

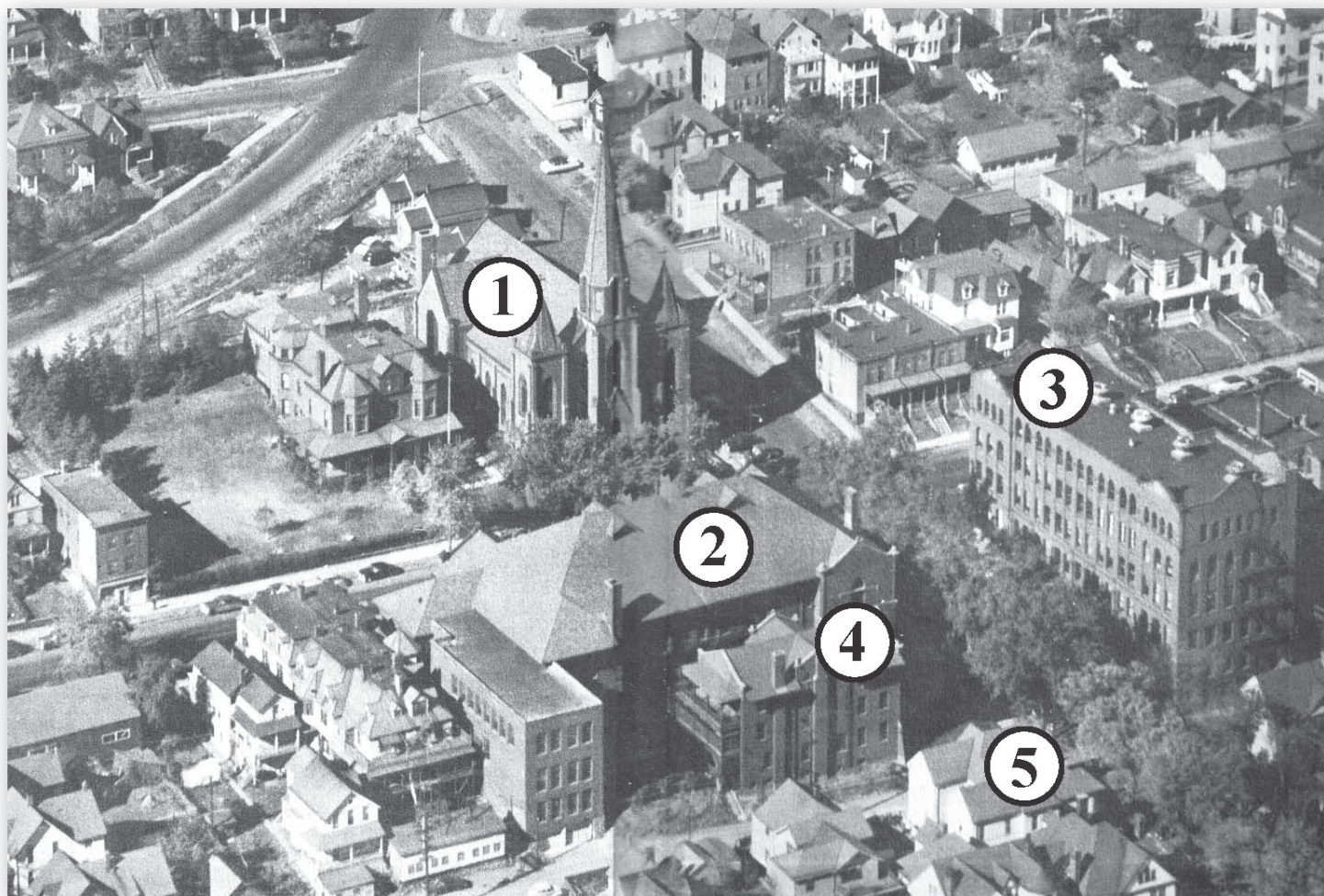
ECHOES FROM THE PAST

By Sister Mary Catherine Shambour

If you have ever visited an historical site and tried to imagine what took place there, you would undoubtedly look for clues. If none are available or if they had been destroyed, you would need to consult survivors or eyewitnesses, as long as they are available. One such clueless site exists in Duluth: the miniscule gravel parking lot lining Second Avenue West at its intersection with Fourth Street. Since I once spent nine years of my early professional life there, I would like to relate a part of its history before it is forgotten.

While Duluth is currently grappling with the issue of building a new high school, it might be a surprise to many that on that site once stood for fifty-six years (1907-1963) Cathedral Senior High School, a four-story, private Catholic senior high school with gymnasium, locker rooms, library, offices, and twenty classrooms complete with all accoutrements for providing a comprehensive, top-notch secondary education of the day. In addition, a few blocks to the east stood the thriving Lincoln Junior High School and the iconic brownstone Central High School. (“Where have all the children gone, long time passing?”)

To understand the story one must know something of the important role played by the Catholic community in the cultural history of early Duluth, particularly as clustered around the Sacred Heart Cathedral on Fourth Street, consecrated in 1892. (See below, number 1) As the community grew, it strove to preserve the faith of its children by providing a Catholic education for all. Thus, by 1904, the parish constructed its second and far larger building, Sacred Heart School (number 2) with its impressive 1,200-seat auditorium and classrooms for both its own parish grade school and a Cathedral High School open to students from all parishes. Since the Benedictine Sisters had established themselves in Duluth by 1892, they were called upon to be the educators, and in the school’s sixty-three year history (1904-1967) some 250 Sisters served there.



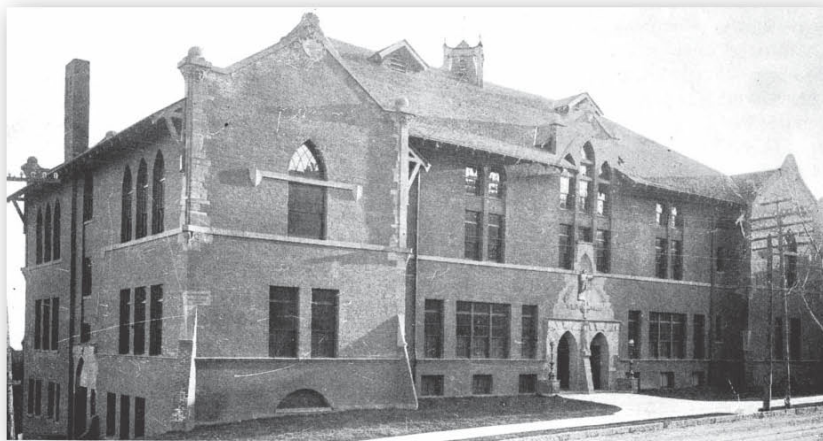
1953 Cathedral High School Beacon

A major development took place in 1907, when four Brothers of the Christian Schools who had been teaching boys in the high school section were invited by the diocese to staff a separate boys' high school built on Fourth Street (number 3) and were provided with new spacious living quarters in the red brick building on 2nd Avenue West, now "Alicia's Place" (number 4) for women in transition. (The Sister teachers all walked to school from their residence near St. Mary's Hospital.) The Christian Brothers Boys School opened in 1910 and continued until 1942 when the Brothers left Duluth and the building became the coed Cathedral Senior High School staffed by a few Diocesan priests, laymen, and, primarily, the Benedictine Sisters, who along with the Sisters teaching in the grade and junior high school then moved into the former Brothers' residence and an additional rented "yellow" house just below it (number 5). Such was the arrangement for the religious faculty when I was assigned to the school in 1954 to serve as librarian and Junior English teacher and did so for the last nine years of the school's existence.

What was school life like for the students and teachers at Cathedral Senior High School in the mid-fifties that made it such a memorable experience? Alumni will tell you it was the very unique school spirit that developed between the faculty and students all confined within one small area. As Gay Cavallero Trachsel and her husband James put it, "We were all one family: priests, Sisters, and students all working together." Valuing a Catholic education, students came from both the poor and the rich sections of town by walking or public transportation. Tuition was minimal so long as priests and Sisters were willing to work for a stipend in lieu of salary – \$50 a month in the 1950s when it was available, and sometimes it was not. To my knowledge no one was turned away for inability to pay. When they became of age, students could earn their tuition through their summer jobs.



Sacred Heart Cathedral's School (c.1914)



Christian Brothers' School, later the Cathedral Senior High School (c. 1914)

The very building itself may have contributed to our closeness. It stood like a matchbox on edge on top of the sidewalk, with only about two feet separating it from the neighboring apartment building – referred to affectionately by biology instructor Sister Emilene (Ethel) Radtke as "our north campus." There was no place for anyone to hide or to be ignored. Filled to capacity with several hundred students, there was no wiggle room, nor was there a cafeteria. Students brought their bag lunches which were stored in their homeroom desks till lunchtime, presenting quite a temptation to students occupying those desks as classes rotated. One entire wall of the building was filled with windows, all facing west and the blinding afternoon sun. The one entrance led to the wooden staircase leading to all floors. The heating system, already close to fifty years old, provided us with steam heat that in winter would announce its coming through the radiators sounding like the Anvil Chorus which prompted one boy to say, "Joe, I'm so glad you paid your tuition." Heat was sometimes skimpy on the fourth floor where students in art class sometimes wore



Sacred Heart Cathedral (1892)

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ECHOES FROM THE PAST, continued

mittens. Yet all this was borne with a family spirit of fun and pride in their school. Parents were as supportive as they could be, realizing the school was doing all it could under the circumstances to provide a solid education for their students at an affordable cost.

The academic standards were high, but teachers were always eager to assist. The curriculum included both college preparatory and practical courses such as “commercial” subjects and home economics. Religion classes were required each year and taught by priests on the faculty. Discipline was enforced, sometimes for boys even by paddle in the office of the Principal, Father Michael Hogan, who was both revered and feared. Weekly faculty meetings took place after school hours in the library to discuss overall progress. Though the school scored high, in the 90th and 95th percentiles in all areas of the yearly Iowa Tests of Educational Development, Father Hogan’s decision was to drop the tests saying, “Something is wrong with the tests. We aren’t that good!” (How many schools today would hide their achievements?)

Another source of pride was the accomplishments of the boys’ athletic teams. Without benefit of their own practice fields, football and hockey teams had to rent space, and schools originally shared one, and later two athletic fields. The Hilltoppers were always a team to contend with and won many a competition supported by their cheerleaders and band in their black and gold uniforms and the Sisters cheering them on. Girls had a very active Girls Athletic Association, with Sister advisors whom they loved, and could compete with girls’ basketball and volleyball teams from other schools in their own building. The GAA also helped with fund raising for various needs in the school. Plays and band concerts were held in the junior high’s auditorium and proms off campus. Basketball games were held in the school’s gymnasium as well as “sock hops” during which the spectator balcony above shook with vibrations from the jitterbugging and polka-dancing crowd below. In addition to required religion classes taught by priests on the faculty, students also had a one-day religious retreat each year and opportunities to participate in religious services at the Cathedral. One required activity in Lent was for students to attend the Stations of the Cross on Friday afternoon at the close of the school day. Because some preferred not to do so, Assistant Principal Sister Margaret James Laughlin posted Sisters at the front door and back fire escape to watch for possible stragglers. Imagine the surprise of the boy slithering down the fire escape to find a Sister in black waiting for him. One ingenious lad had devised an escape route that led somehow from the boys’ locker rooms through a tunnel leading to a manhole in the middle of Second Avenue. Brilliant, unless a car should be coming down the hill!

Such were the joys and experiences of the Sisters who taught in the “old” Cathedral High building. Today of their number remain Sister Ramona Ewen who taught “commercial” subjects, Sister Margaret James Laughlin, Assistant Principal, Sister Johnetta Maher, home economics, Sister Sarah Smedman who taught English for one year, and myself. From the Grade and Junior High School are Sister Agnes Alich and Sister Mary Christa Kroening, the last Sister to remain after the school closed. We often talk and laugh about those days. Sister Jane Casey, Sister Barbara Higgins, and Sister Mary Rae Higgins recall their own student days at the building when the example and dedication of the Sisters inspired them to enter the Community.

Another story to be related someday would tell about the convent life of the many Sisters who taught in the Cathedral schools and lived in the two houses on Second Avenue, trying to balance being faithful to the practices of a vowed religious monastic community of the pre-Vatican II Church while preparing vibrant teenagers to take their places in the rapidly changing post-war world. However, the winds of change were soon to affect both their lives and that of their students, for in 1963 the Diocese sought to provide an expanded, updated modern co-instructional high school on Rice Lake Road and the old Senior High was vacated. Another story for another time.

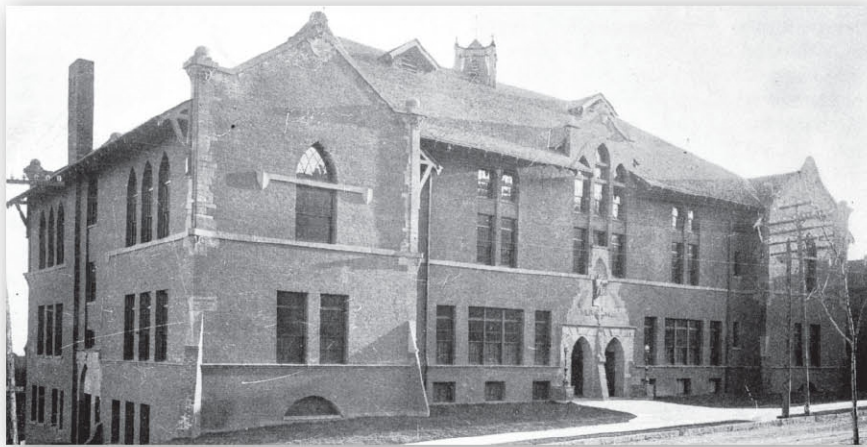
As we contemplate what is best for high school students today, we might ponder what was the secret that made the “old Cathedral” so effective with so little. A final example of how it was loved might come from some members of its last graduating class. In the summer of 1963, after the building was vacated and stood empty, a truck coming down Second Avenue lost control of its brakes and crashed into a corner of the school’s front entrance knocking out a huge chunk of the building’s brownstone. Tom Specht and a few other graduates rescued the stone and carried it with them to parties that summer, standing around it and singing their school song, “Cheer, Cheer for Cathedral High . . . !”

Errata

“...*Nostra maxima culpa.*” On page 23 of the Summer 2016 Pathways, we inadvertently switched two captions. Thanks to the many who pointed out our error. This is the corrected format:



Christian Brother's Boys School, later the coed Cathedral Senior High School (photo c.1914)



Sacred Heart School, which housed the parish Grade School and Duluth's first Cathedral High School (photo c.1914)