

ST. BENEDICT'S HIGH SCHOOL— 1880s to the 1950s

Remarks by Sister Carol Berg at the SBHS reunion dinner held May 21, 2011

Given the brief time allotted to me tonight, I can only highlight small portions of the history of the St. Benedict's High School—especially since I have been asked to cover the years from 1880 into the 1950s. Most of my information was gleaned through several hours of research in our monastery archives and a review of chapter nine in S. Grace McDonald's book, *With Lamps Burning*. While the archives has varied sources on aspects of the high school, such as scrapbooks, expense ledgers, letters, handbooks, etc., there are three major sources of information which I found most useful: **catalogues**—detailing the courses and rules of behavior; **school newspapers**—reporting on people and events, and lastly, **yearbooks**—which showcase academics, clubs, recreation, etc. The catalogues give the most detailed look into the early decades of the school.

OVERVIEW:

The school opened as St. Joseph's Academy in St. Joseph in September 1880 but in 1882, moving into a new convent-academy building, had a name change to St. Benedict's Academy (and in 1940 that was changed to St. Benedict's High School).

From the start it was a success—if one judges by the steady rise in numbers of students. In 1881 St. Cecilia Hall was added and in 1899 St. Gertrude Hall was built to meet the needs of increased enrollment. In 1912 the school first underwent state inspection and was accredited. That same year, collegiate courses were also begun.

A 1915 catalogue lists these departments: collegiate, academic (meaning secondary) normal, music, art, expression, home economics, commercial, primary and preparatory. And, from 1915-1927 the College of St. Benedict and St. Benedict's Academy were under the same roof and same administration, with one catalogue for both levels.

In April 1938, the monastery council voted to discontinue the boarding high school and to admit only day students. Girls intending to join the convent were housed in the high school building. In fall 1956 the "Scholasticate" building was converted into a full boarding school once again.

In January 1960, the monastery Chapter voted to build a new academic building and residence hall, opening in September 1960. But in April, 1973, mainly due to a decline in enrollment and in finances, the council voted to close the high school-- which it did as of May 27 that year.

The Early 1900s—

Graduating classes tended to be between 15 and 30 students during the years 1915-1930 and the curriculum expanded as well. Catalogues list the following offerings: General Science, Ancient and American History, Latin, German, Spanish, Needlework, Algebra, Phy Ed., Chemistry, Biology, Bookkeeping and Home Economics.

A basic tuition and board was standard during the years 1882-the 1940s with special fees charged for music lessons, art work and science labs. For example, the 1883 catalogue listed the sum \$80 for tuition and board; washing and bedding were an extra \$20; piano or organ lessons were \$10 (violin \$25 and the harp \$30). Labs ranged from \$8-\$12. These costs remained under \$100 until the late around 1915; by

the 1920s and '30s the costs had doubled. For example in 1912 tuition and board was \$160 but in 1919 it rose to \$250 and in 1926 to \$390.

Catalogue descriptions of courses gave a practical bent but stressed that the most important reason for the existence of the school was "to form the character of the students." Over the decades, the catalogues emphasized that education concerned the whole person; heart and soul as well as mind and hand must be developed. Instruction was given in religion and in etiquette and, of course, concise rules of behavior were promulgated. It is interesting to note that at the Commencement each spring prizes were awarded for comportment and manners alongside academic excellence.

The catalogues list a schedule of events and activities such as plays, excursions, guest lectures, etc. For example, the 1912-1913 catalogue has the following schedule of extracurriculars:
Oct. 3—a trip to St. John's University Nov. 22—a musical production Jan. 20—a senior sleighride;
Mar. 24—lecture by Abbot Alcuin Deutsch and June 5, a picnic.

Wardrobe:

Those planning on attending the school anywhere between the 1880s and 1930s received detailed instruction on what wardrobe items to bring. Typically the list included: six changes of undergarments, six towels, three black aprons, three pairs of shoes, three daily dresses, 12 pocket handkerchiefs, six pairs of cotton hose, one plain black dress for Sunday, minimal jewelry (only ear rings and a brooch), stationery and postage stamps.

Interestingly, there was no school uniform until the 1920s. A description in 1925 refers to a one-piece dress, blue, wool for winter and lightweight for fall and spring. The uniform called for white collar and cuffs. Every student was required to have two uniforms and they could be purchased at Fandel's Store in St. Cloud.

Wardrobe directions in the catalogue for 1925-26 are very brief but very telling of the times (no roaring '20s at St. Ben's!): "On no occasion will students be permitted to wear sleeveless gowns. Parents will kindly see to it that such gowns are not brought to the institution." Also, "the excessive use of cosmetics will not be tolerated."

Discipline:

There were general Rules of Discipline written in each catalogue each year. For example, in the 1889-1890 school year calendar (ran from early Sept. to mid-June) the rules include:
--except for times of recreation, silence is strictly observed in all places
--pupils are forbidden to have particular friendships
--pupils will write to their parents or guardians once a week
--neatness must be strictly observed.

While the wardrobe directions became less detailed over the decades, the discipline section remained somewhat lengthy and was renamed General Regulation by the 1930s. For example, the 1935-36 catalogue gives these rules:
"The school reserves the right to inspect all incoming and outgoing mail. All books brought by students or sent to them must be submitted for approval.
No students will be permitted to go to St. Cloud or elsewhere without a written permit from parents or guardians, addressed to the Principal, nor be permitted to go unchaperoned."

In the 1950s and '60s, there were still many detailed rules for "correct" behavior. Demerits or points taken off were levied for such actions as chewing gum in public, using nicknames and even crossing one's legs.

Recurring Family Names—

In the decades between 1880 and 1940, some very recognizable names keep cropping up in the school rosters—I note the following in particular:

Eagan, Otto, Kapsner, Hilger, Bernick, Karls, Wimmer, Fandel, Borgerding, Gergen, Wenner, Peters, Terhaar, Welle, Bechtold, Bohmer, Nathe, Lorsung, Terway, Loso, Blatz, Rieland, Notch and Marthaler.

SCHOOL NEWSPAPERS

I found no regular school newspaper printed pre-1930s. Occasionally, some special news sheets would come out, reporting on a major event coming up or on a recently celebrated one. The oldest newspaper I found was the ACADEMIC CHIMES, dated March 17, 1932. It was three typed sheets and consisted mainly of summaries of classes being offered and gave brief anecdotes of students who were honored for some achievement or sharing the fruits of some conference/workshop they attended.

The next newspaper I came upon was called ACADEMIC ECHOES, dated Dec. 12, 1938. Mainly, it gave lists of student activities, a couple of poems, results of a school election and noted that volleyball games were being held every Mon. and Wed. evening. Apparently basketball was a favored sport, too, for many decades: there seems to have been an annual day hop vs. aspirants game—which more often than not was won by the day hops.

Next, there appeared a paper called the BENNY BUGLE, dated May 19, 1948. It reported student activities, such as a banquet for Seniors hosted by the Juniors; an entire page was given to predictions for the Seniors' future and another page listed bequeaths from the Seniors to the Juniors.

Apparently, there was a break of two years before a new school paper was published. I found one dated Oct. 31, 1950—but it had no name. It announced a contest for a name (Darlene Primus, now S. Colette, was editor). On Nov. 22, 1950, the second issue came out with the name NEWS FLASH (the winner of the contest being Mary Kempf, the future S. Gilmary). The paper was put out by the Gopher Historian Society and was a monthly. In 1952, the newspaper had another name change: THE DOME. Its first issue is dated Oct. 21, 1952.

Scanning the newspapers through the years 1951-1960, I found consistent patterns and topics. There are numerous articles about special events, some poetry, book reviews, messages from the Principal and updates on conferences, competitions (both academic and athletic), exhortations or what we used to call "ferverinos" on values and good behavior, updates on awards, honors, etc. There are frequent reports on club activities, school elections and the yearly Retreat.

Yearbooks--

There were no yearbooks—or at least none exist anymore—for the high school before the 1950s. Throughout the 1950s the yearbook was named THE TORCH and until 1957 it was quite small in size—10-12 pages; by 1957 it had doubled in size and had many more pictures. Small or large, the yearbooks featured individual student profiles (mainly of the Seniors) along with class wills and prophecies.

School Song--

Apparently there was no official school song before the 1950s. I did find a copy of words and music dated 1952—by the senior class. The title of the song is “Pledge to Saint Benedict’s.” The words: “St. Benedict’s we pledge to thee our truest love and loyalty. To keep thy truths and guiding light, thy name and honor ever bright. Wisdom thou sharest to all who seek the right, who pledge to search forever, until they find the light. To truth loving students, thy portals extend. To thee, Saint Benedict’s, our voices we lend.” There is no evidence that this song ever “caught on.”

Sister Faculty:

Some faculty names which appear regularly year after year include during the 1940s and ‘50s are Sisters Alacoque, Cassilda, Celeste, Prudentia, Mirella, Ancille, Madelon and Miss Ruth Allen (phy ed.).

Several Sisters taught for over 40 years in the high school. The longest stint was by Sister Prudentia Taylor whose years are 1912-1935; 1937-1963 (49 years total). Many of us fought the Gallic Wars with her. And, for 44 years, Sister Alacoque Mayer taught math to high school students: 1913-1939 and 1940-1958 (44 years total). I, for one, was terrified of her—probably true of any who did not excel in math!

Many of us know well several of the Sister faculty who taught in the high school during the 1930s and ‘40s and then moved on to teach in the College here. These include S. Alacoque who taught Geometry and Algebra; S. Donalda Terhaar, who taught French and Elementary Algebra; S. Glenore Reidner, who taught Biology and Home Ec; S. Magna Werth, who taught General Science and Physics; S. Mariella Gable, who taught English and S. Marcine Schirber, who also taught English.

We have several Sisters still with us (some now at Saint Scholastica’s) who taught during the 1950s:

S. Dunstan (Phyllis) Plantenberg 1950-1951
S. Olivia Forster 1950-1952
S. Roderick (Margaret) Van Kempen 1952-53
S. Ingrid Anderson 1953-54
S. Aaron (Kathleen) Kalinowski 1953-54
S. Patrice Reed 1954-55
S. Vivia Theisen 1954-1956
S. Kenric (Margo) Bischof 1956-1959; 1965-1973
S. Antone (Ann) Malerich 1958-1959
S. Idamarie Primus 1958-1962
S. Mary Mark (Grace) Donovan 1945-1947 and 1959-1960
S. Romaine Theisen 1959-1966

CONCLUSION:

As I look around this room, I note that we have a wealth of individual and collective memories and experiences of St. Benedict’s High School. The written records are somewhat sparse. There is no comprehensive narrative of the school, only bits and pieces. We can do something to remedy this situation. If even a few of us would choose to write or tape reminiscences and memories of our high school years, we could enrich the archival holdings. And, who knows, some enterprising alum may get the urge to pull this all together and give us our first full history of St. Benedict’s High School. One can wish.

Sister Carol Berg *talk given on May 21, 2011 (final draft done May 26, 2011 for Web and archives)*