

REMEMBERING THINGS PAST: THE CASE

By Sister Margaret Clarke

In the last half of the nineteenth century, floods of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe arrived in the United States, bringing with them their Catholic faith and traditions. This led to a great uneasiness among the Protestant inhabitants of the country, and the formation of a number of anti-Catholic movements. These were the days of the “nativists,” the Know-Nothings, the American Protective Association and *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*. At the turn of the century Duluth had its own anti-Catholic sentiments, and the young Benedictine community encountered these in a number of ways. As soon as St. Mary’s Hospital opened in 1888, a group of businessmen arrived, ready to deliver the Sisters from their involuntary servitude, but were enlightened gently by Sister Alexia as to the nature of a religious vocation. In 1896, as the new St. Mary’s was being built, another group gave tours of the “cells and dungeons” in the building’s basement foundations, inspiring a blast from Bishop McGolrick in the *Duluth News-Tribune*.

Individual sisters who were converts to Catholicism also experienced problems with their families, ranging from being disinherited to what was probably the most notorious nine-days-wonder for the local press, the abduction of Minnie Digne, a.k.a. Sister Borromeo. Emily (Minnie) Digne was the daughter of a prominent railroad man and, in 1899 at the age of 16, was enrolled by her family (who at that time were living in Superior) at Sacred Heart Institute. In 1901, much to their dismay, she became a Catholic, and even more disturbing to them, in 1903 decided to become a Benedictine Sister. She spent her early years in community teaching in parish grade schools and was looking forward to taking perpetual vows on July 11, 1907. Her family, by then living in St. Paul, mistakenly thought that this was to be June 11 and decided to take action to prevent it.

DULUTH NEWS TRIBUNE SATURDAY, JUNE 8, 1907

TWO MEN KIDNAP NUN FROM SCHOOL AT WEST END, OUTFRAN MOB AND ESCAPE

**Abductors Boldly Enter Room Where
Sister Borromeo Is Teaching
and Carry Her Away.**

PUPILS SPELLBOUND BY TERROR

**They Stand Mute While Abductors Drag Shrieking Woman to the
Street and Thrust Her Into Hack, But Recover in Time to Give
Chase—Are Joined by Hundreds of People in the Neighborhood,
But the Team Is Fast and Outfoots Them—No Clue to Where
the Outlaws Have Secreted Their Victim—Relatives of the Sister,
Who Is a Daughter of Edward Digne, Formerly of Itasca,
Are Suspected of Being Responsible for the Desperate Act.**

On the afternoon of June 7, as reported by both Duluth newspapers, a hired hack drove up to St. Clement’s school and two men leaped out and entered Sister Borromeo’s classroom, seized the screaming Sister, and bodily carried her into the hack. The children rushed screaming into the street, bystanders gave chase, but the horses were whipped up, and the carriage disappeared.

OF THE KIDNAPPED NUN

Later information revealed that the abductors were her father and brother, and her mother waited in the carriage. She was taken first to her brother's house in Superior and then by train to the family home in St. Paul. When contacted by the press, she stated "I was kidnapped, pure and simple. I'm over age and have a right to do as I please. As soon as I can run away from home, I'm going back to the nunnery. I want to be a nun." In the next few days, there was an exchange of letters between her and Mother Scholastica, who encouraged her to return by any means possible. Her father took her to Omaha for a few days, but on June 21 she wrote to Mother Scholastica, "I ran away from home this morning and went to the detective's home and stayed there all day and they brought me in disguise to Sister Helen's sister's home and here I am safe and sound and will be with you soon. I got your letter yesterday and I made up my mind right away to go the first chance I got. . . . They have every convent in St. Paul watched to see if they can't find me, but nobody knows where I am but the chief of police and a detective." On June 23 Mother Scholastica wrote, sending a check for expenses to Mr. Vervais (Sister Helen Quirk's brother-in-law) and Mr. Eugene Villaume who was to accompany her by train to Duluth. Mother Scholastica suggested that she wear something colored, put a thick veil over her head, and don a pair of smoked glasses. Sister Borromeo returned to Duluth shortly thereafter, and did indeed make final profession on July 11.

It would be nice to complete this with "and they all lived happily ever after." However, exactly a year later, she called her sister in Superior and told her to come and get her, "she was through with the convent." She told a news reporter through her father that "she had tired of convent life and would not return." She eventually settled in Superior, Wisconsin, where she worked in a bank for many years.

The extensive press coverage of the kidnapping can be found in the *Duluth News-Tribune* and the *Duluth Evening Herald* beginning on June 8, 1907, and continuing for several days following.