

*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 also the Annals of the Holy Name Convent, Vol. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## The Poisoning of Holy Name Convent



**October 2019**

**Written by**

**Nancy Barthelemy**

**Archivist**

**nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org**

**sndnewengland.wordpress.com**

**boiparchives.omeka.net**

Holy Name Convent  
Chicopee, MA  
2016.17

—The annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame beginning in the 19th century and continuing through the early 1970s provide many amazing and interesting stories. One of the most surprising tales comes from the Annals kept by the sisters of the Holy Name Convent located in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

In 1867, Fr. Patrick Healy, the pastor of the Holy Name parish in Chicopee, invited the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to teach the girls in the parish school. Fr. Healy had become acquainted with the sisters during his years in East Boston and was eager to bring them to his new parish. His request had the sisters venturing for the first time into western Massachusetts. Traveling by rail from Salem to Boston, the four founding sisters then took the Boston and Albany train to Springfield, MA, where they were met by Fr. Healy. He drove them in his carriage over the next three miles to the Holy Name Church, where the sisters were greeted by more than 300 children and their parents. After Mass and a meal, the sisters were given a tour of their new home. They were delighted, both with the reception they had received, as well as their new home. School was scheduled to start on Monday, September 2nd, though the building was still under construction. Between September 2nd and November 21st, the sisters made do with the chapel that was attached to the church as their first schoolroom.

As was the norm in those years, the sisters taught the girls, while lay women and later the Christian Brothers, taught the boys. The school prospered and during the years that followed, the sisters had on average more than 500 children enrolled in the school every year. In addition, they also prepared children and adults for the Sacraments and in 1876 helped form the Sodality for single and married women.

According to their convent journals and annals as well as the many reports from the local newspapers, the sisters, the school and the parish were all thriving. But in 1879, there were other creatures that were also thriving in the mill city of Chicopee.

In the spring of that year, the convent experienced an infestation of cockroaches. Though all the sisters were horrified by this event, one sister in particular took great offence at the invasion—the convent's cook, Sr. Mary Rosa Foy (1844-1908). Determined to rid her kitchen and the rest of the convent of the nearly indestructible invaders, she immediately sent for the local druggist to purchase two items intended to destroy the vermin.

Soon after she spread the powders in the places the roaches liked to gather, several sisters began to feel unwell. They were plagued with aches and pains. After some days, a few of the sisters' skin had a definite yellowish tinge and the poor Infirmarian was run ragged trying to tend to the afflicted sisters, unable to determine the cause of their maladies. She tried every powder and pill in her arsenal and finally resorted to applying pitch plasters—a common remedy at that time—in an effort to ease the sisters' suffering. Nothing helped. Finally, she had no choice—she sent for the doctor.

It wasn't long after his arrival that he diagnosed their ills—the sisters had been poisoned. And the culprit was indeed one of their own, Sr. Mary Rosa. The powders she had bought from the druggist to kill the cockroaches were oxalic acid and what was then known as Paris green. Oxalic acid was—and is—commonly used in the laundry, to eliminate stains. Paris green is a pigment

once favored by many painters for its vibrant hue, ranging from emerald green to a pale bluish green. Artists such as Renoir, Monet, Cezanne and Van Gogh often employed it in their works. Unfortunately, however, it is primarily comprised of arsenic.

By itself, oxalic acid wouldn't have affected the sisters. And most likely, Paris green, used alone in places favored by the cockroaches should not have harmed the sisters. But mixed together, the compound formed a toxic gas—arsine—that infiltrated every room in the convent. The symptoms of breathing in such a toxic gas resulted first in aches and pains, followed by jaundice. If the cause had not been discovered by the physician, it is very likely some or all of the sisters could have died.

Their recovery was a slow one. And though this experience was as horrible as it sounds, in true Notre Dame fashion, one of the survivors commemorated, not only their brush with death—but also their survival—in rhyme later that year.

Dear sister kindly listen,  
To what were going to sing;  
Tis a very sad event  
That happened here last spring.

No use talking, no use talking  
You've never heard the like  
Ah! If it ever happens again  
We'll surely lose our life.

The cause of this disaster  
We'll first proceed to tell  
It was some famous roaches  
That came with us to dwell.

Our cook she was so bothered  
With these annoying pests  
That morning, noon or evening  
She never had a rest.

On their complete destruction  
Her mind she fiercely bent  
So for Paris green and acid  
She to the druggist sent.

In every nook and corner,  
She put this powerful stuff  
And in a short time after  
Its fumes we began to snuff.

The effect was truly dreadful  
For we presently fell ill  
With pains and aches we were attacked  
And scarcely could keep still.

The first upon our sick list  
Was number 273  
Her face became as yellow  
As stout old baffety!

It next attacked a giant frame,  
Her jaws they felt quite low  
And nothing else would suit her  
But to Mount Tom she'd go.

The next to fall a victim  
Was number 275,  
Her toenails ached so badly  
She scarce could keep alive

The next set needed mending  
Was number 83  
Her face it got so woebegone  
We wondered what it could be!

To add to these misfortunes,  
Our little lamb fell ill,  
Her pains they were so dreadful  
That she could not keep still.

Her voice of old so thrilling,  
Now took a lower tone,  
Her tongue she used so seldom,  
You'd think was not her own.

Of old our doctress had complained,  
Her practice was so scarce  
But now she's kept so busy  
You'd say she was running a race.

She glides around so swiftly  
With nothing heard save groans  
As she went through the different wards  
To seduce our aching bones.

Then worst of all disasters  
We too grew sick enough  
She wished it all Guine  
This terrible patent stuff

The M.D. was sent for  
He came two-fifty rate  
He said we all were poisoned  
And in our awful state

Of liniment, pills, and powders  
There surely was no lack  
And then we put pitch plasters  
Upon each aching back.

Now all were put on rations  
A cracker every day  
We were so very hungry  
We declared we'd run away.

That famous year of '79  
We never shall forget  
Those sunken eyes and ghost like  
forms  
Methinks I see them yet.

### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Chicopee Holy Name Annals, 1867-1937.
- ◆ Chicopee Holy Name Journal, 1867-1906.
- ◆ Botanical.com
- ◆ Science.gov