Mother Leocadia (Mary) Delanty held the position of novice directress of the Monroe IHMs for 44 years, from 1894-1938. She served in that capacity longer than any other woman in the congregation's history. In fact, in 1925 it was said that 550 of 670 currently living IHMs had been trained by her. This was approximately three-fourths of the community.

Mary's parents were from Ireland and their first child, a boy, was born in Canada. She was born in west Michigan in Muskegon and attended St. Mary School there. She entered IHM on July 16, 1874, where she was mentored by Mothers Clotilda Hoskyns and Justina Riley. Catherine McGrail, later Mother Mechtildis, was her novitiate companion and lifetime friend.

After 19 years teaching (1875-1894) on the missions at St. Michael Monroe, St. Vincent and Holy Trinity Detroit, Holy Cross Marine City, St. Edward Cheboygan, St. Augustine Kalamazoo and St. John Jackson, she returned to Monroe as directress of novices. In that position, she taught the novices the meaning of religious life and the spirit of the IHM community. She was expected to instill in them not only a belief in the importance of keeping the rule but also of acting with good manners and behavior befitting women of the time. So, she offered appropriate advice; for example, "Do not make faces; [When at the table] avoid having crumbs around your plate"; and, "Two things a woman should not talk about are her health and how occupied her time is."

Even so, in her novitiate, the pervasive milieu was one of caring, kindness and human warmth. Her novices remembered things such as evening walks in the old convent park, her initiation of monthly Infant Circle gatherings and their attendant sociability and how her interest in them continued after they left the novitiate and went on mission. She was said to be the first one to greet them when they entered the congregation, wish them well as they left for the missions each year and be at the front door to greet them when they returned to Monroe for the summer.

The novices, with her encouragement, published Echoes, a newsletter sent to sisters on the missions that gave news about things like the sick and what was going on—a picnic, croquet games, etc. The November 1928 issue describes a Halloween party where postulants in costumes told novices that a man had been murdered and they needed to go to verify the crime. Novices were blindfolded and taken one at a time to the "morgue." There they were confronted with "skinned grapes for eyes, spaghetti for veins, soaked marshmallows for brains, a glove stuffed with ice and porridge for a hand, and a basin of thickened water for his blood." These experiences of camaraderie developed a sense of belonging and group identity.

Leocadia enjoyed a good time with the novices and this innate good nature stayed with her over a lifetime. Toward the end of her life, after she had retired, when a young novice who was pushing her wheelchair suggested a fast ride "... she readily consented and enjoyed the experience as much as her youthful companion."

It was Leocadia who taught a majority of the sisters the spirit of the congregation and the meaning of religious life in those days. She was described as the "spiritual architect of the community."
One Chair for Sitting or Kneeling

The “nine dollar chairs” were a standard novitiate furnishing for decades. They were distinctive because they could be converted from chairs to prie dieus. Photos of the old Motherhouse show them being used during Mother Leocadia’s time; they were still being used in the present Motherhouse until 1962.

When the novices arrived in their community room for meditation at 5:30 a.m., the chairs, arranged in rows, were where they knelt for the “first point.” When the second point for reflection was read, they rose from their kneeling position, rotated the chairs, put the seats down and sat.

During the day, the chairs, with seats down, were either placed around the familiar long tables or in rows for conferences. These tables and chairs were replaced in the 1960s with round tables and simple wooden chairs.

One of the chairs may still be found in the Archives’ heritage display space.

Infamous Signs in the Novitiate

During the 1960s, nearly 100 novices lived in dormitories on the second floor of the large Motherhouse. On occasion, when there was a plumbing problem, it needed to be resolved quickly. Often the sisters could fix it themselves; and, because problem-solving is part of the IHMs’ DNA, they usually arrived at solutions quickly and independently. But, this story tells of a time when they needed assistance.

The novice directress, Mother Benedicta (Margaret) Brennan, arranged for the maintenance men at the Motherhouse complex to come and make the repairs. In those days, IHMs were still wearing the traditional habits and were not seen by “seculars” if they were not formally dressed.

Because it was late evening, the novices were in and around their dormitory rooms in two adjoining corridors on the second floor of the Motherhouse. Mother B did not want them parading around the corridors in their nightgowns and black half-slips when the men arrived; and novices were not always known for their good judgment. So, Mother B instructed her assistant, Sister Mary Immaculate (Mary) McDevitt, to put up a sign in the dormitory area informing the novices of the repair work.

Mary Immaculate carefully prepared a large banner with big, colorful lettering. She didn’t want to take the chance that anyone would miss it. She taped it in a prominent spot on a wall where the corridors came together for all to see. It read, “Sisters, Stay in Your Beds! The Men Are Coming!”

Seeing the sign, Mother B found Mary Immaculate and said “I took that sign down. Have you lost your mind?”

A pair of antique “nine dollar chairs” with contemporary upholstered seats were recently spotted on the Internet selling for $315.

Mary (Mary Immaculate) McDevitt, IHM
1960s

Margaret (Benedicta) Brennan, IHM
1960s

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