

Sister Bonifacia – Teacher
31 Years At St. Mary

Hello to all of you here in this beautiful St. Mary Cemetery. I am Sister Bonifacia, a Sister of Christian Charity. I was the Sister Superior and a teacher here at St. Mary in Westphalia for 31 years. I do remember those days and I can recall many family names like Schafer and Freund, and I had many students named Thelen and Schmitt. I have so many things to tell you, but before I talk about my years in Westphalia, I should tell you about my first years in Germany.

I was born in 1833 in the Westphalia province of Germany in a little village called Neuhaus. My family name is Gunther. I attended the parish school in Neuhaus until I was 14 years old. I liked school and my teachers. I was always ready and eager to help them in school and the work in the church.

I was an only child and sadly, when I was six years old, my father died. Now it was just my mother and me. But my mother always said, "Put your trust in God and then you won't be so sad."

As I grew older, I yearned to join a religious order, especially the Sisters of Christian Charity. Many of you may know all about Mother Pauline von Mallinkrodt. She founded that religious order on the 21st of August in 1849. On that day, Pauline and three companions received the religious habit from the hands of the Bishop of Paderborn. Now Pauline was ready to establish schools for the blind, elementary schools, orphanages, and day nurseries. And the membership of her community increased to several hundreds. She was helping the poor and disabled long before the government was giving them aid.

When I was twenty years old, I entered the convent of the Sisters of Christian Charity in Paderborn. After my Noviciate, I was assigned as teacher to the schools and superior of the house in Dortmund, a large city in Germany. I stayed there for 20 years.

In the 1870's, the storm clouds of the Kulturkampf, or as we say, "Bismarck's Fight For Culture," were falling over the religious institutions in Germany, especially the Catholic institutions. Mother Pauline was becoming more apprehensive. Very soon, she feared, the government would pass a law excluding members of religious orders from the office of teaching. And this happened in August of 1872. The Sisters were forced to close their schools. But Mother Pauline's courage never failed. She encouraged her Sisters to spend their time studying foreign languages. If her work in Germany was being shut down, other lands were calling – both North and South America.

And you here at St. Mary may know this – in 1874, Mother Pauline sent 4 Sisters of Christian Charity to Westphalia, Michigan in answer to a request from Father Reiffert, the Pastor of St. Mary Parish. He had written that Westphalia with about 2,000 German Catholics was in need of teachers. A new school and convent was awaiting teachers.

I was now 40 years old and about to make a big change in my life. I was going to America. Mother Pauline was sending me to the new motherhouse in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. I was honored.

After a short rest in Wilkes Barre, I was sent West to Minnesota. I was first stationed in Henderson and then in Minneapolis. After two years in Minnesota, my next ministry was Westphalia, Michigan.

My train from the West brought me to Fowler, Michigan where a carriage was waiting at the station to take me to my new home at St. Mary in Westphalia. And there the first thing I saw was the school – a large brick building – a real gem with four large classrooms. A few steps to the north was the new convent. It was a two-story home big enough to house the Sisters. It was a well-furnished house – better than many of the simple log homes of the settlers. So I can say the church, the school, and the convent were surrounded by spacious grounds for a garden and an orchard. And the people – so friendly and so generous. When I heard their names – Rademacher, Snitgen, Hanses, I knew they had come from my German homeland – the Sauerland.

The school enrollment was well over 200. The Sisters had charge of the younger children and the older girls, but the older boys were taught by male teachers. Mr Frederick Biergans was one of those teachers. By 1884, the Sisters replaced all the male teachers and later boys and girls were taught in the same classroom.

Looking out at you here today, I'm certain all of you have a high school education. But in my time at St. Mary, only six years of schooling was available. A few of the town children went to the public school for the 7th and 8th grades.

In October of 1878, the first young woman to join the Sisters of Christian Charity was Frances Thome. She was one of the many young women of St. Mary to join that order – 21 during my time here. Elizabeth Snitgen entered the convent in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania a few days after my death in May of 1907 and when she professed her vows, she received the name Sister Bonifacia – an honor to my memory.

Did you know – a saint once walked the streets of Westphalia? In June of 1880, Blessed Mother Pauline came from Germany to spend five days with us at St. Mary.

The school enrollment was steadily increasing. We needed more classrooms. So Father Herwig, that good priest, made plans to build the West Side School, and when Father Broegger came, he added an addition to the building. Now we had a beautiful auditorium with a stage – a place for entertainments. That priest accomplished many things, and the very best was a new convent for the Sisters. It was a wonderful brick house – big enough for the ten Sisters I had under my care.

When we moved into our new convent, the old convent became a boarding house. And we Sisters staffed that house. Any child who lived too far away from school could stay in the house. For \$2 or \$2.50 a week a child would eat and sleep there. Three meals a day were served in the convent across the street. Yes, we were busy. During the

winter months, there would be as many as 70 boys and girls in the house. The girls slept upstairs and the boys downstairs. One Sister was assigned to the girls and another to the boys. And the children helped us with the work – washing dishes, cleaning, and carrying in the water. The parents brought their children on Monday morning and returned for them on the following Friday. When the weather was threatening, the children would come in on Sunday after Mass. Yes we were busy, but we had the help of the parents, the priests, and the good Doctor Schoenith.

Before I say good-bye, I want to say that the best years of my life were here in Westphalia. These good people helped me celebrate my Golden Jubilee. My hope is that I will long be remembered. I thank you for coming today. And as the poet said, "I thank you for bringing such joy to my soul." Auf Wiedersehen and God bless all of you.

