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Bringing God to Gold Country Sisters of Notre Dame come to Marysville

By Sister Barbara Hanagan, printed January 22, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

A letter written in 1850 by Mere Constantine to Sister Mary Cornelia in Oregon seemed to predict the coming of the daughters of St Julie Billiard to the Golden State:

"It is evident that God has His designs upon us, in conducting us so near California just at the moment, when so many poor creatures are eager for gold, so indifferent for their salvation. It is here that the end of our Holy Institute is carried out most perfectly where we can devote ourselves to the children of the most abandoned places."

At the urgent and insistent request of Father Peter Magagnotto, the Sisters of Notre Dame first arrived in Marysville on October 26, 1856. He spent many months desperately trying to convince the Superiors (both in San Jose, and in Namur, Belgium) to open this new foundation. He made several visits to the Sisters in San Jose.

At first, Sister Superior Mary Cornelia refused his request. This area was a land teeming with gold mines, where to her mind, everyone was wealthy. Where would they find the poor for whom the order had been founded? But Father Peter was untiring in his appeals.

At last his petition was granted and permission was obtained from the Reverend Mother in Belgium to send Sisters to Marysville as soon as a sufficient number was available.

On October 18, 1856, eight days prior to the arrival of the Sisters, the Marysville Daily Herald announced: "The Sisters whose Academy at San Jose has obtained an enviable reputation, have opened a seminary for young ladies in this city. The seminary building is one of the finest in the state, and is pleasantly located away from the noise and din of the town. The course of instruction embraces the primary and higher English branches, the French and German languages, music, drawing, and painting, plain and fancy needle work, etc. The terms of tuition are reasonable and every effort would be made to give those who are placed under their charge a thorough and accomplished education. We heartily commend their institution to the attention of parents and guardians throughout the state."

Three sisters made up the first foundation in Marysville: Sister Superior Bernard Weber, Sisters Alphonse Marie Vermulyen and Marie Julia Walsh. They were assisted by Miss Louise Prevost, niece of Archbishop Blanchet.

In October 1856, this small group left San Jose accompanied by Sister Mary Cornelia and Sister Mary Catherine. They went by stage from San Jose to San Francisco to Sacramento, and again by stage from Sacramento to Marysville. It took five days to complete the journey. When they arrived the Sisters boarded with Father Peter while they prepared and finished rooms in the school. At the end of the first week, Father Peter offered the first Mass in the convent chapel. Sister Mary Cornelia returned to San Jose "leaving the little Community of three entrusted with the cultivation of this new vineyard."



Photo: Sacramento Bee Collection

Notre Dame Academy, Marysville

Sister Mary Bernard realized that increasing enrollment and plans for a boarding school would necessitate not only additional space, but more sisters to assume the various responsibilities. In 1857 three Sisters, Mary Gonzago Van Ashen, Kostka Dehan, and Victoria Barry, were sent to Sister Mary Bernard in Marysville. The community then numbered six.

Of the very first Sisters, only a brief sketch can be given. Little is known of Sister Marie Julia Walsh except that she was California's first novice and was one of the three chosen to be sent to Marysville. The other two, Sisters Alphonse Marie and Mary Bernard, had been members of

Throughout October and early November notice of a "Seminary for Young Ladies" appeared in the daily paper announcing November 10 as the date of opening. On that day, nineteen day pupils, one third of them Protestants, emerged to peer at their strange and untried new teachers. By the end of November enrollment had doubled and the Sunday classes too were well attended. Undoubtedly, curiosity played a part in this new interest in the school, for the people were amazed at these women who devoted their entire lives to educating the young.

While the original building was adequate for the beginning, it was not long before

the second band from Namur who had volunteered for the Oregon mission in 1846. Sister Alphonse Marie was gifted in music and began a music program in the school which soon became noted for its excellence. Unfortunately, her stay in Marysville was short since her health was too delicate for the climate of the area. Sister Alphonse Marie was soon recalled to San Jose.

Sister Mary Bernard had begun a school that was to evolve continually during her fifteen years there. Sister left no written records of her early experiences. However, before her fifteen years were even one third finished, the "Academy of the Sisters of Notre Dame" had attained a high reputation for excellence.

Notre Dame owed a lasting debt of gratitude to Sister Mary Bernard who, through her dealings with the City Council, built a strong foundation. She was selected "superioress" and with her community cultivated gardens and planted vegetables and fruit trees to defray costs.

Sisters Gonzaga, Kostka, and Victoria were also long and loyal workers in Marysville, each contributing her individual skills in painting, in teaching boys, or in knowledge of mathematics. Another early Sister, Aloyse of the Cross, awakened in the hearts of the children a devotion to Holy Childhood, a devotion that lasted through the years.

The boarding school materialized in September of 1857 when an addition was made to the original structure, providing ample accommodations for the nearly forty boarders and total enrollment of eighty pupils. An early description stated: "...in a short time the little wing could no longer contain the number of children. The mines near Marysville were very rich. The population was increasing and it seemed that the Sisters would have many pupils and up to that time they were all paying; there were no poor. They, however, would have liked very much to have a charity class."

The Sisters did begin a small class of charity pupils around 1858, but it was not for several years that it was "at all attended because no one wanted to be poor at this time."

Still further expansion necessitated more building, and construction meant the purchase of more land. Consequently, in 1859 lots were brought in the immediate vicinity, small wooden tenements were removed, and an addition of a wing, 70 x 30 feet, and "two stories and an attic high" was made. This new building provided three classrooms, some music rooms, and a chapel large enough to accommodate 100 pupils. The intention was to make a dormitory out of the chapel after a separate chapel could be built. In 1860 the Academy registered 120 students and 10 Sisters.



Marysville convent demolished in 1961

Photo from Diocesan Archives

The new wing was completed in 1861 and the Sisters were able to purchase the rest of the half block on C Street. On this new property was the very fine home of Jose Ramirez. One part of this home was used for parlors and dormitories for the Sisters while the other part became their kitchen, refectory, and community room. There were then 57 borders, 45 day pupils, 74 free pupils, making a total of 176 students. In addition, across the street in the basement of Saint Joseph Church, 47 boys were being instructed. As the first five years of the Sisters' apostolate evolved, 1856-1861, it became evident that the seed of Christianity had taken root. With their varied cultural backgrounds they strove together to build, and it was clearly seen that Providence continued to shed its blessings on their new foundation.



Photo by John E Boll 2010

Notre Dame School, Marysville Today

