IHM Archives Notes

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IHMs Moved College to Detroit 85 Years Ago

On Sept. 18, 1927, the first classes were held at Marygrove in Detroit. They were preceded by an academic procession and the Mass of the Holy Spirit. The dedication took place two months later on Founders’ Day, Nov. 10.

But 1927 did not mark the beginning of the IHM involvement in higher education. It can be traced back to 1899. At the commencement of St. Mary Academy that year, Abigail Drawe, who later became Sister Theodosia of the IHM faculty, received honors in post graduate work in Greek, Latin, French, and vocal and instrumental music. She had graduated high school at the Academy in 1898. In 1904 similar awards were made to former Academy graduates.

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On Jan. 14, 1914, the 68th anniversary of the opening of St. Mary Academy, the first Cap and Gown Day was held. Fourteen college students participated. Then, on June 16, Bishop John Foley of Detroit conferred the first Bachelor of Arts degree.

Because the State Department of Education did not like housing a college and high school in the same building, plans were made to erect a new building in Monroe where the IHMs owned a 300-acre plot of land; it is the present Motherhouse property. Ground was broken Nov. 10, 1920; however, construction was delayed when Bishop Michael Gallagher invited the sisters to build in Detroit instead of Monroe because “it would have a larger field of influence and it would offer an opportunity to thousands of young women who would otherwise not have a chance to acquire a Catholic education.”

March 2, 1922, the IHMs purchased an 80-acre plot of land in Greenfield Township, lying south of West McNichols Road. The sisters were advised by some that the location was too far from the city, but within a year it was included in a section of northwest property incorporated into the city. Finances were also a problem. The money that had been saved to build the new college in Monroe was used to buy the Detroit property. A building fund campaign was opened May 5, 1923, at a luncheon at the Hotel Statler. The campaign’s largest project was the “Marygrove Festival” held Oct. 13-19, 1924, in the Arena Gardens. It netted $101,000—$1,000 over goal. Unfortunately, the fund was only a small portion of the $4 million needed to build and equip the college. With great courage and trust, Mother Domitilla Donahue and her administrative council found a way to borrow the money.

Two years before moving to Detroit, the name of the college was changed to Marygrove because there were many St. Mary Colleges. Ground was broken for the first building during April in 1925 and the college was established in Detroit.

Marygrove seniors with Cardinal Patrick Hayes, Archbishop of New York, after dedication of Our Lady of Marygrove statue in 1927

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Liberal Arts Building at Marygrove College, Detroit
Sister Claudia, an Eminent Papal Scholar

Sister Claudia Carlen’s long career as a librarian included work as a director, consultant, archivist, writer and editor. Papal documents were the focus of her scholarly research for more than six decades. Her thesis in library school at the University of Michigan was published as a book: *A Guide to the Encyclicals of the Roman Pontiffs from Leo XIII to the Present Day* (1878-1937). Later, her 5-volume *Papal Encyclicals 1740-1981* was the first comprehensive collection ever published. Beginning in 1988 she collaborated for 10 years with other scholars in producing a monumental work, the *Vatican Archives: An Inventory and Guide to Historical Documents of the Holy See*. The project was directed by Dr. Francis Blouin.

Her interest in collecting papal medals is not surprising. She explained the significance of the medals in an oral history interview in 2001. Every year for the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul in June, a medal is cast with the current pope’s visage on one side and an event being recognized on the other. This has been happening since the mid-12th century. There are three versions of the medal: bronze, silver and gold. Claudia pointed out that the event pictured on the back is “usually the most important event of the year, so if you have those from 1150, coming straight down, you have almost a history right there. And they are beautiful.”

During this year honoring the opening of the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago, several medals of John XXIII and Paul VI are displayed in the case on the ground floor of H-Wing of the Motherhouse.

Pontiac Sisters “Raced” to Monroe

During the early 1960s the sisters missioned to St. Frederick School in Pontiac didn’t have a car. When they had to do things like going shopping, getting to a meeting, or traveling to the Motherhouse, they borrowed one. This wasn’t always easy. A group of parishioners, led by a Mrs. Thebo, decided to raise the money to buy the sisters a station wagon. They knew that the books of Green Stamps that stores often gave to people when they shopped could be redeemed for cash.

Families donated many stamps, sending them to be collected at school. Surprisingly, it didn’t take long to amass enough money for the new vehicle. From then on, the sisters travelled in style.

For trips to Monroe, the station wagon’s three rows of seats were often filled. The back seat was the least desirable as it faced the back window/door. The two youngest sisters sat there. The drive along Telegraph Road from Pontiac to Monroe seemed long, especially when there were so many traffic stops for red lights.

The sisters were still wearing the traditional older habits and often seemed to attract attention from riders in other cars stopped at the same intersections. The back-seaters, being young and not yet “seasoned nuns,” decided to have some fun. At least they thought it was fun. On a piece of 8 x 11 paper they printed in as large letters as would fit “RACE ???” Then, when other drivers would look over curiously at the sisters, they held up their sign with its question.

The superior, Sister Melanie Moran, was driving the station wagon and began to notice that cars around her at red lights were revving their engines and squealing their tires as they took off to “win the race.”

After repeated experiences of this, she exclaimed to her passengers, “What’s the matter with everybody today? Why are they all in such a hurry?”

She never did find the real answer.