

R-114

History of St. Joseph Convent, Campbellsport 1873-1973

Entered on computer by Bernadette Fleischmann, September, 2005

Notes and Endnotes by S. Connie Halbur,

Former archivist for the School Sisters of St. Francis

Note: St. Joseph Convent, Campbellsport, is currently a retirement home and nursing care facility for members of the School Sisters of St. Francis. However, the order was founded in Campbellsport (then New Cassel) in 1874. For a few years, the convent here was the headquarters of the order. Much of the following account deals with the beginnings of the order. Therefore, in a sense this folder presents a brief account of the founding of the order. The contents of this folder have been entered verbatim. However, S. Connie Halbur, formerly archivist for the School Sisters of St. Francis, has added some endnotes. These are intended to clarify or correct some of Mr. Reese's statements. Almost certainly, he had to rely on oral tradition for most of this information. There are a number of inaccuracies, but none are major. However, there are also a few bits of information previously unknown or forgotten by members of the order.

Father Anthony Michels asked the help of Bishop Henni for sisters for a new Catholic school in Campbellsport.¹ Arrangements were made for Father Michels to meet Sister Alexia, Sister Alfons, and Sister Clara. Because of religious persecution, they came to America from Germany. The Schwarzach convent near the Black Forest was their home. Father Michels came from Treves Diocese in Germany. And was ordained at St. Francis Seminary, August 12, 1868, by Bishop Melchor of Green Bay. He was assigned to St. Matthew, New Cassel, in 1869, the fourth pastor of a ten-year-old parish.

Father Michels purchased a combination school-convent for the three sisters.² It was located in block 9, in lot 15 on Fond du Lac Street.³

On April 28, 1874, Father Michels picked up the three sisters at the Notre Dame Convent⁴ with a horse and buggy, and brought them to the New Cassel School-Convent. The parish people were very generous in helping Father Michels furnish the school and convent with whatever was needed. The sisters renewed their vows before Father Michels.

The convent was started on May 2, 1874 by Mother Alexia when she signed her name to a construction contract with John Fellenz for the erection of a new convent for the sum of \$10,950. The brick which was used for construction was from the Kewaskum brickyard.

N.G. Koch, a Milwaukee architect, was the supervisor of construction.

Ten acres of land was purchased across Mill Street from Jenny to Helena Streets and then to Sheboygan Street from Mr. F. M. Findeisen for \$500.00. Besides the convent work, the sisters had to plan for the September school.⁵

The parish men made 25 student desks and several wooden benches. The first school attendance was eighty pupils.

The first year Miss Margaret Kieckhaefer taught English (taught one year) and helped with elementary studies. Miss Peterson from Chicago taught music.

The convent building was not quite ready, but part of it was livable for the sisters. Around the 25th of December, 1875, the chapel was ready for dedication. In September, 1875, there were about 30 young women from Chicago parishes at St. Joseph's Boarding School.⁶

Father Michels was chaperone one the train for trips back and forth.

In the sudden influx of boarders the need for additional teachers became apparent.

Mother Augustine of the Franciscans at Silver Lake allowed to exchange two sisters, Sister Seraphica and Sister Elizabeth. In 1876 the students displayed a large painting done in thread of our flag at the Philadelphia Exhibit. The sisters would run a bazaar for sale of fancy-work.

The original structure was 45ft by 60ft. Because of overcrowding in the boarding school, a new addition was added. So Mother Alexia asked for a 40ft by 60 ft. addition of three stories high. The building will be twice the size as before. A new schoolhouse will be erected by St. Matthew Congregation at New Cassel. Its dimensions being 30 ft by 54 ft and one storey in height. Sister Alfons went to Germany and brought back five women to join the St. Francis Order.

Kerosene lamps were used to light the building. In 1874 there were four sisters, 3 novitiates⁷, and 5 postulants⁸. By 1877 five more became sisters: Anna Mooney – Sister Agnes; Louisa Rheinhardt – Sister Antonia; Theresa Bonesho – Sister Bernadine; Margaret Lethert – Sister Augustine; Marie Gremminger – Sister Hyacinth.

Because of most of his time was in helping the convent sisters, Father Michels resigned his pastorate in 1879, and became chaplain of St. Joseph's Convent. The 1880 addition included an apartment for the chaplain.

In 1879 John B. Singenberger came from Pio Nono College, St. Francis, and began his work as music teacher of the community.

Mother Alexia went to Germany and Monsignor Schwetzzer, director of the cathedral in Freiburg, helped Mother Alexia acquire 23 new postulants to New Cassel on September, 1879. In 1880, six more came from Europe. In 1881, Sister Theresia came and in 1882-1884-1889 brought many more to the convent.

The directory⁹ for 1885, ten years after the first reception, showed there 114 professed sisters, 18 novices, and 10 postulants.

The boarding school was closed, and the addition still didn't give enough room for all the sisters. In 1883, Mother Alexia received a letter from Bishop Thomas Grace of St. Paul, Minnesota, [*inviting her*] to build a convent in Winona. On January 4, 1884, Mother Alexia went to Winona to sign a contract for a motherhouse in that city.

From Winona¹⁰ Mother Alexia established St. Joseph Convent in Greenfield Park in Milwaukee – boarding a day school conducted by the Sisters of St. Francis and will open Monday, January 9, 1888.

In 1890 a fire destroyed the building¹¹, creating much hardship to all the sisters and Father Michels. They all came back to New Cassel by train from Milwaukee. All thirty-two had no place to go but to the convent.

Sister Theresa asked the villagers to help and they responded graciously with bed clothing.

In the months that followed they all helped making benches, bedding material, chairs, tables, sidewalks and cellars. The straw for bedding came from Thomas Dieringer, a farmer.

Mr. H. P. Schnetzky was the architect for the new convent in Greenfield Park. It took 13 months to clean and rebuild the convent. In 1892 Mother Alexia required a bronchial inspection and in May of 1892 returned to Bavaria for treatment. After her recovery from the attack she visited a sanitarium in Germany and was convinced to build on like it somewhere in America.¹² In September 1893 she returned and brought 23 postulants along. In 1893, April 28, Anton Ezyak received eight thousand for the lots along Lapham Street from 22nd to 24th.

Mother Alexia, Dr. Herschfeld and Sister Paula¹³ worked very hard to solve all the problems. In the fall of 1894 there were eighty patients receiving treatment of the hydrotherapy. It closed for a while because of small pox epidemic. It opened again in March 1895 with Sister Stanislaus as Superior.

Her work in all the areas of Europe was a tremendous undertaking and it took a lot of courage to take the disappointments. In 1904 Mother purchased 11 acres on a high plateau in Luxemburg.¹⁴ On August 12, 1904 it was dedicated and Mother Alfons journeyed from Milwaukee to the convent of the Sacred Heart. She returned to Milwaukee October 1904.

The Sisters of St. Francis had 429 members in 1895, 300 teaching in 65 schools. In 1905 there were 540 members and they were teaching 98 parochial schools, covering parts of eleven states.

Many problems of the parochial school were its lack of coordinated supervision of the school system. The best program which would come within our Federal law was by Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul giving state schools and parish schools of different denominations a place in the general school system of our nation.

On July 26, 1890 St. Joseph Convent was granted a charter by the Wisconsin Department of State empowering its members to confer such degrees and grant literary honors, diplomas and awards, which they see fit by educational institutions.

Mother Alfons was elected Mother Superior after her fifty-seventh birthday in July 1907. Under Mother Alfons' supervision the sanitarium became the greatest developed institution in the United States.

The mentally ill became a problem¹⁵, so Mother Alfons purchased five acres of land, two blocks west of the sanitarium. The building was built in the winter of 1911 and summer of 1912¹⁶.

Dr. Julius Ken Plesky¹⁷ was engaged to direct the medical work at the new St. Mary's Hill. There were ten patients that came to St. Mary's Hill and Sister Emmanuel was the first superior. In fifty years 16 thousand patients were treated at St. Mary's Hill. The latest know-how in psychotherapy testify of their wisdom.

The professor of music, John Singenberger, taught music from 1879. He came to New Cassel and when the Motherhouse was transferred to Milwaukee, he continued until his death in 1924. In 1903 Cecilia Schaefer of Slinger, Wisconsin, daughter of the great and famous organ builder, became director of music at St. Joseph Convent, after her apprenticeship as organist and choir director at St. Lawrence Church. She established the St. Joseph Conservatory of Music. She was a pupil of Singerberger. Sister Mary Cherubim was her name. She supervised the Alverno College of Music in Milwaukee until her retirement in 1938.

A death occurred on July 18, 1911, Father Michels, after thirty-seven years of work for the St. Franciscan Order. He was seventy years old and loved the outdoors and early mornings.

On November 13, 1911 Reverend John H. Theisen became chaplain of St. Joseph Convent. Father was 39 years of age and his ability to further the education of the Franciscan Order by a Catholic University education department. In 1913 Dr. Sielde was ready to open up the Catholic Sisters College. Mother Alfons sent three sisters to the Sisters College in Washington, D.C. in 1914. They were Sister Beatrix and Sister Alexander and Sister Jutta. Sister Beatrix in 1916 opened up the St. Joseph Convent High School. Sister Alexander and Sister Jutta received their degrees in 1917 and came back and taught at the Convent high school.

A new study house was considered on July 6, 1917 at Brookland, Washington, D.C. and specifications were drawn up at a cost of \$27, 953.88 by Brust and Philipp Architects. The Washington exams continued until 1930.

Father Theisen went to Switzerland and then to Luxemburg to dispose of the property at Limpertsberg¹⁸. E. Hackner of La Crosse, Wisconsin submitted the designs for the marble altars¹⁹. The Mosaic Company of Innsbrook, Germany; one hundred fifteen stain glass windows and the reredos in the adoration chapel.

On August 25, 1913 the chapel was begun. In September the foundation was started. It took three years and seven months to build the chapel. It was 210 feet by 127 feet at a cost of \$225,000²⁰. The First World War broke out in Germany and over one hundred and seventy sisters were assigned to work in all of the hospitals. In the Pacific the Japanese have taken over the Caroline Islands. October 8, 1914, it was very rough on the sisters and Father during these war years. It created a tremendous amount of problems. Religious freedom was forgotten and transportation was in a terrible condition.²¹

On June 2, 1917, Rev. Joseph Schell took his post in St. Joseph Convent for two months while Father Theisen was on vacation. Mother Alexia became more sick on February 2, 1918 and at 8:50 in the evening Mother Alexia was taken by the Lord.²²

To myself as not being with Mother Alexia's because of being only six-year's old at the time of her death. The driving force of her energy to establish all the hospitals, sanitariums, and Mother Houses and schools was one of the great actions of humanity in our times.

To my knowledge she was very close to a saint. A cable message came from Basel to Sister Alfons of Sister Alexia's death. Father Theisen, during the Gloria²³, announced to the Sisters of her death.

A year after her death her wish was granted with a report of Archbishop Carl Fritz of Freiburg to transfer the Sisters to Erlenbad. It was June 12, 1919. His Holiness Benedict XV approved of the provincial house for Europe. By her wish Sister Alexia's body was taken along and buried at Erlenbad. The three Mothers²⁴ are buried in the cemetery crypt, Mother Alexia's, Bernardo, and Catherine. In 1957 a chapel was erected at the site.

In April 1922, Archbishop Fritz gave his approval of the fourteen Sisters and 60 orphans to join the Marienheim House²⁵. By putting an addition on the orphanage it stabilizes the problems of room.

The New Cassel Plat was done by John Bannister in June of 1846. It was Crouchville until 1856 when Emil Brayman called it New Cassel, after his homeland town in Germany.

St. Joseph Convent, May 2, 1874 – cost \$10,950. John Fellenz was the contractor. The brick was purchased from the Kewaskum brickyard. N.G. Kock from Milwaukee was the architect. Ten acres of land was purchased from F. M. Findeisen for \$500²⁶. East and west between Helena and Jenny Streets, and north and south between Sheboygan and Mill Streets. The original structure was 45' x 60'.

Kerosene lamps were used for light.

In 1890 fire destroyed the convent²⁷. A new convent was erected in thirteen months and H. A. Schnetzki was the architect.

In 1932-33 the western part of the new convent was built²⁸. It was built on the old Husting and Reformed Church property. The architects were Brust and Brust from 1212 West Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin – telephone # 1-272-6300. The contractor was Hutter Construction Co. of 134 Western Avenue, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin – telephone # 922-6900.

The three-story eastern part of the building was constructed in 1963. Brust and Brust were the architects (of Milwaukee Wisconsin). The contractor was Steigerwald Construction, Inc. of 1510 West State Street; Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The St. Joseph Convent sewer and water system was installed in 1924. The water system was from their own water drilled well and the water pipes were laid six feet underground. The sewer system went west into their own disposal and aeration plant in the middle of the orchard along Mill Street and then south across Mill Street and under St. Matthew School on the East end to Main Street and then across to a manhole where Rosalia Schneider lives and then east to Jenny Street and south to Forest Street, and finally east on Forest Street to the river.

1963 the last addition of St. Joseph Convent.

In 1925 a provincial convent was erected northeast of the old villa.²⁹ That was Mother Alexia's final planning to ease the much-needed room.

After Sister Beatrice's death Sister Alexander was named Principal of St. Joseph Convent High School, and when she took over the novices, Sister Jutta became principal of St. Joseph High School. Mother Alfons was elected for the third time to be Superior of St. Joseph's. An 'L' shaped addition to the Motherhouse was made in 1922 for the purpose of a music and pressroom.

Mother Alfons agreed with Cardinal Mundelein's request to establish a girls high school on the northwest side of Chicago. Brust and Philipp from Milwaukee were the architects. The other³⁰ was Alvernia High School in September 1924. Cardinal Mundelein dedicated it on May 3, 1925.

Madonna High School in Aurora, Illinois was in 1926 with H. J. Vander Meer of Rockford as the architect.

Father Theisen became ill in October and died September 25 of cancer of the stomach. His last word was "Praised be Jesus Christ". In November a new Chaplain came from Sacred Heart Sanitarium who was Father Adolph Klink, who served 27 years at St. Joseph Convent. Through the winter of 1928 and Spring of 1929 Sister Alfons became very ill. And on the 5th day of April in the morning she received Our Lord with a loving soul. Mother Sister Alfons was buried at Mount Calvary Cemetery, Wisconsin³¹.

Rev. Father Adolph J. Klink, Chaplain 1926 – 1953

Rev. Mother M. Stanislaus Superior General 1930 – 1942

Rev. Mother M. Corona Superior General 1942 – 1960

Rev. Mother M. Clemens Superior General 1960 – 1968

Rev. Sister Ellen Diez Superior of St. Joseph Convent in Campbellsport August 15, 1968

Today the Congregation has four provinces in North America, including the Central American Mission region, together with the European Province conducts 202 elementary schools, 31 high schools, 10 professional schools, 124 kindergartens, 9 hospitals, 2 clinics, 13 homes for the aged, 6 homes for dependent children, 8 sanitariums, and Alverno College Milwaukee.³²

St. Joseph chicken barn fire was on January 26, 1924³³.

St. Joseph Convent fire was on February 8, 1927. Fond du Lac department was called for emergency because of the danger of the fire getting out of control. Basement fire at 5:45 in the morning. Damage between 4 and 5 thousand.

On December 15, 1921 St. Joseph Convent³⁴ purchased 25 acres of land adjoining their property from Gilbert McDougal, Sr. at a cost of \$5,350. James B. Day, Real Estate Agency.

On November 11, 1940 the St. Joseph Convent cow barn fire was extinguished by the department.

St. Joseph Convent May 10, 1922 Parcel of land East of River Street and South of Washington Street, from Royal A. Smith. It was half of the old Mill place. Mill Street was the South border.

Emma Hoell to School Sisters of St. Francis of St. Joseph Convent Lots 3-4-5, Block 9, March 21, 1891.

St. Joseph Convent purchased the Robert Raymond Estate in Oct. 2, 1947 and sold it to Walter and Rose Baumann on December 5, 1956.

Rev. Mother M. Alexia Hoell 1874 – 1907³⁵

Rev. Mother M. Alfons Schmidt 1907 –1929

Rev. A. Michels acquired lots 2-3-14-15, Block 9 on September 10, 1874 from F. Mac Findersen.

Rev. A. Michels acquired lots 4-5-12-13, Block 9 from John Henry Inbusch³⁶.

Sister Alexia Hoell Aug. 5, 1880 – First Sisters home and school on lot 15 – Block 9.

Bishop John Martin Henni Aug. 31, 1880 Estate on lot 1-2-16 – Block 9 Church-School-Sisters Home built during this time.

Sister Alexia Hoell August 12, 1890 to John A. Bertram Lots 3-4-5 and parts 2-12-13-14 March 3, 1893.

St. Joseph Convent, Rev. Peter Joseph Thuille OSB was born in Tyrol, Germany Feb. 21, 1848 (small country in Europe) became ordained on October 1, 1871. Died June 6, 1916 at St. Joseph Convent.

St. Matthew's Congregation Rev. Bernard P. July – ordained 1889, died May 24, 1939.

Monsignor Joseph C. Lederer – ordained June 21, 1903, died Jan. 7, 1955.

St. Joseph Convent Rev. Joseph P. Bertram ordained June 16, 1901, died Sept. 13, 1964.

Sister Alexia Hoell March 2, 1891 Lots 3-4-5

School Sisters of St. Francis of St. Joseph Convent March 21, 1891.

¹ The councils of Baltimore had shortly before mandated that each parish establish a school. According to tradition within the order, Fr. Michels went to Mother Caroline of the Notre Dame convent to ask for sisters. She could provide none, but Sisters Alexia, Alfons, and Clara were staying at their convent at the time, and arrangements were made for them to staff the New Cassel school.

² There are a number of versions of how St. Matthew's Parish came to own that building. One version was told to S. Connie Halbur by Rosalia Schneider, who said that her grandfather (Michel Schneider), Anton Ullrich, and one of the other Schneiders had shortly before 1874 finished building the structure, intending it to be used as the parish school. This does seem plausible, as the Schneiders were coopers and Anton Ullrich made bricks. The men were not pleased with the fact that Father Michels allowed the sisters to live in that building while their convent was under construction.

³ What was then Fond du Lac Street is now known as Main Street. It is not to be confused with the current Fond do Lac Avenue.

⁴ In Milwaukee

⁵ This refers to teaching at the parish school.

⁶ On a bitter cold day, December 28, 1874, the sisters moved into the new convent. The convent boarding school was referred to initially as St. Joseph Institute. The three sisters had stayed with the aunt and uncle of one of them in Chicago for some time before coming to Milwaukee. They had a number of contacts in Chicago. The boarding school is not to be confused with the parish school, which continued to function for a short time in the first building.

⁷ The word should be *novices*.

⁸ A postulant was a woman in training to become a sister. She was not yet a sister, and did not yet have the veil.

⁹ This refers to the NATIONAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY.

¹⁰ Having the motherhouse in Winona did not prove successful due to unacceptable limitations the new bishop there, Bishop Ireland, intended to place on the community.

¹¹ This refers to the building at Greenfield Park, which is now the corner of 27th Street (Layton Blvd.) and Greenfield Ave.

¹² The building was erected immediately south of the motherhouse. It was named Sacred Heart Sanitarium.

¹³ Dr. Hirschfeld was the medical director, whom Sister Alexia hired while she was in Europe. Sister Paula was the first superior at Sacred Heart Sanitarium.

¹⁴ It was Mother Alexia's intention to establish a branch of the order in Germany, but the German government at that time was rather intolerant of religious groups, so it was necessary to establish the convent in a neighboring country.

¹⁵ This refers to the fact that some persons going to Sacred Heart Sanitarium for treatment were actually in need of psychological treatment. Sacred Heart Sanitarium was not staffed for treating the mentally ill.

¹⁶ The hospital for the mentally ill was known as St. Mary's Hill. It opened in 1912.

¹⁷ The name was WenGlesky. However, he was known simply as Dr. Wen.

¹⁸ Due to political problems in Germany, and World War I, it took 3 attempts to establish the headquarters for the European branch.

¹⁹ This refers to the construction of an additional wing at the Milwaukee motherhouse. Most of this wing consisted of a large chapel, which is now a Milwaukee landmark.

²⁰ This figure is not correct. The cost was significantly greater, but that included not just the chapel, but the rest of the new wing, as well as renovations of the old chapel.

²¹ The sisters began ministering in the Carolines in 1906. Most of these missionaries were from Germany. Life became very difficult for them when World War I broke out. The islands had for some time been controlled by Germany, but during WWI Japan was at war with Germany. The sisters were forced to leave when the Japanese gained control of the island. The last sisters to leave did so in 1918.

²² She was in the European provincial house at Strassbourg at the time. When the provincial house was built there a few years earlier, the area was still part of Germany, but by the end of the war, it was under French control and is to this day part of France..

²³ The Gloria of the Mass at the motherhouse chapel in Milwaukee.

²⁴ Of the European Province

²⁵ This refers to a group of sisters living at Schwarzach, in the Black forest, in Baden, Germany. The three foundresses had originally been members of that order, which had been founded by the pastor there to take care of the orphans in that area. Due to the suppression of religious orders during the Kulturkampf, the vows of the sisters at Schwarzach were dispensed in 1872. Three of the sisters decided to go to America and establish an order there. These three were Sisters Alexia, Alfons, and Clara, foundresses of the School Sisters of St. Francis. The other sisters remained on as lay women. By 1888 the situation in Germany had eased considerably, and the sisters who had remained at Schwarzach as lay women could again make vows. However, the group was always extremely poor. By 1922 the archbishop of Freiburg, under whose jurisdiction the sisters were, told the sisters at Schwarzach that they would have to join another religious order. He gave them 2 choices. The one selected was the Franciscans at Erlenbad. (The convent at Erlenbad was known as Marienheim.) Thus, the mother community joined the daughter community.

²⁶ This appears to be an error. The legal description of the land on which the first convent for the sisters would be built was Block 7, lots 7,8,9, and 10. A warranty deed dated February 14, 1874, shows that Father Michels purchased this very land for \$400 from Michael Schneider. Another warranty deed, dated May 23, 1874, shows Mother Alexia (Emma Hoell) purchasing the same land from Father Michels.

²⁷ This refers to the convent in Milwaukee, not the one at New Cassel. See above reference to that fire.

²⁸ This refers to the main building of St. Joseph Convent at Campbellsport (formerly New Cassel). It was actually east (not west) of the first motherhouse.

²⁹ This refers to the convent at Erlenbad in Germany. It had originally been a villa, before its purchase by Mother Alexia, a kind of spa to which people could come to rest.

³⁰ The word “other” may be a typographical error. The name of the high school was Alvernia. There was no other high school in Chicago staffed by the order around that time.

³¹ In the 1960s her body was transferred to a plot behind the motherhouse chapel in Milwaukee.

³² Since Mr. Reese wrote this, all of the branches of the order (provinces) in the US joined together to form one province.

³³ This occurred at Campbellsport.

³⁴ In Milwaukee

³⁵ Years she was superior general of the order. In 1907 she became the provincial superior of the newly established European branch.

³⁶ Inbusch was a real estate broker in Milwaukee.