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Jubilee year affords occasion to tour the Maria Stein Center's Heritage Museum

BY GRETCHEN BOLLENBACHER

The Sisters of the Precious Blood, a Catholic women's religious order with a long Ohio history whose motherhouse is located in Salem Heights, Dayton, is marking the 175th anniversary of the founding of its congregation.

The sisters have proclaimed January 15, 2009 through January 15, 2010 as a year of jubilee and are marking this historic anniversary with a full calendar of events. These include a lecture series that is now running, the next lecture to be held in June; an open house at the Salem Heights motherhouse in April; and a Mass of Thanksgiving in Dayton in October. August 16 has been set for an outdoor mass and a picnic at the Maria Stein Center (MSC).

In recognition of this jubilee year, the Mercer County Chronicle is publishing some articles about the Sisters of the Precious Blood community in the Mercer and Auglaize county area. One such article is this account of the delightful opportunity to meet Sr. Regina Albers, C.P.P.S., curator of the Heritage Museum, and to be treated to a specially guided tour. The museum is located in the Maria Stein Center which is just north of State Route 119 on St. Johns Road, Maria Stein.

HERITAGE MUSEUM HAS MANY STORIES TO TELL

The museum started operation in 1982. "The displays in

the museum tell a very distinct story," said Curator Sr. Regina. "It's not just about the sisters, the priests and the brothers; it's a mingling of the culture and the faith – they go together, you can't have one without the other.

"We're starting the tour in this room full of beautiful paintings and creations by some of our own very talented sisters," Sr. Regina said. She pointed out several things by the same artists that showed the individuality of each person's works. One of the paintings, a picture of Jesus, was found behind a door in a barn on the Center's property that was being torn down. "It is likely a place where one of our sisters did her work and used the picture as her focal point for meditation," Sister Regina thinks.

"In fact, as we go across the hall to the museum proper, you'll see many artifacts of our own sisters, some of it from their hobbies, some of it work done for parishes, priests and



SISTER REGINA ALBERS, curator of the Heritage Museum, points out a picture of an oil well on Grand Lake St. Marys. "We had the first offshore oil wells in the country," she said. The picture was part of an extensive display about the canal system that ran through our neighboring counties.

for others, for example, vestments and other items to sell for income for living expenses

and for charity. The early sisters developed many ways to support themselves." There are also many artifacts given to the museum by local people.

The museum's displays tell many stories. When you walk in the door, one of the first exhibits shows a map of Ohio, with Maria Stein located on it, superimposed over a map of Switzerland, with Maria Stein marked on it, too. Maria Stein in Switzerland was near the place where the Sisters of the Precious Blood's foundress, Mother Anna Maria Brunner, raised her family and began

The 'other' collection at the Maria Stein Center

During a recent tour of the Heritage Museum at the Maria Stein Center, Museum Curator Sister Regina Albers, C.P.P.S., also talked about the National Marian Shrine of the Holy Relics, the specifically designed place where the Center's "other" collection is kept. She is also the curator of the relic collection.

"Though the Maria Stein Center is a place of prayer, and prayer was and is the reason for the Center's being," said

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Maria Stein Center's Heritage Museum

Continued from page 1

her ministry. Her son, Fr. Francis de Sales Brunner, who brought the Missionaries and Sisters of the Precious Blood to America, attended school there and was ordained from the Benedictine monastery of Maria Stein.

"Near the area in Switzerland where Maria Stein is, in the 1400s," Sr. Regina related, "a mother was caring for her animals and small three-year-old child atop a tall cliff with a sheer 120 foot drop into a rocky cavern below. The child wandered from the shepherdess's view, and she realized he was lost. Fearing he had fallen, she hurried to the bottom, and there he was picking flowers. She asked him how he got there and he said, 'I fell, but a Beautiful Lady caught me.'

"The boy also said this Lady had expressed the wish to have a shrine erected in the cavern into which he had fallen. The area thus got the name Maria Stein or in German Maria Steig or Mary's Rock."

Sr. Regina continued, "A Benedictine monastery or abbey was built on top in 1636, and you can go 158 steps down into the cavern which was converted into a beautiful temple, a place to pray, a retreat house and a guest house for visitors." Sister Regina stayed there when she traveled in Switzerland.

In the museum there is also a Fr. Brunner exhibit in which his steamer trunk and some of his things are displayed. Close by is a model of a large castle at Loewenberg, Switzerland, Fr. Brunner bought to be used as a boarding school for boys, hoping to start religious vocation there. Mother Brunner also stayed there in a room close to the chapel where she spent hours of adoration. From here, she organized a group of women into what would eventually become the Sisters of the Precious Blood. The sisters also perpetually kept the adoration throughout their years in Switzerland and in America whenever there were enough sisters at a particular place to do so.

Especially enjoyable was the display of dolls that showed the history of the religious dress as it changed through the years. One of the dolls was dressed as Mother Brunner would have looked in her native garb. "Mother Brunner would not have worn a habit," Sr. Regina said. "She wouldn't have even been aware that her prayer life had founded a religious commu-



ESPECIALLY ENJOYABLE was the display of dolls that showed the history of the religious dress as it changed through the years. The one on the right was dressed as Mother Brunner would have looked in her native garb. This picture shows the years from 1834 to 1928. Habit wearing ceased around the late 1960s.

nity over and above the small circle of followers she had there in Switzerland.

"We've come full circle back to Mother in that we no longer wear habits. I stopped wearing one in 1968," said Sr. Regina. "The reason they wore them originally here in America is that the Bishop told the community when they came here if they were going to call themselves religious they had to wear a distinctive habit, and that's where the first one came from.

"I wore a black one just one year when I was teaching first and second grades, then we went to the grey ones. The black ones were really hard to care for and hot, too. You had to brush them with soap and water. The grey ones were so much easier; they were washable. You had to iron them, but that was easy compared to the old one's care. We still had black cloaks, however. One day when it was cold I had my cloak on, and a student came up to me and asked, 'Are you gonna wear that again?' The kids liked the grey ones better, too."

A picture of Christ's head was one of the exhibits. It is believed to have been done in ink by one of the sisters and is made up of words of scripture. "Every part of it is words, no other lines or markings, just words of scripture. The scripture, Matthew 21:11-26:27, was written in German and covers from the beginning of Jesus' time of preparation as he entered Jerusalem and ends with an account of the Last Supper," Sr. Regina said.

The sisters made many crafts through the years, some made of woven hair – "when someone died, they'd save some of his or her hair and weave it into a memento or a relic as a reminder of the person. They made hats, rugs, wax dolls and figurines, any-

thing they could sell for revenue. In the early years they were in pretty severe poverty-like conditions at times," Sr. Regina explained.

There was a hand-drawn picture in ink of the inside of the relic shrine done in 1923 by a Protestant minister in his 90s, there were bedwarmers, a knitted table covering – "So intricate! Can you imagine?" Sister Regina marveled.

One of the museum's displays tells the story of the making of the canal system. One story she related was about one of the workers on the canal who lived just a half mile from where they were digging. "The foliage was so thick that after work his wife would blow a horn so he could find his way home. Another example of the deepness of the foliage was that there were paths only large enough for a rider and his horse to get through," Sr. Regina said.

There were also actual pieces of some of the wood from the canal. The canal wasn't in operation very long. It took 23 years to build – and brought the ties for the railroad system – and by the time the canal was finished, it had helped to put itself out of business already by helping to complete the railroad system more quickly. The 1913 flood was also partly the cause of the canal system's demise. It caused a lot of destruction, washing out locks and bridges that they didn't repair.

"People used to go on two-day outings on the canal boats after they were used more as passenger transportation. They'd get on at St. Marys and go to Spencerville, for example, stay overnight in a local hotel, and come home the next day," Sr. Regina said.

SISTER ANSWERED A CALL TO CHILE

Sr. Regina grew up in Egypt, Ohio, and said she went to "the little two room

school house that is now used for community activities. Two Sisters of the Precious Blood taught all eight grades, with four grades to a room. I did my high school in Dayton at the Sisters of the Precious Blood prep school, then got my degree in education at the University of Dayton."

She came to be curator of the Heritage Museum in 2001 by way of Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan and even Chile in South America. "When I was making my vows, some of our sisters were going to Chile, and I thought 'Wow!' that sounded good. My mom used to tell us about the mission fields when we were young. She got the Messenger of the Precious Blood newsletter, and she'd read stories to us about the missionaries.

"When we made our vows we were allowed to put our name down for missionary work, for example in Chile, and so I did. But when I told my mom and dad what I'd done, they were very unhappy; they wouldn't hear of it because I was too young – I was only about 21 at the time and to them that was too young.

"So for several years I almost forgot about it while I was teaching in Ohio, Missouri and Wisconsin, but I didn't take my name off the list. I did decide that I'd put a fleece before the Lord. I said, 'God, if You call me, I'll say 'yes' and if not, I don't go, and one day I was called. I was there 12 years."

In preparation for this work Sr. Regina studied Spanish in Cochabamba, Bolivia, for six months. At first she was a teacher in Chile and then was in charge of a small country parish. "It was an experience I treasure," Sr. Regina said, "but then it was time to come home and spend some time with my parents."

On her return from Chile she studied at St. Louis University in preparation for work as a Pastoral Minister. She was in this ministry at Holy Angels in Sandusky, Ohio, and then at St. Mary's in Adrian, Michigan, before coming to the museum.

Beautiful and ornate vestments actually worn by the priests, wax statues and dolls, tools and other instruments used back then, utensils, needlework, homemade soap, other items of clothing are just some of the many fascinating artifacts with which the Heritage Museum can delight its visitors.

The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from noon till 4:30.

The other collection

Continued from page 1

Sr. Regina. Devotion to its relic collection, the second largest in the United States, is also very important. The museum and the shrine exist as a part of the sisters' overall ministry of service to the community.

"The devotion to relics goes back to the Bible to the book of Genesis, chapter 50, verse 25, where it says that Joseph told the Israelites that when they returned to the Promised Land to take his bones with them," said Sr. Regina. "Exodus, chapter 14, verse 19, confirms that Moses did in fact take the bones of Joseph when they returned."

She then talked about when persecution of Christians began shortly after the death of Jesus, they hid in the catacombs and when they wanted to have religious services, they used the tombs of the martyrs as their altars. When they were liberated in the 200s, they were so used to having the bones around, they took them along and started building churches and housing the remains in them.

"When our relic collection really had a large addition to it was in 1875. Fr. J.M. Gartner was asked to collect many of them – he amassed 175 – and to bring them to the U.S. His intention was to mete them out to several places, but Cardinal McCloskey of New York said such a nice collection should be kept together," Sr. Regina continued. "Fr. Gartner showed them several places and brought them to our area which at the time was nothing but wilderness. But he found our convent, and he decided this was a good place. At first a room next to the original chapel was fixed up for them."

According to the website www.mariasteincenter.org/pages/mschistory3.html, Fr. Francis de Sales Brunner, the missionary who brought the Sisters of the Precious Blood to America, was an ardent collector of relics and was responsible for the first collection of relics in Maria Stein in 1843-'44. During the 19th century other relics were brought to the states and added to the core collection as a way of protecting them from the continuous strife of 19th century Italy and Europe during which the relics were being stolen and desecrated. Another large part of the collection, some 600 relics, was brought to America by two Precious Blood Sisters and presented to Fr. Brunner as a gift.

Soon news of the relics spread and pilgrims began to arrive to venerate them. Plans were made for the building of a larger convent with a sisters' chapel and a chapel for displaying the relics. In November 1892, the Adoration Chapel of the Sisters under the patronage of Mary, Help of Christians and the National Marian Shrine of the Holy Relics chapel were dedicated. Sister Barbara Ann Hoying, director of the Maria Stein Center, answered the question why was the collection brought to Maria Stein. "Through a nice coming together of circumstances is what happened, I think. This would have been considered a place of safety, away from the big cities here and away from the strife in Europe."

"Today we still get quite a few visitors to view and venerate the relics," said Sr. Regina. "People have always had reverence for the relics of special people considered to have lived a holy life."

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