

## PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

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

### Celebrating 150 Years of Native American Ministry

Loretta Z. Greene

It isn't often that an organization can celebrate significant anniversaries beyond a centennial but the Sisters of Providence are fortunate to do just that. This past October 27 was the 150th anniversary of the Sisters of Providence's first formal foundation to serve Native Americans in the west. On that day in 1864, four sisters arrived at St. Ignatius, Montana, by way of Walla Walla, founding St. Ignatius Indian School. Although "education of both Indian and white children" was one of the mandates given by Ignace Bourget to the sisters headed to Fort Vancouver in



*First convent (1864) of the Sisters of Providence at St. Ignatius, Mont., photographed in the 1890s. Image #SIP.A1.32*

1856, the sisters waited eight long years before that ministry became a reality.

To celebrate this sesqui-centennial, the new historical exhibit in Providence Archives will give an overview of the sisters' ministry to Native

Americans and highlight a few of the sisters who dedicated their lives to several tribes in the Northwest. The exhibit will rotate to the System offices in Renton and then to Mount St. Joseph in Spokane. ✍

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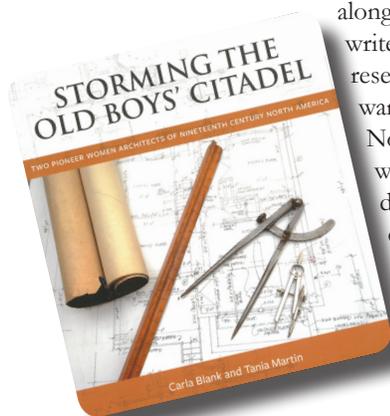
Picturing Providence

News from the Archives

### Reader's Corner: "Storming the Old Boys' Citadel"

Emily Hughes Dominick

In the summer of 2013, Tania Martin, professor at the Universite Laval School of Architecture in Quebec City, came to Providence Archives along with Carla Blank, writer and editor, to do research for a book they wanted to coauthor about North American women who became architects during the 19th century. They pored over anything and everything related to Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart and her work in designing, constructing, and managing



the building of many Sisters of Providence ministries. Besides spending three full days in the archives, the duo also spent a day getting a personal and thorough tour of Providence Academy in Vancouver, Wash. from the basement to the bell tower.

The result of this research is "Storming the Old Boys' Citadel: Two Pioneer Women Architects of Nineteenth Century North America" (Baraka Books, 2014). About half of the book focuses on Mother Joseph and is authored by Martin, while the other half, written by Blank, describes the work of Louise Blanchard

Bethune who designed and built works in the Buffalo, New York area.

Martin provides a detailed description of Mother Joseph and her signature building, Providence Academy. By focusing her study on Mother Joseph's place within the larger architectural community, Martin provides a refreshing view of our foundress in the West. The section on Mother Joseph is illustrated by 16 images from the Providence Archives collection. The book is available at bookstores and the Sisters of Providence Religious Community Library. ✍



## SP Spotlight: Providencia Tolan

Loretta Z. Greene

Early in life, Sister Providencia learned the importance of involvement in civic affairs from her congressman father and his concern for the oppressed. A teacher by training, she became a champion for Native Americans in Montana and a national consultant on Indian affairs, ultimately helping promote a rethinking of federal Indian policy. For several decades she used her talents as a leader, teacher, writer and speaker to mobilize forces and involve others.

This dynamo of social activism was born Denise Tolan on February 24, 1909 in Anaconda, Mont., but grew up in Oakland, Calif. She felt her life calling was to work with the Indians and looked to an 1887 event involving the Sioux spar-



*Name in Religion:*  
**Providencia**  
*Given Name:*  
**Denise H. Tolan**  
*Number in Religion:*  
**3637**  
*Date of Birth:*  
**1909**  
*Entrance to Novitiate:*  
**1929**  
*First Profession:*  
**1930**  
*Date of Death:*  
**1989**

ing the life of her grandmother, sisters and others as a personal obligation to Indians.

After attending a high school retreat she told her grandmother that she would become a sister and work with the Indians. While on holiday with Montana cousins, she visited St. Ignatius Church in St. Ignatius, Mont., home of the first Native American mission established by the Sisters of Providence in 1864.

Following profession of vows in 1930, she devoted

18 years to Providence-sponsored elementary and high schools in the west. While teaching at Providence Mary Immaculate School in DeSmet, Idaho, Sister Providencia formed a Kateri Club. Named after Kateri Tekakwitha, a 17th

century Mohawk convert to Catholicism, the club was a ladies' association for preservation of Native American crafts.

In 1948, Sister Providencia transferred from Sacred Heart to St. Ignatius Province. With a master's degree in sociology, she was assigned to the Sociology Department at the College of Great Falls, Mont. She first worked with Native Americans when she was asked to teach Catholic children on Hill 57, a squalid area outside Great Falls that was home to landless Indians. From here, she launched into social action moving from the college to Providence-sponsored Columbus Hospital, to Hill 57, or to wherever she found human need.

Those who knew Sister Providencia said she had no fear and just believed in doing right. She was impossible to refuse, feisty, determined, stubborn, creative, and compassionate. She encouraged Indians to get an education and become involved in the political process. She built a rapport with Indian friends, organized students, and convinced a group of

*continued on back page*



That was the whole idea in back of my vocation as a sister—to work with the Indians.

-Sister Providencia



The nine panels of this pillow represent Sister Providencia's major interests including writing, teaching, working with Native Americans, and being a Sister of Providence.

## Picturing Providence

Peter F. Schmid

*A column highlighting archival materials that provide visual documentation of the Sisters of Providence.*

In this image, Mother Mary of the Infant Jesus sits with two companions at St. Ignatius Mission. At right is Sophie Finlay (1842-1921). The elderly woman at left has been identified as Pe-ne-ma (or Penama) by a descendant of Sophie Finlay, who has a copy of the same image with that name, and

speculates that Pe-ne-ma was the mother of Sophie. However, in her 1980 history, “A Shining from the Mountains,” Sr. Providencia Tolan identified the elderly woman as Sabine, the young widow with two little girls who had come to offer help to the founding sisters in 1864. Chronicles of St. Ignatius Mission mention that Sabine had brought with her a companion



*Mother Mary of the Infant Jesus (née Perpetua Bougret-Dufort), with Salish women, 1914. Image #33.B1.003. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 12.5 cm.*

named Sophie. According to Sr. Providencia, Sabine spoke French which she had learned from the fur traders, and was of great help in providing translation.

The photograph was taken in 1914, on the 50th anniversary of the arrival of Sisters of Providence at St. Ignatius. Of the original four foundresses, Mother Mary of the Infant

Jesus was the only one still alive. According to chronicles, Sabine died the same year as Mother Mary of the Infant Jesus—1917—just three years after this photograph was taken. Behind them is the original cabin that the sisters occupied upon their arrival in 1864, until 1866, when new quarters were provided by the Jesuits (see first page for a full view of the cabin). ✍

### News from the Archives

#### **FULL HISTORY OF “THE BELL AND THE RIVER”**

Last year, we spent a great deal of time researching the history of the writing of “The Bell and the River.” We wrote two extended articles in previous issues of this newsletter chronicling this history. We also mounted an exhibit which is now on display in the Hawley Center in Renton. The final culmination of this project is a multi-page “full history” available now on our website: [tinyurl.com/Bell-RiverHistory](http://tinyurl.com/Bell-RiverHistory). The history includes links to archival documents and several related images.

#### **UPDATED GLOSSARY OF SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE TERMS**

Several years ago, we introduced a glossary of Sisters of Providence terms available on our website. Over the last several months, we reviewed the terms, added new vocabulary and enhanced some of the existing definitions. You can find the results here: [tinyurl.com/SPGlossary](http://tinyurl.com/SPGlossary). ✍

## *Providencia*

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concerned citizens that action was necessary. She engaged in basic human kindness such as: leaving left-over food from the hospital kitchen in cans for people to take; having a standing agreement with a local market for the needy to charge food; and maintaining a fund to buy gasoline for the stranded.

Her activism spread to Washington, D.C., where she lobbied on behalf of Native American rights. She became a national consultant on Indian affairs, working with Montana senators Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf, members of the House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, and helped promote a rethinking of federal Indian policy.

In recognition for her work and inspiring leadership, Sister Providencia received the

National Merit Award of the National Congress of American Indians in 1955. She was honored with adoption into the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine and Crow tribes and given names such as Black Robe Woman Who Wears a Cross of Mighty Feathers, She Who Captures Two Horses in Battle, Thunder Woman, and Sister Buckskin.

Yet there were those who did not fully support her work. Some called her 'Sob Sister' for what they considered a waste of time on a hopeless problem. And some young Indians argued that Christianity brought by the white missionaries destroyed Native culture. Sister Providencia's response was a simple explanation: Iroquois Indians from the east brought Christianity to Plains Indians a century before the missionaries. She wrote one historical work, "A Shining from the Mountains,"

on the Christian and cultural development of Northwest Indians and the religious personnel who helped them adapt and survive in face of rapid and inevitable change.

Sister Providencia retired from active ministry in 1982 but continued to inspire another generation of Sisters of Providence such as Sisters Nancy MacLean and Lois Murray who served the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine in Fort Belknap, Mont.

Sister Providencia died at the sisters' residence, Mount St. Joseph, in Spokane, Wash., on December 23, 1989. The enormous impact of her work for the underprivileged is still acknowledged in Great Falls with special powwows demonstrating that she clearly met her personal obligation to the Indians whom she deeply loved and who spared her grandmother's life. ✍️

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