

MOTHER CELESTINE HOWARD AND THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

In many ways, Ellen Howard and her first cousin, Ellen Ireland had similar backgrounds of experiences before their entrance into the convent at the age of sixteen. Both were born in Kilkenny, Ireland in 1842. Ellen Howard's parents, James and Anastasia Ireland Howard, died during the potato famine and the responsibilities of rearing the four Howard children, Thomas, Joanna (Joann), Ellen and James, were taken over by Richard Ireland's sister, Nancy, who never married.

Ellen was ten years old when she came to St. Paul after a long journey from Ireland via ship, covered wagon, prairie schooner and steamboat. She knew poverty, death, parting, travel and adventure at a very early age.

She, like the other Ellen, attended the one-year-old St. Joseph's Academy in 1852. Unlike many of the early pioneers of the area, Richard and Julia Ireland and Nancy believed in a good education for the girls of the families and made use of the opportunities which the Sisters of St. Joseph provided at that time. The two Ellens became acquainted with the Sisters, among whom was Mother St. John Fournier who had come from France in 1837 to become a teacher, administrator and superior in schools, hospitals and orphanages in St. Louis and Philadelphia before volunteering to come to St. Paul in 1851 with three other Sisters. By 1852 the students of the academy were occupying a "two storey brick building with large airy classrooms and pleasant apartments" instead of the old log cabin church which now became the Sisters' chapel on Bench street overlooking the Mississippi River. The Sisters who taught there had a long tradition of education dating back to 1650 when they were founded in Le Puy, France. The bilingual curriculum consisted of sacred and profane history, Latin, vocal and instrumental music, needle and art work, mathematics, rhetoric, natural sciences, English and French. Bishop Joseph Cretin who had made arrangements for the Sisters to come to St. Paul, often visited the school and conducted what were known as "exhibitions" where the students showed off their proficiency in the various subjects.

Upon their graduation in 1858, the two Ellens decided to become Sisters of St. Joseph and despite the protests of parents and aunt, they entered the convent that September. At the time of their entrance, there were eighteen Sisters in the St. Paul area where they were in charge of St. Joseph's Academy, St. Joseph's Hospital, a girls' free school (later the Cathedral School), a German school (later the Assumption school), and St. Mary's school (later St. Anthony in east Minneapolis). Four young women, Sisters Gregoire Le May, Pauline LeMay, Ignatius Loyola Cox and Peter Richard Grace had already entered the convent; however, this was the first time that two postulants had entered in the same year. The two Ellens received the habit and entered the novitiate on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1858. Because Bishop Cretin had just died, the Reverend Augustine Ravoux officiated at the ceremony and bestowed the names of Sister Seraphine and Sister Celestine upon the young women.

One week after receiving the habit, Sister Celestine was sent to teach at St. Anthony in a convent then named St. Mary. Where and how she made her novitiate is not exactly clear. According to some records, she taught at St. Mary's for approximately six years. She was then appointed principal at a newly opened parochial school called the Immaculate Conception in Minneapolis, traveling to and from St. Mary's via foot or horse and buggy

from 1866 to 1871 and again from 1873 to 1875. In the intervening years she was appointed directress of St. Mary's school in St. Paul. During that time she resided at St. Joseph's Academy, located at what is now Marshall and Western Avenues.

From 1875 until 1879 Sister Celestine became directress of the academy. Sister Wilfreda Hogan who attended that institution during that time, gave a perceptive account of Sister Celestine's demeanor and method of administering that school as well as her own life as a boarder and student there. She liked it so much that her mother withdrew her from the school for fear she would enter the convent. When she did return for a visit, she found that Sister Celestine had been transferred to St. Louis to be a directress of a school there. There seems to be a discrepancy about this latter assignment because there is no record in the St. Louis archives of Sister being there. However, in an interview which Sister Annetta Wheeler gave to Sister Helen Angela Hurley, she also mentioned the fact that her aunt, Mother Celestine taught in that city. Until very recently, careful records of Sisters' assignments, missions and transfers were not kept. There were no archivists, secretaries or other Sisters free and available to keep files. And if they did keep records, the latter many times were destroyed to make room for newer records or information. There was much work to be done and little time was spent on dwelling on the past.

In 1879, Sister Celestine embarked on a new career -- that of supervisor of parochial schools in the St. Paul province. Mother Jane Frances Bochet, newly appointed Provincial Superior, was especially interested in the education of the Sisters. While Sister Ignatius Loyola Cox was appointed directress of studies in the novitiate where the course embraced Christian Doctrine, reading, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, natural philosophy, astronomy, elocution, writing, drawing and music, it was Sister Celestine who supervised the work in the schools as the "Highest Common Directress". She presided over the annual summer institutes for teachers and novices and pressed into service the best community talent in the Twin Cities to supplement the efforts of specially trained teachers and lecturers from outside. Among the latter was Professor Prim, director of music for many years in the public schools of St. Paul.

Two years later, Mother Seraphine Iteland succeeded Mother Jane as Provincial Superior and a new era in CSJ history began. It would be enlightening to have records of the conversations of the two Ellens about the present and future of the congregation; however, the two were too busy to write memoirs or keep correspondence, so one must rely on more objective reports. According to the Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Board of Trustees for St. Joseph's Female Academy, Sister Celestine was elected to that Board in January of 1884 to replace Sister Peter Richard Grace. That same year she was appointed superior of a new convent named after Mother Agatha Guthrie, Superior General. The Sisters were growing in numbers. They were asked to staff new parochial schools. There was a housing shortage since St. Joseph's Academy and St. Joseph's Hospital were unable to take care of any more Sisters. According to Sister Evangelista Melady who taught at St. Agatha's when it first opened, it was Mother Celestine who conceived the idea of this convent. The November 9, 1885 Minutes of the Board of Trustees states that "on the motion of Sister Celestine the following resolution was adopted: Resolved that the president (Mother Seraphine) and secretary (Sister Ignatius Loyola Cox) of this corporation be, and they hereby are, authorized and instructed to negotiate and secure

a loan of \$15,000, said sum being required by said corporation to purchase property for residence of teachers and also for class teaching." A further study of the Minutes reveals the fact that the Sisters began to borrow rather large sums of money at stated intervals by mortgaging property owned by the community - all carefully spelled out in the Minutes. In 1899, Sister Celestine was elected secretary. The last entry in the notebook containing this information, was dated October 1, 1913 when the corporation borrowed \$100,000. This was two years before Sister Celestine's death.

With the purchase of property, the erection of buildings, entrance of young women to become Sisters, more apostolates to fill, came the problem of finances - where to get the money to pay the debts and provide for the daily expenses of community living and education.

Sister Clara Graham in her book, WORKS TO THE KING, summarizes the two-fold role of housing and finances, St. Agatha's was to play in the history of the community:

New parish schools meant that there would come to Mother Seraphine calls for teachers, and she must be prepared. She regretted that Sisters teaching in downtown schools were so inconveniently housed at St. Joseph's Academy and were walking in all kinds of weather to and from their schools. If the parishes could not afford to build convents near the schools, the community would have to provide a city house where Sisters might reside. St. Agatha's Conservatory grew out of this determination ... Sister Celestine Howard was appointed superior of the Conservatory, where she presided from 1884 to 1915 as a gracious mother to all the Sisters who were missioned there and as a kindly hostess to visitors and to the poor who came seeking help. Mother Celestine was a woman of vision and of genuinely Christian principles. She was, too, a wise executive and an optimist. In those distant days of plain living and high thinking, Mother Celestine realized that Sister teachers could not be housed, clothed, and fed on the meager salaries the parishes were able to pay. An idea, in vogue then, and not entirely laid to rest as yet, was that a Sisters' vow of poverty takes her out of the role of those who have bodily needs. Needless to say, this idea could not be incorporated into community customs. Sufficient funds had to be secured to meet current expenses. Mother Celestine's plan was to make St. Agatha's self-supporting. Due to her inspiration and to the self-sacrificing spirit of the Sisters who were teaching in parish schools and to those who were spending weary hours in small music rooms, St. Agatha's became not only free from debt, but a financial asset, as well, for the Province.

Sister Clara Graham, the author of the above paragraph, was no stranger to problems relating to housing, debts, schools and community living. Born in 1870, she became a Sister of St. Joseph in 1893, taught and later became a superior in a number of CSJ institutions. She was Provincial Superior of the St. Paul Province as well as Assistant to the Superior General in St. Louis. She knew Mother Seraphine and Mother Celestine very well.

Since a long, detailed history of St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art is in the process of being written, a rather short and concise sketch of that institution will be given here in order to understand Mother Celestine's role in its history from 1884 until her death in 1915.

In 1884, a frame building known as the Lick House near St. Joseph's Hospital was rented as a temporary home for Sisters teaching in nearby schools (Cathedral, Assumption, St. Mary, St. Louis). It housed twenty Sisters and accommodated classes in music and needlework. Since the place proved to be totally inadequate, Mother Celestine made arrangements to purchase the Judge Palmer Residence on Cedar and Exchange Streets for the sum of \$50,000. The Sisters moved there in 1886 where it provided housing as well as music and kindergarten facilities. By 1892 the building proved to be inadequate and a plain, crude structure called "The Cracker Box" was built on the rear lawn. This in turn was connected to what was known as "The Cottage" (formerly the barn on the Palmer property) which had been raised one story. These two buildings were used for housing facilities. By 1900, Mother Celestine had added departments in vocal music and expression and there was further need for expansion. The next year the music building was constructed and provided space for studies, practice rooms, auditorium, art rooms as well as dormitories. The two frame buildings known as the Cracker Box and the Cottage were then torn down. Classes were getting larger and larger and St. Agatha's now had the reputation of being the best institution of its kind in the Northwest. The last phase of construction began in 1908 when the foundations were laid for a seven-storey brick building which extended on Exchange Street to the corner of Cedar. The Sisters moved into this building on February 22, 1910. The student enrollment reached the 500 mark. The 1912 edition of THE TWIN CITIES MUSICIANS DIRECTORY carried a two page advertisement about St. Agatha's and listed 817 students as being registered in such subjects as piano, organ, violin, zither, guitar, mandolin, banjo, theory, history of music, harmony, counterpoint, voice culture, elocution, languages, painting, china decorating and drawing. Incidentally, the Directory, found in Sister Leonard O'Shea's trunk after her death, carried smaller advertisements for music departments of other CSJ institutions: St. Anthony Convent, St. Margaret's Academy Conservatory of Music-Art, College of St. Catherine and St. Joseph's Academy. Music was a very important subject and art form in the history of our institutions.

A list of achievements as well as positions held by Mother Celestine have been enumerated. But what was this remarkable woman really like? Several writers have given us some clues. Sister Clara Graham described her as a woman

reared in an atmosphere rich in difficulties, and to her, from childhood on, every difficulty presented an opportunity which she was eager to grasp. She practiced a severe

self-discipline, and her discipline of those she governed was not easy. She was recognized by her Sisters as a woman of sincere piety, of thought and of action. She was generous and sympathetic. St. Agatha's, under her supervision, became a sort of second novitiate for the Sisters who had temporary vows. Her experience as teacher and as supervisor of the schools and of the educational programs of the young Sisters gave her a wide acquaintance with the qualifications of the Sisters for their various works.

Sister Helen Angela Hurley described Sister Celestine as more stately and proper, more deliberate and careful of appearances than her cousin, Mother Seraphine. Could this be due to the influence of her spinster aunt, Nancy Ireland who reared her? In another section of her book, ON GOOD GROUND, Sister Helen Angela wrote that

Mother Celestine remained her (Mother Seraphine's) dependable friend, with greater shrewdness, more caution, and less frankness than her chief. She it was who accepted the burden of fitting country girls to teach in schools, who prodded Mother Seraphine to rigid disciplinary measures, and who acted as a check on her cousin's too visionary plans. Mother Celestine would try to hold back her plunging cousin, but when decisions to expand were made despite her warnings, she strained every nerve to get the money together. In this she utilized St. Agatha's Conservatory, where the Sisters did a brisk business copying classical and popular paintings and teaching the arts then in fashion.

The anonymous Sister who wrote the short sketch about Sister Celestine for the Necrology, stressed her roles as a teacher, educator, administrator, and noted that she "turned easily from questions of education to letters of administration, and to affairs demanding knowledge, foresight and sound judgement, and she always seemed at home and mistress of the situation."

Another writer of the article which appeared about her in ACTA ET DICTA after death, wrote:

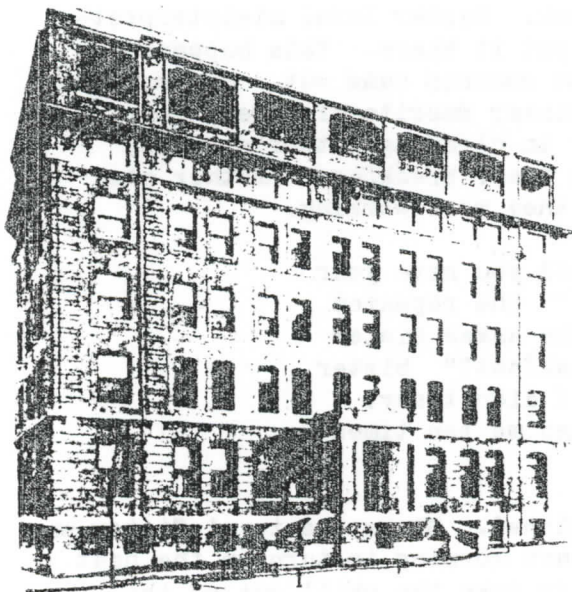
She always took the greatest interest in whatever tended to promote the welfare of Catholic schools from a material, religious and intellectual standpoint. She did all in her power to inspire the Sisters of her community with the highest ideals of the teaching profession and unceasingly labored to improve the conditions of schools under her care by introducing the best approved methods of Catholic pedagogy.

There are very few Sisters living today who recall much about Mother Celestine since the latter died in 1915. Those who have stories to tell were either second year novices or Sisters under temporary profession who were sent to St. Agatha's to teach and live. By this time, Mother was an elderly Sister and not too well. Sister Remegia Dougherty who entered in 1896, recalled her experience at St. Agatha's in 1900:

When Mother Celestine was told by the doctor that her condition was critical, she turned over all responsibilities and plans to her assistant, Sister Berenice Shorthall, who served as housekeeper and bookkeeper. She requested that no business matters of any kind should be referred to her. She was determined to put first things first - and this she did by centering all her attention on the final and greatest event in her life - her meeting with the Lord whom she had so long and faithfully served for fifty-seven years. She died on June 21, 1915 and was buried from St. Joseph's Academy where the Pontifical Requiem Mass was celebrated by her cousin, Archbishop Ireland assisted by her nephew, the Reverend James J. Howard. She was buried beside her cousin, Sister St. John Ireland in Calvary Cemetery.

"A great work was to be done and God sent a valiant woman to do it -- a woman generous and self-sacrificing, a successful teacher, a revered superior, and more than all else, a humble Sister of St. Joseph." (Necrology)

----Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson
October 25, 1982



ST. AGATHA'S CONSERVATORY

From catalogue
St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music
and Art

(printed between 1911 and 1915)

ST. AGATHA'S CONSERVATORY, the oldest institution of its kind in the city of St. Paul, was founded in 1884 by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Its purpose from its inception has been to provide the very best instruction in the Arts— Music, Painting, Expression.

The Conservatory is situated on Exchange and Cedar Streets and because of traction facilities, is easily accessible from all parts of the city.

The buildings are of modern construction and contain Administration Offices, Reception and Waiting Rooms, a Gift Shop, Art Gallery, Reference Library and Auditorium besides Music, Painting and Expression Studios and Practice Rooms. They are designed to meet every requirement of the best modern instruction and to bring the pupil into an atmosphere at once artistic and elevating.

Then I was encouraged to make more. We were very hard up financially and we needed money for the new building. We didn't mind and we worked, worked, worked! Finally the house was completed and we enjoyed every bit of it.

Mother Celestine was a stickler for the niceties of speech, manners and decorum. Sister Macrina McCarthy helped with the portressing and recalled that every time she answered the telephone, she had to say in a very proper voice, "St. Agatha's Conservatory of Music and Art." Others remembered how Sisters would suddenly stand up during a meal in the refectory while silence was being observed, bow to Mother Celestine and say, "Pardon me, Mother," because they had made some unnecessary noise. If a Sister made a mistake while reading in the refectory, Mother would immediately correct her and make her repeat the sentence. It was a custom at that time for the Sisters to gather in the rotunda or large community room used for recreation before Mother entered that room. As she came in, the Sisters who were standing, would bow. One Sister evidently did not bow low enough or in a gracious manner. Her name was called out and she was given a lesson in the art of bowing. Sister Leon LeFebre, an art teacher often told the story about how hungry the young Sisters were and what they did to offset the problem. Sister secretly took three oranges and put them in her pocket. She was called into Mother's office where Mother Celestine silently pointed to her desk. Sister Leon, misinterpreting the gesture, pulled out one orange and put it there. This happened two more times. Finally, the reason for the summons came out. Sister Leon had neglected to dust the desk properly! Sister Emerita also recalled the time she assisted Sister Juliana Toomey in cleaning Mother's office while the rest of the community were eating their breakfast. Mother ate very little and came into the office while they were working.

Mother Celestine said, "Sister, did you have your breakfast?" I said, "No, Mother." She repeated the question ten times and then she asked Sister Juliana, "Did Sister have her breakfast?" Sister said, "No, Mother. Thank you." I didn't say, "Thank you." That is why she asked me ten times if I had my breakfast.

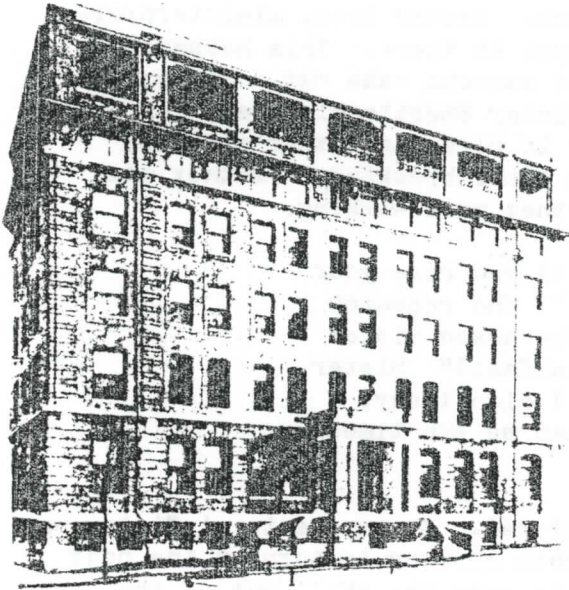
Austerity was practiced. Food was rationed. So was heat. A Sister was assigned to go down into the sub-basement each morning to turn on the heat provided by Northern States Power in order to take the chill out of the building. Then it was turned off. It was turned on again after supper and turned off at 9:00 p.m. Gas light was used sparingly in the dormitory areas. Since there were no fixtures in the dormitories, the Sisters would go out into the halls to fold their veils. One learned how to economize on movements, space and make do with existing circumstances.

The Sisters who were interviewed recalled Mother as a little, old Sister whose health became impaired but who presided at all community prayers and conferences. She was often heard to say, "Speak little of me when I die, but pray much for my soul." Sister St. Margaret Jordan who was missioned at St. Agatha's six months after Mother died, remembered that the Sisters there were praying aloud daily for the repose of her soul.

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Telephone—Cedar 0567

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 Sister Myra Gannon
 Sister Patricius Hogan
 Sister St. Margaret Jordan
 Sister Macrina McCarthy
 Sister Faustina Polzer
 Sister Emerita Raymond
 Sister Edwina Raymond

Taped interviews and typed transcriptions in Community Oral History Collection, St. Joseph's Provincial House, St. Paul Province

A. D. 1909.

*Ellen Howard, known in Religion as
 Sister Celestine, Secretary.*



ST. AGATHA'S CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC AND ART
 Corner of Exchange and Cedar Streets, St. Paul, Minn. Conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph

two page advertisement in the Twin Cities Musicians Directory, 1912-1913

BRANCHES TAUGHT:

PIANO, ORGAN, VIOLIN,
 ZITHER, THEORY, HISTORY
 OF MUSIC, HARMONY,

MANDOLIN, GUITAR, BANJO,
 COUNTERPOINT, VOICE
 CULTURE, ELOCUTION,

LANGUAGES, PAINTING,
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 AND DRAWING.

Supervision of Students' practice by competent Teachers

The Sisters teach in all the departments, 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 criticises their work.

Number of students registered for year 1911-1912, 817.

The Conservatory issues Teachers' Certificates, Graduates' Diplomas, and is also empowered to confer degrees.