

A Finishing School of the 1880's: St. Benedict's Academy

Sister Grace McDonald

DURING THE 1880's there were a number of Catholic boarding schools for girls in the vast territory that stretches from St. Paul to the Rocky Mountains. Outside of St. Paul, however, only one could be described as a "finishing school"—St. Benedict's Academy at St. Joseph, Minnesota. With this exception, the girls' boarding schools of the period were of grammar school level or were bound up with mission work among Indian and mixed-blood girls.

St. Benedict's was housed in a T-shaped red brick building that rose up prominently out of the prairie eight miles west of St. Cloud. Its tower, visible for miles around, was something of a landmark. Travelers on the newly constructed railroad, who saw the convent from a distance of a half mile, remarked upon the structure as it loomed into view.

The building was plain, within and without. Because funds were limited, the ornateness that made hideous so many buildings, both private and public, in the decades of the 1870's and 1880's was lacking in the academy's building. Yet the very plainness of the structure gave it character. The Bavarian cultural background of its builders, together with a sense of conventual simplicity and practicality, served to produce a building that was at once monastic and mid-American.

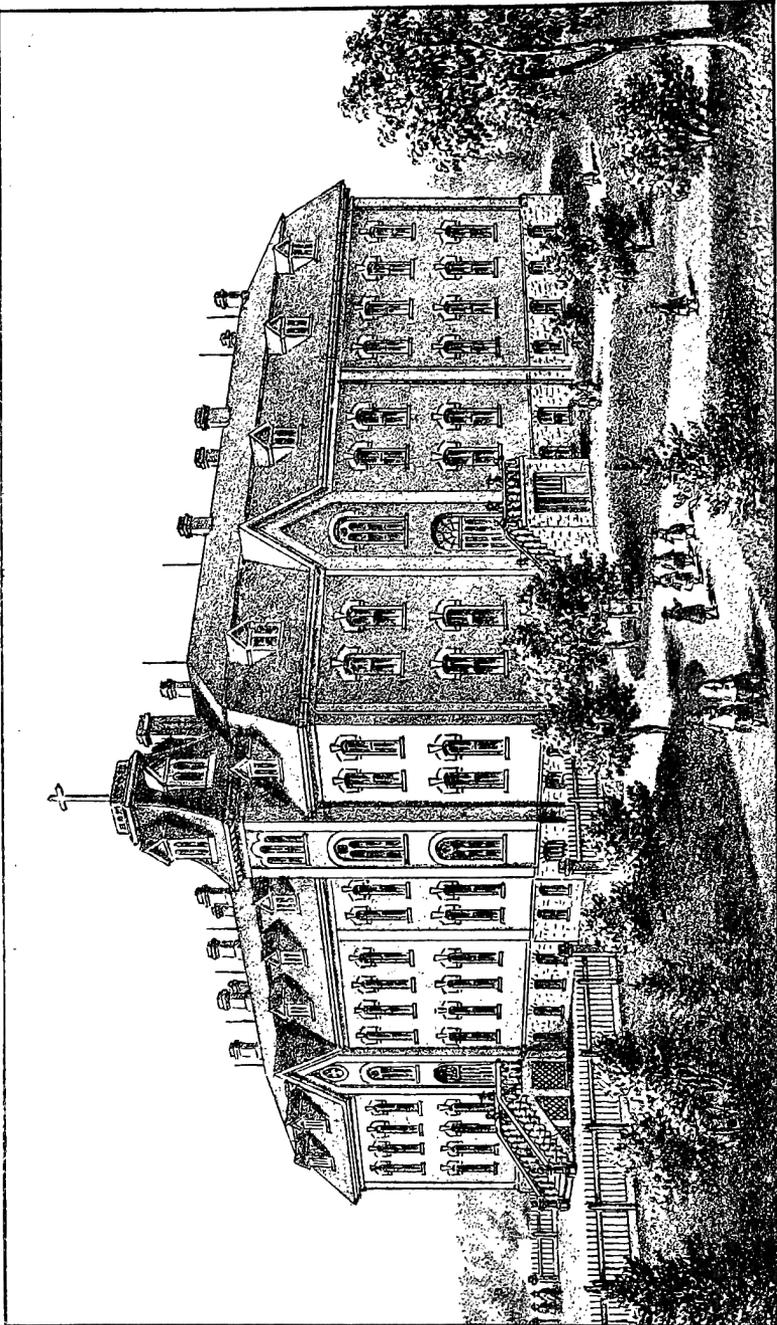
St. Benedict's position as the westernmost Catholic finishing academy of the 1880's drew many students from western Minnesota, Dakota Territory, Montana, Utah, and even far-off Idaho. Others came from such states as Illinois, Wisconsin, Indian Territory, Indiana, and Iowa. Even Ontario and British Columbia had representatives. The majority of the western students appear to have been daughters of state and federal officials, men who had regular salaries or who lived beyond the line of the frontier and appreciated all the more the benefits of a thorough education. The Minnesota students

came from business and professional groups in the towns and cities of the state. Only a few farmers' daughters were enrolled at St. Benedict's. The Minnesota farmer seemed little minded to send his daughter to school beyond the eighth grade, possibly because he was loath to part with her labor, or with the money required for her tuition, or both.

Among the western girls was Melda McLaughlin, whose father, James McLaughlin, was federal Indian agent at the Standing Rock Indian Agency at Fort Yates, Dakota Territory. She was sent to the academy in 1887 partly for the schooling she would receive there and partly for her personal safety. The Indians of Fort Yates were restless because Sitting Bull, the powerful Sioux chief, was in custody there. Carrie Smith's father had a similar position at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The McKenzie girls were enrolled in the St. Benedict's grade school while their mother, who remained with them, studied music, art, needle work, and rhetoric. Their father, Alexander McKenzie, was among the most prominent men in Dakota Territory. He was the political genius of the territory and later of the state; he made and unmade governors; it was as a result of his efforts that the capitol was removed from Yankton to Bismarck. The Gerard girls were daughters of Frederick Gerard, whose grandparents had emigrated from Bordeaux, France, in the late eighteenth century. Gerard himself, after having finished his courses at St. Xavier College in St. Louis, was sent by the American Fur Company to Fort St. Pierre and later to Fort Berthold in Dakota. On his visits to the academy, he regaled the sisters and the pupils with stories of his adventures at Fort Berthold. He told how, in the absence of the friendly Arikara and Mandan Indians, seventeen men bravely fought off an attack on the post by six hundred Yankton Sioux. But more often he told about the part he played in the Custer expedition to the Little Big Horn and its aftermath.¹

The students from St. Paul and Minneapolis had entirely different

¹The Gerard girls later entered the Benedictine Order. Their father is buried in the cemetery near the convent at St. Joseph. For accounts of his career, see Linda W. Slaughter, "Leaves from Northwestern History," in the *North Dakota Historical Collections*, 1:223; *Bismarck Tribune*, April 15, 22, 1874, October 11, 1876; and a record of an interview with one of his daughters in the archives of St. Benedict's Academy.



ST. BENEDICT'S ACADEMY IN THE 1880'S
[From St. Benedict's Academy, *Annual Catalogue*, 1885-86.]

backgrounds. Theirs had been a city life, and they brought with them an element of sophistication. Elizabeth Will and Lena and Margaret Kerst were members of prominent German families in St. Paul; Josie Freund and Lena Schlick's fathers were businessmen in the same city.

The young ladies did not make the long journeys from Idaho and other far-off places alone and unchaperoned. Neither parents nor teachers would have tolerated such action. Each year at the opening of the fall term two sisters traveled to distant points on western railroads in order to meet prospective students, who previously had been instructed what train to board at what time. Even students traveling the short distance from St. Paul were chaperoned on the trip. The *Northwestern Chronicle*, a Catholic newspaper published in St. Paul, carried a notice in its issue of August 23, 1883, announcing that "The female Academy of the Benedictine Sisters at St. Joseph, Minn., opens" on September 5. "Pupils will find a sister," the notice continues, "to accompany them to the school." On September 6 the same paper announced that twelve young ladies, accompanied by Sister Alexia, had left St. Paul for St. Benedict's.

The purpose and aim of the school, which was stated in each issue of its *Annual Catalogue* or prospectus, was to offer a well-balanced education based on thoroughly Christian principles. The 1883 *Catalogue* announced: "Here facilities are afforded to young ladies for acquiring proficiency in branches that constitute an education, at the same time solid and refined. . . . The course of instruction embraces every useful and ornamental branch of education suitable for young ladies."² Other than that of gracing a home, there was no thought of training girls for a career. Nevertheless, the curriculum was comprehensive in character. While covering the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the moral, it did not exclude the practical. A three-year high-school course, which offered subjects differing not greatly from those of a classical secondary school of today, was outlined. The subjects for the first year were listed in the *Annual Catalogues* in the following manner: "Elocution, Algebra one-third through, Church History half through, Religion, Physical Geography, Ancient History half

² St. Benedict's Academy, *Annual Catalogue*, 1882-83, p. 7.

through, Hygiene, Rhetoric, Drawing." During the second and third years these subjects were continued, and logic, natural philosophy, bookkeeping, geometry, and botany were added.

In the science classes, the students used Dr. Joseph Martindale's *First Lessons in Natural Philosophy*, published in 1879. Written in the question and answer form, it deals with such topics as light, heat, air, water, sound, and motion. That the teacher or student should conduct experiments or demonstrations is never suggested. The text used to teach bookkeeping was written by J. C. Smith, a professor in the Iron City Commercial College at Pittsburgh.³ It was intended "for use of schools, Academies, Colleges, and private learners." The author claimed that his work was based upon a "new and original plan altogether more simple, comprehensive and practical than any of the methods now in common use." A. S. Barnes's *General History*, published in 1883, was used as a supplementary text by the history classes. In his preface the author indicates that he was moving along with the historians who were interested in the social phases of the subject, for he asserts that "the political history which occupies most, if not all, of the ordinary school-texts, is condensed [*in his text*] to the salient and essential facts, in order to leave room for some accounts of the literature, religion, architecture, character, and habits of the different nations." As for the style of the book, he declares that "though intentionally written in a semi-romantic style," many of the situations and events described "are accurate pictures of what *might* have occurred."⁴

For the regular "classical" courses and for board and room, a fee of eighty dollars a term was charged. Since a secondary aim of the school was to teach womanly arts and accomplishments, however, all students took some courses in music, speech, or art. Lessons in these subjects cost from five to twenty dollars a term. Work materials, music books, and musical instruments loom large in the expenses of some pupils, as recorded in the academy's early account books, causing

³ Martindale's book was published by Elredge and Brother of Philadelphia; Smith's by J. B. Lippincott and Company of the same city. These and other textbooks used in St. Benedict's Academy are among the archives of the school, now preserved in the college museum described *post*, p. 169.

⁴ The quotations are from pages iii and iv of Barnes's *General History*, which was published by A. S. Barnes and Company of New York and Chicago.

one to suspect that their academic loads must have been rather light. The variety of arts and crafts in which instruction was offered is reflected in the early catalogues of the academy. Students of music were offered lessons in playing the piano, the organ, the harp, the guitar, and the zither. Instruction in drawing and painting in water colors was available at eight dollars a term, painting in oils at twenty-four dollars, and on china for five dollars. The costs covered instruction only; students purchased their own materials. The school catalogues of the 1880's list instruction in various handicrafts then in vogue. In addition to "ornamental needlework" and needle-point lace, pupils could learn to make wax fruit, muslin and wax flowers, and hair wreaths.⁵ Although the school catalogues indicate that accounts were to be paid in cash and in advance, the financial records of the late 1880's show that one student's father used two cows worth twenty-five dollars each, some meat valued at eleven dollars, and a small amount of cash in paying a bill of some eighty-six dollars. Another account was settled by payments made partly in cash and partly in grain.

The Benedictine sisters who served on the teaching staff of St. Benedict's Academy were as capable a group as could be found in many Atlantic seaboard academies of the day. The institution was proud of its faculty, and it did not hesitate to draw the attention of the public to the individual talents of its teachers when advertising or printing news in the local and Twin City newspapers. The music teachers had been trained in Bavaria and in Milwaukee. Several others had attended schools in England, Germany, and the eastern United States. Though the school catalogues indicate that the institution undertook to teach "every useful and ornamental branch suitable for young ladies," the sisters felt that education concerned the whole of man and that the heart and soul as well as the mind and hand must be developed. Character building was the *raison d'être* of the school.

Except for instruction in religion and in etiquette, training in man-

⁵ Records of student expenses are to be found in the account books of the academy for 1882 and 1887-89, now in the museum of the College of St. Benedict. There, too, are displayed examples of the pioneer students' handiwork. Courses are listed in the *Annual Catalogue*, 1882-83, p. 9.

ners and morals was not given in formal classroom procedure. Rather was it hoped that the student would absorb much from the tone and atmosphere of the school as set by the teachers, prefects, and older students. To assist new students and to refresh the memory of the older ones, a set of sixteen rules was printed and placed in the dormitory and recreation rooms. Proper regard for the natural right to property was embodied in the rules that "No student is allowed to go to the desks, stands, or shelves of other pupils," and that "No student is allowed to borrow or lend clothing." Respect for parents was stressed in a rule declaring that "Pupils will write to their parents once a week." The list concluded with the warning: "Pupils must cultivate, or create, if they do not possess them, amiable disposition, polite deportment and gentle manners."⁶ If a student failed to respond to the ideals of the institution, she was corrected in private and her monthly grade or mark in conduct was lowered.

In connection with this phase of education, the sisters frowned on vanity and extravagant display in the matter of dress. Wardrobe rules, which were strictly enforced, specified that school dresses could be of any color or style, but that black sateen aprons must be worn over them during school hours. On Sundays a plain black uniform with a "brooch for closing the collar, and earrings" was to be worn. For commencement in the late 1880's the graduate was allowed to wear a "white Swiss, French Lawn, or Nun's Veiling dress, neatly and plainly made, with high neck and long sleeves; no trimmings of silk, satin, or lace; black or white boots and white kid gloves," but all jewelry except a brooch and earrings was prohibited.⁷

An important aspect of the story of St. Benedict's that might easily be overlooked is reflected in the student's daily life, her reaction to institutional living, and the many adjustments she had to make to her new surroundings. It must be remembered that in this frontier academy conveniences were of a primitive type, wood stoves at times did nothing more than smoke, and water for use in the third-floor dormitories had to be carried up three flights of stairs bucket by

⁶ The rules are among the archives of the academy.

⁷ *Annual Catalogue*, 1883-84, p. 11; 1889-90, p. 11.

bucket. Everyday life in this western academy, where luxuries were suppressed and where youthful spirits often broke into mischievous pranks, is vividly pictured in a series of imaginary letters written decades later by a student of the 1880's.⁸ An extract from one of these letters, supposedly written by a newly arrived student on September 13, 1882, follows:

"Two weeks ago today you and I were busy packing my little home-made trunk: . . . Everytime I open my trunk I have a siege of homesickness.

"Last Sunday I wore my new black dress . . . and felt as well dressed as the best. Of course the bigger girls dresses are longer than mine and sweep along the stairs and floor in grand style. Maybe Mother will lengthen my dresses at Christmas and at the same time put in a bustle. All the big girls have bustles in their Sunday dresses. I should say *had* them, for last Monday Sister Bonaventura confiscated all of them. The loss of style was bad enough, but what is worse the skirts sag in the back. But for next Sunday the girls have planned to take their black sateen aprons . . . and roll them up to replace the confiscated bustles. Won't the Sister prefect open her eyes thinking that bustles like cats have nine lives? . . .

"Ann, I will not know what to do with my big room when I return home. Here fifteen of us sleep in a large room which is called a dormitory. Each girl has for her use a narrow cot, a small washstand, and the only floor space allotted to each is that between one's bed and that of her neighbor. . . . This space which we call our 'cell' is inspected every day by the prefect for neatness as well as for censorship of vanity. Stella Lacombe's talc powder which she kept hid in her Sunday shoes was found and confiscated yesterday. A new girl who did not know about inspection lost a bottle of perfume a few days after her arrival. Lena Kerst nearly met a similar loss in the matter of highly scented soap, but Sister's practical sense would not allow the soap to be destroyed so Lena kept it on condition that her next supply of soap would be plain castile."

⁸The letters quoted appear under the title "When We Were Very Young," in the *St. Benedict's Quarterly*, 2:54, 56 (February, 1928). An introductory note indicates that they are based upon "data gleaned from the archives of St. Benedict's."

In another letter, which is dated the "1st Sunday in Dec. 1882," a mythical student told her mother about some of the inconveniences that existed at St. Benedict's Academy in the days before modern improvements in lighting and heating reached the small towns of central Minnesota. "Maggie Farrel was in tears the other day," the letter reports. "She has charge of the lamps in the study hall and chapel. Think of keeping all those lamp chimneys clean. Someone opened a door or window causing a draft through the study hall and in less time than it takes to tell, the flame in each lamp was lapping at the globe and had smoked up to such an extent that Maggie had to start cleaning them all over again. Another charge I would dislike to have here is to keep the fires going — say nothing of starting them in the morning. There is a large band stove in study hall and chapel, one in each of two dormitories and one in each of the three class rooms and infirmary."

Visits at home or with guests, which tended to distract the students from their studies, were discouraged. When they received gentlemen callers at the academy, the students were carefully chaperoned in the parlor during the visit, unless the caller was a brother or a first cousin. At times the sister directress would smilingly say that it seemed as if nothing but cousins were enrolled in St. John's University at near-by Collegeville. Despite close supervision, the young people managed to convey their messages to one another. One alumna, on visits to the academy, delighted to relate how her future husband managed to slip an engagement ring into her hand — if not onto her finger — all unknown to the sister directress, who was present during the interview.

The crowning point of the student's career at St. Benedict's was reached at the close of three years, when the young lady was "finished" and parents and friends went to St. Joseph to see her carry off her honors. Commencement day at St. Benedict's has ever been something of an event. Guests traveled by wagon, carriage, and railroad from many parts of the West. The assembly hall was decorated with ferns and flowers, and a bunting-draped stage was made more impressive by the illustrious personages seated on it. There were white dresses, flowers, and wreaths in profusion; lengthy ora-

tions by the candidates; distribution of gold medals for "proficiency" in studies and for "lady-like conduct." The prizes were distributed with all possible pomp. The bishop announced the title of the medal and the name of the winner. The recipient, arising from the front row of white-gowned girls, went up to and across the stage to receive the honor in all her finery, with sweet girlishness, and yet with the dignified step the sisters had taught her to use. Abbot Alexius and the bishop of St. Cloud were present whenever possible. They were sometimes accompanied by as many as twenty clergymen. Occasionally, as in 1884, a prominent layman gave the commencement address. In that year the Honorable John W. Arctander of Willmar, an attorney and author who had been educated abroad, delivered the oration.⁹ His local reputation drew an unusually large crowd. On another occasion the guest speaker was Herman Zschokke, chaplain to the Austrian imperial court and ex-rector of the University of Vienna. His visit to Minnesota is described in a book entitled *Nach Nordamerika und Canada*, which he wrote after he returned to Austria.¹⁰

The early commencement exercises were of interminable length, and they often tried the patience of all except perhaps the proud parents. In an old record under the date of June 22, 1881, is to be found the following note: "Commencement at the Academy in St. Joseph last night. The program was so lengthy that Bishop Rupert Seidenbusch, who was present expressed his displeasure."¹¹ Although the exercises of the years 1882 and 1883 were doubtless abridged as a result of this criticism, the brittle and faded old programs in the archives of the academy indicate that the closing exercises still would be found too lengthy by modern audiences.

During the years spent at St. Benedict's Academy, the students led a protected and sheltered life. After commencement the graduate went home "finished" and prepared to grace her father's house and to enjoy the freedom of a debutante while she practiced the arts and graces learned at the academy.

⁹ *Northwestern Chronicle*, July 3, 1884; *St. John's University Record*, 1:55 (May, 1888).

¹⁰ The volume was published at Würzburg in 1881.

¹¹ Bishop Seidenbusch's reaction is recorded in the manuscript "Chronicle" of St. John's Abbey, June 22, 1881, in the archives of the abbey at Collegeville.

In the 1890's other finishing academies arose in northern Minnesota and in the Dakotas. Though St. Benedict's Academy lost its unique position, it did not lose in enrollment, for former students sent their daughters to the school, and these daughters in turn did the same, and the excellent tone and spirit of the academy continued and was in time handed on to the college that succeeded it.



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