

REMEMBERING THINGS PAST—THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

By Sister Margaret Clarke

The year 1918, particularly its last quarter, was a period of both good and bad times for Duluth and its Benedictine community. Under the capable leadership of Mother Celestine Sullivan, nearly \$200,000 of corporation debt had been paid off by raising the rates at the hospitals and community-owned schools, asking for increased salaries for Sisters teaching in the parish schools, and selling the Kerst property near downtown St. Paul. Community membership was increasing steadily as well as enrollment at the Academy and College, and with the end of the “war to end all wars” in November and the easing of government restrictions on building, the Sisters were ready to think about enlarging both the Villa and St. Mary’s Hospital. Good times, indeed!



*Duluth & Northeastern Railroad yards after fire.
Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society*

In mid-October the bad times began. On October 10, a spark from the engine of a train kindled a fire in a drought-ridden wooded area near Cloquet, and by October 12 fire was raging through the area, eventually covering 1,500 square miles and coming very close to the Duluth city limits. More than 11,000 people lost their homes, and 450 died. The fire was visible from the Villa grounds. Refugees flooded into St. Mary’s Hospital, and all unused bedding and mattresses were taken from the Villa to St. Mary’s. Sisters Devota LaVoie and Estelle Panger are among those still living whose families were affected by this disaster.

In January of 1918 the much-loved first Bishop of Duluth, James McGolrick, had died. His successor, Right Rev. John T. McNicholas, O.P., was to arrive in Duluth for his installation on October 15. Much to his surprise, he was greeted at the depot not by an enthusiastic crowd, but by only a few clergy and laymen. Immediately following the Cloquet fire, a rapidly-spreading epidemic of Spanish Influenza had broken out in Duluth. The City Council had ordered the closing of all meeting halls, schools, and many public buildings. On October 18, a private installation ceremony was held at Sacred Heart Cathedral for Bishop McNicholas. One of his first acts was to approve the request of the Benedictine Sisters to care for the fire and influenza victims, and suggested that it be done without expectation of pay.

Many teaching Sisters who were free due to the closing of the schools were sent to serve in improvised hospitals set up by the Board of Health. Sisters Bede Raetz, Blanche Salget, and Antonia LeBlanc were sent to the Shrine Auditorium on October 16. By the end of their third day they had 89 patients, and Sisters Rosalia Friedsam and Imelda Cousin joined the caregivers. The Health Department provided food, medicines, and nursing materials, and as the cases multiplied, more Sisters—Julia Quesnell, Cleopha Milette, Dionysia Bachand, Pierre Robillard and Humilitas Benoit—came to help. All but Sister Blanche were elementary school teachers.

When St. Mary's Hospital was filled to capacity, the Community opened a section of Sacred Heart Institute for patients, including two of the diocesan clergy. Sisters Jane Reilly (a nurse) and Thomas O'Grady with other Sisters served there. At the end of October, the Moose Hall in the West End was opened, and teaching Sisters from the west end schools, Sisters Ursula Kocianchich, Gregory Mannheim, Blaise Fortier, and Pauline Dunphy among others were on the staff.



Refugees and relief workers sort through stacks of donated clothes at the Duluth Armory. Photo by Hugh McKenzie from the collection of the Carlton County Historical Society.

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Sister Blanche wrote: “The work was toilsome, extending from twelve to fourteen hours a day. But it was a good work, and we did it gladly. I know several of the sick who were brought back to the practice of their religion, and I believe that all those who died were well prepared. We deeply appreciated the kindness of the Duluth Health Department. Every morning a police car came to take us to the nearest church for Mass.” The epidemic continued through December and into January, and by the time that it had abated, over 150 persons had died. Sister Gregory remembered that Christmas: “Many of our patients were elderly, and when the disease hung on, they became discouraged. I went around several times a day trying to cheer them up. Mr. Orchard of the Health Department was wonderful. He gave us money to throw a party with all the trimmings at Christmas. All patients received funny presents which made them happy for a week.”

The Community did not escape its personal bereavement. Sister Angela Toben, age 32, a talented young artist, died in November, and Sister Eugene Neddeau, a cook at St. Ann's home, over a year later.

The makeshift hospital/shelters remained open until the end of May 1919, by which time most of the Sisters had returned to their school duties, and Community life had returned to “normal.” The Sisters approved the construction of the first Tower Hall tower, a wing which would provide space for a new chapel, a gymnasium-theater, and an addition to St. Mary's Hospital. The “bad times” in Duluth were over. . . at least for the time being.

--Much of this information comes from an unpublished history of the Community by Sister Agnes Somers.