The graves of all Monroe IHM Sisters, with the exception of Sister Carmen (Philomena) Rosado who is buried in Puerto Rico, are in St. Joseph and St. Mary Cemeteries in Monroe, Mich. During the early years of the congregation the sisters were buried in St. Joseph Cemetery with local parishioners. The first burial was of the half-sister of Mother Mary Joseph Walker, Sister Ignatius (Ann) Walker, who died Feb. 27, 1856. Shortly after that, it was decided to construct a stone wall to enclose an area in the cemetery for IHMs. A wooden cross with the name of the congregation was placed there.

When an expansion of the cemetery was planned in 1865, Rev. Edward Joos, the director of the congregation, arranged for a burial space for IHMs. A small chapel, which the graves would encircle, was erected in the center of the cemetery. The bodies of nine sisters were transferred there from the old section on Nov. 7, 1865. Sister Adelaide Donavan, who died Aug. 3, 1891, was the last of 64 IHMs to be buried there.

When Joos died May 18, 1901, he was buried under the chapel and a large engraved stone slab in the floor marked his grave. The chapel was dedicated June 12, 1902 and became known as the Msgr. Joos Memorial Chapel.

A new section of the cemetery was opened when Sister Josephine White died Aug. 19, 1891. This plot was designed in the shape of a heart and held a Sacred Heart statue. Sister Benigna Lariviere, who died Dec. 2, 1927, is the last of the 133 sisters buried there.

During the 1920s, St. Mary cemetery was prepared on property owned by the congregation adjacent to the St. Joseph cemetery. It was consecrated Aug. 2, 1929. The chapel there holds the remains of co-founder Rev. Louis Gillet in the altar. The first sister was buried in St. Mary on March 16, 1928.

A section just west of the Gillet Chapel has plots of sisters who have been cremated.

In the older, northern part of St. Mary in sections I–VI are the graves of 386 sisters who died between March 1928 and March 1971. In the center of the area are graves of Msgr. Walter Marron, Motherhouse chaplain 1921-1968, and Rev. Clement Esper, chaplain 1985-1992. A section for green burials is set aside in the southwest corner. In recent years, slate markers designating section numbers have been erected throughout the cemetery to assist in locating graves. As of Feb. 19, 2014, a total of 1,445 IHM burials have taken place in Monroe.
An Unlearned Distinction

Mary Jane tells this story, which took place during the 1970s at a parish school in Florida.

One of the things children in the early elementary grades of Catholic schools learned early on was how to behave in church, including genuflecting before entering a pew.

Mary Jane noticed that despite her training, Diane Dodge always seemed to genuflect with her left knee instead of the prescribed right one. So, one day she called her over and said, “You’re still using your left knee to genuflect. Do you think you can remember to use the right one?”

“Oh, yes sister, I’ll really try,” Diane obliged.

One day, late as usual, Diane trudged up the center aisle with her boots on, swinging her book bag and clumping all the way. Arriving at her place next to a pew directly in front of Mary Jane, she plunked down—on her left knee.

“Diane,” the ever-patient Mary Jane whispered, “Just genuflect on your right knee.” And, in an effort to make it all very clear, Mary Jane pointed to Diane’s right knee.

Diane tried to do as directed and was successful. Mary Jane urged, “Now, try to remember to genuflect that way next time, too.”

After getting settled in her pew, Diane turned around to Mary Jane and said apologetically, “I’m sorry, Sister, about not using the right knee; but it’s really hard for me to remember to do that. They look so much alike.”

Mary Jane smothered a laugh and just smiled and nodded at Diane.

A Few Monroe French Links

During the early decades of the 19th century, three European cultures influenced large areas of the United States: British along the Atlantic seaboard, Spanish in the South, and French along the St. Lawrence and Mississippi rivers and the Great Lakes.

Monroe, which was established as a fort and trading post no later than 1778, was originally called Frenchtown. And, it was to Col. Francis Navarre that the Pottawatomi, who controlled the valley around the River Raisin, deeded 20 acres of land in 1785.

Many of the original settlers were French Canadians who were trappers along the banks of waterways which abounded with wildlife. Wild grapes grew abundantly along one of these rivers, giving it the name La Riviere aux Raisins. There they also trapped muskrats, which they considered clean-living aquatic rodents valuable for their fur and flesh. Legend has it that they were a Friday delicacy for Catholics since the Bishop “had blessed them as fish.” Muskrats are still seen as friendly symbols in the area, even being displayed on bicentennial posters.

The French in Monroe were Catholics who were served by French clergy. French-speaking Redemptorists were assigned to the first Catholic church in Monroe, St. Antoine sur La Riviere aux Raisins (Now St. Mary) in 1844. The pastor, Rev. Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR, co-founded the IHM congregation in 1845.

Sister Mary Jane (Marie Mark) Hinks, a master primary grades teacher, has many stories about her young charges that are reminiscent of Art Linkletter’s well known Kids Say the Darndest Things. Of course, these tales often mix wisdom and humor.