

## Lesson Six Primary Source

Callan, Louise. *Philippine Duchesne: Frontier Missionary of the Sacred Heart*. Maryland:Newman, 1957. Print.

The long river trip was drawing to a close. As the limestone cliffs grew higher along the west shore the travelers strained to catch a glimpse of the spreading group of houses that was the town. From the river St. Louis presented a charming sight—white buildings high on the bluffs against a backdrop of green. With more than half a century of quiet annals to record, it was still just a frontier trading post, but its unique geographical position as the center of the fur trade and western commerce gave it promise of a splendid future. Pierre Laclede Liguist had chosen well when he marked the site in the winter of 1763 at a spot where an abrupt wall of limestone rose from the river bank. On the level, well-drained tract of land fronting the bluffs a plan was laid out for the village which Laclede himself declared would someday become “one of the most beautiful cities in America.”

The growth of the village was slow. Small groups of settlers came from the Illinois Country just across the river, which had fallen into English hands, and from Lower Louisiana, Canada, and France. The place was distinctively French. Fur trade, traffic in assorted merchandise, and agriculture in common fields made up the bulk of the livelihood among the inhabitants. They were honest, hospitable folk on the whole; they were happy and not too hard-working. They loved their traditional way of life, and in spite of the cession of the region to Spain and the infiltration of Spanish and American settlers, the village remained decidedly French in manners and customs, language and law until 1804, when the western flow of American population began to stream across the Mississippi. By 1818 the population of the area of which St. Louis was the chief town totaled more than sixty-five thousand and raised a national crisis when Missouri asked admission to the Union as a state in which slavery was allowed by law. All this the nuns on board the *Franklin* had learned when the steamboat anchored for the night a mile below the foot of the Market Street landing on the evening of August 21, the feast of St. Jane Frances de Chantal. The boat had been expected for several days and its cargo of merchandise had been advertised in the *Missouri Gazette* that very day, but the presence of the nuns on board was not presented as a news item.

They were expected, however, by Bishop Du Bourg, and he had made arrangements for their coming. General Bernard Pratte and his wife gave hospitality to these first nuns who ever crossed a threshold in St. Louis. Their home stood at the corner of Main and Market Streets, a French colonial structure of the best frontier type, built of upright posts set on a stone foundation, two stories high, with a gallery extending around the four sides. There was the usual detached kitchen to the rear, and a roomy garden and orchard were neatly fenced in. Bernard Pratte and his wife had lived there since 1797. For twenty years the lower floor was used as a general store, where dry goods, groceries, liquors, hardware, and sundries were sold, the common medium of exchange being furs, which were usually stored in the small warehouse that stood on the southeast corner of the property facing the river. In 1817 General Pratte remodeled the home and added a two-story brick building, which fronted on Main Street, as did the home, and housed the general store on the first floor.

So Mother Duchesne and her companions were welcomed to the newly renovated home, and there they remained for three weeks in the midst of kindness and consideration that rivaled even the charity of the Ursulines. The Prattes were a happy French Catholic family, presided

over by a charming Creole mother, who had been Emilie Labbadie, and including two sons and five daughters. They were related to “almost everybody in town,” as their maternal grandmother was Pelagie Chouteau, sister of the co-founder of St. Louis, and intermarriage had been frequent among the best Creole group in town.

Neither the sultry August heat nor the fatigue of travel and first acquaintance with so many people deterred Mother Duchesne from writing to her Superior General on the night of August 22 to give an account of much that had happened on the trip up the river and much that she had learned during her first day in St. Louis:

My Very Reverend Mother,

We are now nearly 3000 leagues from you, but the farther I go, the closer I try to keep to you by my desire to act according to your intentions and to carry out your instructions. But at such a distance I can at times only groan inwardly as events happen and situations arise and I am unable to ask your advice. Here we are at our third halting-place since we left Paris. Bordeaux and New Orleans were unpleasant only because they retarded the joy we were anticipating. We had our hearts set on St. Louis, and it turns out to be another camping place. We are lodged in a comfortable home, where we are getting acquainted with the children who will be the first pupils in our boarding school. In a week we shall leave for St. Charles, where we are to begin our work in a rented house. Monseigneur is going to accompany us there and remain a few days to help us get settled.

He is very kind to us. He heard our confessions today and says he regrets that he cannot keep us in St. Louis, but there is not a single room for rent in the town. He puts before us the great advantages St. Charles possesses. He thinks it will become one of the most important cities of North American, as it is situated on the Missouri River, along which the population is growing daily and which is about to give its name to a new state of the Union. No day passes without the arrival of four or five families with their belongings, who come to settle in a country which is making astonishing progress.

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During the next three weeks Mother Duchesne became fairly well acquainted with St. Louis, a town of four long streets, with farms beginning just beyond and extending over the hills and out on to the prairie. In the freshness of the early morning the nuns went each day to assist at Mass in the old church that was falling into ruins. No wonder the Bishop was so insistent about the construction of a cathedral!

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The nuns went on foot through the town with General Pratte, inspecting first one place, then another. Mother Duchesne drove to Florissant with the Bishop to look at a house. It was a delightful drive through one of Missouri’s most beautiful stretches of country-virgin country almost uninhabited-but the house proved to be as unsuitable as the locality itself. There were lengthy discussions-in French, to Mother Duchesne’s great relief-regarding the prospects of a convent at Ste Genevieve, but St. Charles had been decided on, long before the nuns reached St. Louis, and after their arrival the Bishop gave no serious consideration to any alternative. He listened to the arguments, suggestions, and generous offers of General Pratte, who doubted the

wisdom of placing the nuns in an outlying district and was willing to put at their disposal a house in St. Louis. He admitted the need for an educational institution in the town and the desire which many prominent Catholics had expressed with regard to the Religious of the Sacred Heart. Yet he held to his first decision, and Mother Duchesne knew that soon she would have to say goodbye to St. Louis with its pleasant homes and gardens behind high picket fences of rough saplings, its narrow streets bustling with activity, its river-front crowded with boats of many kinds and shapes, and the wagons lined up on the Illinois shore and waiting to be ferried across to the “promised land.” On her birthday she wrote several letters to France. Thinking of her sisters and their families, of Josephine and her brothers, she gave them a few details about her new world:

My Very Dear Sisters,

...The river trip from New Orleans to St. Louis took 40 days and was pleasant. In a few more days we shall set out for St. Charles on the Missouri, where we shall reside for the present.

This section of the country is going to be organized into a state, which will enter the Confederation of the United States, of which it is now only a territory. St. Louis will be the capital, and its population is increasing every day. They are building on all sides, yet it is impossible to find lodging. Rents are higher here than in Paris and so is the price of food. Luxury is a strange thing. It has penetrated even into the midst of some savage tribes that are partly civilized. Since the coming of Monseigneur [Du Bourg], religion has begun to take some hold, and it has been established in Kentucky by the zeal of Monseigneur Flaget, who is the bishop there. Before he came, the people really had no religion. He has had several churches built. The only churches I have seen here are made of wood.

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Mr. Pratte may also offer us some aid. He is going to entrust to us his five daughters in succession. He deserves already the title I have given him of “temporal father.” He owns a well-equipped store where prices are moderate, and he has promised us credit for as long as we need. His wife is the most highly esteemed person in the city. Her five little girls, though dreadfully spoiled, have taken such a fancy to us that they want to come to our school, wherever it may be. When we go out, they are distressed lest we should not return. In season and out of season Celeste torments her parents at least four or five times a day to send her to school sooner than they planned. These five interesting children have the happiest dispositions and such charming voices. They seem to be related to almost everyone in St. Louis. A great number of their cousins, all delightfully well-mannered, have come to see us and want to be our pupils. One of them could not sleep for joy the night we arrived. I attribute this eagerness to the inspiration of their guardian angels...

Mr. Pratte just called me for a little conference. He is working hard to get us a house and a number of pupils with whom to begin our work. The parents themselves have fixed the tuition at 225 dollars, that is 1125 francs, including laundry.

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For another week the religious enjoyed the hospitality of the Pratte household. Mrs. Pratte continued to “overwhelm them with kindness,” as Mother Duchesne recorded in her *Journal*. She and the General, however, had lost the campaign for residence in St. Louis, so the nuns sadly packed their valises again. And again Philippine said her *Credo* in the midst of doubts. She could go forward courageously, knowing in Whom she believed. The children were heartbroken at losing the nuns and spread the unhappy news among their cousins and friends. This brought more visitors, but they were always welcome. Emilie and Therese Pratte had obtained their father’s solemn promise that they would be the first pupils of the boarding school, once Mother Duchesne and her companions were settled in their new home. The General reluctantly ordered a charette for the baggage, a carriage for the nuns, and saddle horses for the Bishop and Father Richard, to be ready early on Monday morning, September 7.

The *if’s* of history furnish fascinating material for speculation. If General Pratte had had his way, the American life-story of Philippine Duchesne might have been quite different in many respects from the tale of struggle with poverty, anxiety, hardship, isolation, and suffering that stamped her thirty-four years on the frontier.

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