

*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

## Sr. Marie Augusta Neal, 1921-2004



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—It was just announced last month that the 1967 Sisters' Survey, conducted by the CMSW [Conference of Major Superiors of Women] has been digitized at the Hesburgh Library, located at the University of Notre Dame. The Survey can now be accessed online by researchers. This survey, of course, was conducted by Sister Marie Augusta Neal, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur for over 60 years. She donated the survey's data to the University of Notre Dame between 1995 and 1996.

Sr. Marie Augusta was born Helen Catherine Neal on June 21, 1921 in Brighton, Massachusetts, the daughter of Thomas F. and Helen A. (Taylor) Neal. She entered the Notre Dame Academy in Boston in 1934 with a class of 30 students, but one girl, Dorothea Jarvis, died in 1935. The remaining 29 girls went onto graduate in 1938. Having such a small class, combined with the death of one of their friends at such a young age, seemed to draw the girls even closer. Upon their graduation, they created a booklet, entitled *Graduation Memories*, which included class prophecies, superlatives, a class will and songs. "Thou Helen, of the family Neal" they predicted, "as thou hast wished to be a chemist renowned for blowing up things, thou wilt inflate balloons on the corner of Washington and Summer Street." Helen was also named the Most Brilliant of the Class, and in the Class Will, she bequeathed her "extraordinary spelling ability" to the future graduates of the Academy.

After her graduation, she was accepted at Emmanuel College, not becoming a chemist famous for "blowing up things," but majoring in English with a minor in History. A year after her 1942 graduation from Emmanuel, she entered the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Once she made her first vows in 1946, she taught at St. Augustine's High School in South Boston (1946-47), followed by St. Mary's High School in Lawrence (1947-53). In 1948, she began her work for her Master's Degree in Sociology at Boston College. Her thesis focused upon the work of Pitirim A. Sorokin, a Harvard University Professor and the founder of the Sociology Department at Harvard. Upon completion of her Master's Degree in 1953, she became a professor of Sociology at Emmanuel College and taught there for the remainder of her professional career. Sister Marie Augusta began her Doctoral work at Harvard University in 1955, completing her Degree in 1963. As part of her doctoral work, she prepared and implemented a survey for Boston Diocesan priests to measure their motivations and attitudes toward change. It was this survey that became the foundation of her later work. The findings of her Doctoral Dissertation were published in 1963 and entitled *Values and Interests in the Process of Social Change*. After completing her doctoral program, she was named the head of the Sociology Department at Emmanuel. She served as the head of the department until 1973 and again for the year 1980.

In 1959, at the Vatican's request, the Conference of Major Superiors of Women's Institutes (CMSW) was formed. Six years later, Sister Marie Augusta was asked to become the director of the newly created Research Committee of the CMSW. As director of a committee of fifteen sisters, she planned to survey American sisters and their resources in a post-Vatican II environment. While her formal connection as research director for the CMSW ended in 1974 because of lack of funding, her

work on these surveys and their implications would consume much of the rest of her life.

At first, she envisioned a two stage study, but the research evolved into an ongoing project exploring the lives of women religious and their attitudes to the implementation of the decrees of the Vatican II Council. She first prepared a 27 page questionnaire in 1966 to be completed by the Superiors of the Congregations being surveyed. In 1967, she created the Sisters' Survey, which consisted of 649 questions addressed to 398 apostolic religious orders. She updated the survey twice, once between 1979-1980 and again between 1989-1990. She followed the original 1967 Sisters' Survey with a Study of 9 Contemplative Religious Orders in 1968; acted as a consultant for a Self-Study (1966-1969) of her own Congregation, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur; consulted with the Jesuits in 1967 as they began their own Self-Study; and prepared an Assessment of Life and Works (1968-69). Between 1966 and 1984, Sister Marie Augusta was a consultant for the Sisters of Notre Dame's General Chapters and the Massachusetts Provincial Chapters. In 1970, the Catholic Education Council of South Africa asked her to prepare a survey of South African Catholic Schools. Discovering their intentions were to examine only the white schools, she refused. Not until they agreed to include black schools in the survey did she consent to begin. The survey exposed the vast inequities between the white and black schools.

Her passion for social justice and the meticulous research used in her surveys, which delved into the attitudes and motivations of people, brought Sister Marie Augusta many requests to speak at conferences, workshops and symposiums. Dozens of these presentations were published, either in professional journals or as chapters in books on sociology or social justice. She also published eight books of her own. In addition, Sr. Marie Augusta was a visiting professor at many universities, including the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University.

Her groundbreaking work earned her numerous awards and honorary degrees. She received honorary degrees from the College of Notre Dame, Belmont, CA (1977); the College of Our Lady of the Elms (1979); University of Notre Dame (1985); and St. Michael's College (1987). Her awards included the Cambridge School of Business Citation of Merit (1965); she was listed in Who's Who in America (1975); received the Isaac Hecker Social Justice Award from the Paulist Center (1977); the Pope John XXIII Award (1985); was recognized for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching by the American Sociological Association (1986); was listed in the International Who's Who of Professional and Business Women (1988); elected a Fellow in the Society for Scientific Study of Religion (1989); received the Distinguished Historian Award (1992); and the Father Louis J. Luzbetak Award for Exemplary Church Research (2002).

Sister Marie Augusta Neal died in Worcester on Feb. 25, 2004.

To view the data from the 1967 Sisters' Survey, click [here](#).



Helen Neal with family, c. 1930.



Helen Neal upon her graduation from the Boston NDA in 1938.

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Sister Marie Augusta Neal Papers, 2012.75, SND New England Archives.