

Sister recalls early days, life at LaCrosse Convent

by Doris Litscher Gasser

Sister Mary Agnes brings sunshine to her corner of the world, wherever that may be. At this time it is in Plain, as a live-in companion with Mrs. August Hetzel. Sister Mary Agnes was born Agnes Radeske in 1917. She was a dear child of Polish descent, born into a family of 12 children at Mt. Pleasant, Pa. They moved to Brookfield when their father bought a farm there.

As a child, Agnes helped with home chores and had to scrub the floor and get the house cleaned before she could go to church. In the silence of the church she liked to clean the altar and fix the candles. It was this surrounding that inspired her to want to go to the convent and become a Sister.

Agnes recalled: "I prayed and my brothers and sisters prayed. Then, one day Father Kammerer called me into the sacristy and I knew my prayers were answered. He asked, 'What would you like to be?' I said,

'Oh, Father, I would like to be a Sister.' He sent me home for a year to think about it." A year later, when Agnes was 17, she and Father headed for the LaCrosse Convent. As they left Father said, "You'll never see this church in Brooksville again." Agnes thought, 'If I don't see it I don't see it.'

Agnes recalled: "When we arrived at the convent I rang the doorbell and was greeted by a Sister who served as mistress. I was in the convent a little while and the Sister took me upstairs. I had on such a beautiful dress that Father Kammerer's housekeeper had given me. The Sister said, 'You can't have this kind of a dress. You've got to have dresses like these girls.' I looked around and said to myself, 'My goodness, these dresses look so faded out and everything.' I gave up my dress and sent it home. That was all right. And, the day began."

Sister Mary Agnes studies and worked at the convent. She recalled: "We had to serve the meals.



Sister Mary Agnes lives in Plain where she serves as a live-in companion. She grew up in Brookfield and was called to the sisterhood at age 17.

Sister Mary Agnes

We served the Sisters and the novices -- more than a hundred. We had to wash dishes by hand. In summer we had a lot of work because we had about 600 Sisters staying at the Mother House. We'd have to prepare meals. We had to get up at 4:30 to get everything ready. We took turns in the kitchen so that some weeks we could get to all of the prayers.

"We'd have morning prayers. We'd have office and then we'd have an hour of meditation and then we would have mass. After mass we would go downstairs and have breakfast. After breakfast we went to our duties and that was usually cleaning. We each one had a different room and different places in which to work. We always had to have our beds dressed."

Sister Mary Agnes also studied special subjects, religion, history and geography. She continued: "We had home economic classes. The teacher had her degree. Sometimes I think degrees aren't always so good because of how she told us to make bread. We were using this old-fashioned yeast, so we had to get it ready the night before. She said to two of us, 'You'll have to get up at 4:30 because the bread will be running over.' So, the two of us got up early and when the teacher came down we were sitting and laughing because the bread didn't even make a move. It was too cold. She told us to put a pan of hot water under it so it would rise. Well, it didn't rise very much but we rolled it out into tins. It was not very good but she had our class eat it at noon.

"Then, after dinner we'd have Thanksgiving. We'd go to the chapel and we would pray. We'd have spiritual reading 15 minutes at meal time. We never talked at the table except on Feast Days. Our restricted bed time was exactly 9:00."

Sister Mary Agnes went to the LaCrosse Convent in October and in January she was sent on a mission to Festina, Iowa.

She reviewed, "The priest asked me, 'What can you do? Can you cook soup?' 'Oh, I said, 'I think I can cook soup.'" He said, 'Well, then I think you will do O.K.' "

After being a novice for two years, Sister Mary Agnes became a bride when she took her first vows.

She reviewed, "We invited our parents and our brothers and sisters. We walked into the chapel with our habits in our hands in our ordinary dress and then they had some prayers and we would prostrate just like the priests. Then, we put on our habits and walked out

and into the church and had mass. Finally, just before offertory we had our first vows. "I, Sister Mary Agnes, vow to Almighty God and you, Mother General, for one year of poverty, chastity and obedience, according to the rule of St. Francis and our Perpetual Adoration, so help me God and Blessed Virgin, Mary. Amen. There were about 32 in our class. Our final vows were taken after six years."

After Sister Mary Agnes served as a cook for over 25 years, she went back to her home to care for her own father and mother. After seven years, when her father and mother had died, she decided to go and take care of the elderly. She explained, "We can retire when we want to. I retired two years ago and here I am back to my job."

According to Sister Mary Agnes, Sisters would have to ask for money. She explained, "Even when we asked for clothes we'd have to get permission from our superior. They'd give us an allowance. The amount varied. Some Sisters need more, some need less. The Sisters in the Mother House really don't need money so they get \$10 a month. Sisters who are out on mis-

sion, out working, some need \$25 a month."

Sister Mary Agnes keeps herself busy canning and being Adella's companion in every way. Fat, juicy, sweet grapes grow right in the back yard. Sister feels fortunate that she can walk right across the street and shop at Phil's Food Mart and Straka's Meat Market isn't much farther.

Sister Mary Agnes thinks there are many good things about Plain. She told, "I don't get out too much but there are always some good people who take me out here and there, which makes it pleasant. I go back to the Mother House in LaCrosse twice a year. Arlene takes me to church here."

Arlene Diehl, who has been the recorder's faithful supporter in Plain, expressed, "We are so thankful Sister is here in Plain with us."

Sister prays three to eight rosaries a day with Adella. After we partook of fresh, sweet grape juice and delicious zucchini bread with raisins baked just right by Sister Mary Agnes, she closed with the Lord's Prayer and singing "The Blessed Virgin" in Polish.

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