

Holy Cross History Conference
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 13-15, 2013

Theme: Catholic Education in the South

Presentation: St. Agnes School---Jewel of Jefferson, Louisiana
Presented by: Rose Mary Wessel, msc

Before beginning this presentation, I wish to offer it in tribute to the four Marianite sisters who were truly pioneer women: Sisters Isabel Daigre, Pauline Saadi, Dolores Haddad, and Francesca Petrowsky, who in their own unique way gave birth to St. Agnes School. Also, for many years, Sister Evelyn Eason, a loyal and staunch supporter of the Holy Cross History Conference, had encouraged me to make this presentation; so Evelyn, this one's for you!

It was a balmy September 4, 1941, when St. Agnes School opened its doors to 135 students in grades 1-7. I was a 10 year-old 5th Grader at the time. But lest we get ahead of ourselves by recalling the fun parts of the founding years, a bit of history is in order. St. Agnes Parish is located on a stretch of land which pioneers of the early 18th Century named "*Les Chapitoulas*." The land, a strip along the east bank of the Mississippi River, was distributed to early European investors and to a handful of Canadians struggling to survive along the Gulf Coast. The granting of land commenced almost simultaneously with the founding of New Orleans in 1718.

St. Agnes parish comprised the riverfront portions of the original land grants of the Dubreuil, Chauvin, and St. Reyne concessions of 1724; and the de LaBarre, Arnoult and D'Aquin family properties as they stood in 1824.

The original area name, *Chapitoulas*, is a combination of three Indian words meaning "*those who resided at the river*." It referred to the Chapitoula Indians, the first inhabitants of the land, a group which had become extinct by the 18th Century. *Note (The name is now spelled *Tchapitoulas*.)

In 1915, an area referred to as Suburban Acres was opened offering residential lots for sale. By 1930 approximately 300 Catholic families resided in the area prompting the establishment of the church parish of St. Agnes on March 1, 1931. Rev. Charles Beauvais was appointed pastor of the new parish and remained

there for approximately three months. On July 19, 1931 Father Moses Joseph Habeb became the second pastor of St. Agnes parish.

Whitehall Plantation House, constructed in 1857, was the first place of residence. This building with a long and colorful history was occupied by Union troops during the Civil War. Whitehall later became the Manresa Retreat House for the Jesuit priests. This building, located on Central Avenue and the River Road, served as rectory and church until January 20, 1932, when a refurbished nightclub became the second and most versatile home for the parish. Tranchina's Nightclub on Jefferson Highway in the Claiborne Gateway Subdivision was known to have been alive with raucous jazz, gambling, dancing, dining and the merriment of revelers in the late 1920's. The exterior of the building was of bright pink stucco, which, mercifully, over the years had faded to a muted shade of pink. There was a column in the Sunday Times Picayune newspaper entitled "*Believe It or Not*" by Bob Ripley. My mother showed me the clipping when I came home one day and excitedly told her about the *crystal chandelier* in the center aisle of the church. She quietly told me that it was *cut glass*. For almost thirty-five years the old Tranchina building served the parishioners of St. Agnes parish as church, rectory, convent, school and meeting rooms.

In order to prepare for a convent in 1941, the pastor had a new brick rectory built on a lot close to the Tranchina building. He moved into the new rectory and then proceeded to make adjustments in the old building. He promptly went to visit Mother Xavier, Provincial of the Marianites and asked for sisters to come to his parish to help him with a new school. Since he was of Lebanese extraction, he asked if she had any sisters of the same or similar background. Sisters Pauline and Dolores answered the call. Mother Xavier brought the four sisters who would become the pioneers with her to inspect the renovations. Many years later when there were three priests in the parish with an extra room for a guest; the newer, larger rectory was built around the original one, totally surrounding it. The back side door, near where thirsty girls who had come to play cabbage ball, used to ask the housekeeper for water before returning to class, exists to this day. It looks different now because the new church was built next to the rectory and the old baseball lot is hidden.

The Tranchina building had a main central entrance facing Jefferson Highway. The foyer of the church had been the hat check area for the nightclub. On the right side, there were rooms for the management to conduct business and to relax. To the left was a kitchen where food for the guests was prepared and served in an adjacent room. The expansive center portion was reserved for dancing with small tables and chairs around the edges for patrons to have drinks, to relax and visit. To the left of the dancing area was the separate portion set aside for gambling. There were two sets of French doors leading into that area. These doors contained panels of frosted glass and after Sunday Mass some of the people would decide to have Open House and visit the classrooms.

The area that was used for dancing became the worship space and the chandelier was retained in the center aisle. Pews were garnered from other churches that were in process of remodeling. The front of the hall had an elevated area for the bandstand; the altar was placed there and a wooden altar rail was constructed across the front of it. The bandstand itself was moved to the rear right side to become the choir area. A small pump organ was installed and folding chairs were added for the choir.

To transform the gambling area into classrooms, glorified cardboard walls were installed to make four classrooms. Each of the four sisters had double grades except Sister Isabel, who had only the third grade since she was the assistant principal. Father Habeb declared himself principal during the early years but soon grew weary of that job and gave it to the sisters.

The convent portion was divided. On the downstairs right side was the kitchen, sitting room, and a room reserved for guests. There seemed to be quite a few in the early days. The building had a flat roof with a four foot wall across the front. There were twin towers on each side. These were the sisters' bedrooms. You can imagine the hot summer nights with only two small windows per tower. The sisters were very creative. They each took a folding chair up to the bedrooms and after their shower climbed out the window and sat outside on the roof to enjoy whatever breeze they could find. Since it was dark up there no one below could see them! On a given night one of the sisters who slept in the left side tower forgot her clothes on the other side. It was a Saturday and there were people going in and out of church for confession. She didn't want to dress in her habit again, so she climbed out her tower window and walked across the roof, enjoying the sights below. You can imagine how frightened the sisters in the other tower were when

they heard a knock at the window! One of them picked up a chair as a means of defense if it became necessary. After a brief explanation sister went downstairs, retrieved her clothes and returned to her "own" tower by way of the roof. We have all read about great persons in history as well as criminals, who have been consigned to a tower as a form of punishment. But let it be noted that the sisters of St. Agnes willingly went to their towers. Many of them declared that the happiest days of their lives were those spent in the *towers!*

Most of what I have shared with you thus far can be found in chronicles or web sites. Now we come to the fun part! These events are not recorded except in the minds and hearts of those who lived through them.

In his eagerness to open a school, the pastor failed to understand that you cannot have children in your care for 7 hours without water. In preparing the classrooms for the first day of school, the sisters noticed that there were no drinking fountains! What to do? The fire house was across the highway and one of the ladies who was helping the sisters was the fire chief's wife. She volunteered her husband's services. So on the first day of school at the morning recess the children stood outside the building and gave shouts of joy at the sound of the siren on the fire engine as it pulled up to the fire hydrant at the edge of the highway. People passing in their cars slowed down looking aghast at the gathering of children around the fire hydrant. Was the school on fire? Of course not; it was their tax dollars at work. Chief Berot was a hero! Some of the mothers came with containers and paper cups. When the last child received a cup of water, the bell rang and recess was over. This scene was repeated at lunch time and went on for two weeks until the drinking fountains were installed.

You may remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941. My family was returning from the church for the baptism of my sister. There were many young men in their cars passing us by and shouting that war had been declared. When we arrived home all the men relatives gathered around the radio and we realized that we were indeed involved in World War II. Each one gave their opinion as to what needed to be done. This struck fear in my heart and I went into the bedroom, held my sister and prayed for the safety of all little babies.

In the coming months the President called on all Americans to help in the war effort. Certain commodities, especially gasoline, were rationed. We were asked to make Victory Gardens in our back yards. The sisters were not to be outdone in the war effort. Sister Dolores, my 5th grade teacher, got permission from the pastor to have a victory garden on the empty lot next to the school. With the help of some men in the neighborhood, she prepared the ground for the garden, tilling the soil and fertilizing it. The garden was in the shape of a large V with several rows of vegetables on each side to form the V part, and in the open space at the top of the V was a small garden in the shape of a heart. Only red flowers were planted there. This was in honor of all those who were going off to war!

The students begged to help in the garden, so sister set up a system. In order to get to the garden you had to jump over a ditch, much to the delight of the students. We were invited to bring watering cans, but only those with an "A" in conduct need apply to weed and water! Sister had a whistle which she blew every ten minutes for the changing of the teams. She walked up and down supervising and if you made a mistake and pulled up a vegetable, mistaking it for a weed, you were fired on the spot! You can imagine, once again, people passing in their cars seeing children like ants crawling around weeding and watering the garden. Some even pulled on to the shoulder of the road to get out of their cars to take pictures. Eventually one such picture appeared in the newspaper.

One of Sister Dolores' brothers was going to boot camp with his unit. Her family had informed her that he would be on a Greyhound bus on a given day and would pass in front of the church at an approximate time. That morning we were invited to take a sheet of paper and make a sign wishing Steve "*Good Luck or God Bless You.*" Typically, the girls decorated their signs with flowers, birds, and butterflies; the boys were more down to earth. Their signs read "*Kill those Japs*" and were decorated with guns, bullets, and bombs! Some even had blood dripping from the bullets!

Sister brought us outside and we were strung along the sidewalk next to the highway. Once again, the people passing slowed down to see what was happening. Soon the bus was sighted in the distance. Sister pulled out her large white handkerchief and held it by one corner and swiped it in the air. You can imagine what the bus driver was thinking as he approached. Sister flagged him down and got on the bus. When she discovered her brother was not on that bus she told the driver to move on. We decided to wave at all the people passing by.

Finally another bus arrived and was flagged down. This was the one! Steve, dressed in his uniform, stepped out of the bus and shook hands with each of us. We gave him our pictures which he took with him, then got a big hug from his sister and returned to the bus. All the young recruits on the bus waved and shouted to us. It felt good to be an American!

There was a certain rainy day when we were not allowed to go outside at lunch time, so the older girls were asked to take care of the younger ones in the classroom. I was among those taking care of first and second graders while Sister Pauline went to get a bit of lunch. Meanwhile some of the third grade boys in the next room were trying to climb the wall...literally! So, because the wall was made of pressed cardboard, it began to fall down! The little ones began to cry. Just at that moment sister arrived and pushed the wall back into place. The children went home and told their parents what had happened. The next day a photographer from the newspaper came to take sister's picture. It was posed: Sister was standing with her hand on the wall. The picture appeared in the next day's paper with the caption: "*Nun saves children from falling wall.*" There was never a dull moment at St. Agnes.

Advancing to the upper grades, we were in another classroom with another teacher. Sister Francesca was my sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teacher. We soon discovered she was strict in the classroom, but friendly outside of it. From the outset, we noticed certain aromas emanating from the room behind us. We discovered it was the kitchen of "Miss Rose" and "Miss Lily" two immigrants from Alsace-Lorraine who spoke not a word of English. They were the cooks and cleaners of the church as well as the housekeepers for the pastor until he moved to the new rectory. They also rang the church bell three times a day for the Angelus as well as for the Sunday Masses. The aromas were from the Lebanese food they prepared for the pastor each day and were a challenge to our olfactory senses. These two ladies also had a large dog that never seemed to bark, which was good. Sometimes the odor was so strong the boys would clown around and put paper clips on their noses. That did not go over very well.

One of the practices Sister Francesca had was to put a motto or positive slogan on the board each day. Several of us used to keep them in a small note book to read over again. Some of my favorites were:

Every time I pass a church I should stop and make a visit, So that when I'm carried there the Lord won't ask, "Who is it?"

Another was, From the day of your birth till you ride in a hearse, things can't be so bad that they couldn't be worse!

And finally, There's so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves any of us to talk about the rest of us!

I have shared these memories with you so you might understand what a tremendous place St. Agnes School was in the early days. The sisters made tremendous sacrifices especially in regard to their living quarters. But they were always happy! The people, especially the parents of the students, worked side by side with them and helped them in every way possible. The people were not rich or wealthy but they brought the sisters food and other commodities. In a short period of time St. Agnes became the synonym for the most wonderful place to be! Soon the number of students outgrew the small school and a new one had to be built in 1951. The enrollment in the early 60's and 70's reached 1200 students. A new church was constructed in 1957.

However, the old Tranchina building was put on rollers and moved to the back of the property; classrooms were constructed in the area that was used as the church. There were even some small classes held in the towers. When the men from the company hired to move the building were ready to move it, they would sound an alarm and the teachers would take the students outside and have classes under the trees! The building was renamed Marian Hall. Hurricane Katrina demolished the old building, but, like an old friend, it lives on in the memories of many.

Sadly, at the beginning of the 1976 school term, a serious dispute arose between the principal and the school board regarding a break in teachers' contracts. At the conclusion of the school year, the parish bid farewell to the sisters. However, some of the parishioners continued to assist in the Marianite Fair, held annually to help pay off the debt on Our Lady of Holy Cross Convent and College.

The latest figures on school enrollment give a total of 18 eighth grade graduates for this school term and a total of 135 students---the same as the original number. There is little hope for increased enrollment since most of the residents of the parish are senior citizens. There are many commercial entities in the parish which does not allow for new housing development. As the archdiocese continues to assess the needs in catholic education for the near future, it seems almost certain that St. Agnes Elementary School will soon become a treasured memory. However, the voices of past students are heard at annual reunions. The people assure us that we will never be forgotten and that St. Agnes School will live on in the minds and hearts of those who have loved her as the *Jewel of Jefferson!*

Ad Multos Annos!

---*Rose Mary Wessel, msc*

Note:

I had the pleasure of living with Sisters Francesca and Pauline in my early years as a Marianite. They shared their stories of convent living in the first years at St. Agnes.