Three sisters who played major roles in managing the “big kitchen” in Monroe over the years were Hortense Coutts, Myra Shanahan and Mariella Barton. Brief sketches offer readers a sense of their contributions.

Sister Hortense Coutts entered IHM in 1897 and at profession her number in community was 308. From a prominent Canadian family where her father was a member of parliament, she spent her entire IHM life as a cook and housekeeper in large convents and as the manager of the Motherhouse kitchen in Monroe from 1901-1925. She managed meals for up to 1,000 and prepared large quantities of food, such as 200 quarts of strawberries for a meal and a ton of potatoes for a week. She was remembered for her sense of humor, care for the poor, nurturing of the sisters, and prayerfulness. In 1926 she went to St. Stephen, Port Huron, where she served until retiring in 1947.

Sister Myra Shanahan entered IHM in 1903. She was missioned as a teacher for 18 years, 16 of them at St. Patrick, Wyandotte. She loved teaching and was said to manifest deep interest in each child in her class. She was also said to have been the instigator of many a practical joke in the community life of the sisters. She was assigned to manage the St. Mary College kitchen in Monroe during the 1923-24 academic year, and in 1924 began 25 years of service managing the Motherhouse kitchen. Sister Mary Zachary Hurley, who worked with her for 18 years, described how she won the hearts of many. “Here she was the same enthusiastic and wonderful Sis-

ter Myra whose name became a legend to postulants and novices. Those of us who worked in the kitchen—and who of us didn’t—all have memories of carefully planned meals. She often told me … she would pretend that her menus were her school plan book and when a meal was a success she would like to think of it as a class well taught.”

Sister Mariella Barton entered IHM in 1928. After teaching at St. Joseph, Monroe, and St. Charles, Coldwater, and well into work on her master’s degree in education, she gave up her dream of becoming a great educator to provide St. Mary Academy girls with “culinary delights” in their cafeteria for 18 years. Then, in 1950, she replaced Sister Myra as head of the Motherhouse kitchen, where she remained for 18 more years. Young sisters in formation during the 1950s and 1960s well remember how she directed preparation of food for cooking and all the other functions of a kitchen that fed the Motherhouse sisters, the Academy boarders, the employees, and those in the infirmary. No matter how hectic, she could always smile. And, those young sisters who had broken a cart full of dishes, spilled large quantities of food or thrown many loaves of bread into a large garbage disposal by mistake remember her kindness.

These three great women embraced their tasks of service with joy, models to us all.
Family-Style Meals and Early Food Service

From the earliest years IHMs ate family-style meals together that were planned, prepared, served and cleaned up after by the sisters. At the Motherhouse and Academy complex in Monroe, meals were also provided to the boarding students and the men who worked for the sisters. This was no small task given the number of people, often more than 1,000, and the amount of food involved. In the 1960s, when the numbers of able-bodied servers—postulants, novices, and junior professed—declined and family-style meals were no longer possible, ARA, a food service company, took over. At first, a self-serve food line was set up outside the dining rooms, but this proved to be impractical with the dining areas still walled apart. Sister Rose Estelle Kissane arranged to open up areas by removing some walls. Although the whole process caused a stir initially, in the end most were happy, especially when the “buffet bar” was installed within the dining areas.

Understanding the complexity of providing family-style meals helps readers grasp the enormousness of the jobs the sister food service managers—called “the cooks” at the time—undertook. There were three dining rooms for the Motherhouse—professed, novices, postulants; four for the Academy, one for each “division,” such as the division of juniors and seniors; and those for the men who worked for the sisters and the chaplain. During summers, when the boarders left, the sisters returning from the missions filled their places. Clearly, overseeing food service for IHMs’ Monroe campus was a challenging assignment.

Responding to Bells Wasn’t Always Smart

When Sister Agnes Louise Murray was assigned the charge of ringing the bell at Immaculata convent soon after her arrival there in 1964, she was determined to do a good job. She may even have worried about the responsibility enough to interfere with her sleep patterns. And, therein lies the story.

The rising bell in IHM houses at that time rang nine times at 5 a.m. sharp. The bell ringer had to rise early enough to dress and get to the location where the bell was located. On occasion, the sister responsible woke up with a start, realized her alarm hadn’t gone off and she only had a few minutes to ring the bell on time. One morning Agnes found herself in that position, dashed to the bell-ringing station and rang the bell nine times. The 29 other sisters in the house arose still feeling tired and groggy, saw clock hands at “12” and “5” and assumed it was five. After all, part of the daily routine was to rise at that time. They dressed, and headed the short distance across the campus from the convent to the school chapel. It wasn’t until all were assembled for meditation that the superior, Mother Marmion (Jane) Johnson, realized what had happened. The clock had actually shown 12:25 a.m. Instead of beginning the prayers, she merely announced, “Sisters, it’s just a little after midnight. Go back to bed.” And, they got up and began the trek back over to the convent. Everyone was noticeably tired the next day.

Many old customs were in practice until the mid 1960s. One of these had to do with responding to bells. As the saying went, “When the bell rings, it is the voice of God calling.” So, of course, the sisters reacted almost spontaneously to any ringing of a bell. It goes without saying that the responsibility of the bell ringer was taken very seriously. Especially conscientious sisters worried about ringing the bell the right number of times and on time.