HDC Opens in 1918 as First Building on New Campus

Redemptorist Father James Poirier wanted to open a boys' boarding school in Monroe as early as 1849. More than 60 years later, Detroit Bishop John Foley asked the IHMs to open such an elementary school and they agreed.

The Motherhouse and Academy were then located near St. Mary Church on the corner of W. Elm Ave. and Monroe St. Further west on Elm was farmland that the IHM Sisters had purchased during Mother Mechtildis McGrail's administration. Park Place, the 106-acre property opposite St. Edward's Island, with a "handsome brick residence, a farm house, and substantial barns" was purchased for $10,000 in September 1904. The 75-acre Igenfritz farm, adjoining Park Place on the east, was purchased in October of 1912. Sister Rosalita Kelly says that Mechtildis could not have foreseen these purchases would eventually provide the campus for the new Motherhouse, the third Academy, and an elementary boarding school for boys. On Nov. 10, 1915, ground was broken at the west end of the land for the new school, later named the Hall of the Divine Child (HDC) in honor of the child Jesus. Because of World War I, construction was not completed until 1918. On the first day of school, Jan. 14, there were 26 students, including 18 boarders. The next fall, 92 girls from grades one through six at the Academy joined 180 boys to bring the enrollment for the first full year to 272. By 1929 there were 346 students, 264 boys and 82 girls.

Some of the memories left behind when the school closed may be of interest. The school was co-educational from 1918-32. Having the younger Academy girls at HDC provided more room for the older girls at the second Academy, which opened in 1905 and burned to the ground in 1929.

The third Academy, built on the new property east of HDC and the Motherhouse, opened in 1932 and accommodated all of the girls. HDC became an all-boys' school. In 1943-44, the enrollment was large enough to necessitate 15 boys and two sisters to have sleeping quarters in the powerhouse.

High school classes were held from 1932-1941. HDC became a military school in 1936, and by 1945 the marching band and uniformed cadets were well known in Monroe. The annual Mother's Day military drills and band performance on the front lawns drew 2500 spectators by 1951.

In the late 1970s enrollment declined, due in part to the anti-military sentiment of the Vietnam era. HDC closed in 1980. The building was converted into an apartment residence for seniors and called Norman Towers. Interestingly, Edgar Hayes, the first student to register at HDC, returned 67 years later with his wife to live at the Towers when he retired after 35 years as a sportswriter and editor for the Detroit Times.

IHM sold Norman Towers in 2005; it continues to operate as apartment residences for seniors.
Mother’s Day Parade at Hall of the Divine Child
(This story was told by Sister Joyce (Rose Anthony) Duroska, IHM, as part of her Then & Now feature for February 2012) See Then & Now at the IHM website.

Every Mother’s Day the Hall of the Divine Child students would march in a parade. Company A included seventh and eighth grade boys, Company B was fifth and sixth grade, Company C was third and fourth, and Company D was first and second graders. The companies would show their military drills to the parents when they came for their visit. After the parade, recognition would be given to the company that performed the best. Usually Company A would be awarded the trophy because the boys were older and could perform better.

I was assigned to work with the little first and second graders in Company D. I practiced and practiced with them for days. I told them they could perform better than those bigger boys! One of the little boys, John, was the captain of Company D and he would call out the command to turn right, turn left. On the day of the parade, their shoes were shined and they were ready to go!

It rained the night before and there were puddles of water everywhere. I told them if they saw a puddle to march right through it. They were a little apprehensive, since they were proud of how shiny their shoes were. The big boys could maneuver easily around the water puddles but I knew the little ones wouldn’t be able to.

So it was time for them to march. They did their drills and marched on - right through the puddles! They marched in a very straight line. The parents watching went crazy! They clapped and clapped for Company D and how those little boys marched! And of course the big kids marched around the puddles, weaving back and forth.

When the parade was over, the trophy was awarded to Company D, the first time in the history of the HDC they had won the award!