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FRANCISCAN SISTERS COME WEST TO 'The Land of the Padres'

By Sister Carol Anne O'Marie, printed in the October 7, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

Sister Manuela is 80 years old. She makes no bones about it. Technically, she is retired. Yet, here retirement bustles with activity. Currently, Sister is compiling the history of the Franciscan Sisters of Penance and Charity in the western United States.



Photo from Franciscan Archives

**Sr Manuela (left) with Mother Pacific (center) and
Sr Tarcissia (right) at St Stephen Convent 1917**

Surrounded by yellowing photos, original letters and steeped in personal memories, Sister Manuela is a wealth of information on the 75 years her Sisters have served the Sacramento diocese. "I remember coming here myself in August of 1917," she says, "I had just made my vows and was being sent to St Stephen's School (established in 1906) to teach the seventh and eighth grade. My sister companion and I were frightened to death every time the train stopped and men in uniform boarded. It was our first realization that we were at war. But, the Sisters were here long before I came."

In mid-August, 1901, she recounts, six Sisters began a 3,000 mile train ride from Buffalo, New York to Sacramento. The Franciscan Fathers, who had established St Francis Parish in 1895, had invited the Sisters to come west, open a convent and begin a school.

Mother Cecelia Steffens the major superior had promised to name the convent St Anthony if "that renowned Franciscan will find us a suitable place for our Congregation in California, the land of padres." Too ill to travel herself, Mother Cecilia sent Sister Leonarda Hanappel, her first councilor, to accompany the six pioneers.

"Looking out of the window, we could see the long train with a double locomotive winding up and around the mountain, just like a great snake," Sister Leonarda writes traveling through the Rockies. "Very often the train forced its way up such narrow clefts, that with out-stretched hand one could have touched the rocky walls; white, red, black, fringed with coal, copper with all sorts of metallic hues."

Father Godfrey, the Franciscan superior, met the Sisters when the train steamed into the station. With him were five or six ladies, some children and "four carriages in readiness."

"The loveliest flowers greeted us in the convent hall and in every room and on the stairway," wrote Sister Leonarda, "flowers such as one could not buy in Buffalo for large sums of money. In the refectory the table was ready – the ladies waited on us serving ham, fish, strawberries, peaches as large as oranges; luscious grapes, purple and white, cakes of all kinds, delicious water, coffee and good bread...we were just wishing we could send some of this beautiful fruit to Buffalo! How it would refresh our sick Mother and the other invalids."

The Sisters had heard stories of the Wild West and the Gold Rush madness. They were astonished at the convent which "has 22 rooms; all of them have electric lights! And imagine, they all go on individually, and you can turn the porch light on without going outside!"

The convent, which in 1951 changed its name to St Francis, stood on the edge of town. Beyond it was gardens, orchards and vineyards. "I visited there several times while I was at St Stephen's," says Sister Manuela, "it was a beautiful area. The only unsightly view was Sutter's Fort. Then, it was a ruin."

The Sisters opened the school on September 2, 1901. A large number of youngsters attended morning Mass, but only a handful came to school. Within a week, however, the attendance reached 90. By the end of the first year, 150 youngsters from grades one through eight were being taught in four classrooms. By 1906, the Sisters had opened St Stephen School at 3rd and O Streets. "It was an old rickety, wooden structure that once had served as the Crocker stables," Sister Manuela recalls, "I used to pray when we took the children up that old out-door stairway. Yet," she admits, "I loved everything about the place. When I was recalled to the East, I was heartbroken. I cried the entire time I packed my trunk"

From St Stephen's the Sisters extended their services to Holy Angels, the Family Japanese Kindergarten and Mission, Grace Day Home and St Francis High School. "God seemed to take good care of those early Sisters," says Sister Manuela. In 1904, the Sacramento River overflowed. The whole area was flooded. The Catholic Cemetery was submerged and the dead were buried on raised terraces until the waters subsided and they could be placed in blessed plots. Many children stepped from second-story windows to waiting boats and rowed to school. The water, however, never entered the convent gate or garden.



Photo from Franciscan Archives

Sr Lucille Renier (1888-1953)
First Young Woman from Sacramento to become a
Franciscan Sister; entered the Congregation in 1908

During the summer of 1904, Sister Pacifica Kirschel, one of the original six pioneers, became so ill that the doctor had given her only a few hours to live. On the day she was expected to die, Father Pius Nierman, OFM, sent word to the convent that during his Holy Mass that morning he was given to understand that Sister Pacifica would not die and the Sisters were to inform the doctor. Not only did Sister Pacifica recover, but she lived 35 more years to serve God and the people of Sacramento as the second superior of the convent, superior at St Stephen's convent and founder of Grace Day Home.

On April 17, 1906, two Sisters had gone to San Francisco to shop. They had planned to spend the night with the Sisters of Mercy. Somehow they completed their business early and on the spur of the moment decided to come home to Sacramento. The next morning San Francisco was rocked by the great earthquake.

During both the diphtheria epidemic of 1905 and the influenza epidemic of 1918 the Sisters assisted the sick and dying. "Yet, not one of us ever got sick," marvels Sister Manuela. God has also blessed the Franciscan Sisters of Charity and Penance with many vocations from the Sacramento area. As early as 1908, the first young woman, Sister Lucille Renier, now deceased, entered the congregation. "I checked the roster of Sisters just yesterday," says Sister Manuela. "There are 28 Sisters from Sacramento in our congregation and there were three more that died."



Photo from Franciscan Archives

Franciscan Sisters St Anthony Convent, Sacramento, in 1901

According to Sister Manuela, six Sacramento Sisters are presently working in their home town. Two are members of the parish staff of St Francis: Sister Dorothy McCormack, graduate of the Franciscan School of Theology (GTU) in Berkeley, engages primarily in adult education; Sister Kathryn Wood, RN with an MS in psychiatric nursing is involved in counseling and social work. Sister Sheral Marshall, assistant vocation director for the diocese, is moderator of the Franciscan Affiliate House established this year. Sister Elaine Sturges is principal of Immaculate Conception School; Sister Colette Felix and Sister Paula Corsiglia are long-time teachers here.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

**Former Saint Francis Convent on 26th and K Streets
Now Converted to the Parish Office Complex**