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Missouri's Pioneer Nun

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"Canonization! That's wonderful," said Virginia Robyn of St. Louis County, who is 91. Her grandmother, Mary Knott Dyer, who was a student of Mother Duchesne, told her the girls vied to thread their beloved teacher's sewing needle when her sight was failing.

Mother Duchesne, who was born in France, stepped off the steamboat, Franklin, at St. Louis in 1818. All but one of her remaining thirty-eight years were spent in St. Charles, Florissant, and St. Louis, teaching girls. In St. Charles she founded the first free school west of the Mississippi, and in Florissant, she began the first school for native Americans west of the river. She and the four nuns that came with her were the first nuns to settle here.

She was a voluminous correspondent; her 528 surviving letters and a convent journal she kept are fascinating chronicles of a booming St. Louis.

Mother Duchesne might well be called a patron of flexible, active older people. She arrived in America on the eve of her forty-ninth birthday; when she finally fulfilled her lifelong dream of living among the Indians in Kansas, she was seventy-two and infirm. She lived in a world that was changing dramatically.

She could become the patron of feminists. Mother Duchesne pushed the limits of what was allowed to a woman in her times. In the French Revolution as an individual laywoman, she risked her life to bring food, medicine, and news to cholera victims in prison and to dress the dead for burial.

In Grenoble and Paris, in France, and in Missouri, she founded academically rigorous schools for girls with the then radical aim of giving girls an education equal to that of boys. Her voyage to America had a frightening, if romantic, turn. Pirates stopped the ship but did not board.

Today, Religious of the Sacred Heart in the United States form ninety-seven communities of Mother Duchesne's figurative daughters from Boston to San Diego, and many continue her tradition of pushing the limits. One is the chancellor of the San Francisco archdiocese, the first woman to hold that post in a major U.S. city; another has served a prison term for demonstrations against nuclear arms.

Mother Duchesne "is particularly inspiring to us today because she did push the limits," said Sister Anne O'Neil, the provincial of the United States Province of the Society of the Sacred Heart whose national offices are at 4389 West Pine Boulevard, St. Louis "and today, I believe religious women have to push the church to the limits."

Many people called the indomitable Mother Duchesne holy during her lifetime. When she was living among the Potawatomi in Sugar Creek, Kansas, they called her Quah-kah-ka-num-ad, "the woman who prays always." After her death in St. Charles on November 18, 1852, nuns in her convent hired a photographer to take a daguerreotype of her in her casket, "in case she may one day be canonized," they explained in the convent journal. Days after her death, the Reverend Peter DeSmet, a "black robe" Jesuit pioneer, wrote, "No greater saint ever died in Missouri nor perhaps in the whole Union."

International fuss over naming her a saint would have astonished Mother Duchesne. She chose to wear an old, heavily mended black habit and assumed the nastiest chores including the cleaning of the outhouse, milking the cows in knee-deep flood waters, and mending the boarding

students' clothing. Even though she was superior of several convents in America, she chose the least desirable room in any house for her own and even occupied a closet under the stairs in the Florissant convent. She, however, judged herself severely and believed that she had failed in her American mission.

Rose Philippine Duchesne was born in 1769, in Grenoble, France's beautiful entrance to the Alps. Her father was president of the Grenoble bar association, a founder of the city's first public library, and a member of the judicial tribunal. He was, as well, an early supporter of moderate efforts to establish democracy in France, and it was her uncle that called a meeting on his tennis court to draw up revolutionary documents.

The eight Duchesne children and their Perier first cousins lived in adjacent houses off Grenoble's town square, the Place de St. Andre. The men were free thinkers and followers of Voltaire; the women were devout Catholics. The family remained close. Mother Duchesne's own sisters and her Perier cousins gave more generously to her schools in American than any of her American patrons.

As a girl, she heard the Reverend Jean-Baptiste Aubert talk about the Indians at Kaskaskia and Cahokia in Illinois. The child was entranced with the idea of teaching native Americans about God.

From Place de St. Andre, you can see the grey stone convent of Ste. Marie-d'en Haut halfway up Mount Rachis, the highest point in the city center. Today the convent is the Dauphiny Province's history and archeological museum. In Mother Duchesne's life it was a Visitation girls' boarding school. At 12, she and her cousin, Josephine Perier were enrolled. It was a strict school; the Duchesnes were known for their strong wills, and later Philippine wrote about how difficult it was to curb hers.

"Whenever I was willful as a boy my mother would always say, 'You are a Duchesne,'" Yves Clochard-Bossuet of Paris said here in July. He is the fifth generation in descent from Marie-Amelie Duchesne de Mauduit, a sister of Philippine Duchesne. The French seminarian made a retreat in St. Charles in July en route to New York City, where he is caring for victims of AIDS at a hospice begun by Mother Teresa. "Stubborn acts, my mother always said, were Duchesne traits," Clouchard-Bossuet said.

In her second year at school Philippine Duchesne resolved to become a nun. Her father was distressed and made her return home. She was permitted to join her male cousins' tutoring sessions in Latin, Dante, French literature, and mathematics. One of her cousins who helped her with arithemetic would become his country's minister of finance. Four of the boys served in France's national legislature, the Chamber of Deputies. After class she especially enjoyed ballroom dancing. Her sisters teased her about how seriously she practiced the steps.

"She was rather tall and well proportioned, with a noble countenance and bearing and fine manners," Mother Anna Shannon wrote in a description of Mother Duchesne in 1827. "She had blue eyes, and though slightly pitted by smallpox, her complexion was fair and clear. She was…strong and vigorous." Many others described her as having a warm, very affectionate nature.

When she was seventeen, her parents pressed her to marry a man they approved. She refused. To convince them that she was not interested in marriage, she gave away her prettiest dress and declined party invitations. After a year of this simpler life, before her 19th birthday, she asked an aunt to chaperone her in a visit to the convent. When the aunt returned without Philippine, her parents, Pierre-Francois and Rose Perier Duchesne, went to the convent and

asked her to come home. She refused. Years later she wrote about how difficult it was to cause her father pain.

In September, 1789, when she was about to take her vows to become a nun, her father refused his permission, saying that he feared for her life. He predicted that the Catholic Church would become a victim of the spreading revolution. At this time, confiscation and sale of church lands had begun. The cross on the Place St. Andre was removed, and the square was renamed Place de la Constitution.

Though initially Pierre-Francois had supported a democracy in France, he was appalled by the excesses of terror, and so he spirited his large family from Grenoble to their country villa at Grane. The villa remains in the Duchesne family today. Four years after Philippine entered the convent, France banned all religious houses. In January 1791, she joined her family in the country.

Country life was not enough for her. In April, 1793, she broke a rule of respectable French women, taking a room with another woman in Grenoble. As the Catholic Church had been France's social welfare system, after it was outlawed, hospitals, schools, and orphanages closed. Orphans roamed the streets.

Philippine Duchesne nursed prisoners, found shelter for orphans, and helped get food for the poor. She risked catching highly contagious diseases and being arrested, even killed. Her family's political influence waned and an uncle was murdered on a highway for his political views; in a separate incident his wife and children were also murdered.

After the Revolution, and with the help of her mellowed father, she gained title to her old convent. Nearly eleven years after the convent was shut, she returned to start a community there in December 1801. There was no lock on the door, windows were missing and it was damp and

cold. Over the next months, several former nuns joined the novice at the hill convent: a Benedictine, an Ursuline and several Visitation nuns. They began a boarding school for girls and struggled to find a common religious rule to live by. Eventually, most gave up and left.

Mother Duchesne's letters to her family at this time reveal a sadness that she could not bring the group to harmonize. She worried that she would be thought too headstrong, too Duchesne.

In 1803, when just four women remained, she heard of a new community of nuns, the three-year-old Society of the Sacred Heart in Amiens, France. She was attracted to its guiding principle – that charity and warmth, instead of strictness, were to be the core of the group. Rather than mold members to one ideal, it encouraged each to enhance her individuality.

In December, 1804, the twenty-five-year-old founder, Madeleine Sophie Barat (who was canonized in 1925), visited Grenoble. Philippine, then thirty-five, knelt and kissed her feet. Mother Barat had become the society's first mother general and Mother Duchesne would be its first secretary general. Mother Duchesne opened the society's first school and convent in Paris in a house on the Rue des Postes. The convent and school flourished.

As she tried to help her country recover from the Revolution, she talked to Mother Barat about her dream of becoming a missionary to the Indians, a dream that was ignited by Bishop William L. V. DuBourg, bishop of Louisiana (which then included St. Louis), when he visited the convent in Paris. He begged for nuns to establish schools for Indians and French children in St. Louis. The order was still young and too small to spare nuns for overseas missions, Mother Barat explained.

On January 14, 1817, Bishop DuBourg visited again, and again Mother Barat refused and he did not hide his chagrin as he was leaving the convent.

Then suddenly, the Duchesne impulsiveness asserted itself. Mother Duchesne fell to her knees at the threshold and with clasped hands, pleaded with Mother Barat: “Your consent, Mother. Give your consent” to help DuBourg. Mother Barat consented.

On March 13, 1818, Mother Duchesne and four nuns sailed for New Orleans from Bordeaux on the Rebecca. With much excitement, on May 25, as the boat sailed along the Gulf of Mexico, she wrote about seeing, “the point where the waters of the Mississippi mingle with those of the sea.” Four days later, as soon as she stepped on land, Mother Duchesne kissed the Mississippi ground. She had scurvy and was forced to rest at the Ursuline convent on Chartres Street before going to St. Louis by steamboat, which at that time took 40 days.

In St. Louis, Gen. Bernard and Emilie Labbadie Pratte welcomed the nuns to their house at Main and Market Streets where Mother Duchesne’s excitement was deflated by the bishop’s announcement that he had been unable to find a building for them in St. Louis, then a three-street town. Instead, he had rented a house in St. Charles.

The nuns took a carriage to St. Charles and moved into a large vertical-log Creole house. On September 14, their free school opened. The two Pratte daughters, Emilie and Therese, and their cousin Pelagie Chouteau arrived October 3 for classes at the tuition boarding academy. Fuel, water, and food, however, were scarce that winter.

By spring the boarding school had grown to include Eliza Soulard, Mary Doughtery, Odile de la Lassus, Valle, a granddaughter of the former Spanish commandant of Upper Louisiana, as well as Rosalie Lisa, daughter of an Indian woman and fur trader Manuel Lisa. Parents from students in St. Louis complained about the remoteness of the village.

By winter, a handsome two-story brick school had been completed. A highlight of the move to Florissant involved Mother Duchesne’s coaxing of the convent cow onto the ferry with

cabbages, an episode she described with humor in a letter. Today this same building is open as a memorial to her.

Initially that school flourished. Mother Duchesne taught Latin, French literature and religion while others taught English literature, composition, history, philosophy, arithmetic, art and chemistry. Classes followed the curriculum that she and Mother Barat had developed in France.

At this time she wrote that the St. Louis boarders were even more distracted by pretty clothes and bright-colored shoes than the fashionable girls she'd taught in Paris. To restrain the dressing competitions, the students were required to wear a magenta dress with black velvet piping.

A number of the women wished to become nuns, so the Florissant attic became a novitiate and within twelve years, fifty American women entered the Society of the Sacred Heart. They helped staff four Louisiana schools under some of the nuns who accompanied Mother Duchesne to St. Louis but it took nine years of struggling on the Missouri frontier before Mother Duchesne was able to find a place for a school in St. Louis.

On May 2, 1827, she led a group of nuns to an abandoned two-story brick building on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi. That land today is at Broadway and Convent Street. Most of it is in shadow under the overpasses just before the Interstate 70 exit on the merged northbound I-44 and I-55 highways.

"This isolation…has its advantage," Mother Duchesne wrote. "We are going to leave some of our twenty-four arpents (an old French land measure) in woodland where we can gather wild grapes, which are often quite delicious. Hazelnuts, strawberries, and blackberries in

abundance. We still have plenty of land enclosed for a garden, an apple orchard, a little woods for walks…and fields for corn and potatoes…"

Three nuns were sent from France to help staff the school, called the City House, to distinguish it from the convent established in the Florissant countryside.. The compound included a boarding and day tuition school, a free school and an orphanage. At first few Missouri girls could read or were interested in learning, but the climate changed. "We no longer have to urge the children to do their work; they love it," Mother Duchesne wrote to her sister Euphrosine in 1843.

"I can never deal easily with the parents of the children," she wrote from the City House. "The Americans do not understand me. The Creoles want good looks and attractive manners. The best thing for me to do is disappear, either teaching a class or caring for the sick."

But she was a favorite of the children. She would toss off her nun's bonnet and veil to let them blindfold her for blindman's bluff and she entertained the Indian children with the ticktock of her pocket watch.

After twelve years in the United States, there were six Sacred Heart schools with 350 students and sixty-four nuns, fourteen from France and fifty from the Mississippi Valley. Mother Duchesne made two difficult trips to Louisiana to visit her nuns there. On one trip, she alone was willing to care for a dying man with highly contagious cholera.

She always had an international view and wrote that she enjoyed newspapers, especially after telegraph wires were strung. The first thing Mother Duchesne turned to in the papers was the post office notice to see if mail was waiting for her. Loneliness was a theme of many of her letters and occasionally she noted that she hadn't written her family for months because she had

no money for postage. Sometimes letters were lost. In the 1830's Mother Barat wrote, asking her to return to France for a visit. That letter never reached Mother Duchesne.

"I feel that I am a worn-out instrument, a useless walking stick that is fit only to be hidden in a dark corner," she wrote in 1834. Fevers, years of enduring unheated rooms, minimal eating and sleepless nights spent praying were taking their toll.

She was nearly eighty when she initially retired from teaching. For a brief time she supervised boarders at City House. Then she learned that younger nuns were considering closing the Florissant school because of lack of staff so she took a horse cart to Florissant and went back into the classroom in order to keep the school going.

The joy of Mother Duchesne's old age was the year that she spent with the Indians. Twenty-three years after her arrival in St. Louis, she was preparing to help start a native American school in Sugar Creek, Kansas, but, because she was recovering from a long illness, her superior refused to allow her to risk her health.

"But she must come too. Why, if we have to carry her all the way on our shoulders, she is coming with us," said Reverend Peter John Verhaegen S. J., protesting to the younger superior in the City House parlor. Verhaegen himself led the mission to Sugar Creek.

So, on June 19, 1841, four nuns boarded the Missouri River packet, Emilie. In a letter to her brother, Mother Duchesne passed along a list of Potawatomi words that she had mastered in her preparation. She was not, however, fluent enough to teach, so she mended clothing, kept the mission registry, played with the children and stayed up nights nursing sick Indians.

"One really could not find better people than these," she wrote to her sister. "Charity is practiced among them as it was among the early Christians."

After a year her superior ordered her to return to the City House in St. Louis. Later, she went to St. Charles, where she spent the final ten years of her life, mending children's clothes and nursing children in the infirmary. She also gloried in having time to pray in the chapel. Mother Duchesne died November 18, 1852, as the chapel bells tolled noon. She was buried behind the convent, a few hundred yards from the shrine where her remains are entombed today.

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