

Life at St. Mary of the Springs in the time of Anne O'Hare McCormick (1894-1898)

An article, "What a Few Women Can Accomplish," printed in the Washington, D.C., Times for July 4, 1895, is interesting from two points of view: first, it gives some first-hand observations of life at the Motherhouse; secondly, it was written by Clare Hanson Mohun, mother of Sister Stephanie Mohun:

In March, 1894, a cruel accident to my daughter, Sister Stephanie, called me to the Dominican Convent of St. Mary's of the Springs, near Columbus, Ohio. Although educated in a convent, I had never given thought to the wonderful work within cloistered walls, so that all I saw during my months at beautiful St. Mary's, of woman's ability as organizer and her skill as executor, struck me with the full force of first impressions . . .

On entering the always wide open, massive gates, one is struck with the marvelous beauty of the grounds . . . In the center of the ornamental grounds is a high mound . . . in the center of which is a slender flag staff fifty-six feet tall, from which at all times, from sunrise to sundown, floats the Stars and Stripes. Two sisters have special charge of this flag, and when the guns fire at Columbus Barracks you see these two white-garbed nuns raising the flag, and when the evening gun booms through the air, you again see their slight figures tripping across the lawn to lower the bunting and fetch it carefully indoors. At the base of the pole is a life-sized statue of Our Lady of Good Help . . .

There is a family of about 200 – sometimes more, sometimes less. This includes the pupils. Almost everything needed is raised on the place . . . This land is cultivated, the grounds taken care of, the stock attended to, trees and shrubbery trimmed, gates and bridges kept in ordinary repair, gutters made and mended, flower stands and benches painted, lawns cut, by one sister – Sister Mary Ann Sheehy – an old man, and two boys, the latter frequently called to drive to town, to go errands, and to fetch the mail.

There are 19 cows, 3 horses, 250 chickens, 25 pigs, and their stables and coops and sties the best and cleanest I ever saw. Last year Sister Mary Ann and her assistants raised 2,000 heads of cabbage, 124 bushels of apples, pears, etc., 100 bushels of tomatoes, 27 bushels of onions, 48 bushels of beans and peas, 30 bushels of grapes, 50 bushels of sweet corn, 280 bushels of Indian corn, and many tons of hay. From the chickens she has four to eight dozen eggs per day, and in the dairy, of which only one sister has charge, fifteen pounds of butter, sometimes more, are churned every morning by Sister Sabina

There is an immense kitchen and a bake kitchen. Three sisters do all the cooking and baking and you may form some idea of their work when I tell you they average one barrel of flour per day, besides one-half bushel of corn meal.

One sister has charge of the five furnaces, with one of Sister Mary Ann's boys to help her. Another sister has charge of the machinery connected with the gas tanks, for they make their own gas

The sisters all rise at four in summer; four forty-five in winter. The pupils rise at six, breakfast at seven; then the young ladies go to the dormitories and make their beds, but the sisters do all else. At eight, classes begin and from then until six in the evening, except an hour at noon, there is not a moment's idleness. I never saw so happy a family. I was never in so cheery a household.

This organization so perfect in every detail, this discipline so strict and yet so gentle, is the work of two women, maybe three . . . The Mother General is Mother Vincentia who was Miss Erskine of New York. She is a tiny, frail lady, scarcely five feet tall, but business to the tips of her fingers

Excerpted from AT THE SPRINGS – PART TWO
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