

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.

Annals from the Archives

Sto XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Notre Dame School Tales



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Holy Name School Students,
Chicopee, MA
c. 1900
SNDdeN New England Archives

—The annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur contain many routine stories. Occasionally, though, an annalist went beyond the usual requirements for the records and recounted some amusing and occasionally sad stories of life in a Notre Dame classroom during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During those decades, from 1852 to 1909, class size usually ranged from 60 to upwards of 100 children in each room. Of course, in the academies, the sisters would naturally come to know the boarders better than the day pupils, though as time went on, the classrooms for some of the boarders were also quite full. But because the sisters had more time to become acquainted with those girls, they better able to respond to any who needed help.

One story that must have caused the sisters distress occurred in 1875, at the Lowell Notre Dame Academy. One of the boarders that had been there for some years had been abandoned by her mother. There is no mention of her father, so it seemed that he had died or abandoned his wife and daughter. The Annalist wrote that, "*on the 15th of September, a boarder who had been left by her Mother who deserted her since several years, had to be placed in a house of preservation as her inclination led the Sisters to fear for her future. The Superioress [Sr. Desiree Erculisse] and first teacher took her to New York and placed her in charge of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.*" The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were founded to aid girls and young women who had no home, either because of abuse or emotional difficulties. Certainly, this poor girl must have been distraught enough for the sisters to fear for her safety, which caused them to seek what they hoped would be a safe haven for her.

Five years later, in 1880, the sisters in South Boston had in their care a student whose mother had died. Apparently, this girl also had no other family, because she remained with the sisters for several more years. In both cases, there is no mention in the annals of any tuition, which was usually paid by the boarders' families. The Annalist wrote that their student, Mary Jones, seemed interested in entering the Congregation, which she did at the age of 17 in 1879, taking the name Sr. Mary of St. Edward. After her novitiate, she taught music at several Notre Dame schools, including St. John's in Peabody and the NDA at Berkeley Street, where she died on June 12, 1910 at the age of 48.

Of course, these stories of Notre Dame students wouldn't be complete without including Sr. Desiree Erculisse, the Superior of the Lowell Academy from 1852 until her death in 1879. She became something of a legend in Lowell due to her continuous efforts to ease the plight of the poor in the city. Once the sisters were settled in their Lowell mission, it didn't take long for Sr. Desiree to realize that many children lived so far from the school, the walk was more than little legs could manage. She offered to provide beds for the children during the week, so they could be taught and not have to endure long walks in cold and damp

weather. She also discovered that the majority of parents needed to work in the mills, just to keep a roof over their heads and feed their family. Because of that, children were often caring for younger brothers and sisters, making it impossible for them to attend school. And so, *“after many arrangements and much scheming, the zealous Superioress [Sr. Desiree] succeeded in having the older children taught at the same time that the little ones were cared for. Too young to enter any of the classes, they were kept in a large room, supplied with amusement and toys, and subjected to a kind of kindergarten surveillance.”* The Annalist went on to say that, *“As was most natural the little ones became very fond of those who were so kind to them and the evening hour of going home became the saddest part of the day.”* As time went on, more and more of the children were allowed to remain overnight at the school and as the Annalist remarked, *“This was in reality the beginning of the boarding school.”*

Being so close with the boarders, the Sisters also experienced the sadness of those times—the deaths of many of their students. In 1868, the Annalist in Roxbury wrote about one young woman dying at the school. *“At 12:50 AM the child died. She was 19 years old. We brought her into a small parlor downstairs. She was dressed in her First Communion dress and she looked very lovely. . . her body was brought to the chapel . . . At 8:00 the hearse came. Four Sisters in a carriage and four carriages filled with students went to the cemetery. This made a great impression on all. . .”*

In 1909, the annalist for St. Augustine’s School in South Boston told two amusing stories of the children in the youngest classes. The first recounts one of those moments when children say the *darndest* things. *“Sister M. Cornelia was one day teaching Addition and trying to get her young disciples to word their explanation properly. When the last column was added, she taught them to say, ‘Write the whole amount.’ One little lad hesitated and Sister said, ‘Now, what did I tell you to say?’ He looked at her for a moment, then answered, ‘Put down the whole business.’”*

Teaching dozens of small children must have been more than a challenge, especially during those years when there were few guidelines or age requirements for entrance into first grade. Often, overwhelmed mothers sent their children to school sooner than they were ready. One little four year old boy, who was, no doubt, too young for the challenges of first grade, refused to stay in his seat. Though this solution would be never be condoned today, the *“Sister took a cord and tied him to his seat. It was more than he expected and his offended dignity sat as still as a mouse for the rest of the morning. However, at noon, when he had donned coat and cap, he stood before Sister, removed the cap which he plunged with his hands into his pockets and said, ‘Sister, I ain’t coming to school no more.’ ‘Oh, my, where are you going?’ said Sister. ‘I’m going to work for my Mother,’ replied the lad of four. The picture he presented and the size of the lad ready for work even now brings a smile to the lips. That afternoon he was absent and we wondered if he had found work. He appeared the next morning, however, and is still busy with slate and pencil.”*

One can suppose that just like the sister, that little boy never forgot the day he failed to find work and was sent back to school by his mother.



Class of 1914
Unknown School
SNDdeN New England Archives

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ South Boston Convent Annals, 1871-1902.
- ◆ Lowell NDA Convent Annals, 1852-1904.