

# Past *Forward*

PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province • Providence Health & Services

## Iron Rails and Wagon Trails: A Journey to Mon- tana in 1878

*Elizabeth Russell*

In 1856, Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart and her companions traveled 36 arduous days to reach Vancouver, Washington Territory. A summary of their route: ferry, train and boat from Montreal to New York; steamship to Colón, Panama; train across the Isthmus of Panama; steamship to San Francisco; and finally steamship to Vancouver. A wagon trail summed up the travel options for an overland journey across the United States. After 1856, as the sisters' grew their ministries in the western United States, the railroad companies laid down more miles of track each year, pushing rail travel ever further westward. On May 10, 1869, construction of the Union Pacific line from Iowa reached Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, joining the Central Pacific track from California to form the first transcontinental railroad.

It is clear that the transcontinental railroad changed the journey from Montreal westward, but what were those trips actually like? Detailed descriptions of the sisters' early train travel are rare, but a letter in Providence Archives at the

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### Inside

Exciting new accession from the University of Providence

The unique chapel at the former Columbus Hospital

## Artifact Spotlight

*Jessica Long*



A loud boom echoed over the city of Missoula, Montana on November 21, 1999. The thunder came not from the partly cloudy skies, but from the 427 pounds of explosives, set by Controlled Demolition, Inc., used to implode the six-story Broadway Building on the St. Patrick Hospital campus. Completed in 1952, the facility originally served as the main hospital building and was later converted to other uses, including administration. Three bricks that survived the Broadway Building demolition made their way to the Archives over the following years. Tied to one of the bricks is a bright green laminated viewing pass for Sister Simonne Begin. This pass, along with another one for Sister Eileen Croghan, are mementos from a special VIP brunch that was held to view the 18-second event. Both sisters served at the hospital for several years, including as administrator from 1975 to 1980 and director of educational services from 1981 to 1987, respectively. The St. Patrick Hospital artifact collection also includes a “before and after” long-sleeve shirt created to commemorate the occasion. While the “after” picture on the shirt is a blank image, plans for a new building on the site were already in motion at the time of the implosion. The new \$50 million facility would open in 2002 and contain ambulatory services, underground parking, a conference center, outpatient services, and offices for a number of physician practices, including the Western Montana Clinic and the Missoula Oncology and Infectious Diseases Specialists.

# A Great Collection Falls Into Our Hands

Loretta Greene

Recent issues of *Past Forward* have described large records transfers that line the hallway outside the Archives, such as the recent 98 boxes of photographs from the three ministries in Portland, Oregon. One collection is barely processed and another takes its place. Such is the case with the recent transfer of 200 boxes of archival records from the University of Providence, Great Falls, Montana (formerly known as the University of Great Falls). The university's heritage dates to 1932 when the Sisters of Providence and Ursuline Sisters worked together with Bishop Edwin O'Hara to create Great Falls Junior College.

It all began in May when Father Oliver Doyle came to Seattle for the funeral of Sister Mary Ann Benoit. Sr. Mary Ann was retired university faculty; Father Oliver is vice-president of mission integration. Anyone who has met Father Oliver knows him as an Irish whirlwind. Full of enthusiasm, creativity and Irish cheer, Father Oliver is a genuine individual who achieves what he sets his mind to.

As it so happened, Father Oliver roomed beside the Archives offices at Saint Joseph Residence during his stay. A historian and former college president, he was intrigued by the extent of our archival collections; preservation, cataloguing and dissemination of information; and our various outreach efforts. His proposal took us off-guard: Would we want the university's historical collection transferred to Providence Archives? "Yes!" was the short answer - as long as the transfer had approval from all concerned. How much was it? "Oh, about half the size of this room

(archives reference room)", he replied with a wave of his arm. One week later, Father Oliver shared the exciting news that Dr. Tony Aretz, university president, had approved transfer of the archival collection.

The next step in the transfer process was a site visit in June to meet the university librarians who were the main users and caretakers of the collection, assess the extent of the collection, and determine what would be needed to transfer it. Father Oliver acted as my personal guide for an in-depth campus tour and highlights of Great Falls including the cemetery where Sisters of Providence are buried. The campus tour included a visit to Galerie Trinitas which houses the artwork of Sister Mary Trinitas, and meeting Marcia Driskell, director; orientation to campus buildings and more work by Sr. Mary Trinitas around campus; and introduction to, and warm welcome by, the library staff (Oliver Pflug, director, Susan Lee, information services librarian, and Jane Kronebusch, serials clerk), Dr. Tony Aretz, and Trudi Cole, executive assistant to Dr. Aretz and Father Oliver. I experienced many energizing moments spending extended time in Galerie Trinitas, and talking shop with Sue Lee about the historical collection and the library. All the while, Father Oliver enthusiastically imparted his thoughts about ways to share Providence heritage on campus through a walking tour of Trinitas art, university heritage committee, potential exhibit space, and a graveside prayer service at the Sisters' cemetery.

Sue Lee introduced me to the university's historical collection primarily stored in a walk-in brick vault adjacent to the library entrance. She explained that in the past it had been moved to different locations in the library and was in jeopardy of being moved again. No one wanted it to be potentially damaged or relegated to a less desirable location. Fortunately, the collection had previously been processed to a folder level



*A peek inside the vault containing archival records in the University of Providence library*

by Sister Marita Bartholome, CHM, a retired public librarian and volunteer at the university library. The collection included about 200 archival boxes, 10 oversize boxes with scrapbooks, university newspaper, and oversize material; 3 filing drawers each of photographs and scrapbooks; 12 binders of supporting documentation for the photographs; and two filing drawers of yearbooks. In addition to processing the paper collection, Sr. Marita had identified and numbered all the photographs - perfect for Peter Schmid, visual resources archivist, to easily incorporate them into our online database.

The return trip to box and transfer the collection was planned for mid-August before convocation. Moving the archival boxes from Great Falls to Seattle involved detailed planning regarding whether the boxes would be shipped or driven via rental van. It was decided to hire Jeff, a man who works for the Sisters with any number of needed projects. Boxing supplies were delivered to the university. Peter and I arrived on a Monday afternoon. Tuesday was a laborious day for Peter, packing and moving the boxed collection, and Jeff arrived and filled the rental truck. In the evening, we played tourist and viewed the falls on the Missouri River for which the city is named. Early Wednesday morning Jeff headed out on the road to Seattle while Peter and I had the opportunity to visit sites significant to Sisters of Providence history in Great Falls including the second Columbus Hospital (see article on page 3), site of St. Thomas Home, and Mount Olivet Cemetery. On Thursday morning Jeff arrived at Providence Archives, the truck was unloaded, and just like that another massive collection lined the hallway outside the archives!

The next step is a deeper processing of the collection and integration into our legacy collection for the University of Providence/Great Falls. Elizabeth Russell, associate archivist, will tackle this massive project. She has already removed the document boxes from the shipping boxes, compared the contents to the finding aid, and at the request of Sue Lee has started processing the course catalogs

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# A Chapel Like No Other: The Former Columbus Hospital

Peter Schmid



While in Great Falls, Montana to pick up archival records (see article on page 2), Loretta Greene and I had the chance to visit the old Columbus Hospital, founded by the Sisters of Providence in 1892. As we drove west on Second Avenue, we instantly recognized the 1929 building, in the shape of a triptych. It was exciting; there are precious few Providence buildings extant from our long history!

There was the name of the original hospital cut into the terra cotta framing the entrance, with the religious community motto in the center, painted gold: *Charitas Christi Urget Nos*. To the right of the doorway, the cornerstone memorializes the building's dedication by Bishop Mathias Lenihan on his golden jubilee, October 9, 1929.

As we entered, we noticed what must have been the original admissions window; an original pendant light fixture illuminated the vestibule. The cornice was of cast plaster, painted gold. We walked on shiny terrazzo floors (a blend of

marble chips and Portland cement) with thin strips of brass between the slabs.

The building receptionist, Marie, noticed our interest and greeted us warmly. After we introduced ourselves, Marie explained to us that the building, now known as Columbus Center, was home to dozens of businesses, including a few eateries (we couldn't help but notice a neon "pizza" sign visible in one of the windows outside!).

Our guide was very obliging and obviously had a passion for the building. Her mother had worked in the building as a nurse and she had lots of memories of the hospital. Marie took us on the old elevator up to the second floor where the original chapel is still intact, though stripped of statues and most ornamentation. She explained that in recent years the chapel has been used by a Lutheran congregation for services, and also as a theater (according to the Columbus Center website, the space can be rented for weddings and other catered events).

As we looked around the rather plain space our eyes were drawn to the ceiling. There, ornamental plaster moldings and brackets which spanned the width of the space were adorned with decorative flourishes in gold. It was unlike any Providence chapel we had seen, either in person or in our historic image collections. Among the scrollwork were highly fancy letters which we recognized as initials. Some were rather typical of traditional Catholicism: "M" for Mary, the Blessed Mother; "JM" for Jesus, Mary, Joseph. But there were others very specific to Sisters of Providence religious community history: "MG" for Mother [Emilie] Gamelin; "IB" for Ignace Bourget, founding bishop of the community in Montreal; "FCSP" for the original French title of the religious community, *Filles de la Charité, Servantes des Pauvres* (Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Poor); "MJ" for Mother Joseph; and "StV" for St. Vincent de Paul, principal patron.

These decorative initials are striking for their singularity; a review of our images of historic Providence chapels revealed nothing similar. And though a few would be recognized by most Catholics, those that are specific to the community would not have been, even at the time. Though chapels in Providence institutions were designed for all, whether Sisters, patients, students, or public, they were also sites of personal ritual and devotion for the religious community, and had a special meaning for the Sisters of Providence. Though our historical records here in the archives do not explain the rationale for how this particular chapel was decorated, it truly was a uniquely Providence place of worship.



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General Administration in Montreal provides a glimpse into one sister's experience.

In 1878, soon after making final vows, 21-year-old Sister Mary Wilfrid Perreault traveled with six companions to her new ministry in Missoula, Montana. They left Montreal on September 3rd and arrived on September 28<sup>th</sup>, a journey of 6 days by train and 20 days by wagon. The group was led by Sister Mary of the Infant Jesus, who had returned to Montreal from St. Ignatius Mission to bring more sisters west. In a long letter to her parents dated October 25, 1878, Sr. Mary Wilfrid describes her trip (the original French text has been translated for this article).

Leaving Montreal in the evening, the sisters' train traveled eastward through Quebec, almost certainly on the Grand Trunk Railroad line that followed the northern shoreline of Lake Ontario: "We traversed Upper Canada along Lake Ontario with an abundant rain; was it in sympathy with us that the sky was somber and wept?" The sisters had brought a supply of food with them on the train: "the abundance and wise choice of provisions furnished by the sisters of our community before our departure, made us see what was in the heart of our dear friends who had provided this little store of food."

For a young sister, who was leaving everything she knew to go to a strange land thousands of miles away, the first days of travel were very emotional. She writes, "...on that first day, my heart filled my chest, and left me no room for food, and I ate hardly anything."

On the evening of September 4<sup>th</sup>, the train reached Detroit, where U.S. Customs officials inspected the baggage. Sr. Mary Wilfrid was impressed

by their speed: "if everyone did their duty like the American customs officers, confessions would be shorter, and everything more efficient, I think, in the world." However, it seems that the customs agents' efficiency precluded civility, as they "put their hands into all the nooks and crannies of our trunks and travelling bags, totally disarranging and crumpling the contents," and their

water to fill the teapot they had brought with them.

From Chicago, the train took them to Burlington, Illinois, and from there to Omaha, Nebraska, a major transportation hub. Many of the passengers boarding the train near Omaha must have been traveling to the transcontinental railroad's terminus in California. Sr. Mary Wilfrid was unimpressed: "Most of the travelers were Californians who...



*Sr. Mary Wilfrid, ca. 1897*

inspection completed, the sisters received "in the end no more compensation than one word: all right!"

The next morning, the train reached Chicago, and passengers were given 30 minutes to get off the train for breakfast. The sisters traveled with maximum economy, eating their meals on the train from their provisions. At Chicago, two of the group went to the station restaurant, but only to ask for the charity of some boiling

resembled bandits more than anything else."

By the time they reached Omaha, the sisters had been on the train for a few days and were beginning to feel the strain:

"Omaha, an important city which grows every day with a very American speed, is in the state of Nebraska; if one can judge by the brouhaha which dominates the station, this is a very busy city. We almost lost our way in the midst of all the disorder and confusion. If our

good angel had not been helping us, we would not have managed it. We needed to renew our tickets; those purchased in Montreal were valid only as far as Omaha. We also needed to eat, since we had had nothing since Burlington and above all, we felt in extreme need of bathing; we were so dirty that we were afraid of each other. I swear to you, dear parents, that what tired me the most during our long voyage, was to feel the grime take up residence on my body."

As noted, the sisters did not leave the train to eat, nor was there water on the train for bathing or washing the tin dishes they had brought. They created makeshift beds with their seat cushions.

However, the grand landscape compensated for the lack of comfort. "From Omaha, we traveled west, we traversed the state of Nebraska, the territory of Wyoming, and we entered Utah, the land of the Mormons, to get to Ogden, a city situated near to Salt Lake. To fully describe to you the mountains, the gorges, the precipices, the tunnels, the bridges, etc. that we crossed on the way from Omaha to Ogden, is impossible. The variety of different panoramas that we saw is indescribable; after the sight of a precipice wrenched from us a cry of fear, we exclaimed in admiration at the sight of a rock which seemed to raise its head to the skies; then when we felt like we were on the road of an eternal abyss, we were all of a sudden dazzled and rejoicing in the view of the sun which seemed more beautiful than that sun which shines upon mortals. Ah! We were truly in the famous chain of Rocky Mountains which crosses North America along all of its length like a backbone."

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On the evening of September 8th, the train reached Ogden, in northern Utah. This must have been the last leg of travel for the sisters on the main Union Pacific line. The sisters relished an overnight stay at an Ogden hotel, finding tremendous comfort in a real bed and a bath, and a hot, delicious meal. At 9:30 the next morning, they transferred to a Utah and Northern Railroad train to go north to Oneida, in the southeastern corner of the state of Idaho. This was the closest they could travel by train to their Montana destination. Oneida is now Arimo, Idaho.

“So we finished rolling along the iron rails, and being dragged along with the speed of the wind by the steam! Tomorrow we would take horse-drawn wagons. It seemed to us that we would now have less to suffer, and it was with joy that we abandoned the fire-breathing beast.”

At Oneida, a wagon-driver sent by the Missoula sisters met them. After staying overnight in Oneida, they left on September 10<sup>th</sup>, beginning their 19-day journey by wagon through the terrain separating them from Missoula. They had two wagons to carry the seven sisters and all their baggage: “the one pulled by four horses was to carry our baggage, the other which had only two horses was for the seven of us.”

A fellow passenger bound for Helena, Montana volunteered his services to drive the second wagon. During the next 19 days, they lived mostly outdoors, stopping to camp at night near water sources. Travel mix-ups popped up along the way. “...it must be said that the science of military genius did not preside over our traveling preparations; we were seven, and we had only one tent which would shelter three people. So we were forced to find another solution: the canvas sheets which covered the wagons were taken off, and with the help of some sticks we made tents.” Another night, hoping to find a better sleeping arrangement, the sisters piled into a wagon to sleep. They were so cramped that by the morning, they had lost circulation in their limbs and in order to get out of the wagon, had to stand up in unison to avoid stepping on each other. They decided to stick to camping outdoors after this experience.

On a typical day of travel, “The afternoon resembled the morning, nothing came to break the monotony of our pilgrimage through mountains and valleys; sometimes we had to climb up a mountain, sometimes we had to cross a plain of light sand. The vegetation is sparse: Loneliness seems to be the queen of this land. We contended with her power as we went with our canticles and hymns.”

The wilderness caused some anxiety. Wolves were heard around their camps, frightening the sisters although never causing them any harm. Another day, Native Americans described as belonging to the Yellowstone Tribe approached them; the group caused no difficulty, but quickly ate all the food offered to them by the sisters. The travelers also encountered a group of U.S. soldiers, charged with protecting the trails leading to Montana. The sisters’ travel occurred just after the Bannock War, a conflict between the Bannock and Paiute tribes and the U.S. military in southern Idaho and northern Nevada between June and August 1878. After these events, the U.S. military forced members of the tribes to return to the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho and also interned more than 500 members of the two tribes on the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington Territory. Sr. Mary Wilfrid refers only obliquely to the conflict.

Twelve days of travel along the trail from Oneida brought them to the outpost of Deer Lodge, Montana (about 80 miles from Missoula) where they stayed overnight at a lodge. At Deer Lodge, Monsieur Frank, the fellow passenger who had taken the reins of the second wagon, left them to go on to Helena. The sisters took turns driving the second wagon for the rest of the trip. This part of the trail passed through more populated areas where they could almost always find indoor lodging.

Eight more days of travel finally brought them to the mission in Missoula. They “experienced something of the sentiments expressed by the pilgrims of the Middle Ages, once they saw in the distance the walls of Jerusalem.” Although their exact trail from Arimo to Missoula is not known, by any route they must have traveled almost 400 miles by wagon. Just a few years later, the sisters from Montreal could take a train all the way to Montana: the *Chronicles of Sacred Heart Academy for 1883-1884* note a new station of the Northern Pacific Railroad near their location in Missoula.

Four of the group, including Sr. Mary Wilfrid, stayed in Missoula to work at Sacred Heart Academy and St. Patrick Hospital; Sr. Mary of the Infant Jesus returned to the mission at St. Ignatius, accompanied by the remaining two sisters from Montreal. By the time Sr. Mary Wilfrid was recalled to Montreal in 1905, she had traveled throughout the northwest. She taught students music at Sacred Heart Academy, Missoula; nursed at St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula and at St. Clare Hospital in Fort Benton, Montana; and served in leadership roles at St. Amable School in Olympia, Washington, St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula, and Providence Hospital in Wallace, Idaho where she served as superior from 1893 until 1898. After returning to Quebec, this sister continued to work in Providence hospitals and hospices until her death in 1937 at the age of 80.



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since she uses them to respond to many questions from the registrar's office. We look forward to our future working relationship with Sue.

Whenever historical records are transferred to Providence Archives it is a win-win situation for the archives, donating institution, researchers, and especially the historical materials: Providence Archives continues its mission to preserve and disseminate information about the Sisters of Providence and Providence ministries; the donating institution gains room and knowledge that their records are secure; researchers can access a complete historic record either in-person or online; and the historical material is arranged in an orderly manner and preserved in a safe environment.

When the University of Providence/Great Falls collection is processed, the hallway will be empty again. Or will it? Let us know about historical records at your facility that can be evaluated for transfer to Providence Archives. In this way you can have a direct hand in carrying on Providence heritage.



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