

Talk – St. Mary’s, August 31, 2019

William Fagan

160 Years Since the Arrival of the Presentation Sisters – August 11, 1859

Good afternoon:

St. M. Bay South Historical Society	Holy Name Society and Ladies Auxiliary
Father Courtney	Sister Betty Rae and Presentation Sisters
Relatives	Friends
	Visitors

1. History is made up of FACT and STORY
2. FACTS come from Records and I am indebted to the Archives of the Presentation Sisters for a number of FACTS.
3. Stories come from people and I wish to acknowledge three people who provided me with stories over the years.

Mr. William Chafe - his father was a policeman in St. Mary’s around 1900. He lived at the top of the Courthouse Hill

Ms. Susan Cahill – left the Point as a young woman for Philadelphia. I had the honour of visiting her about 30 years ago, then in her 90’s.

Mr. Paddy Drohan – who was born on the Point, lived for a while in Point La Haye and thee moved to Harricot. Paddy listened to history and lived history.

FACT

On August 11, 1859, Bishop Mullock arrived in St. Mary’s with the founding community of three Presentation sisters, originally from Ireland. These Sisters were: Sister Patrick Meagher (Maher), Sister Mary Francis Kinsella, and Sister Catherine O’Dowd.

Brave women

STORY

Why did they land in the Point Cove?

A storm had destroyed part of the Public/Government wharf. The Sisters were asked to choose the wharf or stage of a fisherman where to land. Not wishing to single anyone out, they opted for landing in the Point Cove

STORY

There were no papers, or television or photos at that time of the Presentation Sisters.

People had no idea what a Nun would look like.

A story passed down from my Grandmother, was that her Mother, my great grandmother, Bridget Drohan, who lived on the Lower Road (near where James Burke lives) and her friend, Kit Quilty (who lived near where the McDonalds live) were chatting when they saw a group arriving in from the Point Hills, or the Fort as it was called then.

They took cover behind a shed and watched as the group walked in the Lower Road. Kit thought it was an invasion. However, when they saw the rosary beads on their dress (habits) they knew they must come in peace. According to passed down reports, the Nuns received a warm welcome with guns firing and flags flying and a reception that evening.

FACT AND STORY

The Sisters first lived in a small house owned by Magistrate Blackburn at the top of the Courthouse Hill. This was next door to Magistrate James Harney's house, which still stands today, though in altered form.

The Sisters named the Convent, the Convent of the Dolours or Our Lady of Sorrows and lived there for 18 years. In July, 1876, Bishop Power laid the foundation stone of a new convent to be named St. Anne's Convent, in the upper part of the community up from the church. The third convent, also called St. Anne's, was blessed and opened on December 13, 1970. This existed as a convent until 1987. Today this is the Claddagh Inn.

FACT AND STORY

The Sisters settled in and lived as did the rest of the community. They grew vegetables and kept livestock. The men of the community provided them with firewood for the winter – later they purchased coal. They were rated by “inspectors” as running an exemplary school where they not only taught the traditional subjects of reading, writing, arithmetic, history, etc. but also taught business/commercial

courses. Some of their students received great recognition in international employment;

STORY

I always like a bit of supernatural in stories.

Mr. Ben St. Croix was wreckmaster for St. Mary's area. There were a lot of shipwrecks then. He owned land bordering the Courthouse Hill and the Lower Road where there were a number of buildings to store materials salvaged from shipwrecks. We called that area the Buttment when we were growing up. Tim Kearney was his watchman for a number of years. After the Sisters had passed away, Kearney reported that every night at midnight, a Nun would walk down Courthouse Hill, and out the Lower Road to the Point Hills. He decided one night to follow but could never get close enough to see her face, and once she reached the Point Hills and stood between the hills, looking out, and disappeared. She was never seen again and in Irish-Newfoundland folklore it was believed her spirit had gone back to Ireland and she had been waiting for a witness.

FACT AND STORY

Ms. Genevieve Duggan from St. John's was believed to be the first NL Sister who was professed or took her final vows in St. Mary's. She was professed in 1907 and took the name, Sister Cecilia. Ms. Susan Cahill was in school at the time, a student of Sister Cecilia, and remembered the event clearly. Susan had fond memories of Sister Cecilia. She described Sister Cecilia as a kind and caring person and sometimes guided the children in taking over the role of teacher for class periods. She recalled there were great preparations for Sister Cecilia's "profession". One Sister was in charge of refreshments. They had a barrel of soft drinks packed in straw. This was the first time that children (or adults) had seen coloured drinks (orange, lime, pineapple) in bottles. The only soft drink they knew was "lemon crystal" (a powder mixed with water). The Bishop arrived in a carriage pulled by two horses, not seen before. A man, Neale was the driver. As soon as the carriage appeared on the "Big Meadow", the Convent and Church bells began to ring and the celebration began.

FACT

Two Sisters who spent a long time in St. Mary's were Trepassey women – Sister Agnes Hewitt, and Sister Rose Sutton.

Sister Agnes was the lay Sister and a great Trepassey accordion player. Often when someone dropped by the Convent, Sister Agnes would have a pan of potatoes on her lap which she was peeling, and then she would lay the pan on the floor and take up the accordion and play a tune.

On the morning of December 16, 1947. Sister Agnes got up as usual and went to the Chapel to say her prayers. She passed away while praying. Sister Agnes was the last Sister to be buried the Nuns' Cemetery, just behind the Town Hall.

FACT AND STORY

Sister Rose was a very colourful Sister.

Sister Rose was retired and in charge of the “press”, a large cabinet where religious items of all sorts (medals, scapulars, rosary beads, leaflets, etc.) were kept for sale. Sister Rose received all her materials from Ireland, including the Sacred Heart Messenger to which almost all families in the community subscribed. Sister Rose was a great salesperson. When a shipment of religious items arrived, Sister Rose pinned as much as she could on her habit/dress, and the rest in her hands and made her way to the classrooms. The “teaching” Sisters did not like the interruption but there was no stopping Sister Rose as she opened the classroom door and walked in, and took each item, explaining to the children what it was, and the merits of buying it.

Sister Rose was a “standby” or substitute, when one of the teaching Sisters was sick. Sister Rose was a born storyteller, and loved telling stories which she interjected at any point regardless of what the teaching topic was and even during prayer time and which could go on to the end of the class. Sometimes we would be on our knees for prayer in the morning and Sister Rose decided to tell a story. We

would sit back on our heels and listen to Sister Rose and her stories. No doubt the children loved Sister Rose “filling in”.

Sister Rose was also a believer in the curative power of May snow for sore eyes. After a light snow fall in May, Sister Rose was ready as the children arrived for school and gave out earthenware jars and spoons and the children carefully scooped snow into the jars. She gave the snow water to anyone with sore eyes.

Another long serving Sister in St. Mary’s was Sister Dolores English from Branch. I recall my Uncle who would visit from Boston and would always go and see Sister Dolores who was his first teacher. She was also my first teacher. Sister Dolores was the organist and music teacher as well as teaching regular classes.

The Sisters were known for May devotions. May was the month of the Blessed Virgin and all the children wore blue ribbon. True to Eddie Coffey’s song, Grey Foggy Day, the days were warmer then. We went to school without a jacket or coat. In the afternoon, before classes started, the children would line up and walk around a hill at the back of the school, saying the rosary and singing hymns. During the month they wrote letters which were kept in the classroom and then on the last day of May, they took their letters and at the start of the walk there was a fire and they dropped in their letters as they walked by.

The Feast Day of the Presentation Sisters was November 21 – a holiday for the school children.

The Sisters changed their traditional habit/dress in 1967.

The third and final Convent, St. Anne’s Convent, closed in 1987. The three Sisters at the time were: Sister Rose Crawford, Sister Gonzaga Furey, and Sister Frances King. Interestingly, three Sisters made up the community which opened the first Convent in 1859 and three Sisters made up the community when the Convent was closed in 1987.

A total of 107 Sisters served St. Mary’s during their time there.

The remains of four of those Sisters are buried in the “Nuns’ Cemetery” – behind the Town Hall, in the meadow – just over from the Convent where the Presentation Sisters lived.

In that cemetery are buried:

Sister Joseph Marnell	March 4, 1885
Sister Francis Burke	July 17, 1905
Sister Magdalen Hennessey	April 5, 1906
Sister Agnes Hewitt	December 16, 1947.

May they rest in peace!