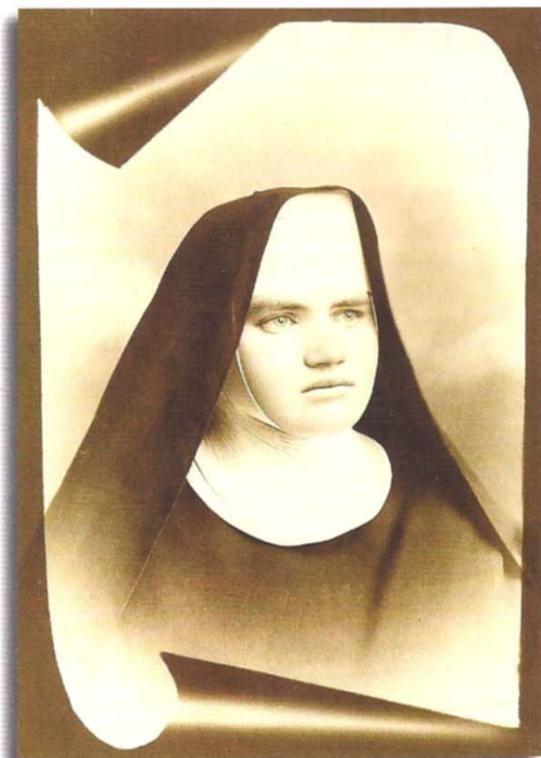


REMEMBERING THINGS PAST

The Last Pioneer: Sister Leona Michlitch (1869-1966)

By Sister Margaret Clarke



Sister Leona in 1890 at the time of her first monastic profession at St. Benedict's Convent.

In 1891 Sister Leona was sent to Duluth as housekeeper at Sacred Heart Convent, and when the Duluth community became independent in 1892, she was one of the volunteers. Mother Scholastica assigned her to St. Mary's Hospital to be the bookkeeper. She prepared by taking a correspondence course in bookkeeping from Scranton, Pennsylvania. However, as she later said, "In those days we had so little money that it hardly took a bookkeeper to take care of it." She occupied her spare time by working in the pharmacy and the laundry and by selling "hospital tickets" to the lumberjacks in camps along the Missabe Railroad line. In the new century she was busy securing funds for the construction of the new St. Mary's Hospital, which was opened in 1911, and then the addition in 1922.

Aloysia Michlitch was born in Wallenburg, Austria, the youngest of ten children, to a farm family that spoke both German and Magyar in the home. In 1881 the family moved to the United States, to a farm in Stearns County, Minnesota, where she continued her education and learned English. When she was seventeen and living with her sister in St. Cloud, she delivered milk to the Benedictine Sisters' convent and told the Sisters that it was her dream to become a Sister as well. It was then that she met Mother Scholastica, prioress of St. Benedict's Convent at that time, who invited her to come to enter the community. Aloysia received her religious name, Leona, in 1889 and made first vows in 1890. She was sent to St. Cloud Hospital for nurses' training where she also worked in the pharmacy and did housekeeping duties.



Sister Leona in Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel in the 1940s.



Sister Leona at the time of her Diamond Jubilee (60th anniversary) in 1950.

In 1924, at the request of Mother Agnes Somers, she came to the Villa as treasurer of the Benedictine community, an office that she would hold until 1954. In those days the community was struggling with low income and high debt, and that debt increased with the extension of Tower Hall in 1927. Under her leadership, and with careful planning and borrowing, the debt was paid down until 1936 when construction began on the Chapel/Library and Stanbrook Hall, and eventually that was paid off as well. It is amazing to think that all of this was done by a woman who learned everything about business and finance through reading and independent study—typing, budgeting, insurance, accounting—and who was instrumental in bringing the community to the financial stability that it enjoys today. She was known throughout the business community of Duluth as a woman wise in the ways of finance.

Sister Leona retired as Treasurer in 1954 but continued in the business office as a bookkeeper until 1960, when she moved to the infirmary at St. Mary's. She died in 1966 at the age of 96, having celebrated 75 years of monastic profession. She was the last remaining member of the group of Sisters who founded the Duluth Benedictine community in 1892. Mother Athanasius commented in her obituary: "Her interest in the welfare of every Sister of the community had made her beloved by all."



Sister Leona and Sister Anselma Mahowald making their daily pilgrimage to the Sisters' cemetery in 1960.

Photos courtesy of Monastery Archives