

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)

The 33 sisters left behind in 1873, and those who followed, have built schools and institutions for the mentally retarded and the pre-delinquent. They have established group homes for the retarded.

St. Mary's Academy in Milwaukee and Cardinal Stritch College, north of the city, are owned by the sisters. They have taught at St. John's School for the Deaf, nearby their motherhouse, since 1872.

Franciscan sisters also teach at Kennedy School in Palos Park, Ill; St. Coletta's in Hanover and Braintree, Mass., and conduct a class for mentally retarded at St. Sebastian's Parish, Milwaukee.

The sisters staff grade schools. St. Aemilian's Orphanage, which burned to the ground in St. Francis in 1930, continues on Milwaukee's northwest side. Now it is a day center for 45 children with emotional problems.

The order opened a teaching mission in Tsinanfu, Shantung Province, China, in 1929. When the Japanese took over in 1937 the work continued, but by December 7, 1941, Japan and the U.S. were at war. By March of the next year the American sisters were herded off to a concentration camp. The native Chinese sisters continued the mission.

The Chinese Communist take-over after World War II spelled the end. All the sisters, Chinese and American, left in 1948 on advice of the American consul. Their buildings were abandoned. The school is now a factory.

In 1967, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi started a mission Taiwan, but seven of the Chinese nuns never returned to the Orient. They are living and working at the St. Francis mother-house.

In the museum at the convent's lower level, are dolls dressed in all the order's habits that were worn through the years. When you look at them you see how much they look like the long black skirts and shawls worn by all women in the middle of the last century.

Everybody else's fashions changed, but the sisters kept this garb until the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Now, sisters wear conventional clothing if they wish. The one distinctive sign is a simple gold signet ring inscribed IHS, which stands for Jesus' name.

In the olden days, sisters struck themselves during prayer to strive physically for greater and greater humility. In the museum are the ropes and spiked chains they used in "the discipline" as the action was called. The ropes and chains later were themselves called "the discipline".

Sister Jeanine, in her mid-sixties, does not remember those days, but does recall the silent periods, from 8 p.m. until after breakfast everyday. This rule continued until the 1960's.

Then came Vatican II, and the declaration for all people to "read the signs of the times".

The Franciscan sisters continued as teachers but they also followed "the signs". They train, enable and empower others. One sister lectures, gives retreats and workshops to raise people's consciousness about the situation of the American Indian. She herself is part Cherokee. Others are active in the farm workers' organizing movement and in the inner-city community groups.

Another sister, a pharmacist in Ganada, Ariz., works among the Indian people. And only two miles from the motherhouse in St. Francis is a new Hospitality House for women. It's a place to be quiet, to be counseled and to work through decisions at crisis periods.

"I am happy to have lived through these difficult times since the sixties," Sr. Jeanine said. "We have come to understand better what it means to be church. I understand better what it means to give my life in service to the church as a sister. The foundation is Jesus and the Gospel, and His mission of bringing all people to the Father."

Enjoy a fun afternoon at the library!

Fall Festival at the St. Francis Public Library

Sunday, September 20, 1-4 p.m.

1-3 p.m. Pumpkin painting and Scarecrow making*
3-4 p.m. Ardan James

***Volunteers needed. Proceeds to benefit St. Francis Historical Society.**