

# Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School (Fairbanks, Alaska) records

---

## *Collection Finding Aid*

### **Contents**

Overview of Records .....	2
Historical Note .....	2
Arrangement .....	3
Administrative Information .....	4
Box and Folder List .....	6
History .....	6
Administration .....	6
Personnel .....	6
Local Community .....	7
Financial.....	7
Facility.....	7
Reports .....	7
Subject Series.....	7
Scrapbooks.....	8
Monroe High School .....	9

## OVERVIEW OF RECORDS

**Repository:** Providence Archives, Mother Joseph Province, Seattle, Washington

**Creator:** Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province; Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School's students and staff.

**Record Group Name:** Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School, Fairbanks, Alaska

**Record Group Number:** 192

**Dates:** 1946-1996, bulk 1959-1976

**Scope and Content:** This collection comprises primarily chronicles, correspondence, local community records, and newsclippings (scrapbooks), with a small amount of supporting materials. The early years of the schools are especially well documented.

**Extent:** Approximately 2.5 linear feet

## HISTORICAL NOTE

**Abstract:** In 1945, the Sisters of Providence responded to the request of the Catholic community of Fairbanks to staff the town's first parochial grade school. Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School--founded a decade later--flourished with the support of parents and the church. The Sisters of Providence withdrew from Fairbanks in 1978, but both schools continue to serve the community today

On September 19, 1945, the Most Reverend Walter J. Fitzgerald, Apostolic Vicar of Alaska, wrote to the Sisters of Providence in Seattle, Washington, to request teachers for a new school at Immaculate Conception Parish in Fairbanks. The sisters had operated St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, since 1915, so it was natural that the bishop should turn to them when planning the town's first Catholic school. In January 1946, approval for the new venture was received from the sisters' General Administration in Montreal and happily announced to the parish.

On August 12, 1946, Sisters Joan of Providence and Ignatia Marie arrived in Fairbanks after a week-long journey from Seattle via boat, railroad, and plane. They were pleased to find the small but pleasant school that had been carved out of the former parish hall on the ground floor of the church. Only four rooms with a small addition for cloakroom and lavatory, but sufficient for the planned kindergarten through fourth grades, and outfitted with army surplus equipment, new desks shipped in from the "lower 48", and the latest in textbooks and teaching aids.

Immaculate Conception School opened September 3, 1946, with thirty-six children enrolled. Sister Ignatia Marie taught the first and second grades, with half-day kindergarten, and Sister Joan of Providence taught the third and fourth graders and served as principal. The following year, enrollment climbed to 104 students, and Sister Ann joined the small faculty. The first lay teacher, Helen Polk, was hired for the 1948-1949 school year.

In the summer of 1949, Sisters Ignatia Marie and Ann conducted a religious vacation school in Seward, the first offered by the Sisters of Providence in the Territory of Alaska. The experience was a success, and initiated a long tradition of vacation schools in towns throughout Alaska. The sisters in Fairbanks also conducted religious education classes throughout the year for Catholic students in the public school and at Ladd Field Air Force Base.

As enrollment continued to grow and the children progressed through the grades, additional classrooms and teachers were added to Immaculate Conception School. Plans to build a new school were announced in the spring of 1950, and the parish purchased several acres of land in the Slaterville neighborhood, a few blocks from the existing school. When financial difficulties precluded constructing an entirely new building, a number of army barracks on the site were renovated and attached to

create a single story school with five classrooms, office, recreation room, lavatories, and garage. The new school opened in the fall of 1951, with eight grades in four classrooms; the fifth was leased to the public school district for a kindergarten.

Within a few years, plans were made to expand the school again, to open a high school, and to secure a convent for the sisters. On September 6, 1955, Monroe High School, named for the Reverend Francis Monroe, SJ, founder of Immaculate Conception Parish, opened in the basement of the church with 10 freshmen and five priests sharing teaching duties. The following September saw the dedication of the new high school building on the same tract of land as Immaculate Conception School. Although the high school was placed under the administration of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the Sisters of Providence agreed to provide one sister, with others to follow as available. Sister Dorothy of Providence, the Reverend Bernard McMeel, SJ, Principal, and the Reverend Louis Doyle, SJ, formed the faculty for the 1956-1957 school year.

From 1946 to 1959, all the Sisters of Providence in Fairbanks lived together in the convent at St. Joseph Hospital and were under the authority of the hospital superior. On March 6, 1959, the teaching sisters moved to a house at 502 Monroe Street, rented by the parish from the Mark Ringstad family. On June 15, the Sisters of Providence General Council approved this convent as autonomous from the hospital and appointed Sister Beatrice Ann as the first superior. The sisters named their new home Immaculate Conception Convent, a title that was to travel with them to several other locations. In 1962, they moved to 417 Monroe Street, and finally on August 31, 1964, to 757 Illinois Street, a large house purchased by the parish. This convent served the Sisters of Providence and members of other religious communities for many years to come.

In the 1960s, Fairbanks, like all of Alaska, was still very much "mission territory" for the Catholic church. Dedicated young men and women from throughout the United States responded to the bishop's call for volunteers, and in the fall of 1960, the first six Lay Apostle Mission Boosters were assigned to Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School. These volunteers and the members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps who followed them signed a one-year contract to teach, assist with maintenance of the facilities, or serve in the office in exchange for room and board. Their contributions helped both schools to survive and thrive in the years to come.

In the summer of 1968, the Sisters of Providence transferred administration of St. Joseph Hospital to the new Fairbanks Community Hospital. The departure of the nursing sisters left the teaching sisters feeling rather isolated. Although the number of sisters assigned to the schools had remained steady at eight for several decades, only five were available for the 1968-1969 school year. The sisters helped the parish to begin looking at long-range plans for Catholic education, and in 1971, Sister Helen Brennan arrived to organize and direct a new religious education program for the Fairbanks area.

As teaching sisters retired or turned to other ministries, the Sisters of Providence found it necessary to withdraw from many of their elementary schools in the province. Their departure from Immaculate Conception School was planned for the summer of 1972, but Sister Mary Florence Gaetz remained for two more years as principal. The sisters' commitment to Immaculate Conception School ended with the close of the 1973-1974 school year.

Several sisters continued to teach at Monroe High School or to serve in religious education programs until 1978, and then the long ministry of the Sisters of Providence in Fairbanks came to a close. Today, however, both Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School continue to flourish and to serve the people of Fairbanks and beyond.

## ARRANGEMENT

The records of Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School are arranged in ten series, housed in five document boxes. The record series are: history, administration, personnel, local community, financial, facility, reports, subject series, scrapbooks, and Monroe High School.

The records in this collection actually reflect three distinct but interrelated entities: Immaculate Conception School, established in 1946; Monroe High School, established in 1955; and Immaculate Conception Convent (local community), established in 1959. Immaculate Conception School and Convent were official foundations of the Sisters of Providence religious community, while Monroe High School was a diocesan school under the administration of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). However, because the Sisters of Providence were instrumental in founding Monroe High School, and because the sisters who taught at the high school lived at Immaculate Conception Convent, there are many overlapping records in the collection.

The majority of the records originated directly from Immaculate Conception School or the sisters' local community. Only some, such as the chronicles, include mention of Monroe High School, and there are relatively few records specific to the high school. In processing the collection, a decision was made to include both schools in the collection title; to arrange the majority of records as series of Immaculate Conception School; and to create a separate series for the few records that are specific to Monroe High School. This arrangement reflects the status of Immaculate Conception School and Convent as official foundations of the Sisters of Providence, while acknowledging the history and records of Monroe High School as an independent but related entity.

## ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

**Restrictions:** Providence Archives is a private repository. Access to some records is at the discretion of the archivist.

**Preferred Citation:** [Title of cited item]. [Series Name]. Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School, Fairbanks, Alaska. Record Group 192. Providence Archives, Seattle, Washington.

**Acquisition Information:** Records were transferred to Providence Archives, Seattle from the school and local community.

**Related Record Groups and Other Collections:** Since the sisters lived at St. Joseph Hospital from 1946 to 1959, the hospital's chronicles, Personnel and Works and Annual and Semi-Annual Financial Reports, and local community records for these years include personnel statistics and other information regarding Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School.

The records of the education ministry and the Education Division of Sacred Heart Province contain related correspondence, reports, and the annual "school bulletin," a detailed record of enrollment statistics, student involvement in ancillary groups (e.g. Sodality, safety patrol), and special programs (music, vocational preparation, etc.).

The history of both Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School is well told in Providence in Alaska: Sisters of Providence Education Ministry in Alaska, 1902-1978, by Sister Pauline Higgins. Sister Pauline (known then as Sister Louis of the Blessed Sacrament) served in the education ministry in Alaska for much of the 1960s and 1970s. Her book, published by the Sisters of Providence in 1999, draws on the chronicles, personal experience, and interviews with other sisters. It includes many interesting photographs from the archives as well as from the sisters' personal

collections.

See separate index for articles on Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School printed in the periodicals *Caritas*, *Providence Sister*, and *The Good Work*, published by the Sisters of Providence, Sacred Heart Province.

A nice collection of photographs, many from the early years of Immaculate Conception School, is stored and inventoried separately. A very few artifacts are catalogued separately.

The Jesuit Oregon Province Archives, located at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, is the official repository for the historic records of Monroe High School.

***Processing Information:*** Records arranged and described by Terri Mitchell, Assistant Archivist; completed on October 20, 2000.

## BOX AND FOLDER LIST

### History

This series contains two complete set of chronicles for Immaculate Conception School, 1946-1974. The second set also includes two supplementary chronicles, 1974-1976, for the sisters remaining in the convent after the community withdrew from the elementary school. The chronicles provide a complete and interesting summary of school life, especially in the early years. The focus throughout is on Immaculate Conception School and the sisters living in the convent, but the chronicles do mention many activities at Monroe High School after it opened in 1955. They also document the growth and development of Fairbanks and the Catholic church in Alaska, mentioning many pioneering priests, bishops, and religious communities. There is a complete summary of the disastrous 1966 flood of the Chena River and its aftermath, as well as mention of many other historic events.

Box	Folder	Title
1	1	Chronicles, 1946-1974
1	2	Chronicles, 1946-1976

### Administration

The administration series comprises seven correspondence folders, spanning 1945 to 1975, which were accessioned into the archives from both the school and the Provincial Administration of Sacred Heart Province. Their original chronological order has been retained. The letters include significant details not found in the chronicles, particularly regarding preparations to open Immaculate Conception School, the acquisition of necessary supplies and equipment, the sisters' first journey to Fairbanks, and arrangements with the pastors regarding the sisters' salary and convent.

Key correspondents include the Reverend Clifford Allbutt, SJ, Donald S. McDonald, SJ, and E.A. Anable, SJ, Pastors of Immaculate Conception Church; Mother Marcien and Mother Mary Philothea, Provincial Superiors; Sister Judith, Director of Studies, Sacred Heart Province; and Sisters Ignatia Marie and Joan of Providence, founding teachers.

Box	Folder	Title
1	3	Correspondence, Foundation Request/Approval, 1945-1946
1	4	Correspondence, Pastors/Provincial Superiors, 1945-1964
1	5	Correspondence, Pastors/Sister Judith, Director of Studies, 1946
1	6	Correspondence, Sisters/Sister Judith, Director of Studies, 1946
1	7	Correspondence, Sisters/Provincial Superiors, 1954, 1966-1970
1	8	Correspondence, Pastor/Sisters, 1964-1966
1	9	Correspondence, General, 1974-1975

### Personnel

This series contains a complete list of Sisters of Providence who served in the community's three institutions in the Diocese of Fairbanks: Immaculate Conception School, Monroe High School, and St. Joseph Hospital. There is also a tribute to Sister Mary Florence Gaetz, who served at Immaculate Conception School for fourteen years.

There are no lay faculty or official student records in the collection. The student activities folder contains summaries of various religious observances and a copy of "SMF: Super, Marvelous, Farout," a compilation of poetry by the 1974 third-graders, dedicated to Sister Mary Florence.

Box	Folder	Title
2	1	Sisters
2	2	Students, Activities, 1949-1974

### Local Community

Local community records, which concern the governance and administration of the convent (local community), begin in 1959 when the sisters moved from St. Joseph Hospital to Immaculate Conception Convent and became an autonomous house within the religious community. The records in the series are a list of local superiors, the minutes of the annual visits of the provincial superior (proces verbal), 1959-1966, the sisters' daily schedule (horarium), and the convent guest register, 1964-1975.

Box	Folder	Title
2	3	Superiors
2	4	Proces Verbal, 1963-1967
2	5	Trimestrial Report, 1964-1967
2	6	Horarium, 1963-1967
2	7	Convent Guest Register, 1964-1975

### Financial

The main financial records are an incomplete set of the provincial and local council Acts of Council regarding loans and purchases for the convent, 1959-1961. The miscellaneous folder contains a 1963 internal audit of financial procedures, in which the sisters are commended for their success in "making ends meet in Alaska."

Box	Folder	Title
2	8	Local Council Acts of Council, 1959-1966
2	9	Miscellaneous

### Facility

This series includes materials on various building and fund-raising campaigns undertaken to expand the facilities of both Immaculate Conception School and Monroe High School. Also found here is a floor plan and brief description of the new Immaculate Conception Convent at 757 Illinois Street, which was acquired by the parish in 1964.

Box	Folder	Title
2	10	Building Campaigns, 1950-1965
2	11	Convent Floor Plan, 1964

### Reports

The one folder in this series contains three brief reports of varying formats, dated 1965 to 1970. Each report gives some basic information on Immaculate Conception School's curriculum, faculty, and enrollment.

Box	Folder	Title
2	12	Miscellaneous

### Subject Series

The folders in this series are arranged in alphabetical order. They include information on and publications from Immaculate Conception School's fiftieth anniversary in 1996; the impact of the August 1967 flood of the Chena River; and the history and pastors of Immaculate Conception Parish. The documents published for various school and church anniversaries contain interesting historical data, reminiscences, and photographs. There is also a folder on the 1974 HI POW (Happiness is Paying Our Way) benefit auction for the two schools.

Box	Folder	Title
2	13	Anniversary - Fiftieth, 1996, Celebration
2	14	Anniversary - Fiftieth, 1996, Newsclippings
2	15	Anniversary - Fiftieth, 1996, Cookbook, <i>Cooking with a Side of Nostalgia and a Dash</i>

*of History*

2	16	Flood, 1967
2	17	HI POW, 1974
2	18	Immaculate Conception Parish, History/General
2	19	Immaculate Conception Parish, Anniversaries
2	20	Immaculate Conception Parish, The Reverend Neil K. Murphy, Pastor

**Scrapbooks**

The sisters prepared five scrapbooks, covering the period 1954-1974, and consisting of newspaper clippings glued or taped onto the pages, with photographs and printed material sprinkled throughout. During processing of the collection these scrapbooks were treated according to their condition, as follows.

The 1954-1960 scrapbook originally contained photographs and newspaper clippings, with a few printed items. The scrapbook was deteriorating, with most of the items loose on the pages, so the entire book was photocopied onto acid-free paper, creating a facsimile for the collection; photographs were then removed to the photograph collection. Selected original newspaper clippings were retained, but the other originals were disposed.

The 1957-1967 scrapbook originally contained newspaper clippings of activities of both schools, photographs, and two letters received from President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy. The scrapbook had been disassembled at an earlier date, with photographs removed to the photograph collection. At the time the collection was processed, the clippings were photocopied onto acid-free paper and the copies placed into a folder with the Kennedy documents; a selection of original clippings was retained.

The 1965-1974 scrapbook originally contained newspaper clippings, primarily of activities at Monroe High School, snapshots of the sisters, a few printed items, and correspondence. The scrapbook had been previously disassembled, with photographs removed to the photograph collection. During processing, the newspaper clippings were photocopied onto acid-free paper and the copies placed into a folder with the documents. Selected original clippings were retained.

The 1967-1968 scrapbook, compiled by Sister Mary Louise Vachon, originally contained newspaper clippings, primarily about Monroe High School, with a few photographs and documents. Among the supplemental materials are interesting accounts of the 1967 flood of the Chena River and documents related to the formation of a parish Board of Education. The scrapbook was deteriorating, with most of the items discolored and falling off the pages, so it was disassembled during processing. The newspaper clippings were photocopied onto acid-free paper; selected original clippings were retained.

The 1968-1969 scrapbook, also compiled by Sister Mary Louise, contains newspaper clippings, primarily related to Monroe High School activities, students, and alumni, with some printed materials. This scrapbook is in good condition, with items still firmly glued to the pages, so it was left intact, with the exception of four pages of snapshots, which were removed to the photograph collection.

The newspaper clippings folder contains selected original clippings from among those that were removed from the scrapbooks or other folders in the collection and photocopied onto acid-free paper.

Box	Folder	Title
3	1	1954-1960
3	2	1957-1967
3	3	1965-1974
3	4	1967-1968
3	5	1968-1969

**Monroe High School**

As noted above, all of the records specific to Monroe High School were arranged in this series, with subseries of history, commencement, activities, and publications. The history folder contains the original Provincial Council Act of Council, dated February 22, 1954, accepting the invitation to provide teachers for the high school. In addition to various announcements and programs, the commencement folder includes the speech given by Jay Hammond, Governor of Alaska, at the 1977 graduation exercises. The bulk of the series is an incomplete set of the school yearbook, Aurigena.

Box	Folder	Title
3	6	History/General
3	7	Commencement, 1959-1977
3	8	Activities, 1958-1975
3	9	Newsletters
4	-	Yearbooks--Aurigena, 1959-1965, 1968-1969
5	-	Yearbooks, Aurigena, 1970-1975, 1977