Mother Domitilla did not assume office unprepared, having served for 18 years as first assistant during Mother Mechtildis McGrail’s administration. According to No Greater Service, they worked well together, but were different in personality and appearance. Mechtildis was short, stocky and strong, while Domitilla was tall, thin and never entirely well during her term.

Those were years of significant growth and development. The final approval of the Constitutions by Rome in 1920 brought special joy to the celebration of the diamond jubilee. And membership almost doubled, increasing from a few more than 450 to almost 800.

She permitted and encouraged Sister Rosalita Kelly to negotiate for four years to obtain the remains of Father Gillet from France. She had the memorial chapel built in the new cemetery to receive them in 1929.

This was also a time the mission fields widened and a strong educational system was developed. By 1925, all IHM teachers had teaching certificates as required by the Dacey Law of 1925; 170 teachers had bachelor’s degrees; and 15 secondary teachers had master’s degrees. A comparison of data from 1919 and 1930 illustrates the expansion. In 1919, 400 IHM Sisters taught 21,000 children in 43 schools. In 1930, 600 sisters and 130 lay teachers taught 32,000 children in 62 schools.

The accomplishment considered most important to her legacy was moving Marygrove College to Detroit, erecting its beautiful buildings and establishing the campus, and hiring a nationally recognized educator to be its first president. George Hermann Derry, whom she hired, was the first lay man to head a woman’s Catholic college in the United States. According to No Greater Service, her greatest single contribution to Catholic education was “her envisioning of a great Catholic woman’s college and the translation of that vision into reality. Marygrove College is her monument.”

The last year of Domitilla’s leadership was described as a period of a great storm, resulting havoc and finally silence and peace. On June 3, 1929, fire destroyed the second St. Mary Academy, which had been built and dedicated in 1904-05. As the firemen, some in tears, tried unsuccessfully to bring the flames under control, Domitilla stood watching, a symbol of strength. Later she thanked God that not a single life had been lost and reminded the community that buildings can be restored, but the precious life of a child, never.

Domitilla, struggling with a severe heart problem and anguished by the loss of the Academy to fire, the debt incurred building Marygrove and the need to rebuild the Monroe Campus, sought to carry out the duties of her office and to encourage the congregation to find hope in dire circumstances. She wrote the sisters:

> Dear sisters, The cross is the test of fidelity; as one letter says so beautifully: “Fire purifies, so it may be that the dross of earthly frailty will be cleansed from out our souls, and that the rehabilitation, spiritual as well as material, will be nobler than before.”

She died May 15, 1930, at the age of 66.
In September 2005, Sister Marietta Murphy, who had been the director of development for IHM, received a letter from Jackie Penman, a 1960 graduate of All Saints High School in Detroit. She sent a copy of a piece her daughter Theresa, almost 8 at the time, had written in 1979 in her second grade class about Sister Rose Magdalen. Jackie had found “this treasure” when cleaning out her basement and said she just had to send a copy to the IHM Sisters to read.

Jackie and her husband were both graduates of All Saints and they kept up friendships with sisters they had met there. Among them were the principal, Sister Ellen (Mary Arthur) Van Antwerp, and the 12th grade teacher, Sister Rose Magdalen. For many years, the family visited Ellen and Rose at the Motherhouse. It was these visits that Theresa wrote about. Readers will enjoy reading it in its original form.

In the days when the IHM Sisters didn’t have many cars to drive, they were dependent upon others to drive them to things such as meetings or shopping. Usually that meant asking family or friends, but sometimes the more creative looked for other means of transportation.

One time, when Sister Patricia Ann Kidder was teaching at Sacred Heart School in Roseville, she devised a plan. With another sister she walked to Arnold’s used car lot which was about one-half mile from the convent. Once there, she inquired about the possibilities of either borrowing or renting a car. They learned it might be possible to borrow a car.

While some papers were being prepared and signed, Mr. Arnold asked Patricia whether or not she had insurance.

Happy to be in compliance, she said brightly, “Oh, yes. I know we have Blue Cross, Blue Shield.”

Mr. Arnold loaned her a beautiful, almost new, Chevrolet.

Mary Laubacher, IHM