

FINDING THE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE: THE LIFE OF “THE BELL AND THE RIVER”

This History of “The Bell and the River” was pieced together by Loretta Zwolak Greene, Archivist, and Emily Hughes Dominick, Associate Archivist, in 2014. The research was originally presented as a two-part series of articles in our newsletter, Past Forward. It was always our intent to share a more complete version of the history since the newsletter format limited the amount of detail we could include. It is our hope that this more complete history will offer some context to those who are reading “The Bell and the River” and demystify the process of its publication. When possible, links to digital scans of the original archival documents have been provided for those wanting to delve deeper into the story.

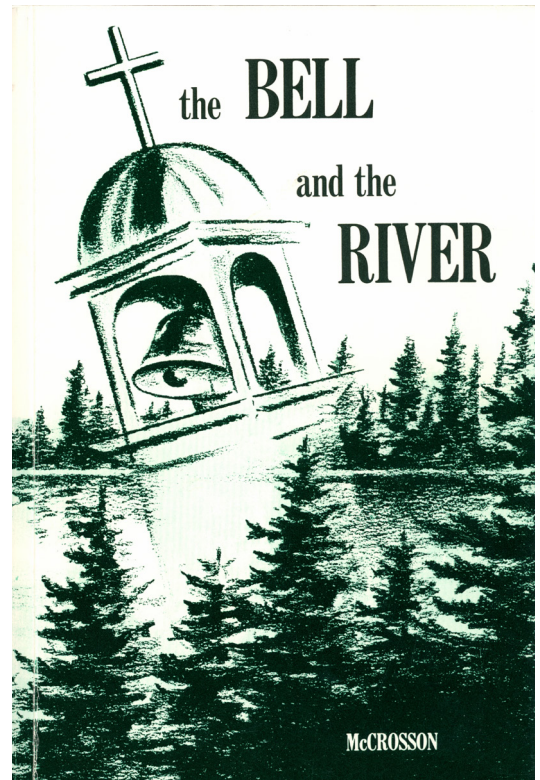
Imagine trying to complete a puzzle without all the pieces; the scene takes shape but holes remain. In places you guess what fills the hole and in others the missing remains unknown. Transfer that imagery to historical research and you will have an idea why any history of the publication of “The Bell and the River” is incomplete.

Our journey through the records was equally exciting and disappointing as we followed leads that ended at new discoveries or dead ends. We sifted through correspondence, chronicles, council deliberations and minutes in Providence Archives and the General Administration Archives as we tried to gather as much information as possible. In some cases, the records led us down paths that were completely unexpected: for example, we learned after much research that the writing of “The Table of the King” was intertwined with the research being done for “The Bell and the River.”

Published in 1957 to celebrate the centennial of the Sisters of Providence arrival in the West (1856), “The Bell and the River” has become the standard biography of Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart. The process of research, writing, editing, and publishing the book was long: the idea for the work was sparked in 1947 but it would be 10 years before it was actually published. In those 10 years countless personalities were involved in shaping its course.

Most notably three Sisters of Providence share the authorship of the work: Mary Leopoldine Throll, Mary of the Blessed Sacrament McCrosson and Maria Theresa (Mary) Gleason. There were sisters in leadership positions, several provincial superiors and two general superiors, who were corresponding or meeting on-and-off to discuss the progress of the project. There were handfuls of manuscript editors, coordinators, and other contributors throughout. You will meet some of them in the following pages, but others have not been fully unearthed in the records because the records don’t exist or we haven’t been able to locate them.

What you might now consider as a straightforward and dependable book about Mother Joseph took shape



Cover of “The Bell and the River,” 1957

only through a good deal of effort made by many people. We can only guess if the final shape has any resemblance to the initial idea of 1947. We offer these words as a reminder that this history is not completely understood. We have certain facts but we can only guess at the motivations and feelings of all of those involved in the process by reading between the lines and imagining what transpired during conversations behind closed doors.

Getting the work to book format was the final goal of the multitudes involved in the process. However, this is not the end of the story. Since its publication in 1957 its popularity has ebbed and flowed, but “The Bell and the River” has never failed to have advocates over time who have ensured that it continues to occupy an important place in the understanding of the history of the Sisters of Providence in the West.

RESEARCH

When [Sister Mary Leopoldine](#) was appointed by the General Council to research and compile a biography of Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, she was overjoyed. And who better to conduct this research than her? She had known Mother Joseph personally for a number of years while at Providence Academy, Vancouver, Wash., and she was no stranger to historical research. In fact, she had recently authored “[Fifty Golden Years: 1886-1936](#),” an anniversary history of Sacred Heart Hospital, Spokane, Wash.



*Sister Mary Leopoldine, image
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A [letter dated August 10, 1947](#) from Sister Mary Leopoldine to Mother Berenice, Superior General, indicates that the project was proposed while Mother Berenice was visiting Sacred Heart Hospital, after her official visit of Sacred Heart Province. Sister Mary Leopoldine, obviously keen to begin this important work, spells out some of the details including logistics of travel and finances and her desire to speak with “old timers” who could offer personal stories of their work and interactions with Mother Joseph. She also requested a portable typewriter and possibly a secretary.

Several weeks after her letter to the Mother General, Sister Mary Leopoldine’s research had officially begun. She set up her headquarters at Mount St. Vincent in Seattle on September 22, 1947. From

here she ventured near and far collecting stories and information. Chronicles from this and other institutions note her comings and goings. Her travels took her to various ministries and libraries in Washington, Oregon, California, British Columbia, and Montreal, where she contacted Stanislaus Pariseau, Mother Joseph’s nephew, and other relatives. Among her major feats were translating the annals, or chronicles, for Providence Academy from 1856 forward. She also saw to it that over 100 of Mother Joseph’s letters were translated from French. She consulted newspaper articles, many of which she copied by typewriter and compiled. In Montreal, she used the chronicles of



Mother Berenice, image #SP1604.001

the Mother House for information about Mother Joseph's seven trips to Montreal and her various begging tours.

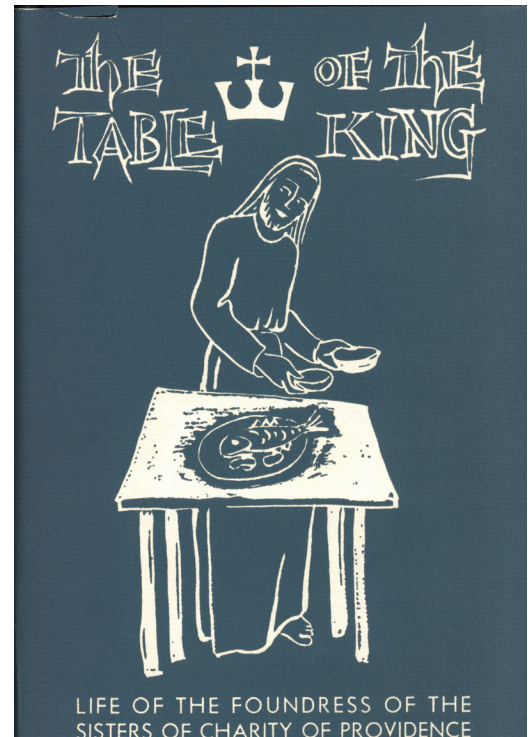
When Sister Mary Leopoldine started this research she was 76 years old. She had already lived a full life of ministry as a Sister of Providence. She notes that she first saw Mother Joseph when she was 12. A year later, she was sent to Providence Academy in Vancouver, Wash., for her secondary schooling. This introduction was to begin a more than 75 year association with the Sisters of Providence. She earned her high school diploma at St. Amable Academy (now St. Michael School) in Olympia, Wash., and soon after returned to Vancouver to enter the novitiate. She pronounced vows 25 months later.

WRITING

The year before Mother Berenice asked Sister Mary Leopoldine to research the life and ministry of Mother Joseph, a question was brought before the 1946 General Chapter: "Would it not be an advantage to have a new biography of Mother Gamelin, in English, written by Katherine Burton?" Katherine Burton was a convert to Catholicism and became renowned as a religious biographer. One month after Sister Mary Leopoldine agreed to begin her research, Mother Gerard of Providence, provincial superior, Sacred Heart Province, invited Katherine Burton to write Mother Gamelin's biography. The depth of Sister Mary Leopoldine's research provided new perspectives on the type of research needed for Mother Gamelin's biography. "She has opened my eyes as to what

it means to unearth fresh material..." wrote Mother Gerard to Mother Berenice. She even suggested that while Sister Mary Leopoldine was in Montreal inquiring into Mother Joseph's life that she should compile research on Mother Gamelin for Katherine Burton. In April 1949, Burton signed a contract to write "The Table of the King" for publication in 1950, the centennial of Mother Gamelin's death. She shared pleasant correspondence with the following provincial superior, Mother Marcien, encouraging Sister Mary Leopoldine in her research and even hoped that someday she might write about Mother Joseph's life, too. Mother Marcien supported Burton in the Mother Gamelin project but she also hoped that Burton would use Sister Mary Leopoldine's research to write Mother Joseph's biography. This was not to be—probably because Burton was involved in the research and writing of other biographies at the same time.

After four years of diligent research, in 1951 Sister Mary Leopoldine passed her detailed notes to Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament, who was her choice to author the manuscript. Sister Mary of the Blessed



"The Table of the King" was published in 1952. The cover art was done by Sister Mary Trinitas.



Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament, image #SP2360.002

Sacrament was living at the convent at Providence Hospital and teaching at Central Catholic High School in Portland, Ore. Early in 1951 she had suffered an acute illness after a bout of pneumonia. Her illness was so serious that Extreme Unction, known today as Anointing of the Sick, was administered. As she recovered, she began to work on the biography. Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament was able to write the first eighteen chapters before her [sudden death in May 1954](#).

In June 1954, the General Council [appointed Sister Maria Theresa](#) to complete the manuscript hoping it would be finished by the summer's end, allowing time to publish for the centenary celebrations in 1956. Sister [Maria Theresa](#)'s task was enormous. She had to use one person's research, study the style and tone of the deceased author, and determine the proposed story line. Although the Superior General relieved Sister Maria Theresa of all summer duties so she could concentrate on the manuscript, she continued as senior advisor and later principal at St. Joseph Academy, Yakima, Wash., while working on the book.



Sister Maria Theresa, image #188.E8.1

PUBLICATION

The manuscript was finally completed in August 1955 and returned to Sister Mary Leopoldine for proof-reading. “[Now] begins the torture of typing, proofreading, and finding a publisher,” [wrote Mother Mary Philothea](#), provincial superior, Sacred Heart Province, to Mother Berenice. The manuscript was given to a fourth sister, Cecilia Mary Kucera, who was assigned to handle the details of publication. This included selecting and negotiating with the publisher and choosing the title and illustrations. Sister Cecilia Mary was also [appointed to coordinate](#) all the anniversary celebrations and produce a centennial pageant (see article in the Spring 2013 issue of Past Forward, [“Archives Mystery Solved: Missing Film Found”](#) about the “Land of Loo-et” written by Sister Cecilia Mary).



Mother Mary Philothea, image #SP3620.006

At this point the records reveal conflict. Sister Mary Leopoldine, from St. Ignatius Province, felt that her [“brainchild”](#) was being taken over by Sister Cecilia Mary, from Sacred Heart Province. Sister Mary Leopoldine spoke her mind freely to Mother Mary Philothea and Mother Berenice, who first appointed Sister Mary Leopoldine. Her letters express her concern for the outcome, personal ownership of the work, and her authority in the facts due to her first-hand relationship with Mother Joseph. The Sacred Heart Province council, however, was concerned about her health and age as well as a successful outcome for the biography.

Mothers Mary Philothea and Berenice frequently corresponded regarding the book's progress and conflicts. The apparent solution was to conclude Sister Mary Leopoldine's work on the manuscript. In terms of management of the project, the General Administration urged the



Sister Cecilia Mary, image #SP3150.003

Sacred Heart Province council to handle the details relating to the book's publication. The rationale for this decision was that two of the authors belonged to that province and the centennial celebrations were being planned there. Sister Mary Leopoldine respectfully accepted this solution but maintained that Mother Joseph was foundress of many missions in St. Ignatius Province as well. From this point, publication was in Mother Mary Philothea's hands.

In early 1956, Sister Cecilia Mary sought an appropriate publisher for the biography. She found one in Mr. Stanley Croonquist of Pacific Books (Palo Alto, Calif.). On [August 17, 1956](#), Sister Cecilia Mary wrote to Mother Mary Philothea with final publication details about authorship, introduction, title and illustrations. Two weeks later, on [August 30](#), Mother Mary Philothea signed the agreement with Pacific Books for printing the volume.

The first question about authorship came up late in 1955. Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament was the original author but upon her unexpected death Sister Maria Theresa wrote the final chapters. Through the process, Sister Mary Leopoldine did some of the writing and editing. The question was who should be named primary author? In September 1955, Mother Mary Philothea wrote to Mother Berenice: "Sister Maria Theresa would prefer that Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament be given the title as author and that she would receive acknowledgement in the proper place in the book. However, Sister Judith [provincial councilor from 1952 to 1957 and Directress of Schools] tells us that she knows of no publishing house which would consider a dead author unless she had previously published one or two books." In the end, it was decided to list Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament as author with acknowledgement of collaboration by Sister Mary Leopoldine and Sister Maria Theresa.

The book still needed an introduction. In [October 1955](#), Sister Mary Leopoldine announced to the provincial council that she had been in contact with a well-known writer of the Northwest, Mr. James Stevens. This was one of the last meetings involving Sister Mary Leopoldine before she was [asked to step back](#) from decisions involved with the publication planning but her suggestion was taken up: in [August 1956](#) Sister Cecilia Mary wrote that Stevens was working on the introduction and she expected to have it soon.

The question as to the title of the book surfaced several times. The manuscript (that may have made rounds to readers prior to publication) was titled "Like a Tree Growing," borrowed from the final quote of the biography, an excerpt from Psalm 1 in the Bible: "Like a tree growing by the rivers of water...his leaf shall not wither and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." In her [August 17 letter](#), Sister Cecilia Mary noted that "'A Bell and the River' is an acceptable title. 'Like a Tree Growing' is unsatisfactory—too trite and closely allied to 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.'" The origin of this title isn't entirely clear, though years later, Sister Cecilia Mary wrote that Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament chose the title based on a quatrain by T.S. Eliot. After some research, no such quatrain has been found, but she may have been referring to one of Eliot's "Four Quartets", the poem "The Dry Salvages", that references both "the bell" and "the river." Through this poem Elliot explored the nature of time and humanity's place within it and emphasized the need to follow the divine will.



Original artwork by John Fisk based on Mother Joseph's portrait.

As for illustrations, a pencil sketch made by Mr. E.B. MacNaughton depicting the front yard and main entrance of Providence Academy had already been [completed by 1953](#). MacNaughton was a prominent businessman as well as a trained architect and engineer living in Portland, Ore. The question, and disagreement, was whether or not to also include a portrait of Mother Joseph or the other foundresses. Sister Cecilia Mary thought using a photograph along with the sketch was not artistically acceptable, while Sister Mary Leopoldine thought a true photograph should be used to add authenticity to the book. The apparent compromise on this point was a [pencil sketch, by John Fisk](#), based on Mother Joseph's portrait.

PROMOTION

With all of these decisions finalized and the [publishing agreement signed](#) by Mother Mary Philothea, the book was ready for printing. The last question was how many to print. The publishing agreement stated, in part, that the Sisters of Providence would purchase a minimum of 1500 copies of the book. However, to encourage sales and recoup publication costs, for one year after publication the publisher reserved the right to sell the book to the public while the sisters were [restricted](#) from selling or gifting copies. This restriction was removed by early [December 1957](#). An invoice dated March 1957 shows a bulk order of 2000 books were charged to Sister Cecilia Mary. Later invoices show that an additional 4299 books were sold in the first four years following publication.

When the book was published in 1957, Sister Mary Leopoldine had mostly gotten past the hard feelings that led up to the book's printing: she was thrilled and had an apparent renewed energy to promote sales of the book. In a letter to Mother Mary Philothea in [December 1956](#), she tells about meeting with several booksellers in Spokane, each ordering 25 copies of the book. Several months later, Sister Mary Leopoldine personally autographed dozens of copies when she was honored at a party held at DeSales Catholic Book Shop in Spokane.

Reviews of the book were favorable. Sister Mary Leopoldine wrote an article for the "Little Journal of Providence" ([Jan. 1958](#)) summarizing the book's success and the background of its creation. She included quotes from sisters and others about their reactions to the book and included a full reprint of a magazine article that she declared had "climaxed the reviews thus far." The review, written by Paul Brindell, O.S.B. and published in the 'Sacred Heart Messenger' magazine, called Mother Joseph "one of the most remarkable and successful religious in the United States." However, the review concludes with sharp criticisms of omissions that still frustrate readers today, including that the book has "no index, no chapter headings, no bibliography and no maps of territory unfamiliar to most Americans."

REFORMATTING

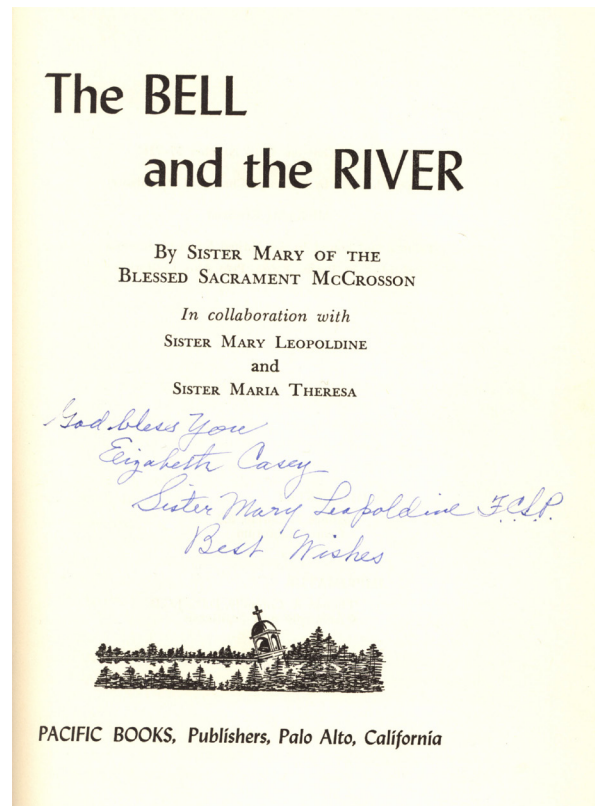
For decades after its publication, “The Bell and the River” continued to have interest to the religious community, employees of Providence Health & Services and the general public. The dedication of the Mother Joseph statue in Statuary Hall, Washington, D.C., in 1980 renewed interest in this pioneer woman and her biography. As a result, the supply of extra copies began to dwindle, so it was [reprinted](#) by the provincial administration in 1986. This softbound edition was an exact reprint of the original book with an additional preface by Sister Barbara Schamber, provincial superior; 5,000 copies were printed. Shortly after the re-print, in [August 1987](#), permission was given to the Washington Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped to transcribe the book onto audio tape.

In 2006, the religious community celebrated the 150th anniversary of its arrival in the Northwest. The year-long celebration with key events in Seattle, Spokane and Vancouver, Wash., sparked another renewal of interest in the pioneer history and an increased demand for “The Bell and the River.” The anniversary was seen as an appropriate time to reprint the book again. Spearheaded by Sister Susanne Hartung, Chief Mission Integration Officer of the Washington/Montana Region of Providence Health & Services, this project included correcting errors in names, misspellings, and other inaccuracies. This major effort resulted in 10,000 copies being printed and distributed to employees.

In recent years the text has been reformatted to meet changes in communication and technology. In 2009, an effort was launched by Sister Susanne to produce a new audio version of the book. The original issues of research, authorship and production took on a modern dimension as it was necessary to find the right voice to read the text,

select a production studio, identify the correct pronunciation of names and places, correct errors, and determine the best method of distribution. The result of this effort is the availability of the digital files on the Leadership Formation intranet site as well as compact disc.

Most recently, the book was made available electronically when it was scanned as part of the [Google Books](#) Library Project. The Sisters of Providence, as copyright owners, gave permission for the whole book to be available online. This e-version of “The Bell and the River” benefits the religious community, employees, researchers and the general public, and supports the system core value of stewardship by eliminating the likelihood of reprinting a paper edition.



Title page of “The Bell and the River” signed by Sister Mary Leopoldine



Audiobook released in 2009.

What would Sister Mary Leopoldine think about “The Bell and the River” now that it is more than 65 years since she was appointed by the General Council to research and compile this biography? She would likely not be surprised to learn of its longevity. Her research was meticulous, her zeal for the project was untiring, and her belief in the subject was true. She would be proud that her work has stood the test of time and is a valuable historical resource. She would knowingly nod her head at the difficulties encountered with the reprint and reformat editions but just as in 1957 she would probably take great joy in seeing each edition come to fruition and be its champion.