



# A Beacon Of Learning

Benedictine Education, Which First Sprouted In 1922 With A High School Academy, Has Blossomed With Mount Marty College

**M**ount Marty College, Yankton's liberal arts college in the Catholic, Benedictine tradition, has been a major part of Yankton's heritage for nearly 100 years. Founded by the Sisters of Saint Benedict, Mount Marty has grown from an all-female high school academy established in 1922, to a robust, four-year liberal arts college that we know today.

The following historical reflections telling of how MMC came into being were shared several years ago by Sister Stanislaus Van Well, Mount Marty's first academic dean.

The waning moments of daylight shimmer on the Missouri River as it flows along the bluffs marking South Dakota's southern border. Overlooking the river and the surrounding Yankton community, the towering silhouette of Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel reaches into the horizon as a landmark to 50 years of quality education.

Its presence serves as a reminder of the Catholic heritage brought to the Dakotas by Bishop Martin Marty, first bishop of the Dakota Territory, and as a link between the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent and the past and future of Mount Marty College.

For the future of Mount Marty cannot be envisioned without looking at past endeavors and contributions reaching back far beyond Mount Marty College's 1936 beginning.

If one looks back far enough, one finds the sixth century teachings of St. Benedict. Emulating those teachings were the five Sisters who emigrated from Switzerland, and established the Sacred Heart Convent in Yankton in 1889 upon the invitation of Bishop Marty.

Once settled in Yankton, the Sisters of Sacred Heart Convent immediately took to the task of providing education to the area.

Among the members of the Sacred Heart Convent, Sister Stanislaus Van Well remembers the events leading to the opening of Mount Marty College. The first step was establishing a high school for educating Sisters to become teachers. Sister Stanislaus, Sister Jerome Schmitt and Sister Thomasine Edrich were among the first Sisters chosen to become teachers for the new school.

After earning their bachelor's degrees, the three college-educated Sisters returned to Yankton where they joined Sister Marcelline Gleixner and lay member Lucille Lacy to become the teaching staff for the new Mount Marty Academy.

Sister Ignatius Ryan was the first superintendent. Sister Stanislaus was selected the school's principal.

"I was principal for no reason except that I had a major in education," Sister Stanislaus said. "But Sister Ignatius, who had no degree at the time, supervised the school. We were all in our twenties. We were not a very likely group of people to be starting a school."

"From the day we started that little school, Sister Ignatius said, 'We have to start a women's college here in Yankton. That's what our community should do — the convent here.' And she never gave up reminding us of that. She lived to see it come true. The rest of us were too young to have that kind of long vision, but Sister Ignatius had remembrances of the women's college in Indiana, Notre Dame and Our Lady of Providence. So she really had the dream always that there should be such a college in Yankton."

## THE ACADEMY OPENS

The Mount Marty Academy opened in the existing convent building with 37 students. Five boys were among the first year's enrollment.

"It was only the first year from 1922-23 that we had the boys. We felt it wasn't fair to the boys. We had nothing to offer them that boys would be looking for in high school and so it was discontinued," Sister Stanislaus said.

A scarlet fever epidemic and the Dust Bowl years are also among Sister Stanislaus's memories of the early high school years.

"Everybody can remember the dust storm years. It was so dirty in the mornings that we would have to spend an hour — all of us — girls, everybody, cleaning the house before you could sit down. The first few times, they



**TOP AND BELOW:** Scenes of life at Mount Marty College, which opened in 1936. The Benedictine sisters had originally delved into education with a high school academy in 1922. **ABOVE:** The center of life at MMC was Bede Hall, shown in this 1935 construction photo. The Benedictine sisters forged ahead with the college idea in the middle of the Great Depression. Initially a women's college, it went co-ed more than three decades later.

COURTESY PHOTOS

thought it was funny. The girls got the idea of going to the chemistry lab and they got the scales out to see how much dust they swept up. Well, that got old after two weeks."

The Sisters of Sacred Heart Convent looked upon the Academy as the precursor of a college. By the 1930s, a high school education no longer sufficed. A two-year college for teacher certification as well as for liberal arts preparation for the Sisters of the community and the young women of the area was a necessity.

Sister Stanislaus said the creation of Mount Marty College began to take shape in 1932.

"In 1932, Sister Jerome became prioress, and it changed things at the Academy very much. She was also very convinced that we should start a college because teacher certification requirements were always rising. I can still see her walking into Sister Ignatius's office. I happened to be in the room. She came in and said, 'Well, I'm more and more convinced we have to start a college. We have to get all these Sisters that are teaching now and the young people who enter the convent to be fully certified before they ever go out teaching at all.'"

Sister Stanislaus was sent to Catholic University where she received the first master's degree from among the convent community.

She later went on to earn her doctorate degree. "Meantime, Sister Jerome and others had gone on to study for master's and many of the Sisters who had been teaching school for years were sent away to get their degrees. So we had a lot of degreed Sisters that we could use as staff at the college."

The college's campus began to take shape with plans to construct a \$200,000 facility. With the sale of a convent-owned house in Switzerland and money saved by the Sisters, \$90,000 was raised to allow construction of Bede Hall to begin in 1935.

"In the summer of 1935 we started the construction of the building that we now call Bede Hall. The college would be housed in this building and so would the high school. People thought we were crazy trying to build that college building in the depth of the Depression. Some people got the story going that some rich people in Switzerland who were relatives of the Sisters had given a large amount of money. Well, it became a persistent rumor."

"The College was built by the hard work of all the Sisters at Sacred Heart Convent and maybe a few dollars here and there that good-hearted people contributed."

## COLLEGE TIME

In 1936, Mount Marty opened as a junior college with hopes of becoming a four-year liberal arts college. Sister Jerome was the college's founding president.

"We were accredited while we were a jun-



ior college by the University of South Dakota and we deliberately decided not to apply for North Central accreditation because we intended to become a senior college," Sister Stanislaus said. "As a matter of fact, when we prepared our curriculum we put down Mount Marty College. A member of the examining team said, 'You can't do that.' But Mother Jerome said, 'Why should we call it Junior College? We hope very soon to make it a senior college and then you have the problem of people getting used to the new idea.' I remember we were told no, you shouldn't use the name Mount Marty College. And so it became Mount Marty Junior College."

Early guidelines for women attending Mount Marty College were stringent. All students wore a one-piece uniform dress of blue woolen serge with sleeves reaching to the wrist, a high neck line, white collar and cuffs. Students were not permitted to leave the school in the evenings unless they were in the care of their parents or a school chaperon. Regular visiting days were Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Telephones were for business use only and students were not allowed to receive boxes of food from home except during the Thanksgiving and Easter recesses. An automatic bell system summoned students out of bed, to classes, to meals, to study hall; and a lights out system sent them back to bed.

After awarding its first bachelor's degrees to graduating seniors on May 29, 1951, Mount Marty College was well on its way in becoming a quality institution of higher learning serving the regional needs of South Dakota, Iowa, Ne-

braska and Minnesota.

In 1957, Sister Jerome completed her 21 years of dedicated service as Mount Marty's founding president. By that time, Mount Marty offered bachelor's degrees in 13 majors.

Chosen as second president, Sister Evangeline Anderson took on the task of accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. On March 22, 1961, Sister Evangeline received official notice that Mount Marty had received full accreditation as a four-year college.

In 1905, years before Mount Marty Academy, the Sisters of St. Benedict founded yet another educational program, a three-year hospital-based nursing program at Sacred Heart Hospital. The nurses, taught by physicians and Sisters, were housed on the fourth floor of Sacred Heart Hospital. Benet Home, built adjacent to the hospital and joined by an enclosed ramp, was dedicated in 1947. This became the permanent dormitory for nursing students and later high school students.

From 1908 to 1964, the Sacred Heart School of Nursing graduated 800 nurses. In order to continue to provide quality education and to keep abreast with national trends, Sacred Heart School of Nursing closed in 1964 and students enrolled in Mount Marty College's four-year nursing program. The Sacred Heart Hospital continues to serve as the main clinical facility for health care programs begun 80 years ago.

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