

A Devotion On The Hill

Monastery Was A New Beginning For Benedictine Sisters

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF
The Press & Dakotan

Sacred Heart Monastery and Bishop Marty Chapel tower over Yankton's skyline, watching over the city and surrounding countryside.

The symbol is appropriate, as the monastery has served others since 1880 in various ways, from education and health care to prayer and other ministry.

The Sisters are currently under the newly-elected leadership of their prioress, Sister Penny Bingham, and their sub-prioress, Sister Jeanne Weber.

The monastery's 125th anniversary in 2005 offered reflection on the first small group of nuns who left the motherhouse of Maria-Rickenbach Convent in Switzerland and arrived on the harsh Great Plains, Sister Penny said.

"Imagine the Sisters coming in 1880 from the beautiful mountains of Switzerland first to Maryville, Missouri, and then to the sparse plains of Dakota, leaving behind family!" she said in amazement.

Throughout their history, the Sisters have celebrated the joy of serving God and their fellow man. But they have also mourned the tragedy of a February 1997 fire that destroyed their monastery, claimed one of their Sisters and left them displaced for five weeks.

From the smoldering ashes of that fire, they have rebuilt their monastery and returned with a renewed commitment to their calling and their community.

Mother Jerome Schmitt played a major role in the monastery's growth and development. She was born March 30, 1899, at Epiphany, S.D., the second youngest of nine children.

She brought many attributes to her work, according to the book, "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by the late historian and author Bob Karolevitz. He provided the following account.

Mother Jerome attended St. Mary's parochial school at Epiphany, where she became acquainted with the Benedictine Sisters of Yankton. Perhaps because of those ties, she decided to enter Sacred Heart Convent when she was 15. She attended Yankton High School, where she earned high marks and graduated in 1918.

She professed her first vows in 1919 and went on to earn a degree from St. Teresa College in Winona, Minn. She returned to Yankton to teach languages at Mount Marty Academy which opened in 1922 with 40 students, including four boys.

Her life — and the future of the convent — took a major turn June 4, 1932, when she was elected prioress at age 33. She would lead 291 Sisters through the Great Depression.



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTOS

LEFT: Sacred Heart Monastery's history has been seen through the eyes of its members, including (left to right) Sisters Wilma Lyle, Marie Helene Werdel, Evangeline Anderson and Cynthia Binder. The monastery celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2005. ABOVE: A photo of Sacred Heart Monastery, taken in 1908. BELOW: Mother Jerome Schmitt guided Sacred Heart Monastery for five terms and nearly 30 years, overseeing the start of Mount Marty College and the construction of Bishop Marty Chapel. (From the book "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by Bob Karolevitz)

While Mother Jerome may not have possessed what some considered the needed experience or education, she brought a tremendous faith, optimism and common sense.

Despite the tremendous economic strain, drought, grasshoppers and dust storms of the Depression, Mother Jerome received the convent community's go-ahead, and she signed a \$234,000 contract to build Mount Marty Junior College — without a loan to back it up.

Eventually, Mother Jerome received the needed funding, and the junior college opened in 1936. Still only age 37, she became the school's first president as well as remaining the prioress.

From 1932-61, she assigned Sisters to teaching assignments in about 20 schools; provided housekeepers for two bishops; witnessed the vows of 345 new Sisters; was deeply involved in liturgical changes; began a new priority when the number of nuns in Yankton reached 500; kept in touch with the affairs of four hospitals and the Madonna Home in Lincoln, Neb., and ran a college and convent at the same time.

With the end of World War II, she pursued another dream — Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel and the

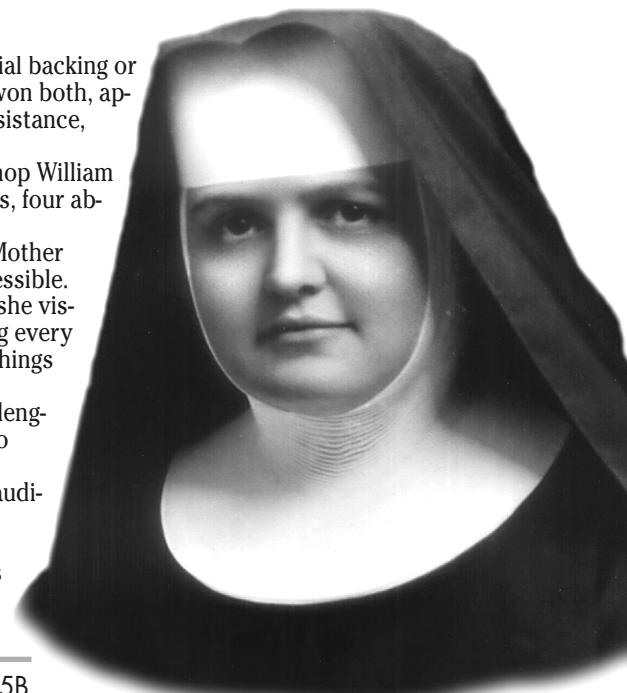
Benet Hall for Nurses — without financial backing or government approval. Eventually, she won both, appealing to U.S. Sen. Chan Gurney for assistance, and the projects became reality.

The chapel was consecrated by Bishop William O. Brady, assisted by four other bishops, four abbots and about 180 priests.

According to Karolevitz's account, Mother Jerome remained truly human and accessible. She loved to cook for the Sisters when she visited missions, with a reputation of using every available pot and pan. One of the first things she made was a batch of fudge.

While Mother Jerome provided challenging assignments for her Sisters, she also showed a sense of humor and enjoyed telling stories — such as her personal audience with Pope Pius XII.

After finishing her last term in 1961, Mother Jerome worked on her master's degree in German at Marquette University. She returned to teach at Mount



MONASTERY | PAGE 15B

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