

Celebrating 125 Years – The Journey Continues

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The 125-year history of the Duluth Benedictine Sisters is a continuation of the story begun 165 years ago when the first Benedictine women to settle in North America arrived at St. Marys, Pennsylvania, from Eichstatt, Bavaria. From there some traveled to St. Joseph, Minnesota, to establish St. Benedict's Convent, and from there some to Duluth. The challenges these pioneering women faced in coming to Duluth were immense. They had left the security of their motherhouse in St. Joseph, journeyed to what was still considered the "wilderness" of northeastern Minnesota, were impoverished and at first unwelcome in the predominantly non-Catholic city. They had to decide if they should use their scant funds to begin elementary schools, build small hospitals for iron miners and lumberjacks, or buy acres of land far from the city's center on which to build what would one day be a motherhouse and a college. Should they respond to the needs for Sisters to minister to the elderly, to orphans? Should they respond to requests to establish and/or staff schools throughout Minnesota and beyond when they barely had enough Sisters to meet the needs of their own diocese? After establishing their independent foundation in Duluth in 1892, the Community began to answer each of these questions in turn—and each with a "yes."

Expansion of Ministries

By the end of Mother Scholastica's nineteen years as prioress in 1911, the Benedictine Sisters were staffing 18 elementary parish schools, four secondary schools, five hospitals, an orphanage, a home for the elderly, and a School of Nursing. Community membership at the time of her death in 1911 was 161 Sisters, an increase that allowed Sisters to respond more fully to other needs of the area and beyond the diocese in addition to education and health care.

St. James Orphanage

When the original St. Mary's Hospital at 22nd Avenue West and 3rd Street reached its capacity and needed to expand, a new hospital that could accommodate twice as many patients was built at 5th Avenue West and 3rd Street on land originally intended as a site for the Benedictine motherhouse. When the "new" St. Mary's Hospital opened in 1898, Mrs. Peter Kerst, mother of Mother Scholastica and Sister Alexia, purchased the former hospital building in 1900 for the Sisters to use as an orphanage. The Community took on the cost of repairing, repurposing, and furnishing the building, and eight Sisters welcomed 25 children the day it opened. Archival records show that although orphan fees and other outside funding helped with care of the children, it was never sufficient to cover the full cost or that of the Sisters' living expenses or provide them with even a nominal salary.



*The first building of the original
St. James Orphanage when completed in 1910*

Ten years later when more than 100 children needed a home, Bishop James McGolrick, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Duluth, and other benefactors purchased a 45-acre tract of wooded property in Duluth's Woodland community, and after a year's construction a new St. James Home was opened, with care provided by the Benedictine Sisters. Placement of children changed over the years. In the early years, involuntary separation

due to a parent's sickness or death of one or both parents was common. In later years children were brought to the home because of neglect issues, and, as divorce became more prevalent in society, the need for dependent care increased. The orphanage was incorporated as an institution of the Diocese of Duluth in 1916, and the Sisters continued to staff the home along with dedicated laypeople and clergy.

Children learned responsibility through completion of their assigned chores in the upkeep of the buildings, learned vegetable gardening and helped with livestock, which provided food for their large family. The facility also offered farm and industrial training. A letter written by Mother Celestine Sullivan in October 1918 to the St. James Board of Directors described the three classrooms with an enrollment of 84 students. She also described the difficulty in determining which grade a child should be in when they came from ungraded schools or had no prior education, and what the teachers were doing to address the problem. Many of the children left after a year to live with relatives, were adopted, or were old enough to be employed. But for many, as former residents have attested, St. James Orphanage was the only childhood home they had, and they remember the Sisters who cared for them with fondness.



Sister Pascal Pocta (1911-2008) made whatever cake a birthday celebrant requested and had matching cupcakes for the rest of the children.

In later years St. James' Orphanage underwent significant changes, in large part because of new federal relief programs enacted during President Franklin Roosevelt's administration that provided unemployment insurance, disability benefits, and aid to dependent children. This enabled more families to stay together or encouraged relatives to assume the children's care. Over the years the children's needs for a home changed, as did the number of Sisters who were available to care for them. St. James Children's Home was licensed for the care of 40 emotionally disturbed children in 1965. Six years later it had separated from Catholic Social Services and a new corporation, Woodland Hills, was formed. Two Sisters continued after this transition – Sister Mary Martin Beringer as housemother and Sister Paschal Pocta as cook and kitchen manager. Sister Mary Martin ultimately served at St. James/Woodland Hills for 23 years. Sister Paschal endeared herself to "her" boys and girls during her twenty years with them by her loving ways, her welcoming smile, and the wonderful creations that came from her kitchen. Both Sisters were honored in separate ceremonies commending them for their dedication to the children.

What began in 1900 as a small orphanage owned and staffed by the Benedictine Sisters has evolved into Woodland Hills, which today is a residential and day treatment facility staffed by lay professionals that offers a variety of services, with programming focusing on trauma repair, social development, and relationship building.



Sister Mary Martin (1922-2015) provided the teenage boys with stability, taught them practical skills, took them shopping and on outings, and learned about hockey and football so she could better connect with them.

St. Ann's Home

When the building at 20th Avenue West and Third Street that had been St. Mary's Hospital and then St. James' Orphanage was vacated, the Sisters established a home for the aged. It was repurposed by the Sisters once again to become the first St. Ann's Home, which ministered to the elderly from 1911 to 1956.

Most of the building was used to house elderly residents, and although it served them well for decades, the aging structure required considerable maintenance that became increasingly costly, much of which was put off for lack of funds. In 1956, 45 years after the first occupants came to St. Ann's Home, a complete overhaul of the plumbing and the electrical wiring system was ordered by the state fire marshal, a requirement that would involve substantial renovation. Mother Martina Hughes and the Community determined that the cost was too high and began to seek alternative housing for the residents. Some went to nursing homes in Superior, Wisconsin, some to the St. Louis County Cook Home. All residents were placed except for "nine very elderly ladies," according to archival records. Bishop Thomas Welch visited the administrator of St. Mary's Hospital on their behalf, and a wing on the hospital's first floor was given for their use.



The original St. Mary's Hospital/St. James Orphanage/St. Ann's Home was razed because it was too costly to bring up to code.

The *Duluth Herald* included a story by staff writer Walter Eldot on May 25, 1956 that lamented that "the oldest institutional building in Duluth is nearing the end of its service." Eldot went on to say:

Oldtimers who have made their home there for decades are saddened by having to move. Other Duluthians, too, may view the passage of this ancient landmark of service with feelings of regret and nostalgia. But in a broader sense, as the Benedictine Sisters and public welfare leaders indicated, it may serve as a poignant challenge to secure better provisions for the city's aged.

Thus, upon the crumbling cornerstone of Duluth's oldest institutional building may grow the firm foundation of bigger things to come.

Although Bishop Welch recognized the need for a new "St. Ann's Home" and announced plans for such a facility in 1957, he died three years later and did not see his dream become a reality. His successor, Bishop Francis J. Schenk, continued the dream and began to look for a site. In March 1961 the Whiteside mansion on Ashtabula Hill, facing Lake Superior and adjacent to St. Mary's Hospital, was purchased by the Diocese and razed, along with several smaller buildings.



St. Ann's Residence today

A building committee was formed, architectural plans were developed, and application was made to the Federal Housing Administration for a long-term loan. In May 1961 approval of the \$2,427,000 loan to cover most of the project was announced by Senators Hubert H. Humphrey and Eugene J. McCarthy and Representative John A. Blatnik. To that date, the six-story 187-unit facility that could accommodate 234 residents was the largest ever approved project under the federal housing for the elderly program. The facility was not a nursing home, according to the building committee, but rather a home that would “provide congregate living facilities for the aged.” The cost of constructing an adjacent chapel connected near the main entrance of the building was not included in the government loan.



*Sister Magdalen Dooper
1912-2009*



*Sister Thea Sandusky
1908-2013*

Groundbreaking took place on March 23, 1962, and residents began to move in on October 1, 1963. Many Benedictine Sisters had worked with the elderly over the years, but two Sisters spent most of their lives in this ministry. Sister Magdalen Dooper’s 40-year ministry began at the original St. Ann’s Home, then during the interim St. Ann’s at St. Mary’s Hospital, and then again with the residents at the new St. Ann’s Home until she retired and moved to the Monastery in 1996. Sister Thea Sandusky began her ministry in 1961 with the elderly housed at St. Mary’s Hospital and moved with them to the new St. Ann’s Home where she spent 23 years at the Information Desk and in clerical services.

On March 17, 1977, the facility’s name was changed from “St. Ann’s Home” to “St. Ann’s Residence” to underscore the fact that it is an apartment building, not an infirmary. Today the facility is a nonprofit entity no longer under the auspices of the Diocese but managed by a secular board of directors

McCabe Guest Home

An interesting sidebar to the story of St. Ann’s is that of McCabe, known since 1977 as McCabe Renewal Center. Built in 1914, the Georgian-style three-story home stands on four acres of beautiful grounds at 2125 Abbotsford Avenue in Duluth and was the home of W.J. McCabe and Jane Chidlaw McCabe and their two sons, Ben and John. The house had 19 rooms, 6.5 baths, and six fireplaces. In addition to housing the immediate family, it was a gathering place for the McCabe extended family, including some relatives who stayed for a longer period of time while attending school.

Sometime after W. J. McCabe died in 1933 and Mrs. McCabe had moved into an apartment, her sons were given the tasks of disposing of the house and property. In 1940 they offered their family home as a gift to St. Ann’s home, then located at 20th Avenue West and 3rd Street, and thus to the Sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery who owned St. Ann’s. The home underwent some renovation to accommodate the needs of retired men and women and became known as McCabe Guest



Residents at McCabe Guest Home

House, a “place of gracious living for senior adults who no longer lived in their own homes.” During those years McCabe was home to 15 to 20 adults with a staff of four Benedictine Sisters. Mrs. McCabe then chose to return to her home where she lived until her death in 1947.

When the “new” St. Ann’s Home opened in 1963 at its present site on Fourth Avenue East and Third Street, all the residents of McCabe Guest Home moved into the new facility. State guidelines for senior housing had been standardized, and the McCabe Guest Home did not meet the regulations.

The McCabe property had multiple uses between 1963-1977, including housing students from The College of St. Scholastica and their Sister prefects, and housing for several Benedictine Sisters who cared for the house and grounds and gave piano lessons. In 1977 the home became McCabe Renewal Center, a facility that offers retreats and programs promoting spiritual and personal growth to people of many religious traditions.

The facility is also available to nonprofit groups for their use when their missions are in harmony with those of the Center. McCabe Renewal Center is an integral part of the expanded Center for Spirituality and Enrichment housed at the Monastery.

The McCabe estate had a carriage house which from 1968 through 1983 housed The Barn art program that became an important part of the childhoods of more than 800 young participants. Assisted each summer by other Sisters and laypeople, Sister Mary Charles McGough opened her artist’s studio and developed programming that encouraged creativity to flourish on the McCabe grounds. “These children, like little sponges, absorbed the connectedness between the beauty all around and within themselves,” she said.



McCabe Renewal Center

St. Gertrude’s School of Arts and Crafts

Father Thomas Verner Moore from Fort August Abbey in Scotland and a small group of Americans purchased a tract of land in Washington, D.C. in 1923 on which to build a Benedictine Priory, which was named St. Anselm’s. Dom Thomas, as he was to be known, had long desired to provide care and education for Catholic children with special needs and in 1924 had plans to open a facility for them. He gave a retreat to the Duluth Benedictines and told Mother Agnes Somers about his project. She brought the idea to the Community Chapter as a possible ministry. Subsequently several Sisters were sent to the University of Minnesota and Columbia University to prepare.

In 1926 three Sisters and one postulant began the Community’s ministry at St. Gertrude’s School of Arts and Crafts that would continue for nearly 70 years. What began in a barn refurbished as a



Arrival of Sisters at St. Gertrude’s in August 1926 with Dom Thomas and another Benedictine monk, along with ladies of what would become the St. Gertrude’s Guild.

school with just two students on farmland purchased by the monks adjacent to their property, quickly became overcrowded and was replaced with a new school building in 1928. The Sisters and some students continued to live in a renovated farmhouse until a new classroom and dormitory was constructed in 1968. The Sisters then moved into the 1928 building except for the Sister Prefects who lived with the children in their dormitory.

The school cared for and educated up to 40 girls a year, ages six to nineteen, who were classified as educable but mildly emotionally disturbed and/or disabled. Offerings included academic, pre-vocational and vocational training, physical education, arts and crafts instruction, speech therapy, and self-help skills. The girls were taken on field trips each month to museums and historic places in the Washington, D.C. area as well as to programs and plays. The older girls learned office and home economics skills.

Many Sisters were assigned to this ministry, some for between ten and thirty years. Sister Maureen Harney's ministry lasted for more than forty years, and she was Director for most of that time. In 1968 the newly-constructed classroom and dormitory building was named Harney Hall in recognition of her commitment to the school.

In the 1970s federal legislation had provided that parents could request funding for exceptional children to attend a special school if their needs were not being met in the public schools. The beginning of the end of St. Gertrude's School began when it became more difficult for parents to secure funding for their special-needs daughters to attend St. Gertrude's because school districts, which were losing out on per-student funding, wanted them to attend public schools. By the late 1980s parents were hiring lawyers to challenge the school districts, a largely costly and ineffective action, and by the early 1990s enrollment had dwindled to only a few girls. St. Gertrude's was closed in 1992, and the property and buildings were sold to Boys' Town, which established several programs there for disadvantaged boys and girls.



Sister Maureen Harney and student.

The Journey Continues

The story of the Duluth Benedictines from the beginning has been to respond to the needs of the people and places to which they were called. An orphanage, housing for the elderly, and a school for girls with special needs were examples of new and different ministries even as the Community was also expanding efforts in its more traditional ministries of education and health care. While they continued teaching primarily in the Diocese of Duluth, as the Community grew in membership the Sisters expanded their teaching and parish ministries throughout Minnesota as well as in Cincinnati, Chicago, and the Phoenix area because of special requests for Benedictine Sisters. The early history of the Community was a journey into the unknown, one that can be described in the words of the poet Rainier Maria Rilke (*Letters to a Young Poet*): "It is not the answers that show us the way, but the questions."

Clearly the challenges faced by the Duluth Benedictines when they left the security of their motherhouse in St. Joseph and traveled to what was still considered the wilderness of northeastern Minnesota became questions: how to settle in a predominantly non-Catholic city that was not welcoming, how to best use their scant funds for ministries, what schools should they staff, how could they meet the city's overwhelming need for health care? And as they faced the challenges that raised more questions for the young Community, "It was not the answers that showed them the way, but the questions."