

# REFLECTED GLORY

## The Story of Ellen Ireland

Patricia Condon Johnston



ELLEN IRELAND was the archbishop's sister, and more than that, his female counterpart. At 16, when that brother, John — who was to become the first Archbishop of St. Paul — was in France studying for the priesthood, she took the habit of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and the name Sister Seraphine. The rest of her life, some 72 years, was spent as an educator and administrator in the service of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

There was never much doubt that she was cut from

the cloth of leadership. Almost from the beginning Sister Seraphine was placed in responsible positions. Then, for a period of 39 years beginning in 1882, she served as Mother Superior of the sisters' St. Paul Province (Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota). During her tenure the sisters opened more than 30 new schools, often under extreme hardships, and established five hospitals. Ultimately she accomplished her dream of founding a college for women.

Ellen Ireland's story is set against the backdrop of St. Joseph's Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota's first girls' school (1851) and the state's first high school (1853). She began her studies there at the age of ten when the academy was in its second year and was a member of its first graduating class in 1858. Barely three years later she was given the title of directress of the school, and after that, except for temporary assignments to other convents, it was her lifelong home.

She was also something of a traveler. It is sometimes jokingly said (at least in Catholic circles), "Join the convent and see the world," and Mother Seraphine did just that. She traveled widely in this country attending to the business of the sisters, and shortly after the turn of the century she was one of the entourage that accompanied her brother, the archbishop, to Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Here and four paragraphs below, see Sister Helen Angela Hurley, *On Good Ground: The Story of the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul*, 104, 108, 264 (Minneapolis, 1951). See also Sister Mary Lucida Savage, *The Congregation of Saint Joseph of Carondelet* (St. Louis, 1923); Sister Antonine O'Brien, *Heritage: A Centennial Commemoration, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet, 1836-1936* (St. Paul, 1936). Many Roman Catholic nuns have changed their views of themselves and their roles over the past few decades; the work they have done in preserving the history of their orders and the individual women who comprised them has been of real help in preparing this article.

Patricia Condon Johnston, a graduate of St. Joseph's Academy, is a free-lance writer living in Afton. Her articles have appeared in the *Spring and Winter*, 1980, issues of *Minnesota History*. This article was written with financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

She did not want her life to be remembered and in fact fastidiously destroyed her correspondence, so there are no Ellen Ireland papers. Like other sisters in the order, she had chosen to lead a life of penance and poverty, expecting to submerge as much as possible her individual importance. The nuns were routinely discouraged from keeping such personal memorabilia as letters, photographs, and diplomas, and the beginning of Lent was often a time for ridding themselves of this extraneous material. What little remained was usually destroyed at the time of a sister's death. Still, a telling life portrait of Ellen Ireland can be painted from the memories of those who knew her and from the indisputable record of her achievements in education, health care, and social service.<sup>2</sup>

IN A STONE cottage near Burnchurch in County Kilkenny, Ireland, Ellen Ireland was born in the summer of 1842. She was a middle child in the family of Richard and Judith Naughton Ireland that numbered four daughters and two sons. There has been some confusion concerning the exact date of her birth, but her baptismal certificate indicates that she was baptized on July 1, and that is very likely also the day she was born.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Ireland was a strong, well-built carpenter, a man of indomitable spirit, quick-witted, and better educated than his occupation might indicate. His wife is described as a deeply religious woman, gentle, dedicated to her church and the care of her family. Ellen's character reflected those of both parents. High-spirited, energetic, she knew her own mind and rarely changed it. Obstacles to her purpose were merely to be overcome, and she refused to recognize failure. She had a passionate love of literature: "She laughed and cried and lived with book people. She was forever stating on what page of what book you would find this thing she was telling you and when you hunted it up, it was only cold, dry print on the page, and as she told it, the airy nothing breathed a stimulus and an inspiration." She was Catholic through and through; her faith was inbred, an inseparable part of her.<sup>4</sup>

The Irelands left their homeland for much the same reasons that hundreds of thousands of their countrymen abandoned Ireland during the mid-1800s. The potato famines of the 1840s left them little choice. Richard knew misfortune at first hand; his sister, Anastasia, and

her husband, James Howard, had already perished, leaving four orphaned children to add to the Ireland family. In 1849 Ireland sailed to the United States, bent on finding a more promising life for his expanded family. He was accompanied by one of the Howard children and his unmarried sister, Nancy, who would rear the young Howards. Judith Ireland, with the six Ireland children and the other three Howard cousins, remained behind until the following year when Richard found work in Burlington, Vermont, and sent for them.<sup>5</sup>

It was a dismal, five-week crossing from Liverpool to Boston, one the children never forgot. The ship was overcrowded with poverty-stricken Irish, many of them sick at heart as well as physically. Little Ellen perhaps found some comfort on this voyage in her cousin of the same age, Ellen Howard, who would be her lifelong companion and confidante. The Irelands and the Howards had much to be happy about when they finally reached Boston, however. Richard was waiting for them and promptly marched them about the city, telling them stories of Bunker Hill and Concord Bridge — their first lesson in American history.<sup>6</sup>

The two families spent a year in Vermont and then, caught up in the excitement that was pushing the population westward, set out by covered wagon for Chicago. There Ellen was sent to the Academy of the Sisters of Mercy. One of her few memories from that time was of a single-minded teacher who had thrown Ellen's copy of "Jack and the Beanstalk" into the fire before the child

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, Director of Community Oral History Project for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province, St. Paul, February 22, 1979, tape in author's possession. All interviews cited, here and below, took place in the Sisters of St. Joseph Provincial House, St. Paul.

<sup>3</sup>Some biographical sketches of Ellen Ireland — for example, Sister Helen Angela Hurley, *To Commemorate the Birthday Centennial of Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 6, 8 (St. Paul, 1942) — reported her birth on July 4, 1842, the date inscribed on her grave marker at Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul. See also Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 87. Copies of baptismal certificates for both Ellen and John Ireland are on file in the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province, St. Paul (hereafter, Sisters of St. Joseph Archives).

<sup>4</sup>James H. Moynihan, *The Life of Archbishop John Ireland*, 1–3 (New York, 1953); Hurley, *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 13, 16.

<sup>5</sup>See Ann Regan, "The Irish," in June D. Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, 130, 140 (St. Paul, 1981). In 1949 Father James Reardon and Sister Helen Angela Hurley each interviewed Mother Annetta Wheeler, Superior of St. Luke's Convent in St. Paul and a cousin of Ellen Ireland, about the Ireland family history. Father Reardon's interview is dated February 23; Sister Helen Angela's, April 19. Summaries of both are in the Sisters of St. Joseph Archives.

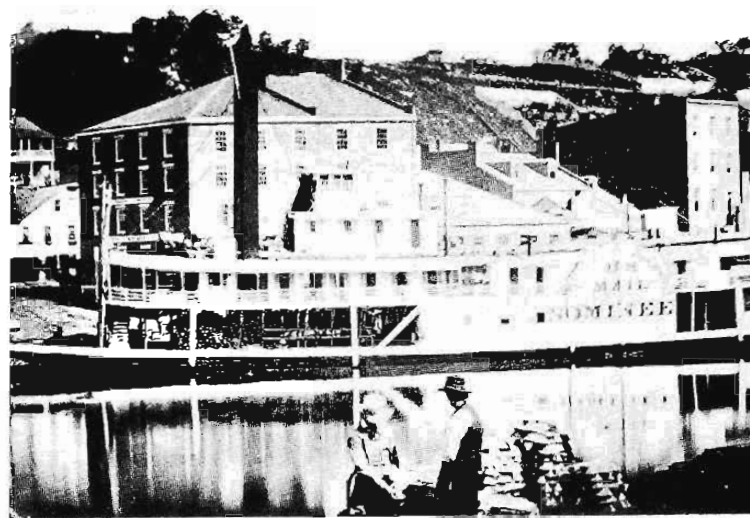
<sup>6</sup>Here and two paragraphs below, see Hurley, *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 8–10, and *On Good Ground*, 87, 88.

*THIS ARTICLE is the sixth in a series of Minnesota Profiles, biographical sketches of interesting Minnesota men and women. Each profile presents the salient facts of the subject's life, attempting to characterize the person and to assess the significance of his or her work.*

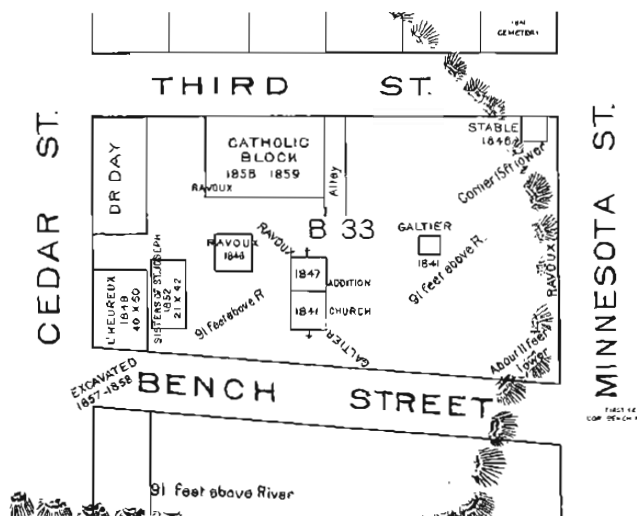
had finished reading it. To young Ellen it was a tragic experience; she did not know how the tale ended.

But the families' odyssey was not yet finished. St. Paul, they were told, was the city of the future, so in the spring of 1852 the Irelands with their Howard cousins eagerly boarded the steamboat "Nominee" in Galena, Illinois, bound for the frontier town. On May 20 they docked at the Jackson Street levee. They lived at first in a rude shack hastily put up at Fifth and St. Peter streets; then Richard Ireland purchased a lot and built a sturdy five-room house on Pearl Street (now West Fifth Street) between Washington and Market. When summer was over, Ellen and her cousin, Ellen Howard, were enrolled at St. Joseph's Academy.

THE SCHOOL, originally called St. Mary's, had been established less than a year before by four sisters of St. Joseph: Mother St. John Fournier, a Frenchwoman who led the group; Sister Philomene Villaine, also from

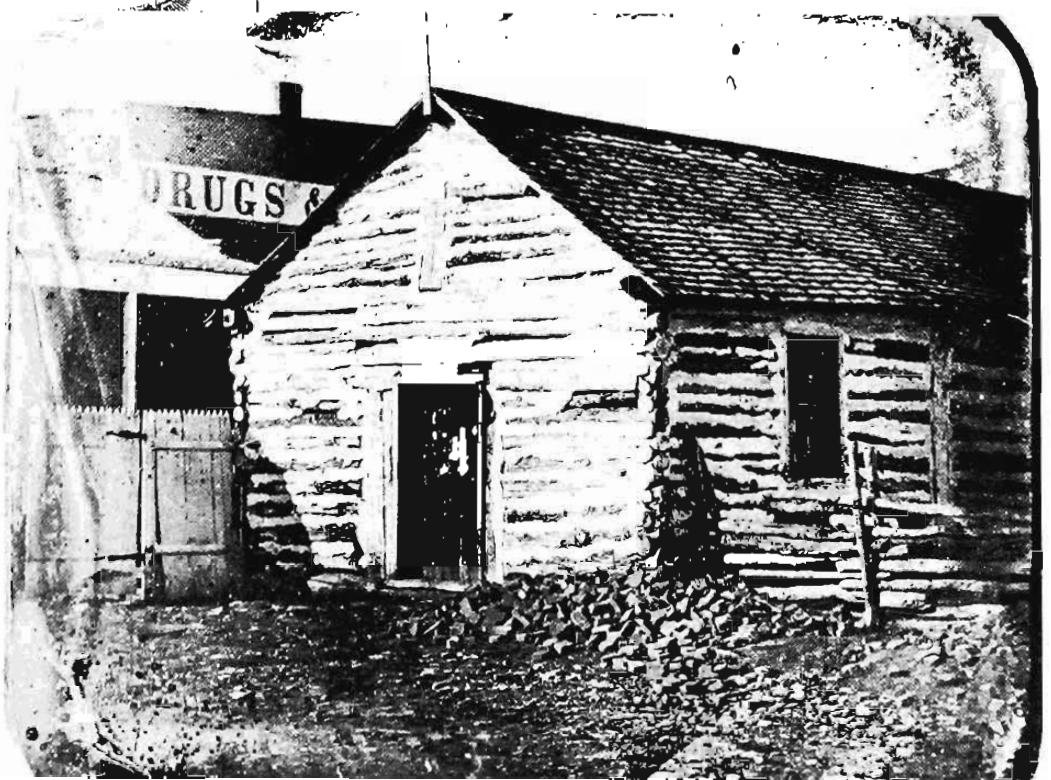


THE STEAMBOAT "Nominee," docked at Galena, where the Ireland and Howard families boarded it en route to St. Paul



THIS MAP of St. Paul shows the location of the old log chapel of St. Paul (right) and of the Catholic Block Richard Ireland helped build. The corner of the structure left of the chapel may be part of the early living quarters of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

France; Sister Scholastica Velasquez, a French and Spanish Creole; and Sister Francis Joseph Ivory from Pennsylvania. They had traveled upriver by steamboat from their mother house in Carondelet, Missouri, at the request of St. Paul's first bishop, Joseph Cretin. Classes were held that first year in the vestry of what had been St. Paul's first cathedral. Built by Father Lucien Galtier in 1841, the rough-hewn log church was chinked with newspapers against the winter winds. But by September, 1852, when the two Ellens began their studies, a new two-story brick building on Bench Street had been built to accommodate a greater number of pupils. In addition to those able to pay the meager tuition — a ledger entry during the academy's first year shows the cost of enrolling *two* girls totaled \$1.70 — the student



body was swelled by St. Paul's orphans and destitute children whose care fell by default to the sisters.<sup>7</sup>

One of the girls' classmates was Mary T. Mehegan, who married James J. Hill, the railroad tycoon. Long afterward their daughter, Clara Hill Lindley, recalled: "In later life my mother and Mother Seraphine would reminisce over their schooldays and would laugh over a dramatic performance, the trial scene from the 'Merchant of Venice.' The costumes were the best white muslins with a black velvet bodice, with Van Dyck points, to distinguish the male characters." Hill and John Ireland subsequently became household names in Minnesota, and the paths of the two men crossed more than occasionally. Although not himself a Catholic, the "Empire Builder," prodded by his devout wife, became a generous benefactor of the church. For example, he donated the land and a \$550,000 endowment for the St. Paul Seminary, built in 1894.<sup>8</sup>

At St. Joseph's Academy girls learned both French and English. The Catholic population of St. Paul was still predominantly French. At the cathedral (then housed in a three-story building at Wabasha and Sixth streets that also served as a residence for the bishop, his priests and seminarians, and a boys' school) sermons were preached in both French and English; the congregational singing was in French. Students were also introduced to a full schedule of Latin, history, mathematics, rhetoric, music, and the natural sciences.<sup>9</sup>

Although books and newspapers were scarce, Ellen always found more to read than her textbooks. If there was a newspaper in the house where she had been sent to borrow milk, she might forget her errand entirely. Once a parish priest gave her three additional volumes of Butler's *Lives of the Saints* because she could recite verbatim the lives of St. Eulalia and St. Agatha contained in the first volume. And there was the treasure of classical books at home in the Ireland attic, stored there by Denis Doyle, an itinerant Irish schoolmaster who claimed to have been Richard Ireland's first teacher in Ireland. Doyle frequently spent his weekends with the family, but while he was away his books were carefully read.

Family life at the Irelands' centered on the church, even more so than in most Catholic households. Richard Ireland, credited with building many fine St. Paul residences, also worked on Catholic construction projects in the city such as the three-story Catholic Block between Third and Bench streets built in 1859 for store rental space. Bishop Cretin was a personal friend of the family. It was he who saw to it that young John Ireland was sent to France in the summer of 1853 to study for the priesthood. And when eight-year-old Richard contracted the typhoid fever that soon killed him, the bishop visited every day to instruct him for his first holy communion. On one of these visits he told the two Ellens, "You must be sisters. The Lord has need of you."<sup>10</sup>

When they graduated from the academy in 1858 at age 16, the cousins made plans to join the Sisters of St. Joseph. They had taken Bishop Cretin's words to heart; both were certain that God had called them for his work. Surprisingly, their decision was not a popular one among their family members, possibly because they were considered too young. But their minds would not be changed, and they entered the novitiate, then housed at St. Joseph's Hospital, as postulants in September, 1858. On December 8, the day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, they were formally received into the order as novices. Ellen Ireland was given the name of Sister Mary Seraphine and Ellen Howard became Sister Mary Celestine. In two years' time they would profess their perpetual vows. But the next week, 17-year-old Sister Seraphine was teaching at St. Joseph's Academy.

From the beginning she was well liked by her pupils. Described as a "born teacher" by many who knew her, she taught in classrooms for 15 years. What she lacked in experience she more than made up in enthusiasm. English and history were her best subjects; she was well read and had a special talent for enlivening her classes with interesting correlations. Mathematics was perhaps somewhat less clear to her.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>The Order of the Sisters of St. Joseph originated in France in the 17th century, the first six sisters sent to the United States arrived at Carondelet in 1836. The site of St. Paul's first church is marked by a granite boulder with two inscribed bronze plates on Kellogg Boulevard between Cedar and Minnesota streets. Sister Elizabeth Marie [Martens], *Academy for a Century: A History of Saint Joseph's Academy*, 5, 6, 8-11 (St. Paul, 1951); Sister Ignatius Loyola Cox, "Notes on the Early History of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Minnesota," in *Acta et Dicta*, 3:258 (July, 1914); Sister Helen Angela Hurley, "Territorial Daguerreotypes: The Sisters of St. Joseph and the Minnesota Frontier," in *Minnesota History*, 30:8 (March, 1949); Sister Dolorita Marie Dougherty, et al., *Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet*, 140 (St. Louis, 1966). The original ledger for St. Joseph's Academy, 1851-79, found in the attic of the school when it closed in 1971, is now in the Sisters of St. Joseph Archives.

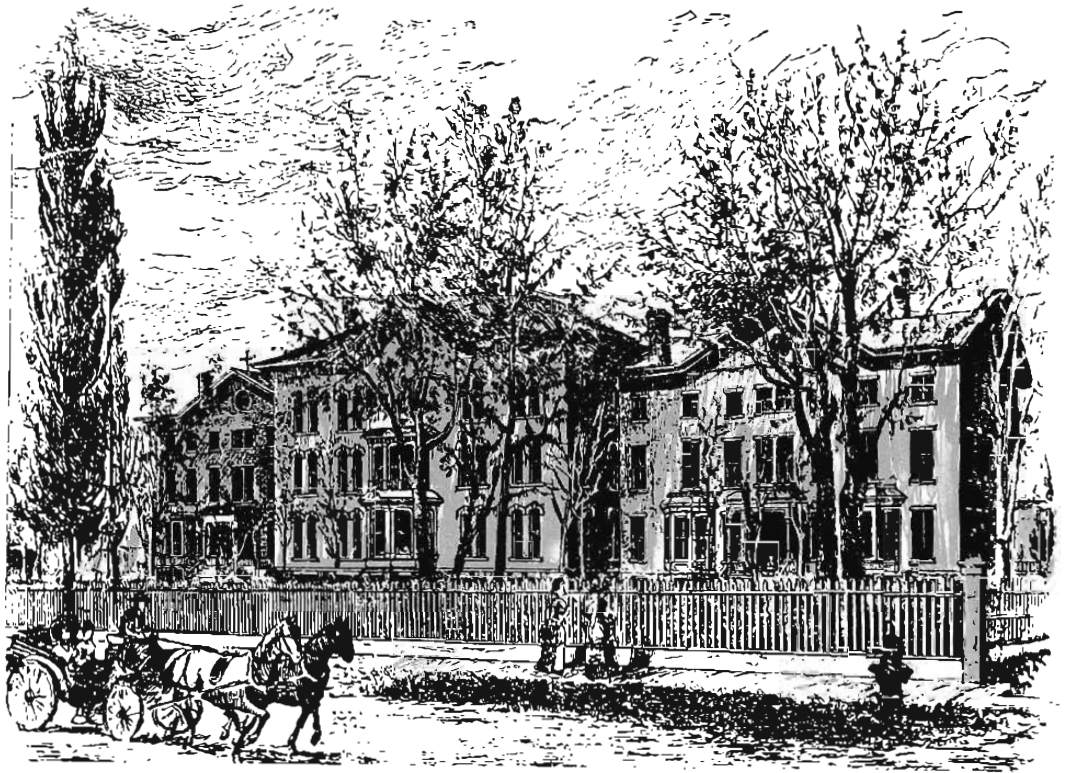
<sup>8</sup>Clara Hill Lindley, *James J. and Mary T. Hill, An Unfinished Chronicle by Their Daughter*, 52 (New York, 1948).

<sup>9</sup>On St. Paul's Roman Catholic cathedrals, see Franklin T. Ferguson, "The Cathedral of St. Paul," in *Minnesota History*, 39:153-162 (Winter, 1964). Here and below, see also Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 89, and *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 10; James M. Reardon, *The Catholic Church in the Diocese of St. Paul: From Earliest Origin to Centennial Achievement*, 77 (St. Paul, 1952); Sister Clara Graham, *Works to the King: Reminiscences of Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 24 (St. Paul, 1950).

<sup>10</sup>Here and below, see Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 86, 88, 89, 126; Graham, *Works to the King*, 15, 21, 23; Reardon, *Catholic Church*, 90.

<sup>11</sup>During some of her teaching years Sister Seraphine also had administrative duties. Here and two paragraphs below, see Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 126, 133, and *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 11-13, Moynihan, *Archbishop Ireland*, 6.

ST. JOSEPH'S  
Academy, where Ellen  
Ireland lived most of her  
adult life, as it looked  
about 1885



Being a sister never diminished her love of fun. Each year on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the youngest novice was permitted to sit in the mother superior's chair and grant permissions. When it was Sister Seraphine's turn, she wasted no time in ordering up the supply of dried raspberries for an unorthodox "feast of pies." The youngster's celebration caused some of the more strait-laced sisters to raise their eyebrows, questioning the wisdom of continuing the custom.

IN THE FALL of 1861 John Ireland returned to the United States. He had been away more than eight years, and Ellen had missed him. One of her first letters to him (certainly inspired by her prayer book) began, "Dear Brother John: As pants the hart for living waters, so does my soul pant after thee." He had not been present with the rest of the family to see her take her vows, but there is little doubt that Sister Seraphine was in the cathedral when her brother was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Thomas L. Grace on December 21.

Sister Seraphine was then, at 19, head of the academy. Two years later, however, she was called to teach at the mother house in Carondelet, where she remained for five years. There is an oft-repeated story that Father John Ireland, returning home from duty as a chaplain during the Civil War, stopped there to see her

and complained vigorously to her superiors concerning her assignment. He argued that if the sisters persisted in taking St. Paul girls to St. Louis and sending French sisters to St. Paul, they would not be able to recruit Minnesota girls for the sisterhood. What effect his protests may have had is hard to determine. The sisters certainly did not rush to transfer Sister Seraphine, who was not returned to St. Paul until 1868. Nevertheless the episode points up the type of support Ellen could always count on from her brother.<sup>12</sup>

Back in St. Paul in 1868 she was reappointed directress of St. Joseph's Academy, but she also became assistant to the Provincial Superior. The school had moved in 1863 to its present site on St. Anthony Hill where, because it was on the outskirts of the city, it was primarily a boarding school until about 1868. During this same year, ten years to the day after she had received her own habit, Sister Seraphine welcomed to the order her younger sister, Eliza, who became Sister St. John. It has been suggested that Sister St. John was named for her brother, but more likely she was named for an earlier nun, in keeping with the custom of the Sisters of St. Joseph of passing down their names. (The first superior in St. Paul, for example, had been Mother St. John Fournier, who in turn was the namesake of an earlier sister in France.) Sister St. John Ireland was later superior at Holy Angels Academy in Minneapolis for many years until her health was broken by tuberculosis. She died in 1897 while in the care of the sisters at St. Joseph's Academy, where her funeral Mass was said in the chapel by her brother, the archbishop.

<sup>12</sup> Here and below, see [Martens], *Academy for a Century*, 15, 19; Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 133, 137, 138; Graham, *Works to the King*, 31, 42, 46.



A FAMILY of nuns: Eliza Ireland (Sister St. John), Ellen Howard (Mother Celestine), and Ellen Ireland (Mother Seraphine), about 1885

By the early 1870s the number of Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul was such that they were able to reach out to neighboring communities. Sister Seraphine was sent with six other nuns to found a convent in Hastings, where she would teach and act as mother superior. The renowned Minnesota reformer, orator, and author, Ignatius Donnelly, whose daughters attended the Hastings school, lived in nearby Nininger, and the sisters were always welcome at his home. During her later years, Mother Seraphine recalled a summer afternoon there when he had presented her with a book of poems by his sister, Eleanor C. Donnelly (then widely known as a Catholic poet), which he had hastily inscribed, "To Mother Seraphim from Brother Cherubim." She had laughed, she said, and told him, "There are a few things you will have to do before you can be called Brother Cherubim."<sup>13</sup>

From 1877 to 1882, Mother Seraphine was superior at the Catholic orphanage for girls in St. Paul's Lower-town. She was described then as "Being of a strong and robust constitution," and it was noted that she "usually

bore the heaviest part of the burden and was first in laundry, kitchen, and at the scrubbing." Even though she was the superior, she slept in the dormitory with the other sisters and in all things led their common life.<sup>14</sup>

She was 40 years old, with 24 years of experience as a Sister of St. Joseph to draw upon when she was elected superior of the St. Paul Province in 1882. The sisters had fared amazingly well in the St. Paul Province despite having few resources other than their own dedication. They had increased in number from the first four pioneers in 1851 to more than 160 strong some three decades later. By 1882 there were eight houses or institutions: St. Joseph's Academy, St. Joseph's Hospital, and the girls' orphanage in St. Paul; St. Anthony Convent, Holy Angels Academy, and the boys' orphanage in Minneapolis; St. Teresa's Convent in Hastings; and St. Joseph's Convent in Stillwater. But now the province was embarking on a period of unparalleled growth under the leadership of Mother Seraphine, who would be re-elected to her three-year term a dozen times. She would spend many anxious midnight hours in the chapel during the next 39 years, seeking guidance for her decisions. During that time the sisters established some 48 new houses, including five hospitals.<sup>15</sup>

THE FIRST of Mother Seraphine's projects was St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art in St. Paul, which was opened in 1884 in a rented house on Tenth Street behind St. Joseph's Hospital. It moved two years later to a permanent residence on Exchange Street opposite the old State Capitol. Mother Seraphine named her cousin, Sister Celestine Howard, by then an able administrator in her own right, mother superior in charge of St. Agatha's from its beginning. She remained in that position until her death in 1915; during her 30 years there she also co-ordinated the parochial school system. St. Agatha's was intended as a home for the sisters who were teaching in downtown parochial schools; some of them had to walk considerable distances whatever the weather. Eventually the convent housed more than 90 sisters who in later years used public transportation to reach their schools.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 144, 149, 150.

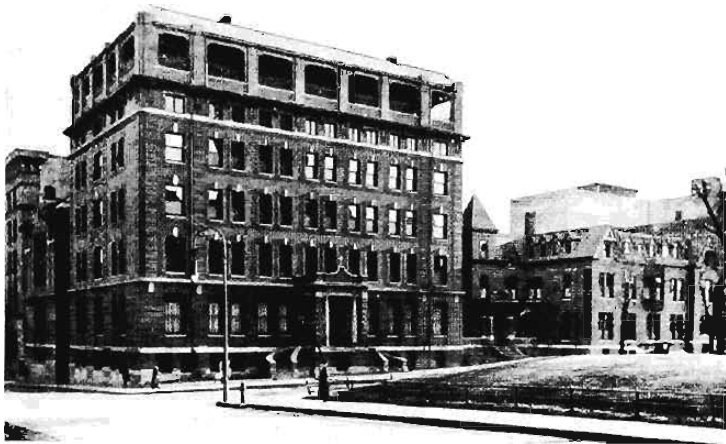
<sup>14</sup> James M. Reardon, "The Church of St. Mary of St. Paul," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:257 (October, 1934), Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 191.

<sup>15</sup> Graham, *Works to the King*, 32-34; Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, "Historical Significance of St. Joseph's Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota 1851-1971," [January 29, 1979], type-script in Sisters of St. Joseph Community Oral History Project; Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 164, 165, 171, and *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 172, 264; Graham, *Works to the King*, 36; interview with Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, February 27, 1979, tape in possession of author.

But St. Agatha's, which became nationally recognized as a music conservatory, was to be unique among the sisters' institutions. The income derived from the art and music classes and other enterprises conducted there became a much-needed source of support for the always hard-pressed community.

As a community, the Sisters of St. Joseph established a long-standing reputation as students and teachers of art and music which dated to their earliest years in France. An appreciation of the fine arts had been part of their cultural heritage. One of the first expenditures in any new convent was usually for a piano; lessons then brought in needed revenue to help sustain the houses. At St. Agatha's, however, the success of the art and music programs exceeded even Mother Celestine's high expectations.



ST. AGATHA'S Conservatory at Exchange and Cedar streets in St. Paul

In a musicians' directory of the Twin Cities for 1912–13, a full-page advertisement for St. Agatha's Conservatory appeared. Under an impressive photograph of the building were listed the classes offered: piano, organ, violin, zither, theory, history of music, harmony, mandolin, guitar, banjo, counterpoint, voice culture, elocution, languages, painting, china decorating, and drawing. "The Sisters teach in all the departments," the advertisement stated, "but in order to keep in touch with the best Conservatories abroad as well as in this country each department is placed under the supervision of an outside professor — always the best to be

obtained — who conducts the examinations, classifies the students and criticizes their work. Number of students registered for year 1911–1912, 817."<sup>17</sup>

Several of the sisters at St. Agatha's became expert at copying classical paintings, working at first from masterpieces in Twin Cities collections, then in Chicago and Montreal museums. In 1908 Mother Seraphine allowed three of these artists, Sisters Marie Teresa, Anyisia, and Sophia, to go to Europe for two years, where they studied and worked in galleries in Italy, France, and Germany. They returned home with copies of Renaissance paintings by such masters as Andrea del Sarto, Correggio, Murillo, and da Vinci. One of the most prized pieces was a copy of Raphael's "Madonna of the Chair," copied at the Pitti Gallery in Florence and placed in a replica of the original frame. Some of these remarkable paintings were sold to the sisters' patrons, but many others were kept for their convents. Until the school closed in 1971, an outstanding collection hung in the classrooms, halls, parlors, and chapel at St. Joseph's Academy.<sup>18</sup>

But the money never came easily at St. Agatha's. The sisters were constantly at work teaching classes, painting and selling pictures — miniatures, still lifes, particularly floral arrangements, and religious subjects — or hand painting and firing their popular chinaware. Many a sister walked home from teaching school only to go to work in an art room making, perhaps, finely detailed hand-painted cards or exquisite imitation roses. A story is told that in 1904, when the sisters were selling calendars door to door, one tired nun returning to St. Agatha's after selling all her calendars was sent out again because she had done so well.<sup>19</sup>

The income from these endeavors was rarely expended on the sisters. One who was at St. Agatha's during Mother Seraphine's time told of seeing a former superior at lunch in the 1970s at Holy Angels Academy: "[Mother] said [to me], 'Sister Myra, drink some milk, it would be good for you.' Of course I was kind of old then, and I was thinking maybe I should have had some when I was a little younger. And you'd just think she read my thoughts," Sister laughed. "She said, 'Sister, I suppose you're thinking that we should have had it at St. Agatha's, but we couldn't.'"<sup>20</sup>

The money was needed to carry on the expanding work of the community. After establishing St. Agatha's, Mother Seraphine opened more than 30 schools, many of them in the western Minnesota communities colonized by Archbishop Ireland — Graceville, Kilkenny, Minneota, Marshall, Avoca, and others. The state was rapidly being settled by wave after wave of Roman Catholic immigrants, and Mother Seraphine intended to bring education and at least some measure of refinement to their prairie communities, where both were in short supply. Although most schools flourished, a few did not, but Mother Seraphine rarely looked back. During this

<sup>17</sup>The *Twin Cities Musicians' Directory, 1912–1913*, in Sisters of St. Joseph Community Oral History Project.

<sup>18</sup>Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 173; Graham, *Works to the King*, 76; [Martens], *Academy for a Century*, 32.

<sup>19</sup>Interviews of Sisters Carlos Euc and Sampson, February 27, 1979, tape in possession of author.

<sup>20</sup>Interview of Sister Myra Gannon, February 27, 1979, tape in possession of author.



TEACHER and pupils at St. Mary's Academy, Graceville, about 1892

time the sisters strove to "Build, increase in number, spread out, and strive for the means of doing so," in order to minister to as much of the population as they could reach. They staffed five new hospitals, three of them in North Dakota — St. John's in Fargo, St. Michael's in Grand Forks, and Trinity in Jamestown — along with St. Mary's in Minneapolis and St. John's in Winona.<sup>21</sup>

MOTHER SERAPHINE also accomplished her dream of a Catholic college for women. The College of St. Catherine was the capstone of the educational endeavors of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Minnesota. The first plans, laid in the late 1880s, had to be scrapped when the financial panic of 1893 tightened purse strings. But in 1900 Archbishop Ireland published a special edition of *The Church and Modern Society*, a collection of his sermons and addresses, and assigned the proceeds to the sisters' college fund. The nuns became book peddlers, selling the volumes from door to door and town to town, and eventually the wearying project brought in \$60,000. Hugh Derham, a well-to-do Rosemount farmer, acting on the archbishop's advice, gave the sisters an additional \$25,000, and the cornerstone for Derham Hall, the first building on the campus, was laid in 1903.

Despite her position as provincial superior of the order which was establishing St. Catherine's, Mother Seraphine took a back seat to her brother — "our distinguished founder," as he was called in an early student publication — and to its early leader, the much respected Sister Antonia McHugh. Mother Seraphine, de-

scribed in the same article as "co-builder and adviser" of the college, might be easy to overlook, since her business acumen and concern for academic excellence were not so notable as those of Archbishop Ireland and Sister Antonia. But it would be a mistake to ignore her importance as a motivating force behind the beginnings of the college. Especially in a religious community like the Sisters of St. Joseph, the role of a charismatic leader who believes wholeheartedly in achieving a difficult but worth-while goal can hardly be inconsiderable. Also crucial was Mother Seraphine's willingness to delegate power to Sister Antonia. One sister, remembering Mother Seraphine, contrasted her with Mother Celestine, her cousin. The latter was a strong woman who controlled



DERHAM HALL, the first building on the campus of the College of St. Catherine, about 1920

her domain directly; the former "was a strong woman and had strong ideas, [but] once she delegated authority," she stood behind that person and supported her.<sup>22</sup>

Nor was it only with the college that Mother Seraphine relied on her brother and a capable staff to keep the province solvent. It seems that the archbishop, for

<sup>21</sup> Here and below, see Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 164, 165, 228. For a comprehensive account of Archbishop Ireland's colonies, see James P. Shannon, *Catholic Colonization on the Western Frontier* (New Haven, 1957). The Sisters of St. Joseph's first and one of their best-known hospitals is St. Joseph's in St. Paul. Mother Seraphine became its president when it was incorporated in 1895, see John M. Culligan and Harold J. Prendergast, "St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:201 (October, 1934).

<sup>22</sup> *Ariston* (student quarterly), November, 1930, p. 38; Euc interview, February 27, 1979. For more on the college, see Merrill F. Jarchow, *Private Liberal Arts Colleges in Minnesota: Their History and Contributions*, 106–118 (St. Paul, 1973).



MOTHER SERAPHINE (left) in conversation with Sister Antonia McHugh

example, occasionally proffered more than brotherly advice for the sisters' other institutions as well. In 1895 the community borrowed \$40,000 to enlarge St. Joseph's Hospital. The loan caused Mother Seraphine a great deal of worry. But her more worldly brother was something of an entrepreneur. When wealthy European friends gave him money to invest for them, he loaned it to the Sisters of St. Joseph, sending the interest to the investors. Copies of personal correspondence just before his death in 1918 showed that he had also recently loaned Mother Seraphine \$10,000 that she needed for an academy in North Dakota.<sup>23</sup>

EVEN MORE than money, the convents needed sisters, and Mother Seraphine had a definite talent for recruiting young women. For one thing, she had a magnetic personality, drawing people to her. For another, she was persistent. From the parishes where they taught, her sisters regularly brought girls to meet her. And once she decided her visitors had a vocation, they usually ended up joining the convent, whether they originally had any intention of doing so or not.

One 21-year-old woman told of accompanying her 15-year-old sister, who wanted to join the order, to St.

Agatha's one day in 1912. The younger girl was introduced, but the feeling seemed to be that she was too young. Then "Mother Seraphine came over to me and patted me on the cheek — she always did that — and she said, 'How old are you?' And I told her, and she said, 'Well, you're the one that should come.'" This woman had been a Sister of St. Joseph for 70 years in 1982.<sup>24</sup>

Another girl, a serious music student at St. Agatha's in 1919, was taken to St. Joseph's Academy by her teacher and left alone in a parlor with Mother Seraphine. It seemed like a chance meeting, but it appears to have been otherwise. Mother Seraphine took an immediate interest in her, and before their conversation had progressed very far she said, "I think you have a vocation."

"Oh no, not now," the girl replied, "I might enter sometime, but not now."

"What would keep you from entering now?" Mother wanted to know.

"Well, the biggest thing is that I am supposed to appear in a recital with Dr. [Silvio] Sciouti in the spring. And that must be."

The conversation took another direction until Mother said, "I think you'd better enter in February," adding, "why don't you consider this? If you enter the convent you can dress in secular clothes in the spring and send out invitations and put on this program just as you would have."

The girl was still quite sure she did not want to enter, but she promised to think about it. Their conversation continued at some length, she recalled, and then Mother dismissed her with a good pat on the cheek. "She'd [always] give you a loving pat on the cheek — and sometimes it wasn't so loving!" The meeting had its intended result. The girl entered the novitiate in February, 1920. In 1982 she had been teaching music for the sisters for 61 years.<sup>25</sup>

Nor were all of the nuns American born. Mother Seraphine's sister, Julia (the only one of the six Ireland children to marry) was the wife of a teacher, Charles McCarthy, who had moved to St. Paul from the Canadian Maritime Province of Prince Edward Island. Late in the 1890s, when he learned that Mother Seraphine was looking for young women to train as teachers, he told her she could find them in plenty on the island. In characteristic fashion, Mother Seraphine lost little time in putting on her traveling shawl. She obtained a letter of introduction from her brother, the archbishop, asked her cousin Mother Celestine to accompany her, and headed for the island. There the pair went from parish to parish, telling of the great need for teaching sisters and issuing invitations to join the order. In all, over a period of several years beginning in 1899, some 85 girls and young women from Prince Edward Island joined the sisters. One of the earliest Canadian sisters remembered

<sup>23</sup> Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 218, 219. The loan was canceled when the archbishop's estate was settled; see correspondence in the Sisters of St. Joseph Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Cannon interview, February 27, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> The dialogue recounted above is from Eue interview, February 27, 1979. Silvio Sciouti was visiting music director at St. Agatha's from about 1914 to 1934 and again in the 1950s.

dressing as a postulant in a black dress and wearing a veil for the train trip to St. Paul. As she recalled, Indians and members of religious orders rode free on the Canadian trains.<sup>26</sup>

Additional prospective nuns from Canada and Ireland were taken to St. Paul by priests, and sometimes a sister could obtain permission to go home for a visit if she promised to return with a niece or a cousin. When Mother Seraphine became provincial superior in 1882 there were 162 sisters in her province. At the time of her death in 1930 their number had risen to 913.<sup>27</sup>

CUSTOMARILY Mother Seraphine visited all of her convents once a year. Sometimes she arrived by train, other times by a horse-drawn buggy. Always her visits were eagerly anticipated — social events to be savored and announced in the newspapers. Her enthusiasm for any current project was invigorating to the sisters, and her fine sense of humor delighted them. She could entertain her audience, including the parish priest who had come to call, with amusing anecdotes, such as her account of the Lutheran deaconess who asked her how she kept her sisters in at night. There was usually a purpose to her visits, but it is recounted that while “her word was law, the charm of her personality generally left her subjects liking the law.” She could be stern if the occasion warranted it, but for the most part the sisters remembered her warm, motherly qualities. She made necessary business trips to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, attended biennial conferences at the St. Louis mother house, and traveled to Montreal and Quebec City on religious pilgrimages.<sup>28</sup>

The trip that gave her the most pleasure was a voyage to Europe late in 1908 in a party of six that included Archbishop Ireland and two nuns from the St. Louis mother house. On December 8, the 50th anniversary of her own reception into the order, she and the others made a pilgrimage to the mother house in Lyons, France, which had sent the first Sisters of St. Joseph to the United States. In Rome they were met by Mother Celestine and three sister-artists from St. Agatha's. Pope Pius X received them all in a private audience, blessing the hundreds of rosaries Mother Seraphine presented — one for each of the sisters in her province. During the next few months the Minnesotans traveled to Florence, Milan, Venice, Genoa, and finally, to Lourdes in France. Mother Seraphine was storing up memories, and once back at St. Joseph's Academy, she shared them generously with her sisters from her rocker on the porch.<sup>29</sup>

MOTHER SERAPHINE was known as the archbishop's sister, but what we know of their relationship makes it clear that John Ireland, even at the pinnacle of his powerful career, was still Ellen Ireland's brother. Sever-

al nuns recalled interactions that they had observed: “When the archbishop came to visit us at St. Agatha's or [St. Joseph's] Academy, she *always* came too. She saw to it that she was there. . . . And she'd sit beside him and prompt him if he . . . forgot something, and he'd do the same to her if she forgot.” Mother Seraphine's concern for the diocese's priests was another link with her brother. “A real friend and confidante to priests,” she served them as “kind of a go-between” with the archbishop. If the priests could not get the archbishop to go along with their plans, or if they had a misunderstanding with him, “they'd bump themselves right over to [St. Joseph's] Academy, where she was

and she would say, ‘You go home and I'll take care of my brother.’” And he played a parallel role with her at times. When Sister Antonia McHugh had failed once to persuade Mother Seraphine to take on additional debt so that St. Catherine's could have another building, Sister Antonia took her plea to Archbishop Ireland, who is supposed to have told her, “you go home and call your contractor, and I'll take care of my sister.” The two Irelands also shared a family resemblance; according to one sister, Mother Seraphine was of average height, heavy set, with “a jaw like the archbishop's.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1921, at the age of 79, she retired from active leadership. (Changes in church law made in 1918 allowed superiors to finish their current terms, but thereafter limited the tenure of religious offices to six years.) After that, although the provincial headquarters were moved to the campus of the College of St. Catherine, Mother Seraphine remained at St. Joseph's Academy. She served as a provincial councilor until 1927. Up to her final illness, she still paid calls on neighboring convents, usually by streetcar, and churchmen who had been friends of the archbishop continued to visit her.<sup>31</sup>

Her religious fervor, if anything, intensified. Even in her old age she thought little of hiking up her skirts and

---

<sup>26</sup> Prince Edward Islanders were particularly attracted to the Sisters of St. Joseph because the order used English both for prayer and everyday speech; the other religious orders they knew of used only French. Interview of Sister Lamberta Hegarty by Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, July 6, 1977; interview of Sister Cosmos Shea by Sister Mary O'Brien, July 1, 1975, both in Community Oral History Project; *Catholic Bulletin* (St. Paul), September 2, 1977, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Shea interview, July 1, 1975. Hurley, *Mother Seraphine Ireland*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 166–168; Graham, *Works to the King*, 74, 75; Gannon interview, February 27, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Graham, *Works to the King*, 76; Hegarty interview, July 6, 1977.

<sup>30</sup> Gannon and Eue interviews, February 27, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Herc and below, see Hurley, *On Good Ground*, 264–266; Graham, *Works to the King*, 97, 98; *Catholic Bulletin*, June 28, 1930, p. 1; Sampson and Eue interviews, February 27, 1979.

trudging through deep snow if necessary to attend her customary second Mass at the cathedral each day. The "tense vigils she had kept in the chapel in earlier times became sweet conversations with her Lord." On June 20, 1930, nearly three months after she had suffered a heart attack, Mother Seraphine died. For all but 16 of her 88 years she had been a Sister of St. Joseph. Her entire family had preceded her to Calvary Cemetery, and she was the last of the Ireland generation that had led Catholic affairs in Minnesota for more than half a century.

As the archbishop's sister Ellen Ireland was privy to

his thoughts and welcomed his advice and counsel; her horizons were broadened by their shared experiences. But she was a great woman in her own right. The convents, schools, and hospitals she founded reflect the glory of her vision, her dedication, and her generous heart.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on pages 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, and 24 (left) are from the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul; the one on p. 15 (bottom) is from the Catholic Historical Society Archives, St. Paul Seminary, St. Paul. All others are from the MHS audio-visual library.

*THE NOTED Ireland chin is evident in these views of the archbishop and his sister, who is seen here in her rocking chair on the porch at St. Joseph's Academy.*





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).