How Catholic Sisters Changed *Everything*

A History of the Sisters of the Upper Mississippi River Valley

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The Hardscrabble Beginnings

Written to coincide with the traveling national exhibit, Women and Spirit, this history of the Sisters of the Upper Mississippi River Valley tells stories of the religious communities who taught, healed and cared for the people of the land.

By Steamship, Train and Covered Wagon

The lush and fertile Upper Mississippi River Valley attracted settlers by the thousands throughout the 19th century. They came to fish, farm, mine for lead, work at the lumber mills and build new railroads. They came from eastern states, but they also came from Germany, Ireland and all of Europe. They came with their children, their languages, their religions – often Catholic - and even their diseases.

As the Catholic bishops and clergy faced this rapidly growing population, they called on Catholic Sisters for assistance. *Would they help provide education, healthcare, and care for the elderly and orphans?*

Sisters came by steamship, train and covered wagon to the hardscrabble frontier. Often their log homes also functioned as schoolrooms, orphanages and workrooms. Community archives tell stories of Sisters rolling up their bedding to make room for their pupils every morning. They also tell of making meals for the children; providing washing and bedding for boarding students; giving medical attention when needed; doing farm chores and caring for livestock. Sometimes they had to dispatch snakes under their floorboards and outwit wolves at the door.

Although they faced greater hardship than most had ever experienced in their lives, the Sisters forged a new beginning, doing what needed to be done for all who needed help. They built schools and hospitals and orphanages. They shared their meager provisions with the hungry. They put one foot in front of the other, attending to chores, fitting in their own prayer when they could.

Sisters Hitch Up their Skirts

The first group of Sisters arrived in Dubuque in 1843. Docking along the banks of the river at Dubuque, five **BVM Sisters** climbed out of the boat from Philadelphia and, "gathering their skirts," scaled the sandy hill, past crude shacks and untethered livestock, toward the Cathedral. Irish townspeople were "hard pressed to understand the influx of women they could not take to wife, yet who wore no habit and kept no cloister."

Across the Mississippi River in 1847, a few pioneer daughters of local miners and farmers were forming a community under the direction of Italian Dominican Missionary Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli. The new **Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters** began teaching students as they themselves took classes, learning how to be teachers.

1867 saw the arrival of five **Sisters of Mercy** in DeWitt, two years after the end of the Civil War. Although they began teaching immediately, one of their members had helped nurse the "Irish Brigade" of the Union Army. Soon a request came from downriver: *Davenport was in great need of a hospital to provide care to the poor and mentally ill. Would the Sisters consider establishing one?* In December 1869, Davenport's Mercy Hospital opened on Marquette Street. Soon, patients with urgent conditions were seeking admission.

The Benedictine Sisters traveled to Nauvoo, Ill., in 1874 to open an academy for girls.

There has been an increase in the number of cholera cases in the city. ... The list of dead now numbers about twelve. ... Will the cholera death-roll lengthen or grow shorter within the next twenty four hours? We know not.
Davenport Democrat, 9-2-1873

Upriver, the **Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration** arrived in LaCrosse, Wisc., in 1870, braving harsh northern winters to care for orphans and serve as teachers. Back in Dubuque, a request from Dubuque's Bishop John Hennessey to "help bring education and culture to the city" was met with the arrival of the **Visitation Sisters** in 1871.

Three years later, in 1874, the **Benedictine Sisters** came ashore to teach young women in the area of Nauvoo, Illinois. An old armory served as both home and school, and classes were held in what was once a billiard hall. Despite the efforts of some townsmen to denounce "these nuns on the plea of public nuisance," by the turn of the century, the Benedictines were "making a thriving city out of a deserted Illinois town." (St. Louis Post Dispatch)

Many Sisters arrived along the River Valley during intensely cold and snowy winters, and the young Irish **Presentation Sisters** were no different. Dubuque was piled with "snow several feet deep," when they arrived in 1874 to teach Irish immigrant children. Settling in perhaps the poorest section of the Cathedral parish, West Hill was riddled with open mineral shafts, making travel dangerous at best. Beginning with 20 students, the new school's enrollment swelled to 80 within months. The children who could escape or postpone labor in the neighborhood saw mills by attending school were fortunate indeed.

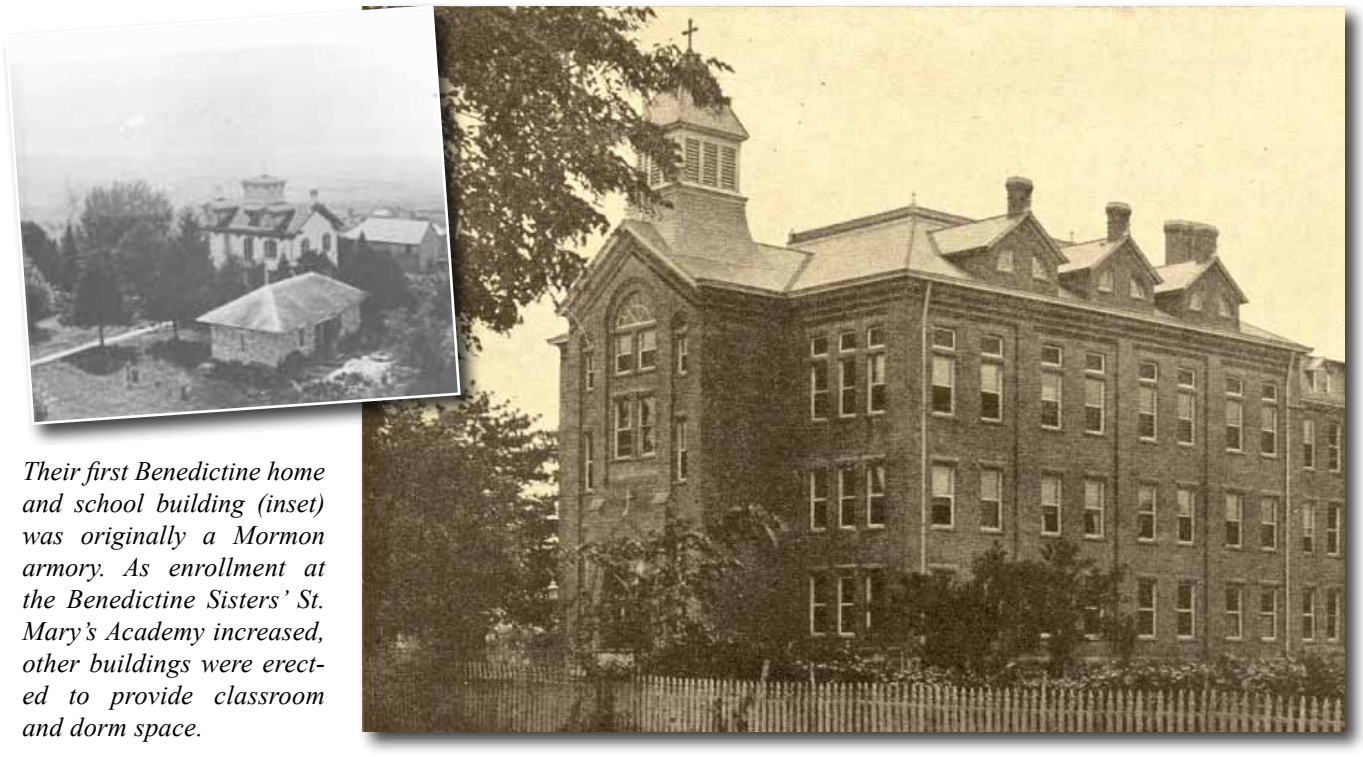
Sisters often worked for free, meaning they had to find other means of income. During hard times, some Presentation Sisters sold rags and stockings, while others worked in public schools for a salary when possible.

Following hostility toward Catholics in Germany, a group of **Franciscan Sisters** emigrated to Dubuque in 1878 to establish an orphanage. Together with a growing number of orphaned children, the Sisters lived in the woefully small old Holy Trinity Church.

The Dubuque Franciscan Sisters had to beg for funds to support both the orphans and the needy elderly who soon occupied the orphanage. Times were hard. When asked for money to buy meat for dinner, Mother Xavier looked in her purse and found 30 cents. She handed half to the Sister cook. "It would not be prudent to spend everything. Here is 15 cents to buy a ring of sausage." When hearing a complaint about the beggars who came to their door, Mother said simply, "One beggar must help another."

Another Franciscan community entered the Valley when 21 Sisters, 11 novices, one postulant and a dog arrived in Dubuque on December 3, 1890. They would eventually become the **Clinton Franciscan Sisters**. Staying for a time with the Dubuque Franciscans, the new Sisters began teaching and operating hospitals throughout the area immediately. By 1893, they had purchased property and established their motherhouse and an academy for girls in Clinton.

The number of needy and abandoned children grew dramatically following the Civil War and outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, diptheria and other infectious diseases. The **Sisters of Humility** arrived in Davenport in 1897 to open and staff St. Vincent Home for orphaned children, on farmland off West Central Park. There, they also raised crops and livestock for feeding their young charges.



Their first Benedictine home and school building (inset) was originally a Mormon armory. As enrollment at the Benedictine Sisters' St. Mary's Academy increased, other buildings were erected to provide classroom and dorm space.

The Expansion Years: Let There be Light!

As the 20th century got underway, modern conveniences began to change our lives. Automobiles transformed travel. Radio brought the world into our homes. And electricity lit up the night. This was true for area Sisters as well.

When a group of Carmelite Nuns arrived in Davenport in 1911, they came by train and by exotic "horseless carriage." The small community first set up housekeeping in a little Queen Anne cottage on the corner of 15th and Brady. After hosting an open house for townspeople the monastery closed its doors, becoming a cloister for silent prayer that continued with its relocation up the hill in Bettendorf five years later.

New Challenges

Not all was quiet following the move, however. The Ku Klux Klan feared that Catholics were destroying America and worked to intimidate them wherever possible. Sometimes the Klan's tactics worked, but when they erected fiery crosses next to the new Carmelite monastery in Bettendorf, the townspeople came to the nuns' defense. The KKK was put down.

Another cloistered community arrived 53 years later in Dubuque. The Trappistine Nuns baked cookies to support themselves while following a prayer schedule that stretched from before dawn until after dark. Eventually, they chose caramel-making over cookie-baking, a ministry for which they are well-known yet today.

As the Valley's population grew, classrooms grew more crowded. Sisters often taught 60 or more students at a time, working 60 hours or more a week to keep up.

While immigration continued to increase area population, it also affected the Sisters' communities. The Clinton Franciscans saw 18 Irish immigrants join their community in 1908, followed by 51 from Newfoundland over the next several years. Other communities experienced similar influxes. New building projects occupied nearly everyone.

Education ... for All

Sisters met the educational, medical, social and spiritual needs of this exploding population as quickly as they could, but needed more education to do so in a fully professional way. This presented a tricky problem. The busy Sisters could not spare the time from their own classrooms to attend college. And in any event, many universities barred women.

Gradually, that changed, and communities began sending Sisters to summer school in a "20-year plan" to acquire bachelor's degrees. Some traveled to Milwaukee to attend Marquette University when permission was granted in 1912 "for ladies and even nuns" to do so. Others attended nearby colleges - many of which were founded by the Sisters themselves - such as Marycrest, Mount Mercy, Clarke, Loras and Mt. St. Clare.

Infectious disease continued to be a great problem into the 20th century. Tuberculosis, influenza, cholera and polio each took thousands of lives. Sisters tended the gravely ill in their homes and in hospitals, sometimes succumbing themselves. One young Dubuque Franciscan Sister died while caring for victims of the Spanish Flu, while four BVM members lost their lives to flu two years later.

As in the classroom, the Sisters took pains to educate themselves in medicine, founding and attending their own hospital schools for nurses.

Despite the great need for quality healthcare, it was not a profitable industry. The original Cedar Rapids Mercy Hospital earned $1.00 per day per patient at the beginning of the 20th century. Surgeries were performed next to the women's ward on the second floor of a two-story home. The first operation – to correct a cataract – yielded a total of $27.40 for the hospital.

Caring for the Least Among Us

Orphans were one of the great tragedies of war and disease. Some children had been born in the River Valley, while others came from New York by way of the Orphan

Benedictine Mother Ricarda Gallivan, OSB, traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the 1955 White House Conference on Education. The first such conference of its kind, participants strategized how to provide quality education for the baby boom students flooding classrooms.

Artifacts from our history include this altar host maker, the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary which was carried through the Chicago fire by Mother Otillia Hoeveler, and the "Happy Girls of St. Mary's," a collection of poems about our early academy students written by Mother Otillia.

Train. Many families opened their homes and hearts to the little ones. But for the children left behind, the Sisters spread safety nets.

The Dubuque Franciscans incorporated St. Mary's Orphan Home in 1912, while the Humility Sisters added farm buildings, dorms and a gymnasium to St. Vincent's Orphanage in Davenport. Other communities provided loving homes via their boarding academies.

Other Constant Challenges

Fire was an ever-present threat in wood frame buildings lit by kerosene lamps, and many communities suffered sometimes-tragic conflagrations in their early years. Schools, orphanages and even hospitals burned to the ground. In nearly every case, townspeople would band together to help the Sisters rebuild.

Money was tight in the early days of every community. Students who could not afford to pay tuition often were allowed to attend for free, and needy families would often ask for help. Nevertheless, bills had to be paid.

The Panic of 1907 hit the Benedictine community hard, when an unscrupulous financier swindled their funds. The Sisters were left penniless. Years of begging, borrowing and doing without ensued as the Benedictine Sisters worked to buy back the buildings that had been acquired by the bank. Thanks to the efforts of the Sisters and their friends, the Benedictines were solvent again by 1926.

When the Great Depression hit just three years later, every community was affected. Not only did the Sisters themselves struggle, those to whom they ministered needed help, and "hobos" knocked daily at their back doors for a meal. To help keep afloat, Sisters often taught music lessons to area children.

Optimism at Mid-Century

By mid-century, the Sisters' ministries were beginning to yield great fruit. Enrollment in their schools and convents continued to climb, necessitating new building projects. Graduates of the Sisters' academies, colleges and hospital nursing schools were becoming teachers, administrators and healthcare professionals. Change was inevitable.

Orphanages, once bursting at the seams, were closing. Improved health care was allowing people – parents and children alike - to live longer. For those children who needed safe haven, the foster system was gaining favor.

Diocesan schools began replacing those once run by religious communities. Lay teachers – many of whom had been educated by Sisters – were beginning to staff the classrooms and administrative offices. Lay administrators and nurses took hospital positions as well, often with credentials earned at the Sisters' academies.

Modernization and the Approach of Vatican II

By the mid-1950's, the Sisters of the Upper Mississippi River Valley had begun responding to Pope Pius XII's call to begin modernizing their communities and customs.

To wit, the BVMs adopted a modified habit that allowed them to see clearly while driving! The Benedictines adopted an English translation of the Liturgy of the Hours in 1954, allowing them to worship together in their own language. Pope Pius's call to enhance their professional, cultural and spiritual education was met with great enthusiasm.

As their ministries at home began to change, the Sisters began to respond to needs further afield. Sisters from nearly every community journeyed to South America following a 1961 request by Pope John XXIII to teach children there. They expanded ministries among poor and underserved populations. They began building and staffing retreat centers.

The stage was set for the social, religious and political changes that marked the years following the Second Vatican Council.

Changing With - and For - the World

As social, political and cultural changes of the 1960's swept the nation, they arrived as well within the convents of the Upper Mississippi River Valley. By 1965, Sisters here had begun responding to the changes, and to the urging of the Second Vatican Council to reflect on and renew their customs and habits. They were urged as well to remember the original reason for their founding, while recognizing and adapting to the signs of the times.

For the cloistered Trappistine Nuns near Dubuque and Carmelite Nuns in Eldridge, Iowa - whose chief ministry had always been prayer - changes were more internal than external, affecting private and prayer life rather than outside ministry. For active communities, the changes were more visible and profound.

New Habits of Life

For the Benedictines, the 1960's ushered in major changes. Having been established 1500 years prior to seek God in monastic enclosure, this community had taken up the active ministry of teaching in response to the need of pioneer Americans. Now, reflecting on the Rule of Benedict, the Sisters began reclaiming their contemplative origins while eliminating outmoded customs. To wit, they placed greater emphasis on contemplative and communal prayer. They began sharing their spirituality more formally with the public, through various spiritual retreats and spiritual direction. And they transitioned to the dress of the common people.

The apostolic communities from the area – the Franciscans, the Presentations, the BVMs, the CHMs, the Mercies, the Visitations and the Dominicans – experienced equally profound changes. At first dressed in a modified habit and eventually transitioning to the common dress of the time, most continued moving out of the classrooms and hospital wards and toward the underserved and neglected populations of the area, country and world.

Race relations took center stage during the 60's. While some area Sisters marched in support of Civil Rights in distant towns, others organized marches and demonstrations at home.

A Dubuque Franciscan Sister was struck with a brick during a march in Chicago, while the Benedictine Sisters marched through the streets of Nauvoo, observing townspeople peering out from behind windows and doors. Other area Sisters, including Sr. Barbara Vaughn, OSB, left home for positions in historically black colleges to allow African-American faculty time off from teaching to earn advanced degrees.

In Clinton, an ecumenical organization named Inter-Faith/Inter-Race impelled the Franciscan Sisters out of their convents and onto the streets in support of Civil Rights. Eventually, their demonstrations grew to embrace additional groups, resulting in boycotting lettuce in support of California Farm Workers. Eventually, as the Viet Nam War dragged on, the protests became centered on peace.

By 1969, the BVM Sisters had formally pledged to work on such issues as race relations, poverty and peace. In Davenport, Iowa, a collaborative Sisters' Council – one of the first in the U. S. - was formed to wrestle with these issues.

Many communities worked to alleviate the worst symptoms of poverty by founding food pantries, transitional housing opportunities, adult education programs and other programs designed to help underserved populations become self-sufficient. From the CHMs' Humility of Mary Housing in Davenport to Dubuque's Maria House and Teresa Shelter – a transitional residence jointly sponsored by six Sisters' communities – Sisters sought to solve both immediate and long-term problems.

By the mid-60's, the Benedictine Sisters had begun exchanging their habit for the dress of the day, as encouraged by the Second Vatican Council. Concurrently, they began examining their prayer, recommiting to the contemplative aspect of monasticism that marks the lifestyle as different from apostolic religious life. The prayer service above took place in the early 60's.

Civil Rights became a chief concern of religious communities. In Nauvoo, left, the Benedictines marched in demonstrations, while Sr. Barbara Vaughn, center, taught in Birmingham. Meantime, Sisters became more involved in parish business, serving in such positions as Parish Minister. Above right, Sr. Marilyn Roman (center) participates in a Parish Council meeting.

The Mercy Sisters' Catherine McAuley Center, Cedar Rapids, is a case in point. Created in part to provide transitional housing and counseling for women, it also was established to provide basic education for adults. Today, students are able to improve their English speaking skills, work toward a GED, and complete course work for the U.S. Citizenship test. They take an important step toward both self-sufficiency and becoming contributing members of the community.

Today's Benedictine Ministries

Today's Upper Mississippi River Valley Sisters continue to minister to the underserved and overlooked; to the vulnerable and marginalized, with prayer and services. Here are a few examples:

Sisters provide services, advocacy and educational opportunities to immigrants from Guatemala to Bosnia. They work for immigration reform. They provide medical care, legal clinics, bill payment and other critical services. The Benedictine Sisters support peace and social justice programs through substantial financial contributions, and by serving in positions of assistance close to home (see below).

Sisters have established and operate shelters for victims of domestic violence and homelessness, run food pantries, provide educational opportunities and tutoring, and work with mentally-disabled persons to help provide dignity and self-sufficiency. Here in Rock Island, the Benedictine Sisters minister in all of these fields.

The Benedictine Sisters also minister to the spirit. Along with nearly every other community, the Benedictine Sisters offer ecumenical spiritual retreats and programs for individuals as well as groups. Spiritual direction is also available.

The Benedictine Sisters, as other communities, work to protect the earth by adopting geothermal heating and cooling systems and driving hybrid cars. They sponsor environmental programs and use green construction methods. They tend acres of prairie grass and protect wetlands and woodlands.

Today, Upper Mississippi River Valley Sisters continue to work ceaselessly to bring justice, hope and peace to all of God's creation, from here at home to the ends of the globe. From offering prayer to digging wells and providing spiritual retreats to helping write legislation to address such issues as human trafficking, the Sisters continue to do what they always have done: they respond to the need that is greatest

For more information about the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery, visit www.smmsisters.org or contact us at (309) 283-2100.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Benedictine Sisters began reclaiming their contemplative origins and sharing their spirituality more formally with the public. Above, Sr. Helen Carey joins in a Christmas caroling excursion.

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