

RECOLLECTIONS OF TULSA, INDIAN TERRITORY,
FROM SISTER MARY AGNES NEWCHURCH, O. CARM.

By Charles E. Nolan*

INTRODUCTION

When the writer first met Sister Mary Agnes Newchurch in 1965, she was living in retirement at the Carmelite Motherhouse in New Orleans. When it was discovered that she was the only remaining member of the community to have taught in the Carmelites' short-lived Oklahoma missions, Sister Mary Agnes was encouraged to recall those early days. She spoke and wrote of her youthful years with remarkable detail and accuracy. She usually had at least a hint of mischief in her eyes when she recounted her first years as a Sister of Mount Carmel.

A native of Paincourtville, Louisiana, Sister Mary Agnes was reared in the Carmelite orphanage in New Orleans after her mother's death, and entered the community of the Sisters of Mount Carmel on April 28, 1898. She made profession on July 24, 1901, and taught in the Carmelite Louisiana schools at Washington and Thibodaux before her Tulsa assignment in 1902.¹

The Sisters of Mount Carmel came to Indian Territory from Louisiana at the personal request of Bishop Theophile Meerschert.² On April 30, 1899, the General Council of the Carmelite Sisters voted to accept a school in Vinita, a few days later, the Council accepted another school in Tulsa.³ The Carmelites agreed to staff a boarding and day school in Vinita and a day school in Tulsa for five years, although provision was made for earlier termination of the agreement in case of dissatisfaction. The two missions were to be dependent on the Mother General in New Orleans. The local parishes were to provide furnished convents, fuel and light expenses, a salary of \$20 per month for

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¹ *Register of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, New Orleans, La., (1825-)* p. 54. *Records of General Chapters and Appointments of Sisters from 1887 to 1931*, pp. 75, 79, 96, 102. Archives of the Sisters of Mount Carmel of New Orleans. These archives will be referred to as CANO.

² Meerschert to Monseigneur Jean Laval, Guthrie, Oklahoma, July 12, 1902. Archdiocesan Archives, New Orleans.

³ *Decisions of Council, II, 1896-1923*, pp. 27-30, in CANO.

each sister plus extra fees for music, painting, drawing, etc. In addition to teaching, the sisters agreed to take charge of the parish choirs.⁴

On August 23, 1899, the first sisters left New Orleans for Indian Territory on the Texas and Pacific Railroad. Sisters Lucy Dobbins (superior), Aloysia Rice, and Clotilda Cabelle were assigned to Tulsa, Sisters St. Charles Dunn (superior), Cecilia Munch, and Mary Liguori Lazero were sent to Vinita.⁵ Other sisters who were subsequently stationed in Indian Territory included Laurence Didier, Maurice Webre, Clare Coady, and Virginia Breaux in Vinita; Sisters Rosalie Loftus, Catherine Bouvier, Ambrose Sisson and Leon O'Brien taught in Tulsa.⁶

The Carmelite Sisters withdrew from both Tulsa and Vinita in the spring of 1903. Financial difficulties and misunderstandings as well as a lack of personnel led to the Carmelites' departure from Indian Territory.⁷

The following pages are Sister Mary Agnes Newchurch's recollections of her year in Tulsa (1902-1903). The text is based mainly on a narrative that sister completed on July 15, 1966. An interview on July 12, 1966, and a narrative that was completed on September 1, 1967, have been woven into the text. In June, 1968, the combined text was given to Sister Mary Agnes who made the final corrections.⁸

Sister's style has been retained as much as possible. Grammatical changes have been kept to a minimum and have been introduced only when the combination of sources or the flow of the narrative demanded a change or clarification. Some connotations have been added to the narrative.

⁴ Contract between Reverend Theophile Meerschuerl and Reverend Mother Apolline (Junck), Guthrie, Indian Territory, June 3, 1899 (Vinita) and July 1, 1899 (Tulsa) in C.A.N.O.

⁵ *Decisions of Council, II, 1896-1922*, p. 90, in C.A.N.O.

⁶ *Records of General Chapters and Appointments of Sisters from 1883 to 1931*, pp. 88, 102 in C.A.N.O.

⁷ Cf. below, page 96 concerning personnel; there was a decline in the number of sisters around the turn of the century. Concerning the financial difficulties, cf. Meerschuerl to Monseigneur Jean Laval, Guthrie, Oklahoma, July 12, 1902. Archdiocesan Archives, New Orleans.

⁸ The originals of this material are in the possession of Dr. Charles E. Nolan.

Sister Mary Agnes Newchurch died quietly in her sleep on April 27, 1970, five days after her 92nd birthday.

THE RECOLLECTIONS OF SISTER MARY AGNES

I was missioned to Tulsa in Indian Territory in 1902, with Mother Ambrose (Sisson) and Sister Leon (O'Brien). Our trip from Louisiana to Vinita, where we stopped for ten days before going to Tulsa, was most painful and uncomfortable in an old-time train with low-backed seats and no sleeper. We travelled two days and one night in this way and stopped over part of the night in Texas when the train needed refueling.

There was no dining car so we had taken a basket of lunch as a precaution—a few sandwiches for that day with fruit and canned meats. We hoped this would last throughout the trip but, after a late evening nap, we found out that the basket of lunch had disappeared. God always provides and a priest who would not tell us his name sent us coffee and food several times during the next day.

The station in Vinita was crowded with our sisters who had been in Indian Territory for four [three] years and many of their friends.* The good pastor in Vinita [Father Arthur Vertavel] had gone on a sick call and could not come to the station but he had provided transportation.

We enjoyed ten very pleasant days. One day, a Protestant Indian mentioned the wish to attend Mass and was told that she was welcome any time. "How much must I pay?" was the next question. "We don't pay for Mass," was the answer. The next morning, bright and early, our lady was in church and took in the whole ceremony with great interest. After Mass, she went to see the priest. "Mister," she said, "you performed beautifully this morning. When will you give us another show?" An explanation was given with an invitation to attend every morning if she wished.

The house in Vinita was very large. It had been prepared as a boarding and day elementary-high school and convent. They had practically three to four hundred pupils.¹⁰

* Concerning the school in Vinita, cf. Velma Nieberding, "Sacred Heart Academy at Vinita, Established 1897," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XL (Winter, 1962-1963), pp. 379-385.

¹⁰ Although the number seems excessively large, Sister Mary Agnes reaffirmed the figure when questioned about it.

Then came the time for us to leave for Tulsa, about sixty miles southwest from Vinita. Father (Versavel) had the horse and buggy ready for the trip to station and six of us crowded in. We had received message that Father Theophile would be at the station [in Tulsa] waiting. He was there with a little "jumper" and the buggy followed; he was most cordial. We soon reached the convent.

The convent-school was in the middle of the city of Tulsa with many friendly Indians as neighbors. Our school was a parochial elementary school. The school and convent were a single, very plain, frame building with just sufficient space to accommodate the number of sisters and pupils at the time. The convent provided a small chapel, a parlor, a community recreation room, a laundry, a pantry, and a dining room on the third floor. Below this was a secret cellar where the Mass wine was kept [out of reach of the Indians] for prudence's sake.

On the second floor were bedrooms, and above this was an attic for the usual convent "do-away-with" and sleeping quarters for local members in case we were unexpectedly surprised by soliciting members of other communities.

The school was on the first floor—three classrooms with plain furniture and an office.

The parish church where we went to Mass was close-by. It was very small, like some of our little chapels in the country places. Because there was no rectory, Father lived in one of the two small sacristies and took his meals with the sisters at the convent dining room.

There were about 150 pupils, many of whom were Indians. Our pupils were by no means all Catholics. We had more Protestants of various denominations. This was noticeable at the first communion preparation. A class of twelve was a good size class. But, with the help of God, it had improved and many converts were in view. However, the older "blanket Indians" did not like the sisters or even religion. The blanket Indians we knew then were a group who lived in the woods as groups of their kind and made their way to the villages or towns in the beginning of every season to buy their necessary items for that season. They always wore blankets around them—for protection against insects, they said. The mothers carried their little papooses on their backs. These little ones were tied in cases, made for that purpose, and strapped to their mothers. Everybody minded their own business

about them. The slogan was, "We are on our way, go about yours."

Sister Leon and I each had three grades and Mother Ambrose taught seventh and eighth grades. While I taught sewing to the girls in the upper grades, Sister Leon taught music and singing to the lower grades and Mother Ambrose filled in time with the upper grade boys. We had no lay teachers and Father had all he could do with three missions, about 60 miles apart.

Some of my third graders were sixteen, seventeen and eighteen years old. They were so tall that when I had to correct their lessons, I had to use a pointer. The pupils really wanted to learn; they were no problem in class and I can never remember having to give them a slap. I taught arithmetic, spelling, English, geography, history and religion.

Both schools in Tulsa and Vinita had very large playgrounds, divided for the larger and smaller pupils. Baseball and football were in vogue for the larger boys and girls.

Those large hills produced a very lovely scene with the boys and girls coming over on homemade skates in the morning when a group of them, each holding hands in line, skated down while other groups were seen coming up in the same fashion.

The first communion preparation was unlike ours in Louisiana where we have two to three hundred or more. When we were told to get the children ready for the event, what was our surprise to see twelve little boys and girls lined up for the retreat. After confessions were heard, Father jokingly said, "My neck hurts." "What happened, Father?" we asked. He answered, "I heard so many confessions." We responded, "Whoa! What would you do in Louisiana if these make your neck hurt?"

Thanksgiving was a very important day for the people in Indian Territory. Plans were made long ahead of time to have the sisters entertained by some family in the country. That day, they killed the fat calf and hog and brought in all the vegetables possible. It was decided on "first come, first served" basis with regard to the home for receiving the sisters. So many were anxious to do their share. Then the whole neighborhood was invited. There was plenty of noise all day and many old time stories were related.

Mrs. Thomas Freeman was the one to entertain the sisters. The weather was freezing cold that day so she had a roaring fire

where we sat from about 8 A.M. until 11 A.M. The airtight room with the roaring fire made us feel as though our brains were on fire. Father Theophile passed by and noticed how uncomfortable some of the sisters were so he called Mrs. Freeman to take the sisters out to see some of her litters back there. He and Mr. Freeman went up the hills for a walk. The sudden change in temperature was almost overcoming. The sons had heavy overcoats that they slipped off to wrap the sisters in. They returned to the house.

Evening came and the little spring wagon or "jumper" was ready for us. Under no consideration would those boys take their coats. Two of them on horseback followed us and when we were in the convent got back on their horses and slipped their coats on.

Our Christmas season came along and the ceremonies in church were about the same as those we have here in Louisiana. Because of the number of Protestants in our school, we had no school program for Christmas. And definitely, no one mentioned Santa Claus. They laid no importance to him.

On one occasion about the month of May, 1903, we were notified that confirmation would be given in Quapaw where Father Ketcham, an Indian Jesuit priest, would lead in the ceremonies. All schools belonging to the diocese were to prepare the children belonging to the confirmation class and would be expected to take their classes there.¹¹

On the day assigned to meet, we were there late in the evening. We met with Bishop Meerschaert in the parish school where tables were prepared and the bishop himself helped in serving milk and doughnuts to our boys and girls.

We all slept on the floor in various large classrooms. The

¹¹ For a more detailed account of this trip in early June, 1903, of Sister M. Laurence (Didier) Order of Carmelites, "A Trip to Quapaw in 1903," transcribed and annotated by Velma Nisberding, *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXXI (Sumner, 1953) pp. 142-167. Sister Mary Agnes was unaware of this narrative. The parents of Father Ketcham mentioned here were descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims, devout members of the Methodist Church and pioneers on the American frontier who made the "run" on April 22, 1889, and settled in Oklahoma City. Their son William Henry attended a Jesuit College in Louisiana, was received into the Catholic Church and ordained as a priest in the pro-Cathedral at Guthrie, with the Right Reverend Theophile Meerschaert performing the ordination ceremony. At the time of his death in 1921, Father Ketcham held first place as Catholic missionary to the Five Civilized Tribes (See a biography of Monsignor William Henry Ketcham in "The Educational Activities of Distinguished Catholic Missionaries among the Five Civilized Tribes," by Sister Mary Ursula Kehos, C.D.P., in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXIV No. 2, 1946).

boys and girls slept in separate classes and the sisters occupied the spacious office downstairs.

The next morning, the Indians were terribly excited until the Mass bell rang and all went in fairly good order until Sister Laurence struck the first organ notes. Then the women stood on the pews and reclined on the back of those pews, beating their feet to the tune of the music. Some were preparing to have a dance in the middle aisle until Father Ketcham came to settle them. He spoke their own language. Everything went fine the rest of the time.

We remained in Quapaw that day and the next. Some good, civilized Indian ladies took us to visit the Devil's Promenade where the splashing of the Arkansas River had worn an enormous rock and formed a real porch almost a mile long, making it possible for a tall person to walk without touching the top.

We also visited the Lover's Leap, a very large, pointed rock, extending over the river, where two lovers on the verge of marrying and unable to attain their aim grabbed each other saying, "Since we cannot live together, we'll die together," and over they plunged into the river.

We happened to be there on Saturday when the medicine men were having their meeting. Mrs. Kelly, who so kindly took us around, went to the chief and asked that we be allowed to attend their prayer meeting in the tent and she took us in through a flap in the tent. We were offered seats on the ground with the chief who was about to give the signal for prayer.

He announced something and beat the drum to the tune of something they were saying. Heads, eyes, mouths, hands and feet moved at the same time by all who were in [the tent] and it was packed with women, children, grown boys and girls and an Indian delegation who attended the chief. In the center was a large cement horseshoe, at the head was a crucifix and between these was a fire where all who brought anything purified their donations over the fire, made their offering to the crucifix and left it there as a donation. These donations consisted of bags of candy, fruit, toys, etc.

Now and then they brought in a man who had used the medicine (I call it dope) When they rallied from this, they were carried in, swung over the fire to be purified and presented to the chief to tell him what sort of dream they had. If the dream was

good, they were given a place of honor near the chief and so on with each dream. Father Ketcham told us that he was trying to influence these good people to give up the custom but so far had reached nowhere.

Mother St. Patrick ¹² wrote us that we had to come back to Louisiana. She said that there were not enough sisters for our houses in Louisiana. We all loved Indian Territory and hated to leave it.

¹²Sister St. Patrick Helleman was superior general of the Sisters of Mount Carmel from 1894 to 1897 and again from 1901 to 1907.