

Holy Names Sisters' archives to be more than a warehouse

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Ed Langlois

Article has been edited for brevity.

MARYLHURST —
“September 7 — His Grace [Portland Archbishop Alexander Christie] came to St. Mary’s announcing that he had fifty acres of valuable land cleared and a good portion under cultivation about one mile and a half from Oswego on the west



bank of the Willamette River. . . . The amount asked by the owners is twenty thousand dollars but Mr. O’Brien our real estate agent, hopes to secure it for fifteen.”

The aging book containing this 1906 chronicle from the Sisters of the Holy Names will be among items the religious community will store in a new archive on their riverside campus here.

By spring 2007, what the sisters are calling a Heritage Center will open. In addition to documents like the personal papers of labor leader Sister Miriam Theresa Gleason, the 15,000-square-foot building will house religious art, old textbooks, vintage silverware, photos, films, furniture, china and Japanese carvings the sisters brought back from their missions in Japan. The sisters’ old habits are gone, having been cut apart and used for other things.

But this is no mere warehouse. The sisters plan to have a meeting room and a rotating display of items so the public can visit.

This will be a house of heroic tales, from the story of sisters who served smallpox epidemic victims in Jacksonville in 1869, to the women who a decade ago decided to develop their property here into a faith-inspired small city of housing for elders.

The women religious also are offering resources and research know-how to the many Oregon families who have collaborated with them in ministry over the years at schools and parishes.

The sisters had 11 foundations in the Pacific Northwest. In Oregon, they served in Jacksonville, The Dalles, Salem, Eugene, Bend, St. Paul, Astoria and Portland, where they founded St. Mary's Academy in 1859.

In all those places, families helped the sisters get established and sustained them by donating property, giving food, offering transportation and enrolling in schools. In the 1920s, a team of lawyers and the sisters teamed up to defeat a Ku Klux Klan-inspired Oregon law that would have forced the closure of Catholic schools.

"The sisters are saying that a lot has been done since 1859, but it could never have been done without the partners," says Adrianna Carr, the Holy Names' director of development.

Carr and the sisters say they want everyone to know how big a difference one family can make on history.

"We think it will give newer generations hope for the future," Carr says.

"We want to continue our ministry of education," Sister Jane says.

The sisters have put effort into staying connected with families that helped them over the years. Two times per year, groups of sisters return for reunions in the cities where they served. Though some of the schools have closed, people recall the legacy of education and faith formation left by the women.

The popularity of the gatherings has grown. The first Salem meeting drew 50.

The second, a few years later, drew 250, as many adults clamored to chat with their beloved grade school teachers.

This year, reunions are planned for The Dalles and Bend.

In Bend, the old St. Francis School has been turned into a McMenemy's brew pub. Sister Jane, a former principal there, has a room named after her.

As much collaboration with families as there was in the old days, it is only happening more now that the Holy Names community is aging and getting smaller.

"We are doing a lot more partnering with other people," Sister Jane explains. "In the old days, we were going out to teach you. We were providers of a service."

She recalls that in 1964, when she entered the convent, she had 35 classmates. Now, there are just a handful of women in formation.

History permeates the provincial house adjacent to the new center.

As she speaks, Sister Jane sits in the Mary's Woods bistro, where retirees and guests can come for an elegant lunch.

She recalls the large room as a kind of sisters' parlor, where women religious for decades came after meals to sit and talk or read. The old sisters' laundry now hosts retreatants. This place, now off a major highway, was once accessible only by boat.

The sisters currently keep their archives and artifacts in a Northeast Portland warehouse. When the items were in the provincial headquarters, now used to house retired sisters, many researchers came.

"I would love for the center to be a vehicle for people to reflect on where they come from," Sister Jane says.

"And on and how blessed the journey has been."