

South Hill Tavern 1989

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There is a time for everything. Little by little pieces fall into place. Forces gather from all sides to move them along. Some forces are recognizable and help with choices that must be made. Others run deep but definitely influence all that is to come. Then at last some fragile human thing tips the balance and a project is launched.

Just so it was with Mother Teresa Dease's foundation in Joliet, Illinois in 1880. The force of national expansion was opening up Illinois. An ever-growing force of Irish immigrants was laying railroads, working mines, and digging the Canal that linked the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River. The Church was spreading westward, too. French missionaries from the Diocese of Vincennes did their best to care for the hard-working immigrants working in Illinois.

Joliet, incorporated in 1837, had enough Irish Catholics by 1838 to warrant the building of St. Patrick's Church. By 1868 the Irish population had risen sufficiently to establish a second parish, St. Mary's. In 1880 Father Walter Power, pastor of St. Patrick's was searching for Sisters to come to Joliet to educate the children.

Mother Teresa Dease had been asked by others to come to the United States but she had deferred. Now, just 4 months after receiving the letter from Father Power, she was on her way to Joliet. Some fragile human thing had tipped the balance.

The Loretto foundation brought quality education to the people of Joliet. The Academy built by the Sisters was chartered under a general law of the State of Illinois in 1882. They offered a classical

curriculum which included music, art and drama. Parents and Pastors were pleased and they encouraged the students toward excellence. Father Maurice Burke, pastor of St. Mary's parish, provided gold pins with their names engraved for honor students. In 1892 the Academy was accredited with De Kalb Normal School and graduates from the Academy could and did take the examination for teaching certificates. In 1903 the Academy received accreditation with the University of Illinois at Urbana.

In Joliet the Ladies of Loretto became part of the Parish Schools Phenomenon of the Church in the United States. To ensure a Catholic education for their children, parishioners built parish schools and paid tuition for their children to attend. Nor were these good parents exempted from paying taxes that supported the public schools of their State. The Sisters provided staff for 4 parish elementary schools in Joliet. Ties with the parishes they served endeared the Sisters with the people. Later parish schools, 12 in all, were staffed in Chicago and suburbs, Phoenix, Arizona, and Sacramento, California. Enrollments were large. In the 40's, 50's and 60's elementary enrollment was between 800 and 1000 students.

After Mother Teresa Dease's death in 1889, the American Region continued to expand. Her successors built 3 other Academies, each with room for about 20 boarders. Two were in Chicago: Loretto-Englewood (1892-1962) and Loretto-Woodlawn (1905-1972); another in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan: ^{Loretto}~~St. Mary's~~ Academy (1896-1971). In 1955 Loretto High School was built in Sacramento, California with present enrollment 400.

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The influence of Vatican II on American Sisters can hardly be measured. Today Loretto Nuns are working closely with their bishops and priests. Some are pastoral assistants, directors of religious education in parishes, school administrators, diocesan directors, psychological counselors. Others are engaged in teaching, in conducting shelters for battered women, in missionary efforts among native Americans, in work in the inner city. All are striving not just to answer the needs of the poor, but to bring about national systemic change that hopefully will put an end to those needs.

written by Mary Clare

IBVM Archives

Research Sources

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