Crawfton, a Place for Community

Crawfton was the answer to the search for a vacation site for IHMs following a Chapter directive from 1966. It was used over time for retreats and meetings, but most importantly as a place to come together for fun.

Sister Mary Vincent Corice, a member of an ad hoc search committee, “discovered” Crawfton. She had gone to the Oxley Retreat House in Ontario with her students, when Rev. Ted Gatfield, the retreat master, told her Crawfton Inn was for sale. It was built in 1943-44 by Arthur Crawford and Kathleen Charlton – thus the name Crawfton. In 1947 Harry and Doris Chevalier became the owners, but death and illness in the Chevalier family had forced them to put it up for sale.

Sister Jane (Marmion) Johnson, community treasurer, asked Spiro Micallef, IHM’s master craftsman, and Richard Brennan, of Brennan Construction Co. to look at it and make a recommendation. They found it to be a beautiful spot, but in need of a lot of work. The decision was made to purchase it using the patrimony of Sister Mary Theodore Digneit, whose father was a Burroughs’ executive. Spiro assumed much of the responsibility for the renovation work, which continued through the spring of 1968. Plumbing, heating, electrical, and water supply systems were brought up to date; a new well was dug, a new transformer installed, the oil storage tank replaced and the furnace repaired. The back porch was enlarged with a place for a laundry.

In the spring of 1968, Sister Marguerite (Lorenza) Tourangeau was asked to prepare the Inn for use that summer. Sisters Mary Vincent and Helen Fidelis Bleyaert assisted her and stayed on the following year. Mary Vincent was a master of all trades; she worked on the lawn, the beach, and the shed; she drove the van to town and to local farms to buy food. She did so many things Spiro recalled her as an "engineer without portfolio."

In 1979 Sister Barbara (Therese Lisieux) Torzewski became the resident manager. She was followed in 1995 by Sister Eva (Mary Neumann) Schoell, who remained until Crawfton closed. Sister Mary Lou (Agnes Patrice) Theisen assisted Eva. Spiro was succeeded by Barbara’s “Uncle Joe” Plotzke, a master carpenter, who donated his skilled workmanship from 1973 to 1981. He built the outdoor stairs, enlarged the shed into a garage, constructed a walkway to the lake, rebuilt the picnic tables and glider swing, paneled the indoor rooms, painted the entire Inn and built “the hut” for solitude.

Hundreds of sisters visited Crawfton each summer; some came for the day and others for longer periods. Summer hostesses saw to the administration of the Inn during those days. Sister Marguerite was first to serve in this capacity. She was followed by Sisters Mary Margaret (Johnita) Boland, [Continued on p.2]
Breaking Barriers with a Speedboat Ride

Some delightful stories can be told about the IHMs first years at Crawfton. For many, never having appeared in public dressed in anything but a habit for so long made even dressing in casual clothes an event. And, wearing bathing suits was a bigger thing than most folks could ever imagine. It did take some getting used to; and, of course, individuals accepted changes in their own time.

Sister Rita (Lucita) McFarland had been looking forward to her vacation at Crawfton and planned to enjoy every minute of her time there. Now that IHMs were allowed to swim, she could hardly wait to get in the water with her friends. On the day in question Rita was one of a group who were splashing, floating and swimming when they noticed a nice speedboat approaching. It slowed down, the engine idled and the craft drifted towards them. There were a couple of men in the boat who introduced themselves as Jesuits from down the beach. Of course, the sisters sitting on the beach only saw a boat with men in it approaching the IHMs who were swimming. For some, this was not acceptable.

Rita was a person who never met a stranger and liked fun. So, when the invitation to take a ride was issued, she accepted right away. She and an IHM friend climbed into the boat and they took off out into the lake. When the ride was over, the boat pulled up in shallow water in front of Crawfton and the sisters jumped out. They felt so blessed for the chance to enjoy the lake spray in a boat wearing bathing suits after all these years.

But all on the beach was not well. Someone had announced, “Monroe just called! They want to know if it’s true that sisters are riding in a motor boat in their swimming suits with men.” Needless to say, when Rita and friends got to the beach they had to face the music. After all, different sisters adjusted to changes at different paces. Some were still having trouble with others not wearing the habit at all times. And, when they did, they felt compelled to “Call Monroe!”

Those who knew Rita knew that her love of people, good times and even her ride in a speedboat on Lake Erie in a bathing suit never allowed her spirit to be squelched. She would ride again!

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Angela (Carleen) Rees, Eileen (Adelma) Fitzpatrick, and Mary Fran (Christiana) Hogan. Many others provided hospitality, wonderful meals, general housekeeping and care of the four-acre grounds.

For the 40 years of its existence as an IHM summer vacation place and year-round destination for meetings, retreats, workshops and celebrations, thousands of sisters, and later, many co-workers and friends enjoyed Crawfton.

One sister said it was the IHM’s best investment; a great place to strengthen bonds and enjoy good times. Where else in those years could the sisters go to spend quality time with friends and have such perfect surroundings to just “hang out together?”

Crawfton closed with a special farewell ritual in December 2005 and was sold to a developer in 2006.

Sisters Rita McFarland, Jean Burbo, Mary Lou Theisen, Jo McAnoy, Donna Schroeder, Marjorie McFarland, Nora Duggan, James Marian Sarchet

Eileen Fitzpatrick

Imelda Neaton, Margaret Rottach, Ruth Glaser, Mary Ann Untener

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