



## THE CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Diocese of Amarillo



806-414-1076 + Fax 806-383-8452

P. O. Box 5644 + Amarillo, TX 79117-5644

4512 N. E. 24th Avenue

Email: [sgarner@dioama.org](mailto:sgarner@dioama.org) **NEW**

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# Sister Nellie Rooney



## “Sister Nellie”

STORY OF FAITH and the love of God

Laura was born November 3, 1902 on the Dwyer farm west of Cheney, Nebraska, the second of five children to Jim and Teresa Rooney.

The Dwyer farm had a long, shady lane leading south from the country road. To the east was a small stream, lined with willow trees. Trees sheltered the wooden frame house and barn and the other farm buildings. It was a pleasant home for the young family.

Teresa extended her knowledge of sewing by making clothes for the family, beginning with the baby that was soon expected. She cared for the house, the chickens, and

the garden. All her life she preferred outdoor occupations and took delight in animals. The beautiful form of baby calves, for example, and their awkward grace delighted her. It was her job, and later the children, to feed the calves after milking time. Their little noses slobbering milk were fun to watch, and sometimes hard to manage. Teresa helped to milk the cows and she made pets of friendly cows and horses. Except in emergencies, however, she did not work out in the fields as so many of the farm women did. Her domain was the house, the garden, and the chickens, and to some extent the farmyard.

In 1906 the Rooneys were ready to buy a farm. Jim had chosen a quarter section of land (160 acres) one half-mile west of the town of Cheney, the northeast quarter of the section. The Cheney Cemetery occupied a few acres of the northeast corner of the farm.

The farm was a comfortable and happy home for James Rooney and his growing family. The farmstead which was a small portion of the farm, perhaps ten or fifteen acres, that was set aside for buildings, garden and fruit trees was located in the southeast portion of this farm, facing the road on the east.

The farm had been purchased from the Hostettler family, who had an interest in a nursery close to the city of Lincoln. This family had lavished their love of trees and shrubs on this farm. The whole farmyard was adorned with trees and shrubs and flowers. There were numerous fruit trees; apples of several varieties, peach, pears, cherry and mulberry. There were raspberries, black berries, gooseberries and strawberries. A row of trees ran around the farmstead, consisting

*She was instrumental in the creation of the Museum...*



The Rooney Family at Family Farm in Cheney, about 1909  
James R. Sr., Monica R., Laura R., Jim R. Jr., Edna D. Olson, Mrs. Drimmie, Neil R. held by  
mother Teresa R. and Pat Murray

of cottonwoods, elms, willows and boxelders. Facing the road to the east were the farm buildings - house, barn, granary, and other small buildings and sheds commonly seen on Nebraska farms. The farm also had the traditional farm animals; horses, cows, pigs, chickens, bees and the family dog.

### COAL AND CORNCOBS

To the west of the house and north of the barn there was an area where some outbuildings were placed. The west gate of the lawn opened into this area. One of these outbuildings held the coal needed for the house. In one bin was the soft coal (anthracite) used in the kitchen for cooking. It burned quickly and brightly. The other bin held the hard coal (bituminous) that was used for heating the other rooms of the house.

Another one of those outbuildings was the "cob house" used for storing corncobs. Corncobs when burned made a quick, bright, warm fire for cooking. The corncobs were left when the corn was shelled or after the corn was eaten. Some of the cobs were strewn on the ground of the pigpen, or in cold weather left inside the pig shed. The pigs loved to chew on them and they were also plentifully trampled into the soft dirt. It was one of the children's jobs to pick up the cobs for the kitchen fire. The cobs were black from the mud and from the trampling, but they still made good fuel and a bright fire.

### THE BEEHIVES

North of the house was a long fence, running east and west, and the area north of that fence was dangerous territory for the Rooney children, for along the fence was a row of white bee hives. Then came the apple orchard. One day the three little Rooneys crossed over, or under, the fence and got into the territory that belonged to the bees. The bees came storm-

ing out to sting them, and the children ran for the house. Jimmie was about five. He ran to call Mama. Laura was four. She ran after Jimmie. But Mona was only about two. She could not run fast, and the bees got into her long dark hair and stung her into unconsciousness. Mama immediately called the doctor, but Mona remained in a coma until the next day when she came out of her coma to the great relief of her parents.

Daddy had taken care of the bees. He had put on some head gear and gloves, and the children enjoyed watching him. The bees disappeared after this mishap.



### THE FAMILY DOG

Every farm family had a dog. The Rooney family had a black and white dog named "Shep". And when the first Shep died, another "Shep" was found. Mama could keep track of the children in their outdoor play by looking for Shep's black and white tail waving above the grass.

### CHICKENS

In the area west of the house there were chicken houses, one for the grown chickens, one for the baby chickens, and one for the medium sized ones. There were some fairly large trees in this area also, and the grown chickens insisted on roosting in the trees at night. One of the chores of the children was to try to get the grown chickens into their houses at night. This chore was for the protection of the chick-

ens against wild animals such as coyotes, who roamed at night and into early morning. The chickens sometimes got the better of the children for the Nebraska nights were very hot and the chickens didn't want to go back to their houses.

### **THE WHEAT CROP**

Wheat was sown in September, and cattle would graze on it in the winter. In July the wheat was ready for harvest. It was cut with a machine called a binder. The stalks of wheat were bound into bundles by the binder and tied with yellow binding twine. Men gathered several bundles together and leaned them upright against each other to create a "shock" of wheat. Men were often hired to help with this work and were called "hired hands". The wife's duties included cooking beautiful meals for them, and sometimes taking a cold drink to them in the fields. Some farmers, however, gathered the bundles into tall stacks. One or two men in the neighborhood owned a threshing machine which went from farm to farm threshing the grain.. This machine consisted of a "separator" which separated the grains of wheat from the stalks. Since the operation kept a large number of men busy, the farmers of the entire neighborhood accompanied the machine. The shocks of grain had to be loaded into wagons and brought to the separator and loaded into it.

The golden grain flowed out of a pipe into a lumber wagon drawn by two horses which carried the load of grain to the elevator in a nearby town. At the elevator the wagon bringing in the wheat had first been drawn onto a scale where it was weighed. The owner was given a receipt for the amount of wheat he brought in. The wagon returned to the field for another load. At the elevator the wheat could be either sold or stored. The wheat that was sold was shipped by rail to mills where it would be made into flour. The straw was blown out of the separator through a long pipe onto the ground where it piled up into large stacks that became food for the cattle in the winter months.

Threshing usually lasted on one farm for two or three days, depending on the amount of wheat grown on the farm. The threshing crew consisted of twelve to eighteen men, depending on the job who were hungry and excited by the prospects of the harvest. The women of the household baked pies and cakes ahead of time, made butter, baked bread, dressed chickens, and brought forth delectable jellies and pickles. Neighbor women often helped each other. Growing boys and girls also helped with the threshing, the girls in the house and the boys in the field. Some younger boys had the job of carrying milk cans filled with water to the men in the field. A horse and buggy would be used to transport the water.

Men and women were vitally interested in the yield of grain on each field and the price received for it, for wheat was a money crop. The money would be used to make payments on the land, which nearly everybody had to do (for Nebraska land was new), or to pay grocery bills that might have piled up in the winter. Some of the money could hopefully be put into the bank for expenses such as clothing, school expenses or taxes.

In a good year wheat might produce 25 or 30 bushels to the acre, in a bad year 10 bushels to the acre.

### **THE CORN CROP**

Corn was planted in the spring and harvested in the fall. On the Rooney farm, corn was partly a money crop and was also feed for the horses, chickens and pigs. It was fed liberally to animals being readied for market, in addition to year round feeding. For the family meals corn was also a favorite as a vegetable and in bread. Nebraska is ranked second among the states in the production of corn. Only Iowa produces more corn. The University of Nebraska football team are known as the Cornhuskers, an indication of the importance of corn to Nebraskans.

### **CONCLUSION**

This was the farm where the Rooney children grew up in their happy, busy, early years.

### **JIM AND TERESA'S CATHOLIC FAITH**

Jim and Teresa were founding a staunch Irish-Catholic family. They had inherited a strong faith from their Irish fore-bearers. The Irish people had been Christian and Catholic since the time of St. Patrick and had developed a strong sense of religious and national loyalties. In the United States the Irish loved both their Catholic faith and



**The Rooney Children About 1912**

Monica, Laura, Niel and James

their new country and they never felt any opposition between them.

### **ATTENDING MASS AND CONFESSION WAS NOT EASY**

The nearest Catholic Church was St. Theresa's Pro-Cathedral in Lincoln where they attended Mass whenever possible. Their only means of travel was a top buggy drawn by one horse. It was a trip of between three or four hours on dirt roads in good weather. It meant getting up before dawn on Sunday morning to do the farm chores and be on the road by six thirty. But in rainy weather, the roads would be muddy and in snowy weather the valleys might be drifted full with snow. The last Mass was usually at 10:00 or 10:30 AM.

Since persons planning to receive communion had to fast from midnight from both food and water, it was not common to schedule later Masses. In those days some conscientious persons wished to go to confession just before communion. Confession was heard at stated times: Saturday afternoon and evening and just before Mass on Sunday. For persons living as far from church as the Rooneys, it would not be easy to make a trip to confession on Saturday. To go to confession on Sunday morning meant getting there a little early to get in line in the church. And there were always some that slipped in at the last minute. They made the line longer. The priest had two choices:

- He could hear everybody's confession and keep the congregation waiting, as many priests did. In that case those who came fasting, fasted a little longer. It is doubtful that many had any urgent business after Mass for which they might be late, for Sundays were religiously observed in those days.
- Or the priest might attempt to train his penitents by walking out of the confessional, even though some were still waiting for confession. In that case those who were waiting for confession were fasting, but were not able to receive communion.

The Rooneys went to Mass when they could, and when they couldn't they

were nourished by all they had been taught, by love and right living, and by the deep prayer that people unconsciously use when they live in the peace and quiet of the country. They cherished the faith, they loved the Church and obeyed its laws, and they honored the priests who gave them the ministrations of the Church.

### **OTHER CATHOLIC PRACTICES**

We may be sure that no meat was served on Friday in the Rooney household; that they fulfilled their Easter duty by receiving the sacraments at Easter time, and tried to do it at least a few other times during the year; and that of the little money they had, they gave to the Church and the poor and contributed to the mission's collection. The Rooneys were helpful toward their neighbors, which was especially needed in farm work. They took care of the old father in their home, and welcomed the new lives that came to them in marriage. When their first baby was born, they planned at once for the baptism. Probably the godparents had already be determined. A baptism was one of the most significant family events. It brought the child into the Catholic Church. The baby was a tiny member, filled with grace, cleansed of original sin as the Church expressed it then. The virtues of faith, hope and charity were planted in its soul to be nourished by its parents, and by its gradual training in the Catholic faith.

### **RAISING THE FAMILY IN THE FAITH**

The Rooney children were Catholic children, brought up in their

Catholic faith. Much of that training was left to Teresa. “Daddy” seldom took a hand, but when he did, the matter was settled. Teresa taught the children their prayers very early. Laura’s earliest memory was kneeling with Jimmie at her mother’s knee learning the Hail Mary, for that was the shortest prayer. The Our Father and the Apostles Creed would come later. She mastered the second part of the Hail Mary because that was the shorter part and stumbled through the other with help. Jimmie could say it all glibly, and Laura wondered at him, as at a being from another world, so superior was he. But the children learned them all, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles Creed.

### **FAMILY DISCIPLINE**

The children had to learn morality, too. Laura remembers being punished for telling a lie. Mama sat down to explain the matter to the tiny girl and then spanked her. Laura turned to her mother, put her head down in Mother’s lap and sobbed her heart out, for where else could she turn for comfort. And Mother comforted her. At the end of the west walk grew a bush that had slender, supple branches that stung if used as a switch. When the children were a bit older, Mama sometimes sent the culprit to get his own switch, and laughed to herself at his lagging steps that went down the walk to get the switch that she would use for the punishment.

### **FATHER MORAN STARTS A NEW CHURCH AT CHENEY**

In the last years that the Rooney family lived at Cheney, the Catholics were delighted to have a Catholic Church, St. Michael’s built in the little town of Cheney. It was due to a young fervent priest from the East, where the Catholic Church was well established, and priests could be spared for mission work in the west.

Father Robert F. Moran appeared one day in the Cheney area scouting for Catholic families who would be interested in forming a Catholic parish in Cheney. He was received enthusiastically. He was like a gift from heaven, as no doubt he was. No more long trips to Lincoln would be needed for Mass and baptisms.

Father Moran had a car, as many of his parishioners would soon be getting, and he started two small Catholic parishes, one in Cheney and one in Denton (a little town to the west). He lived in Lincoln, and his parishioners, mostly farmers of German and Irish decent, began the usual business of developing a parish and building a church. Mrs. James Rooney used a small inheritance from an uncle in Ireland to provide a statue of St. Michael poised to destroy the force of Satan.

When Father Moran came for Mass he stayed over night with one of the parishioners, often with the Rooneys or with the O’Briens. A strong Catholic family was the Knopps, who were German, and there were others coming from miles away. Strong supporters were Warden Fenton, head of the penitentiary south of Lincoln, and his wife. (She once donated a hand painted set of dishes to the bazaar and very much enjoyed all the warm enthusiasm.)

A sad thing happened the night of one of the early bazaars. Perhaps it was because the work in the parish was new and possibly not well organized. There was also critical talk about priests in the area, where Catholics were few. The room was crowded. A sum of money was received for certain items, which were sold. It was put away in a certain place in the room for safekeeping. When the money was counted at the end of the evening, that money received from the sale of those certain items was nowhere to be found. Everyone looked. At last one young man suggested that perhaps the priest had taken the money. All the others protested, and came to the support of Father Moran.

Father Moran was staying that night with the Rooneys. For hours he walked the floor. “If I had wanted money”, he said, “ I could have stayed at home. I had chances of entering business and making plenty of money.”

But Father Moran put aside his feelings and stayed with his work.

## LAURA MISSES A YEAR OF SCHOOL DUE TO ILLNESS

Laura attended Cheney public schools for the first eight grades. In the latter half of her eighth grade school year (the year that Jim began school at Creighton), it happened that Laura had suffered from an attack of rheumatism, and was not very well when school started the next fall. Mother persuaded Daddy to keep Laura at home the next year to recuperate from the illness. So it transpired that she would still be a year behind her brother in the next school year. It was probably the best thing to do.

## THE ROONEYS MOVE TO OMAHA

World War I was in progress (1917 through 1919). Our men were in the battlefields of England and France. Prices in the United States for food were high. Even much poor land in the United States was put into cultivation. With this prosperity in the land, the Rooneys decided to sell their land and go to Omaha to put their children into Catholic schools. The move was very much due to the persuasion of Theresa who was just as determined as her mother was that the children receive a firm foundation in their faith. She wanted to move to a place where there were Catholic schools for her children to attend. There were such schools in Omaha. Accordingly, the beautiful farm was sold, and move was made to Omaha. Jim looked for a house to rent.

There were cheaper homes to rent in a Negro area, but some influence caused Jim to say that he would not put his children in a Negro area. He found a house for rent in Benson (a little to the west of Omaha) in St. Bernard's parish in the area of the Catholic cathedral.

Laura took the second half of the eighth grade over again at St. Cecilia's parochial school. The Dominican sister who was teaching the eighth grade challenged her pupils to compete with this student who had come in from a public school. The girls in her class, though evidently used to much richer things than Laura were very friendly, and Laura enjoyed being with them.

Laura finished the ninth grade in St. Cecelia's Cathedral High School. However, there was also another parochial high school in Omaha taught by the Dominican Sisters, Sacred Heart High School. It was not



in an elite area as Cathedral High School, but it was taught by the same congregation of Dominican sisters as at Cathedral High School. One of them advised Theresa that there would not be the competition with the richer students if Laura went to Sacred Heart High School. (Sister Nellie has commented that "I'm not sure what prompted that advice, but it was probably true.") Laura went on to high school at Sacred Heart High School, a school that in later years was closed. (The area in the north part of the city became completely industrial.) She found the Sisters to be very fine teachers, indeed. She had to come to school on the bus every day, so she did not have much time to socialize with the students and did not get to know the girls.

Jim had to find a way to support his family. He was a very competent person, but he did not have the education required for many jobs in the city, so he took a job delivering milk on a route for which a milk wagon drawn by a team of horses was supplied. But he wasn't content in his work and worried that all the

money he had accumulated for his family would be frittered away. He decided to go back to farming.

### **FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES IN TECUMSEH**

In 1919, at the end of World War I, prices for agricultural products fell drastically. The European farmers who had served in the war returned to their farms and the additional farm produce from the United States was no longer needed. Prices for grain and other farm products were low, but the interest on any debts that the farmer might have, stayed the same.

As it turned out Jim's farming plans in Tecumseh were a little too ambitious. Jim Rooney could not pay the interest due on the two farms. Jim sold the house in the city and the family moved to the 80-acre farm. Eventually only the eighty-acre farm near Tecumseh remained in the family.

The children remained in the Tecumseh public schools and all four completed their high school work at Tecumseh High School. Laura graduated from high school in 1921.

Laura and Monica worked to help the family. Jim was working his way through the College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

### **LAURA , MONICA AND NEIL BEGAN TEACHING**

At the time that the Rooney children were attending the high school in Tecumseh, the State Department of Education authorized high schools to offer a course in Normal Training to prepare teachers to teach in the rural schools of the state. These teachers were under the supervision of the official known as the County Superintendent. This applied only to teachers in rural schools.

Laura, Monica and Neil took this Normal Training course and all did some teaching after high school in rural schools.

Laura's and Monica's plan was that Laura would teach in a rural school for two years. Then she would attend the University of Nebraska for a year while Monica taught in a rural school. Then Monica would attend the University or one year (September, 1924 through June, 1925).

After Laura completed the normal training course, she taught for two years (September, 1922 through June 1924) in a small rural school, District 20, of Johnson

County, just a few miles from the Rooney home in Tecumseh. Immediately after this period of teaching, Laura then attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln for one year.

### **LAURA'S TEACHING AT GOTHENBERG**

After Laura's year of university training, she taught 7th grade for three years (September, 1925 through June, 1928) in the public schools at Gothenburg, a town in the western part of Nebraska.

When Laura was near the end of three years of teaching seventh grade in schools at Gothenburg, most of the teachers were given a raise in salary, but Laura did not get one. She asked for one, but the superintendent, Mr. Burke, was quite firm in refusing it. Mr. Burke could have been justified in not giving her the raise in salary. Truth to tell, Laura was not a very good disciplinarian for seventh graders. She often had her head in the clouds. But, Laura's pride was hurt, none the less that she did not get a raise.

Laura resigned her job at Gothenburg in 1928 and then found it difficult to get another teaching job. One place at which she applied for a job was at the town of Beatrice. The new superintendent there frankly explained to her that he could not accept her application because his Board of Directors would not permit him to hire a teacher who was Catholic. At that time there was a strong anti-Catholic prejudice in the Middle West.

### **WORKING IN LINCOLN**

"I took a three month course in typing, and answered an ad in the newspaper offering a part time typing position in the office of Safeway Stores, Inc. in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was accepted in the Safeway office, though I knew nothing about business"

The part time job became full time and lasted seven years until 1936. The people in the Safeway office were very kind and patient with me, for which I will be always grateful. I felt that they overlooked some of my ineptitude. I decided, however, that I was a little better at working with adults than with children.

In the Safeway office, I was surprised to learn that I could get along amicably with men. But if they offered me more than friendship, I withdrew a bit. At the risk of getting ahead of my story, I will tell you why. It was because I learned in my childhood to know God in my



soul, and no human being could rival that love. Another element enters into this situation. I naturally had a tendency to defer a little bit to a man's opinion in day to day affairs, and men liked that. Explain that as you wish. They say that men are a bit more logical, and women a bit more emotional. Be that as it may, my affective powers were wrapped up in God, as I knew him in my soul.

During this time in Lincoln, I took night classes at the University and completed two more years of college work there. It was at this time that I developed my habits of prayer.

### **MONICA'S WORKING**

While I was teaching in Gothenburg, Monica attended the University of Nebraska for a year and then taught in the rural school in the Tecumseh area for a while. Monica then did office work in a Tecumseh bank, and later in another Tecumseh bank. After which she worked in the office of a trust company in Lincoln for a number of years. Monica and I lived together in Lincoln during this period.

### **CHILDREN HELP TO PAY FARM DEBTS**

In Laura's work in the office of Safeway Stores in Lincoln, and Monica's work in the bank, they helped

their father to keep up the interest payments on the two farms. Laura sent checks regularly to make payments to the creditors as the interest payments came due. One year she arranged with the Safeway Stores to send a large shipment of dry groceries to the farm. But the practical Monica always enclosed in her letters a little cash to meet current expenses in the farm household.

For several years Mother raised turkeys for sale, selling them to a businessman in the area. She enjoyed the turkeys immensely. They seemed to know about the time that Mother would feed them, and would come to the kitchen window and peck on the glass to alert Mother to come out and sprinkle their grain on the ground.

### **LAURA DEVELOPS HER PRAYER LIFE**

While working in Lincoln in 1934, Laura took night classes at the University of Nebraska and she did some reading at the city library.

A book of spiritual letters written by a Jesuit priest came to my attention. His advice to these sisters, whom he was addressing in the book centered on the usual type of prayer and encouragement until he came to the last chapter, where he used the term "ligature". Webster's Collegiate Dictionary said the word meant "to bind or tie". That was all. What could be bound or tied in terms of prayer? Out on the farm we had tied bundles of wheat together with binding twine, but that had no connection to prayer. In contemplative prayer ligature means "anything that binds". In contemplative prayer the senses were bound, in the activity of the spirit. The senses are not active. One stops using the senses of sight and sound. Don't

look or listen. Be quiet and wait a little, and a calm steals over you. That is prayer, contact with God. God loves you. If you haven't tried that, do try it. It is contemplative prayer. It is God reaching out to you in your soul. It is quiet delight in your soul.

### **LAURA'S LIFE AS A SISTER**

### **LAURA LEARNS ABOUT THE DIOCESE OF AMARILLO**

At this time, also, she became acquainted with Mrs. Olive B. Marple from whom she learned about the pioneer conditions in the Texas Panhandle and the efforts to organize the new Diocese of Amarillo.

The diocese had only recently been created on the western plains of Texas. At the time the diocese was 73,000 square miles of farms and grasslands, which was rapidly being developed with oil wells and irrigation from underground water. An energetic priest, Rudolph A. Gerken was named the Bishop of the Diocese. Bishop had to start with no money. Oil, gas and water had been found on the High Plains of Texas at approximately the same time. All of West Texas was in that area, or close by, and no doubt the other Bishops of Texas felt that with such gifts of nature, the new Diocese of Amarillo could finance itself. For they founded the diocese, but provided the new Bishop with no money to begin its organization.

The Bishop was an energetic worker and a trained educator. He had been a lay teacher before he became Bishop.

One of his first steps was to look for teachers. He tried to get Catholic sisters to teach in his new di



Bishop Gerken

ocese, but none were to be found.

Texas was not a Catholic area. Catholic immigrants to the United States at that time came largely from Ireland and Germany, coming from Europe through the ports of New York and Boston and finding homes in the Middle West. The Catholics among them wanted Catholic schools for their children to bolster their faith in a Protestant environment. Large numbers of Catholic Sisters in Europe responded to this call, but there were few to answer calls in the largely Protestant South. When Bishop Gerken could not get religious teachers for the schools he wished to open, he turned to Catholic lay women.

Bishop Gerken founded a group of lay women whom he named Mercy Workers, lay women who could volunteer to come to his new diocese to help in the training of the children and also in parish work. This worked well for a short time. The Mercy Workers were women of good will, but friction arose among the Mercy Workers and also a bit of scandal. The scandal led to the collapse of the movement. The program could not be tightly controlled and eventually was discontinued.

Mrs. Marple had been a Mercy Worker in the new Diocese of Amarillo, Texas.

When the organization collapsed, Mrs. Marple returned to Lincoln and had been offered this basement apartment in a building that belonged to the local parish. Laura came to realize that she had no other place to live. There were some Catholic people who did not understand her position, and criticized her, but as I visited her, I came to know her situation and to admire her courage in accepting her poverty.

Mrs. Marple was a convert to the Catholic faith. She explained that when she joined the Catholic faith there had been some disagreement with her husband and her family. Her husband was a Protestant minister. She left her husband. She was a sincere, faithful Catholic and Laura enjoyed visiting with her.

Laura knew something about poverty in her family as they struggled with debt, but this was poverty in the Church. This might have led Laura to sympathize with the struggle of Bishop Gerken and the young Diocese of Amarillo. All of this appealed to Laura as a work for God that needed to be done and it was work that she with her teacher training could do.

#### LAURA CONSIDERS THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

There was a zealous young priest in Lincoln who knew that I was considering the religious life. He introduced me to a Dominican sister whom he admired greatly. The sister was sure I would like to join the Dominicans. I met with her. She was quiet and sedate, and I am sure she was holy, but for some reason

she did not impress me.

I felt the need of some good advice, and I went to the top, Bishop Kuchera of the Diocese of Lincoln. I did not know him personally, but I knew he was an active and able leader. He spoke fervently of the needs of the Church, and for people in the religious life. He recommended that I join a missionary, or active religious life. He did not speak specifically about any one group or program and he did not ask me to work in the Diocese of Lincoln.

Possibly the need for religious sisters in the New World of the Americas led the Western Church to emphasize active missionary work and consequently ignore contemplative life. The Western Church was active.

#### LAURA GOES TO TEXAS

After talking to Bishop Kuchera it seemed best to me to act upon the need for help in the new Diocese of Amarillo, Texas. I felt drawn to the work in a new country, and I wrote to Bishop Gerken about the possibility of working in his Diocese. He had just been appointed to the See of Santa Fe and he referred me to the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate in Amarillo, who had just come to the Diocese of Amarillo. This was in 1934, when the Texas Panhandle was deep in the throes of the Dust Bowl. (I was 32 years old.) I did not realize what the dust bowl meant. Once while walking to work in Lincoln, I noticed that there seemed to be a layer of dust on the sidewalk. I wondered what had caused that layer of dust. I had never seen anything like it before. How could that be, I wondered, But I did not have the answer to my question, and I forgot about it.

A little later I took the train to Amarillo and arrived duly at the station there. Two Sisters in long brown habits met me at the station. They were dignified and quiet, very well mannered, and I could not tell anything more about them except that their clothes were neat and clean and well pressed. But their faces did not seem to be well washed. Perhaps that may have been caused by the dust of the Dust Bowl, though I was not yet well enough acquainted with the dust bowl to ascribe that cause to their appearance of somewhat unwashed faces. I wondered about it; I thought that Sisters would be perfect in every way that could be observed, such as the appearance of their faces.

A little later I received an explanation of this phenomenon. These Franciscans had come originally from an old organization of cloistered Sisters in Switzerland, so old that its roots went many centuries back, possibly farther back than the Middle Ages. Those Sisters of earlier times had followed strict poverty when soap was considered a luxury to be used frugally. These sisters who met me were perhaps of the first generation to use soap liberally, and where they came from there was no Dust Bowl. But they seemed so holy and quietly gracious that I reserved judgment in the matter.

#### **DATES SISTER NELLIE'S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT**

Oct. 30, 1936 Laura entered St. Francis Convent  
June 12, 1937 Laura's investiture, her religious name: Sister Nell  
July 31, 1939 Sister Nellie's First profession  
July 31, 1942 Sister Nellie's Final profession

#### **LAURA RECEIVES HER RELIGIOUS NAME**

Laura received her religious name at the time of her investiture, June 12, 1937. In those days the sister's names were picked for them by their superiors.

#### **SISTER NELLIE'S ASSIGNMENTS**

The following lists some of the assignments of Sister Nellie, some of which are explained in more detail in the following sections of this biography.

- From 1939 to 1941 Sister Nellie was assigned to St. Francis School, Price, Texas (east of Amarillo). For a few months in the spring of 1941, she left St. Francis School to substitute in St. Mary's School in Amarillo. These assignments were before she made her final profession of vows to the religious life.

- For the 1941-1942 school year she taught at a public grade school in Dixon, New Mexico.

- For seven school years, 1942-1949, she taught at St. Anthony's School in Hereford, Texas

- In 1949 Bishop Fitzsimon asked Sister Nellie to return to Amarillo. For two years, 1949-1951 she worked at St. Francis Convent, Amarillo to assist Bishop Lawrence J. Fitzsimon in historical research on the Diocese of Amarillo.

- For five years, 1951 - 1956, she worked as St. Mary's School, Balboa in the Canal Zone. (Sister Nellie commented that she returned to Amarillo because she had been too weak in discipline.)

- In 1956 Sister Nellie and Sister Gemma opened Our Savior High School at St. Francis Convent in Amarillo.



Sr. Geraldine Duran

- In 19?? Sister Geraldine and Sister Nellie were sent for one year to the Catholic University in Washington D.C. to follow Dr. Roy Deferari's plan to bring Catholic Sisters up to date. Many had been trained in their own convents, but did not have state certificates.

- In June 1961 Sister Nellie and Sister Geraldine opened the College of Our Savior at St. Francis Convent.

- Until 1969 Sister Nellie taught at the College of Our Savior at St. Francis Convent, Amarillo. Sister Martha closed the College in June, 1970 when there were not enough sister attending it.

- From October 1969 to November 1970 she was a member of the General Council of Sisters in Rome. Sister Nellie took over the remainder of Sister Aloysius' term on the General Council when she left the community and went to teach at the Catholic University in Washington D.C.

- When Sister Protasia was made representative for the U.S. at Rome for the next term, Sister Nellie replaced her at St. Mary's School at Odessa, Texas. (Nov. 1970 to June 1971)

- In December 1970 she was elected Provincial Secretary. She began work in Amarillo as Provincial Secretary in June 1971.

February 28, 1972 till July 15, 1979 she served as Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Amarillo. She was appointed by Bishop DeFalco

- In approximately 1975 Sister was instrumental in starting the Catholic Historical Society with Msgr. L. T. Matthiesen and several others preparing for the 50th Jubilee of the Diocese in 1976

- From 1979 till 1981 she lived at St. Francis Convent

- In 1981 at the age of 79 Sister Nellie moved to a convent on Ron Street when there was a breakup in the order and she transferred to the Franciscan Mission Sisters, an experimental group of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate .

- From 1981 - 1983 she served as St. Francis House council member and secretary treasurer.

- From 1983 to 1986 she served as St. Francis House acting secretary.

Beginning in 1989, Sister Nellie underwent a series of operations (3 on her right hip), the last of which included a replacement hip; one on her large intestine, which consisted of cutting off an excessive portion of it; and a removal of her left breast, because of the threat of cancer). These five operations within about five years pretty much incapacitated Sister Nellie. Since that time Sister Nellie has not been in active work, but worked on her family history

## TWO NOVICES IN AMARILLO

When I came to Amarillo there were two novices there (three but the third was in New Mexico and I met her only later.)

One of the two was Novice Dorothy. She had completed a degree in agriculture at an agriculture college in California. She came from a farming family in a valley in northern California. I believe that her father was not a Catholic, but I know her mother was. From what she said about her home life, farming there at her home was not very profitable. She had a brother who was mentally deficient. She had initially applied to join a religious community, but she was not accepted. Then she applied to the Franciscan Sisters in the new Diocese of Amarillo, Texas. The Franciscan Sisters in Amarillo were eager to develop a community in the United States, and they accepted her.

The other Novice in the new convent in Amarillo was Novice Aloysia Payne. She and a sister of hers were converts to the Catholic faith, a result of having attended a Catholic boarding school. Novice Aloysia, happy and vibrant and young, was a favorite with the Sisters in Amarillo. Novice Dorothy was a contrast to Novice Aloysia - quiet and self-contained. It was clear that one of the two Novices, Aloysia, was the darling of the Sisters and Novice Dorothy was ignored just a bit.

Novice Dorothy was trained in agriculture, not in teaching, which was the work of the Swiss sisters in Columbia. Dorothy was capable in her own field, agriculture and farming, but not in teaching. Her students did not behave very well, like mine. But she did her best and tried to interest her students in agriculture and science. In spite of her poor discipline, I believe that a number of students benefited from her teaching.

At this writing (1997), Sister Dorothy is living in a nursing home conducted by Sisters in the town of Panhandle, Texas. Our Sisters visit her regularly, at least once a week. She has wonderful care and can attend Mass if she wishes. We (the Franciscans) do not have enough Sisters to take care of her, the kind of care she needs. She is happy there. She remembers things only partially.

Sister Aloysia left our community, but she could use her college training to teach at a section of the Catholic University in Washington D. C. and she seemed happy. She died there recently. She was a convert to the faith. When she was sent as a representative from our community to the general government in South America, she was not happy. They are wonderful Sisters, but I think she did not understand or accept their European spirituality. God will make her completely happy in heaven.

## THE COLLEGE OF OUR SAVIOR

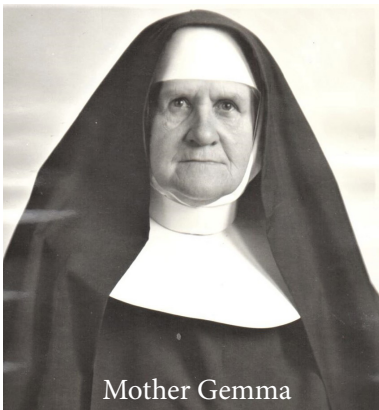
Conditions were changing rapidly in rapidly in the United States as they were elsewhere. Up and into the twentieth century, the United States was so involved in missionary work over the world that it had to struggle to keep up with the events

around it. The Church had produced a plethora of religious missionaries, both men and women, who went all over the world to make the Catholic Church known.

Religious Sisters were trained in their own colleges and convents. They were well trained and were effective in their work. This was the case with religious Sisters in the United States.

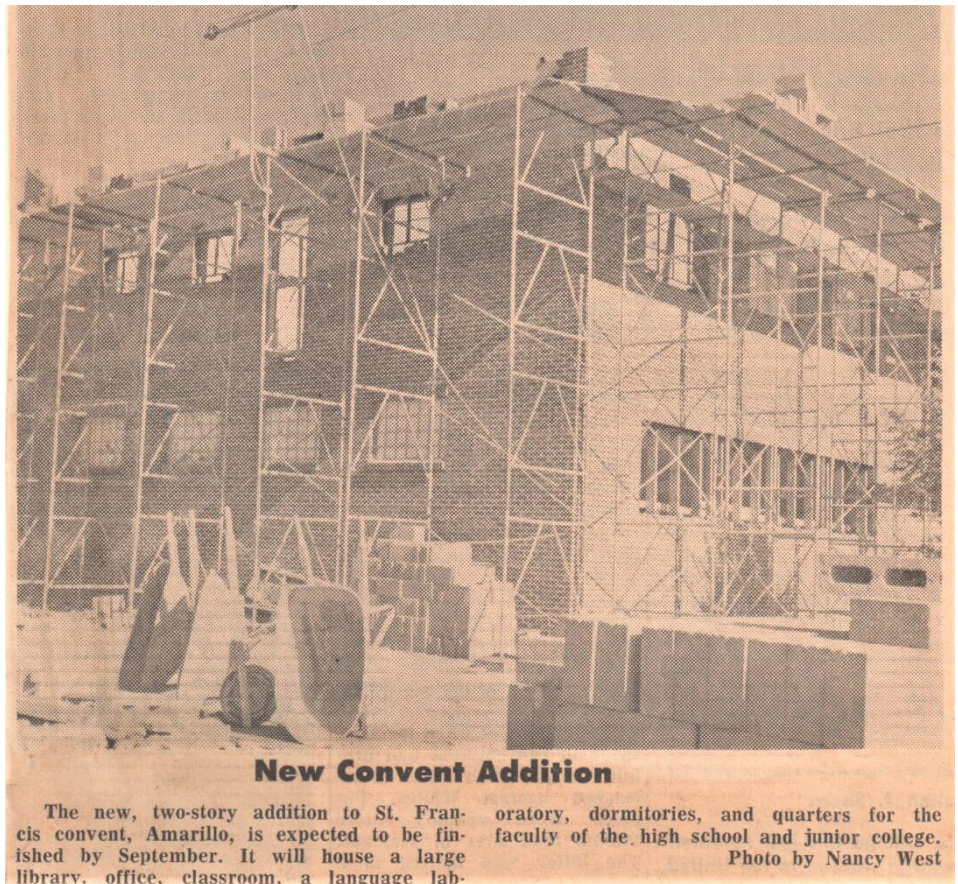
The Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. instituted a program to assist the religious teaching orders in the United States to train and update their teaching Sisters to meet the new conditions and to get their teaching certificates quickly. Dr. Roy Deferari at the Catholic University carried out a plan to this end. He encouraged the religious orders to conduct in their own convents a two year course in college training which the Catholic University would accept if the students attended the Catholic University in the final two years of their degree work. A considerable number of the religious orders accepted this plan for it enabled the orders to update their Sisters at less expense.

This seemed like a good idea for the Franciscan Sisters. Sister Geraldine would teach Spanish, her native language, and I would study for a master's degree in history and one in



Mother Gemma

Sister Gemma and I (Sister Nellie) decided to accept this plan for our sisters. Sister Gemma, the efficient builder, added a wing at the west end of the St. Francis Convent in Amarillo to house a two year college which was named Our Savior College. Sister Geraldine and I were sent to the Catholic University in Washington to get the requisite training to conduct the college



We carried out this plan and returned to Amarillo to train our novices at the College of Our Savior. Some other Sisters helped with the training. I had no trouble with the situation in the College of Our Savior. The College of Our Savior petered out because we did not have enough students. Other colleges did well with the Catholic University plan. We did not. Monsignor Leroy Matthiesen, later Bishop of Amarillo, said (or implied) that was all we, in the Diocese of Amarillo could do was to keep the Catholic high school open, and he put his energy into that.

I think that the Catholic University program helped the religious orders to update teachers who had taught well in the Catholic schools, but did not have teaching degrees. Some others of those two-year colleges accredited by the Catholic University went on to become successful accredited colleges, but ours did not.

#### **SISTER FRANCES, ONE OF THE LAST STUDENTS AT THE COLLEGE OF OUR SAVIOR**

One of the last students in the College of Our Savior was a girl from a Spanish family in central Texas. There were several children in that family.

She worked in the cotton fields with her father to permit her brothers and sisters, who were older than she, to finish high school. When that was carried out, she came to our convent, to begin with the first year of high school. When I asked her to read the first page of the American history text, an introductory page, she could not explain a sentence of it.

I deeply regretted that I could not continue our Savior College at least one more year, to help her get at least a start in the work.

She was sent to our convent (Mount St. Mary's) in Los Angeles. There she was given a job in the library. (I do not remember the name of the congregation of Sisters who were staffing the library.) This congregation was operating a high school for students who had adequate preparation for the work, and were also conducting this school for those students who needed a little more help in doing the high school work. There in that library she helped the students find the reference books that they needed, and she gradually became able to read the more difficult matter. She went on to get a bachelor's degree at Mount St. Mary's, and she finished the fifth college year required for teachers in California schools.

Today she is a missionary in Mexico in an area just south of California where she works with Franciscan Fathers who have missions in California and also conduct a mission complex in Mexico below the Rio Grande. She oversees a series of study clubs for Mexican women eager to study their Catholic faith.

These women had held to their faith in an area where missionaries came

to them infrequently. They are grateful to missionaries like our Sister Frances.

### **SISTER NELLIE IN ROME**

When the college of Our Savior was closed, I was sent to the General Council in Rome to finish up the term of Sister Aloysia as the representative of the United States houses of the Franciscan Order. (Sister Aloysia had left the community to teach in Washington D.C.)

I didn't know Spanish, which was spoken by the sisters there in Rome. I learned later that my difficulty was that I was strongly eye-minded, not ear-minded. I could read simple Spanish, but I could not understand Spanish when it was spoken. I was somewhat too proud, also. I thought others should listen to English when it was spoken, and should learn it. That policy was perhaps the best then, but today in a global society, with United States business and social contacts all over the world, it would be better to overcome the reliance on English only.

In any event, I spent my time in Rome in visiting the churches in old Rome. There are many of them, one every few blocks, and it is like a course in church history to visit them at leisure. In taking the mail down to the old city by bus I missed some of the later churches. It seems that before Catholics were accepted by the Roman government, the Catholics had to live and to worship across the Tiber, to the north. It is the area north of the old city. Many Catholic churches, now considered old or ancient, were built there across the Tiber (which the Romans call the Tevere). I went to look at some of those later, and I found them beautiful.

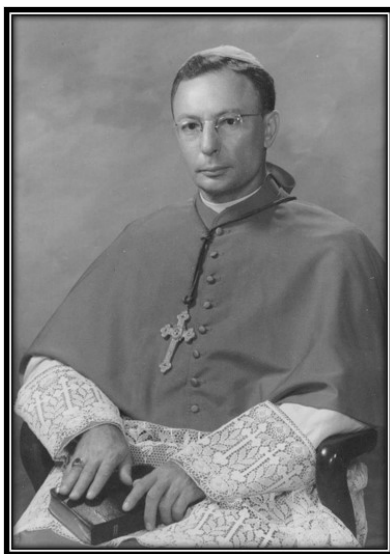
One beautiful thing that I saw in Rome was the side altars in the Jesuit church in the old city. Built of variegated marble in soft colors, they were dedicated to the two holy Jesuit priests, St. Aloysius Gonzago and St. John Berchmans, who died in their younger years.

### **SISTER NELLIE SAW HILE SALASSIE IN ROME**

Once I was sent on an errand to a place a little distance from the center of the old city. It was getting late on my way back, but I noticed that a crowd had collected on one corner of the street that led up to the site of the present government of the city of Rome. I had just seen a few blocks farther back, perhaps fifteen or twenty soldiers on horseback. They were in fine array. The horses were noble, in decorated harness, and the soldiers handsome, in equally fine gear, and elegant. I watched the company going down the street, but I didn't know what they were doing there. As I reached the corner of the street that led up to the seat of the Roman government in the city, a crowd was waiting there. Two nuns were standing there, possibly English Protestant nuns, and I asked them why the crowd was waiting there. They said that Hile Salassie had come to Rome to get help against the German army that had taken over his government in Ethiopia. (We might note that the Italian government had earlier taken over Ethiopia.) But here he was,



trying to get help from Rome, in a style befitting a noble ruler. I waited to see him, but as he approached, a crowd of newsmen with cameras pushed everyone out of the way and I saw only his back, a little man sitting on a high seat, and accompanied by the soldiers in their splendid uniforms, that I had seen on the street earlier.



### Sister Nellie Experiences with Bishop DeFalco

The fifth Bishop of Amarillo was Bishop Lawrence M. DeFalco.

Once shortly after he came to Amarillo, I found among my papers one sheet that I thought should have been filed with papers of Bishop

FitzSimon's. Right inside the front door of the Bishop's House was a file where I used to file papers for Bishop FitzSimon. I made a mistake in judgment and thought I would just slip inside the door and file the paper there. But before I could finish, Bishop DeFalco came in and asked what I was doing there. I explained, but he was not pleased. I never went into the Bishop's House again until it was time to take papers out to send them to Austin.

There was no exception to his determination. I had occasion to go, along with another Sister, to the parlor in the Bishop's House to a meeting about some matter. I sat in my chair, very quietly, and spoke very little. Occasionally he looked at me as if he could look inside of me, but I think he often looked at people that way. He was very discerning.



Sr. Nellie Rooney

### Sister Nellie Retires As Superintendent Of Catholic Schools

AMARILLO — Sr. Nellie Rooney, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Amarillo for the past seven years, has announced her resignation effective at the end of the 1978-79 school year.

"I am sure that someone younger and more adequately trained in educational administration can take over the position for the betterment of our schools," she said in a letter to the members of the Diocesan School Board.

Sister Nellie is 75. A Franciscan, Sister Nellie is stationed at St. Francis' Convent here.

Two senior high schools, two junior high schools, and 11 elementary schools make up the diocesan Catholic school system, which is accredited by the Texas Education Agency.

Bishop Lawrence M. DeFalco has appointed Msgr. L. T. Matthiesen, principal of Alamo Catholic High School, to head a committee to search for a new superintendent.

### Sister Nellie as Superintendent of Schools

Later on it came about that the diocese needed a new Superintendent of Schools, and it came to the point that it would be between me and another sister. A group of us were seated in the Bishop's parlor again, discussing it. The Bishop was there with us. He had been very quiet, but suddenly he spoke up: "It will be Sister Nellie." So the matter was settled.

And so I began some years as the Superintendent of Schools. I liked visiting the schools and going into each teacher's classroom and seeing what the students were doing. It was the time when many Catholic schools were closing because they could not get sisters to teach in them. It seemed that the Catholic people were so used to having sisters to teach in the schools that they could not have a school without the Sisters. But I hoped that none of our diocesan schools would close.

By SISTER NELLIE ROONEY edited by Philip Tscheschke March 9, 1998



Sr. Nellie presents a plaque to a winner of the 50th anniversary essay contest.

# Sister Nellie Retires

by *Sister Martha Delgado, OSF*

*March 15, 2003*

Has Sister Nellie ever retired? From time to time she would complete one ministry, one project and something new would be waiting for her. Her personal story very well list the various ministries and activities in which she was engaged both, within our religious community and in the Church, mostly in the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas. Her involvement as Educator, Historical Researcher, Writer, President and Teacher of Our Savior College and High School, General and Provincial Secretary, Curator and Secretary of the Diocesan Catholic Historical Museum, as well as her participation in an all community and Church activities can be summarized by simply saying that she has been a person of infinite ideas, a person of creativity and dedication to God and all God's people. Where others encountered obstacles she questioned, challenged and found a way to succeed, or at least attempt.

One of the greatest challenges of her life's ministries was that of an EDUCATOR. She has been one who can enable others to learn. She has always believed that with a little affirmation, a willingness to learn and good teaching anyone can learn and receive an education. Many women who at one time or another have been candidates in our community, as well as some of our Novices and Sisters still give Sister Nellie credit for helping them learn to read, write and to study. She has always been very proper in the manner in which she spoke the English language. Both, in speaking and in our writings she would bend backwards to correct our mistakes. Even at the age of 99 she would still find errors in different writings she came across and would make an effort to correct them!

Sister Nellie wrote her family history *From Ireland to Nebraska: The Donahue and Rooney Families*. At this time too she had completed *The Story of James and Teresa Rooney*, the life of her father and mother. At about the age of 95 she wrote her own life story which you just read.

The following are some other contributions of her research and writings:

*A History of the Catholic Church in the Panhandle Plains Area of Texas From 1875-1916*

*The Society of the Atonement in West Texas*

Besides all the above contributions and writings, Sister Nellie often researched information for articles for the *West Texas Catholic*, the Diocesan Paper. There were several people she interviewed and their stories were published such as *Anna and Mike Januta - Their Work in War and Peace*.

In 1989, Sister Nellie retired from her office as Assistant Secretary. One of her duties in that capacity among many others was to write the chronicles. That she did very well, for they have been very helpful in writing the History of our Autonomous Province. Her English expertise has been an asset to all of us as she was always ready to edit and type and write Newsletters, other community documents and correspondence. For this service to our community we are deeply grateful.

For this woman of infinite ideas there was always one more thing to do that seemed so very important to her. For several years she was instrumental in preparing the Mass for Ascension Thursday, which was celebrated at Palo Duro Canyon. Along with Liturgy there was a dramatization depicting the first settlers and explores of this area who celebrated their first Mass most probably in that spot or area. (I well remember one year when she stayed up until 5:00 o'clock in the morning making costumes for the actors. She also, searched high and low trying to find the bell used at that first Ascension Day Mass celebrated by Friar Juan de Padilla).

In her retirement years, Sister Nellie remained very active in all of our community activities, celebrations, and all

that our consecrated life as Franciscans calls us to be. She also remained very active in several organizations such as The Catholic Daughters of Americas who still have her in their roster as an inactive member, the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women and the Church Women United. In her 80's she became a member of the Committee for the Shroud of Turin. She has always maintained a great interest in politics and local, national and world events. Often she would write names of the candidates for whom we should vote. To this day, at the age of 100, she still tries to read the newspapers, but in a very limited way.

I think the job she enjoyed the most was working at the little Diocesan Historical Museum which she was instrumental in starting. That job brought no pay, there was no schedule for her except the one she made. She could work at her leisure with no obligations. She would pack her lunch, leave for Mass at 8:00 A.M. and spend the day at a place and ministry very dear to her heart until she was picked up at 5:00 P.M.



Between 1978 and 1994, Sister Nellie had several major surgeries, but survived them all. The last one in 1994, at the age of 92 was a second hip replacement. When the Doctor informed her about possible surgery, advising her to think about it, she quickly replied, "If I have to live another 10 years I might as well have it done and be able to walk." To this day she makes a heroic effort to walk by using a walker which she began using at the age of 99.

In 100 years of life, some honors and recognitions seem to be in order. Nicely rolled away in her closet we have discovered several awards and certificates that she received but seems never to make a big issue of them. It is fitting to mention them here:

1985 and 1988...Certificates and two medallions for Outstanding Zeal and Christian Service in the church.  
1989...THE LAURENCE J. FITZSIMON AWARD in recognition of the extraordinary Pastoral Service and professional excellence as an archivist of the Catholic church in the State of Texas, from the Texas Catholic Historical Society.

1999...Certificate acknowledging her contribution to the LEGACY OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION throughout the 100 years of the history of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas.

1999, July 31,...Bishop Yanta obtained for her the APOSTOLIC BLESSING on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee, 60 years of Consecrated Life.



Bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen presents the papal medal Benemerenti to Sister Nellie Rooney for her historical work for the Diocese of Amarillo, Lubbock, March 3 1989, at the meeting of the Texas Historical Society.

As Dr. Felix D. Alvarez, Jr. congratulates Sister Nellie, Bishop Matthiesen holds up to view the new award being established by the Texas Catholic Historical Society award--given in the name of Bishop Laurence J. FitzSimon--for his dedicated efforts to preserve the Catholic history of Texas



To all the aforementioned, Sister Nellie would probably say, “that is not what is important in life” and rightly so. But along with special recognitions and awards what counts in a person’s life is the love of our Lord that went along with all that we do. I am sure that in her case she did all things for God and God’s people!

On July 31, 1999, Sister Nellie had the joy of celebrating her Diamond Jubilee. She was presented with the Apostolic Blessing from the Holy Father by Fr. Joe Bixenman at the request of Bishop Yanta. The Diamond Jubilee signifies sixty years of consecrated Life from first Profession of Vows. The Mass on that day celebrated by Bishop Emeritus L. T. Matthiesen marked the closing of our retreat at the Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center at which all of us renewed our vows. It had a special significance because Sister Lisa Taylor, the youngest member of the community, renewed her vows for three years. And so the youngest member and the oldest one were celebrating together. Celebrations, Awards, and plenty of work have been very much a part of Sister Nellie’s life.

Last but not least, sister Nellie made it to her 100th Birthday! What a celebration we were privileged to have on November 3, 2002! We began with the celebration of the Eucharist at St. Hyacinth’s Parish. The Church was filled to capacity for the 11:00 o’clock Mass. After the Mass we gathered in the Parish Hall for a festive dinner and reception.

How might one define the secret of a long life of this remarkable woman of so many accomplishments? Perhaps the definition can be found only in God. In our human condition perhaps one can truly say that what has given Sister Nellie strength to live life, enjoy it and work for the kingdom of God here on earth has been her faith in God, her contemplative prayerful spirit, and her fidelity to a mission she was called to fulfill. Every thing that she has done here on earth has been accomplished with joy and serenity. Her life as a Franciscan Sister has always been very important to her. Her yearly contemplative retreats, her daily contemplative prayer, daily Mass and all community activities have always been a priority in her life.

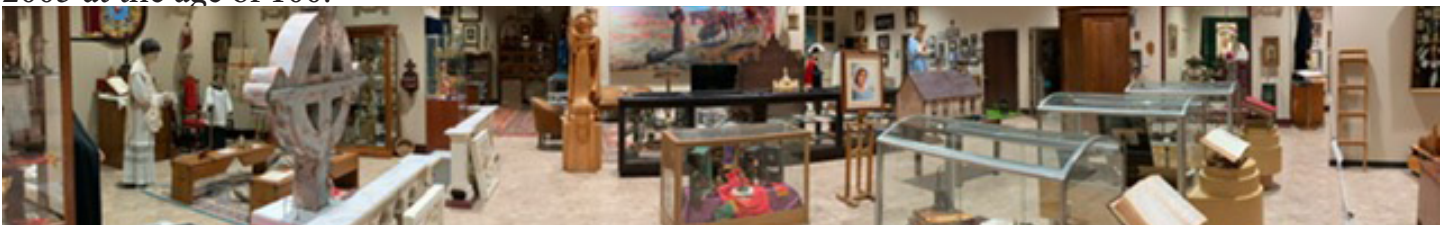
As I write these reflections of the life of my first Superior and Principal as I left the novitiate, my secretary and councilor in later years, my Franciscan sister, and at present myself as her care-giver, I wish to express my gratitude for all she has been, for all she has shared with our community, and as I journey with her to her eternal reward in heaven I pray that she will enjoy that beautiful mansion God has ready for us ever so much more than this present life.

One final note on a personal level: I certainly felt a call from God to volunteer to be her caregiver when I realized that at the age of 97 she was a very needy person. With God's grace I have tried to walk the journey of faith with her into eternal life by assisting with her physical needs and her final ministries of PRAYER, PRESENCE, AND LOVE--our most important ministries in life. As I watch her frail and fragile condition, I commend her to God asking Him that in His own good time He may take her to heaven. In the meantime, may we all draw strength from this person who has been blessed so abundantly and who has blessed us all with her presence and her zest for life. How Franciscan! "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us!" Sister Martha Delgado, OSF, March 15, 2003

## WORKING ON THE DREAM



More than fifty years ago, Franciscan Sister Nellie Rooney dreamed that one day the Catholic Church in the Texas Panhandle would have a free-standing museum to house and display memorabilia of our ancestors in faith. In 1975, she created the Catholic Historical Society to make the dream a reality. It was realized when the museum was dedicated December 9, 1985, at 2200 N. Spring adjacent to the entrance to the Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center. Sister Nellie died July 11, 2003 at the age of 100.



## Sister Nellie in her Favorite Place



Father Michael Pintacura and Sister Nellie in front of what was the Diocesan Museum but now has become the Museum Annex which is used for the overflow of items from the new museum



Sister Nellie is sitting Bishop Rudolph A. Gerken's chair, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Amarillo.



The Klink case. Lower section displays items from St. Francis. Upper section shows memorabilia from Father David Dunn and from the Diocese of Amarillo.



Sister Nellie shows articles from the Mass Kit of Father Charles Knaap used in early days in the area north of the Canadian River.



Sister Nellie stands in front of the bookcase filled with rare books, most of them belonging to Bishop FitzSimon. On top of the book cases are antique reliquaries.



## Father Matt Schafle

When he died he was 67, old age for some, retirement age for many.

But in a real sense, Msgr. Matt Schafle never grew old and he never retired. Fatal illness hit him on a Thursday morning (he drove to the hospital himself) and by the next morning, early, he was dead.

That day he had planned to finish a greenhouse he was building, and book he was reading about how to grow green things in a greenhouse.

In the rectory living room--one of the well lived-in ones around-- the Vitagro lights were still shining on the African violets. Across the room there was an unfinished rug he was weaving on the loom, one of several he had around.

Across the way there was still a message in the teletypewriter he used to communicate with other deaf people in Amarillo and across the country.

Ceramic chimes he had made were tinkling in the late April wind as doors opened and closed.

The tools he used in the locksmith trade he had taught himself were waiting to be picked up.

The industrial sewing machine on which he had taught himself upholstering was ready to be used.

An old typewriter -- he had taught himself how to repair them -- stood there ready to be pounded on.

Photography equipment was piled in a corner, waiting for the next trip through the west.

On his desk were penny coin folders. He had gotten interested in coin collecting. There was a magnifying glass there, part of the trade.

A terrarium he had planted in an Ozarka water bottle will live on to remember him. He had learned the art of glass cutting.

Candles stood, in warm colors around the room. He had taught himself how to work with wax.

In the shop outside were the machines he used to build things with. And alongside, the trailer house he pulled around as he traveled “to find out what they’re thinking” out there.

Msgr. Schafle was a prowler. He roamed the country, stopping in out-of-the-places, to chat with the people, to put his finger on side of the ordinary man.

And he prowled through books and magazines. They were his teachers, and he followed their instructions religiously, with outstanding success.

A year ago he was talking about learning skin diving, about going back to work in a mission church in the diocese among the Mexican-American people (he really believed no Anglo priest understood them quite so well as he).

He fretted about the loss of priests in the diocese, believing strongly that we should reopen a minor seminary. Or, failing that, at least to have summer camps for young men.

He thought the financial affairs of the diocese could best be handled by laymen, sticking doggedly to that thesis, though few were listening.

He fretted about the parishes, again holding that pastors should do the spiritual work and leave the rest to the parishioners: The bulletin mak-



Msgr. Matt Schafle

ing, the ministerial appointments, the financial affairs, the maintenance of the plant.

Wherever he went he practiced what he preached, with eminent success.

He was old-fashioned and new-fangled at the same time, an interesting combination of the best of the old and of the new.

He was not a saint, not yet, but if a Christian is one who believes in the future, who is filled with hope, who can walk with paralysis, and hear without an eardrum, he was Christian.

He met the challenge of deafness by joining an association for the deaf, learning to lip read (he worked hard at that and was just beginning to succeed) and to sign with his hands, and searching out other non-hearing people to minister to their spiritual needs.

He had suffered spinal meningitis, and had a kidney problem and high blood pressure, but you never heard about it from him. His talk was all about how to serve other people and

about the future.

He thought we should have a retirement home for priests at Panhandle, but said he himself could not live in the one now being built because it has wall to wall carpeting. Where would he put his tools?

He knew his life would end. He prepared his parish council for that day. “I can go at any time” he said.

It was only natural that he drove himself to the hospital, in a final act of self confidence and self reliance. There he had to be helped into a wheelchair, never to walk or to drive or to build again. Except in that new world that will have no limits and no end of time, where he shall surely roam to his hearts content for ages on ages.



**Thank you for  
your continued  
Generosity!**

# Night at the Museum

## Peoples Choice Awards



Sr. Phillip DLJC wins first place in mixed medium for her cross stitch of the Holy Family. Tyler Llewellyn wins first place in painting for his Blue Madonna. Each one received a blue ribbon and a \$1000 dollars.



Angelia Ellis scores second place in Mixed Medium and \$250.



Amy Wixom takes home a honorable mention in Paintings.



Kalee Mitchel earns a second in Paintings and \$500.



Mary Riggs of St. Martins stands next to her abstract painting.

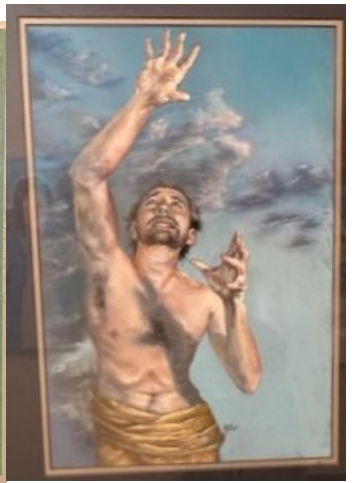




These lovely ladies in green are both CHS Board Members. Doris Smith and Natalie Barrett.



Erin Matthews takes home a third in paintings with "Love one another"



June- August 10, 2023  
Donations

Don Allen Jr.	50
Jody & Kay Bezner	350
Lanny Bezner	100
Marlene Casasanta	25
Don Dolle	30
May Hochstein	25
Gracie Lineman	25
Peggy Newcomb	25
Dee Ramirez	50
Howard Raef	50
Carmen Roper	100
Richard Rouillard	25
Mark Sarzynski	50
Roxann Schwertner	75
Tom Stauder	50
John Walsh	100
Leo and Audrey Wink	1000
Don White	75
Roy Urrutia	25
Total	2180

**MEMORIALS**

Msgr. Norbert Kuehler	
By Orville Blum	100
Bishop John Yanta	
By James C. Honea	75



These antique artifacts were donated to the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ and they most generously donated them to the museum. Thank you sisters!



These lovely items were donated to the museum by Madeline Rhyburg.



West, a gentleman cleaning out a repossessed house, called the museum and asked if we would like these items. Yes, please. They are pictured above and below.



Catholic History Society  
Board Members

Bishop Patrick Zurek - Honorary Chair

Susan Garner - President/Editor/  
Curator

Natalie Barrett - Vice-President

Kathryn Brown - Secretary

**Board Members**

- Natalie Barrett
- Jim Jordan
- Ruth Ann Keller
- Peggy Newcomb
- Rev. Tony Neusch
- Rev. Francisco Perez
- Rev. Scott Raef
- Roxann Schwertner
- Doris Smith



You may stop by daily ( Monday through Thursday) to view the museum. For a guided tour it is recommended that you make an appointment. The museum is open by appointment for church and school groups. This includes evenings and weekends.

Susan: (806)383-2243 Ext. 120 or even better: [sgarner@dioama.org](mailto:sgarner@dioama.org)

Did You Know?

This Newsletter and all the displays in the museum are made possible solely by your donations!