

MERCYHURST COLLEGE — THE FIRST DECADE

by

Gary Leon Bukowski

EDITORIAL NOTE: Fall, 1976, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Mercyhurst College. Mr. Bukowski's article, which was completed in 1973 as his senior thesis at the College, studies the College's early years in depth.

I

One of the first owners of the 75 acres that Mercyhurst College now inhabits was a man by the name of David Wallace. The Wallaces were one of Erie's original frontier families. It was in the year 1854 that the Wallaces decided to sell their 75 acres. In fact, to be more accurate, it was on April 1, 1854 that the transaction was carried out.¹

The buyer of the land was Sebastian Rinderle who paid a grand total of \$2,150 for the 75 acres.² Rinderle turned the acreage into a farm which he eventually sold to a Morrow B. Lowry on April 1, 1871 for the price of \$15,000.³

Of all the previous owners, Morrow B. Lowry probably had the most interesting history. At the time, Lowry was supposed to be one of Erie's greatest characters. He was an outspoken man and fighter; he meant what he said at all times, and in all places. He was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, so close in fact that Lowry and a friend of his, General Kane, went to Washington and practically kidnapped Lincoln, and had him in the woods near Kane, Pennsylvania, for nearly five days. They wanted the Great Emancipator to get away from his troubles. Also, Morrow B. Lowry had a lot to do with Lincoln winning the election in 1860.⁴

In Morrow B. Lowry's will he gave his grandchild, Annie Lyon, Mercyhurst's 75 acres.⁵ Annie Lyon was the owner until the Sisters of Mercy of Titusville and Crawford County purchased the land in the early 1920's.

The Sisters purchased the property because they were thinking of building a college for women in Erie. But first, they had to get permission from Bishop Gannon and that they did in 1921.⁶

The Sisters chose Erie because Father Gaston, the founder of Boston College, had advised them to build their proposed college in a large city and on a hill overlooking the water.⁷ So it was that Mother Borgia, Superior of the

¹ Erie Court House, **Deed Book I**, February 6, 1854, p. 438.

² *Ibid.*

³ Erie Court House, **Deed Book 41**, May 31, 1871, p. 345.

⁴ Obtained from a newspaper story by Tom Sterrett. This clipping is contained in a book of newspaper clippings about Erie personalities in the Reference Room of the Erie Public Library.

⁵ Erie Court House, **Will Book G**, March 1875, p. 549.

⁶ Some of the Sisters of Mercy in personal interviews expressed the view that Bishop Gannon originally did not want to grant permission to the Sisters of Mercy because Villa Maria College had recently started. The Bishop reportedly reasoned that the city did not need another girls' college, and tried to persuade the Sisters to build a High School but eventually gave way before their determination.

⁷ Father Gaston was giving a retreat in Titusville to the Sisters of Mercy when the subject of a new college came up.

Titusville Motherhouse, accompanied by Sister Collette, Treasurer; and Mother Pierre, Assistant Supervisor; came to Erie in search of a site for their perspective institution of learning.

The Sisters began their search by securing the service of Mr. T. O. Andrews, a real estate agent, who was beginning a million dollar development in Glenwood Hills. During the year, Mr. Andrews took the Sisters around the city looking for the proper site, but the search was in vain. Then one day, Sister Pierre's cousin took the Sisters to the Annie Lyon farm, whose name was now Annie Cornillier through marriage. The farm had a beautiful view of the lake and it was on a hilltop.

Mother Borgia, however, was afraid that the site was too far away from the city of Erie. It must be remembered that in 1920, the city limits ended around 26th Street and the Cornhillier farm was in Millcreek. There were only two buildings on the property at the time of purchase. One of them was the Home Management House which still stands today and a barn which was situated in the area where today's main entrance to the Administration Building is located.⁸ All the surrounding area were barren fields.

Nevertheless, the more the Sisters looked at the site, the more it interested them. Finally, they bought the land and the deed was signed on September 30, 1922, at 11:47 a.m.⁹ The Sisters had only \$65,000.00, and Sister Borgia had a difficult time deciding whether she should spend all the money on the land or save some for the building. The Sisters, with an eye for the future finally decided to buy all 75 acres for the total price of \$51,000.00¹⁰

The big step had been taken--the Sisters of Mercy had the land, now they had to build a college.

In looking for an architect, Reverend Gaston was once again a decisive figure, for it was he, who suggested the architect to design Mercyhurst College. The architect was F. Ferdinand Durang of Philadelphia, who was one of the country's foremost designers of educational buildings. Father Gaston had warned the Sisters that they must choose only the best, for they would have to live with their choice for a long time.

F. F. Durang finished the design of the main building in 1922, and the Sisters spent two years studying the results. Opinions of all the Sisters were sought. In fact, a small model of the plans were placed in the Sisters' recreational area. For two years, they were studied and re-studied.¹¹

The original plans consisted of a complex which contained a dorm, classrooms, and an administration area (now the area encompassed in Old Main and Egan Hall). Because of the additional cost, plans for a chapel were temporarily shelved. The original plans also called for a six or seven story tower, but this idea was finally abandoned because of Erie's high winds. The present tower was not even started until 1932.

The H. J. Conrath Company of Erie was selected as the general contractors, and ground breaking ceremonies finally took place on September 8, 1924.

⁸ There is some dispute as to the exact location of the barn. According to Harvey Lorei, a member of the Mercyhurst maintenance team, the barn was situated near the front entrance to Old Main. Mr. Lorei's uncle was a farmer on the Mercyhurst property before the Sisters of Mercy arrived.

⁹ Erie Court House, **Deed Book 268**, September 30, 1922, p. 400.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ **The Merciad**, March 5, 1943, p. 3.

Msgr. Cauley, pastor of Saint Patrick's Church, taking Bishop Gannon's place, who was in Europe, turned the first shovel of earth in the area that is now called Old Main. Mother Borgia Egan was given the spade and it was passed down to the other Sisters who shared this historic moment. It was estimated that it would take eighteen months to finish the project, and the opening date was scheduled for September of 1926.

That first winter brought problems, for it was an early, as well as a harsh one. The workers had hardly begun work on the digging for the huge foundation when the winter slowed them up and eventually forced them to quit work until spring.

When work was resumed in the spring, much of the earlier work had to be redone. Not until August of 1925 did the building start to take shape.

It was during August that the laying of the cornerstone took place. The exact spot of the placement was the extreme north corner of Egan Hall, (near the present cafeteria entrance). The principal speaker at the cornerstone ceremony was the Rev. William J. Kirby, S.T.L., professor of sociology at the Catholic University of America. Besides Msgr. Kirby were Rt. Rev. John Mark Gannon who officiated, as well as Rt. Rev. Msgr. Peter Cauley and Rt. Rev. Msgr. Edward Hasse.¹²

Rev. Kirby characterized Mercyhurst as "a new outpost of eternity and a new spiritual laboratory."¹³ To add to the occasion, Bishop Gannon presented the Sisters with a check for \$5,000.00, and then F. F. Durang presented one for \$2,000.00. Over 5,000 people were present for the laying of Erie's first College Cornerstone.

The contract had called for completion of the building by the Spring of 1926. But Mr. Conrath needed another six months. Even by the time summer rolled around, there was grave doubt among the contractors as to whether the school could be opened on the scheduled date.

More workers were brought to Mercyhurst in a valiant effort to meet the deadline. In fact, there were two shifts working--one during the day, the other at night. Prospects were brightened; it looked as though they might make it in the two weeks that remained when a sudden strike halted all the work.

What was so ironic about this situation was no union principle had been violated on the Mercyhurst property. The difficulty had occurred miles away when H. J. Conrath's son used non-union workers to build a garage. In retaliation, all Conrath workers went on strike to bring the son to terms.¹⁴

The determined Sisters then took matters into their own hands to insure that Mercyhurst would open its doors as scheduled on September 7, 1926.

Time was running out, for the opening was only ten days away, so Sister Borgia called in all the Sisters from chapter houses who were skilled in the use of paint and varnish brushes.

This determined crew viewed the condition of the strike delayed building

¹² Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives, "Articles on Mercyhurst College." This Archives contains newspaper articles, documents, personal letters, pictures, and individual stories written by various Sisters. Many of the articles, as well as the newspaper clippings, have no reference or footnotes, and in many cases, no author is named. They are valuable, however, since they often contain personal recollections of the pioneer Sisters, and also records unavailable elsewhere.

¹³ *The Lake Shore Visitor*, October 8, 1926, Section Three, p. 7.

¹⁴ Personal interview with Sister Mary Rachel Weber, October 13, 1972. Sister Mary Rachel was a distant relative of Conrath and was familiar with the incident.

with dismay. The most pressing need were the floors of the dorm which had to be sanded and varnished. With advice from the idle strikers, the Sisters set to work with huge sanding machines on the floors of Egan Hall.

Work continued day and night from the Superior, Sister Borgia Egan, right down to the youngest novice. In those days there were no elevators nor men to carry furniture from the receiving area which was in the serving room of the present cafeteria. As soon as one crew of Sisters put the furniture together, another carried it up the stairs to its destination.

Although the strike ended on Thursday, September 2, the classrooms were still unfinished, and only a few days remained before the opening. When the whistle blew at 12 noon on the Saturday before Labor Day, the Sisters immediately took up where the workmen had left off. They worked into the evening applying coats of varnish to the present floors of Old Main.¹⁵ After such yeoman efforts, the doors of Mercyhurst opened in time to meet its grade and high school students. Since College Registration was scheduled for September 20, the workmen had time to finish the college classrooms and labs on the second floor. The third floor of Old Main, however, wasn't finished until much later.

A total of 21 freshmen were enrolled in Mercyhurst's first class. Four sophomores were also accepted. So, with 25 students, Mercyhurst College began its existence.

Those first students were of the same pioneer stock as the Sisters. On the first day, the front campus was just one large mass of mud with a huge hole near the present entrance to Old Main. The students had to walk over planks to get into the building, and a tractor stood near-by to pull unfortunate vehicles out of the mud.

The Sister's troubles weren't over yet. While the Tudor-style main building looked beautiful, there were some serious problems with the exterior brick work. In fact, when it rained, towels had to be placed around the first floor windows because of leaks. There was also another problem. The cement between the bricks was starting to crumble.¹⁶ Until something was done about these situations, the Sisters refused to make the final payment to the contractor, H.J. Conrath. Durang also refused to issue a certificate stating that the building had been finished until Conrath made corrections. The whole matter finally ended in court.

Clarence Conrath, a relation of the late H. J. Conrath (who died on February 24, 1927), brought suit against the College for final payment in May of 1928. In his suit he stated that the Mercyhurst building was completed on October 1, 1926, in strict accordance to plans and specifications, and since the building had been completed he was entitled to a certificate of approval from the architect.¹⁷

Conrath insisted that the work had been done in strict conformity to the plans and orders of the architect. He also said that H. J. Conrath had told F. F. Durang that the mortar would crumble and fall out under Erie's wet

¹⁵ Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives, "Articles on Mercyhurst College", and from the personal recollections of Sister Angelica Cummings, R.S.M., August 23, 1972.

¹⁶ Personal interviews with Sister Eustace Taylor and Sister Jane Frances Raffeto, September 4, 1972.

¹⁷ Erie Court House, *Statement of Claim*, May 2, 1928. Clarence F. Conrath, Plaintiff, versus Sisters of Mercy, Defendant, May Term 315, Section 9, 13, 14, pp. 2, 3.

weather, but Durang had insisted that his mixture be used.¹⁸ Conrath concluded by insisting that the Sisters pay the \$22,599.73 owed on the building, plus all interest that had accumulated since January 13, 1928.¹⁹

The Sisters, however, told a different story.

They were prepared to fight for what they paid for -- a structurally sound building! In the final amended affidavit of defense, the Sisters denied they were indebted to Conrath for \$22,599.73, and they also denied that Conrath had complied with provisions of the written contract.²⁰ They charged that he had not used the correct mixture of cement; that the mixture should have consisted of one part of cement, three parts of sand, and ten per cent of lime paste.²¹ Conrath, the Sisters stated, had used more than ten per cent lime paste, with the result that the mortar crumbled easily. In addition, the windows leaked, and there was an assortment of other problems. The Sisters concluded that Conrath owed them \$8,345.29, since the necessary repairs would cost over \$30,000.00²²

The case was apparently never settled in court. The original hearing was discontinued until the next term of court because a juror withdrew. When the court session resumed, the case never re-appeared. From all indications, the case was settled out of court, with all three parties -- the Sisters, Conrath, and Durang -- paying a share of the cost of repairs.²³ Apparently, Conrath got at least some of his \$22,000.00 and the Sisters succeeded in forcing some repairs. Old Main and Egan, however, bear the evidence of the bitter argument, since different portions of the building require re-pointing almost yearly. One building contractor commented several years ago, that the College would have to repair the crumbling mortar until the entire brick of the original building had been replaced.

The next building the College needed was a Chapel, both for the Sisters and the students. The temporary Chapel was the present home of the Business Office.²⁴ It might have remained the Chapel for some time, but as one account has it, a wealthy woman, Mrs. Orva O'Neil, was attending services at Mercyhurst one day and to her dismay, had to kneel out in the hall. After this uncomfortable experience, Mrs O'Neil suggested that the Sisters build a real Chapel with enough seats for all.

Mrs. O'Neil was in a position to help the Sisters, since her husband, Mr. James E. O'Neil, had two Sisters in the Mercy Order: Sister M. Regis and Mother M. Xavier, both of whom were stationed at Mercyhurst. The O'Neil family had been raised in near-by Titusville.²⁵

A genial, ambitious man, Mr. O'Neil, eventually became the President and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 16 and 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 22. Apparently, Mr. Conrath had a point because the Sisters who worked on the building during the strike, had actually occupied the building. Therefore, it was an act of acceptance before the proposed date. Because of this, the Sisters in later buildings waited for the official word before occupying them.

²⁰ Erie Court House, *Amended Affidavit of Defense*, July 1928, Par. 13, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Par. 16, p. 6; par. 17, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, Par. 27, p. 14.

²³ In October of 1930, the case was discontinued until the next term of court. But the next term of court never materialized. From all evidence, there may have been an agreement between Mercyhurst, Conrath and Durang. The actual details of the settlement are unknown.

²⁴ It should be noted that the original plans of Old Main called for a Chapel, but the available money wasn't adequate at the time Old Main was completed.

²⁵ *The Lake Shore Visitor*, October 8, 1926, Section Three, p. 3.

General Manager of Prairie Oil and Petroleum Company, which was the largest and most important oil company in the mid-west during the twenties. Mr. O'Neil received a \$50,000.00 annual salary plus his stock options.²⁶ Unfortunately, however, his friends became involved in the nationally famous Teapot Dome Scandal.

Thomas A. Bailey, a well-known historian, described the Teapot Dome Scandal in this manner:

“Loose morality and get-rich quickism of the Harding Era manifested themselves spectacularly in a series of scandals . . . Most shocking of all was the Teapot Dome Scandal; an affair which involved priceless naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome (Wyoming) and Elk Hills (California). In 1921, the Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, induced his colleague, Secretary to the Navy Denby, to transfer these valuable properties to the Interior Department. President Harding indiscreetly signed the secret order. Fall then quietly leased the lands of oilmen Harry F. Sinclair and Edward L. Doheny; but not until he had received a bribe (“Loan”) of \$100,000.00 from Doheny and about three times that amount in all from Sinclair.

Teapot Dome finally came to a whistling boil. Details of the crooked transaction gradually began to leak out in March, 1923, two years after Harding took office. Fall, Sinclair, and Doheny were indicted the next year, but the case dragged through the courts until 1929.²⁷

James O'Neil had first become involved with Sinclair when he and John F. Overfield, the famous Pittsburgh capitalist, helped Sinclair get started in the oil business.²⁸ He continued his association with Sinclair in several business ventures, including the formation of a holding company (Continental Trading Company), a venture which netted O'Neil and his friends over a \$2,000,000.00 profit. When the Teapot Dome affair finally broke in 1924, O'Neil left the country to take up residence in Cannes, France, not far from the French Riviera. He knew he would be called to testify against his friend Sinclair, and he did not want to do this; nor was he up to the strain of courtrooms with his serious heart condition. He knew that the United States Government could not force him to testify as long as he was in France. The Government, however, sent Secret Service agents to find both him and H. M. Blackmer, an oil business associate, who had also gone into exile in France.²⁹

John Starr, and M.R. Werner in their book **Teapot Dome** have stated:

The French Police, cooperating with J. E. Murphy, the Secret Service man assigned to find Blackmer and O'Neil, turned up a bewildering variety of rumors about their whereabouts. They were reported to be on an extended automobile trip in the Balkans. O'Neil was said to be hiding in the Swiss Alps, and Blackmer to be living in a

²⁶ **High Cost of Gasoline and Other Petroleum Products**, “Hearings before a subcommittee of the committee on manufactures, United States Senate, Sixty-seventh Congress, Second and Fourth Sessions, Pursuant to S. Res. 295. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923) Volume I, p. 18.

²⁷ Thomas Bailey, **The American Pageant**, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1961). pp. 784-785.

²⁸ Hartzell Spence Ed., **A Great Name in Oil-Sinclair Through Fifty Years**, (F. W. Dodge Company and McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1966), p. 14.

²⁹ Werner and Starr, **Teapot Dome**, (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), pp. 51-54, 182, 187.

Sultans' palace in Morocco. Another report said that O'Neil entered a monastery in Spain and had taken the vow of silence.³⁰

The Secret Service eventually found Blackmer, but not O'Neil, who seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Where O'Neil actually was remained a question for some time. It was reported that he crossed the border many times and hid in San Remo, Italy, to avoid being served a summons to testify.³¹ Starr and Werner reported:

O'Neil could not be found. His son, Wayne O'Neil, had bought the Villa San Patrizio in Bordighera, Italy, and his wife had been found in Cannes, but neither of them could be forced to give the whereabouts of the father and husband. The Government advertised in the Paris edition of the **New York Herald** with a picture of Mr. O'Neil but it got only false alarms in return.³²

Mr. O'Neil had a different story. He said that he made no effort to hide but insisted that he had registered under his own name at the Grand Hotel in Cannes, France. He said that no effort was made to serve him with a subpoena, though the government agents knew where he was 'at every hour of the day'.³³

Another picture of O'Neil, besides that of a fugitive, appeared during the trial. Mr. W. S. Fitzpatrick, Chairman of the Board of Prairie Oil and Gas Company, offered the following remarks about O'Neil:

We all loved Mr. O'Neil, and love him yet, and I would do as much for Mr. O'Neil — he made all of us, brought us up and gave us the positions we now have. He taught us the business, and this is the only thing that anyone of us ever knew or ever heard of in connection with him that might be questioned, and we love him and will do as much for him, all of us, as we would do for our own family.³⁴

In October of 1919, O'Neil openly stated that he had no relevant testimony to offer and, therefore, say no reason for such surveillance as the United States Government had provided. He never did testify in the case and continued to reside in Cannes, France. In 1931, he sent for his two sisters, Sister Regis and Mother Xavier, both of whom resided at Mercyhurst College. The Sisters received the letter in the early part of 1931. The letter contained a travel check for \$2,000.00, and an invitation to visit O'Neil at his French Villa. Sister Regis and Mother Xavier accepted the invitation and it was during their visit that they suggested to their brother that he help build a Chapel for Mercyhurst. He replied that he "would think about it."

The Sisters later reported that their brother wished to return to the United States but was too sick to make the trip. They recalled that to celebrate the 4th of July, Mr. O'Neil fixed up his house with American flags, and held a party to celebrate the Declaration of Independence. During their visit, James O'Neil

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³¹ *The New York Times*, August 25, 1931, p. 31.

³² Werner and Starr, p. 228.

³³ *The New York Times*, August 25, 1931, p. 31.

³⁴ Werner and Starr, pp. 256-257.

also remarked, that he hoped to return to the States to die. His wish was never granted; for two moths later in August, 1931, he passed away of pneumonia. Before he died, however, he made it clear to his wife, Mrs. Orva O'Neil, that he would finance the building of a Chapel and Tower at Mercyhurst.³⁵

A year later, in October of 1932, the ground was broken for Mercyhurst,' second building, and on November 5, 1932, the cornerstone of the Tower was laid in the presence of Mrs. O'Neil and her daughter, Mary. The Tower consisted of four floors; a reception hall on the first, a library room on the second, an assembly area on the third, and sleeping quarters on the fourth. The Chapel contained room for 500 people plus one main altar and two side altars.

The architect was Walter T. Monahan and the Contractor, H. Platt Company, both of Erie. Since it was the Depression Period, the Sisters announced that they would hire only local help. The Tower and Chapel were expected to be completed in eight to ten months.³⁶

The financial arrangements called for Mrs. O'Neil to give the Sisters \$175,000.00 in three checks to pay for the building. The cost of the handsome edifice was estimated at \$100,000.00 and the furnishings (organ, etc.) at \$75,000.00³⁷

The Chapel and Tower were completed in 1933, but it was then decided to add a "Queen's Chapel." This Chapel was an exact replica of a Chapel that Mrs. O'Neil had seen in England which impressed her greatly. Mrs. O'Neil wanted this Chapel to be a burial vault for herself and her family. She stated in her will that if she died in the United States, she was to be buried at Mercyhurst in the "Queen's Chapel" and her husband's body was to be brought from France to rest beside hers. In addition, Mrs. O'Neil's two sisters in law, Sister Regis and Mother Xavier, were also to be buried in the Chapel.

The four Chapel vaults have never been used. Since Mrs. O'Neil died in France, and not in the United States, she was buried next to her husband in the Church "Notre Dame des Pins" at Cannes, France, where she and her husband still rest. Sister Regis and Mother Xavier preferred to be buried with the other Sisters in Saint Catherine's Cemetary in Titusville, and that is where they now repose.

Over the years, the beautiful Queen's Chapel has increasingly become the subject of ghost stories that tell of the restless souls of the O'Neil's still seeking to return to America and Mercyhurst.³⁸

Starting a college requires more than just constructing buildings; it also involves securing the necessary charters of authorization from the proper authorities. It is interesting to note that even before ground was broken for Old Main, Mother Borgia and Sister Pierre Wilbert called on the State Department of Education regarding a charter for Mercyhurst. They were informed at the time that the State did not normally grant full authorization until the first class had been graduated.

This was a serious handicap for the young college because it meant that the

³⁵ Personal interview with Sister Eustace Taylor, October 7, 1972.

³⁶ **The Lake Shore Visitor**, November 11, 1931, p. 1.

³⁷ Personal interview with Sister M. Benedicta, October 2, 1972. She was the Treasurer of the College while the Tower and Chapel were built.

³⁸ The most common of these stories can be found in the Appendix C.

students attending Mercyhurst were doing so without any assurance that their degrees might be formally recognized. The Sisters realized they had to obtain a charter as soon as possible for Mercyhurst.

In the summer of 1928, they improved the school facilities by finishing the third floor of Old Main adding new dormitory rooms, a social room, and an art studio. Then they petitioned the State again for a charter before their first students graduated in 1929.

The State Department of Education finally replied by requesting that Mercyhurst representatives appear in Harrisburg to present the College's Charter petition on October 5, 1928. Some of the more important provisions of the original charter were as follows:

The undersigned, all of whom are citizens of Pennsylvania and residents of the County of Erie, in said Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, having associated themselves together for the purposes and upon the terms and by the name hereinafter set forth, to the end that they may be duly incorporated, according to law, hereby certify:

FIRST: The name of the intended corporation is MERCYHURST COLLEGE.

SECOND: The purposes for which the said corporation is formed are as follows:-

The establishment and conduct of a college for women, with power to confer degrees in art, pure and applied science and literature.

EIGHTH: The number of directors is fixed at five, and the names and residences of those who are chosen directors for the first year are as follows:

Sr. M. Borgia Egan	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Pierre Wilbert	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. Collette Brown	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. Mercedes Prendergast	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Evangelista Forsythe	Erie, Pennsylvania

NINTH: The amount of assets in the possession of the subscribers hereto which is to be devoted to the purpose of establishing and conducting said college is One Million Six Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$1,600,000.00) in land and buildings; Thirty Nine Thousand Dollars (\$39,000.00) by the capitalization of contributed services of twelve professors at Twenty Five Hundred Dollars (\$2,500.00) per year, and six instructors at Fifteen Hundred Dollars (\$1,500.00) per year, and in addition thereto the contributed earnings of One Hundred and Twenty Five (125) persons not capitalized. The minimum number of persons whom it is intended to regularly employ as members of the faculty of said corporation is eighteen.

WITNESS our hands and seals this tenth day of March 1927.

Sister M. Borgia Egan
Sister M. Pierre Wilbert
Sister M. Collette Brown

Sister M. Mercedes Prendergast

Sister M. Regis O'Neil³⁹

So Mother Borgia, Sister Pierre Wilbert, Reverend William L. Sullivan and Michael J. Relihan set out for the ten - twelve hour drive to Harrisburg on October 4. On the 5th of October, the four Mercyhurst representatives arrived at the Pennsylvania Educational Building at 10:00 a.m. Their meeting was with the State Council which had 15 members chosen from various colleges in Pennsylvania. In front of each council member was a copy of the second Mercyhurst Catalogue.

Mother Borgia opened the Mercyhurst presentation by stating the College policies, the recent improvements, and the future plans of the institution. The other three Mercyhurst representatives also spoke and were questioned by the council members. The final consensus was that Mercyhurst had progressed so well that their Charter should be granted immediately. It was a great moment for Mercyhurst. Mother Borgia quickly relayed the message to Erie by wire, and the triumphant four left from Harrisburg around three o'clock. They arrived in Erie around three o'clock in the morning and as they entered the Mercyhurst driveway, all the lights in the school were turned on. When Mother Borgia and her group emerged from the car, they were met with applause from the students and faculty. Despite the lateness of the hour, a small party was immediately held as the College celebrated its "official birth."⁴⁰

A few days later, on October 10, 1928, the Mercyhurst community celebrated the historic occasion by planting a Charter Oak (which died in the first winter). Later the event was recalled by annually holding a Charter Day.⁴¹ The first Charter Day was held in 1935 on October 10, which was Mother Borgia's Feast Day. The purpose of Charter Day was to remind students for years to come of the day's importance to them and to the school. Each year a program was presented which recounted the founding of the college, the obtaining of the Charter, and the planting of the Charter Oak. Mother Borgia's Feast Day was also celebrated on Charter Day, even though it was five days later than the original Charter date⁴².

On Wednesday, June 4, 1929, less than six months after the Charter was received, Mercyhurst College graduated its' first Senior Class consisting of twelve students. Included in that historic class were: Eleanor Frances Krah, Margaret Mary Reese, Mary Ann Robaskiewicz, Mary Ellen Wilbert, Sister Mary Claudia Rich, Sister Mary Elizabeth Behr, Sister Mary Eustace Taylor, Sister Mary Inelda Brown, Sister Mary Jane Frances Raffetto, Sister Mary Jerome Allen, Sister Mary Suzanne Eimer, Sister Mary Victorine Monahan-

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The pioneer faculty of Mercyhurst was a hand-picked one. Years before the College was built, Mother Borgia took steps to insure that the future faculty received the best graduate training. Younger Sisters with intellectual promise

³⁹ Application for a Charter for Mercyhurst College. Submitted to the Court of Common Pleas of Erie County, Pennsylvania. No. 249, May Term 1927, Book 15, pp. 328-330, (Prothonotary Office). The complete original Charter Petition can be found in Appendix A.

⁴⁰ Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives, "Articles on Mercyhurst College."

⁴¹ The Lake Shore Visitor, October 19, 1928, p. 1.

⁴² The Merciad, October, 1935, p. 1.

⁴³ The Erie Daily Times, June 5, 1929, p. 1.

were sent off to such schools as Notre Dame, Catholic University, Michigan, and the University of Pittsburgh.

The first faculty consisted of 18 teachers and 2 administrators. Two of the first faculty are still actively in service at Mercyhurst: Sister Angelica of the Art Department, and Sister Mary Jane Frances, who first was assigned to the Music Department and now works in the Library. The other faculty and administrators were: Sister Pierre Wilbert, (Biology and Sociology); Sister Fidelis O'Connor, (Chemistry and Physics); Michael J. Relihan, (Education); Sister Philippa Kinnan, (English); Sister Mercedes Prendergast, (Romance Languages); Sister Mary Suzanne Eimer, (German); Sister Mary Anna Clark, (History); Sister Collett Brown, (Home Economics); Ruth Whalen (Home Economics); Sister Agatha Hogan, (Latin and Greek); Sister Liguori Robinson, (Library Science); Sister Clotilda Sullivan, (Mathematics); Sister Evangelista Forsythe, (Music); Reverend William L. Sullivan, (Philosophy and Religion); Sister Mary John Brown, (Music); Sister Claudia Rich, (Music). The two chief administrators were the Dean, Mother M. Borgia Egan, and Sister Mary Alice Weber, the Registrar.⁴⁴

Table I summarizes the faculty data for Mercyhurst's first decade of existence. The figures show that the faculty increased by almost 33% in the first ten years, but that the salaries and educational preparation changed very little. The Depression years, plus the fact that the faculty were almost all religious who returned their pay to the school, probably accounts for the lack of growth in faculty salaries.

TABLE I⁴⁵
MERCYHURST FACULTY 1926-1936

	1926	1936
Full Time	14	24
Part Time	6	3
B. A.	8	10
M. A.	10	12
Ph.D.	2	3
Salary Range	\$1,600.00-\$3,500.00	\$1,600.00-\$3,500.00

The enrollment of the school also grew steadily from 1926-1936. The first entering class consisted of 21 Freshmen and 4 Sophomores, but Table II shows that by 1931, there were four times as many students attending Mercyhurst, and by 1936, eight times as many.

⁴⁴ *Praeterita*, (Yearbook Published by the Senior Class), 1939, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Data obtained from duplicates of the annual reports sent to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Public Instruction in Harrisburg, from 1928 to 1936; annual report sent into National Catholic Education Association in Washington in 1934; annual reports sent to National Welfare Conference in Washington D.C. for 1928, 1931-32, 1933-34, 1935-36. (Duplicates of these reports can be found in the files of the Registrar's Office at Mercyhurst College).

TABLE II⁴⁶
MERCYHURST ENROLLMENT PATTERNS

	1926	1931	1936
Total Enrollment	25	104	198
Freshmen Enrollment	21	29	57

The growth in Freshmen from 1931 to 1936 is especially surprising since the Depression kept many students from attending college. One explanation for the large increase might be the increasing popularity of Mercyhurst among Public School Graduates. In 1931, only 15 of the 29 Freshmen were from Public Schools, whereas in 1936, 35 of the 57 were from Public Schools.⁴⁷ The costs for attending Mercyhurst did not change much throughout the first ten years.

TABLE III⁴⁸
MERCYHURST FEES

	1926	1931	1936
Matriculation Fees	5.00	5.00	10.00
Tuition	150.00	200.00	200.00
Room & Board	350.00	350.00	450.00
Other Fees	20.00	20.00	25.00

The original Mercyhurst curriculum was essentially one of the traditional Arts and Sciences. Home Economics was the only specialize program available. There was no Elementary Education or Business Departments. By 1936, however, Business had been added to the program, and as Table IV shows, it was largely responsible for the College growth in enrollment. Home Economics had also tripled its original size by 1937. While the College called itself a Liberal Arts School in the Catalogue, the figures indicate that over half the College was enrolled in vocational areas.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Data obtained from Mercyhurst College Catalogues from 1926-27, p. 3; from 1930-32, p. 7; from 1936-37, p. 8.

TABLE IV⁴⁹
MAJOR AREAS OF CONCENTRATION

	1931-32	1936-37
Arts and Sciences	76	82
Business	--	74
Home Economics	11	31
Others	17	11
	104	198

The Library, after a slow start, also experienced a rapid growth by 1936, especially after the Chapel and Tower were completed which made Room 206 (Old Main) available as a Library. Table V shows the growth in numbers of volumes in the Mercyhurst Library.

TABLE V⁵⁰
MERCYHURST LIBRARY HOLDINGS

	1929-30	1936-37
Volumes	8,500	13,000

Today, the present Learning Resource Center houses five times the number of books available in 1936-37.

While Mercyhurst's first decade had revealed substantial growth in all areas from students and faculty to library books and courses, there was also a corresponding strong development of the College's social and cultural life.

One of the more important formal events in school calendar was Bishop Gannon's annual visit which usually took place in October or November. One of the first recorded visits was on Tuesday, November 26, 1927. At this time, a play was performed entitled: "The Shepherd of His Flock," which was followed by a Mass, dinner, and the singing of the School Song. The evening concluded with an address by the Bishop to the assembled students and Sisters.

Mercyhurst also had its share of clubs and organizations. At various times from 1926-36, there was in addition to Student Government, a Great Books Club, English, an Art Club, International Relations Club, Sodality, Science Club, Order of Good Accountants Sorority, Glee Club, Janus Club, Math Club, Roost Club, Athletic Associations, Home Economics, Pegasus Club,

⁴⁹ Data gathered from duplicates of reports sent to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Public Instruction in Harrisburg, from 1928 to 1936-37.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Latin Club, Le Cercle Francais and Jane Adams Society. One of the more interesting aspects of the College program in the first decade was the number of outside speakers brought to the Campus. Perhaps the best known was Mayor La Guardia, who spoke at Mercyhurst on February 4, 1931. At the time, La Guardia spoke of the importance of women in politics, and cited as an example the influence of the daughter of William Jennings Bryan. On the way home, he excited the College by having his plane fly over Mercyhurst and dip the wings in salute.⁵¹

Another speaker who graced Mercyhurst with a visit was Rt. Rev. Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen. He gave a speech in Christ the King Chapel, in March of 1936, about the dangers of Communism.⁵²

The Mercyhurst Theatre also received its start at this time. One of the first plays produced by the College was the operetta, **The Wild Rose**, which took place at the Colonial Theatre on April 26 & 27, 1929. Some of the leading players included Nellie Guilfoyle, (who played the lead); Eleanor Krah, Margaret Reese and Barbara Wilbert. The Society page in the **Erie Dispatch Herald** had high praise for **The Wild Rose**:

It was . . . without a doubt, one of the most pleasing productions ever given in Erie by a group of students; from the raising of the curtain until the finale. The charming play was filled with bright song hits, clever lines and some really fine dancing. Especially commendable was the ensemble dancing, which showed excellent training.⁵³

The next year, the College switched to a musical comedy: **Maid of Toyko**, with a cast of 100 girls--almost the entire College.

Surpassing on every count, their last year's show, **Maid of Tokyo**, presented Thursday night at the Park Theatre, was as glittering, lively, and colorful a review as one might expect from many a professional company.

Indeed, it was the tempo of the performance more than anything else, which made it seem less amateur and more professional.⁵⁴

Mercyhurst College even had its own sorority formed by the non-resident students in 1930. The name of it was **Kappa Chi**, and its object was the stimulation of interest in College. It also cited as objectives, “. . . the promotion and encouragement of the mental and social developments of its members together with the cultivation of friendship, good fellowship, charity and helpfulness.”⁵⁵

In fact it was this group that initiated the Father-Daughter Weekend, which is still a popular event at Mercyhurst. There was even a Mother-Daughter Weekend initiated in June of 1930. However, this event did not have the lasting power of Father-Daughter Weekend and soon faded away. Unfortunately, the **Kappa Chi Sorority** died out in 1934 because of a loss of interest.

⁵¹ *The Merciad*, February 1931, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, April 1936, p. 1.

⁵³ *Erie Dispatch Herald*, April 27, 1929, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *The Erie Daily Times*, May 16, 1930, p. 13. Some other plays the College produced in that first decade included **Sally Ann**, **More Samples**, **Mignonette**, **Huckleberry Finn**, and **Step This Way**.

⁵⁵ *The Merciad*, June 1930, p. 11.

For the more athletic-minded Mercyhurst girls, the school provided active sports program after 1930. One of the first sports was field hockey, which was played behind the present outdoor tennis courts, on the area now called Tullio Field.

The first field hockey game was against Edinboro and Mercyhurst lost 5 - 0. Girls basketball was started in 1930 also. Scores of those first games in 1930-31 were:⁵⁶

Mercyhurst College	27	--	General Electric	42
Mercyhurst College	23	--	Argonauts	13
Mercyhurst College	26	--	Armory Girls	31
Mercyhurst College	22	--	General Electric	35
Mercyhurst College	22	--	Argonauts	19
Mercyhurst College	31	--	Comets	11

A real athletic rivalry developed with Edinboro and by 1931, the motto of the College was "Beat Edinboro." The 1931 Field Hockey game with Edinboro was considered so important that it was played in the newly built Academy Stadium, which seated over 10,000 people. There are no records of how many people were present as Edinboro beat Mercyhurst once again by the same score of the previous year 5-0. The second basketball season was an improvement over the first one, as the girls won four and lost five under "Coach Miss Heil." The scores of the 1931-32 season indicate that the 'Hurst was better on defense than on offense as they never scored more than 28 points, and once only scored 7!⁵⁷

It wasn't until 1936 that Mercyhurst really arrived as an athletic power. In that year, the 'Hurst beat Edinboro in field hockey for the first time, and then followed up by defeating them in basketball 45-22 before a jammed house in the Mercyhurst gym. Thirty-six years later, in 1972, Mercyhurst beat Edinboro again only this time it was the Mercyhurst males who won the game -- something which the 'Victors of 1936' would have found hard to imagine!

Besides field hockey and basketball, the College sponsored swimming and tennis activity. Tennis was played on courts which were located behind the Chapel, and where the lawn of Zurn Hall is now situated.

One of the most important parts of Mercyhurst social history was the creation of the 'Roost' in 1934 as a campus social center. Under the helpful guidance of Doctor Donatelli, an old chicken house in the back campus, was transformed into a little student union. It was a place where students could socialize--and even smoke. It was the only place on campus where a girl was allowed to smoke, and Mercyhurst was one of the few Catholic Women's Colleges that permitted smoking at all. The interior of the 'Roost' was described by one enthusiastic student in this manner:

The Roost, as a place, came into being as the result of the collegians' insistent requests to Mother Superior for a place of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, February and March 1931, p. 4. and p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, March 1932, p. 3. The scores of the 1932-32 season were:

Mercyhurst College	21	--	Erie Tech	20
Mercyhurst College	23	--	Buffalo Falcons	20
Mercyhurst College	17	--	Red Robins	34
Mercyhurst College	20	--	First Baptist	17
Mercyhurst College	11	--	General Electric	26
Mercyhurst College	16	--	Comets	15
Mercyhurst College	15	--	General Electric	29
Mercyhurst College	24	--	Erie Teachers	26
Mercyhurst College	7	--	First Baptist	14

recreation outside of the school buildings.

During the autumn of 1936, several of the most enthusiastic Roosters decided to band together, redecorate the interior, and establish the Roost on the basis of an organization. Our Dean, Mother Borgia, heartily approved of the idea, stimulated our interests, and donated the striking red and black linoleum which now covers the floor. We all worked hard. Cans of black and red paint, brushes, mops, and yards of chintz flourished for the entire week preceding Alumnae Weekend, for which the occasion our work was completed. The result was stupendous! Recreation in a rustic yet modern environment was made possible. A great fire roared in the white-washed brick fireplace. Red chintz curtains hung at the windows, and lamps of all types illuminated the beamed ceiling. Patsy Morin decorated the walls with pastel profiles of the members. The Alumnae were charmed and the Roosters preened their feathers. Officers were elected, rules and memberships established, and committees designated. We are proud to say that the past year has seen the Roost Club become one of the most popular and progressive societies in the college.⁵⁸

Eventually the Home Economics Department under Miss Whalen, provided food service in the "Roost." For years, the cozy "Roost" was a favorite campus hangout until it was destroyed by fire in early February of 1951.

Mercyhurst, like every new school, had a School Song, but each year after 1929, there was an annual class competition to add new school songs like this typical one:

"Here we are from near and far,
Our colors proudly fly,
We call on you
our classmates true,
To hold them ever high. CHORUS

Then to Mercyhurst, dear old Mercyhurst
Here's our pledge of loyalty
By our confidence in you,
All our dreams and hopes come true
Then to Mercyhurst, dear old Mercyhurst,
True to you we'll ever be,
so fight - fight - sight,
For the glorious Green and White.
Of dear Mercyhurst
To your goal so rare and fine,
Our pledge will urge us on,
To keep our standards ever high,
And long our colors fly!"⁵⁹

Unfortunately, however, no one song really caught on and Mercyhurst has no official school song today.

One of the biggest social occasions of the time was the annual May crowning. Each year a Senior girl was picked to be the Queen to place her

⁵⁸ *Praeterita*, (Yearbook published by Senior Class), 1937. p. 34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, November 1931, p. 4.

crown on the Blessed Mother statue in the grotto. The Queen was first herself crowned on the front campus, and then the whole college community marched to the grotto for the crowning. People from all over Erie area came to watch the colorful event. Every girl wore a special dress and it was considered the greatest honor to be chosen as the Queen. This tradition existed right up until 1967, when the last May crowning was held.

There are many persons who played an important role in developing Mercyhurst in that first decade, but there are two who deserve special attention for their contributions -- Mother M. Borgia Egan and Doctor Michael Relihan.⁶⁰

Mother Borgia was born in DuBois, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Egan. She received her elementary and secondary schooling in DuBois and her college degrees from Catholic University and Duquesne University.

Mother Borgia had entered the Order in 1891 at a very early age of 15, and after taking her perpetual vows, she became an inspiring teacher.⁶¹

Her first leadership post was as principal of Saint Catherine School in DuBois in 1906. And it was under her tenure as principal that Saint Catherine's became the first fully accredited parochial school in the State. While she was principal, she also started a night school for immigrants and adults interested in furthering their education.

Mother Borgia was the principal at DuBois until 1918 when she was elected to Mother Superior. As Mother Superior, she left DuBois for Titusville, where the central convent of the Mercy Order was located.⁶²

One of the first problems that faced Mother Borgia in her new post was the need for a larger convent and school. Always a 'builder', she immediately began planning for new facilities. At this point, Bishop Gannon entered the picture. As Mother Borgia later recalled the situation:

Our first thought was to add a wing to the existing building and an architect had been engaged to draw up plans that would house at least one hundred Sisters.

Before these plans could be executed, Bishop Gannon, on a visit to Titusville, said to Mother Borgia, "Instead of building here, why don't you raise \$150,000.00 and come to Erie?" The invitation was proposed to the members of the corporation the following summer and most of the senior members seemed to favor the suggestion. In the first place our headquarters in the Episcopal city would be advantageous. However, ideas came rapidly. Instead of competing on the high school level with the Communities already well established in Erie, it was suggested that we consider the opening of a college for young girls. At that time there were no colleges in Erie.

A consensus of opinion was that we lay our proposed plan before his

⁶⁰ Beside Mother Borgia and Doctor Relihan, there are two important people that deserve to be mentioned. Sister Pierre Wilbert is one who came up with Mother Borgia in various visits to Erie to talk to Bishop Gannon and find the exact site of the future college. She was an industrious, likable, congenial type of person who pushed her students to go as far as possible. She herself was a builder, for she supervised over the labor in these early years. It was because of her that Mercyhurst developed a biology department and moved onward in education. One of her most important achievements is the roof that exists on Old Main. Because of her hard work and her sense of elegance, Mercyhurst received its present gabled roof.

Another person who should be mentioned is Reverend William Sullivan, who was the first Chaplain at Mercyhurst. In his short stay of four years, he landscaped and designed the campus grounds. To his achievements, we must mention the building of the Grotto and the stately boulevard that we find on entering the school through the main gates.

⁶¹ Sisters of Mercy Community Register, p. 22.

⁶² The Erie Daily Times, February 12, 1962, p. 4.

Excellency. This was done by Mother Borgia, then Superior. The Bishop decided to present the plan to his consultor. In a letter addressed to the Superior some weeks later he approved the idea of moving our headquarters to Erie, opening a high school as a means of support and later opening a college for girls. The plan was received favorably by the consultors and permission was given to begin the search for a suitable location and to have plans drawn up.

Because of this wide experience in building for the Sisters of Mercy of Philadelphia, Mr. Ferdinand Durang, architect of Philadelphia, was selected to draw the plans. These were later approved with minor changes, and a group of buildings to carry on the work planned and to provide a sizable income for the community was approved. It provided facilities for both high school and college classes. The estimated cost was approximately five hundred thousand dollars.⁶³

Moving to a new city, and finding the right location for a school was only the beginning of Mother Borgia's problems. Securing the necessary financing was the next large hurdle. With the help of a banker friend, Mr. Frank Wallace, Mother Borgia arranged for Mercyhurst to float some bonds. As Mother Borgia explained in her memoirs:

In her eagerness to get started, the Community accepted a suggestion of Mr. Frank Wallace, the President of the Second National Bank of Erie, that we float a bond issue of four hundred thousand dollars that would pay four percent interest. He would personally assume responsibility for the bonds, i.e. guarantee their payment

Because of the low rate of interest it was not easy to interest the public in a four percent bond, so they had to be sold through friendly channels. This entailed approaching individual purchasers instead of having the entire issue sold through a bond company. Sales came slowly. It was largely due to the untiring efforts of Sister M. Collette Brown, Sister M. Monica Fisher, Sister M. Pierre Wilbert, and Sister M. Celestine Weber that we were able to dispose of a small portion (\$100,000.00) of the bonds. This meant constant and tiresome walking on the streets of Erie and other cities, wherever a prospective buyer could be found. The balance of the issue, \$300,000.00 were used as collateral for bank loans which we had to contract to meet the monthly payments of the contractors as they became due.⁶⁴

Another example of Mother Borgia's financial astuteness, without which the college could not have survived in those early years is the story of how Mercyhurst acquired some very valuable stock -- climax molybdenum.

Molybdenum is an alloy that is used in hardening and toughening iron and steel. Nothing was known about this metal until the World Wars. It was found that the heavy artillery of the Germans stood up much better than that of the United States. And after much investigation, it was found that the Germans had used a metal called molybdenum to toughen their steel for long barrages.

⁶³ Dictated memoirs by Mother Borgia to Sister Mary John Bosco in August, 1958, Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

This is about the time that John and Samuel Weber, brothers to Sister M. Regina Weber, and uncles to Sister M. Celestine Weber, became interested in Climax Colorado. It was because of their interest in prospecting that they found the ore that contained molybdenum. These men formed a company to handle the processing of the ore and they named it "Climax Molybdenum."

Sam and John, however, needed capital to develop their company. Meanwhile, the Sisters of Mercy had started to build Mercyhurst and the Weber Brothers wanted to help the Sisters. A few years earlier, they had persuaded Mother M. Pierre, Bursar of the Community and Mother M. Borgia, Superior, to invest in their gold mines.

As Mother Borgia later remembered:

The gold mine shares could be had for \$150.00 a share, and it so happened that the two skeptical nuns decided to risk \$600.00 they had made on a money-raising activity and to secure four shares. However, the gold mine, like so many of the Weber projects, did not come through as quickly as expected, and for the moment, the \$600.00 was looked upon as an unwise investment.⁶⁵

Over the years, however, molybdenum rose in value and John Weber urged the Sisters to exchange the four gold certificates for five hundred shares of Climax Molybdenum, which was then selling at \$1.00 a share. The Sisters followed his advice and 500 shares of Climax Molybdenum stock replaced the gold shares in the safe. As the need for war materials ceased, so did the need for molybdenum.

Then in 1933, the unexpected happened. A letter was received by Mother Borgia from a broker by the name of Jr. J. S. Fitzsimmons, who said he was a close friend of John Weber. He explained that the stock certificate of molybdenum had never been registered under the Sisters corporate title and still bore John Weber's name as legal owner. Since John had died, Mr. Fitzsimmons advised the Sisters to consult their broker and register their stock certificates. He also said that the old stock was being called in and issuing three shares for each of the old. The Sisters consulted their old friend, Mr. Frank M. Wallace, of the Second National Bank of Erie, and he sent the stock to Mr. Fitzsimmons with the instructions to register it in the name of the Sisters of Mercy of Crawford and Erie Counties.

It wasn't long before investors discovered that the Sisters of Mercy possessed fifteen hundred shares of stock, the biggest stocks held by any one except the owners. Soon the Sisters were being pressed to sell their stock and Mother Borgia later admitted that the many offers were tempting.

At this time the O'Neil Memorial Chapel was being built and the last ten thousand dollars of the donation was frozen in the Second National Bank of Erie according to Government orders. The temptation therefore to sell the molybdenum stock was hard to resist.⁶⁶

Recognizing the potential value of the stock, Mother Borgia pleaded with Mother M. Xavier, Mother Superior, not to sell, and with her permission, laid the story before Bishop Gannon, who was not familiar with Climax Molybdenum. After he discovered its value, he told Mother Borgia that none

⁶⁵ Memoirs by Mother Borgia on "The Story of Molybdenum and How it Came into the Possession of the Sisters of Mercy," Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives, (Date unknown) estimated date 1956, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

of the stock was to be sold without his authorization.⁶⁷

So eager were brokers to buy this stock that one time Mother Borgia traveled to Saint Louis, and after the train arrived, she was immediately paged by some perspective buyers. Mother Borgia, armed with the Bishop's injunction, refused to sell.

It was a very wise move, for later, Mother Borgia received another letter from Mr. Fitzsimmons saying that Climax Stock was rising at an unbelievable rate and was selling at \$24.00 a share. He advised the Sisters to hold on to every share, and they did. It is still in the possession of the Sisters of Mercy and has paid rich dividends through the years.⁶⁸

As Dean of Mercyhurst, however, she demonstrated that she had more than just financial ability. Mother Borgia always insisted on a high standard of intellectual and cultural achievement for 'her girls'. In fact, it was Mother Borgia herself who directed the school's first musicals -- **The Wild Rose** and **Maid of Toyko**.

She also developed one of Erie's first major cultural series and brought in the best speakers, musicians, and writers she could find. All her contemporaries remember her love of elegance and her insistence that Mercyhurst stand for quality and excellence.

Her interest in the finer things of life can be seen in the beautiful furniture that exists in the Foyer, the room just outside of the Chapel.

She also firmly believed that every Mercyhurst graduate should always represent the perfect lady. In fact, Mother Borgia used to give monthly speeches on good etiquette, and she personally supervised ceremonies such as May Day, the Christmas Dinner, and Graduation, to insure that they were done to perfection.

It was after the 1956 graduation, in fact, that Mother Borgia suffered her stroke which finally led to her death six years later in her home town of DuBois on February 11, 1962.⁶⁹ Even after her stroke, she retained the title of Dean and was always consulted by Sister Mary Esther, who was the "Acting Dean." Mercyhurst always came first for Mother Borgia. The college was never far from her thoughts.

As an Administrator, she had a talent for identifying the right persons for each job. She also had an imposing quality about her that may have been due to her tallness. She dominated situations easily, and she also worked easily with everybody -- from bankers to bricklayers. While Mother Borgia was very firm in her opinions, she tolerated differences of opinion, and encouraged her faculty to be liberal.

While students were often in awe of Mother Borgia, they all recognized her great contributions to the college. Their feelings, and the attitude of the general college community, was summarized in this 1937 Yearbook Dedication:

Whose vision and objectives in the field of education, resurgent courage in the presence of difficulties, vital and compelling personality, and genius for inspiring loyalty have crystallized, in a definite and durable form, the spirit of corporation which has fashioned the walls and the soul of Mercyhurst, we dedicate this the first volume of

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Some of this stock has been very useful as collateral for the building of Zurn and Baldwin Halls.

⁶⁹ The Erie Daily Times, February 12, 1962, p. 4.

Praeterita. Mercyhurst today is a monument to her vision, dedication, and ability.⁷⁰

Doctor Relihan was a member of the pioneer faculty in 1927. He came to Mercyhurst with experience from D'Youville College, in Buffalo (where he had also been a member of their first faculty), and from Seton Hill College in Greensburg. At both Seton Hill and D'Youville, Doctor Relihan had organized the first Education Departments. Moreover, at Seton Hill, Doctor Relihan had also organized professional education courses for the Sisters in the Pittsburgh area so that they might become certified according to the new state law.⁷¹

His school for Sisters was set up in 1921 with the help of Most Reverend Hugh C. Boyle, Bishop of Pittsburgh. Not only had the Bishop helped Relihan but the Supreme Council on the Knights of Columbus also came to his aid.

They donated a building, which housed the Knights of Columbus Evening School or Ex-Service Men. The courses were free to the Sisters, who had little money, and the teachers, mostly from Seton Hill, also taught free of charge. All classes were taught on Saturday and in 1921, the school received State Department approval.⁷²

When Relihan came to Mercyhurst in 1927 from Seton Hill, he was still in charge of the project in Pittsburgh, and spent his weekends in that city directing the Sisters school until 1945, when its work was completed. Relihan's school had helped 8,350 teachers receive their state certificates from 1921 to June of 1945.⁷³

Relihan's experience and reputation in state education circles was a great help to Mercyhurst in the early years, especially when Mercyhurst was seeking their charter. For twenty-eight years, he was Director of Teacher Training at Mercyhurst. With no children of their own, Doctor and Mrs. Relihan were like 'second parents' to many of the Mercyhurst girls.

Doctor Relihan once said: "I'm always proud of Mercyhurst girls. They are outstanding. An impeccable personal appearance, a faultless and sincere courtesy, and a priceless 'savior-faire' distinguish them."⁷⁴

His former student's feelings about him are reflected in the 1938 **Praeterita**:

To Michael James Relihan, M.A., L.L.D., Head of the Department of Education at Mercyhurst College and Director of Teacher Training, whose unfailing sympathy, friendly guidance, tolerant wisdom, gentle understanding and ever-present humor have been unstintingly ours during four years of college life, we the Senior Class of 1938, dedicate this, the Second Volume of **Praeterita**.⁷⁵

Doctor Relihan was very active professionally for Mercyhurst. He attended numerous conventions, served on many state committees, and wrote a weekly column entitled "Your Child in School" in the **Lake Shore Visitor**. For his great contributions to Catholic Education, he was

⁷⁰ **Praeterita**, (Published by Senior Class) 1937, p. 6.

⁷¹ **The Merciad**, October 29, 1964, p. 3.

⁷² **The Pittsburgh Catholic**, January 3, 1946, p. 8.

⁷³ **Ibid.**

⁷⁴ **The Merciad**, October 29, 1964, p. 3.

⁷⁵ **Praeterita**, (Published by the Senior Class) 1938, p. 6.

awarded a Honorary Doctrate from Saint Vincent College of Latrobe in 1934.⁷⁶

His classes were very popular at Mercyhurst especially because he always stressed practical classroom situations. He believed that a 'Good Teacher Could Teach Anything' and insisted that Liberal Education was the test preparation for teaching. He also taught Latin and Greek in addition to Teacher Evaluation.

Doctor Relihan's kind and gentle personality, his love of students and teaching, and his great contributions to the college made him Mercyhurst's "Mr. Chips." It was a sad day for the college in 1959 when ill health forced him to write his letter of resignation:

January 3, 1959

Rev. Mother Eustace
President, Mercyhurst College
Erie, Penna.

Dear Mother Eustace:

It is with sincere regret that I feel compelled, because of illness, to submit herewith, as of ever dates, my resignation as a member of the Mercyhurst College Faculty.

May God continue to bless the Sisters of Mercy in their promotion of Catholic education at Mercyhurst.

Very sincerely yours,
Michael J. Relihan⁷⁷

The reply of President Mother Eustace summarized the gratitude of the college for his services:

January 14, 1959

Dr. Michael J. Relihan
2909 French Street
Erie, Pennsylvania

Dear Doctor Relihan:

After receiving your note of resignation, dated January third, I called a special meeting of the Board of Trustees to acquaint them with the contents of the note. Each member accepted it with comments of regret and of appreciation for the long years of service you have given to Mercyhurst.

With very real earnestness, I confirm their sentiments and say that the good that flowered from your mind and heart these many years into the lives of hundreds of Mercyhurst girls flows on and on into other lives whom they are fashioning as teachers or mothers. The awareness of this great good is, I dare say, some comfort in the sorrow you feel as you bring to an end your classes at Mercyhurst. In spirit you will always be in and out of these halls. In this as in all the acts of your life, may God keep

⁷⁶ The Merciad, February 11, 1959, p.3.

⁷⁷ Relihan, Michael, letter to Reverend Mother M. Eustace, January 3, 1959. In Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives.

you in His Mighty Hand.

Regretfully and sincerely,
Mother M. Eustace⁷⁸

Doctor Relihan died six months later -- and an era in the college history died with him.

APPENDIX A

Recorded: October 21, 1958 @ 1:56 P.M.

IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION FOR A CHARTER FOR MERCYHURST COLLEGE.

In the court of Common Pleas of
Erie County, Pennsylvania. No. 249,
May Term 1927

CERTIFICATE OF INCORPORATION

To the Honorable, the Judges of said Court:

Agreeably to the provisions of the Act of the General Assembly of the State of Pennsylvania, entitled, "An Act to Provide for the Incorporation and Regulation of Certain Corporations", approved the 29th day of April A. D. 1874 and the several supplements thereto, the undersigned, all of whom are citizens of Pennsylvania and residents of the County of Erie, in said Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, having associated themselves together for the purposes and upon the terms and by the name hereinafter set forth, to the end that they may be duly incorporated, according to law, hereby certify:

FIRST: The name of the intended corporation is MERCYHURST COLLEGE.

SECOND: The purposes for which the said corporation is formed are as follows:-

The establishment and conduct of a college for women, with power to confer degrees in art, pure and applied science and literature.

THIRD: The business of the corporation is to be transacted in the City of Erie, Erie County, Pennsylvania.

FOURTH: The corporation shall have perpetual succession by its corporate name.

FIFTH: The yearly income of the corporation from sources other than real estate, shall not exceed the sum of fifty thousand (50,000.00) dollars.

SIXTH: Said corporation shall have no capital stock.

SEVENTH: The names and residences of the subscribers are as follows:

Sr. M. de Sales Preston	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Borgia Egan	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Nolasco Hughes	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Pierre Wilbert	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Clare Connelly	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Collette Brown	Erie, Pa.

⁷⁸ Eustace, Mother M., letter to Doctor Relihan, January 14, 1959. In Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse Archives.

Sr. M. Neri Hopkins	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Austin Kratzer	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Basil O'Brien	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Teresa Wuenschell	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Joseph Reinsel	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Agnes Reid	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Sebastian Aaron	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Antonia Ferrick	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Patricia McLaughlin	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Vincent Aaron	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Aquino Joyce	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Xavier O'Neill	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Bertrand Doyle	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Mercedes Prendergast	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Agatha Hogan	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Loyola Dillon	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Regis O'Neill	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Ildefonse Madlehner	Erie, Pa.
Sr. M. Callista Mahoney	Erie, Pa.	Sr. M. Evangelista Forsythe	Erie, Pa.

EIGHTH: The number of directors is fixed at five, and the names and reisdences of those who are chosen directors for the first year are as follows:

Sr. M. Borgia Egan	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Pierre Wilbert	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Collette Brown	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Mercedes Prendergast	Erie, Pennsylvania
Sr. M. Evangelista Forsythe	Erie, Pennsylvania

NINTH: The amount of assets in the possession of the subscribers hereto which is to be devoted to the purpose of establishing and conducting said college is One Million Six Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$1,600,000.00) in land and buildings; Thirty Nine Thousand Dollars (\$39,000.00) by the capitalization of contributed services of twelve professors at Twenty Five Hundred Dollars (\$2,500.00) per year, and six instructors at Fifteen Hundred Dollars (\$1,500.00) per year, and in addition thereto the contributed earnings of One Hundred and Twenty Five (125) persons not capitalized. The minimum number of persons whom it is intended to regularly employ as members of the faculty of said corporation is eighteen.

TENTH: That attached hereto and made a part hereof and marked Exhibit "A" is a brief statement of the requirement for admission and of the course of study to be pursued in said college.

WITNESS our hands and seals this tenth day of March 1927.

Sister M. Borgia Egan	(SEAL)
Sister M. Pierre Wilbert	(SEAL)
Sister M. Collette Brown	(SEAL)
Sister M. Mercedes Prendergast	(SEAL)
Sister M. Regis O'Neil	(SEAL)

APPENDIX B

BIRTH OF MERCYHURST

(This was dictated by Mother Borgia to Sister Mary John Bosco early in August, 1958.)

The Initial Financing of Mercyhurst College

The original Motherhouse at Titusville, Pennsylvania, which has served as the Community Headquarters since 1870, was no longer large enough to house all the Sisters, so it became quite evident to the Superiors that they would have to build. Our first thought was to add a wing to the existing building and an architect had been engaged to draw up plans that would house at least one hundred Sisters.

Before these plans could be executed Bishop Gannon, on a visit to Titusville, said to Mother Borgia, "Instead of building here, why don't you raise \$150,000.00 and come to Erie?" The invitation was proposed to the members of the corporation the following summer, and most of the senior members seemed to favor the suggestion. In the first place, our headquarters in the Episcopal city would be advantageous. However, ideas came rapidly. Instead of competing on the high school level with the communities already well established in Erie, it was suggested that we consider the opening of a college for young girls. At that time, there were no colleges in Erie.

A consensus of opinion was that we lay our proposed plan before his Excellency. This was done by Mother Borgia, then Superior. The Bishop decided to present the plan to his consultor. In a letter addressed to the Superior some weeks later, he approved the idea of moving our headquarters to Erie, opening a high school as a means of support and later opening a college for girls. The plan was received favorably by the consultors and permission was given to begin the search for a suitable location and to have plans drawn up.

Because of his wide experience in building for the Sisters of Mercy of Philadelphia, Mr. Ferdinand Durang, architect of Philadelphia, was selected to draw the plans. These were later approved with minor changes, and a group of buildings to carry on the work planned and to provide a sizable income for the community was approved. It provided facilities for both high school and college classes. The estimated cost was approximately five hundred thousand dollars.

After studying carefully the income of the Community, it was shown to the satisfaction of the Bishop that the Community could handle this indebtedness. To make the burden of debt as easy as possible, the Bishop insisted that we pay not more than four per cent interest. This was a difficult rate to get as money was very tight at the time. Banks asked six percent as a minimum. In our eagerness to get started, the Community accepted a suggestion of Mr. Frank Wallace, the President of the Second National Bank of Erie, that we float a bond issue of four hundred thousand dollars that would pay four per cent interest. He would personally assume responsibility for the bonds, i.e. guarantee their payment.

It is customary to have a bank assume this responsibility, but National banks are not permitted by law to assume such debts. Hence, his suggestion

that he personally assume it. Because of the low rate of interest, it was not easy to interest the public in a four per cent bond, so they had to be sold through friendly channels. This entailed approaching individual purchasers instead of having the entire issue sold through a bond company. Sales came slowly. It was largely due to the untiring efforts of Sister M. Collette Brown, Sister M. Monica Fisher, Sister M. Pierre Wilbert, and Sister M. Celestine Weber that were able to dispose of a small portion (\$100,000.00) of the bonds. This meant constant and tiresome walking on the streets of Erie and other cities, wherever a prospective buyer could be found. The balance of the issue \$300,000.00 was used as collateral for bank loans which he had to contract to meet the monthly payments of the contractors as they became due. These bank loans, thanks to Mr. Wallace who negotiated them, were made at five per cent interest.

It was always the intention of the officials of the Sisters of Mercy of Titusville that once the building was completed, they would seek an insurance company that would take over the mortgage and let the Sisters have the money on long-term mortgage. But insurance companies are not as a rule interested in construction loans. They want the building completed. Their terms are always convenient for religious organizations. They require payments on the principal at stated intervals and annual payment of the interest.

It soon became apparent to the Sisters that some other arrangements would have to be made to meet the monthly payroll. So in consultation with the Bishop, it was decided to borrow on short payment loans from Pittsburgh and other local banks. Through the efforts of Mr. Frank Wallace, this was arranged. The unsold bonds were given as collateral for these loans.

As soon as the work was completed, negotiations were begun with several insurance companies. Many of them were interested in giving a long-term loan, but most of them required a large bonus for the privilege of having the money.

Mr. Joseph Weber, at this point, became interested in our negotiations and began to look into the matter. In conversation with a representative of one of the companies, he learned that the Massachusetts Life Insurance Company was interested in this particular loan and was willing to begin negotiations as soon as the owners were ready. They even volunteered to forego the usual five to six percent bonus and because of the nature of the institution, to set the sum of \$7,000.00 as the required bonus. The New York Life was willing to dispense with the bonus completely if Bishop Gannon would use his signature in the transaction. This meant putting the entire Diocesan property as security for the loan. After much consideration, it was decided by the finance committee, that the conditions for such a favor were too involved to make appeal to the Community.

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