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1958 - Downtown Location



2011 - Current Location

Stewart Carpet Center

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Monastery

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Marty until turning to pastoral care.

Mother Jerome received one of Yankton's highest honors when she was named "Citizen of the Year" in 1980. She also was selected for the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 2009.

She passed away March 14, 1983.

A NEW BEGINNING

Sacred Heart Monastery's origins came when the founding Sisters arrived in America to work with the German-speaking immigrants of northern Missouri.

A little parish school in Maryville, Mo., was the first education endeavor. From 1874 until today, the Sisters have been engaged in every type of educational work, including the founding of Mount Marty College in 1936.

The Benedictine Sisters have enjoyed ties to Yankton almost from the very beginning.

Bishop Martin Marty urged the Sisters to come to Dakota Territory to work with Native Americans. Some Sisters departed for the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota; others homesteaded in Zell, S.D.

Sister Marie Helene Werdel, a current member of Sacred Heart Monastery, recalled early stories about the harsh conditions at Fort Yates, located south of Bismarck, N.D., along the Missouri River.

"At Fort Yates, each night they set out milk, and in the morning, it was gone," she said. "One night, one of the nuns stayed up all night. She found out that it was the snakes that came out at night and drank the milk."

In 1887, at the request of Bishop Marty, the monastery moved the motherhouse from Zell to Yankton.

At the urging of Bishop Thomas O'Gorman, the building used as a motherhouse was converted into a 30-bed hospital called Sacred Heart.

Meanwhile, the Sisters purchased a former Episcopal seminary in Vermillion, renamed it St. Joseph's Convent and lived there from 1896-1908. To stabilize their community, the Sisters returned to Yankton where they were already staffing the hospi-

tal. They dismantled the Vermilion convent brick by brick and rebuilt it in Yankton.

With the admission of the first patient to Sacred Heart Hospital in 1897, the Sisters began an expanding health care ministry. Over the years, that ministry became the Benedictine Health System and then a co-sponsorship with the Presentation Sisters to form Avera Health.

PROVIDING AN EDUCATION

To meet the educational needs of the girls of the area, the Sisters opened an academy at the beginning of the 1922 school term.

The Sisters literally recruited students for the new academy, according to Sister Cynthia Binder, a current member of Sacred Heart Monastery.

"Even at the beginning, I remember my mother saying that two nuns came to (their home at) Tabor in a horse-drawn buggy, talking to my grandmother about my mother coming to the academy in the 1920s," Sister Cynthia said. "Some of the girls came from Yankton, but nearly all of the people at the academy were boarders."

Sacred Heart Monastery has also played a strong role in elementary, secondary and higher education.

The Benedictine Sisters have provided a strong direction since founding Mount Marty College in 1936, said Bob Tereshinski, vice president, academic dean and assistant professor of recreation management. He is also a member of the Lancer Hall of Fame as the college's winningest coach with 331 wins in 12 seasons at the baseball helm.

Tereshinski has worked at MMC since 1987 and has remained amazed at the nun's close personal connection with the college.

"I was having a conversation one time with Sister Jacquelyn Ernster, and she told me, 'You have a good bunch of (baseball) players who could win the conference,'" he said. "I could only think, 'Here, I'm sitting with a nun and having a conversation about baseball.'"

Tereshinski saw another side of Sister Jacquelyn that evening.

"I was at dinner that night over at the monastery. Afterwards, here was Sister Jacquelyn, the president of the college at the time, wearing an apron and washing dishes," he said. "It's times like that, you pick up on

their qualities of humility and that each of them has a job to do."

The nuns worked hard to keep the college going, Tereshinski said. He recalled working with the late Sister Martin Mergen on fund-raising efforts, including the annual Oktoberfest where she became known for wearing her German hats.

"Sister Martin wore a lot of hats in her work at Mount Marty, but you knew it was Oktoberfest when she started wearing those (German) hats," he said with a chuckle.

Many of the Sisters' talents were used behind the scenes, Tereshinski said. He remembered watching one of the nuns, an art teacher, paint the center circle on the new basketball court.

Another time, Sisters Philomene Kilzer and Laetitia Kilzer picked up on Tereshinski's comment that his baseball team wanted sleeveless jerseys but that the budget couldn't afford it. The two nuns used their sewing skills to produce the desired project.

"It would have cost me \$1,800 to buy those 30 uniforms, and the Sisters billed me \$1.65 each, which was basically just for the material," he said.

The Sisters supported the students with their presence at events, Tereshinski said. He used the example of Sister Ann Kessler, who drove four hours to her hometown of Aberdeen to cheer on the Mount Marty baseball team, which consisted of many of her history students.

On the other hand, the nuns' attention wasn't always a good thing, Tereshinski joked. One time, the baseball team was returning from a game in Wayne, Neb., when Tereshinski, who was driving, didn't switch over to the second gas tank fast enough. The bus ran out of gas in South Yankton, Neb., and the team needed to call for help in getting back to campus.

"The next day, Sister Marie Helene Werdel just looked up at me during lunch and said, 'I hear you ran out of gas yesterday,' and then went back to her meal," he said, laughing and rolling his eyes.

A TRAGIC MOMENT

Sacred Heart Monastery has continued to serve others — even in foreign countries — in many ways, but the Sisters found themselves in their greatest need when fire devastated their monastery in February 1997.

The fire claimed the life of Sister Teresa Schuster, age 89, who was overcome by smoke.

"It moved us notably into the receiving mode, after long years in a giving mode," said Sister Penny, the current prioress.

The fire drew an immediate outpouring of offers of help, Sister Penny said. The assistance ranged from shelter at the Human Services Center (HSC) — offered by then-Gov. Bill Janklow, who was in Yankton that night for a Republican gathering — and in Avera Sacred Heart Hospital to clothing and meals.

"They were also offering us consolation in the loss of one of our Sisters and in the trauma of displacement experienced by all, help with laundering clothes and cleaning everything affected by toxic fumes," Sister Penny said.

"Not only did we bond together in a new way as a community facing a crisis together, we also bonded in a new way with our Yankton community. We learned anew that good neighbors both give and receive in the ups and downs of life. We need one another."

Tereshinski recalls vividly the image of the Sisters, standing in the cold winter night both fearing whether any fellow nuns were still in the burning building.

"During the fire, we got the baseball team's jackets so the Sisters could wear them and stay warm," he said. "You could see most of them were in need. They were scared and frightened. I never expected to see that from such a stalwart group of women."

The Sisters also felt a sense of loss and confusion about where to turn, Tereshinski said.

"They were shocked," he said. "They were always the ones who offered education or advice, who provided help to others in need. Now, these women were the ones needing help."

Depending on their needs, the nuns were transported to the hospital or to the Kelly Inn where they became "motel buddies," said Sister Cynthia said.

Available quarters were quickly set up at HSC, Sister Cynthia said.

"Prisoners came down the next day from the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls," she said. "They were unloading beds and cots, and they had a lot of surprised looks on their faces."

The Sisters found themselves sharing the facility with prisoners and with teenagers with

chemical dependency problems, which created a unique interaction, Sister Cynthia said.

"We had 30 teenage alcoholics and drug addicts, 122 prisoners from the trusty unit and 90 nuns. I thought that God must have had quite the sense of humor," she said, laughing at the memory.

The Sisters bonded together during their five weeks at HSC, she said. Father Denis Quinkert helped set up a lecture hall and theater as a chapel for daily Mass.

The Sisters stayed busy during the five weeks with jobs, clean-up at the fire site and even a computer workshop that had been arranged before the fire.

The nuns also made the important decision to return to the original monastery site.

"The (Mount Marty) students said the thing that bothered them the most (during the nun's absence) was that there were no lights over there (at the monastery), that it was all dark," Sister Cynthia said.

"During the time that we were (displaced), there was a sense of togetherness, of staying strong. We were never so happy to come back home after five weeks."

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

The monastery enjoyed tremendous growth during its history.

By 1945, the community numbered 367 members. In order to provide more room for worship, Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel was constructed at a cost of \$1.1 million and was consecrated in 1950.

The chapel measures 187.5 feet high, from the ground to the top of the cross. The bronze cross measures 12.5 feet in height.

The chapel holds a seating capacity of 600, with 10,640 square feet in the upper chapel. The Peace Chapel, in the lower level, contains 9,266 square feet.

By 1960, the Sisters' community had grown to more than 500 members, considered too large for the monastery. The chapter founded a daughter house, the present Mother of God Monastery, located temporarily at Pierre and later transferred to Watertown.

Over the years, the monastery became a charter member of the Federation of St. Gertrude under the jurisdiction of the Vatican rather than the local bishop.

The Sisters have responded to the Catholic Church's call, through Vatican II in the late 1960s, in answering new ways of meeting people's needs. And Sacred Heart reclaimed the title of monastery, rather than convent, to reflect its monastic way of life.

Today, the monastery remains committed to its mission statement, said Sister Penny. Those Benedictine values include community, hospitality, awareness of God and lifelong learning.

"As always, we remember the past and learn from its wisdom, we respond to the present needs of our world, and we are open to the future and whatever may be the new thing that God calls us to," she said.

Perhaps the greatest measure of Sacred Heart Monastery's progress came during the 125th anniversary celebration in 2005, said Sister Cynthia.

"Mother Andrea visited us from Maria-Rickenbach in Switzerland. When she got here, she was so overwhelmed," Sister Cynthia said. "She saw the work on the buildings, how everything had evolved over the years. She found a sense of, this is what happened when the Benedictine Sisters took that risk (and came to the United States in the 1800s)."

Sacred Heart Monastery has come a long way in 125 years, and plans call for the Mount Marty College choir to sing at Marie-Rickenbach during the college's upcoming 75th anniversary celebration, Sister Cynthia said.

"It's amazing (to see our progress) when you think of the six frightened young women who came across the sea (from Switzerland) to settle our new (Benedictine) order in North America," she said.

Sacred Heart Monastery's impact will be felt for years to come, predicted Tereshinski.

"The Sisters would give you the shirts off their backs, but they are also very good business women," he said. "I always wonder how you can pay them back for the thousands of kids who have gone through their schools, and all the people they help, whether it's a free meal or a warm bed."

"They are always there for you. I hope people realize that (fact) about these women."

Rights

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Yankton College—the school had a policy against that—the student newspaper, *The Yankton Student*, was the playground for philosophical contemplation of civil rights issues and encouraging tolerance and respect. A November 1969 editorial by student Paul Ruben addressed growing feelings of prejudice amongst black students

and the rest of the student body and faculty. However, the editorial lauded the college's tradition of diplomacy: "Thank goodness we have the faculty and administration to always give us the brighter side, and that we students can come in, make suggestions, and help them clear things up. So get out your paper and pencils and head over to Ward Hall."

Gene Thin Elk, cultural advisor at the University of South Dakota's Native Center, was a student at Yankton College and resided in Yankton from 1971 to 1978. He has only positive memories of the

school and Yankton as a community.

In an email interview, Thin Elk stated: "There were so many individuals that really impacted me in such a positive manner that I can still remember them like 33 years hasn't passed but a couple of weeks ago. ... Even though I am from West River, in my mind I still consider Yankton my home town, which says a lot coming from a small ranching community and reservation I have great affection for."

Thin Elk also praised Mount

Marty College and the Benedictine sisters for supporting his idea of a free soup kitchen for those in need in the Yankton area.

"The Sisters at the convent...supported with fresh bread, and with the place to feed the people in the Yankton and surrounding communities at the Native Cultural Center which my grandfather, Mr. Thornton and his family operated," Thin Elk said. "The local businesses donated food items to the soup kitchen."

"I had the privilege to interact and work with many active Native

American families that established a vibrant Native community with activities and services, families such as the Thorntons, Stomachers, Merricks, Sauls and many more."

The search for equal rights and respect for all nationalities continues in Yankton. Major steps toward amending past wrongs committed against Native peoples were made in the 1990s with a reconciliation ceremony and with the changing of the Yankton High School mascot in 1996. The Bucks, once represented by the image of an Indian chief's head, reverted back to the

school's original logo of an antlered deer. ("Buck" was deemed a derogatory slang word for a man of Native American heritage.)

As stated previously, the civil rights movement in Yankton was not particularly flashy, or full of violence or media coverage. Except for Ted Blakey's accomplishments, Yankton's contribution to one of the most important eras in American history is more subtle, more a "lead by example" history. As the original "Mother City of the Dakotas," one would expect nothing less.

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