

Catholic nuns in 19th-century Williamsport

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI



Williamsport tripled in size between 1860 and 1870, from a village of 5,600 to a city of 16,000. Relocating to the city were American-born entrepreneurs, many from New York and New Jersey. They became lumber barons, bankers and industrialists. Also relocating to the West Branch

were workers from Germany, Ireland and other European countries, as well as African Americans.

Many women came with their entrepreneur husbands. Single women also came to the city from nearby communities to take jobs supporting the lumber industry — they

worked as domestics, served as cooks and ran boarding houses for the workers.

Two groups of women came on a significantly different mission. Their mission was to teach in the newly established Catholic schools in Williamsport. In 1874, four Sisters of Christian Charity came from Wilkes-Barre to teach at the parish school of St. Boniface. Then in 1878, six Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary came from Scranton to teach at St. Joseph's School.

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Lifestyle

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PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown, above left, is St. Boniface Church on Washington Boulevard. Above right is the convent of the Sisters of Christian Charity at St. Boniface church and school. Photos courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Catholic nuns in 19th-century Williamsport

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St. Boniface School

Thirty German Catholic families organized St. Boniface Church in 1853. The next year, they erected a frame structure on the present site of the church on Washington Boulevard. In 1859, before the nuns came, a parish school was established; it operated several months of the year with lay teachers.

There is some evidence that a German-speaking African American man, Cornelius Gilchrist, who was a teacher for Williamsport's African-American children, was one of those teachers. Classes most likely were in German.

In 1874, the Rev. Koepfer entrusted the school to the Sisters of Christian Charity. Sister Germana, the principal, and three associates arrived late that year to teach 80 students. Although the sisters came from the motherhouse in Wilkes-Barre, most likely all were born in Germany. Pauline Mallinckrodt, a member of an aristocratic family in Prussia founded the order in 1850, during a difficult time in Prussia called the Kulturkampf, when Otto von Bismarck rose to power and closed down Catholic churches and institutions.

At the same time, German-speaking Catholic churches and schools were being established in the New World, and the sisters were called upon to teach in these schools. A provincial motherhouse and novitiate were established in Wilkes-Barre, and teachers were sent out to parish schools in the diocese.

In 1880, a convent was built on St. Boniface Street, across from the church. It experienced several additions through the years. An article in the Daily Gazette and Bulletin in September 1880, announcing the dedication of the new convent, noted that the sisters were "excellent disciplinarians and good teachers." I think any former St. Boniface student (as I was), could attest that this was still true 100 years later.

St. Joseph's School

St. Boniface was the only Catholic Church in Williamsport until 1865.

Annunciation Parish was established in 1865 by 60 English-speaking families (mostly Irish-American) who left St. Boniface, where the German language prevailed. In 1867, they built a small brick church on Edwin Street. Less than 25 years later, in 1889, the beautiful Gothic church, built on land donated by Peter Herdic, was dedicated.

The Rev. Eugene Garvey, "a zealous young priest" according to a history of Annunciation, resolved to establish a school "to strengthen the faith of the rising generation." He requested that the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart take charge. Families in the parish were required to have their children attend the new school.

So in September 1878, Mother Superior M. Anastasia, along with Sister M. Xavier, Sister M. Casimir, Sister M. Irene, Sister M. Agnes and Sister M. Louis, the housekeeper, settled in Williamsport.

There are few indications of what life was like in Williamsport for these religious women, but a history of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary noted that "St. Joseph's at Williamsport was then the farthest mission from the mother house (Scranton), and the departure of the little band had caused more excitement than does the departure of a mission band in these days for the far West."

The Sisters' letters from this outpost mission were eagerly read, and the homecoming of the sisters for the annual retreat was a big event in the life of the community. The simple announcement, "The Williamsport Sisters have arrived," was sufficient to gather the others from all parts of the house to welcome the "foreign missionaries" (The Sisters of the I.H.M.: the story of the founding of the congregation of the sisters, servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and their work in the Scranton di-



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the Lycoming county Historical Society, is St. Joseph's School on Edwin Street. The rectory of the Church of the Annunciation is to the left of the school building.

cese, 1921).

Although married women can be difficult to research because they used their husbands' names and slaves are hard to research because they often had no surnames, the nuns also are difficult to trace because they gave up both their family names and their Christian names.

The Mother Superior at St. Joseph's was Catherine Hannigan from Susquehanna County. Two of her biological sisters also joined the convent. She and most members of the order were of Irish descent.

The school, according to a history written by Sister Dechantal, principal of St. Joseph's in 1956, was a two-story-high brick building with four rooms on West Edwin Street. There were 223 students, and each teacher had two classes in her classroom. The parish also had a night school for adults, for which it charged a fee of \$1 a month.

McMunn family

Many members of the Edward McMunn family,

including my grandfather, my great-aunts and uncles, my mother and her brothers and sisters and many of their children, were students at that school. One family story is that my great-grandmother Margaret felt so sorry for the pastor, who was riding around town on a bicycle trying to raise money, that she gave him the mortgage money. In return, The Rev. Garvey promised that our family would be blessed forever — and we have been.

There was no central heating, so each classroom had a large stove, which the boys fought over the privilege of maintaining. Water was from a wooden pump in front of the school. In 1900, a new school was built to accommodate six teachers and 300 students. The school still stands.

The sisters at first were housed in the rectory at the corner of Walnut and West Edwin streets. The first convent, built on West Edwin Street in 1881, was in use until May 1924, when the nuns moved to what is now the Rowley House Museum, just across West

Fourth Street from the church. The surroundings were gracious compared to their previous rooms on the third floor of the old convent, rooms that were said to resemble oversize closets.

Since the late 19th century, the Sisters of Christian Charity and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have made significant contributions to shaping the lives of generations of Williamsport children. They have given up a life in the community for a life dedicated to children and to the church.

The Lycoming County Women's History Project welcomes stories from sisters and their families that will enrich our portrait of women in the West Branch Valley.

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