



PAST FORWARD

The Newsletter of the Sisters of Providence Archives, Seattle

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Together Again

On August 17, 1998, the General Council of the Sisters of Providence approved the decision reached by the sisters at the Sacred Heart Province Provincial Chapter and St. Ignatius Province Provincial Chapter to unite their two provinces. After 8 years of dialogue and prayerful consideration, this decision is a momentous occasion for the members of these western provinces encompassing Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and California.

Historically, the creation of this new entity is a reunion of areas which were administered as one from 1856 to 1891. When the provinces were erected in 1891, the Sacred Heart Province archives inherited the records from these earlier years. We have preserved these records along with the current records of the institutions, religious community, and the sisters' ministries. In the same way, an archives was established in St. Ignatius Province. The archivists collaborate in researching the history of the institutions and the religious community, and refer researchers to the appropriate repository. In making their decision to form a new entity, the sisters drew upon the resources in both archives to reflect upon shared beginnings and the numerous ways the provinces have collaborated over the years.

From the archival point of view, it is exciting to see the reunion of these two provinces that share claim to the rich heritage of health care, education and social services in the western United States.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

The Sisters of Providence once operated more schools than hospitals? In fact, eight of the twelve missions established by Mother Joseph in her first twenty years in the west were schools.

When they arrived in Vancouver in 1856, Mother Joseph and her companions found the citizens in dire need of education, especially religious and moral teaching. They immediately began caring for orphans

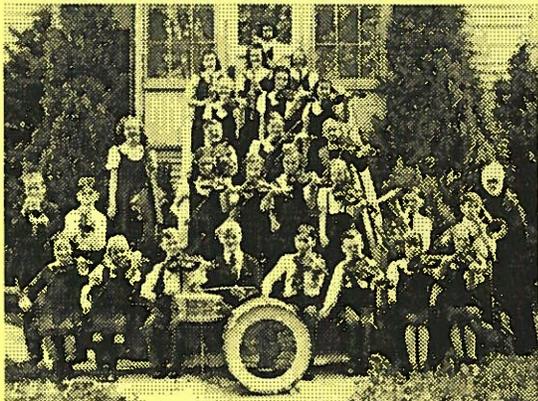
and later opened a boarding school and a day school for families that could afford tuition. Although the Sisters of Providence mission included a mandate "to instruct the little ones," education was not the main focus of the community, and Mother Joseph was somewhat reluctant to take on a ministry that would distract from the "real work" of caring for the poor and sick. She also worried about her French-Canadian sisters' ability to provide an adequate education to American children. In an 1858 letter to Bishop Bourget, she described her dilemma:

"Our ignorance was evident during our first year, especially among the day students who were telling others that our school was only good for beginners... The school now enjoys a good reputation...but there must be something attractive to draw the outsiders. Hence the Bishop and his Vicar General wish us to add music lessons to our curriculum, while keeping the same simplicity that is observed in our schools in Canada. We must also be able to teach grammar, arithmetic and geography well ... It would be detrimental to us, if the girls felt that they know more than the teachers."

The arrival of experienced teaching sisters from Montreal helped to ease the burden, and it soon became apparent that the school not only met a pressing community need but also provided the funds to support the sisters and their other works of charity. In an 1863 letter to the Superior General in Montreal, Mother Joseph argued for expansion of the education ministry: *"Schools are needed first of all. Americans do not count the cost where education is concerned. They are keen enough about their own interests to realize that our establishments are preferable to their own. Their generosity where education is concerned will help us to maintain our establishments for the poor."*

Responding to the people's desire for education, the sisters opened their own academies in Walla Walla, Yakima, and Olympia, contracted with the government to educate Indian children, and later

accepted administration of parish schools. Most of these were in Washington, perhaps due to the community's close relationship with the local bishop, but education became an important part of the sisters' ministry throughout the province.



Sister Mary Afra led the student orchestra at Holy Family Parish School, Seattle, Washington, 1927-1943

As early as the 1890s, some sisters saw the need to develop a standard curriculum for the schools and to provide professional training for all sister-teachers. Sister Mary Loretta Gately, Directress of Studies from 1911 to 1943, prepared the province to meet new church and civic requirements for certification and accreditation. Under her direction, the schools flourished and the Sisters of Providence became well respected as a teaching community.

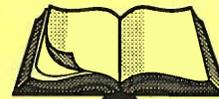
By mid-century, the sisters staffed more than twenty elementary and secondary schools and provided summer religious education in numerous rural areas. But their concern was not limited to children. Within the hospitals, the sisters developed Schools of Nursing, Medical Records, and Anesthesiology so that patients would be guaranteed professional care. The community also established a groundbreaking liberal arts college for the education of its own members and sisters of other congregations.



Sister Louis of the Blessed Sacrament (Pauline Higgins) instructs a Home Economics class at St. Joseph Academy, Yakima, Washington, 1950-1951

Today, education remains an important part of the Providence mission. Twenty-one sisters serve as

educators, in elementary and secondary schools, in parish settings, and in adult literacy programs. Providence High School, Burbank, was recently named a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence—one of only 166 in the United States—by the U.S. Department of Education. Providence Child Center's Montessori School, Portland, and the Intergenerational Child Center at Providence Mount St. Vincent, Seattle, are other examples of the Health System's ongoing commitment to education. And opening just this month at Providence Portland Medical Center is the Gately Academy, a fully accredited middle school for children with learning disabilities.



Want to Know More About Providence Schools?

For a historical perspective, we recommend *The Way It Was in Providence Schools*, by Sister Dorothy Lentz, SP (1978, 145pp.), the story of seven early schools in Washington. It is a bit dated, but still worth reading. Copies are available from the Archives for a \$5.00 donation.

And watch for a new book on the Sisters of Providence education ministry in Alaska. Sister Pauline Higgins, SP, has always loved Alaska and enjoyed the opportunity to teach in Fairbanks during the 1960s and 1970s. When she retired from teaching, Sister whole-heartedly accepted a challenge to write the history of the Providence schools in Alaska. She even moved to West Seattle to be near the Archives! Sister Pauline draws on personal experience, study of the chronicles and correspondence in the Archives, and recent return visits to Alaska, to tell the story of the sisters' schools in Nome, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. She is now choosing photographs and preparing for publication, pending final editing and budget approval. After working with Sister Pauline on this project for several years, we look forward to the results of her research.

As always, if you have any questions about an article in *Past Forward*—or about other aspects of Providence history—please call, or e-mail us at archives@providence.org

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