
PAST FORWARD

Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province ♦ Providence Health System ♦ Providence Services

THE NEWSLETTER OF PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES

FALL 2003 VOL. 11 No. 3

From the Archivist

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Northern Sojourn

The history of the Sisters of Providence in the Pacific Northwest extends beyond the geographic boundaries of the United States into western Canada. Until the provinces of the religious community were established in 1891, all hospitals and schools in the region were under the governance of the Provincial Administration in Vancouver, Washington. Like their



Elois DeGrace, Archivist for Holy Angels Province, displays archival holdings to Loretta.

One of his programs is collecting oral histories of the women religious, thus recording for posterity their unique and interrelated experiences.

American counterparts, the history of western Canadian sisters has been shaped by the needs of the region with cross-border ties having existed among sister personnel, and in administration, culture, and environment. The Holy Angels Province Archives, together with the Provincial Administration, are located at Providence Renewal Center, Edmonton, Alberta. In many instances, the historical records of Holy Angels and Mother Joseph Provinces complement each other by providing supporting documentation or evidence not available in one or the other.

The archives staffs from both provinces have always worked closely together. Elois DeGrace, Archivist for Holy Angels Province, had visited our archives and it was time

“Providence Provides” Debuts

A new half-hour play, entitled “Providence Provides,” debuted on December 2 at the Silver Bells Luncheon hosted by Providence Mount St. Vincent, Seattle. The diverse ministries of the Sisters of Providence and their impact on those in need are presented by two professional actresses, one portraying the roles of seven sisters who were influential in various professions and the other playing characters whose lives were touched by the sisters’ ministries.

Using historical resources, artifacts, photographs, and the traditional habit, the play moves through time beginning with Mother Emilie Gamelin establishing the religious community and concluding with Sister Karin Dufault highlighting numerous elder care services currently sponsored by Providence Health System in King County, Washington. Providence Provides will be available for performance at other venues. For more information contact, Therese Platt, Development Director, at 206-760-6304 or therese.platt@providence.org.



for us to meet with him and explore the richness of his historical materials. From October 14 through 16, Peter Schmid and I had the opportunity to travel to the “Gateway to the North” and meet with Elois. The visit included a tour of Providence Renewal Center, the archival storage facility, and the museum displaying many artifacts unique to the province. We were impressed with the size and layout of the museum space. The afternoon and following morning allowed for an in-depth discussion of common archival issues such as administration and storage of vi-

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Did You Know...The Academy in Sprague, Washington, taught an exceptional number of students who became Sisters of Providence

Saint Joseph Academy in Sprague, Washington, claimed among its erstwhile students a total of 40 young women who became Sisters of Providence. This recognition may not be unusual if it occurred in Montreal, Seattle, Spokane, or Vancouver. But for a “parochial” school in a small town 37 miles southwest of Spokane this is quite an achievement. And that’s not counting those women and men who entered other Catholic orders or the clergy.

According to the academy’s chronicles, the Sisters of Providence took charge of the school after persistent entreaties from local pastor Rev. A. Thomas Meuwese. He had promised them that, if they accepted the mission, God would work a miracle to increase the number of vocations. On December 8, 1886, the same day Mother John of the Cross, Provincial Superior, sent the acceptance telegram to the priest, Sister Olivier was appointed as the school’s first superior. She arrived in snow-blanketed Sprague three weeks after and without delay opened the school on January 3, 1887, becoming Lincoln County’s first parochial and boarding school. By the end of the month she and fellow sister-teachers were instructing 60 students; the number reached 100 in about a year.



Students of St. Joseph Academy holding Advent wreaths in a procession (1956)

How to explain the large number of vocations from a parish that, in 1958, had all of 50 Catholic families and from a town where they were a minority? The promised miracle was becoming a reality! Spokane Bishop Bernard Topel wrote in the 1958 *Inland Register*, the diocesan newspaper, that this remarkable yield could be attributed to the particular kind of Catholicism ingrained among the parishioners many of whom emigrated from the East Coast. He also traced it to the quality of education the sisters offered that fostered the calling to religious life. Besides religious life and priesthood, many academy students, according to Sprague historian Kay (Jans) Walker, became leaders in farm, science, business, medicine, music, education, art, health, finance, sports, real estate and transportation.

This celebrated chapter in the history of Sprague and of the religious community ended when the academy closed in 1965 as a result of the lack of teaching staff and the high financial cost of maintaining a boarding facility. Annette Seubert, 1962 graduate of St. Joseph Academy, would be the last student from this overachiever of a school to add Sister of Providence to her name.

From the Archivist *continued*

sual images; electronic access; storage and reference for sister personnel files; user groups; outreach; and collections development. Perhaps the most beneficial discussion concerned use of the institutional numbering system developed by the General Administration to facilitate recordkeeping throughout the entire community.

A free afternoon on our last day allowed us to tour the newly renovated Provincial Archives of Alberta. As the primary repository for Alberta’s documentary heritage, the Archives retains governmental as well as personal papers collections and private sector records including archives of church congregations and religious communities.

This administrative agreement between church and state allows the archives to fulfill its mandate as a regional repository while meeting the needs of religious groups unable to maintain private archives. As a result, sharing of expertise and assets becomes mutually beneficial among institutions of varied sectors.

Our bi-province meeting is the first of hopefully many among archivists throughout the Sisters of Providence community. There is no better way for us to preserve and make known the history of the Sisters of Providence than to share historical resources and methodologies of the archival profession.

PAST FORWARD IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY

PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES

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