



On the road to Jubilee 2012

From 1900 to 1960 . . .

Loretto schools flourish; colleges leave lasting legacy

By Carolyn Dunbar, Editor

The turn of the 20th century brought no discernible pause in the Sisters of Loretto's ongoing educational mission. The new century followed a remarkable 70-year period from 1830 to 1900 when Loretto founded or staffed 99 schools in areas mirroring the country's westward drive to the Pacific Coast.

During the next 60 years, the sisters traveled across the country to staff an additional 107 schools — including two colleges. They would continue the mission in Santa Fe, N.M., embark on an extraordinary adventure to China in 1923 starting schools in Hanyang and Shanghai before the Communist Revolution would signal their expulsion in 1952. Eight years later, the Catholic Church would urgently call for educators to South America, and Loretto responded, opening schools in Bolivia, Peru, and Chile.

From their base at the Motherhouse in Kentucky, the sisters spanned the American continent from 1900 to 1960 teaching in 61 schools in 15 states. Starting with new schools in Kentucky, the expansion included schools in Virginia, Alabama, Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

It was a period of tremendous growth that stretched the sisters and their resources to the limit. Each foundation has a fascinating tale of its own, with challenges and successes unique to that school, the local culture, and the political and spiritual environment. From tiny settlements to bustling urban centers, Loretto met the specific needs wherever they were called to teach the children.

Apostolate to educate

"Apostolate" is an old but familiar word to many Catholics. The word literally means the mission, office or duties of an apostle. It has since broadened to indicate the purpose of a group dedicated to the propagation of a certain religion or doctrine. In the case of the Sisters of Loretto, their original apostolate was to educate children. In fact, the early rule said, ". . . all exertions shall be made to make and have as many [sisters] able for this important business [teaching] as possible."

It was a natural fit for Loretto when in 1884 the Council of Baltimore called for every Catholic child in America to be enrolled in a Catholic school whenever and wherever possible. Loretto, already serious about educating children — in fact it was their *raison d'être*, or fundamental apostolate — responded to this mandate literally. With the Council's directive as impetus, parochial education in the United States began to grow and flourish. Many other teaching orders met the challenge, too. Religious vocations increased, and, with them, the pool of available Catholic school teachers widened. Loretto continued to traverse the country, staffing schools and influencing young lives.

Florence Wolff SL wrote in her "History Sampler" in 1986, "*From the beginning, the Sisters of Loretto engaged in teaching as the primary focus of their apostolate. In 1834 they began establishing not only elementary schools, but also academies, which were the popular mode of higher education for women during the entire 19th and early 20th centuries. These academies offered a broad liberal arts curriculum which included history, science, languages, philosophy, religion, art, music, and plain and fancy sewing.*"

Extraordinary leadership

At times history takes unprecedented leaps forward, often as a result of the efforts of one person who came along at the right time and place. Praxedes Carty SL was one of those people whose boundless energy and ability to see the vision meant she could work hard to resolve the pressing details of the moment while moving forward to fulfill the "big picture." You could say Mother Praxedes, as she was known for her 24 years at Loretto's helm (1898-1922), was a consummate multitasker. Her drive, her yen for "action," and can-do attitude led to perhaps the most significant accomplishments for the order during the early 20th

Superiors of Loretto 1900-1960

Mother Praxedes Carty — 1898-1922

Mother Clarasine Walsh — 1922-1928

Mother Olivette Norton — 1928-1940

Mother Edwarda Ashe — 1940-1952

Mother Felicitas Quinlivan — 1952-1958

Mother Mary Luke Tobin — 1958-1964



Mother Praxedes Carty

century. Under her guidance, Loretto College in St. Louis and Loretto Heights in Denver were constructed and established as institutions of higher learning, each earning official accreditation in the coming years.

It was also Mother Praxedes' firm belief that the best teachers are properly prepared to do the best job. She and other leaders at that time knew that if Loretto were to grow and evolve its teaching apostolate, Loretto sisters would need masters- and doctorate-level education and training. Universities in America during the 18th and 19th centuries had been almost exclusively the domain of men. At the start of the 20th century, however, admission for women became more common.

In their book, *"Loretto in the Rockies,"* Mary Celestine Casey SL and Mary Edmond Fern SL wrote, *"When the Catholic University of America admitted the sisterhoods to the regular sessions, a fresh impetus was given to higher education. The example set by this institution was soon followed by many Catholic universities throughout the country. The Sisters of Loretto, like the members of other teaching communities, availed themselves of these educational opportunities that they might be better prepared for their profession."*

1633 — 1812
Catholics Settle in America,
Loretto Story Begins

1812 — 1830
Loretto Foundation and Early Days;
Moving Beyond Kentucky

1830 — 1900
Education Mission Expands;
Loretto Pushes Westward

1900 — 1960
Education Efforts Diversity;
First Loretto Infirmary Opens
1923: Loretto in China

1960 — 1970
Decade of Renewal;
Loretto Studies Guidelines, Governance
1960: Loretto in Latin America

1970 — 1990
New Government Structure;
Loretto Works for Justice/Peace
1989: Loretto in Ghana

1990 — 2000
Co-membership Continues to Flourish;
Loretto and Ecological Awareness

2000 — 2012
Loretto Leadership Expands;
Sister Communities Embrace
2009: Loretto in Pakistan

2012
Loretto Celebrates 200th Jubilee!

In 1912 four Sisters of Loretto were released from other assignments to begin coursework toward higher degrees at Catholic University. Meanwhile, Mother Praxedes felt that it was time to broaden the scope of the type of education Loretto could provide, and the plans to build a college began.



“With Mother Praxedes, to plan and dream was to execute. To the astonishment of many of the sisters of her own community, her dreams and plans began to materialize in the college which she was erecting in Webster Groves, Mo. . . . In the fall of 1916 Loretto College, now known as Webster College [and subsequently Webster University], was opened, the first Catholic institution of its kind for women in or near St. Louis,” wrote Casey and Fern.

In 1924 Loretto College was renamed Webster College to avoid confusion with Loretto Academy High School, also in St. Louis.

Mother Praxedes had the same conviction that an institution of higher learning should be established to educate young women in Colorado, and that it should serve the surrounding western states. Under the direction of Mother Pancratia Bonfils, the property had already been chosen in the late 1880s on a promontory south of Denver, and in 1891 the original sandstone building opened as Loretto Heights Academy, a private elementary and secondary Catholic school for girls. The Academy became the premier women’s Catholic school in Denver for 27 years. The building is now on the National Register of Historic Places in America.

In the early 1900s, Mother Praxedes began to transition Loretto Heights Academy into a women’s college. She successfully navigated a set of complicated financial difficulties during that



Webster Hall, the original building on what is now the Webster University campus in St. Louis. As an international university, the flags of all countries affiliated with the university are flown along the circular driveway and main approach to Webster Hall. Photos on these pages were taken by Donna Mattingly SL.

time, and in 1918 the Academy was rededicated as Loretto Heights College. Its nursing school was the first in the state, and earned an excellent reputation.

In those early years, it would take much concerted effort to add new courses, staff the administration and faculty from the Loretto community, bring in priests and other professors to augment the faculty, construct classrooms, and develop the two new colleges into seats of educational excellence. But it was soon accomplished, and Webster and Loretto Heights began to confer degrees on their first students. In the intervening 60 years, each college has graduated thousands of students, who have since become a living testimony to the superb education they received.



As the years went on, the ability to finance these colleges from within the Loretto Community became more and more difficult. For financial reasons, Loretto transferred ownership of Webster College to a lay board of directors in 1967, which is still the model today. The college is now thriving as a private, nonprofit, nondenominational, international university. Webster University has multiple campuses around the United States and in European cities, and also in Shanghai, China.

At about the same time a combination of adverse circumstances resulted in Loretto Heights being turned over to a lay board of

Built in the same architectural style as Webster Hall, Loretto Hall provides additional classroom space at Webster University today.

directors, the Loretto Heights Board of Trustees. The Trustees arranged with Regis University in 1988 to take responsibility for the Heights. Regis then sold the property to the Teikyo University Group, who wished to establish a Rocky Mountain campus for students from Japan. Just one year ago, Teikyo Loretto Heights University changed its name to Colorado Heights University.

Today many Webster and Loretto Heights graduates continue to tell the sisters how much their Loretto education — and their favorite Loretto sister-teachers — meant to them, and of the positive influence their college years have made in their adult lives. Perhaps because they lived “the spirit of Loretto” and came to know those who embodied that spirit, these graduates are among our most loyal supporters in the work of the wider Loretto mission today.

Loretto’s expansion into the realm of higher education has also left a permanent and enduring mark on the sisters and co-members themselves. Intriguing stories abound from their years as teachers and professors. Many community members are still in the education field. All have learned a great deal from their studies and students, and still welcome each day with a powerful love of learning.

Loretto opens an infirmary

The period between 1900 and 1960 signaled the height of Loretto’s involvement in Catholic education. During that time, sisters who had served in schools for decades began to reach retirement age or came to the point where health would prevent them from teaching any longer. In 1948 the Loretto Motherhouse Infirmary opened in Nerinx, Ky., for the retired and ill Sisters of Loretto. The Infirmary was later expanded, and is now a licensed

long-term care skilled nursing facility providing excellent care and support for retired Loretto Community members and lay people.

For more information on the Sisters of Loretto history and on the Motherhouse Infirmary, please visit www.lorettocommunity.org. Much has been published about the history of Loretto during the 20th century. Please see the additional resources listed here as an excellent place to learn more.

Additional Resources

“History Sampler: Sisters of Loretto 1812-1986” by Florence Wolff SL, 1986, Sisters of Loretto, Nerinx, Ky.

“Loretto Education in China 1923-1952,” by Antonella Marie Gutterres SL, 1961, United Publishing Center, Taipei, Taiwan, China.

“Loretto in the Rockies,” by M. Celestine Casey SL and M. Edmond Fern SL, 1943, Loretto Heights College, Denver, Colo.

“More Than a Renewal, Loretto Before and After Vatican II: 1952-1977,” by Helen Sanders SL, 1982, Sisters of Loretto, Nerinx, Ky.

“Venture into the Unknown: Loretto in China 1923-1998,” by Patricia Jean Manion SL, 2006, Independent Publishing Corp., St. Louis, Mo.



The main building originally raised in 1890 for Loretto Academy, an elementary and secondary Catholic girls school in Denver, became the site of Loretto Heights College in 28 years later in 1918. The campus sits on the highest piece of land in the city and can be seen for miles around.