

## PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

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

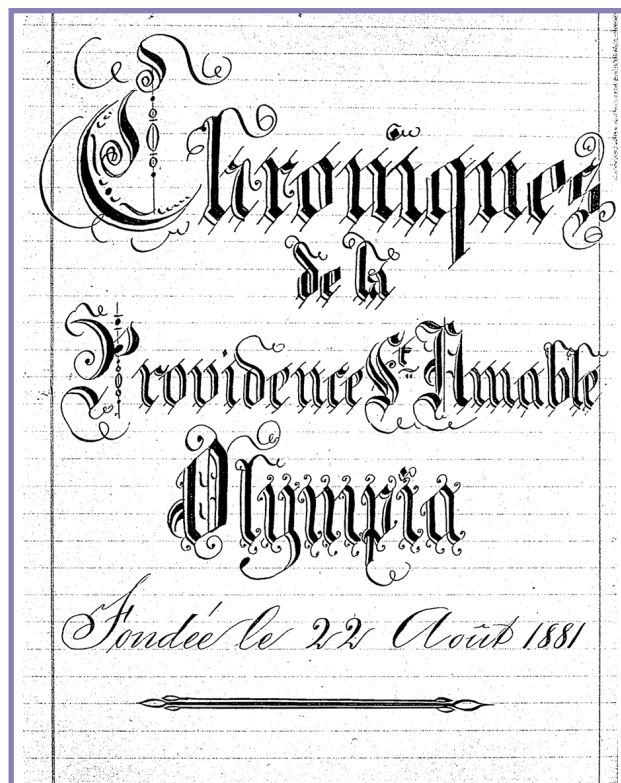
### What's the story with chronicles?

Elizabeth Russell

**W**hat are chronicles? It's a familiar term to Sisters of Providence and some health system employees, but to the uninitiated it may sound like a leather-bound book used by a medieval scribe. To the Providence community, the term "chronicle" refers to a written account of the past year. Schools and hospitals run by the sisters were required to produce three copies of the narrative: one for the general administration at the motherhouse in Montreal; one for their provincial administration; and one copy kept onsite. When chronicles were handwritten (until about 1952), this was quite a chore! One sister at the ministry was tasked with the writing of chronicles. While containing a wealth of information and detail, chronicles are not personal journals; they are generally written in the third person, although at times the reader may reasonably suspect that the sister chronicler's own opinions color the text.

The earlier chronicles give a peek into the world view of the sisters. While in many instances the texts devote many pages to religious life, including baptisms and conversions, sometimes world, national and regional events are discussed. The sisters were observers, and at times participants, in many historical events, but like all people they were limited by the boundaries of their perspectives and their upbringings, and more than most people, by strict daily routines and theological guidance that encouraged them to focus on spiritual life rather than "worldly" affairs. Researchers interested in coverage of many "hot button" topics are frequently disappointed by glancing references or silence. For example, there is no record of sisters having voted in American elections after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Sometimes the spiritual virtue of trust in Providence does not lend itself to loquacity, as when the sisters, again at Providence Academy, Vancouver write very briefly of the banking Panic of 1907, "Crisis of banks which stopped circulating money. Times will be difficult. We put ourselves in the hands of our Heavenly Father."

Despite historical blind spots, chronicles are a fascinating source, and form the nucleus of Providence Archives;



The title page for the chronicles of St. Amable Academy, Olympia, Wash. (later St. Michael School) shows the care and pride with which the chronicler presented her work. Chronicles were written in French until about the 1920s.

as narrative accounts, they are one of the most accessible and complete record types in our collections. Here are some examples of major historical events recorded in chronicles.

#### **The Civil War (1861-1865)**

During the summer of 1863, seven sisters traveled from Montreal to Vancouver, Washington Territory, to work in the western missions. The Providence Academy, Vancouver chronicles contain an account of their journey, and offer a rare glimpse of the sisters' awareness of the Civil War: "The United States Civil War was at its height at this time. On board we were quite apprehensive that a Confederate ship might come pillage the treasures and the

trunks and maybe delay our course, or even cause damage to the boat. There were many conversations on this topic and prophets of misfortune really exaggerated the fatal outcomes of such encounters, but once again we got off with a good scare.” Another entry explains the frustration of the sisters when they were forced to accept “green back” paper money from the Washington territorial government in payment for a contract. This was the currency printed by the Union to help fund the war effort; however, its use caused inflation and it led to a great monetary loss from the contract. The lack of many Civil War references shows the distance between the sisters’ lives in Washington Territory and events of major importance in the eastern U.S. For example, there is no mention of the Emancipation Proclamation nor of President Lincoln’s assassination.

### **Seattle, Alaska and the rush for gold**

Seattle’s location as a transportation hub for the Alaska gold rush was a boom time for Seattle businesses which supplied miners heading to Alaska and provided services to people returning with either wealth or disappointment. The sisters, however, saw the dark side of this rush of newcomers through the city. In 1898, toward the end of the Klondike Gold Rush during the Spanish-American War, the sisters wrote: “We notice the effects of war between Spain and America by the considerable increase in the cost of food and dry goods. Poverty is already felt among the working class. Seattle is one of the central points of departure for Alaska, and the businesspeople have boasted to the newspapers and so on the great opportunity from the gold mines, causing many people to come here. The city has presently a transient population made up of all sorts of people. We have heard of trouble and looting predicted for next fall; let us hope that this does not come to pass.”

“Gold abounds and it is very pure and beautiful.” The Sisters founded Holy Cross Hospital in Nome in 1902, in the boom years of the Nome Gold Rush which lasted until around 1909. The chronicles describe their new city in detail. Arriving in June, they wrote: “Everything is strange to us here; the days are uninterrupted by the nights, the sun disappears for a few moments only to return more brilliant than before and this, for approximately four months.” They loved the “thousands of wildflowers of varied colors,” in the uplands where they gathered blueberries in the fall. Despite the natural beauty and ease of acquiring gold during these years, Nome had its dangers: “Only a small quantity [of gold] is kept in Nome due to the risk of being assassinated when a person owns a large amount of it. In the Fall, when the mines are closed which coincides with the sailing of the last Steamers, murder attempts are frequent.”

### **Earthquakes, 1906 and 1964**

“An earthquake, such as has not been felt for 50 years, threw our normally so peaceful little city into terror” a sister chronicler at Providence Hospital, Oakland, Calif. wrote. On April 18, 1906, an earthquake, probably between 7.7 and 8.3 in magnitude, ruptured the San Andreas fault with a total length of 296 miles (to put this in perspective, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake was a rupture of 25 miles). Although the earthquake damaged a large area of California, it became known as the San Francisco earthquake, mainly because the resulting fire in that city caused so much destruction and loss of life. Across the bay in Oakland, the sisters observed patients under their care traumatized by the shock as well as damages in the building that they estimated to be around \$10,000 to repair (over \$300,000 in today’s money). Then they served the needs of the earthquake refugees as they flowed into Oakland from San Francisco, writing “we welcomed all those who came to us and in a little time there was not a corner of the house which was not occupied by the poor victims of the disaster.” The parish priest also requested that they help to care for the many children orphaned by the earthquake and fire, at least 135 of whom had been gathered in a temporary shelter in Oakland.

“The swaying, groaning and creaking seemed endless... It was frightening to be behind closed doors that automatically shut with the first violent jolt of the building.” This was how sisters at Providence Hospital in Anchorage experienced the 1964 Good Friday earthquake. In the aftermath, the hospital treated a number of people injured in the quake: “We had counted one hundred eight persons cared for during the first night but there were so many that it was impossible to register them all as the doctors went from one to the other.” And of course, one consequence of the earthquake was a great deal of clean-up: “Dear Sister Mary Eliza moaned when she saw what had happened to the supplies in her pharmacy. Milk of Magnesia, cough syrups, expectorants, books, and pills of all types were heaped on the floor. The best she could do was to shovel it up in the trash can and mop up the sticky mess.”

### **1968**

During the 1960s, the sisters experienced the challenges of a changing world. The worldwide social upheaval in 1968 is encapsulated by a chronicler at Providence Hospital, Oakland, Calif. who wrote: “As this year’s chronicles draw to a close, we look back on a year of unrest and disturbance, not only all over the world, due to the student dissatisfaction with existing structures, but in our

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## On the road again

Jessica Long & Pam Hedquist

In our Winter 2019-2020 issue is an article about the abrupt closure of Astria Medical Center, Yakima, Wash. in January 2020 (founded as St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1891 by the Sisters of Providence), and the gathering of items designated as excluded assets. The unsettled future of the campus and COVID-19 complications delayed transporting those excluded assets from Yakima to Spokane until April that year. The move was difficult, because it had to be coordinated from a distance in a very short period of time, and archives staff were not permitted to travel to Yakima to assist with packing. When the moving truck finally arrived in Spokane, Pam and Jessica, masked up and socially distanced, supervised the unloading and placement of the objects in a temporary storage room on the second floor of Mount St. Joseph. The Seattle staff hoped to help unpack the boxes in the summer, but the continued quarantine canceled those plans. Instead, Jessica searched through the many boxes alone months later to identify what made it to the archives, and what was missing.

She discovered photos, 35mm slides, video tapes, documents, books, and lots of heavy binders. Any objects she uncovered, like nursing caps or a promotional travel first-aid kit, were added to the artifact collection. A white medical cabinet, a human skeleton model, and two pieces of the broken St. Elizabeth of Hungary statue (see the related articles in the Winter 2019-2020 issue) were also kept for the collection. Almost all the excluded assets identified in January 2020 were accounted for! The exceptions were structural immovables like cornerstones (which were incorporated into a new excluded asset agreement), small lab equipment objects, and an interior door.

The excluded assets left behind needed to be recovered, but how? Jessica and Pam, who are always up for an adventure volunteered for the job. On November 15, 2021, they headed south to Yakima with a truck packed full of supplies including Pam's handy dandy pink tool kit, boxes and blankets for padding, a multi-purpose hand cart, and of course snacks! Their primary mission was to retrieve the lab equipment located in the school of nursing building known as St. Elizabeth Hall, located next door to the main hospital. The brick building had been unused for several years, but we knew from a previous trip that there was a teaching lab that still held interesting items. Luckily the room was easy to find and its contents had not been cleared out, but it was also extremely dirty. Pam and Jessica were glad to have both gloves and masks. They searched in cabinets and dug through piles of discarded objects. A few of the treasures they collected to enhance our nursing school artifacts included: two Bunsen burners; test tubes

and vials; non-graduated cylinders; an emergency eyewash station sign; a pipette shaker; and drying racks.

The largest artifact they retrieved was one of the original, beautiful mahogany interior doors with oval glass windows and hand painted room numbers. They chose room 326 - this door had the least amount of damage and modifications. However, after unscrewing the hinges and loading it on the cart, they discovered that the elevator was not working, so they carried the seven-foot door down three flights of stairs, which is a difficult job even without all the laughter!



A Yankee pipette shaker recovered from Astria Medical Center

Their last task was to search the main hospital building for a set of framed watercolors, and fill the request of a researcher who was hoping to find the brass names plates of his father and father-in-law who were prominent physicians of the former St. Elizabeth Hospital. The watercolors were not found; however, with the help of the groundskeeper, they did locate the wall of plaques honoring past medical staff presidents. Unfortunately, the groundskeeper was able to remove only one of the nameplates; Pam and Jessica were very grateful for her time and assistance.

Wandering through the dark hallways after their scavenger hunts, it was sad to see this once busy medical facility so empty. Imagine the life and death experienced in these hallways and rooms during a span of 126 plus years.

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## Chronicles

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own country, wracked by controversy over the war in Viet Nam and the mounting concern over the race problem and those of the poor of all races. Also within the Church the same difference of opinion exists concerning the true meaning and intent of the documents of Vatican II, and this comes down to the religious life, not only of our Community, but of all communities.”

## Present Day

When the Sisters of Providence presented their Hopes and Aspirations to the new sponsors of Providence Health & Services in 2009, they included a hope that the health system would maintain the tradition of writing chronicles. This request was honored, and today Providence ministries, regions and service areas as well as the religious community continue to submit chronicles which are heavily used by the Archives to answer reference questions. Within the past twenty years, chronicles have noted national events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the H1-N1 influenza pandemic, Ebola, presidential elections, and now Covid-19. Providence Archives staff thank all of the chronicles writers and chronicles coordinators for investing time today to ensure knowledge tomorrow.

## On the road again

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This somber experience was a memorable opportunity to visit a historic site they had only known through reading the sisters' chronicles and other archival records.

After a long day and a great lunch, Pam and Jessica headed back to Spokane with their new treasures. The drive home took longer than expected due to high winds and an overturned semi-truck on the Vernita Bridge that crosses the mighty Columbia River (this is when the snacks came in handy!). They had no idea there were “high wind warnings” in the area while waiting over an hour to cross the bridge, but they did notice the large families of tumble weeds blowing all around the road. It was a twelve-hour “field trip” but having the rare chance to personally search through records and items at an institution was very exciting and well worth the effort!

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