

A prison stay of a different kind

Yes, several Oblates Sisters of Providence and most of their boarders had to spend some time in the state prison, located on Eager Street across from the school. No, the Sisters and students were not arrested for breaking a law or even for protesting. This was before the Civil Rights movement. The group went to jail of their own free will!

In December 1912, a fire started on the top floor of St. Frances Academy. Because that floor housed the dormitories of the students, the children were in the classrooms. The staff was not aware of the fire. As smoke poured from the windows, Mr. Albert Bowen, the owner of a grocery store across from the school, immediately rushed across the street to notify the sisters of the fire. Meanwhile another gentleman, a Mr. William Collman, turned on the fire alarm, and within a few minutes the firefighters were at St. Frances. They turned in a second alarm and began battling the blaze. On hearing the fire alarm, the 160 students marched quietly in fire drill fashion to Forrest Street. Led by the nuns, the students were taken to the home of Warden Leonard at the State Penitentiary where they knelt and prayed the rosary.

While the officers were controlling the crowd in the courtyard, one sister told the officers of two aged nuns in the infirmary adjacent to the dormitories. The officers battled their way to the top floor and found a Sister Philomena, age 76, lying helplessly in bed. Another sister, Sister Regina, who had surgery just a few days earlier, was struggling to make her way down the smoke-filled hall. The officers wrapped both nuns in blankets and carried them down to the courtyard where a patrol car escorted them to the State Penitentiary. Two firefighters were hurt in the process of battling the fire, one from Truck Company 16 and the other from Truck Company 28.

After the children were safely out of the building, Mother Magdalene directed the work of salvaging the desks and other furnishings. The nuns worked side by side with the firefighters and the Salvage Corp in saving the works of art, the library holdings, the statues and other possessions. The firefighters were amazed at the calmness of the sisters. One of the first paintings saved was a life-size portrait of

Cardinal James Gibbons that hung in the chapel. A number of beds were consumed and very little clothing of the boarding students was saved. Damage was estimated at \$20,000.

While the fire was at its height, Sister Portress did not neglect her duty to ring the noon-day Angelus. She waded through knee-deep water to preserve this custom. Yes, the sisters bowed their head and said the Angelus.

When the fire was extinguished and the flames no longer poured from the windows and roof, Mother Magdalene and another sister collapsed under the strain. They, too, were carried to the Warden's house where they were put in bed according to the city physician's orders.

While at Warden Leonard's home, his wife along with a host of friends and volunteers prepared a meal for the group. When the children were informed that the building was saved, they again started prayers of thanksgiving, while the younger children romped and played in the prison yard.

Had it not been for the prompt measures of the firefighters, the fire would have destroyed the structure. The captain of the central district summoned all available reserves to Chase Street. He personally directed the firefighters in saving the property and covering the pianos, chapel fixtures, etc., with tarpaulins. According to the fire officials, if the fire had started during the night, there probably would have been greater damage and loss of lives. The cause of the fire was never determined.

Tears of joy were shed by the sisters as they praised the work of the firefighters in helping the children to safety, rescuing the two invalid sisters and saving St. Frances. The City Council sent Warden Leonard a note of thanks for his service to the sisters. A Mr. Zimmerman who owned a theater had a benefit to help defray the cost of the damages.

The "protective" attitude of some city officials towards the Oblates has remained and exhibited throughout the years. When we moved to the county, the Manning Estate, then our formation house, caught fire in 1943; it was the Arbutus fire department that came to our aid. Fortunately, we have not had any fires since. However, today, the headquarters on Gun Road houses the Oblate Sisters Health Unit. Like the

Marines, the firefighters are always ready, always willing to answer our many calls for ambulance services.

The motto of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, "Providentia Providebit," became a reality once again.

PROVIDENCE WILL PROVIDE

Sister M. Reginald Gerdes, O.S.P., is a historical researcher for the Oblate Sisters of Providence.