

Here's an excerpt from chapter one of the story book we are working on:

“The Ghosts of St. Ann’s Past – Stories of St. Ann’s Orphanage Worcester, Mass.”

“Many people believe St. Ann’s Orphanage was started by the Sisters of Charity, better known as the Grey Nuns of Montreal. But the Grey Nuns didn’t come into the picture until 1891. Its roots actually started in 1889, the year I was placed into this orphans’ home with my three sisters. My mother became deathly ill when I was eight years old. We were part of the first group of children to live here.”

“You see,” continued Sister Victoria, “It all started when Father Joseph Brouillet, the pastor of Notre Dame des Canadiens Parish in Worcester, wanted to build a school and orphanage for orphaned children and the elderly. He was concerned about the plight of the children left parentless and the elderly left to fend for themselves. In those poverty stricken times they would not have survived without help. He also wanted to start up a religious order to teach and care for those unfortunate people living in Worcester’s fast growing Franco-American community. He worked with Father Alexis Delphos, the pastor of St. Denis Parish in East Douglas, of which St. Anne’s was a mission. Father Delphos granted permission to two teachers at St. Anne’s Parish to take simple religious vows and wear the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis.”

“Father Brouillet rented a three story house on Southgate Street. This two story annex we are sitting in was quickly built as new residents, both young and old, quickly filled the house. My memory evades me, but I believe this orphanage was originally called the Orphans Home of Saint Francis of Assise. Father Brouillet recruited and trained new members of the order over the next year. Eight novices were quickly brought in to help.” “Novices?” interrupted Rosalie. “Oui, replied Sister Victoria. “These are young ladies who are received into the order for a probation period before taking their vows.” Sister Victoria continued her thought process. “They had to care for the children and elderly all the while cleaning, cooking, mending clothes and keeping the building in good repair. Every day, two of them went out into the community to beg for money, food, clothing and other supplies. It was their only source of income. They received support from the Franco-American community, from many in the city’s large Irish community and even from some in the Protestant community. The new annex and the growing number of orphans, stretched their funds very thin.”

“Things started out as expected. Unfortunately, it didn’t last for long.” Sister Victoria gave a little smirk. “I guess you could say Father Brouillet became a bit too ambitious. He asked the sisters to expand their ministry to an orphanage in Fall River and to an old farm in Auburn. There were only 14 novices to work all three places and it proved too much. OK, without dragging out the story, here’s the short version. There were disagreements and misunderstandings between the sisters and Father Brouillet. The sisters wanted to incorporate the Third Order of St. Francis and thought it had been approved. But Bishop Patrick O’Reilly told them the founding of a new

religious community in the Springfield Diocese had not been authorized. Of course, the founding ladies were not very happy. So they packed up and went off to Canada.”

“Eventually a solution was worked out. Their disagreements with Father Brouillet was put aside. They returned from Canada and with their order now reestablished as the Little Franciscans of Mary. Because their Mother House was in Canada Bishop O’Reilly accepted them into the Springfield Diocese as missionaries. There was one condition. They had to take charge of the elderly that were at the orphanage. The orphans would become the full time responsibility of the Grey Nuns.”

“Now I can see how the Grey Nuns fit into this soap opera.” Said Christine. “But please, continue.” Christine was right. We were all listening intently to this story with its twists and turns. We had not been expecting such drama in what was thought to be a straight forward story.

“So, as you can see, elaborated Sister Victoria. “A lot happened during those first two years.” We all resettled ourselves in our seats as she continued. “The Orphan Home started out as a haven for all those in need, young and old. With the disagreements and the situation seemingly getting out of hand a split up was eminent. Father Brouillet turned to the Grey Nuns of Montreal. On January 31, 1891 The Sisters of Charity sent Sister Anna Piche and others to manage the orphan home. They too found the difficulty of caring for the residents without means and had to find ways to procure funds.”

“1891 was a new beginning for two new establishments. The order of the Little Franciscans of Mary took charge of the elderly as they had agreed and moved to a different facility. The order of the Grey Nuns remained to care for the orphaned children. The Grey Nuns soon purchased a large farm with over 149 sprawling acres on Granite Street. There was a large farm house, a barn and stable at the top of the hill.” Victoria paused and looked upward. “I dearly remember that farm. So many dear memories.” She continued her history lesson. “Not that I remembered at that time, but the Society of Benefactors was organized that year. They provided us with \$15,000 so that a new building to house us could be built. I surely remember the excitement we all felt. We were going to move into a wonderful new home. There would be lots of space to run around,” she paused. “And farm animals.” Again, we could see the gleam in Sister Victoria’s eyes as her face glowed with excitement.

“They began building this big white four-story wooden structure. I was later told it was typical to the style of other institutions of that period. It contained a school, dormitories, a chapel, and the needed kitchen and bath amenities. It could house nearly 200 children. Preparation was underway for our move. Our numbers were quickly increasing so ten more Grey Nun missionaries were sent to help support us.”

“Well, in the year of our Lord 1892, on the 27th of February, an Agreement of Association was signed and notarized and the St. Ann’s French Canadian Orphanage was incorporated. So, you see, it took about two years to get the orphans home properly established and St. Ann’s French Canadian Orphanage became official.”

“On January 3, 1893 Mother Anna Piche, Superior, along with the other Grey Nuns and all of us children, moved into our new home. Fourteen acres of the massive site were utilized for farming. We were still very poor and everyone worked the farm, tended the animals, took care of the massive home and made clothes to make ends meet. Everyone had chores to do inside and out. We grew vegetables, and made a lot of our own food from the crops and animals. New orphans were continually welcomed into our home.” Again, we saw her pause as her memories cascaded about her thoughts.

Sister Victoria rose and walked to the large window. “Instead of me prattling on, see for yourselves. Please, come to the window and gaze upon the sights below. A story is unfolding about the time we moved into our new home high on the hills of Granite Street.” We rushed to the window where a whole new wonderment filled our eyes and ears. It was as if we were watching a 3-D movie.

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