

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
SISTER MARGARET ANN
OF THE GREY NUNS OF THE SACRED HEART
ST. MARIES CATHOLIC CHURCH KODIAK, ALASKA
FOR
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES
by
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APRIL 13, 1993

S.T.: When was the first mission founded in Kodiak and why?

Sr. M.A.: OK we are the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart and we first arived in Kodiak, not I, but five sisters in 1944.

The foundation of our mission at Kodiak dates back to the summer of 1944 for then it was that a religious community was first suggested as the logical solution to the problem of managing the Griffin Memorial Hospital. Since the opening of the hospital in 1939, it had been ad ministered by head nurses acting under the Hospital Board, and lastly by Dr. A. Holmes Johnson as medical director. Routine management, remained in the hands of the head nurse. Conditions in the hospital were imminently unsatisfactory. So it was decided by the bishop that a religious community should and take over. We weren't accepted of course at that time. Later on we were. We administered for all those years as a nursing order in the old Griffin Memorial Hospital which is now the Mental Health Center. We lived there til 1967. In 1954 Sister Hillery and one of the fathers (I don't remember which one) decided to start a school, a parochial school. They started with the first second and third grades

S.T.: Where was the first school located?

Sr.MA: The first school was located in old church, theold St. Maries church which was down by the where the Fish and Game building is now.

Sr.MA: There was a long room attached to the church. The first grade was in a quonset hut attached to the church , an the second grade . third and fourth were in one half of the room, and fifth and sixth were in the other half. I came up in 1966 and my first classroom was the 5th and 6th grades adjoining the 3rd and 4th. When Sr. Marsella taught, I gave seat work, When I taught she gave seat work and this is how we worked it out. Sr. Joan Patricia was up stairs in a room adjoining the priests living room and that was the 7th and 8th grade.

S.T. : How many students did you have?

Sr.M.A.: That I'm not too sure of, I could look it up, but I'm really not sure of that, anyway from there the Archbishop , Archbishop Ryan at that time bought the land we are on now . The old church was in an area which under urban renewal. The land was outside of Kodiak was in the boonies, at that time nobody was up here.

S.T. : How did you travel up this way? Was Rezanof a road then?

Sr. M.A. Yes, there was a Rezanof but it was nothing but trees on either side, very few homes and beautiful trees all along and it ended at the cut-off. I think it ended at the Dark Lake Road. We used to go to Abercrombie but it was very different I don't think it went very much farther. They then opened up Otmeloi and I remember walking that road when they began building it.

When we moved, we shared the old public school building with The First National Bank of AK. on the hill above Ford Motors That was quite a hill , half the building was the 3rd 4th 5th 6th grades

Sr.M.A. The bank was on the other side of the corridor, and this building was condemned . The bank stayed until their was built and we stayed until we began to build this school here. This was in 1967 and we were truly called St. Maries of the Island then because the first and second grade were in a meeting room inside St. James Episcopal church, the 3rd , 4th , 5th , and 6th (We had double classes) were in the old condemned public school building, and the 7th and 8th grade were in the abandoned Fishermans Hall that was downtown where the Fish and Game is now. That building was moved up here and it was the old thrift shop next door to the old church . They cut the old St. Maries church in half. The old church was located right across from the Russian Orthodox Church. And we watched it being brought up Millbay and situated here. The old church is the thrift shop now, and they also moved the old fishermans hall up here for the 7th and 8th grades. this area was nothing but trees I think they took 160 trees out of here. Woody Way and Murphy Way was nothing but a ravine and was part of the land. Just trees and trees with foxes and rabbits and other animals.

The old Holland house is where the sisters are living now and and it was bought along with Mirikovich's bungalo for the rectory and we had the old church here til recently, about three years ago, when our new one was built.

S.T.: So up until a few years ago you were very small?

Sr. M.A.: Yes very small, it was like going to church in a bus, that's all I could of, then when they were building the new church we had mass here in the gym for I think it was a full year.

When I came here in 1966 we were in full habit, and I remember flying in , I thought I'd never get here because in that year the airlines pilots were on strike . Our mother house was outside Philadelphia, we had to drive to LaGuardia in N.Y.C. from there we took a flight to Toronto, from Toronto to Calgary, Calgary to Vancouver, took a bus to Seattle, and flew from Seattle to Anchorage, Anchorage to Kodiak. I thought I'm going to the end of the world. I was missioned in a school in Lowell Mass.

S.T.: So you were originally coming from Massachusetts?

Sr.M.A.: Yes to come here, it was as usual wet rainy and MMMUDDY. You couldn't believe it , now we have paved roads, then there were none. When we came in there were about seven grey nuns standing in a row out side this tiny terminal. It was rainy wet and it was muddy and I thought (coming from back east where it was nice and clean) oh my goodness ...nevertheless we got in the car which was dirty and dusty like most cars in Kodiak at that time and drove to the hospital, there were 4 sisters here at that time teaching at the school and they were living in a trailer right next to the hospital. (Right on the channel) One of those sisters was going back east and I was replacing her.

S.T.: Did you volunteer to come to Kodiak ..

Sr.M.A. No, I did not volunteer, the other sisters volunteered, this was what we called a volunteer mission because it was so far from our mother house, But I did not volunteer and thats why when I was asked to come up here the Superior General gave me three days to make up my mind. But I said yes.

When I got up here I had to sleep in the sisters quarters in the basement of the hospital, our dining room our chapel and our sleeping quarters were in the basement of the hospital.

S.T. : So you came up to work in the hospital?

Sr.M.A.:No, I came up to teach, by that time, by "66" we had 8 grades but 4 teachers That's really the beginning of upheavel as far as moving the old hospital to the present sight. The sisters were involved, they administered the hospital (KIH) and were responsible in the building. We had that up until I think about 1978. It wasn't really our hospital, it was leased from the borough, but because of lack of personel we had to turn it over to the present administration. The other hospital was very well administered, I worked there on weekends and holidays. It wasn't alarge hospital and we didn't have too many patients so our superior who was the administer also used to let those nurses off and then our own sister nurses (the RN's) would take over.Those of us who were interested would help out with the other duties. And I loved it, I also worked at KIH until we gave it up. We moved in here in 1968. I find a big change in Kodiak It's not ..I call it cozy it's not as cozy as it was, not as friendly as it was then. I had to travel sometimes very late at night to the base hospital and very early in the morning and never had a fear of going downtown late at night. Even Deadmans Curve had no guard rail. We never locked our doors at night or our car doors at night. Of course it's developed now. Millbay Rd. was a beautiful road just lined with trees and now they're all cut down. Too many trees are being cut down. I think we're losing some of the beauty of Kodiak.

(cont)

Sr.M.A.: There weren't that many people out at Chiniak there would one or two families out there we knew well. It was still a long beautiful ride out there.

We had the Airforce out there at the time and went out quite often....

we were "fated" to beautiful dinners and things like that , it was just wonderful. Joe Batey had his ranch the Burtons own it now and we would go out and visit the Bateys. It was a wonderful ride out and that part I hope is never spoiled , that's Kodiak ya know .

When the Archbishop was going to buy land here several people said "You're" foolish where as other people were advising him to move out here, because this is where the town was going to move. We now know that was true.

But I really love it here, I don't want to leave it. The people are really wonderful . I personally think we have some of the most excellent teachers in all the schools here on Kodiak.

We started in "67" to fly out to Adak each summer, there were 4 sisters that went the first summer.

S.T. : Why did you go out to Adak?

Sr.M.A.: To teach religion to the children of the navy. There were no natives out there. We used to go out every summer until about 1980, we'd go out on Reeves and then we'd go out on a little navy plane then the Coast Guard moved in and we went out on a C-130 going way out to Attu ,stop in Shemya and then go to Adak. It was a wonderful experience, I looked forward to it every summer. It was like my vacation.

S.T.: When you said the sisters were not well recieved when they were going to establish things here back in the 40s, what do you mean by that?

Sr.M.A.; Well I think generally people were afraid nuns , we dressed differently and we had a different life style and the didn't know much about us. They expected a drastic change, but I guess when they realized how hard the sisters worked and how they scrubbed and we didn't have anybody to do that we do our own work. I think when the people realized that we were'nt here to take over or do anything like that and we were just here to help. [Reading from an written annal] Thefirst sisters were turned away and sent to to I think it was Juneau and then they came back and then were sent Ketchikan.

S.T.:They were not allowed to stay on the island?

Sr.M.A.: No..they weren't allowed to stay

S.T.: The people in general or...

Sr.M.A. You know ..I honestly dont know exactly who"THEY" were.

S.T.: Was the Roman Catholic church established on the island at this time?

Sr.M.A.: No.. it was on the base but not here . [Reading] Slowly the small fishing boat chugged out of the bay carrying aboard avery ill young girl, she was on her way to Seward, the nearest hospital. they were only an hour out of the bay when the girl died with a ruptured appendix. This and other incidents finally convinced the people of Kodiak of the need of hospital facilities in their community.

[The following two pages are copies of a writing by one of the sisters covering some history and their journey.] This excerpt explains the brief beginnings of the hospital for which the Grey Nuns originally came to administer.

SUPPLEMENT

FROM: GRIFFIN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL ANNALS (circa 1944)

Slowly the small fishing boat chugged out of the bay from Kodiak Island, carrying aboard a very ill young girl. She was on her way to Seward, the nearest hospital. They were only about an hour out of the bay when the girl died with a ruptured appendix.

This, and other similar incidents, finally convinced the people of Kodiak Island of the dire need of hospital facilities in their community. Obviously, the logical place for such an institution was the town of Kodiak, which was then a growing community, thanks to the tremendous amount of construction at the Naval Base, seven miles from town. After the completion of construction, civil service positions would continue to increase the population of the town.

Medical service in Kodiak was most uncertain at this time.

A. Holmes Johnson, of St. Helens, Oregon, came to the Bristol Bay area in the summer of 1937, to act as cannery doctor for Libby, McNeil and Libby. He was flown about the entire area for surgery and medical services. Dr. Johnson was a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and a distinctive addition to the medical profession in Alaska. Dr. Johnson fell in love with Alaska, a condition from which he never recovered, and he returned in the summer of 1938 to make his home in Kodiak. His wife, Postina, and son Robert, followed him a month later. Coincident with Dr. Johnson's arrival, came Dr. A. Bates Jones, who retired in 1944. Dr. Jones had served for many years as Army surgeon at Fort Yukon

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For the purpose of obtaining State and Federal funds for the erection of a hospital in Kodiak, a group of prominent men organized a Public Utility District. These men were appointed by the Governor, in 1938. The first hospital board was appointed shortly thereafter, consisting of Emil Knudsen, then mayor of Kodiak, Harry Christofferson, Lawrence Wodlinger, and Wesley R. Rhoades.

Mr. Erskine's general manager, E. W. Griffin, moved his home to Juneau in order that he might work with the Legislature to promote the allocation of Territorial funds, under the Works Progress Administration to the building of a local hospital for the Island of Kodiak and nearby Aleutian Islands. Just before the completion of the hospital, Mr/ Griffin died, and it was thought fitting that the hospital be named for him.

In 1938 a grant of \$65,000 was allotted to the Public Utility District of Kodiak for the erection of a hospital. This seems like a ridiculous amount in 1969, but under the PWA program it was sufficient for at least a minimal building. Money did run out before the hospital was completed and the citizens of the city came to the rescue with volunteer labor and a drive for money to buy equipment.

The E. W. Griffin Memorial Hospital was completed and dedicated in 1939; the first patient, in November, was Gregory Chanuin, who was admitted for treatment of a severe leg fracture.

From the opening Dr. A. Holmes Johnson was appointed Medical Director of the hospital. He had his office and consulting room in the building, but almost from the beginning, there were complaints about the type of nursing care given the patients.

Perhaps the most graphic description of the situation might be demonstrated by the following incident. A very young child, whose mother while well-meaning, was not able to properly care for her home or children, became very ill. The Health Nurse, Marion Lynch, brought the child to the doctor, who diagnosed pneumonia, and wrote a prescription for medication. Mrs. Lynch (then Marior Curtis) asked the doctor if he did not think the child should be hospitalized; she knew that the doctor was aware of the child's home conditions. "Oh, no, this child is far too sick to be in the hospital," was his reply.

S.T. When the school first got started, were most of the children of the catholic faith?

Sr.M.A.: No, not all I mean we never turn anybody away, anybody who wanted to come, could
but most were catholic

[Speaking about a written annal Sister was reading from, also enclosed in the transcript]

I think it says something about their first night... " when you read this you have
to take it in to consideration that it was written long ago, and beautifully
written but a little bit with flowers (amix the passion0

They were freezing and then Sister Mary Leo with a perchant for mechanics
experimented with a oil stove and soon the house was comfortably warm.

There are many people here now that dont know that we, our congregation, our
sisters the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart really established the hospital actually
and the new part of the hospital where the ICU is now, is dedicated to the Grey Nuns
of the Sacred Heart.

We were very upset when the dedication ceremony went on and the four sisters who
were here knew nothing about it. We were really kinda hurt, we would have to have
seen the dedication. However those things pass and are not too important.

The army was here they did a lot for us and so did the navy the navy came and
helped us with the house where we live in now. They scrubbed and painted and cleaned
the debris from around the yard and all that and were really wonderful.

When we moved up it had been in disrepair for a while. They tell us it was a
house of disrepute, because there was gambling and that sort of stuff.

It's a beautiful house and we love it, it's smaller than it looks but cozy
There was a lot of junk lumber and that sort of stuff and a huge gambling table
and booths and chairs that had to be removed. Sister Joan Patricia and I scrubbed
every piece of pine work and ceiling. So we needed help and the army and the navy
came out and helped. Those guys were wonderful and people dont know that today.

S.T.; What year was this?

Sr.M.A.: "1966"

S.T.: So you first stayed in a trailer next to the hospital and then moved up here.

Sr.M.A.: Yes, the four teachers, we moved out of the trailer and then sold it and is someplace on mission road, I think the Magnusons bought it.

It was really nice living down by the channel and kinda hard to move away from the channel. It's where I saw my first whale and seal lion, coming from the east that was a big thrill. And you know the seaplanes coming right under our livingroom window was wonderful with the moon on the water at night. But we moved up here now and I wouldn't move for anything now.

S.T.; How was the church effected by the quake?

SrM.A. Well the hospital was not really effected, they used to have services in the hospital chapel that's where the church really was before we moved into the one downtown. When they moved that church and before the school was built.

We had mass in the old Elks building that was right at the harbor ...

I almost forgot about that, we'd have to drive from here and set up for mass. It was right on the channel and we used to have a bakery there, the Naughton bakery. We had mass there and then when we moved up here we had church there in the old church, and when the new church was being built we had mass in here the library and the gym.

S.T. When you first got here was there much damage left from the quake?

Sr. M.A. Pretty much, things going on that would indicate it but I didn't realize because I didn't know it before, I remember the old post office was down by the ferry dock, that building now I think is KANA we used to walk down to get our mail and it was boardwalk all the way up center and I remember the first time I went to the post office I looked up and thought " boy the only thing that would make this complete is John Wayne coming down the middle of the street on horse back

Sr.M.A. (cont) thats all you'd need, thats all I could think of.I really loved it!

The first month I got here I didn't like it,because it was too muddy.

S.T.: What month did you get here?

Sr. M.A.:In august , the first week in August. It was muddy and we had our habits on and our habits were beige but unbelievably the mud would cake on it, and then if you let it alone and let it dry it just brushed off and there was no mark. I remember writing back saying Oh this place is wonderful "even the dirt is clean".

S.T.: That's an interesting way of putting it.

Sr.M.A.: After a month though I dont think you could have gotten me out of here.

I really love it here, we really have a wonderful group of people here.

I 've gone through many pastors , the first three years we had a different pastor each year. Of course each year too we had a new chaplain at the base.

If anybody wants to know any thing about priests I certainly could tell them.

S.T. I truly had a most enjoyable experience talking with you Sister, I hope anyone who reads this willfeel more enlightened to the the history an dedication of the sisters at St. Maries.