

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Sisters of Notre Dame and the Strike of 1877

"Reduction in wages, as in all other expenses, have been made absolutely necessary. . . by the depression of business. . . The process of reduction has been going on everywhere. . . The men ought to understand the causes that make reduction necessary and to acquiesce peaceably in the inevitable."

From *The Boston Daily Globe*
July 20, 1877



Erie, Pennsylvania Train Station, c. 1880

From Google Images

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—One of the most interesting little journals stored with the Boston records contains only a fragment of a story. It begins mid-sentence and ends mid-sentence, but what lies between opens a window into one of the most important labor strikes in U.S. history. In July of 1877, Sister Albania MacKenzie (1838-1911) had been sent to Roxbury to act as the new Mistress of Novices. Travelling with her were four other Sisters, two destined for Worcester and the other two missioned to South Boston. One of those was a novice, Sr. Mary of St. Michael Creed (1858-1933), who eventually became a Superior of the South Boston convent. The five Sisters began their journey in Cincinnati, boarding a train on the Cincinnati and Cleveland Railroad, which was part of the larger Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

The U.S. had been in the midst of Depression for four years. Of the country's 364 railroads in operation, 89 had gone bankrupt. Unemployment hovered at 14%. Railroad workers' wages had been cut 10% in April. A few days before the Sisters began their journey, the railroad workers' pay had been sliced another 10%. On the 17th of July, workers in West Virginia went out on strike. From there, the strike spread like wildfire, through Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Missouri and Illinois. There were riots at most of the railroad stations and workers blockaded the tracks to prevent freight trains from delivering their shipments. These blockades caused the delay of many passenger trains as well.

The unnamed narrator of the journal was one of the Sisters travelling with Sister Albania. She tells the story in detail, and often with a wry sense of humor. The Sisters' train was stopped by the blockade in Cleveland on Monday, July 23rd. They spent the night in the depot, resting in the "Ladies Room," to avoid missing the train in case it departed during the night. Morning arrived and with it, a conversation "with one of the employees of the road, who came to express his regret at seeing us detained. He then went on to tell the grievances of the workmen, till we were firmly imbued with sympathy for the strikers."

At 9 am., the Sisters boarded the train for the 3 hour journey to Erie, Pennsylvania where once again the blockade prevented them from proceeding any further. "We could see the ruins of the freight depot which had been destroyed two nights before, and we heard with sorrow that some men had lost their lives in the riot." Along with the other passengers, they settled in at a local hotel to wait and were introduced to the manager, a Mr. Campbell, who was Catholic. He gave them a small parlor to rest and have some privacy. The next day, Mr. Campbell took them out to breakfast and "despite our embarrassment, we managed to eat a substantial breakfast of ham and eggs, biscuits and coffee." Mr. Campbell's daughter gave them a small tour of Erie, including the church and, to their surprise, a local store run by Mrs. Campbell. "[She] greeted us kindly, and led us to the back part of the store. A curtain was drawn and we stood in a place very familiar to lovers of ice cream, at this moment the daughter returned with a tray containing the veritable delicacy itself; and as we were entirely alone, we thought it would be ungracious to refuse. Moreover, we were, as I have said, wayfarers, subsisting on the bounty of Providence, why then should we quarrel with Providence if ice cream were sent us?"

After this cooling interlude, the Sisters returned to the hotel to learn if any news had come of the possibility of the train leaving. Having heard of their dilemma, a local priest approached and offered to guide them to a nearby convent. While appreciative, they refused, preferring to wait, hoping the train would be allowed to depart. With that in mind, they returned with most of the other

passengers to the train. Again and again, the strikers came to tell the passengers of their regret that they were being delayed. By mid-day, several young men approached the Sisters with an offer of a meal. Despite their attempts to refuse, the men's persistence finally wore them down and Sister Albania agreed to accept sandwiches and tea. It was then the Sisters discovered the cause of the strikers' concern for them. One of the men had a sister in a convent in Pittsburgh.

The afternoon wore on *"when a tall clergyman stood before us, and inquired if we were the Sisters who were detained so long. Having received an affirmative reply, he said. . . Come with me to the convent. In vain did we refuse. . . It was evident that he was not accustomed to taking 'no' for an answer."* Despite their protests, the priest delivered them to his carriage, but decided at the last moment to take them to his parents' home in Erie instead of the convent. *"We were soon whirling through the streets, remarking anxiously to one another—perhaps his family will not be prepared to entertain five strangers. It is just like a man to have no consideration under such circumstances."*

To their surprise they arrived at an impressive, elegant home. The priest's mother, Mrs. Tracy, welcomed them. The priest's father, Mr. Tracy, had been born in Ireland and had emigrated to America forty years previous. Ironically, considering the reason for their presence, he had acquired his fortune through work in railroad companies. During the conversation, they discovered one of the Tracy daughters was friends with a family member of one of the Sisters. The daughter promised to inform her family of the Sisters' presence in Erie.

And *"ere we parted for our several rooms, we said to one another: 'Monday night on the floor of a depot; Tuesday in chairs in a hotel; Wednesday on down beds. What next?'"*

What next included a reunion with one of the Sisters' relatives, followed by the happy news that the train would be leaving Erie. Mr. and Mrs. Tracy delivered Sister Albania and her companions to the depot and on they chugged to their next stop, Rochester, New York, but not without many delays. However, *"all this was a trick on the part of the officers of the road to give the passengers the idea that the strikers had caused the delay. . .the trick deceived no one.. We found the depot at Rochester lined with solders; and every train . . .had four policemen at the door, who scrutinized the passengers."* The train was so crowded that they feared they would have to stand for the remainder of the journey. With the help of a man they christened St. Joseph, another car was added to the train and everyone was able to have a seat.

They finally arrived in Worcester on Friday July 27th where two of the Sisters left them for the convent there. Returning to the Worcester railroad station to continue onto Boston, the conductor noticed the dates on their tickets, He asked, *"Been among the strikers?"* With a nod, they smiled, and finished their journey with no further misadventures.



Map of the train route taken by the Sisters from Cincinnati to Erie, Pennsylvania

From Google Images

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