

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

Minnesota's First Arts School—
St. Agatha's Conservatory
And the Pursuit of Excellence

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ON THE COVER: *The log chapel built by Father Galtier on Bench (now Second) Street in downtown St. Paul became the chapel of the Sisters of St. Joseph after their arrival in the frontier village in 1851. By 1884 they had established St. Agatha's Convent and Conservatory at Cedar and Exchange Streets. The large photograph shows the conservatory, which was Minnesota's first arts school, sometime before its closing in 1962. The conservatory's Music Building stood on the right. The conservatory and convent (on the left) still stands. Known as Central Manor for 25 years, it is now the Exchange Building.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: *The large photograph on the front cover, the photographs on pages 5, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 17, and the top three pictures on the back cover are from the CSJ Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph Administration Center, 1884 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul. The photograph of the Palmer House on page 6 is from the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. All other photographs, including the sketch on the front cover and the picture of the boat race on the back cover, are from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

St. Agatha's Conservatory And the Pursuit of Excellence

Long before women's rights and issues, before networking and coalitions, a small group of women were quietly establishing, administering, staffing, supporting and maintaining a college, a hospital, orphanages, grade schools, homes for unwed mothers, and a cultural center in the heart of St. Paul. It was the first school for the arts in Minnesota, but its history and that of the sturdy women associated with it is either little known or not widely remembered. The following articles are adapted from two monographs, *The Ireland Connection* and *The History of St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art*, written by Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson of the Sisters of St. Joseph, with the support of grants from the Grotto Foundation of St. Paul. They trace the history of St. Agatha's Conservatory whose building, known later as Central Manor and now as the Exchange Building, still stands at Cedar and Exchange streets in downtown St. Paul. This also is the story of the conservatory's founder, Sister Celestine Howard, and her ties to the family of Archbishop John Ireland. She has drawn her material from the CSJ archives at the Sisters of St. Joseph Administration Center, 1884 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul; the Oral History Office, St. Joseph's Provincial House, 1880 Randolph; from some 50 other oral histories she herself has conducted, and from several published histories. A retired teacher and professional musician, Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson is a graduate of the College of St. Catherine, earned a master's degree in music from Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., and pursued further studies at Notre Dame and Loyola universities. She has traveled more than 13,000 miles via river towboats to trace the travels of the pioneer Sisters in America. She is the author, as well, of *Care with Prayer*, a history of St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis, published in 1987; *Guide to Places of CSJ Interest in Minnesota and North Dakota*, and *Mother St. John Fournier: Wellspring of Inspiration*.

By Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, CSJ

St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art, established in 1884 and closed in 1962, was a unique institution in the history of women and of women's religious organizations in the United States. Its story begins with four Sisters of St. Joseph who stepped off the steamboat, "St. Paul," at the frontier village's Lower Landing on the night of November 2, 1851. They had come to St. Paul from St. Louis at the request of Bishop Joseph Cretin. Two weeks after their arrival they opened St. Joseph's Academy, which was to become the first high school and girls' school in Minnesota. Their schoolhouse was the little log Chapel of St. Paul, erected on Bench Street by Father Lucien Galtier in 1841 but no longer used. In 1853 a cholera epidemic broke out in St. Paul and the Sisters established St. Joseph's Hospital to care for the sick. It remains the oldest hospital in Minnesota.

Within the next few years, they opened three more schools: a girls' free school (later the Cathedral School at Sixth Street and Wabasha), a German school (later Assumption School, still standing on Ninth Street next to Assumption Church), and St. Mary's at Ninth and Locust in

Lowertown. More followed. New schools meant increased calls for more teaching Sisters and a growing need for convents to house them. Out of these needs, typical of an expanding frontier community, came St. Agatha's Conservatory, an idea conceived by a remarkable woman educator with the support of a congregation linked by family as well as religious ties. Originally known as St. Agatha's Convent, it housed the Sisters of St. Joseph who taught in the parochial schools in downtown St. Paul but the Conservatory's classes in music, art, expression (as it was then called) and dancing generated the income needed to support the convent and provide for the needs of the nuns. Finally, it became an asset for the entire order of the Sisters of St. Joseph, providing funds for their growing number of institutions.

The Ireland Connection

Not much is known about the early lives of Richard and Judith Ireland. Richard was born and baptized in Danesforth parish, Burnchurch, County Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1805. According to Monsignor James Moynihan, who wrote a biography of Archbishop Ireland, Richard was

an artisan of better education than his social standing would indicate. He was a man of unusually fine physique, impulsive, tenacious in his convictions and the possessor of an indomitable will. Monsignor James Reardon described Richard, a carpenter, as well educated, especially in the Irish language and in mathematics. He was a lanky, raw-boned man, stern and strict with his family and held in awe by his nephews and nieces.

Richard married Judith Naughton and the couple reared six children, all born in Ireland: Mary Anne (Richard's daughter by a former marriage), John, Eliza, Ellen, Richard and Julia. Just when the potato famine was at its height, Richard's sister, Anastasia, and her husband, James Howard, died, leaving four young children, Thomas, Joanna, Ellen and James. Richard, his wife and his sister, Nancy, assumed the care of these children.

In 1849, tired of the struggle to make a decent livelihood in the midst of poverty, lack of work and famine, Richard and Nancy set out for America to find a location to settle the two families. Within a year he was able to send for his wife, their children and the Howard children. After five terrifying weeks on the ocean, on a ship crowded with sick and discouraged families fleeing from the distress of the famine, they arrived in Boston harbor where they were greeted by Richard and Nancy.

Richard Ireland was aware of the danger of so many Irish immigrants overcrowding the eastern cities so he decided to move westward. The trip was made by covered wagon to Chicago where a chance meeting with John O'Gorman, a former Kilkenny schoolmate, made Richard decide to take his family on to Minnesota, then being advertised as a health resort as well as an agricultural paradise. To make this trip, the family of three adults and 10 children, accompanied by the O'Gorman family, traveled in prairie schooners to Galena, Illinois. There they boarded the steamboat, "Nominee," and traveled up the Mississippi, arriving in St. Paul on May 20, 1852. A five-room house for the Irelands was built that summer on West Fifth Street between Washington and Franklin streets. Nancy Ireland, who assumed the responsibility of rearing the Howard children, occupied another house nearby. According to Sister Helen Angela Hurley, who wrote *On Good Ground*, a centennial history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Minnesota, Richard

worked as a carpenter on all the Catholic building projects in St. Paul. He advertised in the city directories and the newspapers and he also took an interest in politics, even running for alderman in his ward, a race which he lost.

In the fall of 1852, Ellen Ireland and her cousin, Ellen Howard, were enrolled in the year-old St. Joseph's Academy. Richard and Judith Ireland must have followed with great interest and pride the careers of their family members: John, who became archbishop of St. Paul; Ellen and Eliza Ireland, Ellen Howard, and Celestine Wheeler, the daughter of Joanna Howard, all of whom became Sisters of St. Joseph.

In many ways, Ellen Howard and Ellen Ireland had similar backgrounds of experience before their entrance into the convent. Both entered at the age of 16. Both had been born in Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1842; both were 10 years old when they made the long journey by ship, covered wagon, prairie schooner and steamboat from Ireland to St. Paul; both attended St. Joseph's Academy. Unlike some of the pioneers pouring into St. Paul, Richard and Judith Ireland believed in a good education for the women of their family and made use of the opportunities which the Sisters of St. Joseph provided.

By 1852 St. Joseph's Academy was occupying a two-story brick building with large airy classrooms on Third Street instead of the old log cabin church which had become the Sister's chapel. The Sisters who taught there brought to pioneer St. Paul the long tradition of education and scholarship in music and the arts that dated back to the founding of the order in 1650 in LePuy, France. Their bi-lingual curriculum consisted of history, Latin, vocal and instrumental music, needle and art work, mathematics, rhetoric, sciences, English and French.

Upon their graduation in 1858, the two Ellens decided to become Sisters of St. Joseph and despite the protests of their families, they entered the convent that summer. Ellen Ireland became Sister Seraphine; Ellen Howard became Sister Celestine.

For the next 17 years Ellen Howard as Sister Celestine taught and served as principal of parochial schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul, traveling to and from her assignments on foot or by horse and buggy. She was sent first to teach

at St. Anthony in a convent then named St. Mary's. She was next appointed principal at a newly-opened parochial school called the Immaculate Conception in Minneapolis, serving there from 1866 to 1871 and again from 1873 to 1875. From 1875 to 1879 she was directress (as it was then called) of St. Joseph's Academy, which is still standing at 355 Marshall Avenue on St. Anthony Hill in St. Paul. Then she embarked on a new career as supervisor of the parochial schools in the Sisters of St. Joseph's St. Paul province. She presided over the annual summer institutes for teachers and pressed into service the best community talent in the two cities to supplement the efforts of especially trained teachers and lecturers from outside.

In 1881 Sister Seraphine—Ellen Ireland—became Mother Seraphine, the province superior. From St. Joseph's Academy, which was the provincial house, she, with the advice of her council, made all the decisions about loans, mortgages and other matters pertaining to the work of the Sisters, and a new era in the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph began. The congregation was facing problems stemming from its very success. It was growing in numbers, from 18 Sisters in 1858 to 162 in 1882. New parish schools—St. Louis, St. Michael's, St. Patrick's—had opened in downtown St. Paul; new requests for teachers were coming in to Mother Seraphine. Required to live in convents, the Sisters were crowded into cramped quarters at St. Joseph's Academy. Required to travel in pairs and to carry their noon meals with them, those who taught in downtown St. Paul made the long walk twice daily up and down St. Anthony Hill, bearing their food baskets, books and supplies in all kinds of weather.

The two Ellens were well aware of the fact that the parishes were unable to provide convents for the teachers, adequate salaries to clothe and educate those who had entered the convent and money to expand the institutions that already had been founded. Moreover, money also was scarce for the 23 institutions—grade schools, orphanages, and hospitals—the Sisters were operating throughout Minnesota by 1884. A convent was needed for downtown St. Paul, but so was a way of supporting the convent and the Sisters themselves. It was then that Sister Celestine conceived the idea of founding a teaching center that would provide housing and money for the work in the fields of



The three Sisters with the Ireland connection: Sister St. John (Eliza Ireland), left; Sister Celestine (Ellen Howard), center; and Sister Seraphine (Ellen Ireland).

education, health care and social service that the Sisters had been asked to do.

Thus, St. Agatha's was born. Although it was deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the religious order, the conservatory also was part of a national trend late in the 19th century to establish institutions that would bring the arts to American cities. St. Agatha's was not alone in the emerging cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Three other institutions were founded around the same time: The Northwestern Conservatory of Minneapolis in 1885; the Minneapolis School of Art in 1886; and the St. Paul School of Fine Arts in 1894.

Ellen Howard—Sister Celestine—with her long experience as a teacher and principal of parochial schools was appointed St. Agatha's supervisor by her cousin, Mother Seraphine. Sister Clara Graham, in her biography of Mother Seraphine, *Works to the King*, summarized the two-fold role of housing and finances, in addition to the teaching of the arts, that St. Agatha's was to play in the history of St. Paul and of these remarkable women who were associated together in this work:

"Mother Celestine was a woman of vision and of genuinely Christian principles. She was, too, a wise executive and an optimist. In those distant days of plain living and high thinking, [she] realized that Sister teachers could not be



Judge Palmer's house at Cedar and Exchange, after it became St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art in 1886.

housed, clothed and fed on the meager salaries the parishes were able to pay. An idea, in vogue then and not entirely laid to rest as yet, was that a Sister's vow of poverty takes her out of the role of those who have bodily needs. Needless to say, this idea could not be incorporated into community customs. Sufficient funds had to be secured to meet current expenses. Mother Celestine's plan was to make St. Agatha's self-supporting. Due to her inspiration and the self-sacrificing spirit of the Sisters who were teaching in parish schools and to those who were spending weary hours in small music rooms, St. Agatha's became not only free from debt but a financial asset, as well, to the Province."

In the fall of 1884, Mother Celestine rented an empty house at 10th and Main streets near St. Joseph's Hospital in downtown St. Paul as a temporary home for Sisters teaching in the nearby schools (Cathedral, Assumption, St. Mary's and St. Louis). It housed 20 Sisters and accommodated classes in music and needlework. Known as the Lick House, the residence had an interesting history. It had belonged to Dr. William Lick, an eye doctor who was charged with the murder of his wife. He spent a fortune to deny and clear himself of the charges. It was later discovered that a dentist friend had killed the doctor's wife.

Within a short time the Lick House proved to be inadequate to house the Sisters and the rapidly growing music and art departments, so a search was made for another site. In 1886 the board of trustees of St. Joseph's Academy



Assumption School, also known as "the German School," with Assumption Catholic Church behind it, near Ninth and St. Peter streets, about 1865. The school is still there.

authorized the purchase of Judge Edward Palmer's residence, across the street from the state capitol on Cedar and Exchange streets, for \$50,000. Judge Palmer had been the second judicial district judge for Minnesota from 1858 to 1864. He later became a railroad lawyer.

His home at the time of the purchase was described as a "well built, modernly equipped frame structure surrounded by well-kept lawns centrally located..." The Sisters financed their purchase by mortgaging other property they owned, specifically St. Joseph's Academy and St. Joseph's Hospital. They were no strangers to the huge debt they had assumed. They were veterans regarding the work they had begun back in 1851 but the pressure to find the money to pay the debts and to provide for the daily expenses of community living and education was constant and it led to a spartan way of life for those women who lived and worked at St. Agatha's Conservatory throughout its 78-year history.

Mother Celestine Howard And Her "Provincial Mint"

What was she like, this remarkable woman who established St. Agatha's Conservatory and presided over it for 31 years? It might be well first to examine this little-known aspect of women's history, the role of the superiors who were appointed to take charge of St. Agatha's during the years preceding the Vatican II Council and the drastic changes in convent life.

The superior was chosen by the provincial superior and her council in St. Paul and affirmed by the superior general in St. Louis. She had to be a woman of integrity and deep faith, faithful to her God to whom she had vowed her life and to the rule and customs of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. She was responsible for the spiritual and temporal needs of each Sister under her supervision. The number of Sisters residing at St. Agatha's ranged from 18 in the beginning years to more than 100 at its peak. They were of all ages, backgrounds, occupations, professions and ethnic origins. Some were principals, supervisors, teachers of grades, art, music, and expression. Others were portresses, housekeepers, bookkeepers, cooks and nurses. Some were newly professed and in their teens while others were elderly and retired from the heavy, active work. Some were well and strong, while others were chronically ill.

The superior had to be a good manager as well as a good model. One of the biggest problems facing her was that of finances. Since there was no common central fund of money to draw from, each convent was expected to support itself. In the beginning, the Sisters received no stipulated salaries and the teaching Sisters' income was meager. In 1901, some of them received only \$10 a month. Some schools solved the problem by putting on huge plays and programs, with the proceeds going to the Sisters at the end of the year. One pastor, when asked to raise the salary of \$15 a month per Sister, turned the matter over to the Women's Altar and Rosary Society. Another parish paid nothing until Archbishop John Gregory Murray instructed the pastor to do so. By about 1912 each Sister was receiving \$25 a month and by 1946 \$45 a month.

St. Agatha's superior was in a special situation because the institution was founded to generate money to purchase property,

expand institutions, build additions and provide for the physical, educational, and spiritual needs of the Sisters. She was not only an administrator and a fund-raiser but she also was a public relations person who had to deal with the pastors and parishes through the principals who lived at St. Agatha's. She was responsible to the provincial superior for the observance of the rules of the order and for the happiness of the Sisters under her care. She received special help from her assistant who was the housekeeper and the Sisters who were in charge of the kitchen, the bookkeeping and the conservatory itself.

Sister Celestine, the founder of this unique institution, was described by Sister Clara Graham as a woman "reared in an atmosphere rich in difficulties, and to her, from childhood on, every difficulty presented an opportunity which she was eager to grasp. She practiced a severe self-discipline, and her discipline of those she governed was not easy. She was recognized by her Sisters as a woman of sincere piety, of thought and of action. She was generous and sympathetic....Her experience as teacher and as supervisor of the schools and of the educational programs of the young sisters gave her a wide acquaintance with [their] qualifications....for their various works."

In *On Good Ground*, Sister Helen Angela Hurley described Mother Celestine as more stately and proper, more deliberate and careful of appearances than her cousin, Mother Seraphine. Could this be due to the influence of her spinster aunt, Nancy Ireland, who reared her? Sister Helen Angela also wrote that:

"Mother Celestine remained [Mother Seraphine's] dependable friend, with greater shrewdness, more caution, and less frankness than her chief. She it was who accepted the burden of fitting country girls to teach in schools, who prodded Mother Seraphine to rigid disciplinary measures, and who acted as a check on her cousin's too visionary plans. Mother Celestine would try to hold back her plunging cousin, but when decisions to expand were made despite her warnings, she strained every nerve to get the money together. In this she utilized St. Agatha's Conservatory, where the Sisters did a brisk business copying classical and popular paintings and teaching the arts then in fashion."

So successful was Mother Celestine that St. Agatha's was described as the "provincial mint"



The Cathedral School, about 1885. This was the St. Paul Cathedral built in 1851 by Bishop Cretin on the block known as "the Catholic block," between Sixth and Seventh, St. Peter and Wabasha streets. The church was on the second floor and the school on the first.

from which flowed generous donations for new foundations and new buildings, especially at the College of St. Catherine. Ledgers kept by the Sisters from 1904 to 1914 list the following amounts of money sent by St. Agatha's to St. Joseph's Academy, the provincial house: \$4,500 in 1904; then \$6,350, \$23,774, \$11,000, and \$26,792. Sometimes during the 1920s income neared \$1,000 a day.

At the same time, St. Agatha's had its own bills to pay for maintenance of the property and housing, food, clothing and medical expenses for the Sisters. In those early ledgers, which record the expenditures in detail, one word stands out above all others: shoes. The Sisters wore out countless pairs of shoes as they walked to and from the schools in which they taught. It was a disciplined, austere life, a life of obedience with orders and assignments issued without explanation and permission required for even the seemingly ordinary activities.

Mother Celestine was a stickler for the niceties of speech, manners and decorum. One Sister recalled that every time she answered the telephone, she had to say in a very proper voice, "St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art." Others remembered how Sisters would suddenly stand up during a meal while silence was being observed, bow to Mother Celestine and say, "Pardon me, Mother," because they had made some unnecessary noise. It was a custom for the Sisters to gather in the room used for recreation and as Mother Celestine entered the room, those who were standing would bow.

Until the changes ushered in by Vatican II, convent life, for most people, has been a

mystery but for those at St. Agatha's it was not greatly different from that of other women who for hundreds of years had chosen to live and work in the convents of the world. As her life neared its end and Mother Celestine was told by her doctor that her condition was critical, she turned over all her responsibilities to her assistant. She was determined to put first things first, and this she did by centering all her attention on the final and greatest event of her life, her meeting with the Lord whom she had served so faithfully for 57 years. She died on June 21, 1915, and was buried from St. Joseph's Academy where the services were conducted by her cousin, Archbishop John Ireland, assisted by her nephew, the Reverend James Howard. She was buried beside her cousin, Sister St. John Ireland, in Calvary Cemetery.

Music, Art, Drama and Dance— The Little Girls Had Long Curls

With the purchase of the Palmer residence, the history of St. Agatha's Conservatory began to unfold. After the Sisters moved into the Palmer home in 1884, they continued to teach in the parochial schools, they taught music and art in the convent and they opened a kindergarten which continued throughout the summer months. It proved to be so popular, with the elite and well-to-do families of St. Paul sending their children to it, that enrollment, overflowed and a second kindergarten room was opened. Within two years, however, more room was needed for the music and art classes and the kindergarten was discontinued. With more and more grade school teachers living at the convent, there was also a need for more housing, so a temporary frame addition was built on the rear lawn. It was nicknamed "The Cracker Box" because of its shape and structure. The basement was used for a refectory, while the first floor contained a community room, a sewing room and a hall with a double row of divisions and wardrobes. The hall had a door opening on a stairway leading to a yard furnished with swings and benches. During the summer months the Sisters played croquet there.

Soon more room was needed so "The Cracker Box" was connected to "The Cottage," formerly the barn attached to the Palmer home which had been raised one story. Here could be

found a workroom on the lower floor and a dormitory on the added floor.

By 1900 Mother Celestine had added departments in vocal music and expression and there was further need for expansion. The next year an addition known as the Music Building was built. It provided space for studios, practice rooms, an auditorium, art rooms and dormitories for the Sisters who were still staffing the parish schools, as well as the music, art, and expression departments at the conservatory. "The Cracker Box" and "The Cottage," were torn down. Classes were becoming larger and St. Agatha's now had the reputation of being the best institution of its kind in the Northwest.

The last phase of construction began in 1908 when the foundations were laid for a seven-story brick building on the corner of Exchange and Cedar streets. The architect was John Wheeler, who represented another link with the Ireland family. Wheeler was Mother Celestine's nephew, the son of her sister, Joanna Howard who had married James Wheeler, another native of Ireland. John Wheeler's sister, Celestine, also became a Sister of St. Joseph, with the name of Sister Annetta. For the first 30 years of the 20th century, John Wheeler would be intimately caught up in the phenomenal building activities of the Sisters of St. Joseph, drawing the architectural plans for 18 buildings and building additions to be used for educational, health-care and housing, and renovating other structures that were converted into schools.

Wheeler designed for St. Agatha's a building in the Beaux Arts style with a feature rarely seen in St. Paul architecture. Its six stories were crowned with a rooftop garden, a delight, during the warm weather, for the women who lived in this convent in the midst of the city. Wheeler added a distinctive entrance with two curved stairways, and he used the same style of architecture in designing the convent's three-story chapel, which still stands behind the main building on Cedar Street.

Inside were offices, two parlors with brick fireplaces and glass chandeliers, study rooms, a community room, library and infirmary on the first floor; classrooms on the second floor and dormitories on the floors above that. The Sisters themselves painted the tiles that still decorate the fireplace mantels. They moved in on February 22, 1910. The old buildings were demolished. Student enrollment had reached

500. In 1912 a two-page advertisement for St. Agatha's in the *Twin Cities Musicians Directory* listed 817 students as being registered in such subjects as piano, organ, violin, zither, guitar, mandolin, banjo, theory, history of music, counterpoint, voice culture, elocution, languages, painting, china decorating and drawing. In 1915, the year of Mother Celestine's death, the last department, the dancing department, was added. At its peak during the 1920s, more than 1,100 students were attending classes at the conservatory and some 100 Sisters were living in the convent.

For these women of all backgrounds and ages who shared a commitment to their faith and to the requirements of their order, the opportunities offered by their seemingly restricted lives were in many cases incomparable, in light of the equally restricted lives of their contemporaries in the outside world. Young women from the country, from the small towns of Minnesota, from such enclaves as Ghent and Graceville created in the course of Archbishop Ireland's colonization program, from such Canadian provinces as Prince Edward's Isle and Nova Scotia where Catholic families of Irish and French origin had settled, found a life of education, travel, and development of their own talents that otherwise might have been denied them.

The philosophy of the Carondelet Sisters stressed excellence and the importance of culture and the arts in education. It was a philosophy that was beginning to take hold throughout America as the founders of great fortunes began to endow symphony orchestras and art institutions. Throughout more than three-quarters of a century, St. Agatha's would educate almost four generations of students who would patronize and support those institutions and establish a demand for art education that the private, parochial and public schools eventually would incorporate into their own curricula. In the process, the Sisters themselves would strive for excellence in their own fields. Some of them would study at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, earn degrees from major American universities, and study under the country's leading artists and hear them perform in special recitals. In 1902, for example, recitals were given for the Sisters at St. Agatha's by two internationally famous music artists: Cecile Chaminade, the French woman composer and pianist, and

contralto Madame Schumann-Heinck. Other Sisters would spend years studying and painting in the great galleries of Europe.

Still, many people in later years have criticized those Sisters who were artists, musicians and writers for not producing more creative work. One has to understand the conditions and the era in which these women practiced their artistic talents. The emphasis was on work. The Community of St. Joseph was expanding rapidly. Much building was going on and no rich benefactors were coming forth to provide the money. The monthly stipends that the teaching Sisters received did not take care of the most basic needs. Therefore, no Sister had the time and leisure to produce original work. A young woman who possessed these talents and who desired to enter the convent had to realize that her talents were at the disposal of the community. And many women made that commitment. In later years, the Sisters who were able to do creative work were those who had the opportunity to do graduate study or who were given Sabbaticals. The Sisters received no pensions and they were promised no retirement benefits. They came to work in whatever capacity they were called to fill.

Although both the music and art departments were established at St. Agatha's in 1884, the music department was not a new endeavor. It dated back to the founding of St. Joseph's Academy in 1851. The first ledger the Sisters kept listed the amounts of money they paid for pianos, benches, tuning and music. By 1881 the department had grown so large that lay teachers were hired to help teach voice, piano and choral music. Summer institutes were held at which lecturers demonstrated the newest and best methods of teaching piano, violin, musical theory, harmony and the history of music.

The music department at St. Agatha's had humble beginnings in the rented Lick house but grew quickly. In the 1890s a program of supervisorship was begun. William Mentor Crosse (born in New Zealand and a graduate of conservatories in Berlin and Leipzig) was the first visiting director of the piano department. Examinations were held periodically, with an outline of work for each pupil. Mandolin and guitar clubs became popular. Fretted instruments had to be learned and studied, including the zither.

Shortly after the erection of the new building in 1908-1910, St. Agatha's printed a 22-page catalogue which, in addition to listing the departments of pianoforte, voice, violin, theory, normal training (piano, voice, violin), dramatic art, drawing and painting, also pointed out that each department had a supervisor who conducted examinations of the students. This was Crosse, a professional recitalist, who made the rounds of other music departments in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Agnes Kueppers, a graduate of St. Joseph's Academy where she had studied under Crosse, described his method of examination:

"...a student who was to play for [him] was a nervous wreck before she got in the room. We stood in line outside the door....Crosse was writing away in the far corner [of the room]. The Sister would announce that you were number five and he would write down that number. Politely, you would say, 'Good morning, Mr. Crosse.' He would answer you. Then he would say, 'Play your five finger exercises.' Then he would hear an etude. Then 'Play your sonata.' 'You may go now.' He did not make any corrections while you were playing....He was writing rapidly.

"There was to be no friendliness or partiality with students. He was very stern under these circumstances. In later years....I got to know a gentleman who was quite unlike my first experiences with him."

Sister Annetta Wheeler, who served as directress of the conservatory from 1911 to 1918, was the first Sister of St. Joseph to earn a bachelor's degree in music from the American Conservatory of Music. While there she studied piano under an internationally known pianist and teacher, Silvio Scionti, a graduate from conservatories in Italy. When she returned to St. Paul, she received permission for Scionti to become supervisor of music for the community. He would come to St. Paul twice a year for six weeks at a time, giving lessons and recitals and playing the second piano parts for the concertos the students played for their graduation recitals.

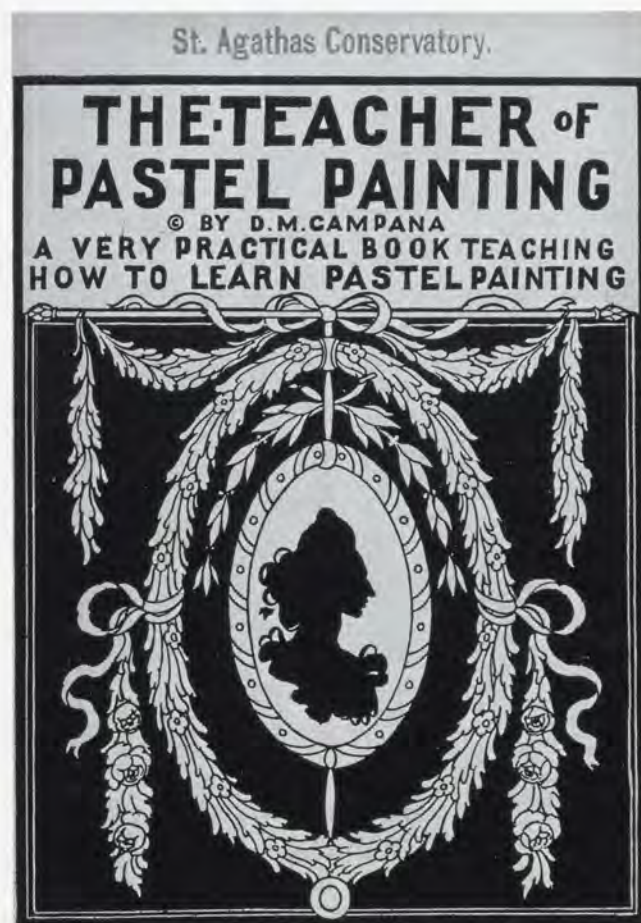
By the early 1930s the Depression was bringing many changes to St. Agatha's as enrollments plummeted. Sister Carlos Eue, who became directress in 1931, suggested that the music teachers go out to the grade schools where St. Agatha's Sisters were teaching and set up satellite music departments. The use of a

room and a piano was approved, music teachers were assigned to the schools and they went each morning to give lessons. After lunch, they returned by streetcar, said their required prayers, and spent all afternoon and evening teaching students at the conservatory. They also taught all day Saturday. On Sunday mornings they taught catechism at churches that did not have schools.

Sister St. Margaret Jordan also was sent to the American Conservatory of Music for lessons once a month from Silvio Scionti. She and her companion would take the night train to Chicago on Thursday evening, arrive Friday morning, take the lesson, have her correspondence work checked, visit some other cultural institution, return to St. Paul on the Friday night train and teach piano all day Saturday. She eventually earned a master's degree in music.

Later, other Sisters were sent away to earn master's degrees from such institutions as the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music; De Paul University in Chicago; Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y.; the University of Minnesota; Northwestern University in Evanston; and the Julliard School in New York. St. Agatha's music teachers were permitted to attend rehearsals of the artists sponsored by the Schubert Club who used the conservatory's auditorium for practice. They took advantage of the Friday morning rehearsals of the Minneapolis (later called the Minnesota) Symphony Orchestra when the visiting artists would be preparing for the evening performance and they had an opportunity not only to hear them but also to meet them. They entered their students in local and state contests sponsored by such organizations as the Schubert Club and the Minnesota Music Teachers Association and they helped judge the contests.

St. Agatha's art instruction was based on the same standards of excellence as the conservatory's music instruction. Perhaps the most talented and famous of the teachers was Frances Mackey, who became Sister Marie Teresa. Born in Stillwater where her father was a lumberman, she graduated from St. Joseph's Academy where she studied art. In 1908 she and two other Sisters were sent to Europe to study and paint for three years in studios and galleries in Rome, Naples, Venice, Bologna, Parma, Milan, Paris, Lourdes and Versailles. They were allowed to copy originals hanging in



Instruction book used by art teachers at St. Agatha's Conservatory.

the Uffizi, Pitti, Louvre and other galleries. They studied with Hans Hoffman and Professor Knirr at the Damen Akademie in Munich and Arthur Colosie at the Maitre dan le Royale Institute de Beaux Arts in Florence. As a result of their work, they soon had a collection of some 300 paintings which they shipped back to St. Agatha's Conservatory. Many were hung on the walls there. Others went to other institutions the Sisters of St. Joseph were conducting. The collection reflected a preference for religious Renaissance art and University of Minnesota professors would bring their students to see these paintings. One might say that the Sisters had art galleries in their individual institutions at a time when the Minneapolis Institute of Arts had not yet opened.

Mother Celestine, however, was faced with the huge debt of \$150,000 on the new building. Since she was adept at figuring out ways to make money and since china painting was popular, she capitalized on this project. Sister Edna Brown was taken out of school for



The reception room at the conservatory, displaying paintings copied by the Sisters who studied in Europe.

a year to devote all her time to this work. She recalled that:

"Everyone wanted hand-painted china. A lot of orders came in and people wanted complete sets of dishes as well as vases. There were three of us who worked in one room: Sister Humilita Kennedy, Sister Leon LeFebre and myself. Sister Humilita also...painted the tiles that were used for the two fireplaces in the parlors at St. Agatha's."

Each piece of china had to be approved by Mother Celestine. If it passed her inspection, it was marked with an "SAC" and sold. There was a room in the east wing where china was put on display and where people could choose the patterns they wished to have copied. One of the Sisters would go down to the basement in the evening to be the companion to the art teacher responsible for the firing in the kiln which was kept in the laundry. After World War I there was a resurgence of interest in china painting, so Sister Faith Wilwerding, who was in charge of the art department for a number of years, spent countless hours doing sets of dishes and decorating large vases. She spent her evenings at the kiln and during the winter months when it was so cold and the heat had been turned off, she had to wear her overshoes while she loaded and unloaded the pieces for firing. She also taught private lessons to women and classes for children all day on Saturday.

Mary Gillen Wirth, a student there from 1914 to 1919, described her weekly lessons:

"We sat at a long table and [Sister Humilita] would come along from one pupil to another

and with a brush would make a few touches which made such a difference. She had finished pieces which we could study and copy....The patterns that were popular were the pine cone, roses and fruit. I made a complete set of dishes and had my own kiln at home.

"The china we used came from France, Germany, Bavaria and Austria and was excellent for firing. American-made china could not stand the firing. World War I stopped the importation of china. Each piece had to be fired at least twice....You painted on plain white china. First you would sketch in pencil and draw an outline. My favorite pattern was roses. The lessons cost \$1 each and there were about 10 to 12 girls in a class."

Sister Edna Brown recalled that, "We were very hard up financially and we needed money for the new building. We didn't mind and we worked, worked, worked! Finally [the building] was completed and we enjoyed every bit of it."

"By the early 1940s, more than 100 students were registered in the art department. Orders for oil paintings, photo tinting, glass decorating and enlargements were filled by the most advanced pupils. But its days were numbered and 1957 marked the end of a department that had existed for 75 years.

There is no record of what was taught when the expression department opened in 1900 but a catalogue published before 1914 states that the department offered "courses leading to the development of mind, voice and body as instruments of expression."

One of the best known among the Sisters who chaired the department of expression was Elsie Meyers who became Sister Anna Marie Meyers. She was born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1891. She graduated from Derham Hall High School in 1918. A year later she became a student at the College of St. Catherine and she took advantage of everything the two institutions offered in music, drama and expression. After a tragic traffic accident left her a paraplegic, she defied the doctor's orders to stay in bed and learn how to knit and crochet. Instead she used her talents and years of experience to pioneer in the instruction of brain damaged children as the founder of the Christ Child School for Exceptional Children in St. Paul.

Yvonne Broenen Johnson, who studied expression at St. Agatha's in the early 1920s, described her lessons then:

"I started elocution lessons and dancing lessons...at about age 3. I remember the pink silk socks and patent leather shoes I wore and the fancy Buster Brown outfits on the little boys. They were so embarrassed learning to bow when the girls curtsied. Many little stage shows were put on by the Sisters. In one I wore a pink silk dress with long streamers, went on the stage and recited, 'Roses on my shoulders, slippers on my feet, I'm my Mother's darling, don't you think I'm sweet?' I had long curls which mother put up in rags. Also a big bow with a hair clasp. In another recital we had a Japanese dance number. We little girls wore kimonos and shuffled on the stage holding fans."

Ruth Haag Brombach recalled the production of *Heidi* where her father provided the goat, kept it in the basement of the conservatory and tended to its needs until the production was over. Helen Lynch, who became Sister Annella Lynch, also studied at St. Agatha's from 1921 to 1925 when she received her certificate to teach expression. She remembered that many women who were not interested in going to college would study at the conservatory instead. Some worked in downtown St. Paul and they would take late afternoon or evening classes. For her graduation recital she gave the entire play, *As You Like It*, from memory with appropriate gestures and voice changes.

In 1934, when Sister Beatrice Anne Tozier, a former St. Agatha's student, was assigned to the department, the enrollment increased dramatically. She had an interesting method of recruiting pupils. She would take frequent trips to the downtown public library, make a list of newborn babies, record their parents' names and addresses, then send literature to their homes when the children were old enough to take pre-school lessons in expression. At that time nearly 100 students were registered, and they ranged from tiny tots to women advanced in years.

The dancing department, established in 1915 at St. Agatha's, was an outgrowth of Sister Anna Marie's expression department. It began with plays and other programs that called for folk dances or interpretations of nursery rhymes presented by the very young children. Other types of dancing were being taught in the Twin Cities at this time: ballet, gymnastics (similar to aerobic dancing today), "fancy steps"



The China Room, where the Sisters' hand-painted china was displayed for purchase or special order. Below is a plate showing the popular pine cone pattern.



and, later on, tap. A young woman, Anna Bell LaFavor, was persuaded by Sister Anna Marie to open the department, with St. Agatha's paying for her dancing lessons in return for half of the money from each student in the department.

Anna Bell was given a large studio on the second floor of the new seven-story building. She taught private as well as class lessons all day Saturday and after school on week-days during the winter and summer, with about 300 boys and girls enrolled. The St. Paul public schools hired her to teach the Irish jig and other dances to their students.

Marie Sepion, who began studying at the conservatory when she was 7 years old, remembered that the students appeared in many programs, among them the annual Knights of Columbus Spring Frolic at the Garrick Theatre and the old Opera House, both of them in downtown St. Paul. She graduated from the College of St. Catherine; studied dancing in New York with Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shaun,



A Dance Department Christmas program, featuring the "Dew Fairies" in "Hansel and Gretel," around 1946. If any of our readers can identify these children, please call the Ramsey County Historical Society at 222-0701.

Martha Graham and Earnestine Day (all important today in the history of American dance); and tap dancing in Hollywood with Bill Robinson.

Her peak years of teaching for the conservatory, she later recalled, were the 1940s. She taught all day on Saturdays as well as week-day mornings for the pre-schoolers at St. Agatha's. After a quick lunch she would take a bus to one of the parochial schools (she taught in most of them in St. Paul) where she stayed until 3:00. Then she would return to St. Agatha's to teach the older students. Some weeks she taught more than 1,000 students. She also involved their parents in making costumes and creating stage settings. She knew the conservatory's policies regarding

costumes, etiquette, good manners and decorum. She knew the types of programs to be given and she respected the Sisters' wishes. Some of her memorable programs included choreographed versions of *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Babes in Toyland*. She especially reveled in the fact that she could attend the recitals and concerts given there, and listen to the various artists who came to St. Paul and practiced in the conservatory's auditorium. One of the Sisters would bring her to the rear door and let her hear them. She taught dancing at St. Agatha's until the conservatory's doors closed in 1962.

A Day in the Life of- Obedience, Poverty and Ice in the Washbasins

The Sisters who lived at St. Agatha's came at varying times and stayed for long or short periods without being told the reasons for the change in work or residence. This was in the days before it became popular to dialogue about housing, work, education and self-fulfillment. Each Sister arrived with a trunk, a suitcase, a small amount of clothes which included three serge habits and possibly some material for lesson plans if they were teachers. They were assigned a dormitory where they had a cell with a bed, a stand, a wash basin and a chair. The floor to which they climbed was in accord with the length of time they had spent in the community at large. Each Sister was likewise assigned a place in the chapel and a desk in the room next to the large community room. She sat in rank at the table during meals. She was assigned a charge (a housekeeping task to be done each day), a time and day to wait on table

and help with the portressing. Once a week she helped in the laundry and took her turn leading morning and evening prayers.

She might or might not know what school she was assigned to teach or what grade she might have. Her principal instructed her in these matters and told her about her schedule at school. There were no maids, cleaning women or secretaries. The heavy janitorial work was done by a man hired for that purpose. Rules were strict within the Sisters of St. Joseph. She was reminded of her obligations as she listened to the reading of a portion of the rule or Book of Customs each evening. If she felt disheartened, she recalled one of the 150 Maxims of Perfection written by the order's founder, Father Jean Medaille, in 1650, which she was required to memorize. She had not been forced to become a Sister. She had had more than five years in which to make up her

mind and if, during those years, her superiors felt that she lacked the motivation or the health to lead such a strenuous life, she was asked to leave. There was no such thing as a partial commitment. There was plenty of work to be done, with new parishes, schools, hospitals, orphanages, academies, boarding schools, a college and a home for unwed mothers opening in rapid succession. There also was no such word as retirement. If her age and health no longer permitted her to engage in the active work of the congregation, she would be assigned another mode of service. A Sister learned to be mobile, adaptable and versatile. She survived the harsh, strict life because she had a sense of humor and she learned how to adapt to the methods, procedures, personalities and idiosyncracies of her superior or principal and the other Sisters with whom she lived.

It is interesting to note that in interviewing over 50 Sisters who lived at St. Agatha's from 1910 on, all but four said they liked the conservatory and had the most fun there. There were a number of reasons for this. First of all, they lived with others their own age who were going through the same trials and they could compare notes, commiserate and laugh about them. If they needed help in their assigned work, they could go to others who were teaching the same grades for ideas and advice. They also could consult with the grade school supervisors who lived there. Since they had few places to go for recreation, they made their own. St. Agatha's gave many programs and concerts and sponsored artists' series and the Sisters took advantage of their opportunities to attend them. The roof garden on the seventh floor as well as the auditorium provided places where the Sisters could have an outlet for physical energies.

What was their daily schedule like? They arose at 5 in the morning to the sound of a large hand bell that was rung nine times. Since a Sister had only 25 minutes to get to chapel for morning prayer, she usually had everything carefully organized the night before. Then she silently made her way to the chapel. Promptly at 5:25 a.m. a bell was tapped and morning prayer began, followed by the reading of the points of meditation lasting 30 minutes. They knelt at the first and third points and sat during the second. Many would promptly fall asleep as they sat down. They were young. It was early. It is interesting to note that today we are reading

about the benefits of quiet meditation, particularly just before a meal. For centuries the convents provided for just such a time and no Sister was allowed to be called away from her prayer life unless there was an earth-shaking crisis.

Meditation ended with a short prayer in which one tried to make some kind of resolution to do or be better. Mass followed, celebrated by a priest from nearby St. Louis Church. Then the Sisters went down in silence to breakfast. Some were assigned to wait on table. Breakfast might consist of coffee, cereal, bread or toast and butter, fruit and eggs. A lot depended on the budget set aside for the kitchen, plus the wishes of the superior. There was tremendous poverty in many periods of the conservatory's history and the last Sister in the serving at the table (there were four to a serving) often didn't get much to eat. Food was especially scarce during World War I and soap for housekeeping tasks was not available. Tables were served according to rank and enough stories have been told by the young Sisters to know that they had hearty appetites that often were not satisfied by the meager fare. Sister St. Margaret Jordan, who taught music there, beginning in 1916, remembered that some of the Sisters would steal food because they didn't have enough to eat. Food sometimes was rationed. So was heat. A Sister was assigned to go down into the sub-basement each morning to turn on the heat in order to take the chill out of the building. Then it was turned off. It was turned on again after supper and turned off at 9 p.m.

Sister Patricius Hogan, who lived there from 1913 to 1919, described Mother Berenice Shortall, who succeeded Mother Celestine, as a woman "who never had anything for herself that she didn't let you have, too. She would have the poorest kind of clothes and shoes. You couldn't expect her to be too generous, but you had to have some shoes. St. Agatha's kept shoes there and you fitted yourself to whatever was handy."

And Sister Elizabeth Anne Feyton (1914-1918) recalled that, "We used to have bread and syrup when we came home from school. We couldn't turn on the lights because we had to conserve on energy. In the wintertime, there was ice in the washbasins when we got up to dress. Once someone gave me a bar of candy and since I dislike candy, I gave it to the boy who cleaned my [school blackboards] for me.

Someone told the superior and I was called in to explain my actions. She said that I was not to repeat that act. The food belonged to the community."

Some of the sisters walked to their schools; others took the streetcar or bus until Archbishop John Gregory Murray saw a group standing in the rain and ordered cabs for them. Then he told the school principals that hereafter the Sisters were to take taxis and send the bills to the parish pastors.

At the end of the school day, the Sisters assembled to return to St. Agatha's by prayer time, which began promptly at 4:40 in the community room.

Prayer consisted of a litany, a prayer for deceased Sisters and 15 minutes of spiritual reading, again led by the Sister appointed for that day. While she read, the others were busy mending, darning, sewing clothes that were disintegrating — habits made of serge, cornets made of linen, cotton stockings, patched underwear and petticoats. The reading was followed by another period of meditation and the recitation of five decades of the rosary. During meditation, one could see many Sisters, as one priest put it, nodding consent to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Despite good intentions, the body has its ways and periods of meditation provided a time for relaxation and badly needed rest.

Evening meditation was followed by supper which usually was eaten in silence while a sister read. At 7 o'clock the Sisters assembled in the large community room for recreation. At 7:30 the bell sounded, ending the recreation period, and the Sisters went to their desks to prepare their lessons and correct papers until 9 p.m. when the bell again rang for night prayer in the chapel. Prayer lasted 15 minutes. Then the Sisters swiftly made their way in silence to prepare for bed. (The period from night prayer until after mass the following morning was known as the Grand Silence.) At 9:45 p.m. (later changed to 10 p.m.) a bell tapped for lights out.

On feast days and national holidays, all carefully listed in the Custom Book, the schedule changed. There might be a high mass with singing and conversation at meals and other periods during the day. The young Sisters were always tired and hungry but despite the austerity and poverty practiced at the conservatory, the superiors were aware of the

problems. All but two had lived this kind of life at St. Agatha's and understood the problems of community living. Besides parties and programs the Sisters were allowed to go over to the auditorium to practice, to make up dances and plays and concoct costumes to wear over their habits.

The weekends, far from providing a period of relaxation, seemed to be filled with even more activities. On Saturdays floors, including the long main corridor, were scrubbed on hands and knees and waxed and polished. Steps, bathrooms and other areas received the same treatment. Sisters assigned to go to school at the Diocesan Teachers College or the College of St. Catherine went to their classes. Others might have appointments downtown. More prayers were added to the weekend schedule and the Sisters usually retired after night prayer at 7:30 p.m.

Sundays had another rhythm. Many Sisters again went to their parochial school parishes to sit with their students at 9 o'clock mass. Then, after a cup of coffee and a cookie or doughnut (sometimes given to them by a parishioner), they would teach catechism to groups of public school children.

Once a month the Sisters were allowed to have company on Sunday afternoon and the parlors and corridors would buzz with conversation and laughter as families exchanged news and the Sisters noted how younger brothers and sisters were growing. Many had no company because they came from Canada or Ireland. If a relative or friend did come to visit, it was a special occasion. Visiting never interfered with the convent schedule of prayer, recreation and rest. At 9 o'clock every door and window was carefully checked, bolted and locked and if one happened to be left unattended, this became a topic of conversation for the entire community — certainly at the Sunday conference. The Sisters lived in a downtown area closely surrounded by the YMCA, the Schubert Theatre and lots of cement.

The strictness of the superiors was legendary, partly because they were trying to pay off the mortgage on the conservatory but also because they were supporting Holy Angels Academy in Minneapolis and St. Joseph's Academy in St. Paul. The Sisters endured the poverty, the frugal meals and strict regime without ever being told that St. Agatha's was financing two other institutions.



In the early years, the meager salaries the Sisters received were augmented by the income of the music teacher who built up a large class of students. The Sisters learned to be ingenious at earning money. Around 1900 Sister Charlotte Mulvehille had a printing press in the old barn attached to the Palmer home and she made calendars that the Sisters sold. They contained little quotations and sayings they collected or composed, plus advertisements they solicited. Each Sister was given a quota of calendars to sell in predetermined sections of the city. They sold them after school and all day Saturday by walking door-to-door. They also sold cookbooks and Archbishop Ireland's two volumes of sermons. Since they were forbidden to eat in homes, they brought their lunches with them on these excursions.

The music and expression teachers got up at 3 a.m. on laundry day to do the wash, since they did not go out to schools to teach. Sister Teresita Judd, who lived at St. Agatha's from 1926 to 1934, remembered that, "When I first went there, there were six bathtubs for the 90 Sisters who lived there. They were down in the basement. All the Sisters who taught in grade schools had to take their baths on Saturday. The door to the room was locked at all other times. You did your [housekeeping chore] first. Then the door was opened at 9 a.m. or so. The Sisters took baths all day long. When you got gifts from home, you turned them in to the superior. When Mother Geraldine Cavanaugh was superior from 1923 to 1928, she would put the candy we got into a closet and it would be taken out on feast days or on Sundays — five pieces for a serving of four! You wondered who was going to get the fifth piece. One time the Valentine candy was served on August 15..."

The chapel at St. Agatha's Conservatory.

Others remembered that they never were allowed to have the lights on during the day, that they could not turn on the lights in the dormitories while preparing for bed, that they were not allowed to touch the radiators to adjust the heat and that they were cold all of the time they were in chapel in the morning. In the early years, gas light was used sparingly in the dormitory areas. Since there were no gas fixtures in the dormitories themselves, the Sisters would go out into the halls to fold their veils. Later on, each dormitory was lighted by a single bulb and one might say that one used the Braille system to dress, make one's bed and tidy up the cell.

As time went on, there was a lightening of the austerity. Sister Clare Cecelia Crump recalled that Mother Annetta Wheeler, the only superior to serve two terms (1928-1934 and 1952-1958), was "very strict, very firm," but "she served a very good table and if...you didn't have enough of anything, you were to let her know about it. We always had plenty of food [even though] we were poor and...on a tight budget...We were very busy in the kitchen because we used to make homemade bread...We used to bake three times a week and we made the bread and beautiful rolls in a great big washtub. We had a regular bakery room with a special oven for baking." Another superior had huge canning bees and the storerooms were full of the canned fruits and vegetables the Sisters put up.

It was during Mother Annetta Wheeler's first term that the oldest parts of the conservatory were renovated and a new entrance built for the Palmer House, which was still standing. Walls were torn out, the office and information areas

well-equipped and the parlor and two art exhibit rooms refurbished. She had the chapel redecorated and, most important of all, she remedied the bathroom situation by changing a dormitory on each floor into a bathroom. The Sisters' need for rest and relaxation was recognized when a large dormitory on the sixth floor was turned into a recreation room.

"We used to dance up there," Sister Victoria Houle recalled. "We did folk dancing and had records. It was really a nice place to...use up your energy because we had no opportunities to go skating, play tennis or other sports...."

Nearly all of the Sisters interviewed throughout the years spoke of how much they enjoyed the community life at St. Agatha's and the fun they had there. Even so, one might ask how these women managed to stay in the convent in light of the strict rules, the unquestioning obedience, and the poverty practiced there. The only answer, beyond that of the dedication of one's life to God and the "dear neighbor" is that all the Sisters had accepted the demands put upon them. During their five trial years before their final vows, each was tested in many ways to see if she was earnest about striving for perfection. She would see other women who had lived the life for many long years under much more trying conditions and conclude that if they could do it, she could do it. Again, the saving grace was a sense of humor plus the imagination to figure out how to beat the system without breaking the rules. The Sisters learned to share their tribulations; they felt support from others going through the same situation and they could laugh as each recalled what had happened to her.

This was not an era of consensus, interpersonal relationships, and doing one's thing. One went, did what one was told to do. What was remarkable was that the superiors and school principals elicited talents the Sisters never knew they possessed and asked them to do projects and take on new assignments that in many cases were mind-boggling.

Thirteen faculties of parochial grade schools lived there at some time or other: Assumption, Cathedral, St. Mary's, St. Patrick's, St. Michael's, St. John's, St. James, St. Peter's, Blessed Sacrament, Transfiguration and St. Pius X, White Bear Lake. The grade school supervisors lived there, as did the music, expression and art department faculties. Sisters who had retired or who had charge of the

cooking, portressing, bookkeeping, refectory, laundry, nursing and sacristy work lived there. This is how some of them remembered St. Agatha's:

Sister Myra Gannon (1915): "So many people felt sorry for us and how restricted we were. But we had advantages that other convents did not have. We could attend all the services at the Cathedral during Holy Week. We had distinguished visitors. Archbishop Ireland must have loved [St. Agatha's] because he would bring many visitors there. Or he would come himself and we would all go in and talk to him. Even Mother Francis Cabrini came to visit and little did we realize that one day she would be a canonized saint. There was no generation gap. The Sisters were our friends. There were musicians, artists, cooks, etc., and we were all housekeepers. The principals as well as the other Sisters scrubbed the lower hall on Saturdays. All were equal... I used to help when I was there. We ended at the kitchen with our scrubbing and the cook would give us two pieces of bread after rubbing them on the bottom of the pan that the roast had been cooked in. At recreation we mixed with the older Sisters who really taught us about our C.S.J. heritage."

In her book, *A Pageant of Our Musical Heritage*, Sister Anna Goutlet wrote that in March of 1928 Maurice Ravel came to St. Paul to be a guest of the city's branch of Pro Musica. "As a special courtesy he consented to play for all the Sisters of the Twin Cities who gathered to hear him at [the conservatory]. Ravel [was] a small man. Even in 1928 he was quite gray, but his luminous eyes and his quick, vibrant personality immediately captured our attentions...he was wonderful."

To summarize, one might say that the advantages were companionship, help from each other, shared experiences, professional guidance under supervisors, diversity from a large number of Sisters, shared talents for social life, and participation in a center of culture and the arts. These overshadowed the disadvantages of austerity, regimentation, a dark and gloomy atmosphere, lack of finances, insufficient food, absence of comfortable furniture and equipment, and the downtown noise that surrounded the building.

The Closing of the Conservatory

There were several reasons for the drop in student enrollment that helped bring about the closing of St. Agatha's in 1962. The decline actually had begun during the Depression when parents, as well as young working women, were unable to afford lessons. It continued during World War II when time and energies were transferred to the war effort. After the war, many other schools opened music, art and drama departments, and there was a loss of teachers to other schools conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Then, too, the Sisters living at St. Agatha's were under a terrible strain as they traveled to and from their schools. The heavy traffic and their convent schedule became a daily battle and caused excessive fatigue. The emergence of Parent-Teacher Associations gave rise to a feeling that if the Sisters could live closer to their work, they would come to know the families and their students better and understand the problems they faced. Some parishes already were building convents. On the other hand, two downtown parish schools, St. Louis and St. Mary's, had severely declining enrollments and soon would be closing. The building itself needed extensive repairs. At the same time, the Sisters of St. Joseph had been asked to build a new Derham Hall High School away from the College of St. Catherine, and huge amounts of money would be needed for this project.

Therefore, the provincial superior and her council decided to close St. Agatha's. They wrote the parish pastors that if they wished the Sisters to continue to teach, they would have to provide convents. This is the reason so many convents were built at this time throughout St. Paul.

Sister St. Margaret Jordan, the last superior, was told how she was to handle the closing. Convents and schools throughout the region were invited to take what they could use for their own institutions. The Notre Dame Sisters, who were opening a new convent and school in North Dakota, took a large supply of books from the vast library the Sisters had collected at St. Agatha's. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate took the famous paintings, "Stations of the Cross" (the originals had been painted by Gagliardi) and the huge oil painting of Murillo's "Immaculate Conception." Others went to places with large walls and high ceilings.

The Stuart portraits of George and Martha Washington, copied by two Minnesota women, Sister Marie Teresa and Sister Anysia, were given to the state capitol and the Minnesota Historical Society. A truck was sent to remove them. It was too small for the enormous picture of George. A second one came; however, it was of no help. Finally, a very large truck arrived and George departed for his new home. Now, together again, George and Martha repose in the Minnesota Historical Society's art collection.

The group most interested in purchasing the property was Central Presbyterian Church, across Cedar Street from the conservatory. The Reverend Harry P. Sweitzer, the pastor, wanted to use the building as housing for employed women and retired people in the downtown area. As Central Manor, it later became a home for mentally disabled adults.

Meanwhile, the Sisters were told to pack their belongings. Their trunks were brought to the auditorium, marked and divided into groups for the Twin Cities area and for out-of-town. The Sisters left their dormitories and other areas in perfect condition by scrubbing the floors and cleaning and removing everything. Many moved over to Mary Hall, formerly the nurses' home at St. Joseph's Hospital, where they set up temporary community living until their convents were ready.

Those who stayed until the end used only the first floor. They were told to leave their missals in the chapel pews. Holy cards with mission assignments written on them were put into the missals. A card marked "CSC - PO" meant that Sister was to go to the College of St. Catherine and work in the post office.

The night before the closing, Father Gleason of St. Louis Church brought over ice cream for a farewell party. The next morning — August, 1962 — the Sisters went to St. Louis Church for mass because the chapel had been dismantled. Sister St. Margaret handed Mr. Sweitzer the keys and an itemized list of all the furnishings of the building they were leaving. Sister St. Agatha arranged for her brother to take the Sisters to their new destinations. A cultural era in the history of St. Paul had come to an end. St. Agatha's Conservatory, founded, administered, staffed and maintained by women for approximately 79 years, had fulfilled its mission.

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Judge Palmer's house at Exchange and Cedar. See Page 6.



"The Ireland Connection": Sisters St. John, left; Celestine and Seraphine. See page 3.



A play staged by St. Agatha's Expression Department. See Page 13. (Can anyone identify these youngsters?)

Passengers on the steamboat, "Red Wing," docked on the St. Paul riverfront, watch the Minnesota Boat Club bantam four race about 1910. See page 20.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.



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