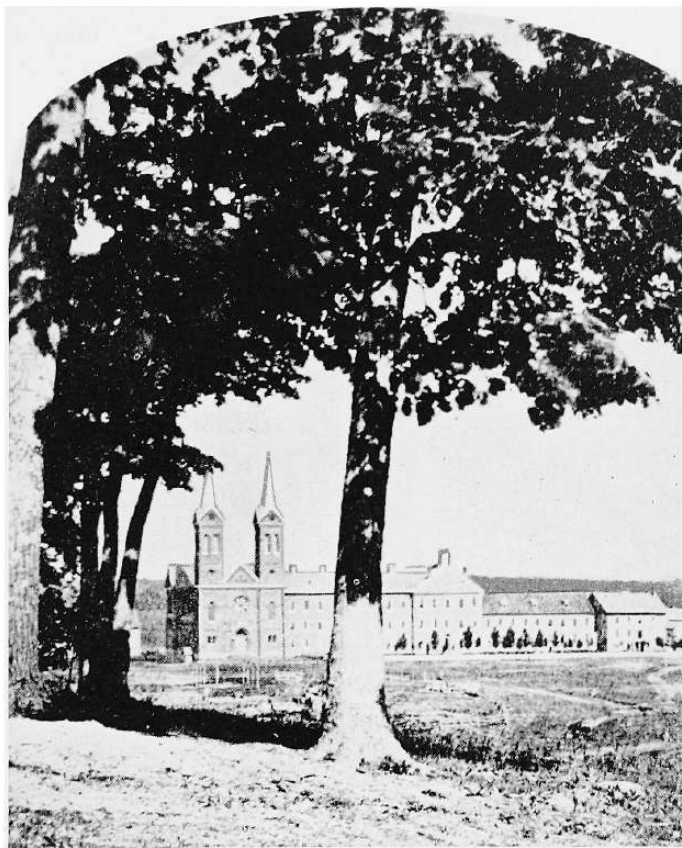


ST. JOHN'S Abbey
and University, 1882

pioneering monks

VINCENT TEGEDER, O.S.B.



FOR TEN YEARS after the first Benedictines moved westward from St. Vincent's Abbey in Pennsylvania to central Minnesota in 1856, these monastic pioneers were wanderers, moving from St. Cloud to St. Joseph, and finally to Collegeville, in the sparsely settled frontier area of Stearns County. With their third move, in 1866, the Benedictine community found a permanent home on a scenic elevation at the north

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end of Lake Sagatagan, about twelve miles northwest of St. Cloud. There the monks built their abbey, and there they still reside.

During the next two decades, under the direction of Abbots Rupert Seidenbusch and Alexius Edelbrock, the educational activities of these pioneering monks prospered in the upper Midwest. The college they had founded at St. Cloud in 1857 was reorganized on a larger scale and given publicity in the local press. Developing from a humble stone house, forty-six by fifty feet, in 1866, the abbey and school buildings, in the shape of a massive quadrangle, by 1886 formed one of the largest continuous structures in the state and occupied 48,252 square feet, or four and three-fourths acres.¹

¹ Alexius Hoffmann, O.S.B., *St. John's University, Collegeville*, 14 (Collegeville, 1907); *St. Cloud*

Visitors marveled at the transformation which had taken place in Minnesota's "Indian Bush." Archbishop John Ireland expressed his amazement to Abbot Alexius during a visit to St. John's in 1889: "Abbot, your buildings! They are simply gigantic, simply gigantic!"² Accommodations for six hundred students had become available. The faculty also had grown, and the curriculum had been expanded.

To serve the current needs of the settlers in the area in which they labored became the objective of the community. Above all, St. John's University acted as a frontier outpost for the training of candidates for the priesthood. By the turn of the century scores of priests had completed their work in the seminary department, and two of them had become bishops — Joseph Cotter of the Winona diocese, and John Shanley of Jamestown, the new ecclesiastical division of the state of North Dakota.³

The growth of settlement in Minnesota and the Dakotas during the 1870's and 1880's provided opportunities for trained business personnel in the growing towns. St. John's organized a well-developed commercial course which culminated with the granting of a special master of accounts diploma. The program featured instruction in bookkeeping, actual business practice, commercial arithmetic, grammar, commercial law, and correspondence.

To provide each student with both a theoretical and a practical knowledge of business, the staff employed an unusual method — the operation of a model emporium and bank. According to one description, every student as he began his work in the department received from the principal his capital in college currency, with which he transacted a regular business. He bought and sold goods, drew checks, notes, and drafts, deposited money and discounted notes at the bank, opened and closed his books in accordance with the various forms of bookkeeping, and thus became thoroughly familiar with the chief business and accounting practices.⁴

Courses of twelve lectures on commercial law by some of the outstanding lawyers in the state and four on banking also formed part of the program. By 1897, a total of 522 students had taken work in the commercial department. Merchants, entrepreneurs, and bankers in many of the expanding communities in the upper Midwest received their training at St. John's. Among alumni so prepared were John and Edward Zapp (1884 and 1889) of the Zapp State Bank of St. Cloud; John Hoeschen (1878), an early merchant at Freeport; Christopher Borgerding (1877) of the Bank of Belgrade; Francis A. Gross (1889) of the Northwestern National Bank of Minneapolis; and Herman J. Terhaar (1891) of the State Bank of New Munich.⁵

True to the Benedictine tradition, the Minnesota monks made it possible for needy but promising boys to receive educations. The financial statement for the school year 1883–84 indicates that 43 students out of an enrollment of 203 received board, clothing, and instruction gratuitously.⁶

The expansion of the school encouraged the development of a library, and by 1885 six thousand volumes were available. The formation of literary and debating societies followed naturally, and a college journal, the *St. John's University Record* made its first appearance toward the end of January, 1888.⁷

Frequent student programs, which

Journal-Press, February 24, 1886. Clippings of items from St. Cloud and other newspapers relating to the history of St. John's Abbey were collected by Father Francis Mersmann and mounted in a series of scrapbooks now in the archives of the abbey. The clippings, rather than files of the papers themselves, were consulted by the writer.

² Colman Barry, O.S.B., "Sowing with Granite," in *The Scriptorium*, 6:19 (Spring, 1946). This periodical is a publication of St. John's Abbey.

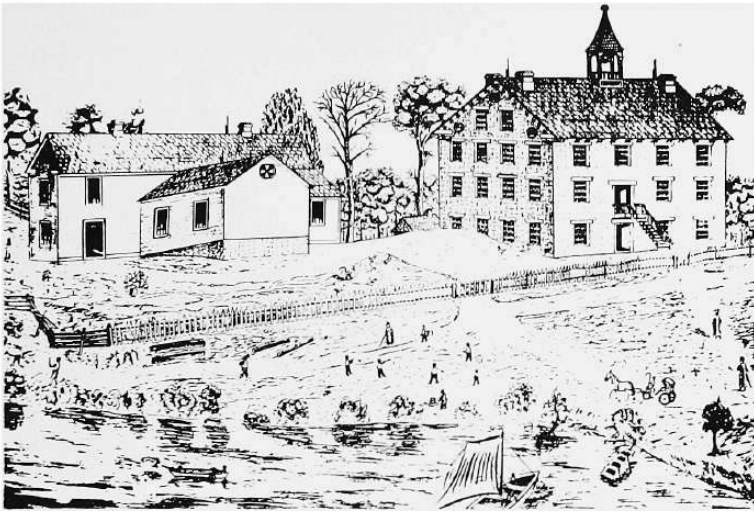
³ *Journal-Press*, February 22, 1897.

⁴ *St. Paul Globe*, May 13, 1888.

⁵ *Journal-Press*, February 22, 1897; *St. John's University, Alumni Directory*, 5, 21, 51, 57 (Collegeville, 1948).

⁶ *Journal-Press*, April 11, 1885.

⁷ *Journal-Press*, April 11, 1885; Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 86.



ST. JOHN'S in 1868

served as the chief source of entertainment in an era when movies, radio, and television were unknown, afforded opportunities for the popular cultivation of the fine arts. Washington's birthday in 1886 was marked by an elaborate celebration. From four until six o'clock in the afternoon various groups provided entertainment in the form of instrumental music, dialogues, an English and a German play, patriotic speeches, and recitations.

A St. Cloud newspaper reporter went forth delighted particularly with the musical performance. He wrote enthusiastically in his column: "There are but few institutions anywhere in the Northwest where musical culture has attained to the excellence it has in St. John's College. . . . Under the able leadership of Father Ulric music has been given prominence, and whenever the instinct has manifested itself in any of the individual members of the institution, it has been recognized by him and developed."⁸

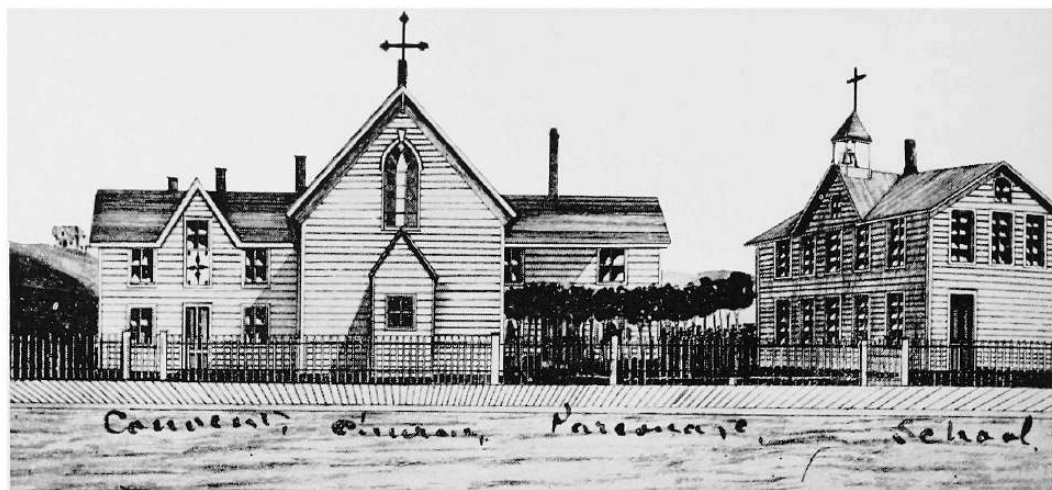
While this educational and cultural activity was underway, steps were taken also to provide more spacious accommodations for the offering of divine worship. The untiring zeal and energy of the second abbot, Right Reverend Alexius Edelbrock, and the co-operation of the community resulted in the

construction of a new Romanesque church, completed in 1882.⁹ Its twin towers, a hundred and fifty feet high, have come to symbolize St. John's in the minds of all familiar with the home and work of the monks in Minnesota. The murals and rose windows which grace the interior visibly demonstrate how the spiritual message of Europe affected frontier development.

NOT ONLY did the abbey and school expand between 1870 and 1890, but parochial and missionary activity increased also. The 1860's had ushered in a great era of railroad building in the upper Midwest. By 1872 the people living along the banks of the Mississippi in the Twin Cities area were served by railroads to Lake Superior and the fertile Red River Valley. St. John's lay near the route of one of the early lines; James J. Hill's road, later known as the Great Northern, passed through the abbey lands within a mile of the college. The Northern Pacific road, which crossed the Missouri at Bismarck, was another important development of the 1870's. On liberal terms the railroad sold its vast lands, acquired by federal grant, to settlers, and

⁸ *Journal-Press*, February 24, 1886.

⁹ *St. Paul Pioneer*, October 25, 1882.



ST. MARY'S convent, church, parsonage, and school at Bismarck

other areas of Dakota Territory were opened to settlement by Indian treaty. Large-scale railroad construction and rapid settlement progressed simultaneously in northern Minnesota and Dakota Territory.¹⁰

In 1875 much of the area served by the Northern Pacific and the Hill system in northern Minnesota and Dakota Territory became the spiritual concern of the Bene-

dictines. In that year Pope Pius IX cut off the northern portion of the diocese of St. Paul and created the vicariate apostolic of Northern Minnesota. The Right Reverend Rupert Seidenbusch, the first abbot of St. John's, became the new vicar apostolic with the title of bishop. His vicariate not only included most of Minnesota north of St. Cloud, but all the area east of the Missouri in Dakota Territory. It extended about six hundred miles from Grand Portage on Lake Superior at its eastern extremity to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in Dakota on the west, and about two

¹⁰ Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 40. For an account of the building of the Northern Pacific and its relation to settlement in Dakota, see Lewis F. Crawford, *History of North Dakota*, 1: 261-264, 271 (New York, 1930).



ST. ALEXIS Hospital
at Bismarck, earlier
the Lamborn Hotel

hundred and fifty miles from its southern boundary in central Minnesota to the international border on the north. When Bishop Rupert entered upon his new duties, there were in this vast area only twenty-nine priests to serve a Catholic population of more than sixteen thousand, of whom twenty-five hundred were Indians and mixed-bloods.¹¹ As vicar apostolic from 1875 to 1888, Bishop Rupert received the help of the new abbot of St. John's, the Right Reverend Alexis Edelbrock, and his Benedictine brethren.

Further aid for promoting Catholic missionary activity in the Dakota section of the vicariate came in 1876, when Abbot Martin Marty of St. Meinrad's Abbey in Indiana and two associates, Father Chrysostom Foffa and Brother Giles, arrived at Fort Yates in the Indian country. This marked the beginning of a zealous career for Abbot Martin in the interest of the Indians and Catholic settlers of Dakota Territory. He became a genuine crusader among the Sioux, for he reportedly brought the rugged chief, Sitting Bull, to peaceful terms with the federal government after the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876; he produced a dictionary of the Sioux lan-

guage; he translated hymns and a catechism into the native tongue; and he eventually relieved Bishop Rupert of the care of Dakota when in August, 1879, he was appointed vicar apostolic of the area.¹²

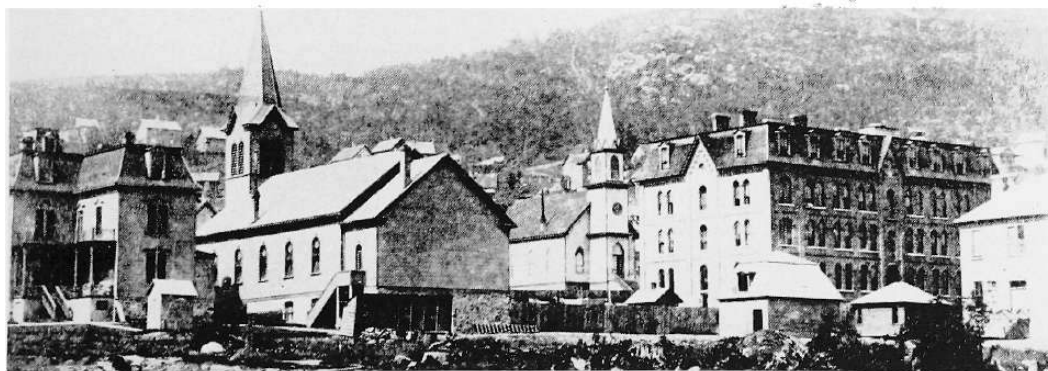
The appointment of Bishop Martin, however, did not mark the end of an interest in Dakota's religious growth by the Benedictines at St. John's. During the 1880's, under Abbot Alexius, monks were regularly dispatched to serve, especially among the Germans, in the expanding settlements which came into being in the upper Missouri country as the Northern Pacific laid its tracks between Bismarck and Glendive, Montana. Abbot Alexius took special pains to build solidly in the growing town of Bismarck. He drew up plans for an academy, a hospital, and a frontier college patterned after St. John's.¹³ Part of his elaborate endeavor was made possible with

¹¹ William B. Mitchell, *History of Stearns County*, 1:200 (Chicago, 1915); *Sadliers' Catholic Directory*, 388 (New York, 1876).

¹² Sister Claudia Duratschek, O.S.B., *The Beginnings of Catholicism in South Dakota*, 65-68, 76 (Washington, 1943); Crawford, *North Dakota*, 1:282; *Northwestern Chronicle* (St. Paul), June 3, 1898.

¹³ *Bismarck Tribune*, April 15, 1885.

BENEDICTINE rectory, church, and hospital at Duluth, 1886



the co-operation of the Benedictine sisters at near-by St. Joseph. They provided the personnel needed for establishing a hospital and an academy in this far-distant Dakota community.

By the spring of 1885 all was in readiness for opening a hospital in the Lamborn Hotel of Bismarck, which Abbot Alexius had obtained for the purpose. After inspecting the new institution, a Bismarck newspaper editor, much impressed, made some pointed observations. "There is a natural prejudice against hospitals," he wrote. "But the Lamborn is such a bright, inviting structure, its rooms so admirably arranged and the management so kind and considerate, that in time it must become the most popular hospital in the northwest . . . and it is the most creditable institution with which Bismarck has been blessed." The policy of operating the hospital as a non-sectarian institution was much appreciated. Its doors were open to all creeds. Patients were free to receive the advice of ministers of any denomination.¹⁴

The Benedictine sisters also undertook the direction of St. Mary's Academy in Bismarck. It was not long before this venture received public notice, and in June, 1885, the following report appeared in the

local press: "During the past ten months the St. Mary Academy has been doing noble work in educating the young ladies of the city. The academy is conducted by efficient and careful teachers, and the young ladies will find in it a thorough christian education which will make them useful members of society. . . . To say anything of the adaptability of the sisters in instructing the young would be a loss of time, for that has been proved to the satisfaction of all unbiased minds long ago. One thing appears certain, they seem to win the affection of the children, then handle their education in such a manner that their studies seem to be an amusement to them."¹⁵

ANOTHER Benedictine foundation which Abbot Alexius encouraged centered at Duluth. Iron ore discoveries and grain and lumber shipments stimulated the growth of this Great Lakes port. Within one decade, from 1880 to 1890, the population jumped from three thousand to thirty-three thousand. The increasing number of Catholics in this section of Bishop Rupert's vicariate

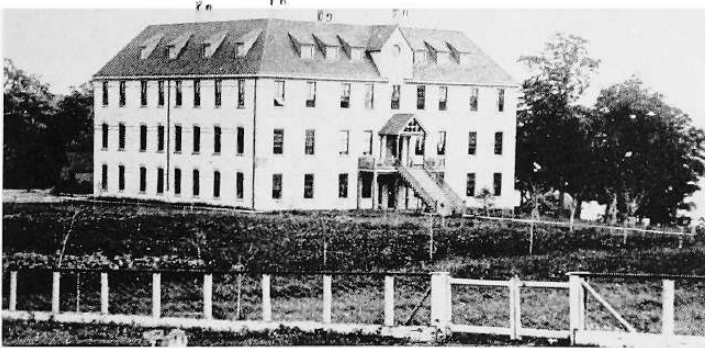
¹⁴ *Bismarck Tribune*, May 10, 1885.

¹⁵ *Bismarck Evening Journal*, June 24, 1885.

BENEDICTINES and Indians at White Earth, 1886



THE *White Earth*
mission in the 1880's



MISSION school at
White Earth in 1891

required the ministration of more priests and nuns. Between 1885 and 1887 the Benedictine parish of St. Clement's took shape at Duluth, and St. Mary's Hospital, operated by the sisters of St. Benedict from St. Joseph, was opened.¹⁶ Abbot Alexius planned that a religious house, a convent, and a college should take root in the Lake Superior country and serve as another spiritual and cultural outpost in an area which appeared to have a great future.

About the same time that the Benedictine sisters provided hospital facilities in Duluth, a similar service was inaugurated

by other members of the order in St. Cloud, where Bishop Rupert resided. They opened St. Benedict's Hospital in April of 1886, just a few weeks before a devastating cyclone struck the city. The timely aid rendered to the wounded by the sisters won widespread commendation for their new institution. The novel hospitalization plan which the sisters fostered also stimulated public approval. For ten dollars, they sold

¹⁶ Theodore C. Blegen, *Building Minnesota*, 286 (Chicago, 1938); Mitchell, *Stearns County*, 1: 262, 282.

hospital admission tickets which could be used in Benedictine institutions at St. Cloud, Duluth, and Bismarck. Those who purchased such tickets received hospital care and treatment in cases of injury or illness at any time during the year that followed.¹⁷

CHIPPEWA Indians living on reservations within the area of the vicariate of Northern Minnesota were served by the Benedictines. Bishop Rupert early showed concern for the spiritual welfare of these Indians, inviting Benedictine monks and nuns to work among them.

On November 4, 1878, Father Aloysius Hermanutz, accompanied by Sisters Lioba Braun and Philomene Ketten from St. Benedict's Convent at St. Joseph, took up their residence on the White Earth Indian Reservation.¹⁸ These pioneer Benedictines remained for more than fifty years, caring for the spiritual and temporal needs of the natives. By 1881 the foundations for St. Benedict's mission among the Chippewa had been made. The erection of a substantial brick church in the Indian country was undertaken. St. John's Abbey furnished the necessary funds.

On July 11, 1881, Abbot Alexius laid the cornerstone for the new church at White Earth. The event gave the Indians an opportunity to enjoy, as they styled it, "a big talk" with the abbot. One of the chiefs, George Jejewigigig, a recent convert, presented a notable address. He saluted the Indians' distinguished guest and described the attitude of his people toward Christianity. "Father, I am glad to see you," he said. "As you see, we are poor and wretched. But our poverty does not keep you away from us, nor does it make us ashamed to come to you. . . . What we have promised at Baptism we will also seek to fulfill. . . . I rejoice that the light of Faith is given to us and to our children."

The missionary work of the Benedictines among the Chippewa led to the establishment of industrial schools for Indian boys

and girls in connection with St. John's Abbey and St. Benedict's Convent in central Minnesota. Between 1885 and 1896 fifty to a hundred pupils were regularly enrolled in special classes. An effort was made to train the boys for such trades as carpentry, shoe repairing, and tailoring, while the girls received instruction in needlework, cooking, and household management.¹⁹ The ardent hope was that the natives thus trained would promote more stable activities among the Indians living to the north.

In 1888 Father Aloysius welcomed Fathers Thomas Borgerding and Simon Lampe as co-laborers.²⁰ The mission work expanded and in the ensuing years the Benedictine monks ministered to most of the Chippewa tribes scattered on various reservations in northern Minnesota.

THUS BY 1890 the Benedictines had established institutions and developed services for the settlers and natives over a wide area of the upper Midwest. Churches, schools, hospitals, and Indian missions grew up in the path of the pioneering monks and nuns. Much of the glorious heritage of Europe was adapted to and used in the new environment. The Chippewa found spiritual and material guides among the Benedictines, and they provided religious and educational opportunities for German immigrants who settled in central Minnesota and Dakota Territory and helped develop a new frontier.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Stearns County*, 1:282; *St. Cloud Times*, May 30, 1888.

¹⁸ Material on the White Earth mission here presented is based upon a manuscript narrative by Benno Watrin, O.S.B., in the archives of St. John's Abbey. See especially p. 1-5, 13.

¹⁹ See Father Watrin's account of "Industrial Schools" in the archives of St. John's Abbey.

²⁰ Mitchell, *Stearns County*, 1:261.

THE PICTURES reproduced with this article are from originals in the archives of St. John's Abbey at Collegeville. The pen sketch on page 55 is the work of Father Vincent Schiffrer, who came from Carniola with Father Francis Pierz.



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