

Bethlehem Academy's 150th Anniversary

By Pauline Schreiber

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Five Dominican Sisters from Sinsinawa, Wisconsin arrived in Faribault by stagecoach on July 31, 1865 with the purpose of starting a boarding high school for young ladies and to teach in the parish elementary school. Their venture founded what is today Faribault's Bethlehem Academy, the oldest Catholic high school in Minnesota.

Alumni and current and former staff of the school gathered the weekend of Aug. 7-9, 2015 at Bethlehem Academy to celebrate the institution's 150th anniversary. Dominican Sister Theresa Thomas was among them.

"I was a freshman the year the new school building (today's existing school) opened," she said. "Since all students and staff were new to the building, everyone understood if you ended up a few minutes late to a class from having difficulty finding your way."

The new building, which opened in 1949 at 105 SW Third Ave., was the fourth building at the school and cost \$1 million. "That was quite a lot of money for that time," Sister Theresa said. Due to its quality construction and excellent upkeep, this building is still in great shape today. A maintenance crew worked many hours getting it ready for the 150th anniversary celebration, but all that effort also made it ready for the opening day of school in September.

Sister Theresa, who retired in 2003 from a career teaching in Catholic elementary schools in the Upper Midwest, is the part-time archivist for Bethlehem Academy and assists the Development Director with alumni activities. She grew up in rural Dundas and attended Rice County District 29 rural school. Her parents opted to send her to Faribault to attend Immaculate Conception Elementary School for seventh and eighth grades and then to Bethlehem Academy for high school. "There was a van that came out from Faribault to gather as many (students) who would fit into it and take us to either Immaculate Conception school or B.A.," she said.

By the late 1950s into the 1960s, Bethlehem Academy was able to afford a bus that had a route through nearby towns and rural areas, bringing students to Faribault. The largest B.A. graduating class was in 1965 with 121 graduates. The peak enrollment was recorded in the 1964-1965 school year with 461 students and most of the school's instructors were Dominican Sisters. A newspaper article from 1976 reported that the school had an enrollment of 310 students with eight Sisters and 18 lay teachers as instructors.

This past spring, 38 graduates received diplomas and there was an enrollment of 282 students were enrolled in the school, which now includes 6-12th grades. The incoming senior class numbers 55, school staff reported. In the past, most of the students were Catholic, but today there are a significant number of non-Catholic students attending the school. Today's Bethlehem Academy students come from Faribault and nearby communities.

Dying mother's wish

The story of the school's founding is like a tale right out of a pioneer novel. The Murphy family set out from New York in 1864 for a better life, intending to make their way to California. By the time they arrived in St. Paul, the threat of conflicts between settlers and Native Americans farther west was upsetting to them. The family decided to stay in Minnesota until it was safe to go farther west. They opted to settle in Faribault.

Tragically, sickness attacked the family. Within 10 months, all family members except the mother and two children, a boy and girl, had died. As the mother, Catherine, lay dying, she received a visit from the local priest. Catherine begged Father George Keller to grant her children a Catholic education. Her request provided the inspiration for Bethlehem Academy.

Father Keller asked Bishop Grace of St. Paul for assistance in granting the dying mother's wish. Bishop Grace contacted the Dominican Sisters in Wisconsin. And, as the story goes, five sisters from the order took a steamboat the summer of 1865 – just months after the Civil War's ending – and journeyed by steamboat from Dubuque, Iowa, up the Mississippi River to St. Paul. They were greeted by Bishop Grace, who traveled with them by stagecoach to Faribault to begin the task of founding a boarding high school for girls and for some of the Sisters to teach in the parish school.

A space for the school was leased from Major Sterne H. Fowler for the boarding school. It is interesting to note that Major Fowler, at the time of leasing a building to the Dominican Sisters was not a Catholic, converted to Catholicism later in life. His funeral took place in 1893 at the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

Parish elementary school classes were held in the basement of the local church until additional space was built. In 1869, the boarding school moved into an existing two-story house a block from Immaculate Conception Church on Third Avenue Southwest. The pastor of the church at that time devised the "Faribault Plan" that opened the parish school and Bethlehem Academy high school to public school students. The plan lasts only two years before public school classes separated from the Catholic school.

As enrollment for the Catholic girl's boarding high school (it accepted day students too) grew, there was need for a larger building. A third school made of stone was constructed in 1875. That building was located where the parking lot for Bethlehem Academy is today.

Closing exercises and commencement at B.A. became an anticipated community event in the late 1800s, according to *A History of Bethlehem Academy*; a booklet compiled from newspaper articles published between 1865 to 1912 in daily publications from Faribault. *A History of Bethlehem Academy* is on file in the Rice County Historical Society Museum's research room, and was a Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) project. W.P.A. projects provided work for the unemployed during the Depression era.

One newspaper clipping in the history from the spring of 1888 reads: "One of the most pleasing features of the evening was the exercises in calisthenics by a class of young misses gaily attired and under command of a leader whose orders were executed in evolutions with admirable precision."

Those early-day closing exercises at the all-girl school included recitations, musical selections, as well as salutatory and valedictory addresses, ending with graduates receiving diplomas. Apparently the audience for B.A.'s closing exercise grew to a point the school could not accommodate it because in the late 1890s, closing exercises were moved to the Faribault Opera House (located where the Paradise Center for the Arts is located today on the 300 block of Central Avenue).

Viewing the closing exercises for the girl school must have attracted some boys with less than wholesome intentions. A newspaper clipping from July 9, 1901 reported that: "A nominal fee of 10 cents will be charged (for attending B.A. closing exercises at the Opera House) to prevent the attendance of boys who congregate where the admission is free, and whose cause, more or less, is a disturbance."

Changing times

By the Depression era of the 1930s, families in Faribault and surrounding area wanted their boys to have a Catholic high school education as well as their girls. So, in 1935 the school became co-educational and its enrollment jumped from 127 up to 400. Most students were day students by that time, but the school continued to have some boarding students until 1962 when the boarding option was discontinued.

Today, Sister Theresa said, there are no Dominican sisters teaching at B.A., and there are only three Sisters on the staff. A convent was purchased a number of years ago after the three Catholic parishes in Faribault merged together to create Divine Mercy Catholic Church and School. The convent is used by the elementary school and for parish activities.

In 1986, the decision was made to transfer the 7th and 8th grade classes from the elementary school to Bethlehem Academy. The in 2013, the 6th grade, too, was moved to B.A., making it a middle school and high school.

What hasn't changed over time is that parents who send their children to Bethlehem Academy want them to have a quality, Christian-based education within a small high school setting.

"I enjoyed school here," Sister Theresa said. "I hated to miss school." Her enjoyment of her years at Bethlehem Academy is why she is the part-time archivist for the school. Bethlehem Academy has a very rich history that should be celebrated, she said.