

Benedictine Community & Sisters' Homes

The Benedictine Community has been such a large part of Saint Boniface history that it is hard to realize they came from such difficult and humble beginnings. In order to understand their progression to Saint Boniface, it is best to start from their beginnings in Arkansas.

When Bishop Fitzgerald took over his diocese in 1867, it was still suffering from the effects of the Civil War and from being without a bishop for five years. He realized the magnitude of his task of shepherding to this vast area and in encouraging more Catholics to settle in his diocese. An opportunity presented itself with the latter problem. At that time, there was a national eagerness to expand and develop the whole continental United States. Since railroads were a major instrument for opening these undeveloped areas, the government was giving huge grants of land on both sides of any tracks that the companies laid. In turn, the railroad could sell this land for profit to settlers who would populate the new areas.

One such grant involved the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad. Mr. W. D. Slack, Land Commissioner for the railroad, approached Bishop Fitzgerald with a proposition he hoped would attract German Catholic settlers to the area along his line. His offer was to give 640 acres to the Abbot of Saint Meinrad, in Saint Meinrad, Indiana, to establish a monastery, plus 100 acres to establish a convent for Benedictine Sisters to conduct parochial schools for the immigrants' children. The Bishop, who desperately needed priests and sisters, readily embraced the idea. This proposal was made to Abbot Martin Marty of Saint Meinrad. The offer was accepted with a stipulation that the railroad would give \$2,500 to be used in building a church, rectory, school and convent for each original foundation.

In December, 1877, Father Isidor Hobi was sent to Arkansas to select the sites. The sisters' location was to be at Shoal Creek and the monks' location was to be at Creole, about ten miles west of Shoal Creek. Abbot Martin visited in January and approved the selection of the sites. He then sent Father Wolfgang Schlumpf, Brother Kaspar Hildesheim, and Brother Hilary Benetz to Arkansas. They arrived on March 15th, 1878, at Creole, and began the foundation of Saint Benedict, which later was called New Subiaco Abbey in Subiaco, Arkansas. In September, 1878, the sisters would begin their journey.

When Abbot Martin approached Mother Benedicta Burns, the Superior of Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, Indiana, she was reluctant to agree in sending sisters to Arkansas. They had only been in existence for eleven years, Arkansas was very far from the motherhouse, and there were numerous requests to staff other schools. Upon the expiration of Mother Benedicta's term as prioress, Sister Agatha Werb was elected prioress. A week later, Mother Agatha sent four sisters to Shoal Creek, Arkansas. These sisters were in various stages of their vows and of various ages. The oldest was 34, two were 23, and the youngest was 21.

Their journey was long and arduous. The final portion consisted of a wagon ride, from what was at the time called Spadra, to Saint Benedict. The sisters were jolted over a rough, rocky and stump-studded road. As difficult as the ride was, it was near luxury in comparison to what Father Wolfgang and his companions had experienced on their arrival. They had made their way only with the aid of an ax.

In a letter written by Sister Bonaventura, she wrote about their expectation of their future home, and of the poverty they had been told. She stated the reality however far surpassed their imagination. At the end of their trip, the wagon stopped before

a building that the sisters thought was a stable. To their amazement, it ended up being the church. After a brief prayer, the sisters ate a meal that had been prepared for them. In this, they were more fortunate than the monks as nothing was waiting for them upon their arrival.

The monastery the monks had built consisted of two small rooms, one a kitchen and the other a bedroom. The monks turned this over to the sisters until their convent was completed. Both Fathers slept in the sacristy and the Brothers slept in the tower of the church.

In November, the sisters' home and school building, which was part of Saint Benedict, was finished. This was the first parochial school to be opened in Logan County. It was a four room structure that included a classroom, kitchen, living room and bedroom. By January of 1879, the combination school and sisters' house in Shoal Creek was complete. This date marked the official founding of the Saint Scholastica community.

Life was extremely hard for the Benedictines. Money was not available to purchase items needed or to pay for any labor required. The Benedictines had to cut their own fire wood and carry water from a stream. The floor originally served as beds and leaves and straw were used for padding. In the early days, tools were not readily available and land was literally cleared by hand in order to plant a garden.

Even with all the hardships, the sisters sustained. Young women were drawn to Saint Scholastica and on March 15th, 1882, Christina Schuler from Fort Smith entered as the first candidate to join the convent. On April 10th, Katharina Hawerott from Shoal Creek joined, and on June 9th, Apollonia Ehalt, also from Fort Smith, became the third girl to join. They were the first of a steady stream of candidates to join the new community. The sisters who had worried about their future now had reason to be more hopeful.

In May, 1882, Mother Superior Agatha Werb visited Saint Scholastica and brought two sisters with her, one of which was Sister Meinrada Lex. Sister Meinrada was appointed as Superior of Saint Scholastica and became the foundress of Saint Scholastica Convent. With the Bishop's approval, permission was given to start a novitiate at Shoal Creek, rather than sending applicants to Ferdinand for training. In 1887, when Saint Scholastica became independent from Ferdinand, Sister Meinrada was elected the first Mother Superior. The Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of morals, obedience, chastity, and poverty, which all Benedictines take, were now to be professed at Saint Scholastica.

Saint Boniface Catholic School in Fort Smith was the first parochial school accepted by Mother Meinrada Lex and also the first school to be taught by the sisters who had been trained and made their profession of vows in Shoal Creek. The original school building also served as the sisters' first home. Two rooms were used by the sisters, and the other two rooms were classrooms. The first two teachers that came were Sister Walburga Hawerott who was from Shoal Creek, and Sister Agatha Ehalt who was from Fort Smith.

The sisters had barely begun their educational ministry when a major problem arose. Father Placidus Zarn, O.S.B., who had wanted the sisters, was replaced by Father Bonaventure Binzegger, O.S.B. The new pastor did not like to be around the sisters and began efforts to have them replaced by lay teachers. Although he did not succeed, one of his successors, Father Pius Zwysig, O.S.B., arranged to have the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters from Pocahontas, Arkansas, staff the school. Father Pius

wrote Mother Meinrada telling her not to send her sisters to Saint Boniface in the fall of 1891. This turmoil must have caused many anxious moments for her, however it also must have relieved her of the burden of having her sisters getting sick in Fort Smith. Two had contracted malaria and one, tuberculosis.

In 1903, the school was again staffed by the sisters from Saint Scholastica in Shoal Creek. In the twelve years that had elapsed, Saint Boniface had grown. The school went from a two-room to a four-room school. In the fall of 1903, Sisters Aloysia Mueller, Ignatia Gyr, Loretta Dunn, Philomena Beschoner, and Lawrence Beck enrolled 140 pupils. In addition, a new house had been erected in 1901 for the sisters. It was located at 221 North 19th Street. The sisters lived at that location till 1953. With plans being made to build an addition to the school, in May, 1955, contractor W.H. Patterson tore down and removed this house. He paid the parish \$425 for the materials he kept.

On July 1, 1953, the beautiful three story house on the southeast corner of North 18th and North B Streets was purchased for \$30,000. It was originally built in 1905 by Mr. Burke, a prominent Fort Smith Catholic. In the 1920's, it became the Thompson Clinic. In 1953, it was owned by Mr. R. E. Brazil and his wife Elsie, and was being used as offices for his realty and insurance agency. Mr. Brazil had been approached by several prospective buyers that expressed interest in buying the property. However, he preferred to sell it to Saint Boniface Parish.

Reverend Mother Jane Frances, and another sister from Saint Scholastica, looked at the house to see if it would be suitable for a convent home. They examined it thoroughly and told the pastor it would be very satisfactory. The Bishop was contacted about the proposal and within a few days, he came to examine the property. After discussions with the Reverend Mother and the pastor, the Bishop agreed that the home would be a perfect fit for the Benedictine Sisters.

Some renovations were done on the house, and a music conservatory was added. The room to the right of the front door became the chapel. It was dedicated to Saint Gertrude in which the Blessed Sacrament was reserved for the strength and consolation of the sisters. The altar was donated from Saint Scholastica, and parishioners donated all the other items needed for offering up the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

For many years, only Benedictine Sisters taught at the school. As the years went by however, more lay teachers were replacing the sisters. Eventually, the sisters' home was no longer needed and was used by the Hannah House, which was a home for unwed and expecting mothers. When it was destroyed by fire, the insurance money was given to the Hannah House to purchase another home, and in 2002 the empty lot was paved for additional parking.

The Benedictine Sisters left Saint Boniface in 1993. Sisters Vivian Luyet, and Mary Ruth Wewers were the last sisters to teach in the school. Even though most of them are gone now, they have had a lasting effect on our parish. Saint Boniface has learned so much from the Benedictines', and benefited by their example and teachings. For the parishioners and students who were fortunate enough to have known them, the sisters will live on in our hearts forever.



The first sisters' home was located in the four room school house.



The second sisters' home was located at 221 North 19th Street.



The third, and last sisters' home was located at 122 North 18th Street.

