

HOLY CROSS ON THE WABASH

St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum 1991-*ad3*  
Lafayette, Indiana

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by

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ST. JOSEPH'S ORPHAN ASYLUM, LAFAYETTE, IND.

Even in their earliest years in America, members of the Congregation of Holy Cross provided shelter and care for orphans. For example, the Manual Labor School opened on the Notre Dame campus in 1843, just one year after the university was founded, always included orphans among the boys enrolled there. Likewise, when the Holy Cross Sisters established themselves in Bertrand, Michigan, in 1844 they opened a small school (later to become St. Mary's Academy) for eight boarders who were orphans and a few girls from the local area. In 1849 Sisters and Brothers traveled to New Orleans to take over St. Mary's Orphan Asylum there. During the 1850s about six mostly short-lived asylums were started in various Eastern cities, and in 1868 the Sisters took charge of a diocesan-sponsored home in Rensselaer, Indiana, and in 1876 Sisters and Brothers started operation of St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum in Lafayette, Indiana, the subject of this paper.

Lafayette is located about eighty-five miles southwest of Notre Dame. Although in the mid-1870s its population was only about 14,000, it was the second-largest city in the northern half of Indiana. It is on the Wabash River and in 1841 was the point at which the original band of seven Holy Cross men from France boarded a riverboat for the last leg of their journey to Vincennes. Since 1867 a faculty of Brothers had been teaching in the boys' school in Lafayette which the Congregation constructed and paid for with its own funds at St. Mary's Parish there. By 1870 a Brother also started teaching at St. Ann's, a mission church also in that city.

The orphanage in Lafayette actually evolved from St. Joseph's Orphanage located in Rensselaer, a city about forty miles to the northwest. There in 1866 Bishop John Luers, first bishop of the Diocese of Fort Wayne purchased the 933-acre Spilter farm a half-mile outside the city for \$18,000 and invited Holy Cross Sisters to operate an orphanage for boys and girls utilizing the two dwellings on the property. Subsequently, in September 1868 Sisters John (directress), Celestine, Veronica, and Christina were sent from Notre Dame to care for about sixty children. Much of the food was furnished by the large farm and dairy on the property. Payments for

furnishings and general expenses depended in part on donations solicited from the townspeople and by diocesan-wide Christmas collections ordered by the bishop. Father Joseph A. Stephan, a diocesan priest, was placed in charge of the establishment.

An active interest in the orphanage on the part of Bishop Luers is shown by his finding time in 1870 to make a long journey into "inhospitable regions" to collect funds for the institution. And his personal concern for the children may be represented in one incident in which he was seen walking from the Rensselaer railroad station to the orphanage

. . . on his right arm he carried a poor orphan child; his other hand was laden with his heavy travelling satchel, while another orphan child trotted on beside him--the Bishop--prattling to him with familiar, trustful confidence.<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Luers died in June 1871 and was succeeded by Bishop Joseph Dwenger, C.P.P.S. A few years later as the Rensselaer buildings were now overcrowded Bishop Dwenger decided to establish a manual labor school for orphan boys at Lafayette and move the boys from the older institution to the new facility.

The plan was made possible when, in 1875, Father George Hamilton, pastor of St. Mary's Church, Lafayette, died leaving to the diocese land and money in value approximately \$10,000 for the purpose of building a school for orphan boys. The real estate consisted of 580 acres of farm land located about three miles north of the city near Battle Ground at Davis Ferry on the Wabash. About the same time fifty-one acres just south of the city on Fourth Street was donated for the same use by Owen Ball and J. B. Falley. The bishop decided to use the small tract near the city for the orphanage itself and for a small farm while the large farm to the north of Lafayette would be developed to provide a source of food and income for the institution. Construction of an imposing structure was underway later that same year.

In February 1876 Bishop Dwenger wrote to Father Alexis Granger, the Holy Cross provincial, reminding him that Father Edward Sorin, the superior general, had earlier promised that Brothers would be sent to Lafayette to teach and superintend the orphans there and that he expected the new asylum to be completed by the end of that summer. He must have already arranged for Holy Cross Sisters to serve there as he adds:

The building is so arranged that the sisters can attend to the cooking and house work having a wing of the building for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The move from Rensselaer to Lafayette took place in September 1876 when Father Bartholomew Hartmann, chaplain and superintendent of the new orphanage, and Sister M. Bathilde accompanied about thirty-five boys to their new home. (This number would gradually increase to over a hundred in later years.) Boys under two years of age were left in Rensselaer. Brothers Columba O'Neill and Raymond Guilfoyle, the former a shoemaker, the latter a teacher, were the first Brothers assigned to the asylum with Brother Raymond designated director or superior. Brother Benoit Crowe joined them as a prefect by January 1877. Sister Redemption Rajot was named directress of the Sisters who were sent from Notre Dame. This group included Sisters Clement Cunningham, Emedius Moran, Paul of the Incarnation Tobin, Dorothy Kelly, and Cosmas Gallagher.<sup>3</sup>

The brick and stone building, erected at a cost of \$33,000, measured one hundred feet by fifty feet with sections either three or four stories high. A basement ran the full length of the structure. A two-story annex, twenty by fifty feet provided the private residence for the Sisters. The front of the building which faced north toward the city was topped by a tower which rose seventy-five feet from the ground.

The basement provided rooms for cellars, laundry, fuel, and a large washroom for the boys. On the other floors were kitchens, a dining room, a large playroom, two schoolrooms, a parlor, work rooms, a chapel which could seat two hundred, two dormitories, and staff bedrooms.

The institution was formally opened on October 1, 1876. The occasion was reported at length in the Lafayette Daily Journal and the account reflected the enthusiastic interest local citizens had in the undertaking.

It was estimated that eight thousand people were in attendance including fifty members of the St. Joseph Society who, led by the Reed Band, marched from their hall in town to the orphanage. There the townspeople witnessed the liturgical blessing of the building by Bishop Dwenger who then addressed them from the south porch both in English and in German. He explained the urgent necessity of the institution and concluded:

Here I have Sisters who give the orphans motherly care, and teachers [i.e., Sisters and Brothers] who instruct them, and a clergyman who preaches to them. I hope soon to teach the little ones agriculture, and here I want them to obtain principles of morality, honor and education and industry. Do what you can to aid us and God will bless you.<sup>4</sup>



Details of the subsequent day-to-day operation of the orphanage are obtained from articles appearing in the local newspapers in the early 1880s. One writer expressing himself in rather stark prose in 1883 had this to say:

One hundred little waifs and strays, the forsaken ones of earth who but for this grand charity would be dragging out a miserable existence in the gutters. Here they are clothed and fed, and schooled and taught some useful occupation. There are budding tailors and shoemakers, and bakers and farmers and gardeners. All who are able to work are kept busy. There are several wan, woe-begone, crooked-backed, warped-limbed, hollow-eyed, blue-faced, scrofulous children among the number, who would, so far as this world is concerned, be better off if knocked in the head, but here they are as kindly and tenderly cared for as if they were princes of the realm. All the big boys, those over twelve, are kept at work during the day, and attend school in the evening; those under twelve and old enough, attend school during the day, for ten months in the year, keeping the same hours as at other schools. During the summer months they go to school four hours each day.<sup>5</sup>

Another newsman reported in the following year that:

There are two school rooms, the Kinder Garten, in charge of Sister Ludovica, and Brother Constantine's room which contains forty-four seniors. Most interesting were the visits to the tailoring and shoemaking departments--in charge of Brothers Mark [Meade] and Columba [O'Neill]. There were six boys at work in each branch, most of them skillful with the iron and the last. All the clothing and shoes for the boys are made here. Brother Mark and his youths have turned out two hundred and thirty-one suits during 1883, and besides that about two hundred pairs of pants for outside custom, principally for merchant tailors in the city. Brother Columba's boys have made two hundred and fifty pairs of shoes during the past year. Thus these boys are taught a useful trade. . . . Besides they are each allowed three hours of schooling every day, educating their minds as well as skilling their hands in a trade.<sup>6</sup>

The reporter then went on to say that the children slept in two large dormitories and were fed from a large and very clean kitchen which included a huge trough in which a barrel of flour was used four times a week to knead dough for the four hundred and fifty loaves of bread consumed. Dairy products were plentiful as eight or ten fine milk cows, the pick of the herd on the farm, replenished the supply of milk. As for fuel for the kitchen and furnace, five carloads of coal and one hundred cords of wood were needed each year.

Ten acres of land to the rear of the asylum were cultivated to produce vegetables for orphanage use. On the large farm to the north

of town three hundred acres were under cultivation which provided more garden vegetables, corn, oats, and firewood. There, too, were thirty-five head of cattle, four horses, three hundred chickens, and some geese and ducks, as well as farm wagons and other equipment. This farm was under the care of a layman who lived there with his family. He received some help from the larger orphan boys who worked there especially in the summer.

The daily schedule for the boys--at least in the early years of the orphanage was not an easy one, and little time was provided for recreation. Six days a week the rising bell sounded at five o'clock. After washing up all went to the chapel for morning prayer and Mass. Breakfast followed at seven, and there was a recess until eight-thirty at which time classes started and ran until eleven-thirty. Dinner was served at noon, and afternoon classes were in session from one-thirty to four. Supper at six o'clock was followed by a study period from seven to eight. Night prayers ended the weekday schedule and all retired with lights out by nine.

Discipline was strict in the early days and corporal punishment for infraction of rules was sometimes employed. This despite a decree prohibiting such physical chastisement promulgated by Father Sorin.

According to 1884 regulations, to be eligible for acceptance into the institution a boy had to be over the age of two and no older than twelve unless special arrangements were made. He could be a full orphan, a half-orphan, an unprovided for or abandoned child. In cases where the boy had a parent or guardian the latter was asked to pay a fee of \$50-\$100 a year for support if possible, but this was entirely optional.

It took about \$8,000 a year to operate the orphanage. Funds were obtained chiefly from a Christmas collection ordered by the bishop to be taken up in all the parishes of his diocese. Some income was also realized from products of the farm. In addition, it was the custom for two Sisters to go to town once a week to collect offerings from generous benefactors, another half-day to collect meat and groceries, and once a month to make a general collection from stores and shops.<sup>7</sup> The only regular remuneration received by the Religious from the chancery was a small annual clothing allowance. (For example, in 1883 the Brothers received a total of \$100 and the Sisters \$225.)

The general overall operation of St. Joseph's Orphans' Manual Labor School (its official name) was under the direction of a board of its incorporators consisting of priests working in the local diocese. The bishop was ex-officio president; the vicar-general a permanent member. The secretary and the treasurer were appointees of the bishop. This body met at the orphanage at least once a year for a dinner and meeting after which "one of the small boys was sent around with a plate on which a goodly collection was placed."<sup>8</sup>

Only a month after Brother Benoit arrived in January 1877 Father Hartmann asked Father Sorin that the Brother be replaced by someone more experienced with controlling boys, <sup>and</sup> who could be named Superior. For some time, he explained, there had been trouble between Brother Raymond and the other Brothers. The priest stated that Brother Raymond was a good teacher but antagonized the others by always finding fault and that he should be replaced if possible. Subsequently on February 23, 1877, Brother Placidus Ochs was sent to Lafayette as superior and Brother Raymond transferred elsewhere. Tensions soon eased greatly and Brother Placidus instructed that any punishable cases of bad conduct by the boys be referred directly to him. A general improvement in the school was noted by Father Hartmann. However, for some unknown reason Brother Placidus was transferred at the end of the school year. Brother Benoit also left at this time.

In September 1877 Brothers Adolphus Walsh and Luke Cahill were appointed to the orphanage with the former as superior. A year later the Sisters also had a personnel problem. Sister Redemption, the directress, although reportedly outstanding in her "zeal, economy and prudence in domestic affairs," had a personality that antagonized the priest and others on the staff, and she was replaced by Sister Godberta Trehey.

In May 1879 Brother Adolphus wrote to Father Sorin asking that he recall Brother Luke to Notre Dame as the latter was in poor health and had been unhappy in Lafayette since his arrival there two years previous.<sup>9</sup> Some changes were made by the opening of the new school year, but surprisingly Brother Luke was not only to remain but had been named superior. Brother Adolphus had been transferred, and Brothers Callistus Bree, a teacher, and Brother John Climacus Conway, a shoemaker, joined the faculty.



Father John Guendling became superintendent/chaplain of the orphanage in July 1880 succeeding Father Hartmann who had served there from its opening and would hold that position until July 1898. With him came his mother, and as the Sisters' chronicles state, she "of course, took things into her own hands which was not pleasant for the Sisters."

In August 1881 Father Guendling requested that the care of the smaller boys (between the ages of 2 and 8 or 10) be taken over by a Sister for, as he contended:

. . . the children are suffering under the present arrangement. A Brother cannot keep children tidy and clean, and the complaints have been so loud during the past weeks especially, that I am in conscience bound to respectfully request a change.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently this change was effected soon after. The success of the Sisters in the new set-up was reflected in an article which appeared in the Lafayette Daily Courier in 1883 where it was reported that

All boys over eight are in charge of the Brothers; those under eight are in charge of the Sisters; the babies--about a dozen--are in charge of Sister Cesarie [O'Regan], and the way those little tots gather around her, and kiss her and caress her, passeth understanding. She is their mother--and a good, kind, loving mother. She is attending to and anticipating every want. When she enters the room it is the signal for a grand stampede, every little "mitherless bairn" leaving its little rocker and scampering like a lot of young colts across the room to meet and greet the good Sister, whose kindly face is one broad, happy, wholesome smile. The reporter peeped into the babies' dormitory -- twelve little iron cots lined the walls--in one corner the Sister's bed; the bare floor as white as a scrubbing-brush could make it; on a kit stood twenty-four little, wee shoes all in a row; the sweet smell of flowers prevailed everywhere and through the window came the sweet odor of new mown hay and "the scent of ripening grain."<sup>11</sup>

At a later date another reporter described his visit to the nursery which was in charge of Sister Pelagia Weber at the time.

. . . Industry and cleanliness are enforced both by precept and example, and the good Sisters are noted for their assiduous attention to the welfare of the little fellows committed to their charge.

A visit was made to the nursery presided over by Sister Pelagia [Weber]. Upon entering eight bright-faced little midgets, who were seated on chairs in a row against the wall, arose to their feet and exclaimed in unison, speaking German, "Gelobt sie Jesus Christus," which translated means "Praise be Jesus Christ". Having performed this little set of piety, which had been taught to them by the good Sister, they sat down and the reporter was entertained by one little atom of humanity, not over three years of age, who performed a clog dance as able as his little legs would allow him, and indulged in

several other antical "breaks" highly entertaining. The youngest child in the asylum is Jimmy McNally, a little over two years of age. He was brought to his new home when but eighteen months old, his mother being dead. Jas. Cholvin, a French lad, seventeen years of age, is the eldest charge. It is thought he was eight years of age when taken to the school, for there is no record of his birth or home. He was found roaming from town to town, and all he brought with him was his name. He is head of the boys at the farm.<sup>12</sup>

As for the older boys, they too received a good press in the same article quoted above.

There are two school rooms, the Kinder Garten, in charge of Sister Ludovica, and Brother Constantine's room which contains forty-four seniors. Most interesting were the visits to the tailoring and shoemaking departments--in charge of Brothers Mark and Columba. There were six boys at work in each branch, most of them skillful with the iron and the last. All the clothing and shoes for the boys are made here. Brother Mark and his youths have turned out two hundred and thirty-one suits during 1883, and besides that about two hundred pairs of pants for outside custom, principally for merchant tailors in the city. Brother Columba's boys have made two hundred and fifty pairs of shoes during the past year. Thus these boys are taught a useful trade, which will enable them to make their own livings when they are old enough to start for themselves. Besides they are each allowed three hours of schooling every day, educating their minds as well as skilling their hands in a trade.<sup>12</sup>

In 1881 the male staff consisted of Father Guendling and Brothers John Climacus, Mark, and Columba. Sister Godberta gave a run-down of her community in a letter to Father Sorin on November 26 of that year together with snippets of comment about each. Listed were: Sisters Ludovica Welsh ("who likes the little boys better every day"), Avalina ("most devoted to the children"), Ligouri Kavanaugh ("about the same as ever"), Honora Daily ("keeps good silence"), Dulcina Wilmes ("very regular"), Theotina Higgins ("helps me sometimes"), Elvira Holland ("very hard working"). Monica Franciscus ("might do better if she had more courage"), and Vitalis Laden ("rather rough with the babies and sometimes a little contentious").

In 1883 friction between Father Guendling and the Brothers and Sisters seems to have developed. On July 3 the aggrieved superintendent wrote a sharp letter to Father Sorin:

It would help matters considerable did both Brothers and Sisters understand that the priest placed here by the Rt. Rev. Bishop is responsible for his doings to no one

but to the Bishop and that Brothers and Sisters must obey on all points which concern the good management of the house.

I am obliged to mention this because my authority is not recognized in any department, i.e., not cheerfully--and I have been informed that they were subject to me in nothing whatsoever which is not only absurd but outrageous. . . .What the orphan asylum wants is Home Rule. When Brothers and Sisters are made to understand that for the time of their residence here they form an integral part of the institution they will work with more cheerfulness and with greater profit to themselves as it will relieve their minds of a vast amount of nonsensical sentiment.<sup>13</sup>

Just what Father Sorin's reaction to this letter was, is not known.

By December 1884 Brother Mark had moved from the asylum which prompted Bishop Dwenger to write that "the tailor shop was doing so well that I regret it exceedingly." Also, in that same year Brother Constantine Lipp who had been superior of the Brothers for a year was succeeded by Brother Dominic Stoffel who would remain in that post until 1895.

Community archives contain little correspondence or other sources of information concerning the orphanage during the late 1880s. However, the Sister's chronicles do provide the details of events leading to their withdrawal from the institution in 1893.

After "blending" of the two branches [i.e., the Sisters at Notre Dame with the Sisters at St. Mary's] Mother General Augusta made an official visit April 1892 and prohibited Sisters from going out collecting. During the Annual Retreat Mother General also prohibited the Sisters from doing the baking, it being too heavy work. In consequence Father Guendling wrote a very insulting letter to Mother General, and she replied that she would withdraw the Sisters as soon as he could secure the services of another Community.<sup>14</sup>

The Sisters moved out of the orphanage by October 12, 1893, and returned to St. Mary's. Included were Sisters Godberta Trehey, Amee La Touche, Elvira Holland, Clement Cunningham, Dulcina Wilmes, Celena Walsh, Brigetta Gleeson, Barbara Felton, Alphonsus Stomp, and Theotina Higgins. These Sisters were replaced by seven Poor Sisters of St. Francis Seraph of the Perpetual Adoration under the superiorship of Sister Donata Schueller. Subsequent Franciscan superiors were: Sisters Remigia, Timothea, Marina, and Michailis.

This community of Franciscan Sisters was founded in Germany in 1863, and six of their members emigrated to the United States coming to

Lafayette at the invitation of Bishop Dwenger where they founded St. Elizabeth Hospital in 1875.

Two or three Brothers remained at the orphanage when the Holy Cross Sisters withdrew. Brother Dominic Stoffel was their director. There were about one hundred and twenty boys at the orphanage at this time. The Brothers worked there until 1895 at which time they and the Brothers at St. Mary's School in town were recalled to Notre Dame after they sold to the parish the community-owned school in which they had been teaching. Although the Holy Cross part in the history of St. Joseph Orphanage ended at this point, the institution continued in operation for another thirty-nine years.

In 1934 the orphan boys were moved to St. Vincent Villa in Fort Wayne which in 1933 replaced an older St. Vincent Orphan Asylum founded in 1886 by Bishop Dwenger to house the girls formerly at Rensselaer. The orphanage was under the care of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. The new institution was carefully planned to create a home-like atmosphere.

Eventually the orphanage building in Lafayette was razed and its site and a part of the adjoining acreage were sold and developed for residences. By 1940 another parcel to the southwest was also sold for the same purpose. More recently a wooded area at the south end of the property, known as Bishop's Wood, was leased to the city for a park. The remaining part of the site of the small farm is now the campus of Central Catholic Junior and Senior High School founded in 1957. Near it the former convent built for its Religious faculty now serves as the Catholic Pastoral Center housing most of the offices of the Diocese of Lafayette which was created in 1944.

The large farm to the north of the city is still owned by the diocese and is operated by a farm manager as a source of income to assist social and educational programs for children. Two large wooded areas included are under the supervision of the U.S. Forestry Program with its representatives deciding when trees are to be harvested. However, the entire farm area is under consideration for a state park featuring the site of the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe in which American troops under the command of General William Henry Harrison defeated the Indians in their last united attempt to drive white men back south of the Ohio River.<sup>15</sup>

NOTES

1. Peter A. Baart, Orphans and Orphan Asylums, (Buffalo, N.Y., Catholic Publication Co.), p. 185.

2. Dwenger to Granger, February 9, 1876.

3. Sisters' Chronicles, Section: "St. Joseph Asylum, Lafayette, Indiana."

4. Lafayette Daily Journal, (Lafayette, Indiana), October 2, 1876.

5. Lafayette Daily Courier, (Lafayette, Indiana), July 14, 1883.

6. Lafayette Sunday Times, (Lafayette, Indiana), March 2, 1884.

7. Sisters' Chronicles, Section: "St. Joseph Asylum, Lafayette, Indiana."

8. Ibid.

9. Adolphus to Sorin, May 25, 1879.

10. Guendling to Sorin to Sorin, August 13, 1881.

11. Lafayette Daily Courier, (Lafayette, Indiana), July 14, 1883

12. Lafayette Sunday times, (Lafayette, Indiana), March 2, 1884.

13. Guendling to Sorin, July 7, 1883.

14. Sisters' Chronicles, "St. Joseph Asylum, Lafayette, Indiana."

15. Information on disposition of St. Joseph's Asylum property provided by Rev. Msgr. Arthur A. Sego, chancellor, Diocese of Lafayette, chiefly in his letter to author dated May 14, 1991.



LOCATION OF ORIGINAL SOURCES

The letters quoted are in the Indiana Province Archives at Notre Dame. The Sisters' chronicles are in the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame. There are files of early Lafayette newspapers in the Tippecanoe County Public Library, Lafayette, Indiana. The engraving of the orphanage and information on the Franciscan Sisters were provided by St. Francis Provincialate, Mishawaka, Indiana. Information on establishment of the orphanage was furnished by the Archives of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend in Fort Wayne. Information on the location and disposition of orphanage was furnished by the Archives of the Diocese of Lafayette in Lafayette.

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