

The Heritage of Mercyhurst College

In 1843, the **Sisters of Mercy**, founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1827 by Sister **Catherine McCauley**, ventured to bring their ministry to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.¹ In 1870, the Sisters built a convent in Titusville, Pennsylvania to extend their ministries.² **Mother Borgia Egan**, serving as Mother Superior in 1920, saw a need for educational opportunities for young women.³ Their search for a location for this school took them to Erie, where **Bishop John Mark Gannon** suggested the sisters start a school “over the lake.”⁴ The Sisters followed Bishop Gannon’s suggestion and on September 30, 1922, purchased for \$51,000 a 75-acre plot of land from **Marrow B. Lowry** on the outskirts of the city.⁵ This was an extraordinary financial investment in a venture with no guarantees, one that would require the Sisters to dedicate themselves to years of hard work in building a college for the future.⁶

Construction on the school began with the construction of **Egan Hall** on September 8, 1924. Its construction was marred by a workers’ strike (not uncommon in those years), which pushed the original opening date for classes back to September 7, 1926.⁷ During the strike, the Sisters reaffirmed their solid commitment to completing the building. As one observer recalled, “When the whistle blew at 12 noon on the Saturday before Labor Day, the Sisters immediately took up where the workers had left off.”⁸ This included painting the walls of the classrooms themselves.⁹ In addition to Mother Borgia Egan, other Sisters involved with the founding of the college were **Sister M. Jane Frances, Sister M. Angelica, Sister M. Philippa, Sister M. Leona, and Sister A. Geraldine.**¹⁰

¹Mary Stanislas Austin, "Sisters of Mercy." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911.

²Mary Stanislas Austin, "Sisters of Mercy." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911.

³Sister Eustace M. Taylor, *The History of Mercyhurst College: Golden Anniversary 1926-1976*, 3

⁴Taylor 3

⁵Gary Bukowski, *Mercyhurst College- The First Decade*. Thesis. Mercyhurst College. 1973, 1

⁶Taylor, 13

⁷Strausbaugh, 14

⁸Bukowski, 7

⁹Strausbaugh, 14

¹⁰Taylor, 7

The final payment for construction of the school was made in May 1928.¹¹ Later that year, the official Charter was granted by the state of Pennsylvania, allowing the college to grant degrees that would be recognizable throughout the state, and eventually the United States.¹² Mother Borgia, along with **Monsignor William Sullivan** (the first Chaplain at Mercyhurst), **Sister Pierre Wilbert** (who taught biology), and **Michael Relihan** (The first lay, male faculty member who taught education from 1927-1959), travelled to Harrisburg to receive the Charter.¹³ Sister Eustace Taylor later recalled that “Mother Borgia’s story [about the Charter] was always climaxed by a picture of the Mercyhurst family waiting, with lights aglow, until, in the early morning hours, as the car bearing the delegation turned into the Mercyhurst driveway.”¹⁴ To commemorate this important part of Mercyhurst’s past, the school community planted the **Charter Oak Tree** on October 10, 1928.¹⁵ Because the location of the tree was lost to the passage of time, it is unknown whether this landmark tree survives or not.¹⁶

The early years of *The Merciad*, the school’s student-run newspaper, illustrate the close-knit college community that the Sisters were able to establish on The Hill. First published in December 1929, *The Merciad* was initially only distributed once or twice every year and held an array of inside jokes, poems commentary about campus topics, announcements about clubs and classes, as well as births, marriages, deaths, and student travel plans.¹⁷ The *Mercyhurst Magazine* and the *Praeterita* (First called *The Pioneer*, but now known as the *Senior Annual*) were also published on campus to showcase events and life on campus. Clubs and organizations on campus flourished and changed as the larger culture and society beyond changed. At first, notable clubs were Glee Club, Sodality, and

¹¹ Bukowski, 10

¹² Bukowski, 10

¹³ Roy Strausbaugh, *History of Mercyhurst College* (Working title). 2011.5, 13

¹⁴ Taylor, 10

¹⁵ Bukowski, 3

¹⁶ Earleen Glaser, Interview. Erie, PA: Mercyhurst College, March-May 2011.

¹⁷ *The Merciad*, Vol. 1 No. 1 Dec. 1929, Glaser

Pegasus Club.¹⁸ Today, dozens of student clubs and organizations are recognized, but *The Merciad* remains the longest standing, student-run organization on campus.

The physical plant of the campus expanded as the student body grew and their educational needs demanded additional accommodations and services. Before there was a student union, the young women of Mercyhurst turned the “**Roost**” – an old farmhouse left by the previous owner of the land – into a lounge and gathering area.¹⁹ There was even a Roost Club while it was in use from 1934-1940.²⁰ Destroyed by fire in 1951, the Roost was eventually replaced by the **Carolyn Hermann Student Union**.²¹

Christ the King Chapel and **O’Neill Bell Tower** were dedicated in 1932, soon after classes began at the school.²² Built in 1931, Christ the King Chapel was intended to honor **James, O’Neill**, husband of **Orva O’Neill**’s.²³ Orva was the sister-in-law to two Sisters devoted to Mercyhurst (Sister Xavier O’Neill and Sister Regis O’Neill).²⁴ James O’Neill was the head of the Prairie Oil and Gas Company and was most likely going to fund the construction until his connection to the infamous “Teapot Dome scandal” was revealed.²⁵ After his death, Orva decided to fund the construction of the chapel. Another one of the most treasured parts of campus, the **Grotto**, was spearheaded by Monsignor Richard Sullivan.²⁶ Construction of the Grotto began simultaneous to the onset of the Great Depression. Monsignor Sullivan and the Sisters served meals to local unemployed men in exchange for their help crafting the beautiful stone work of the Grotto.²⁷

¹⁸ Strausbaugh, 16

¹⁹ Taylor, 8

²⁰ Strausbaugh, Ch. 3 pg. 11

²¹ *The Merciad*, Vol. XVI Oct. 24, 1945

²² Strausbaugh, 28

²³ Strausbaugh, 29

²⁴ Strausbaugh, 27

²⁵ Strausbaugh, 27

²⁶ Taylor, 8

²⁷ Taylor, 8

With 104 students on campus in 1931, campus expansion continued.²⁸ **Weber Hall**, the building now adjoined to the library, was architecturally designed by **Brandon Smith**, who is also responsible for the purchase of the magnificent front gates that welcome students and visitors to the campus.²⁹ The gates, once belonging to **Harry K. Thaw**, the wealthy son of a Pittsburgh industrialist, were sold to the Sisters for \$125.00 in 1949—a cheap price made possible by one of the most infamous crimes of the twentieth century.³⁰ At the turn of the century, Thaw was married to Evelyn Nesbit, a famous artists’ model and chorus girl who had an affair with the well-known architect, Stanford White. In his rage, in 1906 Thaw killed White at Madison Square Garden (which he had designed). Thaw was twice tried for the murder and spent years in an asylum. When his estate was later sold, Brandon Smith astutely made the purchase of the college’s now-signature front gates.³¹

As the years passed, the college continued to respond to the needs of the students, the slowly diminishing numbers of the Mercy Sister community, and a changing society. During the 1960s, **Sister (and Mother Superior) Carolyn Herrmann** led the discussion among the Sisters and lay professors of the college that resulted in a momentous governance decision: for the first time Mercyhurst would not be governed solely by the Sisters of Mercy.³² On March 4, 1967, a new constitution was adopted which affirmed the college’s mission, but allowed for an increased role for lay leaders in the governance of the institution, and stipulated the appointment of the President—in contrast to the tradition of the Mother Superior serving in that role.³³ It was, as Sister Eustace Taylor described it, “a new formula for Christian Liberal Education and training.”³⁴

²⁸ Taylor

²⁹ Strausbaugh, Ch. 3 pg. 10

³⁰ Strausbaugh, 10

³¹ Strausbaugh, 10

³² Strausbaugh, 8

³³ Taylor, 16

³⁴ Taylor, 16

Bigger changes were ahead at the end of the turbulent decade in America: in 1969, the school granted the first co-ed class diplomas and **Marion Shane** was approved as the first male president of the college.³⁵ New programs, like dance and sports medicine, were established, which increased attendance greatly. In 1974, the total enrollment increased by 617 students, which was a far jump from the original 12 graduates in 1927.³⁶ New dormitories, like **McCauley** and **Baldwin**, were built and local apartments, including what became the **Mercy Suites** and **Briggs Apartments**, were purchased for student use. In 1996, as the dance department became larger and the need for more performance space on campus became apparent, the **Mary D'Angelo Performing Arts Center (PAC)** was built. The PAC could accommodate much larger numbers of people than the **Taylor Little Theater**. The library, originally constructed in 1971, was enlarged and renovated numerous times to keep up with the growing demand for larger collections and for modern technology.³⁷ The 3rd floor, **Weber Hall** (dedicated in 1951),³⁸ was transformed from the dance space to the **Carolyn Hermann Reading Room** to meet needs of the students and increasing need for computers.³⁹

Other activities which are prominent on campus are athletics. The first team established on campus was the girl's field hockey team.⁴⁰ After which, basketball was added and competed against smaller local teams, like "General Electric."⁴¹ Various sports (ranked and intramural) were popular on campus, especially after the school was co-ed. In 1971, Mercyhurst men's basketball and rowing competed in their first game and race.⁴² *The Merciad*s published throughout the 1980s acknowledge the fact that a football team should be formed. In 1981, the Laker football team played and won in their first game.⁴³ Later, the first home game was played on **Tulio**

³⁵ Strausbaugh

³⁶ Strausbaugh, 46

³⁷ Strausbaugh, Ch. 5 Pg. 17

³⁸ Strausbaugh Ch. 3 Pg. 11

³⁹ *Mercyhurst Magazine*, Vol. 2 No. 2 1984, 9-12

⁴⁰ Glaser

⁴¹ *The Merciad*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Dec. 1929

⁴² The first football victory and first rowing race. Photos. Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center. Mercyhurst College in Erie, PA. Collection Album D No. 317. Pg. 69, 29.

⁴³ *The Merciad*, Vol. 53 No. 10, January 9, 1981

Field in 1996.⁴⁴ Until the early 1980s, students accommodated the campus's indoor tennis court and auditorium for sports. May 17, 1983, the groundbreaking for the **MAC** (Mercyhurst Athletic Center) occurred.⁴⁵

Today, the Mercyhurst campus continues to evolve and student life continues to change. **Warde Hall**, was built in 2009 as the first co-ed dormitory on campus. **Preston Hall**, originally built as housing for Sisters who taught on campus, evolved into offices.⁴⁶ **Egan Hall** was also transformed from dorm rooms into offices in the fall of 2009. Academic programs have been added that continue to serve the needs and desires of students and larger changes in the world beyond our gates. The Sisters of Mercy and the college commitment to environmental sustainability and global responsibility is now evident across the campus with solar panels, a green roof, and three geothermal buildings (including the **Performing Arts Center** and **Hirt Academic Center**, 2003).

Some prominent events which previously took place on campus, like the annual **Bishop's Day** (Signifies Bishop Gannon's first formal visit to the campus) have been lost to time, while others, such as the **Mass of the Holy Spirit**, live on. **May Day**, when the girls would vote for a **May Day** queen who would crown the statue of **Mary** in the grotto, followed by a large court of other students and many audience members, has also faded into history. The spectacular **4th of July** events, held for many years on the Erie main campus and the North East campus, provided entertainment and fireworks for the members of the community to enjoy.⁴⁷ The campus now has and hosts many sports teams and games, as well as dance and music performances by both students and well-known artists. Whether sponsored by **SAC** (Student Activities Council), **MSG** (Mercyhurst Student Government), **Campus Ministry**, or an independent **RSCO** (Recognized Student Club or Organization), there are various programs and events which keep students occupied and the campus full of life.

⁴⁴ *The Merciad*, Vol 70 No. 1, May 9, 1996

⁴⁵ Strausbaugh, Ch. 7 Pg. 5

⁴⁶ Strausbaugh, Ch. 3 Pg. 11

⁴⁷ Glaser

When Mercyhurst opened its doors for the first classes on September 7, 1926, the initial goal was to educate women who could potentially carry on the Mercy tradition and teach at the school as Sisters of Mercy. Female students who attended Mercyhurst during that time created a tight-knit bond within the gates of “Mercyworld.” Through the poems and stories present in the first published *Merciads*, one can feel like they know the characteristics and personality traits of almost every student in the class. The original, Catholic mission of the college has not changed as the college moves with the flow of time. Numerous times in the history of the campus, students have gotten together in tough times and relied on the community present. Every year, students look forward to traditional events, like the Mass of the Holy Spirit, Christmas on Campus, or Spring Fest. And every year, students live out the Mission of the college and the Sisters of Mercy by living the Mercy spirit of learning how to reach out into the greater community.

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