

THE SORIN CHRONICLES 1992-3

by

JAMES T. CONNELLY, C.S.C.

Presented at the

1992 Conference on the  
History of the Congregations of Holy Cross

June 5-7, 1992

University of Portland  
Portland, Oregon

(All rights reserved)

**THE SORIN CHRONICLES**

In August or September of this year, the University of Notre Dame Press will publish the *Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac*, a 318-page account of the growth and development of the religious of Holy Cross in the United States from August 5, 1841, when the first contingent left France for Vincennes, Indiana, up through 1866, the year that Fr. Moreau resigned as superior general and Bishop Pierre Dufal, vicar apostolic of East Bengal, was elected to succeed him.

While not hitherto unknown - the manuscript has been used in the research for three books and at least one doctoral dissertation - these chronicles have never been readily accessible to the general public.<sup>1</sup> Whatever they may tell us about the history of the University of Notre Dame, they reveal much about the early history of Holy Cross in the United States, some of which is known only by a few, and most of which opens new areas of research for the historian of our community. As the editor of this publication, I may be guilty of some bias in speaking of its significance, but it would not surprise me in the least if some future Holy Cross History Conference were wholly given over to papers exploring the leads opened up by these chronicles. This morning I would like to say a word about their genesis and then give you a sampling of what is to be

---

<sup>1</sup>See Arthur J. Hope, Notre Dame One Hundred Years (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1943); Garnier Morin, Holy Cross Brothers: From France to Notre Dame (Notre Dame, Ind.: Dujarie Press, 1952); Thomas J. Schlereth, The University of Notre Dame: A Portrait of Its History and Campus (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976); John T. Wack, "The University of Notre Dame du Lac: Foundation, 1842-1857," (University of Notre Dame, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1967).

found in them.

The Rules of the Congregation of Holy Cross prescribed that in each house of the community a chronicle would be kept recounting "all that is pertinent to the enlightenment of the general administration as to persons, things and important events and is of such a nature as to edify the community." In France, the chronicler for each house was to bring a draft of the chronicles for the year with him to the annual retreat. Once approved, the chronicles would then be copied into a book kept at the motherhouse. Back at the house from which a particular chronicle came, the approved draft was to be copied into another book that would be kept at that house.<sup>2</sup>

When Sorin's successor as superior general, Rev. Gilbert Francais, made his first visitation at Notre Dame from October or November 1894 to March 1895, he was shown the Chroniques de Notre Dame du Lac. It would appear that he had never seen them before and he wanted to take them with him when he returned to France. The provincial superior of the United States, Rev. William Corby, asked that a translation into English might be made which could be kept in America. The man assigned to make the translation was Rev. John Toohey, C.S.C.<sup>3</sup>

Toohey began work on the translation in January 1895, working

---

<sup>2</sup>Congregation de Sainte-Croix, Regles communes & particulieres (Le Mans, 1858), Regle LIII, 1, 10.

<sup>3</sup>Toohey to Corby, St. Vincent, Ind., Jan. 17, 1895, and Mar. 21, 1895: William Corby Papers, Indiana Province Archives (hereafter IPA).

in the rectory of St. Vincent de Paul parish in Allen County, Indiana, where he was pastor. Reassigned during the summer of 1895 to St. Bernard's parish in Watertown, Wisconsin, he continued work on the translation and completed it in October 1895. By that time, Francais had returned to Paris. Whether the original manuscript was ever sent to France is questionable.<sup>4</sup>

Toohey worked from a bound copy of the manuscript and complained that parts of or whole words had been cut off in the binding process.<sup>5</sup> Presumably, this was the same manuscript which is in the possession of the Indiana Province archives Center at Notre Dame, Indiana, and from which this edition has been prepared. Toohey also noted that he was "aiming to be as literal as possible without making the translation too Frenchy."<sup>6</sup> In preparing this edition, Toohey's translation has been checked against the original French manuscript. While his translation has been retained for the most part, clauses and sentences which he omitted have been restored and passages which he translated so freely as to alter or obscure the meaning have been rendered more literally. On the whole, about 85 percent of the text in this edition corresponds to Toohey's translation.

While the rules of the congregation instructed the chronicler to remain anonymous and to speak of himself only in the third person, there seems to have been no doubt in Toohey's mind that Sorin

---

<sup>4</sup>Toohey to Corby, Watertown, Wis., Oct. 17, 1895. IPA.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Toohey to Corby, St. Vincent, Ind., Mar. 21, 1895. IPA.

was the author of the Notre Dame chronicles.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the chronicle for 1853 identifies the chronicler as Father Sorin himself as does that of 1861.<sup>8</sup> While these instances as well as much internal evidence point to Sorin as the author, the manuscript was written by several different hands. The first seven chapters appear to have been written by the same person, someone other than Sorin. Chapter eight (1849) appears to be in Sorin's handwriting, but a third hand appears to have taken over in chapter nine (1850). In subsequent years, still other hands are evident.

In the Indiana Province Archives is a copybook entitled "Journal kept by the Secretary to serve in the Composition of the Chronicles of N.D. du Lac." A note at the bottom of the title page states that this journal was "ordered by the Council of Administration on the eleventh of January, in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred & forty seven" and the note is signed "Bro. Gatian, Sec'y." The entries in this copybook run from February 8, 1847, to January 10, 1849. While additional journals of this sort are not extant, there may well have been others that were destroyed when the information that they contained had been used.

Although the congregational rules stated that the chronicler in each house should have his chronicles ready to hand in at the time of the annual retreat at the end of the school year, the Notre Dame chronicles, with the exception of the first three years, are

---

<sup>7</sup>Rule LIII, 4. Toohey to Corby, St. Vincent, Ind., Jan. 21, 1895. IPA.

<sup>8</sup>See pp. 120 and 255 of the published edition.

written in chapters which correspond to the calendar year. Internal evidence suggests that the chronicle for each year was written after the year had ended and sometimes after a lapse of several years.

In chapter three, which covers 1844, the chronicler mentions the transfer of the Brothers' novitiate to Indianapolis in November 1846 and Bishop Bazin, who presided over the diocese from October 1847 to April 1848. Later in the same chapter, the number of orphans received up through 1848 is given.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it would appear that the chronicle for 1844 was written in 1849 and the chronicler may have made use of the journal of Brother Gatian referred to above.

In one instance the chronicler specifically identifies the date on which he is completing the chronicle for the preceding year. The last page of chapter thirteen, which covers 1854, indicates that the last part of that chapter, and possibly the whole of it, were written on April 24, 1855.

In summary, internal evidence and community tradition indicate that Sorin was the author of the chronicles. The handwriting in the original manuscript indicates at least three different scribes, Sorin among them. While most of the chapters were probably composed within a few months of the end of the year that they chronicle, some chapters may not have been written until several years later. In either case, a journal of events may have been used

---

<sup>9</sup>See pp. 42 and 48 of the published edition.



to refresh the chronicler's memory.

Finally, the reader ought to be advised that the Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac is the personal account of a twenty-five year period in the history of the Congregation of Holy Cross written by one of the principal figures in the events described. While Father Sorin no doubt believed that he saw things as they were, others saw the same things differently and were just as convinced that their view was correct. When he came to translate the sections pertaining to the history of the congregation in New Orleans, Toohey remarked that the section was of great personal interest to him because he had entered the community as a sixteen-year-old Irish immigrant in Louisiana in 1856 and was acquainted with many of the people mentioned in the chronicle of that difficult period. He urged the provincial superior, Father Corby, to ask the superior general for the chronicles of the motherhouse in Le Mans: "Every question has two sides; and whilst I do not call in question anything written by Fr. Sorin, I think the historian of Notre Dame ought to have an opportunity, if possible, of hearing the other side."<sup>10</sup> The reader is well advised to remember that there is another side to the story recounted in the Chroniques de Notre Dame du Lac.

And a fascinating story it is! Like his fellow countryman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who had visited the United States in the 1830s, Sorin was fascinated by the panorama of life in the young nation and recorded his impressions. He noted the arrival of the Iowa, the ship that had brought the first Holy Cross religious to

---

<sup>10</sup>Toohey to Corby, St. Vincent, Ind., Mar, 21, 1895. IPA.

North America, in "New York bay, probably one of the most beautiful in the world," on September 13, 1841. "It would be hardly possible to describe the sentiments of joy of the pious band at sight of this strange land which they had come so far in search of." One of Sorin's first acts, he tells us, upon setting foot "on the soil so much desired was to fall prostrate and embrace it as a sign of adoption and at the same time of profound gratitude to God for the blessing of the prosperous voyage."<sup>11</sup>

Generally, one is surprised on arriving from Europe to find in a land not long since inhabited by savages, a city whose streets and stores might compare, sometimes even favorably, with those of Paris and London. Although yet inferior in population to those two queen cities of the world, New York cannot fail before long to rival both of them, since it surpasses them in the promises of the future on account of its maritime and commercial location.

12

Not every American city merited such high praise from the young Frenchman. Of the city of New Orleans, which he probably visited for the first time in July 1850, Sorin spoke in terms of moral censure that would have done justice to any revival preacher of the day.

The city has about 180,000 inhabitants from all the nations of the globe, but especially natives of France and Creoles. The French, Irish, and German Catholics form one-third of the population. Everyone knows the opulence of Louisiana of which New Orleans is the principal point, but what is no less notorious is the unhealthiness of the area, which is ravaged almost every year by yellow fever or cholera. Another thing that is no secret is the depravity of morals of a great number of the inhabitants of a region in

---

<sup>11</sup>Page 9.

<sup>12</sup>P. 10.



which the evil passions are more strongly favored than in any other part of the Union. Imagine to yourself a large city in which abound luxury and the products of all the world, where the heat of the climate enervates all energy, where in general Faith exercises little influence, and you will have an idea of the level of morals of New Orleans. There are, however, numerous and very consoling exceptions.

13

His description of the Catholics whom he found living in the villages of northern Indiana and southwestern Michigan and whom he was charged with pastoring once he had settled at Notre Dame du Lac was hardly more flattering.

For two years there had been only very rare visits by a priest from Chicago. The Catholic religion was thus little known as yet in all this part of the diocese. The few ceremonies that could be carried out, being necessarily devoid of all solemnity and even of decency, could have hardly any other effect in the eyes of the public than to give rise to a thousand offensive and sarcastic remarks against Catholicism. There was scarcely a single Catholic in all the country able to defend his faith against these insults and the conduct of many often served as foundation and proof of the blasphemies of the malicious and the ignorant. All the surroundings were strongly Protestant, that is to say enemies more or less embittered against the Catholics.

14

The intensity of the hostility toward Catholics on the Indiana frontier remarked on in this passage was expanded upon in the following paragraph.

At Mishawaka, as well as at South Bend and Niles, there were already three or four sectarian churches. As soon as the arrival of our new missionaries and their object became known, one might have said that a cry of alarm could be heard and all those pulpits of falsehood resounded every Sunday with the most heated invectives against the twelve Popish priests and the twenty monks of the Lake, passion thus multiplying their numbers in order more effectively to put everybody on his guard. Moreover, it was added that the Pope of Rome had already sent Fr. Sorin

---

<sup>13</sup>P. 154.

<sup>14</sup>P. 25.

ninety thousand dollars and that he would send another ten thousand to make the even number. A little later, when the walls of the college began to appear, people seemed to take a delight in saying that we might go ahead with our college, but as soon as it was completed they would burn it down.

15

If the Americans whom Sorin encountered in Indiana thought little of him and of his companions and their religion, he in turn did not hold them in the highest regard.

As to genuine Americans, there is no hope of finding subjects amongst them for a religious house of this kind. We might look upon it as a miracle of grace for a young American to persevere in the humble and difficult employment of a Brother of St. Joseph. The spirit of liberty as it is understood in the United States is too directly opposed to the spirit of obedience and submission of a community to leave any hopes for a long time to come of any addition of subjects in a country in which the nature of the men appears to offer so few dispositions towards the religious life. Hence it comes to pass that the young men who spend some time amongst the Americans soon imbibe their spirit and manners and become in reality all the more unfitted for the religious life the more years they have passed in the New World.

16

As it turned out, it was not "genuine Americans" but people of other nationalities who presented themselves as candidates for the Congregation of Holy Cross. Sorin, twenty-seven years old and outside his native France for the first time, quickly sized them up.

In general, vocations in this country can inspire but very limited confidence until after profession. They are mostly Irish and Germans that present themselves. The former are by nature full of faith, respect, religious inclinations, and sensible and devoted; but a great defect often paralyzes in them all their other good qualities: the

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>p. 16.

lack of stability. They change more readily than any other nation. The latter are ordinarily less obedient, prouder, more singular in their tastes and less endowed with the qualities of the heart; but they are more persevering.

17

Describing a foundation by the Brothers of a school in a German parish some fourteen years later, in Louisville, Sorin had not changed his first impression.

In general, what is done amongst the Germans in this country offers more for the future than amongst the Irish and the French. The Germans are honest, if not generous; the others do not keep their promises; among the former there is order and system, amongst the latter great negligence and little perseverance. There is no doubt but that our German brethren will succeed better than any other nationality in America, and that the Community itself will find more resources in its German subjects than in the others. Hence, the importance of making foundations amongst the Germans!

18

We might wonder what effect the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 had on Sorin's fondness for the Germans.

Time does not permit a more extensive sampling of the chronicler's evaluation of people and events. I must pass over Sorin's touching eulogies for several of his countrymen and -women who died on the American mission in the early years: Sisters Mary of the Cenacle and Mary of Bethlehem and Father Francois Cointet. His moving account of the cholera epidemic that ravaged Notre Dame in 1854, striking down a fifth of the religious employed there deserves to be read in its entirety. When the community had determined

---

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Pp. 162-163.

that the high water level of the two lakes on the property and the marshes thus created were the cause of the many deaths, and the owner of a mill dam which controlled the water level refused to sell his land, the chronicler tells us how the problem was resolved.

There are occasions when, by adopting vigorous measures, the enemy is surprised and frightened and we thus elude his snares. On Thursday morning, before mass, Fr. Sorin sent five or six of his stoutest men with strict orders to listen to no one and to tear down the dam; they were especially charged to answer anyone who might attempt to stop them that they received no orders from anybody except their master and that the land was his. Never was an order more promptly carried out.

19

It is tempting to recount the story of the ten Sisters sent from France in 1855 who had an "itching to talk of the miseries of Sainte-Croix, which they made out to be contemptible, especially in the person of the Very Rev. Father (Moreau)," and whom Sorin put on "absolute silence for an indefinite period." Apparently, the punishment was ineffective, for the chronicler ruefully notes that "in a half-day, ten tongues that were charged to say nothing, will say a great deal."<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, it might be said that if there is one abiding theme in these chronicles from beginning to end, it is that of God's Providence. Whether he is recounting a triumph or a tragedy, Sorin is convinced that whatever happens is part of God's plan. Successes obviously further God's purposes. Tribulations serve to

---

<sup>19</sup>P. 138.

<sup>20</sup>Pp. 169-170.

strengthen the resolves of the missionaries and to remind them that in the end, all is in the Lord's keeping. The story related in these chronicles only serves to make that clear. "Unless we see the obstacles and the difficulties of all kinds that have been met, it will not be possible to appreciate the triumph of grace. Moreover, those miseries contain lessons or warnings which will not be useless for our successors."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>p. 269.