

# Jottings

The AIC / MHA Alumnae Newsletter  
Fall 2016



## A road less traveled

By Sister Paulette Seng, OSB

Who would imagine that three Academy alums from the class of 1949 would be called to serve as missionaries in foreign countries? Sister Phyllis Backer, Sister Mary Leah (Ruth) Baehl, and Sister Rosemary Huber answered that call and took a road less traveled, and it has made a difference. Here, in their own words, is a glimpse into their lives as missionaries.



**Sister Phyllis Backer**

go so far away. We have a perfectly good convent right up the hill!" [Phyllis lived in Ferdinand.]

It's hard to know where to begin. I went to Pakistan in 1958 and returned 30 years later. The Medical Mission Sisters had their beginnings in Pakistan. Our foundress, Dr. Anna Dengel, worked there among the sick and poor as a lay doctor and came to realize the great medical needs of the area, especially among the women and children. So I felt privileged to be assigned there.

I began my mission life in Karachi, the capital of Pakistan at that time. We had a large general hospital (Holy Family Hospital) there, and I spent my first few years caring for the sick children in the pediatric wards. I soon became a midwife, since much of our involvement was with pregnant women and newborn babies.

Later, I spent time in Rawalpindi at our community's first hospital, and some years in a small village hospital in Mirpurkhas, where we took care of many complicated maternity cases which often came to us from surrounding isolated villages.

One of the important contributions that we made to the country was the education of the local people

I joined the Medical Mission Sisters, and if you look at their name, you can see why. I was already "medical," having graduated from St. Mary's School of Nursing in Evansville in 1952. And I felt called to the missionary life and to religious life. I did not even look at any other communities! However, when I told my parents about becoming a missionary, my dad said, "I don't know why you have to

in the health field. We had a school of nursing and of midwifery and a training program for laboratory and pharmacy technicians. Many young doctors came for training. I was director of nurses for many years there and taught and supervised nurses.

One of the greatest challenges for me was the language. The official language is Urdu, but there are also many dialects. It was a real pleasure to finally be able to understand and communicate with the people.

I didn't think much about "rewards" in my ministry, but I was happy doing what I was doing, and I guess that would be reward enough.

After returning to the United States, I was "missioned" to a formation community in Baltimore, where I also became involved in hospice. Later, we facilitated a respite care center for unwell, homeless women in Washington, D.C. That was another new culture for me. For the past 15 years I cared for our sick and elderly sisters in nursing homes. It was a great privilege to minister to our sisters who had contributed so much over the years.

In all of my ministries, in Pakistan and here in the United States, I have tried to be a healing presence among those with whom I was involved.



**Sister Mary Leah Baehl**

My "first" call was to be a Benedictine sister at Ferdinand. I joined our community in 1948. I taught first grade for 25 years. Then I felt another call — to our community's mission in Peru, South America.

My interest in the Peru mission started with my sister, Sister Mary Baehl (class of '51), who was principal at St. Rita's, a new high school that the sisters established when they were sent as

missionaries to Morropon, Peru, in 1969.

I spent two months in 1975 with the sisters in Morropon to test my interest in missionary work. After two more years of teaching in the states, I was given

*Continued*

approval to join the sisters in Peru.

After a summer at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago preparing for the foreign missions, I left for Peru in August 1977 with much anticipation and desire to work in whatever capacity I was needed.

My first stop was in Lima for a few months of studying Spanish. Learning the language was a great challenge for me, even after a few years, but the sisters, students, and the people in general, were very helpful and encouraging.

Other challenges were the heat, droughts, floods, lack of running water and electricity in the early years and of materials and supplies. In 2001 we finally had 24 hours of electricity.

My primary ministries in Peru were teaching, serving in parishes, managing a home for unwanted elderly people, and working with peace and justice issues.

In my first year I helped at St. Rita's High School and at the *pension*, a residential building the sisters established for girls who came to St. Rita's from surrounding communities that had no high schools. The following years I taught all the English classes at St. Rita's. My greatest reward was that my students learned and liked English.

When I discontinued teaching at St. Rita's, I developed a language instruction program to teach and tutor students from kindergarten to university level to English teachers.

I also worked in parish ministry. It was very gratifying to get to know more people in the parish and neighboring pueblos and to minister to their needs.

Another rewarding ministry was managing an "old folk's home" after our monastery took charge of a home for elderly people who had no children to care for them or were not wanted because of the work they caused.

For years I was coordinator of the Office of Justice and Peace in Morropon and worked with the diocese, parish, and local government on educating the people on justice issues, human rights, general elections, land reform, farming improvements, and eradication of poverty. It was gratifying to help the local folks develop ways to improve their lives.

I left Peru this past summer

and returned to the monastery in Ferdinand. Currently, I do supportive services at the monastery and serve as liaison between the Peru and Ferdinand monasteries.

It was in Peru that I learned of God's great love for all of us. I've been gifted in my life, and the love and trust from the people in Peru was the greatest gift.



*Sister Rosemary Huber*

Some Maryknoll sisters visited the Academy when I was a student. That was my introduction to the Maryknoll Missionary Sisters and their work, and I entered the Maryknoll novitiate outside of St. Louis in 1954.

After my profession I earned an undergraduate degree in education and worked in various programs of the community. I then earned a master's degree in Hospital Administration from St. Louis University.

In 1965 I was sent to South Korea for my first mission assignment, a hospital administrator at Maryknoll Hospital in Pusan. While I was in language school, the hospital was transferred to the diocese. I was then asked to direct the educational component in a major credit union founded by the Maryknoll sisters after the Korean War. I worked in Korea for almost ten years.

My next place of ministry was Indonesia. I was among the first four Maryknoll sisters assigned to that country. I helped provide primary health care to the people living on the many Indonesian islands. I spent most of my time serving in health care and stayed as long as the government allowed missionaries to stay, 21 years.

Nepal was my last foreign mission. There I taught English in a Jesuit school and also helped establish a pediatric wing at a government

hospital.

One of my most difficult experiences as a missionary was being away from family and friends at key moments. My father died when I was in Korea, and it was not the practice of Maryknoll sisters at that time to return home for deaths. Another huge challenge was language studies.

Some of the greatest rewards in my ministry came from working with and getting to know people from many cultures and religions — the Buddhists in Korea, the Muslims in Indonesia, and the Hindus in Nepal.

A few interesting stories: I remember taking food and books to a young political prisoner in Indonesia. After his release I wrote a letter of recommendation for him to enter a university in the United States, where he earned his doctorate. The president of the Ivy League university told him that it was the nun's letter that gave him admittance. He wants to run for president of Indonesia and invited me to attend his inauguration if he wins the election.

When I was leaving Indonesia, a woman whose husband had disappeared in the midst of the political chaos came to tell me farewell. She removed a silver ring and asked me to wear it as a reminder of the struggles of the Indonesian people. "Do not forget us," she said. I wear the ring and pray daily for the people of Indonesia.

When I returned from Nepal, I worked at Maryknoll in New York, reorganizing the health care of our sisters. Before retiring I served as administrator of the Maryknoll retirement home in Monrovia, Canada. Now in my retirement at our motherhouse in New York, I work in the mail room, and I read and pray.

It would be impossible to count the number of lives these sisters have touched during their 100 years as missionaries in foreign countries.

American poet Robert Frost wrote in "The Road Not Taken":

"Two roads diverged in a wood — and I  
I took the one less traveled by  
And that has made all the difference."

These women took a road less traveled, and it has made all the difference.

## The biggest and best reunion ever! June 24-25, 2017



Because Academy alumnae are a vital part of the Sisters of St. Benedict family, you are invited to a special **Academy Alumnae Reunion on June 24-25, 2017**, to share in the sisters' 150th anniversary celebration. Alumnae Board members are working on special events for the reunion weekend and encourage you to contact Academy friends and classmates and make plans to attend this "biggest and best" event on the hill.

**Register early.** If you register and pay the \$25 registration fee before **April 1**, your name will be put on a list of **early bird specials**. If your name is one of the three drawn from that list, you will have a chance for a refund of your registration fee, **OR** 20 free tickets for raffle items, **OR** a free one or two-night stay at Kordes Hall for your personal getaway.

**Make lodging reservations early.** Area hotels have few vacancies during the summer months, and we will have only a few openings here at the monastery. Blocks of rooms

for alums are booked at the Hampton Inn in Jasper and the Comfort Inn in Ferdinand. Ask for the Marian Heights Alumnae Reunion block. In addition to local hotels and B&B places in Ferdinand, Jasper, Dale, and Huntingburg, check for lodging in French Lick, West Baden, Evansville, Corydon, and in Owensboro and Louisville, Kentucky — all are within a one to one-and-a-half hour drive.

And if any of you living within that distance would be willing to house a few alums (classmates or others) for the weekend, please e-mail Sister Paulette at [pseng@thedome.org](mailto:pseng@thedome.org), or call 812-367-1411, ext. 2842 by December 1.

**Things to do on Saturday, June 24:** gather in the Event Hall (former MHA gym) between noon and evening to reminisce with classmates, faculty members, and sisters; enjoy a digital slide show throughout the weekend; browse along the wall of memories and add your memories\*; look over raffle items and purchase tickets\*\*; participate in tournaments and challenges between alums and faculty and between classes. At the end of the day, enjoy a cookout of brats and burgers (and beer?) outside by Madonna Lake or in Event Hall.

\*Board members want stories from your Academy days to post on the wall of memories. Please share on Facebook or other ways.

\*\*The Board invites alums to contribute items for the raffle, such as artwork, crafts, and other creations. Contact Tina Dalton at [tinadalton@aol.com](mailto:tinadalton@aol.com) if you plan to bring an item for the raffle.

**Schedule on Sunday:** 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. — sign in, pay (if not paid earlier), and gather for continental breakfast; 10:30 Mass; 12 p.m. dinner followed by brief meeting, more fun, and visiting.

Contact your Academy friends and join us "on the hill" on June 24-25 for our "biggest and best" reunion — "a homecoming," as one alum called it.

### Alumnae Reunion — June 24-25, 2017 Registration Form

**Registrations due by June 9.** If you register with this form, send it to the address below. **Online registration** will be **available after January 1** at [thedome.org/alumnae](http://thedome.org/alumnae). Pay when you register or when you check in on Sunday, June 25. Send to:

**Alumnae Association**  
**802 E. 10th Street • Ferdinand, IN 47532**

Alumnae — \$25  
Adult guest at dinner — \$12  
Children under 12 at dinner — \$6

**Register and pay by  
April 1 to qualify for  
a prize!**

Amount enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Grad year \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ I will attend the cookout on Saturday.
- ☐ I will be at the Sunday dinner.
- ☐ I will bring \_\_\_\_\_ guests for dinner.
- ☐ I prefer housing at the monastery or at an alum's home.



## Celebrating 150 years – 1867-2017

By Sister Paulette Seng, OSB



*Community Photo June 2016 (Three sisters not pictured.) The community currently numbers 144 members, including a postulant who was received into the monastery this past August and two novices who have requested to make their first profession of monastic vows in December.*

On August 20, 2016, the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand gathered in the monastery church to proclaim their “Year of Jubilee,” a year of celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of their monastery in Ferdinand.

Accomplishments and blessings, as well as challenges, struggles, and losses have filled those years. The founding members and early pioneer sisters endured the hardships while nurturing the hopes and visions of what might be. They established a firm foundation for living the Benedictine way of life and serving the people. Their lives gave witness to prayer, community, service, and hospitality — the guiding principles for Benedictine monasteries.

Many young women were attracted to that way of life, and the community grew, in spite of the hardships. Only with a great deal of determination, courage, and deep trust in God did these sisters sustain the new community through its loss of 33 members in the first 25 years. Extreme poverty, malnourishment, and illnesses all contributed to the early death of many young members. The chronicles of those years recorded that on some days the only food the sisters had to eat was a half a piece of bread.

With such hard times, they could not have imagined the rapid growth of their monastic community and the many ways and places they would be called to minister.

### A glimpse of the first 75 years

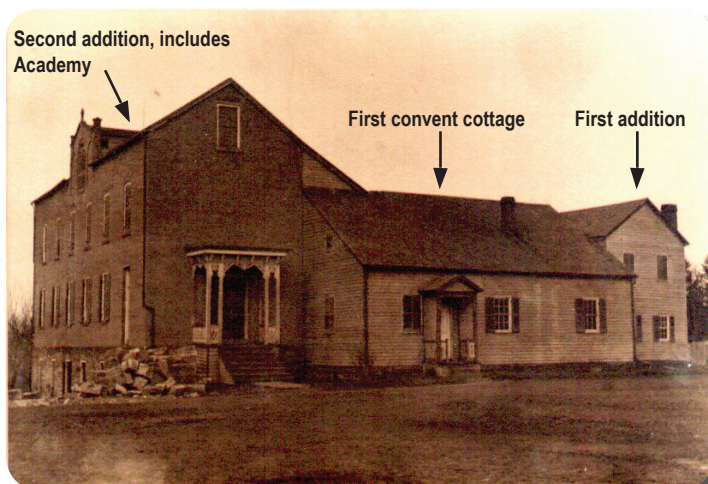
In August 1867, Benedictine sisters at St. Walburg Monastery in Covington, Kentucky, answered an appeal from Father Chrysostom Foffa, pastor of St. Ferdinand parish, for sisters to take charge of the parish school in the small German village of Ferdinand. Hurriedly, but with due deliberation, the monastery superior, Mother Alexia Lechner, decided to accept the school as a mission.

On August 19, the pioneer group of four young sisters, the oldest was 23, accompanied by Mother Alexia, departed by train to Loogootee, Indiana, the nearest railroad station to Ferdinand. Early the next day, August 20, Father Chrysostom met the sisters and accompanied them on the 35-mile trip to Ferdinand, a full day’s journey with horse and buggy.

The sisters arrived in the village that evening and took up their abode in a small three-room cottage a short distance from the parish church. Within 10 days, two young women from the town joined the new community, and after two weeks, the sisters took charge of the







*First convent complex of buildings in 1870*

school in Ferdinand, marking the beginning of 150 years of ministry in the field of education by the Ferdinand Benedictine community. Mother Alexia returned to her monastery in Covington after assessing the new mission and giving further instructions to the sisters.

Anticipating future growth, Father Chrysostom soon added two rooms and a small chapel to the cottage. When the chapel was dedicated on December 8, 1867, the new foundation was named Convent of the Immaculate Conception.

Three years later, encouraged by their success with the parish school, the sisters made plans to start a school for girls only. By 1870, a new two-story brick addition to the original convent provided room for the new school and for housing for the growing community. Initially, lower and middle school classes with the regular school subjects were offered. The sisters also taught music and home economics. As time went on, enrollment and the academic curriculum expanded, and in 1912 the Academy received secondary school status and accreditation by the State of Indiana.

With the potential for increased membership and opportunities for ministries, the new monastery became independent from their motherhouse in Covington in 1871. The 12 professed sisters in the community at the time chose Sister Benedicta Berns, one of the founding members, as their first prioress in 1872.

Anticipating their future, Mother Benedicta purchased 72 acres of land, including a farm and wooded area, on the east hill overlooking the town, “to enable the sisters to provide for themselves the necessities of subsistence.”

The two sisters in charge of the farm work moved into a vacant log house on the farm, and after some renovation, they were able to accommodate a few poor and elderly women to live with them. Thus began another ministry that the sisters have been committed to for 150 years — a ministry of serving the poor, homeless, marginalized, underprivileged.

The monastery’s early history is highlighted by growth

in membership, expansion into new ministries, and construction of new facilities to accommodate the members and their ministries.

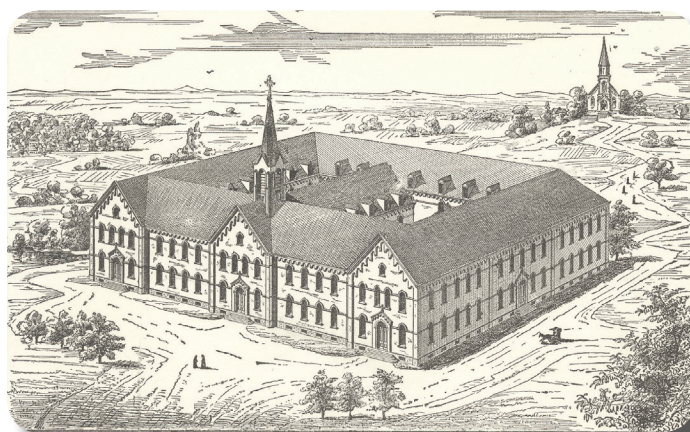
Receiving requests to teach in schools in Southern Indiana, the sisters opened their first mission school in 1876 in St. Meinrad and a year later in Rockport. Two years later they answered appeals for teachers in the Dakota Territory and at Shoal Creek, Arkansas, where they opened a school for German Catholic immigrants and established a monastery within the year.

Even though sisters were being sent out to the missions, the monastery complex was no longer adequate for the increase in new members and Academy boarders. The sisters decided to build a new brick structure on the land purchased by Mother Benedicta 10 years earlier. But “the little savings box of the sisters was much too small for providing the money,” according to the early chronicles, and the sisters went out to ask for donations and loans from the people in the area. And because they could not afford many workers for the job, the sisters did much of the strenuous preparatory work for the new building, such as cutting trees and logs, clearing brush, and leveling the land.

On June 13, 1886, the 72 sisters bid farewell to the old convent and moved into their new monastery in the quadrangle on the hill, which is still used today. Soon after, the Academy moved into the south wing, and the monastery infirmary into the east wing.

Although teaching was their primary ministry, some sisters did other work to maintain the monastery and their missions and parishes.

In the early years, “the little group was always busy in the house, vegetable and flower garden, kitchen, tailor and shoemaker shops, at the embroidery frame, and in the woodshed.” After obtaining a small farm, sisters could be seen plowing a field, cutting hay, milking cows, gathering eggs, etc.



*The quadrangle in 1886, Academy wing on the right*

For years the sisters tried to manage the farming and gardening, working hard with occasional help from

*Continued*

neighboring farmers. But when they could no longer keep up their teaching duties along with the farm work, they hired a farm manager, Bernard Krampe, who served as “guardian and keeper of the farm and properties” from 1883 until 1925. His son, Albert, assumed the responsibility for the next 42 years. The sisters continued to help with the farming duties and taking care of the garden, as they still do today.



*The first community photo (circa 1870)*

In 1891 the sisters replaced the old farm house used for the poor and elderly with a new two-story building, St. Joseph's House. Originally built for visiting relatives of the sisters, the new hostel, with room for 20-30 persons, became a home for infirm and elderly folks. Two of the sisters managed the house and continued to serve the poor.

At the turn of the century, the Academy needed more space for classrooms and sleeping quarters, so the annex was built on the east end of the quadrangle.

The sisters teaching in Indianapolis received much recognition after a natural disaster hit that area in 1913. West Indianapolis suffered the most severely, but Assumption School and convent, established there by the sisters in 1895, remained above the water. Following orders from Sister Seraphine Kordes, superior and principal, the convent and school immediately opened their doors and gave hospitality, food, and shelter to hundreds of flood victims. In a few days, they were assisted by city officials providing additional help and supplies, and doctors and nurses caring for the sick and injured.

The City of Indianapolis gave special recognition to all who “rendered invaluable services to the city during the flood.” The sisters were commended for their “devotion to the lives of others, their exemplary bravery, courage, and heroic service,” and named on the Roll of Honor placed in the public records.

A year later, Sister Seraphine was chosen as prioress and was immediately confronted with two major challenges — further education for the sisters teaching in the 32 schools run by the monastery at that time, and construction of a larger church to accommodate its ever-increasing membership.

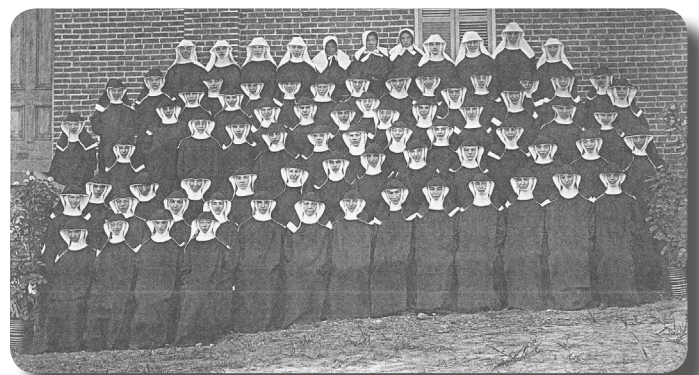
To address education, the sisters established their own training school for teachers, St. Benedict Normal, which was recognized and accredited as a two-year state teachers' training school, and eventually, a fully accredited, four-year liberal arts college open to lay students. Sisters were also sent to other highly respected universities to obtain advanced degrees.

The other major endeavor during Mother Seraphine's tenure was the construction of a larger church. By 1916, the foundation and exterior were finished, but because of increased costs and shortage of workers and supplies during World War I, work on the church was suspended for six years. However, the crypt was completed enough to be used by the sisters for their chapel. In 1924 the current church, the “Castle on the Hill,” was completed, except for the stained glass windows, marble altars, communion rail, and sanctuary screening.

In the early 1930s the sisters accepted a request for missionaries in North Dakota, where they opened a school on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in Belcourt. Twenty years later, after receiving additional sisters from Ferdinand and constructing a new building for a monastery, the sisters established a new foundation there.

Driven by the need for additional space for the monastery and St. Benedict College, the sisters built St. Benedict Hall, connected to the quadrangle, in 1936. It housed offices and classrooms for the college and all the necessary facilities for the sisters — living quarters, infirmary, kitchen, dining room, and many other departments. The Academy expanded its space by using the areas of the quad that were vacated and renovated.

When the community celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1942, its membership was 346. The sisters were serving in various capacities at 43 schools in Indiana, Arkansas, and North and South Dakota, and they continued to receive numerous requests to build and operate schools.



*Community photo 1890*

Little did the early pioneer sisters envision the phenomenal growth of the community and the expansion of its mission and ministries in those 75 years.

The spring issue of *Jottings* will highlight the next 75 years — 1942-2017.





## Buildings and salvaging updates

Soon the work to prepare Madonna Hall for deconstruction will be starting. We plan to salvage some bricks for alums and are working on plans to save the stained-glass windows for various uses to be determined. The large AIC stone marker and other items are being considered as well.

We've decided to preserve the east annex for possible future use, but in order to do that, everything that holds moisture, e.g., carpeting, insulation, etc., will have to be cleared out, asbestos removed, and minimal heat and circulation restored in the building. Removal of the asbestos will be done in conjunction with its removal in Madonna Hall.

Benet Hall Affordable Senior Housing is scheduled for completion by the end of October. An open house for prospective residents will be on November 18. Let's be grateful for the past and hopeful for the future.

Many alums have gathered on the hill the past few weeks, sharing memories, reconnecting with friends, and saying goodbye to Madonna Hall — but also discovering a greater treasure in their relationships with each other and all Academy alumnae.

"The relationships we built and the lessons we learned are not contained in any building. Remember Madonna Hall as it was, vibrant, teeming with life and love."

"I feel grateful, and I keep thinking how happy and lucky I am that I found my way to Madonna Hall in the first place."

"We were more than a school building; we were and still are a family."

## Jottings

Fall 2016

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Academy Immaculate Conception/Marian Heights Academy

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## Sisters' Summer Social

The Sisters of St. Benedict are celebrating their 150th anniversary with special events that began in August 2016 and will culminate with their Summer Social on June 2-3, 2017. The sisters have invited alums to join in the fun and be a part of the event.

One way to do this is to volunteer your help at the social. If you are interested in working in a booth or with an activity or event, e-mail Sister Jill Reuber (chairperson of the social committee) at [jreuber@thedome.org](mailto:jreuber@thedome.org) to let her know that you want to help. She would like to have the list of volunteers by January so she can notify you about your job. You can also contribute items for the country store, quilt booth, or gift baskets. Let Sister Jill know.

Another way to support this event is to bring family and friends with you. Thanks for being a part of the fun!

## Academy t-shirts and hoodies



Order online from [www.t-topshop.com/store](http://www.t-topshop.com/store). Orders due by December 1 and shipped in middle of December. You can get the design on the front and back or just the front with the dome. Free shipping in U.S.

## May they rest in peace

**Alumnae:** Sister Assunta (Nellie) Highbaugh '33, Mary Louise (Pirnat) Tonnemacher '39, Marguerite (Harpenau) Biever '44, Rosemary (Olinger) Mundy '46, Maralee (Lutz) Mossberger '47, Georgia (Myers) Dever '48, Sister Cecilia Smith '51, Margaret Clements '57, Sister Ida (Juanita) Otto '62, Sandy Conches '81, Beth MacMahon '82, Sheri (Brockman) Wooten '83, Vicki Steve '84

**Husband of:** Janice (Mallory) Wittgens '53

**Mother of:** Stella (Schile) Bennett '62

**Daughter of:** Bernice (Laake) Weyer '49

**Brother of:** Sister Anna Gramelspacher '39 and faculty, Sister Marilyn Market '42, Mary Ann (Flittner) Sampson '49, Sister Mary Lee Hillenbrand '54, Joyce Stenftenagel '70, Sharon Brosmer '74, Laura (Smiar) Riha '88

**Sister of:** Sister Jeanne Voges '49, Alice (Smith) Kimmerly '50, Kathy (Steve) McMillan '82, Dolliane Steve '85, Sister Michelle Mohr (faculty)



# Jottings

## AIC/MHA Alumnae Association

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## 2017 Alumnae Reunion Weekend

**“Meet on the Hill” on June 24-25!**

*More details on page 3.*

Experience one of our programs or retreats at Benedictine Hospitality Center at Kordes Hall on the hill. Find rest and healing, renewal and peace for your body, mind, and spirit.

**Check the web site for program details: [thedome.org/events](http://thedome.org/events)**

- |                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| October 30      | Sacred Music Concert by Mark Hatfield, accomplished organist       |
| November 11-13  | Brewing with the Spirit: A Monastic Craft Beer Experience          |
| November 18-20  | Ferdinand Christkindlmarkt   |
| November 29, 30 | How to Read the Gospel of John with Understanding, Part I, Part II |
| February 24-26  | Brewing with the Spirit: A Monastic Craft Beer Experience          |



**Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand  
will be celebrating 150 years!**

**Save the date for our Summer Social  
June 2-3, 2017**