

THE CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE

by

Mrs. Jeff Knight (Sylvia)

"I'm very happy to talk about the Convent. I think it's a subject that anyone who has attended the Convent, or anyone who just happens to be passing by, is certainly very interested as it certainly is a beautiful subject and an intricate part of our Island City.

"My family enrolled me when I was about 3½ years old in kindergarten. Normally, they didn't take boys or girls that young but my grandfather had been a very good friend to Sister Lois Gabriel and he asked if an exception could be made (which was made); consequently, I spent my life from age 3½ to 18 on the convent grounds. I was not a boarder but did spend Saturdays there at times.

"In Kindergarten, I was taught by Sister Mary Lamana whom I'm sure many in Key West will remember. I'm not sure where she is now but she must be up in years; she taught many, many boys and girls, who have done well in their communities and believe much of this is due to the foundation she instilled in these children.

"I started at Mary Immaculate in 1931; the only part of the coeducational program was the Kindergarten. When the boys would enter grade school they would go to St. Joseph's. It was different in that the uniforms were so different. Even as tiny little things, we wore pleated blue serge skirts, white middie blouses with long sleeves, ties, and white stockings. We continued to wear stockings until grade 5 and then they relaxed this a little bit to bobby socks; they also relaxed the serge to something like a sharkskin because, as you know, the weather is not very conducive to serge.

"When the girls went into high school in grade 9, ~~they~~^{they} again went into stockings; the uniform had to be strictly adhered to--there could be no deviation. Everyone wore exactly the same thing, made in exactly the same manner. There was a seamstress to do this and she had quite a business just making uniforms. The middie blouse was quite intricate. It had a very wide band with ^{pearl} buttons on either side; it took quite a bit of doing.

Of course, the first thing we did the first day of school was to kneel down to see if the skirt was long enough as it had to touch the floor. That's been changed quite a bit also.

"The Convent girls were very distinctive and were well known around town as such. So many people stated they could always tell a "convent girl" by her behavior. This was something that was instilled in us--we were taught that when we were away from the convent, we should always act accordingly so that the convent staff as well as the parents could be proud of us.

"I feel that the education that my family afforded me at that school could not have been replaced anywhere else. It was more like a finishing school; it was so cute the way they served us lunches. We used to have a little recess at 10:30 in the morning; that's when the nuns would sell cookies and small bottles of milk after which there would be a period of play. Then, there would be a big recess where the nuns would sell soup, sandwiches, and milk; you could eat this in the yard, or you could eat in the dining room for a small monthly fee. My brother and I ate in the dining room and here again,

discipline was very strictly adhered to. Table manners were watched very closely--so you got it in the classroom as well as lunchtime.

"The Convent was not only like a finishing school but rated very high scholastically."

Mrs. Mary Malone injected a comment here regarding two sisters of Mrs. Larranaga (interviewed on this program) who had entered the Order after attending the Convent of Mary Immaculate, were sent to ~~Florida~~ ^{Fordham} University and entered as Sophomores because of their excellent educational background.

"Mary Immaculate had an excellent music school. I began at age 5 taking piano lessons. Due to an accident, the doctor recommended that I do this as he thought it would be good therapy for my fingers. My first music teacher, Sister Estelle Marie, would have to put me on the piano stool. Twice a year, they would have a recital for parents and friends; the girls learned stage presence--they knew exactly what was expected of them in the way of their performance. Here again, they were given another step in the direction of being relaxed with the public and giving them poise.

^{wounded sailors from the USS Maine}
"There was a little bridge built to go over to St. Cecilia's Hall which was the music room; in case of inclement weather, it was a covered area. This Hall was built during the time that thewere being taken care of by the Sisters, and believe it was a convalescent home for a time; but St. Theresa's Hall and St. Cecilia's Hall were built about the same time. But, St. Cecilia's Hall was the music room and divided into little practice rooms. I remember now of looking out of my practice room and seeing cows near the window; they roamed around the yard. The nuns milked them, but, of course, those days are now gone. The nuns were very excellent cooks; I loved their bean soup and today it's one of my favorite soups. We didn't have a great variety, but what they had was so very good.

"My grandfather became acquainted with Sr. Louis shortly after she came here. He was in the construction business and she sort of depended upon him for anything that would go wrong at the convent. Bless her heart, it seemed that any board that would become termite eaten, she'd find a way to replace that board; she would call Jimmy Wells, or my father, Charles Baker, who would go out and repair the pumps, regardless of the hour. Sister Louis was a very wonderful person and an ~~intricate~~ ^{integral} part of the community, and it was because of everyone's love of her that the Grotto was built.

"The Grotto is on the grounds of the Convent and this was built to our Lady of Lourdes; this was Sister Louis's dream and prayed that this could be done after she had experienced the 1910 hurricane. She had heard from old timers about previous storms and the destruction that had come about in those times, and she felt that if a Grotto could be built, the Island would be protected from future storms. So, in commemoration of her 25th Anniversary of taking her vows, different religious-minded people around Key West paid for the construction of this Grotto which she designed. The rocks were gathered from various grounds so it's all a very ~~intricate~~ ^{integral} part of the convent. Since that time, we haven't been hit by a bad hurricane or other type of damaging storm. There's hardly a time when you pass the Grotto today that you don't see someone praying there. It's beautiful to look at and sincerely hope that it will never be destroyed.

People take flowers there almost daily and say their rosary. Those people have great faith.

"Sister Louis came here, I believe, in 1896. She was here at the time of the yellow fever epidemic; she taught art, music, and other classes; later on, she was the administrator of the Convent. It was Sister Louis that you would go to with your little tuition book, pay your monthly tuition, and mark it in her book and your book. I've had my tuition book all these years but it seems just recently it has gotten away from me, I'm sorry to say. That was really one of the things I wanted to hold on to.

"Another nun who was widely known in the community was ^{Sister} Sr. Mary Elizabeth. She was an excellent music teacher. I think she taught Miss Jennie Vecker her music, as well as many others in town. Sr. Estelle Marie who is here now; she and Sr. Julian were both music teachers; another was Sr. Catherine—everyone on the Island knew her. She spent 49 years in Key West; Sr. Louis was here 51 years.

"In the early days, Sr. Caroline had the museum here but it was taken over by a younger nun and can't remember who she was. The museum was destroyed and believe some of the lumber is at the Martello Towers, placed there by the historical society. As a child, I didn't pay too much attention to the museum, I'm sorry to say. Apparently, it was quite a place. *

Mrs. Malone injected some of her memories of the museum by saying it was, indeed, a curiosity shop. It was one of her daughter's favorite visiting places when they came to Key West. There was a chapel adjacent to the parlor—a lovely serene room.

"I'm sure there will never be another edifice like that. It was written up as one of Florida's most beautiful buildings. We did send a group from the restoration committee to the Sister Superior to see if anything could be done in the direction of saving it. The late Sen. John Spottswood was cooperating with us along with many other interested people but the nuns just thought the cost of restoration was too high. It might have been that they maybe could have left the building and made a more modern facility out of it but to maintain accreditation, a more modern facility was required at that time.

"I remember the steps going up to the Chapel were so beautiful and as far back as I can remember, each class looked forward to using these steps at graduation. I was graduated in 1944, and our class was the last one to use these steps. After that, I believe they went to the Church for the next graduation and used it until the auditorium was built, in the 50's. Believe this was built by the Toppinos—great benefactors of Key West.

"The Old Chapel was probably the most peaceful place that I've ever been in my entire lifetime. As a growing girl, when I felt troubled about anything, I'd always go to the Chapel. And, it wasn't extraordinary to see any number of girls during their recess period go there to say a prayer; or if they were apprehensive about an upcoming examination, they would be found there.

"I am a convert, joining the Church about 7 years after graduating from high school. It seemed there were as many Protestant girls attending the Convent as there were Catholic girls; there were also many Jewish girls there. I must say that religion was never imposed upon you while attending the Convent. While the Catholic girls were having their Catechism class, the Protestant girls would go to St. Cecilia's Hall to practice their music. My conversion to Catholicism
The collection has been stored and it is planned to show it in the renovated San Carlos Institute.

had, I'm sure, no bearing on the fact that I spent a good part of my life in the Convent. I took my instructions before I was married and my wedding took place at St. Mary's.

"St. Mary's is such a beautiful church. Many people in Key West who should be going to St. Bede's still go to St. Mary's and suppose it is because they were used to it from attending the Convent.

"The nuns had a great influence on the community. When they came to Key West in the early 1800's, they were very warmly received. There were only five that came at that time. They had a very stormy voyage from New York to Key West. They were let off here and their ship went down after it left here with all its cargo and passengers lost in the Gulf of Mexico.

"The people of Key West have always loved the nuns. No matter what they would need or want, someone would get it for them. Again, my grandfather was Protestant but he always had a terrific rapport with the nuns. The nuns filled many roles; they were not only teachers, they did kitchen and cleaning work, they nursed the sick, they could do just about anything. During the yellow-fever epidemic, they asked to be assigned to the pest house on the beach. At that time, they completely closed the school and all turned to nursing those stricken with the fever. They had no fear of their own, and as I recall none of them died from the fever.

"After the yellow fever epidemic, we had a small-pox epidemic so the school was closed again. The third time it was closed was when they took care of the victims after the sinking of the Maine. These beautiful ladies were the mainstay of the Island in times of trouble.

"In some recorded history of the nuns in Key West, it is told how they cleared the land where the buildings sit today. It seemed they never rested as at the end of the day of hard work, they would spend their evenings cutting trees.

"The nuns certainly had a definite effect on my life. I cannot thank my parents enough for giving me the rare opportunities I had in Convent life at the Convent of Mary Immaculate. "

This interview was conducted by Mrs. Malone
