

ST. FRANCIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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... Continued from previous newsletter. The following article was written and donated to our collection by Mary Becker. Mary is a retired columnist for the former St. Francis Reminder Enterprise.

The "Spunky Sisters" of St. Francis (continued)

Little is known of what happened to the original brothers. One fled to Europe to escape being drafted in the Civil War. One entered the Capuchin Order for a short time and later became valet for a bishop.

Another forceful woman came to the convent while Mother Aemiliana was still there. She said as soon as she arrived, "I didn't come to the convent to work in the seminary." The superior respected her wishes and sent her to the convent sewing room instead. Two years after taking her vows she was elected Mother Superior.

The seminary leaders soon described this Mother Antonia as a woman who meant to "win or die, but win first." Oppressed by the amount of work assigned to the sisters, she pushed for the right to allow more girls in the community.

Determined that they become teachers, she opened a training institute for them and persuaded Father Heiss and a Prof. Carl Rie to become the staff. From Austria she hired a Miss Straus, a teacher and member of the Third Order Secular of St. Francis.

As soon as they were trained, the sisters spread out to teach in parochial schools. Mother Antonia, like Father Batz, saw their hard life at St. Francis as "unconventional." She wanted them to be independent of the seminary.

Father Michael Heiss, the rector, must have gulped a few times at her words, but gave his support. Mother Antonia bought a small farm in Jefferson, Wisconsin. This became the motherhouse and St. Francis convent was demoted to a mission. For ten years, relations between Mother Antonia and the sisters at St. Francis were strained.

They became more strained when Heiss, the head of the seminary, was named first bishop of La Crosse, many miles across the state of Wisconsin and on the banks of the Mississippi River. He asked Mother Antonia to help him there.

The idea of relocating the motherhouse in the new diocese seemed a natural development, at least to Heiss. He knew schools and teachers would be needed.

When Mother Antonia went there, St. Francis and Jefferson both became missions. The sisters must have felt their Mother Superior was being high-handed, even for that time, when she sent word through her aid Sr. Brigitte: "I want you all to provide for yourselves in the future, but I will still govern you and place you in missions", Mother Antonia said in effect.

Next, in 1873, she ordered all the sisters to come to La Crosse. It was a time of great sorrow. When the wagons came to get them, the sisters jumped off or got on as they saw their friends going or staying.

The agony of the split stretched over several years because the La Crosse motherhouse was not big enough at first to receive all who left. In the end, 90 to 95 sisters followed Mother Antonia to the new St. Rose of Viterbo Convent. That order has flourished. Mother Antonia never returned to St. Francis or Jefferson. But the members of the two orders are friends again, says Sr. Jeanine Gruesser, first archivist for the St. Francis order.

(To be continued...)

Attention all St. Francis Historical Society members!!!!!!!!!!!!

Save the following date on your calender: Saturday, August 15, 10 a.m.-12 noon

**Please join us for our monthly meeting on Saturday, August 15
from 10 a.m.-12 noon at the Lupo House
(located just north of Milt Vretenar park).**

Future plans for the St. Francis Historical Society will be discussed.

Did you know....

- **Most lipstick contains fish scales.**
- **Between 1937 and 1945 Heinz produced a version of Alphabetti Spaghetti especially for the German market that consisted solely of little pasta swastikas.**
- **Like fingerprints, everyone's tongue print is different.**
- **The cigarette lighter was invented before the match.**
- **The average number of people airborne over the U.S. any given hour: 61,000.**