

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, Susan Spatella, and

Annals from the Archives

Sr. Mary Bernard Weber's Memories Of Her Journey to Oregon



March 2019

Written by

Nancy Barthelemy

Archivist

nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org

sndnewengland.wordpress.com

The first convent and school at
St. Paul, Oregon

From [Willamette Interlude](#) by
Sr. Mary Dominica McNamee

—In 1902, Sr. Mary Bernard Weber celebrated her 80th birthday at the Vernon Street Convent in Worcester, MA. She had been the Superior there between 1874 and 1895, but ill health forced her to leave the convent to recover, first in Ohio, then in Waltham and later at Notre Dame du Lac in Worcester. In 1900, she returned to Vernon Street, where the sisters were eager to welcome her back. It wasn't long before they urged her to record her memories of her years at her earliest American mission in Oregon.

Sometime after her 80th birthday, she agreed to write of her experiences as one of the seven sisters who joined the Oregon mission in 1847. The mission had been founded by Jesuit missionaries who had asked the Sisters of Notre Dame to open a school there. In 1844, six Sisters of Notre Dame made that long journey, where they opened a boarding school for the daughters of the early settlers, as well as a day school and orphanage for the Native Americans. Soon after its founding,, Bishop Blanchet of Canada traveled to Namur to meet Mother Constantine and to “*thank her in person for his 'treasures' in Oregon.*” He also provided her with firsthand news of the sisters work at the mission. But his real goal was to secure her agreement to send another group of sisters to Oregon. He promised Mother Constantine he would find the money for passage to Oregon for himself, as well as for seven Sisters of Notre Dame. And because the missionary fever was strong among the sisters in Namur, it was not difficult to find volunteers. Among the seven sisters chosen to go was Sr. Mary Bernard Weber.

Sr. Mary Bernard had been born Anne Marie Weber in Echernach, Germany on Feb. 22, 1822, the daughter of John and Catherine (Reckingen) Weber. She entered the SNDs in 1840 and took her first vows in 1842. While she and the other six sisters prepared for the voyage, they were told that the Ship *Morning Star* would be ready to sail on Dec. 21, 1846 from Brest, France. The first stage of their journey took them to Paris, where they stayed at the Convent of the Infant Jesus, for what they thought would be a couple of nights. Just after their arrival, though, they were informed that the *Morning Star* wouldn't be ready to sail for several more weeks. Because it would have been too costly to return to Namur, they remained in Paris at the convent, where the sisters were happy to continue offering them hospitality until the end of January.

From Paris, the sisters took a coach to Brest. Sr. Mary Bernard wrote that because the coach only had six seats for the seven sisters, “*we were not over comfortable in the coach,*” which was no doubt an understatement, since the trip lasted three days. When they arrived in Brest, they lodged at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, only to discover that once again the ship would not be ready for another month. Their stay at this convent was not as pleasant as the one in Paris. Sr. Mary Bernard spoke of how poor those sisters were, breakfast usually consisting of dry bread and coffee and dinner not much more than a bowl of soup. And because of the severe cold, Sr. Mary Bernard wrote that, “*to warm ourselves before retiring, we generally went to a room at some distance from the Community for an exercise somewhat in the shape of an Irish jig.*”

They were more than delighted—at last—to receive word that the *Morning Star* was ready to sail. They eagerly left the poor convent, thanking the Superior, before making their way to the pier, where they boarded the ship. But as it happened, “*our enthusiasm did not last long! Contrary wind came again, the ship could not sail.*” As much as they were hoping to remain on board, they were forced to return to the convent until word came once again on Feb. 22nd that the ship could depart. And finally, “*when all were on board, anchor was lifted and off we were on the broad ocean.*” Their excitement soon faded. While “*the weather [was] favorable. . .that, however did not prevent us from paying our tribute to the ocean. During three days we did not exchange words, too sick to move. . .even the pigs on board could not stand. . .*” After a few days, though, their health and spirits returned.

In addition to the sailors, the sisters and the bishop, there were also three Jesuits priests, three religious brothers, six other priests and two students on board. The sisters fell into a routine of attending the Mass said by the bishop and daily lessons to learn English, as well as having classes in Theology. Sr. Mary Bernard reported that “*the vessel was well supplied with provisions. We had canned milk till the end of the voyage and plenty of canned vegetables, cages full of poultry were empty by the time we reached land, then our pigs having quite recovered health gave us fresh meat for sometime.*”

She told of a few amusing incidents on the journey. “*It was not very safe to sit on chairs not fastened to the floor, as our confessor experienced on one such occasion when he was celebrant at the Vespers. A sudden heavy wave striking the vessel brought him to the floor, landing him and his chair on the other side of the room. Of course the singing was interrupted for a few moments to give time for silent laughter.*”

When they arrived at the Equator, east of Brazil, the sailors “*expected some fun as it is customary with them . . .they covered a barrel with tar inside and out, and towards evening set it on fire and launched it on the waters where it swam burning. It was a beautiful sight; all enjoyed it till late in the night. Here the heat was intense. . .it was, however, soon replaced by that of Cape Horn; it is not only fresh, but severely cold near the Cape. We passed Tierra del Fuego, and rounded the cape. . .the cold was extreme, days were short. . .we encountered severe storms as we entered the Pacific ocean, lasting no less than eight days. A high gale came so suddenly one day that they had not time to furl the sails, one had to be left unfurled and the mast was nearly carried off with this unfurled sail. . .To avoid going backwards, the Captain steered the vessel from east to west, changing every other day. . .this continued about twelve days. . .*”

The weather finally settled and they continued north toward Oregon. “*Sharks followed the vessel, mermaids [most likely manatees] showed their heads and at times, whales were seen at a great distance throwing the water up at an immense height. . .*”

Finally in mid-August, after a voyage of six months, “*The coast of Oregon was in view; the first time we saw land from the time we lost sight of it leaving France. . .Yet we had another dangerous pass to cross. The mouth of the Columbia river has so many sand banks, and these frequently change place on account of the strong current of its waters flowing to the ocean. It was here that the “Indefatigable,” the ship in which our Sisters had sailed three years previous, very nearly wrecked. . . The good Captain was extremely anxious during three or four hours as we passed this dangerous place. . .*”

After some trepidation, they arrived safely at Fort Astoria. “*Oh! but what a Fort, one single little house, where a Scotchman lived cultivating a garden; here then we set foot on land. It was amusing to see us walking, the motion of the vessel was in our lower limbs, impossible to keep straight.*” They had their first meeting with a “*canoe full of Indians*” and were more than a little stunned to discover that they “*had not much more clothing than Adam had in the Garden of Eden.*” Their stay at the fort was not long and soon “*anchor was raised and on we went, hoping to reach Fort Vancouver where the Willamette flows into the Columbia.*” Unfortunately, the ship soon rammed into a sand bank. They had to unload all their baggage and supplies, leaving the damaged vessel behind, now only fifty miles from the end of their journey. That night they camped on the bank of the river where “*the air was thick with mosquitoes. . .we arose the next morning with swollen faces.*” They were rowed up the river to Camp Sable, where two carts were found to carry them the last thirty miles of the journey. “*We were pretty well shaken upon our arrival, but the joy of meeting our good Sisters made us forget all discomforts.*”

In 1849, gold was discovered in California, causing most of those early settlers to join tens of thousands of others in the search for fortune. And as the Indian students left school to rejoin their families, the sisters were forced to close the school in 1852. Sr. Mary Bernard went with the sisters to California, where she founded the mission at San Jose, California. After twenty years in California, she came to East Boston, Massachusetts in 1873, before being transferred to St. John's convent in Worcester in 1874 as the new superior.

Sr. Mary Bernard Weber died in Worcester on Feb. 14, 1907.

To read more of Sr. Mary Bernard's memories, click [here](#).

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Oregon Mission Papers, 2018.04
- ◆ [Willamette Interlude](#) by Sr. Mary Dominica McNamee, 1959.