



American World War II
Heritage City

Valley City
North Dakota



(Above) The Sisters and their makeshift luggage await transportation to Vittel – front row (l-r): Sister Eloise, Sister Loretta, Sister Alexandra; back row (l-r): Sister Edward, Sister Annetta, Sister Theresa, Sister Corinne

(Left) “Camp Convent”- the ND sisters are on the left, halfway up the staircase.

(Below) Postcards home were allowed but heavily censored.



The Sisters of Maryvale and WWII

Valley City Nuns Became Prisoners of the German Army

From 1942 to 1944, seven young Sisters of Mary of the Presentation from North Dakota were prisoners of the German Army in France. They had left Valley City in 1939, where they were postulants at St. Catherine’s Church, to go to the motherhouse in Broons, France, for a required two-year religious education. Immersed in lessons, the Sisters remained mostly uninformed about the conflict brewing around them. Plans changed when France surrendered to Nazi Germany on June 25, 1940.

An attempt to return to America in April 1941 was thwarted when it was discovered that traveling from occupied territory to the free zone would not be allowed. They tried again in March 1942 to no avail. On September 24, 1942, a German officer advised Mother Marie Bastile that soldiers would be coming for the American Sisters in the morning.

The Sisters packed their few possessions and were loaded into a third-class coach hitched to an ammunition train; they had no lights, beds or water – only wooden benches. They were joined by twenty-two Sisters of the Holy Spirit and learned their destination was Vittel, a French resort city near the border of Germany turned into a dumping ground for foreign nationals trapped with the breakout of the war. For three

days the group traveled mostly at night while spending the day light hours in freight yards, confined to their coach.

The Vittel internment center was a group of hotels confiscated by the Nazis, encircled with fences of barbed wire and patrolled by guards. Upon arrival, the seven Sisters were assigned rooms on the fifth floor of the Continental Hotel along with other confined nuns. The hotel would come to be called “Camp Convent.”

Life settled into a routine for the next two years. Daily Mass was held in the hotel dining room, and retreats and classes were conducted. The Red Cross provided weekly boxes of canned food, coffee, cheese, and also cigarettes (which were used for barter). The German captors interfered very little other than an occasional inspection.

In 1944, the seven Sisters were part of a group of internees exchanged for German prisoners held in the US. Four days on a train to Portugal, where their ship was docked, the change of food and the rolling of the boat contributed to some difficult days at sea. They finally docked at Jersey City; those meeting them were surprised at their good health after two years in an internment camp.

Kriegsgefangenenlager
Camp des prisonniers

Datum: October 2, 1942
Date

We arrived at Vittel Sept 28. Are in good

Kriegsgefangenenlager
Camp des prisonniers

Datum: JAN. 28, 1942
Date

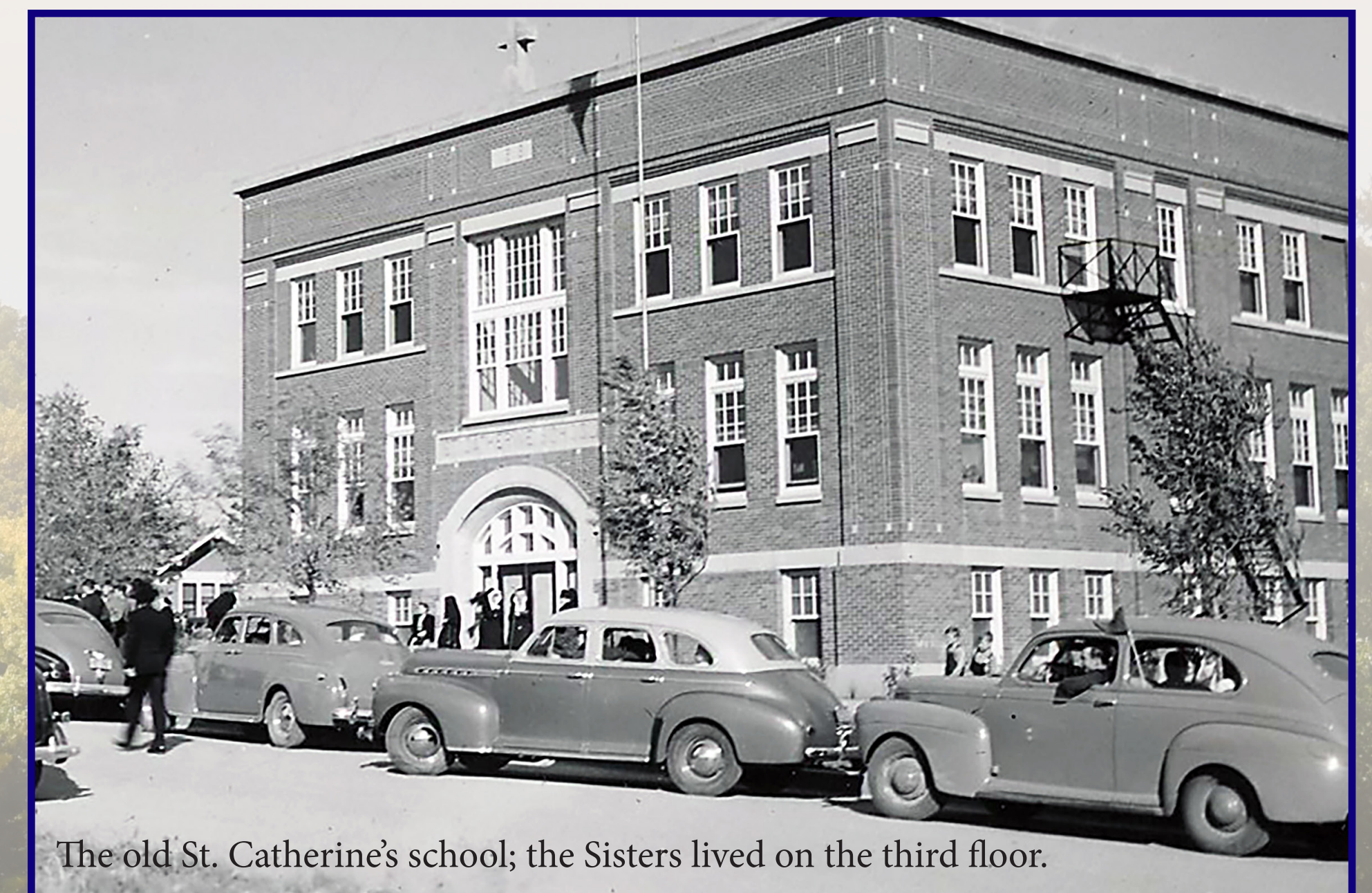
Dear Parents - All - your dear captive is in perfect health and has all she needs. The Am. Red Cross sends us packages every 10 days. 2 Feb. we renew our vows at the 9:00 Mass. No news from you yet, have you received any of my cards. Jesus prolongs our trial "fast" Let's be generous... He knows best! God bless you and keep ^{you} always. "Bientôt!" Love - Agnes. (Sister Mary)

The Sisters Build a New Home at Maryvale

The Sisters of Mary of the Presentation continued to grow and flourish in Europe and North America. In the 1950s they started five missions in Cameroon, Africa to provide education and healthcare to the poor. In the United States, the Sisters expanded their health care ministry, eventually growing into SMP Health, consisting of four hospitals and five nursing homes.

In 1965, the Sisters constructed Maryvale (shown below), the U.S. Regional House of Sisters of Mary of the Presentation, which is located near Valley City. Here the Sisters provide retirement care for their elderly and host spiritual retreats.

In 2022, the Sisters of Mary of the Presentation gifted Maryvale for continued use as a retreat center to a non-profit entity incorporated under the umbrella of the Diocese of Fargo, ND. With this gifting and the additional gift of an endowment, The Sisters of Mary of the Presentation have assured that Maryvale will continue to serve as a place of rest and spiritual reflection far into the future.



The old St. Catherine's school; the Sisters lived on the third floor.

Want more information?

Visit the Barnes County Museum at
315 Central Ave North in Historic Downtown
Valley City or scan the QR Code to connect
to the Barnes County Historical Society website.

