
PAST FORWARD

The Newsletter of the Sisters of Providence Archives, Seattle

Winter 1998 Volume 6, Issue 4

RESPOND IMMEDIATELY: THE STORY OF PROVIDENCE

"I was the pharmacist at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland, when I first heard that we had been offered a hospital in Seattle..." With these words, Karin Dufault, SP, Chair of the Board of Directors, Sisters of Providence Health System, began a one-woman reenactment of the founding of Providence Seattle Medical Center. In the 45-minute presentation prepared by the Archives staff, Sister Karin assumed the persona of Sister Peter Claver, one of three foundresses of Providence Seattle, to tell the story of the hospital from 1877 to 1911.

Sister Karin first became Sister Peter Claver for the System Office Mission Day in October. She was then invited to give the presentation three times for the hospital's 120th anniversary, which was celebrated November 30. Each performance was greeted enthusiastically by the physicians, employees, neighbors, and community leaders in attendance.

The presentation featured original documents (including letters of Sister Peter Claver and Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart), photographs, and artifacts from the Archives. Among the historical finds was the original 1877 telegram asking the sisters to "respond immediately" to King County's invitation to care for the poor and sick at the new County Poor Farm.

Sister Karin will play Sister Peter Claver at least one more time, for the sisters at Saint

Joseph Residence, Seattle, but to date she has no plans to take her show on the road. Those with access to the Providence Health System intranet, can view some of the historical photographs used in her presentation by going to the System Office home page.



HIGHLIGHTS OF 1998

The past year has been both productive and challenging for the Sisters of Providence Archives. As we look back, we would like to share a few of our achievements and update you on several on-going projects.

- Outreach has been a priority in 1998, as we improved our portable exhibit, created a new resource packet, expanded the newsletter, participated in employee orientation sessions, and began planning for a website.
- We have answered more than 225 requests in the past eleven months, and have provided indepth resources to researchers on such topics as the development of Catholic health-care in the west, the sisters' contributions to

professional care for troubled youth, and the architecture of Providence institutions. The requests were evenly divided among employees of the Health System; the Provincial Administration and sisters; and scholars, researchers, and genealogists.

- At the request of the Provincial Councils, we have begun discussions with the St. Ignatius Province Archives staff regarding the restructuring of both archives in preparation for the new province.

- As part of our mission to identify and preserve historical documents being created today, Loretta recently conducted a preliminary survey of the health system to determine the existence of and need for formal records management programs in the institutions. Initial responses, as well as anecdotal evidence, point to the advantages of creating a records management program that can be adapted to fit the needs of each institution.

- Terri and Loretta have been working with an exhibit designer and the Providence General Foundation, Everett, Washington, to provide resources and artifacts that illustrate the interesting and complex history and relationship between Everett's two hospitals--Providence and Everett General--over the past century. The exhibit will be installed in March 1999, to mark the fifth anniversary of the merger of these two institutions.

- Meanwhile, Sister Rita has been engaged in surveying our entire photograph collection and identifying as many Sisters of Providence as possible. This project has raised serious conservation issues that will need to be addressed in the near future.



DID YOU KNOW THAT...

This year marks the 80th anniversary of one of the deadliest epidemics of all time?

In 1918, untold millions throughout the world were infected with a virulent, new disease called "Spanish influenza." The epidemic appeared in March, peaked in October, and then was over as quickly as it began. The infection was so widespread that social and economic order was threatened with collapse. It is difficult to comprehend the devastating scope and speed of the disease. One comparison is telling: Since 1980, when HIV was first detected, 14 million people worldwide have died of AIDS. The Spanish flu killed 21 million in less than one year.

Every institution in the province was affected by the flu; seven sisters died, as did several nurses, employees, and students. The schools were closed and the boarders returned to their families. The chronicles report that the hospital sisters traveled between institutions, filling in where needed as the epidemic struck town after town. At Providence Hospital, Everett, 12 of 17 nurses and 9 of 12 sisters were infected, and yet they cared for 273 flu victims, who remained in the hospital an average of 10 days each. The story was much the same in the other hospitals.

In November, Mother Vincent Ferrier, Provincial Superior wrote: "This terrible epidemic recalls the days of our Mother Foundresses [who endured cholera and typhoid epidemics] and has given us an occasion of proving our spirit of self-sacrifice, and I rejoice to say our dear Sisters of today have not been found wanting."

Surprisingly, until this anniversary year, little has been written about the Spanish flu and its impact on history. The trauma of the greatest pandemic of modern times was quickly forgotten in the euphoria over the ending of World War I. To learn more about the flu in Providence institutions, call us. For general information, visit the "American Experience" page on the PBS website: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/influenza

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