



Spiritual Connections

We hope you will find this communication about our founding both informative and interesting.

We thought highlighting special days of celebration with our friends would enhance your knowledge and understanding of what it means to be Benedictine women in the 21st Century.

We give thanks for the 122nd Anniversary of our founding.

Mission Statement

We, the Benedictine Sisters of Florida, have as our purpose to seek God in community through the monastic way of life and to enable all people in our realm of influence to develop their fullest human and spiritual potential. We accomplish our mission by sharing our human and material resources and our monastic values of community and liturgical worship through works of mercy, education, hospitality and stewardship.

122 Years and Counting

FEBRUARY 2011

The date was February 28, 1889. It was a Thursday. According to the records of the U.S. weather bureau, the temperature reached 80, twenty degrees higher than average. Five Benedictine women - probably clad in warm serge arrived in San Antonio, Florida from Alleghany, Elk County, Pennsylvania. According to the annals of the Benedictine Sisters of Florida, the “great work” began the very next day.

The Sisters had come, at the request of the Florida pastor, to staff Saint Anthony Catholic School which had been started in 1883 by a parishioner in her kitchen. By the time the Sisters arrived, a four-room wood frame school was situated across the park from the “hotel-turned-convent.”

What firm faith and incredible courage our founding sisters must have had! The records in the Pittsburgh archives remind us that these young sisters were clearly told if the venture did not work, they were not to return to Pennsylvania. An examination of the papers shows us that of the five women who signed their severance papers on the evening of February 22, one did not arrive with the founding members. However, one of the sisters who served as a witness, must have decided overnight to join the mission band—she is named in the group of our five founders.

Imagine what daring it took to venture south into Indian territory! These were ordinary women just like us—they were Benedictine women who had a dream and a mission. Above all they were motivated by the love of God and a strong desire to spread the *Good News*.



Artist's rendering of Sisters leaving for “mission” to teach in schools in Florida, Louisiana or Texas. (circa 1940)

During that time, Rome considered the church in America “missionary territory.” In relative terms, the slaves had only recently been freed. Had our Sisters ever seen a black person in their northern neighborhood? Surely not an Indian. And most assuredly not an alligator!

There is some evidence that the pioneer band traveled from Allegheny County to the Benedictine house in Covington, Kentucky. Was this meeting the thread that finds women from both of our communities founding a community in Birmingham (Later Cullman), Alabama? Then, our foundresses traveled southward by train which would have deposited them in southern Georgia or northern Florida. It seems (to me) a safe guess that someone from San Antonio would have met the sisters at the train to bring them in wagons or on horse-back down along what is now Hwy 19 and 41 – parts of the Seminole Trail. Perhaps they met cattle drovers bringing their herds to the harbors in Tampa or Punta Gorda. By the time they reached San Antonio, traveling through the Florida wilderness – in February – there were probably not too many mosquitoes, but surely they heard or saw black bears and panthers, “strange ” birds, and ran across a snake or two.

On Thursday, February 28, they must have breathed a sign of relief to at last be among people they may have not personally known, but whose northern cultural practices, manners and speech patterns were similar to their own.

The next day, March 1, being Friday and most probably a day in Lent, would have been a black fast day. They would have partaken of very little , if any, breakfast. They would have prayed the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. And, as we know from the annals - “the great work was begun.” Perhaps they had a main meal supplied by the parish women of fish fresh caught from Lake Jovita (where our present monastery sits on the shore). Evening came, and morning came...the first full day for the Florida Benedictine women!

Now here we are at day 44,560 in the 122nd year in our history! And the GREAT WORK goes on. As long as there are gaps between our ideals and our reality, there will always be “great work ” to be done. Our founding sisters, and the women that followed them into community, knew that they probably would not live to see all the changes they promoted. We face challenges our foremothers could not have imagined. Our “ daughters ” will face challenges unimaginable to us.

This is part of our Florida Benedictine women ’ s experience – we strive to be better, to be compassionate and caring, to keep faith with the ideals of our founders and to en flesh them into realities worthy of those who will inherit what we build today.

A new day is already upon us – let us be about the GREAT WORK that awaits us today.



Holy Name Convent and Academy circa 1950
Holy Name was later referred to as ‘priory’ and is now referred to as “monastery.”