Territorial Daguerreotypes

THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH AND THE MINNESOTA FRONTIER

Sister Helen Angela Hurley

Until Hollywood discovered nuns, little public interest was attached to their recent activities. Today, however, it is difficult even to change the focus on the image which screen representation has fastened in the mind of every school child. A hundred years ago the attitude toward sisters was different. Then fear and distrust carried the sinister legend of convent life to the remote outposts of the frontier. Naturally, the myth was more exciting than the reality. When specimens of the dreaded genus settled down in Minnesota Territory in 1851, they caused but a negligible stir in the ever-vocal newspapers. The sisters themselves have left a matter-of-fact account of the realities of pioneer life. Their stories strike a note which Hollywood missed—an intimation that the spark which gives convents life is snuffed out neither by the logs and the weather of the 1850’s, nor by the landscapes and the edifices of the 1940’s. Furthermore, the teasing contingency of the spark adds piquancy to the tale of the first Minnesota sisters.

Three sisters of St. Joseph who pioneered in Minnesota Territory, and who knew at first hand the rigors of frontier convent life in the 1850’s, recalled their experiences many decades later in letters. They were written in 1894 and 1895 to Sister Ignatius Loyola Cox, who was then living in Stillwater. In response to inquiries

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concerning the first sisters' school and hospital in St. Paul, an Indian school taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph at Long Prairie, and their school at St. Anthony, these informing letters were addressed to a sister who had lived through the times they recall.

Sister Ignatius has been described as an "English-speaking" Minnesota girl of the 1850's; she received the habit in St. Paul in 1855. Since she had spent her entire life in and about St. Paul, Father Ambrose McNulty, a St. Paul priest, turned to her for information about the early missions of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Minnesota. The sisters to whom she appealed for help had lived in other parts of the country. Yet they had retained a keen interest in St. Paul, and, in spite of age, they were eager to rehearse the past. Sister Francis Joseph, writing in 1894 from Binghamton, New York, said she had attained "three score and ten." Sister Appolonia wrote from an orphan asylum in West Philadelphia, and Sister Ursula from an institute for deaf mutes in Buffalo, New York.

In a lengthy series of notes prepared in 1897 for Father McNulty, Sister Ignatius drew freely upon the letters received from her former companions, but she did not quote them exactly, and her report lacks much of the unsweetened savor of the originals. Father McNulty, in turn, used Sister Ignatius' notes in preparing articles for the Minnesota Historical Society and the Catholic Historical Society of St. Paul. After his death, the notes were found among his papers by Archbishop Ireland, who sent them to Acta et Dicta. There they were published in July, 1914, seventeen years after they were written.¹ The original reminiscent letters written to Sister Ignatius by the pioneer sisters are preserved in the archives of St. Joseph's Provincial House of St. Paul.² Here quoted for the first time exactly as they were written, their fading pages help us reconstruct the now faint picture of the little log Chapel of St. Paul.


² The Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies of these letters.
which as church, school, and hospital became part of the general panorama of life in Minnesota Territory.

In a letter of October 29, 1894, Sister Francis Joseph recalls her departure from St. Louis with three other Sisters of St. Joseph. They constituted “The first colony for the St. Paul mission,” she writes. In the group were “Mother St. John Fournier, of France, S’ Mary Philomene, of France, S’ Scholasticque Vasquas, a French & Spanish Creole born in St. Louis, S’ Francis Joseph Ivory, of Loretto, Pa.” They “went on board of the Steamer St Paul about 8 P.M. Tuesday,” October 28, 1851. Little is known about the members of the group. Mother St. John had volunteered to accompany a mission band which left Lyons, France, for St. Louis in 1836, but she had been sent instead to St. Etienne for a year of training in methods of teaching the deaf. She eventually reached St. Louis in September, 1837. In convents there and in Philadelphia, she spent the years before she went to St. Paul. As a twenty-four-year-old postulant in Lyons, Sister Philomene Vilaine also had volunteered for the foreign missions. She received the habit on January 3, 1836, and set out for America the next day with five sisters.

The French sisters responded to an appeal made to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons for sisters to help the struggling diocese of St. Louis. Their arrival in the Middle West marked the beginning of a century of close association between the upper Mississippi Valley and the naive little organization founded when the credulous Pauline Jaricot taught French working girls to give one cent every Saturday to aid foreign missions. Most of the money thus collected went to Asia and Africa. Narratives published in the society’s Annals, however, aroused French-reading Europeans to so much interest in American “savages” that a million francs were sent to Iowa and Minnesota. While Bishop Joseph Cre­tin was in St. Paul from 1851 to 1857, he received more than two hundred thousand francs from this French society. All the early Minnesota institutions of the Sisters of St. Joseph were financed in large part by these francs. The expenses of the sisters who went to America in 1836 were paid by the Countess de la Rochejacquelin, a
faithful reader of the *Annals*. She sold her jewels to pay the passage of six sisters who went to St. Louis, and when Mother St. John went there a year later she took with her a gift of three thousand francs from the countess. The zeal of lay Europeans was intensified in the sisters, each of whom desired to spend her life in the service of the "dear Indians."^8

Doubtless a similar motivation had caused the young Creole, Sister Scholastica, to enter a convent, and had brought the courageous and enthusiastic Sister Francis Joseph from Pennsylvania to St. Louis. The fact that Sister Francis Joseph was the most "American" of the group may have been a factor in her mission life, for she pioneered in widely separated places after she left St. Paul. Nevertheless, in 1894 the trip up the Mississippi still remained a vivid memory. "We traveled on [with] but a few Short Stops," she recalled, "as the Weather was cold and ice forming on the River. We arrived at Galena Friday the 31st of Oct. We Stopped all night, put up at M' [Nicholas] Dowlings, who was Mayor of the City, that year, his Lady was a Catholic, and was very kind to us. The following morning, being the Feast of All Saints, we heard mass and received the Holy Communion in the Chapel of the Sisters of Mercy. After breakfast, we went aboard the Steamer, and resumed our journey."

The polished wood and the brass trimmings of the old river boats made them glittering palaces, and the Mississippi of the 1850's was the scene of great activity. The boats were wonderfully and intricately built; gay music and good company usually enlivened the river excursion. Forests still clothed the rugged bluffs, helping to make the island-dotted river picturesque. Galena was a veritable Damascus, where caravans of wagons met caravans of boats. Its mayor at the time of the sisters' visit was a prosperous merchant who lived in a substantial house with pillars across the front.

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Sister Francis Joseph, however, recalls something other than her experience in luxurious surroundings at Galena when she writes: "We made about an hour or 2 delay at Debuque. We got off, and went up to see the Sisters who had been there but a short time. We then resumed our journey, the weather being chilly and damp. We did enjoy the Scenery very much. We made a short delay at Prairie de chine, when a priest (the founder of St. Paul Mission) came on board, travelled quite a distance with us. I have often heard his name, but have forgotten it. He built the first Church in St. Paul." The priest, of course, was Father Lucian Galtier, builder of the log chapel from which the city of St. Paul took its name. Under his direction, the rude church was constructed in 1841 on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi. Ten years later, when the sisters arrived, he was in charge of the parish at Prairie du Chien.

Sister Francis Joseph mentions some of the passengers on the boat bound upstream. For example, Major Abram M. Fridley, the newly appointed Indian agent for the Winnebago at Long Prairie, was on board with his family. Both Sister Scholastica and Sister Philomene eventually were to go to Long Prairie, about a hundred miles north of St. Paul, to teach among the Indian children at Fridley's agency. Although unaware of that fact, the sisters undoubtedly asked Fridley many questions about "the savages." Probably as a result of this meeting, within a few weeks the major sent his daughter Mary to St. Paul to become a boarding student in the new St. Joseph's Academy on Bench Street.

The sisters were not unexpected when they reached St. Paul. Earlier in 1851, on April 8, the Minnesota Democrat announced the consecration of Bishop Cretin in Europe and noted that he had been "very successful in securing funds for the erection of a cathedral." The newspaper then went on to relate that "a religious community at Lyons propose to send out four sisters of the Order for the purpose of establishing a Ladies' Seminary here." Since he had worked with Sisters of St. Joseph before he went to the United States in 1838, it is probable that Bishop Cretin did appeal to the mother house in Lyons for teaching sisters for his St. Paul diocese. By 1851, however, no more sisters were sent from France for the
American missions, since St. Louis had become an independent mother house. If a recommendation was received from Lyons, it doubtless stimulated special effort on the part of the St. Louis group.

In an article entitled "Minnesota a Summer Resort for the Wealthy of the South," which the Democrat carried on July 8, the sisters were mentioned again. The story elaborates on the healthfulness and beauty of Minnesota and on the trifling cost at which these advantages could be enjoyed by "gentlemen residing in New Orleans." In addition, the frontier editor who wrote the account points out, "Here every facility will soon be offered for educating their children. A University that will vie with the best in the Union, will soon be erected at the Falls of St. Anthony. It has been liberally endowed by the Government. The Rev. Bishop Creten has arrived with six assistants—he has five lady teachers engaged and is about commencing to build an extensive college at St. Paul. But a short time will elapse before many of the children of the southern valley of the Mississippi will be sent to this healthy region to be educated. Let them come, they will be cheerfully welcomed as kindred who drink with us out of the greatest river in the world." The "extensive college" was a three-story brick structure at Sixth and Wabasha streets—a combined church-school-residence to which Bishop Cretin repaired upon the arrival of the sisters in November. The newspaper's prophecy of an apostolate for the wealthy in St. Paul by the Sisters of St. Joseph was not fulfilled, even at a later period. Their own high purpose of converting hordes of savages, heretics, and infidels, as the Annals had it, can also be written off as a virtual failure. They were destined, rather, to spend a hundred years in good works so small and routine that they largely defy enumeration.

The Democrat briefly announced the sisters' arrival in St. Paul in its issue of November 18: "Four Sisters of charity have arrived at St. Paul, from St. Louis, and will shortly commence teaching a ladies' seminary in the old Catholic chapel." Sister Francis Joseph's more detailed and colorful report is worth quoting. She recalled that "We arrived at St. Paul during the night of Nov. 2nd when we woke up to look at our new home. It looked very dreary, the
hills were covered with Snow, the Cap[tain] sent [a] messenger to the Bishop. about 10 AM. a French Cleric came down for us, took us to a Lady named Madam Tourpan [Turpin], who received us very kindly, and treated us to a very good Dinner. After a rest, the Rt. Rev. Bishop Creten came accompanied by a young Cleric. We then were shown Our New home, a small fram[e] Shanty on the River-bank. We took our first meal, Supper, (Nov. 3) in the vestry of the Old log Church. We had difficulty to get Water enough to make our tea as there was but one Well in the town and that was locked up. We rested in the Vestry until the Students removed all their Effects from their Pro-Theological Seminary. We then took possession of our new home. Opened School [on the] following Monday, in the Vestry. I had charge of the English department, as all the other Sister[s] were French. That week we received our first boarder [for] the Embryo Academy, Miss Martha Ellen Rice. We fixed up an old shed back of the Shanty. M. [Henry M.] Rice furnished her room, a good bed, &c, very comfortable.

Members of the Rice family now living are unable to identify Miss Rice; they believe she may have been a cousin. The St. Paul census for 1850 lists an Ellen Rice, twenty-four years old, born in Vermont. It is known that Henry Rice was friendly to the work of the sisters, since it was he who in 1853 donated to them the land on which St. Joseph's Hospital was built and where it still stands. The tract was so large that part of it was used as the site for the German Catholic Church of the Assumption. Mary Fridley was enrolled as a boarding student in December, and Mary Bottineau, a mixed-blood from St. Anthony, was received in March. "The young Ladies did well," wrote Sister Francis Joseph, and they "seemed happy." She adds an interesting little progress report: "We had a well attended School, as it was the Only one, Except the boy's Class in the basement of the Church, taught by a M' Kelly, who became a priest of the Diocese afterwards. We had very happy times, yet some days we did not tast[e] food, until night. In the Spring we moved the School into the Old Church. We had the building filled." The problem of space was solved in the summer of 1852, when a two-story brick building was erected on Bench Street.
for the school of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The lower floor was divided into two school rooms and the upper floor was used for the sleeping apartments of the boarders, who then numbered sixteen.

In addition to teaching "girls and young ladies" to read, write, and calculate, the sisters soon had thrust upon them by the rapidly growing frontier town the work of caring for orphans and the sick poor. Sister Francis Joseph explained how these new duties developed. In the spring of 1852, she recalled, "many emigrants came to Minn, clearing land, put up temporary residences. Many of these people took sick, some died, there was no place to take them. Whilst I was there, a French Doctor, interested in the affair, tried to get up a Hospital. I heard him talk the matter over to Mother St. John. He said Mr. Henry Rice, said he would give land for the building, and an Indian Sioux Chief promised timber from the land over the River about wher[e] Minneapolis now lies. That was the first about the hospital M. St. John promised Sisters. The
Shanty became a temporary house, until the hospital was built, which as you know became the Noviciat[e] and Academy."

In the early 1850's there were some cases of Asiatic cholera in St. Paul. Usually the victims were passengers on or members of crews from river boats. As there were no hospital facilities, the sisters converted the old log chapel into a temporary infirmary and cared for the cholera patients as best they could. Although St. Joseph's Hospital at Ninth and Exchange was started in the summer of 1853, the building was not completed until late in the summer of 1854. It was a four-story stone structure surrounded by walks and gardens. A "beautiful pure stream of spring water" ran near the building and through the present Seven Corners. The hospital accommodated city and county patients, as well as private patients. If they were unable to pay the sisters' charge of eight dollars a week, they were admitted free. Orphans were housed in the same building, and the novitiate of the sisters also was located there. Two little brick buildings on the grounds were used as schools. One was a German school for the Assumption parish, and the other a free school for the girls of the Cathedral parish. Glowing accounts of the sisters' good works appeared in the St. Paul papers, which published detailed descriptions of the building in announcing its completion. The editors pictured the sisters "relieving the sufferings of the distressed, or soothing the last hours of the dying," or wrote of them as "Angels of Mercy," who provided "the best of nursing, clean and airy rooms, good diet, and attention." They "cheated the stern tyrant of many victims there, and sent them 'on their way rejoicing,' full of gratitude to those who prefer to minister over the couch of suffering, to leading a life of flaunting idleness and vanity."  

*For contemporary St. Paul reports of the early days of St. Joseph's Hospital, see the Daily Minnesota Pioneer, January 26, 1855; the Minnesota Democrat, February 14, 1855; and the Daily Minnesotian, October 22, 1857. Articles dealing with or touching on its history include John M. Culligan and Harold J. Prendergast, "St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul," in Acta et Dicta, 6:195-199 (October, 1934); John M. Armstrong, "History of Medicine in Ramsey County," in Minnesota Medicine, 21:852 (December, 1938); Armstrong, "The Asiatic Cholera in St. Paul," ante, 14:288; and Theodore C. Blegen, "From Cottage to Clinic," in Grass Roots History, 209 (Minneapolis, 1947). The stream flowing through Seven Corners was pictured in 1852 by Robert O. Sweeney; his original sketch is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.*
The sisters received similar praise for work in the Indian school at Long Prairie. This project was dear to the heart of Bishop Cretin, as the result of an earlier experience among the Winnebago in Wisconsin and Iowa. Through a personal appeal to President Millard Fillmore and the Indian Office, the bishop obtained a school for these Indians after they had been removed from their earlier reservations to Long Prairie. The new school gave Bishop Cretin great satisfaction, but his triumph was short-lived. In 1855 the Indians were removed again—this time to Blue Earth.⁵

Among the nuns who taught at Long Prairie was Sister Ursula Murphy. She tells of her experiences at this northern mission in a letter to Sister Ignatius written on January 28, 1895. "Long Prairie Mission was commenced immediately after the Sisters arrival in St. Paul," Sister Ursula recalls. Of the original group, Sister Scholastica "was sent to Long Prairie and the others remained in St. Paul. S' S. went alone, she stayed with the family of M' Laquea [Legeau], his oldest daughter was Sister's companion. . . . I was sent to Long Prairie Jan. 3, 1854. . . . I remained there until the Indians were removed to Blue Earth. The Bishop had the school for the Indian children from the Government at Washington. He placed Rev. de Vivaldi at the head, or I may say rather in charge of it."

After becoming involved in political difficulties in Italy during the revolution of 1848, Canon Vivaldi left Europe in 1851 with Bishop Cretin. Deceived by the Italian's charm of manner, the bishop introduced him to members of his own family, and indicated his trust in the priest by placing him in charge of a mission of the new diocese of St. Paul. As time went on, however, the canon greatly embarrassed Bishop Cretin, who expressed his displeasure in letters to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith at Lyons, characterizing the canon as a person of "a too independent zeal." The bishop wished, he said, that Vivaldi's faults were "of the head

⁵Revealing accounts of the Long Prairie school, sent by the agent to the commissioner of Indian affairs, are to be found in the latter's Annual Reports, 1851, p. 165; 1852, p. 51-53; 1853, p. 72-74; 1854, p. 61; and 1855, p. 56-58. The writer has copies of letters sent from Minnesota to Washington about the Winnebago mission; the originals are preserved in the Catholic Indian Bureau in Washington.
Sister Ursula is more specific, for according to her, "Rev. de Vivaldi ran the mission heavily in debt. The Bishop had to make the loss good with the money of the diocese. This is what induced the Bishop to give up the mission," writes Sister Ursula. She recalls that "The Bishop was terribly distressed over the disgrace it was to the church as well as to the diocese, and to think that the good that might be done for those poor souls had to be abandoned. You know the Sisters did not go to Blue Earth when the Indians were removed there. Rev. de Vivaldi hired secular ladies to teach them for a short time."

Of even greater interest is Sister Ursula's account of the Long Prairie mission school, and of the varied activities that revolved about this remote Indian agency. She points out that "The children remained with their parents and attended the school. According to their treaty, each pupil received a certain amount of flour, pork, blankets, and everything needed for food & raiment. Each of us received $40. per month, the Superintendent recd $60. per month, besides there was a farmer, who had to take the boys a certain number of hours in the week to teach them how to work. He recd $50. per month. All of which came out of the school funds. There were horses and all farming implements. Also a store-house for their provisions. You know every thing had to be bought in St Paul, and hauled in wagons to the Mission. It was in one of those trips that I was hauled up there."

In order to amuse her correspondent, Sister Ursula tells about the journey to Long Prairie. "You know Dear Bishop Cretin was fond of sending Sisters off alone, so I had to go alone," she writes. "As I have said, the teams had to go to St. Paul for provisions etc. for the school. They came after Christmas so I was sent with them. They were driven by young men (Half Breeds) The weather was extremely severe, and I was not well provided for such a journey in an open wagon, loaded with barrels of flour & pork, etc. After riding all day we arrived late in the evening at a little log house, occupied by an old couple & their son. They had no accommoda-

*See especially Bishop Cretin's letters of March 21 and June 7 and 11, 1856. The Minnesota Historical Society has translations of these and other letters to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.
tions, however we were glad to get shelter for the night. . . . The old woman fell in love with me, she tried every way she could think of to have me stay with her. She seemed almost heartbroken next morning when I was leaving her. The next day we were overtaken by a man by the name of Moran, with a team loaded with provisions going to the pineries above Long Prairie. We put up at Waatab for the night. Mr. Moran came to me and asked where I was going, how I came to be alone. He said I see those men have no judgement or no care for your safety, you will never get there alive travelling in this way. I will take you in my sleigh and try to get you there safe. You will perish if you remain as you are. I asked if he were going the same way, he said yes, I will keep right along with them. I want to take care of you. I consented to travel in his sleigh, he deprived himself of his Buffalo robes, blankets, &c. for my comfort. At night where ever we put up the best accommodation had to be for me, the rest might be satisfied with any thing they could get. When we arrived at Long Prairie, Rev de Vivaldi met us. After M'r Moran left he shewed some displeasure and asked me why I was with that Orangeman. I told him how, and why. I had been sent out without robes or blankets and the men had kept theirs for themselves & I was very cold, when that man took me and gave me his robes and took good care of me all the way. It seemed to satisfy Rev. F de V. He said 'that is an orange-man of the worst kind.' But I did not think so. I never met the man since, but I often pray for him."

Another sister who taught at Long Prairie, Sister Appolonia, supplements Sister Ursula's report in a letter written on January 23, 1895. "You might like to know how many stories high our house was at Long Prairie," she tells Sister Ignatius. "Well! it was one Room," the writer goes on to relate, recalling that before the sisters arrived, "it had been used for keeping the salt meat in for the use of the Indians." For the sisters, "it sufficed for Parlor, School Room Kitchen and in fact for everything." Sister Appolonia describes also "a little Room upstairs with hay on the floor to sleep on that was [all] the mattresses we had."

The third mission established by the Sisters of St. Joseph in
territorial days was located at St. Anthony, in what is now East Minneapolis. Sister Ursula recalled that the “St. Anthony Mission opened, Nov. 5, 1853,” with “Sister Philomene Superior, Sister Ursula, teacher, cook, & house-maid in general with a young lady to assist me; as well as I remember her name was Bridget Malony. She was from Dubuque. The Bishop thought a great deal of her.”

Contemporary newspapers throw additional light on the subject. According to the St. Anthony Express of June 3, 1854, the Reverend Denis Ledon, the pastor at St. Anthony, was making arrangements “for the erection of a large building for a Female Academy, in this place.” On the following November 25, the Daily Minnesota Pioneer of St. Paul announced that the St. Anthony Seminary had opened under the management of “Mother Abbess Scholastica Nasquer,” and that it had “between 30 and 40 boarding scholars. The building is capable of holding 100 scholars, and as the Abbess has called to her aid three ‘Sisters’ there is no difficulty in regard to a sufficient number of teachers. French, Latin and Music, together with the English branches, are taught in this institution.”

The showy newspaper notices are a striking contrast to the simplicity of the serene conclusion in each of the sisters’ letters. Sister Francis Joseph longed for one more little peek into St. Paul. Sister Appolonia said: “On my arrival at St. Paul, I was expecting a grand house to my surprise it was a log Cabin with one room, and a shed Kitchen with a few small out houses which accommodated eight boarders, we had to saw the wood for fires having no coal. We had to place the victuals all on one dish when cooked and enjoy it the best we could so you see we Kept the Vow of Poverty well and indeed we were happy with all the hard work. . . . I often give the sisters a laugh telling about those days.” Sister Ursula wrote, “I never forget my early life in St. Paul; it seems to be the only life I ever lived.” From the optimism of the territorial newspapers to the lengthy complaints of Bishop Cretin in his pleas to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith for his poverty-ridden diocese, the letters of the pioneer sisters point a middle way which is full of quiet confidence for all its ruggedness.