

# Building the Halls of Knowledge: The Early Years of Saint Mary College

By Tonya Crawford, SCL Archivist

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, work in America was undergoing changes. One area where those changes were visible was in the field of teaching. Increasingly, teachers were encouraged to have more formal training and education before entering the classroom. As such, teacher training programs, referred to as normal programs and normal schools, grew in number and size.

Reflecting this, St. Mary's Academy students in Leavenworth had been requesting the creation of a normal program to help graduates prepare to become teachers after receiving a diploma from the academy. In 1915, Mother Mary Berchmans acceded to this request and began a normal program for academy graduates. Unfortunately, developments in the field were already outstripping this model.

Certification and professional organizations began pushing for teacher training beyond the high school level. They made the case that future teachers should either attend specialized post-secondary normal schools or receive normal training in a college setting. This push affected the Sisters as some bishops wished all the teachers in their dioceses to be certified and many state certification boards began requiring the higher education levels.

The idea of the Community opening a college had come up before but Mother Berchmans was reluctant to do so, as she felt it superfluous due to the number of existing colleges. As pressure increased for trained and educated Sisters in not just teaching but also nursing, dietetics, and more, Mother Berchmans became convinced of the value in providing education to laywomen and Sisters. A junior college located with the Motherhouse in Leavenworth meant that postulants, novices, and young Sisters could live in Community and receive a needed education at the same time.

Before the junior college could open, however, there were space requirements. In the 1920s, St. Mary's Hall, Mead Hall, and Xavier Hall housed both St. Mary's Academy classrooms, living spaces, and dining areas for the girls attending the school and the Community's Motherhouse, with living and dining spaces for the Sisters. The new junior college needed room amongst this. What is now the Walnut Room in



Saint Mary's Academy graduates, 1912.

Mead Hall became the initial location of college classes. The space was the second location of Annunciation Chapel until 1916 when the current Annunciation Chapel building opened. The Walnut Room was divided into four areas—two large classrooms and two smaller locker rooms. Elsewhere in St. Mary's and Mead Hall, some space was taken from the Sisters' dormitory and the Academy dormitories to make living spaces for the junior college women.

Finally, the Community was ready and Saint Mary's Junior College opened September 10, 1923. Staffing the small college were Mother Mary Berchmans as president, since in her role as Mother General she was also the head of the academy. Additionally, Sister Margaret Clare Herron was dean and instructor in education and Latin. Sister Mary Adelaide Tully was disciplinarian, Sister Mary Luke Gaffney was librarian, and Reverend Benedict Rodman, S.J., was instructor of religion. Lay women filled out the rest of the staff: Miss Alice Barndt taught English and history, Miss Agnes Keefe instructed in French, Spanish, and Italian, and Miss Priscilla Wood taught chemistry and mathematics.

Enrollment that first year was small; three young women entered as sophomores and eighteen entered as freshmen. These women came not only from Leavenworth and the Kansas City region but also from states where the Community had missions, such as Nebraska, Montana, and Colorado. At the end of that first year, one diploma was awarded to Miss Mary Orr, sibling to Sister Mary Mark Orr.

A year later, however, there were 54 Sisters enrolled at Saint Mary's Junior College for summer session classes. Two years after that, in the fall, there were 61 full-time students and 20 part-time ones. This pleased Mother Mary Berchmans as there needed to be at least 60 full-time students in order to



**Chemistry students at work in the science building at Saint Mary Junior College, 1928.**



**The three photos above, all taken in 1929, show the various phases of construction of Berchmans Hall.**

apply for certification from the North Central Association of College and Schools (often referred to as the North Central Association).

The North Central Association was a group which accredited colleges and schools in 19 states, but whose authority was recognized and honored across the U.S. Belonging to the North Central Association would mean graduates should have their diplomas and degrees recognized by certification institutions, such as various state boards of nursing and state teacher accreditation. It was a very important step for the future of the college and the employability of the Sisters and women who graduated from the college.

On February 20, 1928, the North Central Association examiners visited the junior college and reportedly were quite satisfied with what they saw. The Community eagerly waited until March 15 when word came that Saint Mary Junior College was, indeed, accredited.

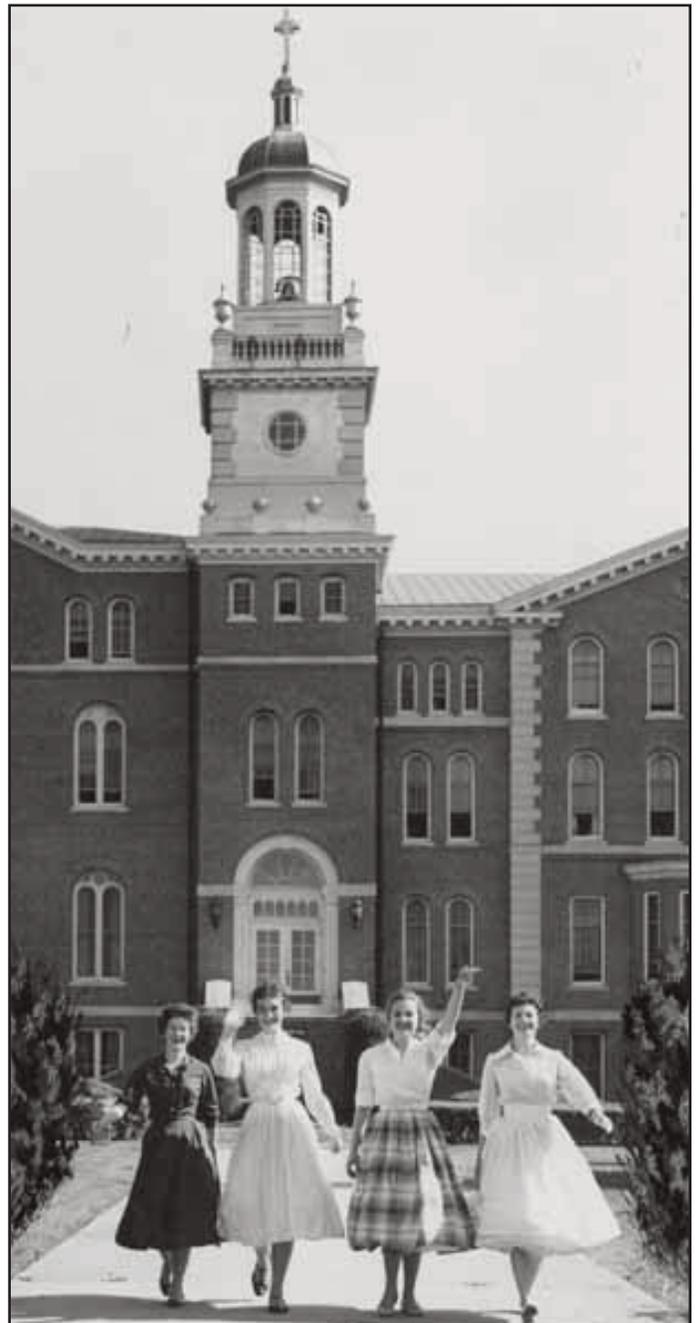
Once again, though, social pressures were pushing Saint Mary Junior College forward. While the institution attracted more and more women, jobs were also demanding more and more education to enter various careers. A four-year college degree became increasingly desirable, and the success of the junior college proved there was demand to support it.

In preparation for a growing college population, construction began on a new building for the campus. In 1928, the science building opened; designed to house chemistry, biology, and physics. It was the first new classroom building since Xavier Hall opened in 1915. This building became Miega Hall in 1930, but today is known as Cantwell Hall.

In September 1930, the junior college opened as a four-year college. The academy students who shared the campus referred to this iteration as "Greater Saint Mary's." The four-year college still shared campus, classroom, living, and dining space with the academy girls.



**The gates to the entrance drive of Saint Mary College and Saint Mary Academy.**



**Female students wave to the camera at Saint Mary College in the early 1950s.**

While many local women came to the college in the morning and returned home in the evening, other women came from farther away and lived on campus. Additionally, a four-year college required more faculty members who taught more subjects. To provide more living and office space, construction began on the first official college building on campus. While Mother Mary Berchmans' tenure as Mother General ended in 1928, her efforts on behalf of the college were recognized in the new building bearing her name. Opened in 1930, Berchmans Hall provided housing for college and academy boarders on the upper floors, offices for faculty members primarily on the first floor, and recreation space for all the students mostly in the basement level. As classes graduated, they left class gifts behind for those entertainment purposes. One young woman's parents gifted a piano, one class donated a Victrola, a later class gave a radio, and so on.

Saint Mary's College also gained a new seal and a new motto: "Virtus et Scientia" – Virtue and Knowledge. Mother Mary Olive Mead, Mother General following Mother Mary Berchmans, also felt that the college needed an academic president to place it on a firmer footing and hired their first lay president.

In addition to the postulants, novices, and young Sisters who attended classes before being sent on missions, older Sisters now periodically returned for refresher courses or to learn the latest techniques or discoveries in their fields. The Community leaned into the idea of continuing education long before that term even existed.

The end of Saint Mary's College's initial growth phase was marked, not by a college event, but by one in St. Mary's Academy. As the college expanded, the space for St. Mary's Academy decreased. Declining academy enrollment, due to the increased number of available Catholic high schools, and a decreased interest in single-sex education, signaled the end of the institution. Mother Mary Francesca O'Shea announced that, after 91 years, St. Mary's Academy would close at the end of the 1950 school year.

And with that, the Community moved ever forward into new realms of education, which continue to this day.

***About the author:***

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