

Rockyford, Alberta

According to Volume Two of the Chatham Ursuline History Book called Pilgrims in Service, in January 1921 Right Reverend J.T. McNally, bishop of the Diocese of Calgary, Alberta, contacted Mother Clare Gaukler of the Chatham Ursulines regarding establishing an Ursuline community in that city. Unable to obtain permission from Bishop Fallon, bishop of the Diocese of London, Ontario, she contacted various other Ursuline communities.

Reverend J.Q. Killen, the newly appointed pastor, realized the spiritual values to be gained in having religious teachers in his parish school. Thus, at the request of Bishop Kidd, the Ursulines were asked to work in Rockyford. Father Killen had asked the sisters to establish a boarding residence for the students, especially the little ones, who couldn't come by wagon or pony and to teach in the Separate School in Rockyford.

According to the St. Rita's Parish, Rockyford, 75th anniversary booklet, Mr. Frederick Stinn donated the property and building for the residence. The building had once been an old drug store and rooming house. Lawrence Stinn recalled the moving day and the many people who turned out to help with the basement, raise the roof and add a new addition to the front. When completed, it was a fair-sized boarding school. The Catholic Women's League and the many donations from the parishioners made living there a little easier. As was recorded in the newspaper at this time, "Bishop Kidd formally opened the new Ursuline convent on August 29th, 1929. Thus was realized a cherished dream of the first pastor, Right Reverend H.A. Boltz and his people."

The personnel of this newly formed house were Mother Joan of Arc, Mother Regina McNamara, Mother St. Philip Gleeson, Sister Mary Agnes Sullivan, Mother St. Ann, Mother Anna Marie Colton and Mother Margaret Mary Kilroe.

In the booklet published for the St. Rita's School Reunion of 1995, it is written that "moving into a new house before it is completed can create problems. The brave Sisters proceeded to have the opening and blessing of the boarding school, but by August 29th the new stoves had not been installed. Dinner preparations proved to be a feat of culinary art. To add to the difficulty, there was no water as yet and the only cooking apparatus were small electric plates. Hence the dinner was cooked, literally, all around the house: the potatoes in the parlour, the vegetables taken over to the rectory oven to be kept warm. Sister Regina laughs as she tells about the day, but at that time it was no laughing matter."

On May 14th, 1926 St Rita's School District was established. St. Rita's School was built. It was a two room school. In 1929 Sister St Philip was the first Ursuline principal, teaching grades 7 to 9. Mother Anne Marie Colton taught grades 1 to 6. The boarding school began with 26 students.

From the Pilgrims In Service book, in 1934 the Calgary Ursuline community that included the Rockyford sisters, was amalgamated canonically with the Chatham Ursulines.

In 1936 a couple of students from Rockyford, Rosemary Harrigan, and Kathleen Sullivan left for the East to become Ursulines at the Motherhouse in Chatham, Ontario. In June 1941 Rita Harrigan, a boarder, and Leona Henke, left for the East to join the Ursuline Order. Ann Wilson also entered the Ursulines. In 1949 Selma Hagel and Rita Lavoie from Beiseker made final profession with the Ursulines in Calgary at St. Mary's Cathedral.

There were also priestly vocations from among the students of St. Rita's School including Leona Henke's brother, Stan Henke.

"Christmas concerts were always a gala event. Costumes by the dozens were made. Many hands make light work. At the convent in 1944, Inspector McLeod commented very favourably on everything – especially on the dances and costuming." (from St. Rita's School Reunion Booklet) Enclosed with this information is a photograph of the cast for the play – Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs directed by Mother Angela Meyer.

During summer vacation the sisters taught religion in Drumheller and missions in Beiseker, Strathmore, Sunnynook, Dorothy, Munson, Carbon and Midlandvale.

Over the years there were frequent visits to the Sisters in Rockyford from the Sisters in leadership in Chatham. The Sisters from Drumheller also came for regular visits.

A new High School was opened in 1945. It was named Cabrini Hall. This allowed the older students to stay in Rockyford. The Sisters taught the Senior High students.

In 1960 a new school was built where grades 1 to 12 were taught.

Besides regular classroom teaching, in her retirement, adult education in art was given by Sister Angela Meyer. Art classes were also given by Sister Angela in the evening to students who came from Standard. This was their own choice so that they could get their required credits.

In 1953 due to a shortage of Sisters to staff the boarding school and the fact that there were now buses for the students to get to their classes, the boarding school was closed.

The Rockyford Sisters hosted a retreat for the sisters prior to 1953 and one in 1953.

In 1968 the convent almost closed but two sisters hearing of the situation, volunteered to work in the Rockyford School giving up their positions in Edmonton and Calgary.

In 1976 the Public School was in danger of closing so the students from St. Rita's were sent to the Public School and St. Rita's School was closed. The religion classes were being taught during school hours first by the Sisters and then by volunteer lay people. One of the Sisters did parish work at this time. The school building was sold to the parish of St. Rita's in June 1981 and the Separate School District ceased to exist. The building is now leased to the village and is used as the Community Centre.

In all, 46 Sisters came to serve the parish at different times. Some of these women were from Alberta and others were from Saskatchewan – the Vibank Sisters who had also amalgamated with the Chatham Ursulines. Sister Angela, loved by all, was to return three times. Sister Regina spent many years preparing nourishing meals to all who boarded at the convent. With the closing of St. Rita's School, the Sisters very regrettably left the community in 1980 and the convent was sold. As Sister Margaret Wekel writes in the community annals on May 31, 1981, it was hard to say good-bye "But that is the way it must be. Sisters are always ready with staff in hand to go where they are sent." and Sister Leona Henke recalls how difficult it was because of the wonderful people with whom she had worked for so long.

Sister Rose Marie Blonde'

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Assistant Archivist

Ministries in Rockyford

Boarding School from 1929 to 1952

Teaching of Grades 1 -12 in St. Rita's Separate School

Teaching Religion in the Public School after 1952

Parish Work

Summer Religion Classes in Rosebud, Carbon, Strathmore, Beiseker, Munson, Dorothy, Standard, Drumheller, Sunnynook, Midlandvale, Claresholm

Mother Angela Meyer taught evening classes in Art at the Secondary School level as well as to adults*

Christmas Concerts

Hospitality for retreats for the sisters and for visiting of the sisters