There Was a Ford in the IHMs’ Past

On April 11, 1929, Henry and Clara Ford were guests of honor at a reception and dinner at St. Mary Academy on the occasion of their 40th wedding anniversary. An old-fashioned dance festival, featuring performances by Academy students of folk dances of the time, served as entertainment. The Fords seemed to enjoy themselves, promenading throughout the evening. The Ford party consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin B. Lovett; Mr. and Mrs. Ernest G. Liebold; and Mr. and Mrs. Louis B. Ives. Mr. Lovett was the dance master.

About the same time, during Dr. George Derry’s presidency at Marygrove College, every Friday morning was “American dance” time in Alumnae Hall. Derry would call out a name and then spin the young woman onto the dance floor. The callers and small orchestra were provided by Henry Ford.

On Aug. 17, 1939, Ford’s secretary Mr. Liebold, delivered the five-millionth V-8 model Ford to Monroe as a gift from Ford. He also brought the message from Ford that he was sending a new truck to replace the old one. And, these gifts continued. For many years, IHM employees Spiro Micallef and Jules Verhaegge drove Mother Ruth Hankerd and Sister Miriam Raymo to Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. There, the old car was exchanged for a new one — an annual gift of a Ford to the sisters.

As interesting as these vignettes are, they don’t explain how Ford had become acquainted with IHM. It was Micallef who shed light on that question with two stories. The Raymo family owned a hardware store on 12th Street in Detroit and Ford had a bicycle shop on Michigan Ave. He shopped for parts at the Raymo’s store where young Jen (Miriam), who worked there, came to know him well. After Jen became an IHM, Ford visited her each year. She was the bursar of the congregation from 1924-1948.

And there is a second connection. Louis Rabaut, the grandfather of Sisters Celeste, Stella and Martha Rabaut, owned a barn on Congress Street in Detroit. Ford, in the very early days of his business, needing storage space for early versions of the car, rented the Rabaut barn for $5 a month. Sometimes even that was beyond him and he would write out an IOU. Celeste told how her grandfather watched Ford’s frustration on the little gravel road from the barn when his car would stall after a short distance. Once, instead of the regular gas cap, he stuffed the opening with a rag, and the car rumbled off. That’s when he discovered that gasoline needs oxygen to operate.

These stories of neighbors helping neighbors may help to explain the connections between Ford and the IHMs over the years.
*Paver Recognizes IHM Presence in Detroit Since 1861*

When Sisters Mary Ann Markel and Marie Sweeney were presented with the opportunity to purchase a personalized 8” x 8” brick paver to be prominently displayed at the Rivard Plaza along the new Detroit River Walk, which opened in 2007, they jumped at the chance. It seemed a good way to mark the IHMs’ long-time presence in Detroit.

They decided to email Detroit area IHM Sisters and Associates requesting donations. They also asked then-IHM President Sister Mary Fran Gilleran if she would help with the $500 cost if they came up short. She readily agreed, but in the end no help was needed.

Responses were immediate and numerous. In fact, within a relatively short time, Mary Ann had to tell would-be givers to stop sending donations. She noted, “It was the easiest money I ever raised.”

Mary Ann encourages those who have not seen the waterfront lately to visit it and look for the paver. To get there, follow Rivard Street down to the waterfront where there is free parking. The paver is located west of the carousel in the second section in the far white panel, the fifth one down from the top.

The paver celebrates the IHMs’ presence in Detroit for more than 150 years. The sisters opened their first school in the city at St. Joseph Parish on Sept. 4, 1861.

In the 1940s, but new documents in recent years suggested it was time for a reassessment of his life in the context of church and Redemptorist history.

Professor Leslie Tentler says that Gillet’s “turbulent story makes for fascinating reading” and that he is “appropriately honored by this impressively researched and briskly narrated biography.”

*New Biography of Louis Gillet Now Available*

After more than five years, the Rev. Gil Enderle, CSSR, has completed a new biography of Louis Gillet, co-founder with Theresa Maxis Duchemin, of the IHM Sisters. Research took Enderle to archives in America and Europe. He retraced Gillet’s early steps as a Redemptorist in Belgium, his travel to the United States and his places of ministry in the Midwest. He followed Gillet south to New Orleans and north to Kingston, Ontario. Finally he visited Hautecombe, where Gillet spent his last years as a Cistercian monk in France.

An account written by Gillet shortly before his death described the mission at St. Mary Parish and details of the founding of the congregation, but was silent about his life after he left Monroe. Mother Maria Alma Ryan, IHM (Immaculata), and Sister Rosalita Kelly, IHM, wrote biographies in the 1940s, but new documents in recent years suggested it was time for a reassessment of his life in the context of church and Redemptorist history.

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