

# Sister Josephine O'Sullivan

*A delightful, unforgettable person who touched the lives of many*

BY FLORENCE (GALLAGHER) HANEY

At one period during our childhood, six of the Gallagher girls attended school at the same time, at Presentation Convent in Cathedral Square in St. John's. At the same time, four of my brothers were students at St. Patrick's Hall on Harvey Road. The Catholic sisters and brothers were devoted teachers and we received wonderful training from them. We all sang in the church and school choirs.

One day, I was summoned to Sister Josephine's music studio in the convent and told she wanted to audition me. After school, I walked up the 12 steep, stone steps of the convent and, after entering the vestibule, knocked on the studio door to my right.

## Greeted with a smile

Sister Josephine greeted me with a smile and merrily waved me in. She told me that my choir director, Sister Carmelita (one of her prized students), had recommended me to her and she asked me to sing. We chose a lovely song called *Scenes That Are Brightest* from the operetta *Maritana*.

Sister Josephine listened intently as I sang and, after I finished, she told me she wanted to coach me and would henceforth give me free singing lessons. I was thrilled beyond words because I couldn't afford private coaching.

She took me under her wing and from that time on a friendship ensued which lasted until her death in 1945. It seems we "hit it off" immediately and took an instant liking to one another. She knew I was very musical and offered to give me lessons on the harp but, since I didn't own one to practise on, I declined her kind offer.

## Singing lessons

Sister Josephine started my singing lessons with two beautiful arias from *The Bohemian Girl*, an opera written in 1843 by the Irish composer Michael William Balfe. The songs were *I Dreamt That I Dwelt In Marble Halls* and *Then You'll Remember Me*.

I still have the tattered, torn and faded sheet music of those two beautiful songs. Since Sister Josephine and I were both Irish, it seemed an appropriate place to start.

My mother's maiden name was Catherine O'Rielly, and Sister Josephine laughingly said, "We're the O'Sullivan's and the O'Rielly's. We've got to pray together, learn together and sing together." Knowing her was a joy and she enriched my life.

Sister Josephine was also the choir director as well as the organist at the children's 9 a.m. mass Sundays at the Basilica. I remember one occasion when she and I sang the entire mass alone because no one else showed up. For weeks the choir practised some lovely hymns in three-part harmony and we were anxious to hear how we would sound in the huge cathedral. In those days the small organ was located in the centre aisle of the church and the choir stood around it in a semi-circle.

It was winter and the church was celebrating some high feast day, but on that particular weekend, one of the fiercest storms ever recorded hit St. John's and the population was snow-bound. Some people couldn't get out of their houses for days. My dad knew I was singing a solo at the mass so he roused me out of bed and, because the



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## SLICE OF LIFE

storm was so severe, he accompanied me across Harvey Road, holding tightly to my arm. The wind was howling and the snow was blinding, but we finally made our way to the church.

After we entered and brushed the snow from our snowsuits, I looked up the centre aisle and there was Sister Josephine sitting forlornly and alone at the organ, in the nearly empty, cold, damp cathedral. She hugged me saying, "Florence, I can always count on you. We'll sing the mass together." In those years the masses were sung in Latin which was taught to us by another wonderful nun, Sister Paula, so we proceeded to sing the entire mass in perfect Latin.

By Monday morning the storm had abated and a few of the girls came to school. The ones who didn't show up for the mass were scolded and given a stern lecture while Sister Josephine

praised me to the highest, which embarrassed me. We were great friends and so I couldn't let her down.

There was a covered passageway between the convent and the church which spared the nuns the ordeal of the severe outside weather.

Eileen O'Sullivan (her real name) was born in Eire, Ireland, in 1865. Before she came to Newfoundland in August 1891 she was a socialite in County Cork. She was 26 years old when she

her Golden Jubilee in 1945.

When Sister Josephine came to Newfoundland she was already an accomplished actress, opera star and musician, having performed in Dublin and New York. She also enjoyed virtuoso status as a pianist and harpist. Her family was very wealthy and cultured, and saw to it that she received a liberal education in literature, history and music, as well as training in art and painting. She had fantastic talent.

Her first assigned chore when she became a postulant was to light, clean and maintain all the fireplaces in the convent ... and there were many. Bishop Howley was acutely aware of her accomplishments and background, and when he visited the convent, he would often ask the Mother Superior if Sister Josephine would kindly play the piano and harp for him. When Sister Josephine was summoned, she would hurriedly scrub the soot from her hands and proceed to play brilliantly for the bishop.

Her genius was soon felt in the religious community and beyond. She

taught piano, harp, voice, drama and art, and was the musician behind such songs as Dan Carroll's *Heart Cry From The West*, *The Flag of Newfoundland* and Bishop Howley's *Cde to The South Side Hills*. She did some beautiful paintings on church vestments and became known for her gorgeous illuminated, hand-painted addresses for various formal functions, which were requested by both clergy and businessmen.

Sister Josephine was also very proud of Julie Andrews, another young singer she coached. Andrews had a terrific coloratura voice and already had a radio program on VOCI called *The Little Song Bird*. Her signature song was *The Italian Street Song* and she could sing it better than most opera stars. My voice was a light lyric soprano (the Italians call it *Lyric Spinto*) and since Julie's lesson was before mine, I would sit entranced on a bench outside in the hall, listening and waiting for them to finish. I felt like I was attending a free concert and picked up many tips that way.

## Excellent training

On several summer afternoons when I didn't have a lesson, I would sit outside on the top step of the convent, listening to the beautiful music and singing drifting through the open window of Sister Josephine's studio. Later, when I studied voice at Carnegie Hall in New York, my renowned teacher, Madame Susan Boice, complimented Sister Josephine on the excellent training she had given me as a teenager.

Back in the '40s and '50s, the convent had strict regulations and laws which frowned upon any display of individual expression, but that didn't stop Sister Josephine from being very friendly and outgoing. She brought joy to the young novices with her terrific sense of humour and gaiety.

She had a very friendly, outgoing personality and a hearty, melodious laugh. She entertained the young nuns with her great gift of mimicking and storytelling. She was noted for her tardiness, and her late entrances into the dining room would always be accompanied by a low, profound bow to Mother DeSales, the Mother Superior. Years later, when I lived in New York and saw the musical *The Sound of Music*, I couldn't help but compare the character Maria to Sister Josephine.

On Oct. 30, 1945, after a brief illness, Sister Josephine died at the age of 80 and was buried in the convent cemetery. She was a delightful, unforgettable person who touched the lives of all who knew her. Although Sister Josephine left us more than half a century ago, her beloved memory still lives on in the hearts of thousands of grateful students she taught.

Whenever I hear Cesar Frank's *Panis Angelicus*, Mozart's *Hallelujah* (*Exultate Jubilate*), Bizet's *Agnus Dei*, and particularly Gounod's and Schubert's *Ave Maria*, my mind wanders back to that little studio in the convent vestibule, where I spent so many happy hours learning those beautiful hymns from our unforgettable Sister Josephine.

She contributed a great deal to my life and my recollections of her are very vivid and happy. As a tribute to her memory, her treasured Irish harp is still displayed in the convent's exquisite Victorian parlor.

*Florence (Gallagher) Haney lives in Camarillo, California.*

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arrived in St. John's and became a postulant in the motherhouse of Presentation Convent in Cathedral Square.

In April 1895, at age 30, she was professed and lived in the convent for more than 50 years. She renounced a brilliant music career to devote herself to God and religion, and chose St. John's as her mission. She celebrated