

"COME IN YOUNG LADIES": A STUDY OF SARAH CASH, 1991-7  
A STUDENT AT SAINT MARY'S ACADEMY, NOTRE DAME, INDIANA,  
IN THE 1870s

by

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"Come In Young Ladies": A Study of Sarah Cash, A Student at Saint Mary's Academy, Notre Dame, Indiana, in the 1870s

From their heavy gold frames on our living room walls, two pictures look down on a little world of shifting scenes. They bind the past and the present, my ancestors and me. On the north wall is my great-grandfather, Kiren Cash-- Kiren Cash, a young Irishman well known in the Chicago of his time for his charming manner, his skillful racing, his beautiful horses, and the finest stables in the city. Near my great-grandfather's picture is another, that of a girl of fourteen, quite like him in appearance, with black, curling hair and blue eyes. She wears a long, dark, bustled dress of satin and wool, trimmed with white lace. Her jewelery consists of beautiful cameo earrings and two handworked bracelets of gold. Despite her youth there is a typical air of gracious dignity about her. This is Kiren Cash's daughter, my very own grandmother, Sarah Ann Cash. Soon after these pictures were painted, Sarah's mother died. This shock left Kiren, her husband, and the two children, Sarah and little Willie James, lonely and sad.

When the education of Sarah and Willie James became a problem with which Kiren could not cope, he decided to look elsewhere for help. Thus, it was for this purpose that on a crisp October day in 1874 this same Kiren Cash left Chicago by train for Notre Dame, Indiana. He had decided to enroll his little son, Willie James, in the Notre Dame Preparatory School which had been founded by Father Edward Sorin. His daughter, Sarah Ann, would attend Saint Mary's Academy, the convent school directed by the Sisters of the Holy Cross under the guidance of Sister Angela. The train carried them past woods and lakes and fields of harvested wheat into strange, new territory, into a new world governed by priests and sisters. Saint Mary's was just nineteen years old and struggling for survival, having been established on its present site in 1855.

Sarah felt rather bewildered and lonely in the new school at first, but she

quickly grew to love Saint Mary's. This love grew and developed with the years, with Sarah later recalling many amusing incidents that had occurred. For example, it seems that the table rules forbade the students' taking food from the dining room and eating it in the privacy of their bedroom. But the students ignored this rule and filled the wide pockets of their long, full skirts with cookies and cakes. One evening after they had finished supper and said their prayers, the students rose to leave, pockets laden as usual with sweets. The Sister presiding, not to be outdone, walked to the door and silently held out a large tray. Without a word, the students filed out, blushing leaving the various sweets on it. Needless to say, Sarah and her friends never repeated this incident.

I received a deeper insight into my grandmother's life one day when I happened to find some of her autograph and memory books in the bottom of an old trunk in the attic. They contain many letters and verses which are interesting revelations of her early school days and the personalities of the writers, who came from various parts of America, including the Dakota Territory. Most of the verses in the little black autograph book were written by her friends--ironically--in the study hall. A typical inscription is one from her seatmate:

Best beloved of my heart--

'Tis a pleasure that I scribble this effusion, in this little book; for, 'beloved,' though we 'reside' in the same seat and the same eye scans us both at the same moment (as sister presiding says, 'This is where all the talk is?'), we have still an unlimited affection for each other's charms. May it so continue through the years is the wish of yours distractedly, Gertie Breeze.

In 1875 she wrote this Christmas letter to her father:

My own dear Papa,

Happy Christmas and New Year! As the holy season of Christmas has again returned, I could not, dear Papa, let it pass without writing you a little note of thanks for the many favors you have so kindly lavished upon me during the year. . . . I must. . . return thanks to our kind Heavenly Father for sparing you to us; for, what would become of us if it were not for our kind father? We would be truly orphans were it not for you. May Our Sweet Infant Saviour bestow upon you his choicest

blessings and spare you many years to your two children--and may we in return, dear Papa, for your many kindnesses, be dutiful and obedient children--Once more, dear Papa, a most Happy New Year.

Your loving daughter,  
Sarah

There is a letter which she wrote to Mother Angela, dated May 31, 1876:

Very dear Mother,

As your happy, happy feast has again returned, accompanied with its many joys, and especially that of bringing our dear Mother safe home again to her affectionate children at Saint Mary's. . .after the dangers you have passed through since your departure, I mingle with the many who are writing you letters of congratulation. Dear Mother. . .I prayed very fervently to our Blessed Mother, whom we have a special right to ask, to protect you and our dear Father General, and today I have the happiness of receiving our dear Lord for you, and of thanking Him for preserving you. Once more, dear Mother, I ask you to accept my sincere gratitude and thanks, hoping that you may live to enjoy many, many happy returns of this lovely feast and that our dear Lord may pour down the many graces and favors which you richly deserve and that you may forever be happy. Such is the sincere wish of your devoted pupil of the First Preparatory class.

Sarah Cash

Saint Mary's Academy  
Feast of Saint Angela

An excerpt from an essay, "Early Rising," dated January 8, 1876, is indicative of her daily habits. The custom of beginning the day at five seems unduly rigorous to us today:

Early rising is nowhere practiced so punctually as in a well regulated boarding school. The pupils are up at the first signal of the bell, regardless of the weather, and have half a day's work done almost before some people are thinking of getting up. . . .

The Sisters taught religion, literature, art, music, history, composition, sewing, lacemaking, needlework, and geography. The students spent a certain amount of time learning intricate stitching in needlework class. Sarah used a fascinating double stitching on a beautiful carriage robe for her father. The pattern consists of a tawny lion boldly standing against a background of forest green above the inscription Saint Mary's,

1875, Notre Dame, Indiana. After sewing class, the day closed with the hymn "Fading, Still Fading" before the young women marched to bed by the light of kerosene lamps.

Once a month Father Sorin, "a fatherly priest, very French, with his distinctive white beard, and a serene sweet smile," brought the minims over to Saint Mary's to visit the Sisters and the Saint Mary's students. These were welcome occasions, for Sarah felt a deep love for her little brother, and the death of their mother and their homesickness served to increase this devotion. Another memorable occasion was "Point Night." Then Father General read the marks and delivered certificates along with a short speech of encouragement and praise.

Conditions were severe but nevertheless endearing. There was no beautiful Le Mans Hall with elaborate furnishings--only bare plaster walls and plain wooden chairs and rockers. During the winters, darkness fell in the late afternoon. Sometimes the students and the Sisters were almost snowed in, while the penetrating cold prevented any outdoor activity. In an interview by Ann Elizabeth Dandurant for the October, 1936, issue of The Saint Mary's Static, Sarah, then an elderly woman, said: "Everything was very simple in those days, but we were happy. . . . There were only humble buildings then, but they held many good times. Plays were given in the gymnasium, which was an old whitewashed barn." There were a few dances, too. The dancing master, Professor Billy Ivers of Chicago, "wore shrunk trousers, and played a fiddle. He was the only lay teacher." On one occasion the students presented him with several beautiful penwipers which they had made in sewing class. It was quite an accomplishment in those days to make beautiful penwipers. On his next visit to the school, Professor Ivers appeared, wearing the fancy penwipers as a jabot, much to the students' amusement.

The older students had the privilege of going to town a few times during the year. It was an experience to bundle into Mr. Shickey's hack,

which served as a taxi, and to rattle and bump over the dirt roads. Later, Sarah said of these trips, "We had to mortgage our lives to get into town. Sister always chaperoned us" and carefully drew the shades against the dust of the road and the inquisitive glances of any onlookers.

Since most of the students were equestriennes, one of the favorite outdoor sports consisted in riding Rosie. This served as special entertainment, even though Rosie was only a farm horse. With the coming of spring, evening strolls down the Niles road became increasingly popular. Of course, no boys were allowed within a radius of a mile. But by a marvelous prearrangement, the students were able to find notes from the "dear boys" across the way in the recess of an old and faithful oak. This strict seclusion brought protests of resentment from some. They wrote these protests in the form of verses in various notebooks. One such poem bears only the non-committal phrase: "Original composed by a young lady of Saint Mary's Academy." The title is "Impromptu":

When the sun is sinking far over the sea  
We walk on the bank--'tis just after tea.  
Down by the bank of the river we stray  
And see the "College boys" over the way.  
When hark! there's the voice of a Sister calling,  
"Young ladies, come in, the dew is falling."

We cannot sit quietly, but must walk around  
For we "would catch cold" if we sat on the ground.  
The glorious sun is just sinking to rest  
And the old bird is calling her young to their nest.  
"Come in directly, the dew is falling."

Young George bows so gracefully and tips his hat  
While the girls throw kisses and all of that;  
And our Prefect looks from her hole in the wall  
Just to watch the girls of Saint Mary's Hall.  
When, desist your sport, a voice is calling,  
"Come in, young ladies, the dew is falling."

Then, when we are having such glorious times,  
And Mr. Joseph is busy ringing the chimes,  
And the boys ride gayly past in their boats  
With their knobby hats and stylish coats;  
And handkerchiefs suddenly are called into use,  
Though, if detected, our points we would lose.  
It is too provoking! But a voice is calling,  
"Young ladies, come in, the dew is falling."



To young Ladies: If you have any home at all,  
Never change its joys for Saint Mary's Hall;  
For, if there's a boy anywhere to be seen,  
The nuns will immediately order you in.

Occasionally, some observing Sister would notice the unusual enthusiasm with which the students hastened to the Saint Joseph River. On one such occasion the good Sister decided to see for herself the object which created such excitement. Quietly walking up the steps, she parted the vines which enclosed the doorway and gazed on a scene which must have horrified and shocked her. The stockings which the students had been demurely darning were tossed about in wild confusion, and the cracking of fallen branches down by the edge of the river betrayed the hurried departure of some "guests"--while the embarrassed girls nervously stood about, waiting for Sister to reprimand them. But that which was most incriminating was part of a fashionable sport coat caught on a nail of the trap-door in the floor of the summerhouse from which the "guests" made their exit. The Sisters took action immediately, and notified Father Sorin of the misdemeanor. Father's search for the culprits, however, one of whom would have a torn sport coat, proved unsuccessful. It was later revealed that the young gentleman had promptly disposed of his coat by secretly burning it and burying the ashes.

These young women maintained a normal social life during the summer vacation, especially on New Year's when they entertained their friends with afternoon teas, evening dances, and punch parties. On such joyous occasions Sarah and her closest friend, Margaret De Veney, were in their glory, receiving such wonderful young men as Colonel Hoynes, Professor M.T. Corby, and Professor Lyons from Notre Dame.

But good things eventually come to an end, and so it was with regret that Sarah left the life of Saint Mary's to return to her Chicago home. The notebook again yields such inscriptions as these, for example, <sup>this</sup> letter to the Sister who was in charge of the minims of Notre Dame:

June 11th, 1881

Sister Mary Aloysius

Very dear Sister,

As this scholastic year is drawing rapidly to a close, and fearing that I may not have the pleasure of seeing you at its end, I could not let it pass without writing you a little note of thanks for the good care you have taken of my poor little motherless Willie, and of the many good and noble virtues you have endeavored to implant in his mind, while under your guidance. You have surely done a good and meritorious act, and in my simple words I cannot express to you my feelings; but with a heart overflowing with gratitude to you, all that I can say is that I hope and pray Almighty God will bless you now and ever and may he amply repay you for all your good deeds in this world and crown you forever in Heaven with a diadem, not of earthly laurels but with a never fading one of Heaven. . . .

A few thoughts, written while sitting on the river bank, concerning her reluctance to depart from the school which had been mother, friend, and counselor for seven years, follow:

Dear Saint Mary's, my beloved Alma Mater! must I leave thee at last. Long have I dreaded this bitter separation, but alas! it must be so. . . .I must bid thee a long farewell but not forever. To those happy scenes which first charmed my sorrow away, dear Sisters, and loving companions, I must say to you all "farewell". . . .But though parted from thee, my memory shall ever return to you rebounding with joy. The tendrils of my affections still cling to every spot of dear Saint Mary's with a never dying love, and especially dear Loreto where so often in moments of sorrow I have retired to its solitude to whisper a Pater and Ave to our Blessed Mother. This too has the first place in my heart. . . .how well do I remember the happy moment when first I had the pleasure of entering beneath thy blessed portals to bid adieu to the world for a while—to leave its vices and follies in the distance as it were and enter upon a new life and breathe the holy atmosphere of purity and religion. . . .truly Saint Mary's is like a kind Mother, sheltering us within her arms—shielding us from sin and danger. . . .

Every spring, thereafter, found Sarah at Saint Mary's and Notre Dame for the annual commencement. These were her joy and she took great delight in being present for them, meeting again such dear friends as Mother Pauline, Sister Cyril, and Sister Leander. However, the years brought sorrows as well as joys. The deaths of her father and brother were severe blows from which she never completely recovered.



In 1907 she moved to South Bend with her husband, James Sweeney, and nine children, including my mother, Marguerite Cash Sweeney. In Sarah's later years she would reminisce about the automobile trips and picnics with the Sisters which formed an enjoyable period of her life. On one such occasion they had planned to spend a day in Bertrand, walking through the old graveyard, later picnicking in one of their favorite nooks. The party consisted of my grandmother, Sister Cyril, Sister Leander, Sister Domitilla, Sister Rosalie, and my Aunt Veronica, who was going to drive them in her new car. Everything went along very well; it was a beautiful day, and there was little traffic on the highway, so my aunt thought that she could safely drive at the shocking pace of thirty-five miles an hour. Suddenly, she became aware of what appeared to be raindrops falling on her head and shoulders, even though the sun was brightly shining. Aunt Veronica stopped the car, got out, and proceeded to roll down the curtains on the sides of the car in preparation for what promised to be a shower. What was her amazement when she looked in the back seat and saw Sister Leander, her eyes closed, whispering aspirations between nervous gasps of breath, occasionally blessing herself, and tightly clenching a bottle of holy water, which she sprinkled over the occupants of the car every few seconds!

Another picture of my grandmother, taken on the occasion of the golden jubilee of her graduation from Saint Mary's, hangs on the south wall. It shows an elderly lady, with silky white hair arranged in an upswept coiffure. Tiny silver beads pattern her dress and choker. This is the image I shall always have of her; this is my best remembrance--especially these little characteristics: the well defined jaw, the white hair, the choker, or sometimes a heavy gold cross, the effervescent energy, and the ever-present air of unquestionable authority.

Sarah enjoyed an active membership in the South Bend Saint Mary's Club

and always participated in the annual summer reunions, renewing old acquaintances and meeting new friends. She loved people and was happiest when entertaining her host of friends.

Whenever Saint Mary's women gathered at any time in those years, it was customary to sing the hymn "Fading, Still Fading" at the close of these reunions, just as they did as students marching to bed. Rose Devoto Coffman, the well-known singer and a graduate of 1874, always led the singing. This practice became traditional. The song holds the same appeal even today:

Fading, still fading, the last beam is shining,  
 Ave Maria! day is declining;  
 Safety and innocence fly with the light  
 Temptation and danger walk forth in the night;  
 From the fall of the shade till the matin shall chime,  
 Shield us from danger, and save us from crime,  
 Ave Maria! Ave Maria! Ave Maria! Audi nos!

Ave Maria! Oh, hear when we call,  
 Mother of him who is Savior of all!  
 Feeble and fearing, we trust in thy might;  
 In doubting and darkness thy love be our light.  
 Let us sleep on thy breast while the night taper burns,  
 And wake in thine arms when the morning returns.  
 Ave Maria! Ave Maria! Ave Maria! Audi nos!

Then, during the winter of 1940, her burning vitality began to ebb, preventing her former activity. February dragged slowly by while she grew weaker daily. March came. Finally, on the evening of the twenty-third when the great bells of Saint Patrick Church were tolling in the distance, she left us for her heavenly home. She is a Saint Mary's woman forever.