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Interview no. 126

Loretto Sisters

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Loretto Sisters
INTERVIEWER: Dora L. McNeely
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Nuns.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Sister Pancratia and Sister Rose Clare of the Sisters of Loretto discuss the history and development of El Paso's Loretto Academy.

30 minutes (1 7/8 tape speed); 18 pages.

- M: The following interview will be with two sisters of the Loretto order. They were pioneers in aiding the educational field here in El Paso: Sister Pancratia and Sister Rose Clare. Could you tell us when and where you were born? First of all your name, your personal name and then your religious name.
- P: My personal name is Irma Madarasz, but you'll never be able to spell that. I was born in El Paso.
- M: And your religious name is, of course, Sister Mary Pancratia.
- R: My name is Rose Alice McWhorter and my religious name is Sister Rose Clare. I'm a native of Mobile, Alabama.
- M: Could you tell us a little bit about your parents and where they lived here, Sister Pancratia, what your father did?
- P: My father came from Hungary and my grandfather was one of the group expelled from Hungary in the revolution, in the 1850's. They came to this country. My father and my mother were married here in El Paso. My mother was born in Clifton, Texas, and my father was a broker.
- M: Sister Rose Clare?
- R: I can't tell very much because I was quite young when my parents died. But they are Americans, they were both born in this country. But I lost my parents at a very early age.
- M: What did your father do, do you know?
- R: I really don't know because my father died three months before I was born.
- M: I see. Where were you educated, Sister Pancratia?
- P: I was educated in Loretto Heights Academy in Denver, Colorado. I received my degrees in Greeley, Colorado, and my library degree I

received in Denver University.

M: Do you remember any of your teachers? Well, all along primary, high school.

P: Well, most.

M: Do any stand out particularly?

P: Oh yes, Mother Pancratia. Mother Pancratia took me as a baby, just five years old, at Loretto Heights Academy. I grew up under her tutorship.

M: I guess that's why you chose the name Pancratia?

P: Yes.

M: Your association with her and admiration for her. Could you tell us a little bit about the discipline in, for example, what stands out during your education?

P: Oh, I can remember I used to get spanked quite a bit when I was little. But they used to have a punish class in the evening and everyone that had marks had to go to that punish class. That was one of the main ways in which they disciplined there. Of course, it was a boarding school entirely, no day pupils.

M: What did they expect you to do as punishment in punishment class?

P: We just simply sat there.

M: That was punishment, I'm sure. All right, and Sister Rose Clare, where were you educated?

R: In Alabama, and I went to boarding school in Montgomery, Alabama. Then I had my nominal training at the Mother House and attended various colleges.

M: Do any of your teachers, did any of them leave a memory with you, a special memory?

R: Yes, I should say that they were very close to me because they were as mothers to me. I had lost my mother at the age of four. I was very close to them because they mothered me and did so much for me. There's one sister here at Nazareth that taught me when I was a child, Sister Mary Dora. She's an El Paso girl, too.

M: I see. What stands out from your educational years?

R: They're just days of happy memories as far as I can say. The competition was just something that was exuberating at all times. I can't remember anything, just the happiness of it all.

M: That's wonderful. Let's see, when did you come to El Paso Sister Rose? I know you're not from here.

R: I came to El Paso right from the novitiate after my nominal training. I had my novitiate training in 1922 and I taught in old St. Joseph's Academy for a year, while Loretto, the present Loretto was in construction. Then, the following September we moved into the quarters that year, from St. Joseph's. Loretto is really an extension of St. Joseph Academy, which was located at 704 N. El Paso Street. Mother Praxedes, who was our Superior General for twenty-five years, went out of office. It was she who came out here to El Paso to build Loretto Academy, and she brought me out in 1922. I taught one year at old St. Joseph Academy while this place was in construction.

M: When did that close?

R: It closed as an academy in June, 1923. It continued as an educational

center for the sisters from México when they were having so much trouble and persecution. Then later after they left, they went back to various Mother Houses in the city and probably in foreign countries. The Sisters of Loretto took it over as a high school for the Mexican girls and they taught there for a number of years until it was time to close.

M: As I remember I had a friend who had gone to St. Joseph.

R: Well see, they had a lovely high school down there and they taught there for a number of years. There were so many girls who wanted it, a Catholic High School, but could not afford Loretto and distance too.

M: Now that school was in operation, as a high school, as late as what year? St. Joseph.

R: I can't remember.

M: I think as late as the '40's, I think in the late '40's or early '50's.

P: I think it was.

M: Then I'm going to ask Sister Pancratia about the homes, the furnishings, the heating, and all that you can remember more or less in the time when you all started Loretto Academy, here in El Paso.

P: Well the heating, we had regular radiators that used to leak, of course, like every radiator leaks. Then, our furnishings, we really lived a life of poverty. We had a pretty hard time getting started because we had few girls to begin with, boarders, and the boarders were really the source of income. For a few years we had a hard time, but we plugged along and Mother Praxedes pulled us out of it.

M: Where were those bungalows mentioned in the article?

P: The two right here beyond us.

R: On Trowbridge and Hardaway, and they were built on the premises.

M: But they're not there anymore?

R: Oh, yes!

P: One is the home economics department and the other one is where some of the sisters are living now. It used to be the chaplain's home.

M: Your chaplain used to be Father Paine?

R: That's right.

M: I had met him in Guadalupe. I go to his 10 o'clock mass. I think Sister Rose Clare was telling us before the interview about where you got your food, your groceries, Sister.

R: We used to get quite a bit from the wholesale grocers here in town. Most of them are nonexistent now, but we depended a great deal upon the fresh produce from the valley. Men would come in trucks each morning and Sister would buy it from the trucks. It was a big help and at the same time we procured the very best we could get. We also traded with the wholesale stores in town, but many of them are no longer existing.

M: Did you want to tell me the little story about the...?

P: Well, we had an elderly sister who was in the kitchen, she had been down at St. Joseph Academy, Sister Yudora. She was very fond of birds and she had three or four pet canaries. Of course, they came to live at Loretto with her from old St. Joseph's Academy. She used to

keep them out on the little porch right in back of the kitchen, as it were. They chirped and chirped all the time. Sister Rosalie at the time was a procurator~~ess~~. Of course, as I say, we had hard times. It was during the Depression years at the same time we were building Loretto. We scrapped for every penny that we needed and worked for it too. So the sisters used to make remarks in Latin, remarks to Sister Yudora. "Hey, Sister Yudora, what's the matter with your birds? Your canaries do nothing but beep cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep." Her reply, her retort was, "Well how can they do anything else, when that's all they hear from Sister Rosalie from the window sill, 'Give it to us cheap, give it to us cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap.'" (laughter)

M: That was fine. Then I'd like to ask you about, do any of you remember what transportation was like? How did you used to get around?

P: We used to go on the streetcar. We walked down to, what was that? Roosevelt Street, about three blocks down. We had to walk down with the blazing hot sun. There was nothing around here, you know.

R: It was the entrance of Austin Terrace.

P: It was really the end of the car line; it seemed just about a block beyond where we used to get on.

R: See, in those days we were outside of the city limits. That's as far as the bus went, so we walked down from Loretto, really a good three blocks.

M: You nearly made your school right above us. We live right below Medical Center and according to this article in the paper it said you nearly bought that place.

R: We did buy...we owned Golden Hill, that part of it, I'd say. But when

Mother Praxedes came they had the architectural drawings ready. The architects went to our Mother House with Mr. Morgan, Mr. J. E. Morgan, who was the contractor, and Trost and Trost were the architects. They went to Loretto for the final approval of the drawings, and Mother Praxedes looked them over and in her wisdom and knowledge of buildings, she said she didn't think it was a suitable place because it was so inaccessible. It would cost a fortune to grade it and there was also the question of getting the water up there. So she told them that she would hold off for a while, that it was better to delay it until she could come out and see if she could find a more suitable location. Within a short time, she came to El Paso. The contractor and architect took her out, and she spotted this place outside of the city limits.

P: The alley was the city limits.

R: Yes, we were 5 1/2 miles out.

P: The bungalows were out of the city limits.

R: We were 5 1/2 miles from the center of town, so she said, "This is the spot," and it's almost 19 acres. So they purchased this and we still had Golden Hill on our hands. But I remember later on they had a cave-in and of course it was very hard to sell the place on account of that, then also the difficulties of building and everything. We had to meet our taxes as usual because we weren't using it for an educational purpose. We finally deeded it to the city, and they took it over with the taxes. I think that the city sold it to individual builders or something, and they developed Medical Center.

M: What schools did your order set up in El Paso, Sister Pancratia?

P: Oh, I don't know exactly that they set them up, but the first schools that they taught at were St. Mary's, which is not in existence now.

M: The one on Myrtle?

P: Yes, the one on Myrtle. Then they had St. Ignatius downtown; we don't have that anymore. We don't have any of them anymore except St. Joseph and Cathedral. Then at one time they had Holy Family over in Sunset.

R: What was that...

P: Sacred Heart.

R: Sacred Heart and Guardian Angel. Yes, we taught in all those schools. The sisters all lived out here.

M: So they had to go...

P: At first...

M: Oh, they had to take the streetcar every time to go down to teach and come back?

R: Yes, and St. Patrick and St. Joseph opened around the same time that Loretto did.

M: Now St. Pat, the old St. Patrick, they added that addition to it.

R: That was built later.

M: At the same...

R: At St. Joseph School.

M: What subjects were taught? Do you remember, Sister, at St. Joseph?

R: We had subjects on a regular credit curriculum. I taught fifth grade down at St. Joseph. I taught the regular curriculum subjects.

It was an accredited school. We taught and had school from the primer to the twelfth grade. In those days there was no kindergarden, we called it primer, it was a preparation of first grade, but in those days the children really learned in the primer what they learned in the first grade. We took them at the age of five in those days. I had the fifth and sixth grades down there. When I transferred out here, I took the babies from primary grades.

M: Where did you first teach, Sister Pancratia?

P: In Colorado.

M: I thought the article was about you. It said you had been a teacher before you entered the order.

P: Yes. I taught four years before I [entered] the order. Then I went to college and finished up, and then I went to the orders as soon as I had gotten my master's degree.

M: Which one of you would like to tell me a little bit about the history of the Loretto Order -- where it was founded and when?

P: The founder was a Belgian. He came over, he was expelled. It was the time of the revolution over there.

R: The French, they had so much trouble.

P: He was in hiding for quite awhile, and then finally Bishop Carol brought him over here. He stayed in Baltimore for quite a while, learned the English language, and then Bishop Carol sent him to Kentucky.

M: What was his name?

P: Nerinckx. We don't spell Nerinx, Kentucky that way; it's just Nerinx,

because of the postage. We have our own post office, and because of the spelling, they have shortened it. Then Father came over here and had a very hard time of course. He finally got these three young ladies who wanted to be teachers. They started the teaching of children. They told Father that they wanted to be religious, so he trained them, and they became religious. Father Nerinx lived on at Loretto until the 1820's. The order was founded in 1812, and then from that time, why they have just grown. We have several houses out in California and many in this part of the country, the Midwest, and the South.

M: You care to add something to it?

R: Might say that he studied English before. He wasn't able to go right into the _____ because he didn't know the language and /in/ those days the United States was a foreign country. He volunteered for the missions of the United States. He was no longer able to use his priestly faculties in Belgium on account of the French Revolution. He learned the English language; he took quite a bit of English work in the English language with the Trappist Fathers in Kentucky.

P: The Trappist monastery in Kentucky bought their property from us.

M: What is the name of that monastery?

R: The Excemedy. I think he also worked in Louisiana for a while, that was his first stopover. He was destined for Kentucky, the wilds of Kentucky, and he rode **all night** long sometimes from one little mission town to the other. He never got out of the

saddle for nights, going from one little mission town to another, because there were two or three priests in Kentucky doing missionary work at that time. Then he, as Sister said, realized the dire necessity of education of the children.

M: Was he what we call a diocese or something?

R: He was just a secular priest. He was wanted, there was a price put on his head, because he did so much work for the Catholic Church in Belgium. He used to disguise himself, he'd be a carpenter one time and maybe a milkman. He would say mass at the homes of the people early in the morning. His aunt was a religious in this hospital and he lived in the attic, because they hounded him. He would say mass at two o'clock and then leave in the morning, the wee hours of the morning. Then he would take care of sick patients at night. And when there was no danger of him being...

M: This was in Belgium?

R: That was in Belgium. He didn't want to continue like that, because it seemed like the revolution was at it's height, and so he volunteered.

M: Very much like what happened in México, right?

R: Yes. When he came over here, his father was a doctor. He came from a large family; he was the oldest of the large family.

M: Could you tell a little bit about the present history, the present activity of the order? Are all of you Sisters dedicated to teaching or do you have some other field?

P: No, not now. Not now since they've gone into secular clothes,

which is about eight years. They're doing social work, and some of them right here are teaching in the public schools. Some that live over here in Loretto teach in the public schools. Most of them, I think, are in education work, but it's also social work. Two sisters are in Saigon now running an orphanage. One of our trained nurses...

R: And some in La Paz, Bolivia.

M: Yes, I wanted to ask you that, whether your houses were limited to just the United States or whether you had...

P: We did have two houses in China, but when the war came along the Holy Father told the sisters that they would have to come back to this country.

R: They were really expelled. Two or three were over there and they were in communistic camps.

P: That was the Japanese, Chinese War.

R: Chinese.

P: That wasn't World War...

R: They were considered foreigners, you see.

P: And they...

R: They were in the concentration camps for a year or two.

M: What do you consider to be the future for the Loretto Order? Let's say here in El Paso?

P: We don't know.

M: Your not making any predictions, either?

P: We don't know, it changes so from year to year, doesn't it, Sister?
It changes from year to year. People are doing different things and we just don't know.

M: You might say it's like the council coming up to date, and you are adapting also.

P: That's right.

R: We are learning to adapt ourselves to the times.

P: That's right. That's what they're trying to do, but at the same time it's mighty hard. We in the habit of course just can't stand the rest of them. /Laughter/.

M: Well, coming back to the business of the habit, you say that those that are allowed, those that want to wear the habit may?

P: Yes.

R: That's right, we have an option. They are not compelled at all to take off the religious habit, it is a matter of choice.

P: That was really an accident though, because they intended to have a tailored suit that everyone would wear. There were three styles of suits to suit different types of figures and there were different colors: there was the grey, black, and the two shades of blue. They intended /to have the suits/, and then just a little white blouse. Now, that was what was intended and nothing was said about the veil at that time; they didn't know. Hart, Shaffer, and Marks were getting out the suits. Well, when they got the first shipment of material, it wasn't right and they wouldn't accept it. Consequently, the suits didn't come, so Mother just said, "All right," she said, "just wear what you can pick up right now," and they

picked up, all right! (Laughter)

M: Now everybody wears what they want?

P: But the suits did finally come, and they're lovely, weren't they Sister? They were beautiful suits. I don't think any of us would have minded, if it had been a uniform.

R: Right.

P: They were to be uniforms. Some of them still wear the suits.

M: But don't you imagine that it's easier now for the social workers and such, without the habit, to do their work? They don't stand out so much and that's maybe one of the ideas.

P: That's one of the things they think, because they're working in different types of social work. Some are doing hospital work.

M: Which is more practical.

P: Others are working down in the slums in some places. We had one little sister here, Sister Peter Joseph. She went down to live in South El Paso. She was rather delicate and she had to give it up. But she used to go down to teach; until just last year she had to give up.

R: Yes, she had to give it up.

P: So, it's just a matter of... we just don't know what's going to come.

M: But I'm sure you know you're here to stay.

P: We're here to stay.

R: Right.

M: What is your life like here at Nazareth Hall? When was Nazareth Hall started?

R: We completed our eleventh year in June. We moved over eleven years ago. Sister Eberdene, who was the former principal of Loretto Academy, but at that time was serving as a provential, was the one who was in charge of the building of Nazareth Hall. Then we moved over eleven years ago, and the sisters from various parts of the society, especially Santa Fe, came to make their homes here. Santa Fe was getting ready to close.

M: But is it true that the architecture, the design of the chapel is suppose to...

R: Yes, they say...

P: That was what the man put on the poster card, but it wasn't true. They didn't know that until they picked it up in a store.

M: Didn't know exactly what Sister?

P: See, this man took the picture, and he had it printed. The nuns picked it up in the store down there, and they didn't know anything about it; it wasn't designed that way.

M: What do you call it?

P: Veil.

M: Could you tell us a little bit, Sister Rose Clare, about your life at Nazareth Hall? What things do you do? How do you spend your day?

R: We spend it as in the regular religious way that you would expect your religious friend to live, but our time is divided. We have prayer, spiritual exercises, and our own little manual labor. The sisters have hobbies they like to follow and work on. There is a certain amount of recreation with each other and just time, I would say, of long

deserved leisure, and maybe a rest after many years of activity.

What we enjoy most is the spiritual life, the access to the chapel and the Blessed Sacrement.

M: Do you have a hobby in particular yourself, Sister Rose Clare?

R: I nurse little Sister Therese Clare, who is an invalid with arthritis and not able to move at all. I help out in any of the ways I can. But I really haven't much time for any kind of a hobby. I gave up my stamp hobby some years ago, and I taught up to three years ago. I put in 48 years here at Loretto Academy. There are many little hobbies that I would like to adopt. I promised that I would do it in my old age, but I never found the time to do it yet.

M: How about you, Sister Pancratia?

P: I have charge of the patio, so that keeps me kind of busy, and I have a stamp hobby. Of course, we collect stamps to send to our Mother House, and they use those. There's a sister there that has charge of them, to receive them. She cleans them off and sells them to dealers, and that money is sent to our mission sisters in South America.

M: You say you have a house at La Paz?

P: Yes.

R: La Paz is in Bolivia.

P: La Paz, and what is the other one?

R: Well it's Tacna.

P: No. What's the one we have in the mountains? We have two Sisters that are teaching down in the...doing social work in Santiago.

M: In Chile?

P: Yes.

R: Then we have some who teach. The school was conducted by our sisters, but I think it has been turned over to the state. The sisters still teach, do they not?

P: But they're not doing teaching anymore.

R: No.

P: They're not teaching, they're doing social work.

R: They were teaching in Tacna, I know. Time is so turbulent, so changeable, the governments change so much, that they...you really just don't know.

P: One nice thing we have here is one sister that came from South America.

M: She's an native from...

P: From Bolivia.

R: She's an El Pasoan.

P: She lives in El Paso. She was an El Paso girl and educated here. She has the recreation for the sisters. There are a good many sisters that are in wheel chairs. She collects them all into the library there, you know, and they throw their little disc. And poor little things, some of them can hardly move.

R: They do therapy. She does therapy with them.

P: They have a little soft ball.

M: Indoor games?

P: They have foam balls, they throw the shuffle board.

R: Just together.

P: Now, she has some sisters in there that hadn't smiled, I know, for two

or three years. They'd just sit there. Now she has them laughing and you know in there, and it's the sweetest thing. She is just great herself. They play in the morning, almost for a couple of hours, they play records. We have some very fine records. They play these records and if she knows the word of these, any of these records, she sings for the nuns. They just enjoy it so.

M: This is the sister that came back from La Paz?

P: Yes, and she has picture shows, she gave a picture show yesterday. She does different things, she'll get up a bingo game or something. She does a lot of good work. The state people say that it's the only one that they have, it's the best one.

M: The best sister in that field?

P: In that field, we're the only one.

M: You're lucky, then. Well, this has been very enjoyable, Sisters, and I don't want to keep you any longer. I don't want to tire you. But it's been a great pleasure to interview both of you.

R: Thank you.

M: God Bless you.

P: It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

M: Thank you.