

REMEMBERING THINGS PAST: STANBROOK HALL HIGH SCHOOL

By Sister Margaret Clarke



When Bishop McGolrick encouraged Sisters from St. Joseph, Minnesota, to establish an independent community in Duluth in 1892, one of his objectives was to have a Young Ladies' Academy similar to the one Mother Scholastica Kerst had opened in St. Joseph while Prioress there. From the very first, the Sisters undertook this project, creating Sacred Heart Institute in their first downtown motherhouse and then moving it to the Kenwood Avenue site in 1909 to become Villa Sancta Scholastica Academy. In 1912, with the opening of the junior college at the Villa, competition for space between the academy and the college began. Additions to the building, which was eventually named Tower Hall, in 1920 and 1928 gave a bit more breathing room. Finally, in 1936, Mother

Agnes Somers and the Community began a building program aimed primarily at providing more space for the now four-year College, to include a central chapel, College library, and a whole five-story building to house the high school and initial formation programs of the Community. This provided classrooms, administrative offices, parlors, lounges, laboratories, dining rooms, and residential areas for high school boarders, aspirants, postulants, novices, and a number of Sisters. Mother Agnes, always the anglophile, named it "Stanbrook Hall" after the well-known Benedictine abbey in England.

The high school moved into its new building after the Christmas holidays in January 1938. The first graduating class of 36 young women included three who would become Sisters the following September: Sisters Agatha Riehl, Renee Cormier, and Mary Paul Ludwig. Sister Agatha recalls "I was an aspirant and remember moving to the fifth floor of Stanbrook which provided us with dormitory space. Since the elevator was installed sometime after we moved in, I remember carrying all our possessions up five flights of stairs. This included some of the lighter furniture and other dormitory things."

With the expansion of high school space and its beginning as an independent entity separate from the College, enrollment gradually grew with the number of day students now greater than boarders. During the thirty years of its existence, enrollment averaged 250 students per year with forty to fifty seniors graduating each spring. Most students were Catholic, but there were also girls of other faith traditions as well. As the reputation of the school grew, a trend began for the leading families of Duluth to send their daughters to Stanbrook for a year or two before shipping them "back east" to one of the exclusive girls' schools. Catholic culture dominated, and one alum, DeeDee Lauer Killian '49, noted: "Sr. Timothy directed many musicals and plays, and it seemed as though the non-Catholics always had the 'kneeling' parts."



Stanbrook Hall High School Crest

Students wore uniforms from October 1 to May 15: the first uniform was a blue corduroy jumper with a white blouse with long lapels. This was eventually replaced by a navy blue wool suit (purchased from Mrs. Silver's dress shop in the East End) with white blouse, white anklets, and saddle shoes. It was soon discovered that if one wore the suit jacket it was necessary only to iron the front of the blouse. Skirt lengths could be quickly altered by rolling the waistband, and were regularly checked by one of the Sisters by making the student kneel on her desk chair. If the skirt did not reach the chair seat, it was too short! The school crest, adopted in 1939, was worn on the jacket pocket.



*Sister Ann, Sister Frances Joseph,
Sister Lisa, and Sister Dolora at
Stanbrook Hall in 1966.*



*1953 Boarders (resident students) left to right: Sandy
Mueller, Ann Hinsperger, Eileen Gruber, Jean Gurno,
Mary Kiss, and Carol Robertson*



*1961 Hall Chatter staff L to R:
Pat Cruikshank, Judy Matzke,
Nancy Krause, Mary LaLiberte,
Betsy Brewer, Mary Beerhalter,
and Cyd Slabodnik*

Stanbrook was accredited by the University of Minnesota and the North Central Association and affiliated with Catholic University. Its curriculum was always directed toward college preparation; besides classes in English, history, and religion, there were sciences through physics, math through higher algebra, and multiple-year language choices of Latin, French, Spanish, or German. Home economics, typing, art, and music were also offered. There were many dramatic presentations and musical programs which involved most of the school. Barbara Martini Johnson '55 recalled being in the orchestra for four years mainly because she was the only viola player in school, having come with six viola lessons. She wrote: "Once the orchestra put on an all school assembly and each section performed and presented their instruments. I had practiced my solo, "Dreaming" by Schumann, for six months to really show off my instrument. When the viola section stood, my moment in the spotlight had been trimmed to four notes. . .the (open) strings on the viola!"

Besides the academic offerings of the school, there was great emphasis on deportment. Jean Rossman Erwin '41 said: "The outstanding contribution of the school other than scholastic excellence was the emphasis on 'ladylike' behavior. This wasn't too popular during our school years: we were fined a quarter for sitting on the arms of chairs, crossing our legs, chewing gum, slamming doors, and numerous other things I've probably forgotten. The main goal of our instructors was to graduate refined students from the hallowed halls of Stanbrook. And this was achieved." Nevertheless, there was an undercurrent of mischief. Margaret Norman White '57 mentioned: "Some girls managed to get into a cloistered area and stretch Saran Wrap on the toilets. Another managed to string popcorn on the curtain stretchers in the laundry and jumped into a cart with laundry in it when she heard someone coming." In my own case I had a two-period long class to accommodate chemistry labs. On one April first, when the bell rang to end the first period, all the class members whipped out candy and started eating it. I thought it was actually pretty funny until the voice of Sister Enid, who was subbing for principal Sister Margaret James, came over the intercom saying in no uncertain terms that all must be punished. I collected 25 cents from each one for eating above ground floor. The student body was also treated to a multi-day workshop on gracious living by a well-known speaker. The most remembered precept from this event seemed to be "Carry a hatpin on a date in case of emergencies and keep a Sunday newspaper between you and your date and all will be well."

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The greater number of faculty were Sisters; a number of laywomen were also employed and became part of the Stanbrook extended family, among them Gladys Swanson, Mina Lorix, Geraldine Backstrom, Barbara Esbensen. At one time, we gave Barbara a certificate making her an “honorary Benedictine.” Her husband Thorwald mentioned this to a monk that he met at an educational conference. “How was that accomplished?” asked the monk. “Oh, in the usual way,” replied Tory. Over the years, about seventy Sisters served on the faculty, and each deserves mention, but space does not permit it. The principals included Sister Bernice Braegelman, Sister Raymond McLaughlin, Sister Mary Horgan, Sister Isabelle McKeague, and Sister Margaret James Laughlin. Many graduates recall their admiration for Sister Mary, the epitome of ladylike behavior, but also a person of great kindness and understanding.

In the mid-1950s, Sellwood Hall on East Second Street, one of Duluth’s stately homes, was donated to the Community and remodeled as a residence for up to 23 high school boarders and two Sister prefects. Students were transported to and from the Kenwood campus by bus, and a housekeeper and cook for the evening meal were hired. The “Sellwood Girls” have their own collection of reminiscences, as do the former prefects.



1948: Orchestra members at the annual spring concert



1945 Junior Class Officers L to R: Irene Artley, Marcia Nolan, Pat Fitzgerald, Mary Anne Lewis

In the fall of 1963 the new Duluth Cathedral High School was opened, with a brand new building and a student body that was half male. Stanbrook enrollment began a four-year decline so that by 1967 there were only 150 students—not enough to pay the expenses. The decision was made to close the school, a difficult one for all involved. Nevertheless, in its 30 years of existence, it had educated about 1500 students, most of whom would certainly agree with Beatrice Freischle Taus ’46 who wrote: “My four years at Stanbrook Hall are one of the happiest memories of my life! Friendships made are still alive and well today. We received a good education that prepared us for future endeavors. We were blessed with dedicated teachers who took personal interest in developing our potential. I am grateful to my parents for giving me the opportunity to attend Stanbrook Hall. Stanbrook taught me self-respect, self control, accountability and responsibility which enabled me to be an asset in my husband’s career and in other civic and church activities. For these gifts, I am grateful.”

Sister Margaret Clarke taught physical sciences and math at Stanbrook from 1962 until it closed. She still believes, in some fashion, that “they closed the wrong school. . . .” Quotations from alumni were collected by Mary Kay (Remington) Staudohar ’64 in hope that someday a much longer account of Stanbrook history might be written.