

ST. FRANCIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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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

The year ending October 4, 1982 marks the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis of Assisi, the Italian nobleman's son who renewed the Catholic Church in his short life of 45 years.

Set far back on a private driveway in the City of St. Francis, Wisconsin is the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. The 615 women in the order all have promised to live in poverty and cheerfulness and to serve God with humility, like their patron saint.

But they did not promise to be doormats. Running through the story of their accomplishments is a thread of spunkiness and persistence. It makes them a model for today's liberated woman.

The order's history is older than St. Francis Seminary, whose grounds adjoin it.

The roots reach back to a little band of Christians living in Ettenbeuren, Germany, in 1848. They belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi, a lay group. These seven women, five men and two priests, decided to come to America and form a colony. They were part of a great 19th century movement to evangelize North America.

In their compact they promised to provide for missionary priests, teachers and the children of the poor. They later extended their mission to being teachers themselves, even though their spiritual directors saw them only as humble hand-maidens and workmen.

One woman, Otilia Duerr, was married to Anton Zahler before she left Germany. According to law at that time, single women could not use their inheritances and she needed hers. Otilia and Anton, as well as everyone else in the band, promised to remain celibate.

The band bought 35.67 heavily wooded acres on the high bluffs of Lake Michigan, five miles south of Milwaukee. The land was called Nojoshing, an Indian word for a piece of land jutting into the waters. Three dilapidated, uninhabited log cabins found along a creek were brought together. The group lived in them for a start. They also put up a makeshift chapel.

That June, the 14 began to build a house for the sisters but the site proved to be a poor choice. The creek bank crumbled when blocks of ice were cut and dragged up. The convent's foundation started to give way. Eleven years later the sisters had a new home and the brothers a house some distance away.

The two priests quickly went to their parishes. The Rev. Anthony Keppeler was assigned to New Coeln, a rural parish outside of Milwaukee. The Rev. Mattias Steiger went to Holy Cross, to the west of the new village.

The married couple, Ottilia and Anton, were named superiors for the women and the men respectively. Later, Ottilia took the name of Mother Aemiliana.

Tragedy struck in 1851. Keppeler and Steiger died of cholera within a few days of each other. The little group lived in solitude and mourning for over a year. Details are sketchy, but the women became the Sisters of St. Francis by professing their vows in 1853.

(To be continued...)

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

Save the following date on your calender: Saturday, March 28, 9-11 a.m.

**Please join us for an informational meeting on Saturday, March 28
from 9-11 a.m. at the St. Francis Public Library – lower level.
Our good friend, Bill Drehfal, will be discussing the needs of the Society
and how to fulfill them.**

Coffee and schnecks will be served.

Those were the days....

- 1. When I first started driving, who would've thought gas would someday cost 29¢ a gallon. Guess we'd be better off leaving the car in the garage.**
- 2. Kids today are impossible. Their ducktail haircuts make it impossible to stay groomed. Next thing you know the boys will be wearing their hair as long as the girls.**
- 3. There is no sense going for a weekend, it costs nearly \$15 a night to stay at a hotel.**
- 4. No one can afford to be sick anymore, at \$35 a day in the hospital, it's too rich for my blood.**