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# The Archives Department at Mount Providence

by Dennis Wodzinski

On a windswept hill in the South Hills of a Pittsburgh, nearly ninety years ago, the newly formed Lithuanian Sisters of St. Francis (the modern-day Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God) laid the first physical foundations on the property that would come to be known simply as Mount Providence.

Today it is on this property in Whitehall Borough, now covered in trees and lush vegetation, that the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God's Motherhouse still stands and holds within it the community's Archives Department. The department exists as a physical testimony to the community's past endeavors and the Sisters who devoted their lives to the simple life of Franciscan vowed religious women.

As stated in the department's mission statement, the purpose of the archives is to "collect, preserve, and make available for research those documents related to the community's history, its members, and its ministries."

Roughly sixty years ago, it was Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis, one of the pioneer sisters of the community, who understood the importance of maintaining the young community's history and important documents. While she served as a general councilor and secretary (1950-56), Mother Aloysia began organizing all of the early foundation documents of the community in leather-bound binders. Her work was continued and expanded by Sr. M. Leona Backauskas during her twelve years as general secretary (1956-68). After her twelve year term as a general superior, Mother M. Loyola Sebelkas continued this work while she served as the general secretary 1968-1980. It was under Mother Loyola's influence that the Archives Department began to take the form that we see today.

In the late 1970s, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) began a series of annual workshops to train archivists for individual congregations. Mother Loyola attended these sessions held at the Bergamo Center of the University of Dayton, Ohio, for two consecutive summers. It was she who appraised, classified, and — assisted by Sr. M. Georgene Utaris — filed these records

documenting the community's history in 12" x 16" storage boxes and prepared not only an inventory of their contents but also an alphabetic guide to facilitate retrieval of information. In Fall 1990, Sr. Mary Jaskel succeeded Mother Loyola upon the latter's retirement at age 84. Under Sr. Mary's tenure, the archives collection improved in organization and size. With her background in teaching high school English and prior experience as an archivist for the Archdiocese of Hartford, Sr. Mary was able to obtain a grant from the Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission for improvement of the archives' collection and storage arrangement. Her efforts in the department were aided by several volunteers, most prominently Sr. M. Beatrice Siratavic and Sr. Marianne Walters, both of whom served into early 2012.

As the community began to grow older and archival records and artifacts began to accumulate even faster, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God began to look for professional, outside help in the archives department. Thus, Emily White Oxenreiter, a graduate of Duquesne University's Graduate School, was hired in 2003 as the community's first full-time, lay archivist. Under Mrs. Oxenreiter's guidance, the community's files were arranged to reflect current archival standards and several attempts were made to make the archives more present and visible in the everyday life of the community. In 2008, after Mrs. Oxenreiter was hired as archivist for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston (West Virginia), the community hired the current archivist, Dennis Wodzinski, to resume the work of the department. Currently Mr. Wodzinski is assisted by Sr. M. Edward Urban in the daily operations of the department.

At its bare bones, the Archives Department exists primarily to chronicle the past history of the community and to highlight the Sisters who have filled its ranks in the fields of education, health care, and pastoral ministry. Additionally, as the community has a deep connection to its Lithuanian origins, the Archives Department also maintains several cultural artifacts of the Lithuanian people, most prominently from the first half of the twentieth-century.

Generally speaking, the archives repositories of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God preserve numerous community reports, correspondence of the Sisters with local and regional leaders, and specific files on each of the Sisters, among many other types of records and artifact collections. One notable item from the collection includes the Duke Gediminas Medal which was given to Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis by the Lithuanian government for her work with the immigrant Lithuanian community in the United States. Several artifacts and items pertaining to the now-closed St. Francis Academy, which once operated on the Motherhouse's grounds, are also housed in the Archives Department.

In addition to maintaining the files and records of the community, the department also oversees the convent's Heritage Room which is found on the first floor of the original Motherhouse building. By visiting the Heritage Room, visitors can gain a sense of the community's history by looking at the photographs, artifacts, and informative panels that are on display. Amongst the items visible in this room are a papal zucchetto of Pope Pius XII and several early images of the Mount Providence property which was formerly a farm.

In order to promote the unique history of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, the department has recently begun hosting its "History at Twilight" walking tour series. These tours, which generally take place in late Spring, have led friends, neighbors and newcomers alike on informative tours of the community's properties and various structures. Additionally, in order to promote the community's Lithuanian identity, the department has recently promoted an All Souls Day luminaria program in nearby St. Casimir Cemetery.

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God's Archives Department is open from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. If you are interested in the community's history, or simply taking a look at the collection and buildings, please do not hesitate to contact us at (412) 885-7231 or [archives@osfprov.org](mailto:archives@osfprov.org). If interested, tours can be arranged for individual, school, and church groups.

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The Archives Department at Mount Providence (continued)



All of these photographs are courtesy of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God Archives