was locked each night.

4. Some of the material from Mother Clarke’s dress can be seen in the relic rooms at Mt. Carmel. These are pieces of cloth with a small black and white check pattern much like gingham. Gertrude affixed small pieces of this to a card which someone decorated in watercolor. Then she sent them out to those who wanted them.

5. A note which accompanied a wish for a Happy Feast to Lumina seems to favor “B” as Mother Gertrude’s room. The note says, “Our loved Mother Gertrude put this little letter in my room “A” (which was across the corridor) “on the Eve of the Feast. (signed) S.M. Lumina .” Nurse Francis Rose Urbanowski thought Gertrude had her last illness in “H.” Both “B” and “H” are in the same corridor but “H” is away from traffic.

6. If “B” is Gertrude’s room, it is right next to the stairway and the door from it leads to the corridor. A strong current of air up the staircase could catch the door and slam it. Mother’s penance, the *De Profundis* (“Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord”), a penitential psalm, was said often enough at prayers to be memorized.

7. It was the duty of novice Rachel Eppel to take care of Mother Gertrude’s room (dusting, etc.) She made sure that Mother Gertrude’s plain, rectangle, 6x3 inch candleholder was clean. (Interview, Mt. Carmel, summer 1967)

8. A home ec teacher at Clarke, St. Clara remembered this story distinctly.

9. Information about the shawl from Francis Rose Urbanowski (Mt. Carmel summer 1967) and Majella Kent, sacristan at Marian Hall, agrees with other stories told of Gertrude.

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10. Story of egg tonic made for Gertrude by little Cordelia comes from Francis Rose—1967.

11. Story of the basin comes from the group of Sisters at Mt. Carmel, 1967. All the lavatories were called annexes because the bathrooms were added as an afterthought to the west side of the main staircase. These were removed in the renovation of the Motherhouse in 2006-7. As a result of the name given to the bathrooms off the front stair landings, all lavatories in the whole motherhouse complex were called “annexes.” There are “annexes” all over the community since the motherhouse was constructed in 1892-3 and the name went out to the missions with generation after generation of novices and newly professed and yes, each former BVM.

12. Story in 1967 of Gertrude’s reaction to novice dancing is from BVM Roseanna Darragh, who ran the Mt. Carmel farm.

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