

PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province • Providence Health & Services

Accessions add to Chehalis and Centralia Collections

Peter Schmid

A recent accession of records from the former St. Helen Hospital (Chehalis, Wash.) and Providence Hospital in Centralia, Wash. has added valuable historic material to our existing record groups, which also grew substantially from two 2019 accessions.



Guest book from the dedication and open house for the 1952 wing, St. Helen Hospital, Chehalis. The book is bound in hand-decorated wood covers. Acc. 2022-069.

Providence Hospital, Centralia was created as a merger of the old St. Helen Hospital in Chehalis, and the existing General Hospital in Centralia. These institutions present unique challenges for the archives in terms of their lineage.

St. Helen Hospital was founded in 1907 by the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds, Wash. who already had a presence in the region, having opened St. Joseph Hospital in

Preserving St. Ignatius headstones in the artifacts collection

Jessica Long

Our artifact collection storage rooms contain all kinds of odd shapes that create weird shadows in the dark (the lights are kept off when not needed to limit UV damage), so it's easy to get a bit spooked sometimes. The medical mannequin lying on an antique exam table used to get the most double-takes, but a group of gray marble headstones now lined up against one wall may be the new titleholder!

The stones were the original grave markers for some of the early sisters buried at St. Ignatius Cemetery in St. Ignatius, Mont. Rather small, with an average height of only 14.5 inches, the stones are engraved with a simple cross, the sister's name, and either a range of years or just the year of death. Two of the headstones actually came to the Archives back in 2011 when all the sisters' original headstones at the cemetery, many of which were weather-worn or broken, were replaced. The stones were those of Mother Mary of the Infant Jesus (Perpetua Bougret dit Dufort, 1826-1917) and Sister Paul Miki (M. Mathilde Roby, 1842-1880). As foundresses of St. Ignatius Province, their headstones were chosen to enhance the rather limited objects representing that province in our collection. At that time, the remaining headstones were placed in the first convent of the Sisters of Providence in St. Ignatius. The little cabin was built in 1864 and is now located on the grounds of St. Ignatius Mission Parish where it's used as a small museum dedicated to the history of both the Sisters of Providence and the Ursuline Sisters, who also taught at St. Ignatius.

In August 2021, Archives was asked if we would like the remaining headstones. Mindful of our limited storage space, I knew we couldn't accept them all. So, to aid in selection, I compiled a simple spreadsheet and filled it with research. One of the first pieces of information added was the condition of each stone. If it was too damaged, broken into pieces, or the engraving illegible, then the headstone would be unsuitable for the collection. The next step in narrowing down our choices was researching each sister

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to look for any significant historical information, especially something associated with St. Ignatius Province or the Montana ministries. In the end, six headstones were selected, bringing the collection to a total of eight.



Headstones covered in lichen, St. Ignatius Cemetery

Of the eight headstones, the oldest is that of Sister Paul Miki, who died on December 19, 1880 at Holy Family Hospital in St. Ignatius, Mont. She was the first of the four St. Ignatius foundresses to die, and her fellow foundress Mother Mary of the Infant Jesus was the last on April 11, 1917.

The headstone of Sister Celanire Belcourt (1847-1891) is the second oldest. She was a member of the Third Order of the Servites of Mary, also known as a tertiary sister, who died in 1891. This separate tertiary order was established by Bishop Bourget in 1864 for those who wished to serve the poor and to be associated with the Sisters of Providence community, but who, for a variety of reasons, were either unfit or unwilling to commit to the life of a fully professed sister. These sisters were only required to make annual vows of chastity and were not permitted to vote on governance matters within the community. (Note that they did not receive a name in religion, but were known only by their baptismal names.)

In 1900, the tertiaries were incorporated into the religious community by allowing them to make perpetual vows as coadjutrix Sisters of Providence. Like the tertiaries, the coadjutrix sisters were typically assigned to menial tasks, such as those in the kitchens or farms at an institution (to learn more about these sisters, see the [Summer 2008 issue](#) of Past Forward). Because of the na-

ture of these early tertiary and coadjutrix sisters, there are very few artifacts in the collection that represent them. This reasoning played a part in the selection of three coadjutrix sisters' headstones: Sisters Anna Magnan (1864-1950), Agnes Marceau (1868-1930), and Odile Gignac (1847-1926).

According to her necrology, Sister Anna Magnan stood out from others of her order with an aptitude for mechanical work. She learned carpentry, plumbing, and engineering from her father and older brother, and was even a licensed engineer! She made the altar and pews for the chapel at Sacred Heart Academy in Missoula, Mont., as well as ceiling-high cabinets in the sisters' community room. Sister Anna died at Holy Family Hospital in St. Ignatius on September 9, 1950.

Sister Agnes Marceau had a unique connection to St. Ignatius, Mont. At the age of eight, she was placed as a boarder at St. Ignatius Indian School and after joining the tertiaries at the age of 20, she was appointed to ministries in St. Ignatius; DeSmet, Idaho; Wallace, Idaho; Fort Benton, Mont.; and Great Falls, Mont., before returning to St. Ignatius due to ill health and dying of tuberculosis on October 6, 1930.

Sister Odile Gignac left Montreal for St. Ignatius Mission with fully-professed Sister Jane de Chantal (Marie Esther D'Aoust, 1850-1929) in 1873, and remained there at St. Ignatius Indian School until the school burned to the ground in 1919. She then spent some time in DeSmet, Idaho before returning to St. Ignatius to work at Holy Family Hospital. She spent 53 years total in St. Ignatius and died on October 5, 1926 at Holy Family Hospital. The headstone of her traveling companion, Sister Jane de Chantal, is also a part of this collection. She spent her first 20 years and her last 12 years at St. Ignatius School and learned the Kalispel language. She also died at Holy Family Hospital on January 31, 1929.



Cleaning the headstones required D/2 and some elbow grease!

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The headstone of Sister Blanche Lea (Marie Beatrice Lord, 1906-1930) tells a tragic tale of the hardships the early sisters endured. She was appointed to the kitchen at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane, Wash., but became ill and was sent to DeSmet, Idaho hoping for a cure in the clean country air. However, after only being a Sister of Providence for only three years, she died on March 28, 1930 from tuberculosis at Holy Family Hospital in St. Ignatius, having made her perpetual vows from her sick bed just one month earlier.



The headstone of coadjutrix Sister Agnes Marceau after cleaning

The reasons for supporting the preservation of these specific headstones in the artifact collection, including all of these stories, were added to their catalog records now available on our online digital collections database, along with a full description, measurements, condition report, and other useful information. But the work didn't end with the research. When the headstones finally arrived in Spokane in the fall of 2022, they couldn't immediately be placed in the collection. The marble slabs had accumulated layers of grime after decades of being exposed to the elements. I didn't want to introduce dirt or any hitchhiking insects into the storage rooms. In order to clean the stones safely and without damaging them further, Pam Hedquist and I had a fun day outside scrubbing each headstone with water and D/2 Biological Solution, which is a biodegradable liquid used to remove biological growth (like moss, mildew, or lichen), stains, and dirt from most masonry surfaces. With a bit of elbow grease, the stones are clean and legible. The final step in this headstone project was physically labeling each one with a unique item number and finding them a home among the other artifacts in storage.

Providence Archives is golden!

Peter Schmid

On May 1, 2022, Providence Archives, established in the former Sacred Heart Province, reached its 50th anniversary. On that day in 1972, Sister Rita Bergamini was appointed the first archivist. In the history of Sacred Heart Province, the archives had always been kept at the provincial administration offices, and so moved along with the offices, beginning in Vancouver, Wash. (Providence Academy), 1856-1923; Seattle, Wash. (Mount St. Vincent), 1924-1961; and Issaquah, Wash. (Providence Heights), 1961-1972. Thus, in 1972 the historical collections were housed in the provincial administration vault at Providence Heights. It wasn't until November 1972 that the collections were moved to Saint Joseph Residence, which was in a sense a homecoming, since they were stored with the provincial offices at Mount St. Vincent on the same campus from 1924 to 1961.

Over the years, the Archives has grown in staff, historical collections, research and outreach, and space. Between 1972 and 2022, we have added 8,159 accessions! (An accession can be anything from a single item up to dozens of cubic feet of records). And, between 2003, the first year we began entering records into our reference database, and 2022, we have responded to over 5,575 requests for information. (Before 2003, reference records were recorded on slips of paper which we still have, but have never counted - sounds like a future volunteer project!)

Since the history of the Archives has been written in several sources, we will not repeat it here. Readers are invited to refer to earlier Caritas and Past Forward articles that recount Providence Archives history and celebrations (all are accessible from the Providence Archives website):

- [Caritas \(provincial newsletter\), January 1973](#): Profile of Sister Rita Bergamini
- [Caritas, April 1992](#): 20th anniversary of Providence Archives
- [Past Forward, Fall 2012](#): 40th Anniversary of Providence Archives, including photographs and a timeline
- [Past Forward, Spring 2021](#): 50th anniversary of the founding of St. Ignatius Province archives
- [Past Forward, Fall 2021](#): A lasting legacy: Sister Rita Bergamini celebrates 100 years

While we're observing anniversaries, the year 2023 marks 30 years of the Past Forward newsletter! Our [first issue](#) was published in January 1993. The issue was mainly devoted to answering basic questions about the nature of archives and our work. Check out the issue on our website.

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Aberdeen, Wash. in 1890. Chehalis was a strategic spot to locate a hospital due to its central location between Portland and Seattle, and the presence of the railroad which allowed valuable access to seaports. The Dominican Sisters expanded the hospital from an original frame building in the 1920s, and built a major new wing in 1952. Still more beds and a nursing home were included in a 1963 wing.

By the 1980s, the Dominican Sisters were looking for a new sponsor for St. Helen Hospital. Selection criteria included alignment of values with the Dominican Sisters, and the financial wherewithal and management experience to continue the ministry. The Sisters of Providence Health System was one such system, and so a dialogue began. Of course, the Sisters of Providence also needed to examine the hospital's finances and assess liabilities before entering into a new sponsorship.

Both parties agreed and on July 1, 1983 St. Helen Hospital began operating as a Providence institution.

In 1988, Sisters of Providence Health System acquired Centralia General Hospital. (The Sisters previously had a presence in Centralia in St. Luke Infirmary, 1945-1969.)* The Providence board recognized that both St. Helen Hospital and Centralia General, just five miles up the road,

had each been operating at less than 50 percent capacity, and so merged the two institutions, forming Providence Centralia Hospital. In this new arrangement, Providence Centralia provided acute care services such as emergency, obstetrics and gynecology, surgery, radiology, laboratory, and general medical care. Some services in Chehalis continued, including long-term care and rehabilitative services at Rosary Manor, a 41-bed nursing home; a stroke rehabilitation unit, and an outpatient addictions recovery center.

As sometimes happens with acquiring historic institutions, Providence Archives inherited some legacy records documenting both St. Helen Hospital during the Dominican era, as well as records from the former Centralia General Hospital.

Records from these accessions, dating from 1912 to 2000, include: photographs; governing board minutes; capitol campaigns and construction projects; institutional newsletters; communications on the 1988 merger; and a guestbook from the open house of the expanded St. Helen Hospital in 1952 with wooden covers (pictured). They will be preserved for future understanding of this important part of the health system in Lewis County.

**A previous version of this newsletter mistakenly identified the previous ministry as Ozanam Home.*

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