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Book Review. Rockhurst University: The First Hundred Years, by Shirl Kasper

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Shirl Kasper, *Rockhurst University: The First Hundred Years.*

Kansas City: Rockhurst University Press, 2010. 403 pp. \$50.00.

By Charles R. Gallagher, S.J.

The magnet which attracted young men to Rockhurst," President Maurice E. Van Ackeren, S.J. stated about his then co-educational institution in 1971, "is still the effective force today – their recognition that the campus offers a friendly climate in which to conduct their search for truth and value." (p.283) Shirl Kasper's beautifully bound, four-color, commemorative yet critical history of Rockhurst University pays tribute to the friendly atmosphere of the institution as well as the abiding serious search for truth conducted on the rocky rises near Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Missouri. Kasper, the biographer of Annie Oakley, and former award-winning journalist for the *Kansas City Star*, has marshaled the archival resources of Rockhurst University to present a picture of Rockhurst as an institution heroically persevering, sometimes against the odds, toward full integration into its host city, the American Catholic experience, and the world. Rockhurst's story is one of Jesuit determination, coop-

erative lay discernment, and faith.

Kasper does a fine job of anchoring Rockhurst's past in the larger story of Catholicism in America and the American West. Drawing largely on the analysis of Notre Dame historian Philip Gleason and to a lesser extent Holy Cross and the University of Dayton's David J. O'Brien, she shows at every turn how the Rockhurst story intersected with the larger vision of Catholics in the U.S. In the early years, much of that vision was granted to one man, the founding president, Rev. Michael Dowling, S.J. Dowling thought big, bought big, and spent even bigger. Convinced that his initial 25 acre purchase would pay for future needs through the eventual sale of properties adjacent to his building lot, Dowling was shaken only one year in when the property values moderated and city expansion ceased. "Let us thank the Lord...and begin," Dowling asserted as the foundations of the first building were being laid.

Dowling, who keenly cut his teeth as president of Creighton University, had visions of creating schools of dentistry, medicine, science, and law at Rockhurst. But Dowling found it hard to replicate

his Creighton experience in Kansas City. Lacking major donors, and swimming in an expanding pool of debt, the school received its charter in 1910, but did not open its doors until 1914. Regional anti-Catholicism, the World War, and a largely immigrant Irish church bereft of cash kept Father Dowling from realizing his dream immediately. His enthusiasm for the Rockhurst enterprise, however, created a positive founding theme for future endeavors.

Rockhurst College was like any other Jesuit "college" of the early 20th century – essentially a high school with a curriculum grounded in the Jesuit plan of studies dating from 1599, the *Ratio Studiorum*. But in America, the Jesuit schema was coming under scrutiny just as Rockhurst

Charles R. Gallagher, S.J., a member of the history department at Boston College, received the John Gilmary Shea Prize for Vatican Secret Diplomacy: Joseph P. Hurley and Pius XII from the American Catholic Historical Association.

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got off the ground. Under debt, unaccredited, and with endowment efforts failing, by the mid-1920's Father Dowling's dream of a modern, multi-faculty, university-level institution had to be put on hold. As Kasper points out, it was accreditation which became the perennial hurdle for Rockhurst as it moved forward as a young college.

The accreditation challenge had to be met before any other – and it called for the jettisoning of many traditional Jesuit methods and curricular themes. Leaning on the Jesuit values of consultation, prayer, and adaptation, in April of 1925 Rockhurst became accredited as a two-year junior college. The North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools would grant Rockhurst full four-year Class A sta-

tus in early 1939. The high school and the university would not separate campuses until 1963. With attention to detail interspersed with lively anecdote, Kasper conveys the story of Rockhurst in compelling, readable prose.

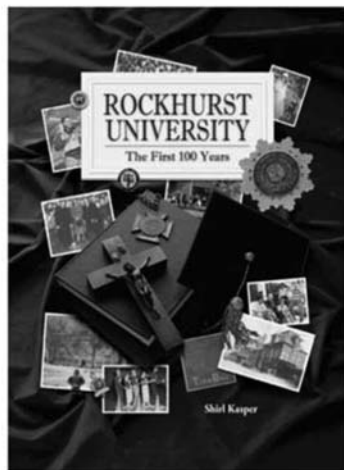
The author writes in chronological fashion. The book is heavy on top-down exposition of presidential decision-making and initiatives. Consequently, the fortunes of the university seem to rise and fall with the personalities, and pecuniary success, of its presidents. "Presidential Profiles" sidebars are illuminating and of great interest. Building and expansion projects are also highlighted, sometimes with every feature explained. Campus life is depicted through various vignettes of cam-

pus heroes and institutional movers. Special profiles of major donors such as Lee M. Sedgwick are balanced with profiles of illustrious alumni of intellectual achievement, including Walter J. Ong, S.J.

How

Rockhurst was distinct from its sister colleges of the same size is left for a larger study. Campus culture of the 1950's and 1960's is taken up within the context of the times, but organizational history prevails. Issues of race and gender are mentioned and described. Issues such as separate incorporation (transfer of university authority from Jesuit control to control by a lay board of trustees), or the influence of Vatican II on campus culture are left unexamined.

Amid myriad challenges, optimism has marked the path of advancement of Rockhurst University. This unbridled optimism in God's grace makes its centenary all the more elusive. Father Dowling began building the college in 1909, one year before he was granted a charter by the state of Missouri even to operate one. This optimism in searching for truth, its expression in friendliness, is excellently captured by Shirl Kasper's expertly-researched commemorative history of Rockhurst University's first one-hundred years. ■



Rockhurst University: The First 100 Years

Shirl Kasper

With a Foreword by Rev. Thomas B. Curran, O.S.F.S.

For a century, Rockhurst University has stood for excellence in learning, leadership, and service. *Rockhurst University: The First 100 Years* documents the struggles and triumphs of Rockhurst, from its modest beginnings in 1910 to its current status as a comprehensive university. The 416-page book features almost 400 color and black-and-white photographs, illustrations, and

historical documents, in addition to a complete index of people, places, and events. Ideal for alumni, friends of Rockhurst, or anyone interested in the history of Jesuit higher education or Catholic beginnings in the Midwest.

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