

## From an oral history by Sister Francis d'Assisi

I was a novice in the year of the 1917 explosion. I was professed and in charge of the summer school (at MSVC) in 1945. In 1951, I was dean of the college. It was December 6, 1917. There was some dispute about whether it was nine o'clock, five minutes of nine, or five minutes after, as if it mattered. My impression is that it was five minutes after nine, (certainly in Mount time it was five minutes after). Sister Evaristus was anxious to get Greek on our curriculum and a class had been formed for Grade 12 Greek. It meant doing grade 10, 11 and 12 in one year, which meant class every day at nine o'clock. We had just said the prayer and the class was beginning. St. Evaristus was teaching it herself. Sister Rose Celestine, Sister Stella Gertrude and I were in the class, and from the academy, Grade 12 was Kitty Harris (now Sister Catherine Claire). Monica Nearing (now Sister Monica) and one other girl.

We had just begun the class, when this loud noise came and a shaking of the building. Sister Evaristus looked down at the Sisters; at Sister Rose Celestine in particular, and indicated that it was something serious. Immediately after, came a second shock and the Statue of our Lady, up at the front of the room, swayed. We were thrown out of our seats. Sister Rose Celestine was thrown down on her knees and so was I, and Sister Stella Gertrude began to say the Act of Contrition out loud. When the shock was over, we stood and Kitty Harris, who was very fond of Sister Rose Celestine, ran to help her stand up. We left the room (the "A" classroom) and went out into the corridor. I met Sister Bernard outside. She was coming from her room, which was fairly close to this and she was holding up her two hands and they were bleeding. Mother Berchmans

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came out of her office (her bedroom was also in that suite), and she said to Sister Bernard, very businesslike, "I suppose it's a bomb, get everyone to go out of the building". But when they went downstairs to go out behind the house, they found Sister Assisium, who was rather 'broad', standing up against the door. "Nobody is going to go out - all stay in," she said. I went to the novitiate and at the door of her office was Sister Aloysia, tall and serene. She said to me, "Sister, go and find Sister DePazzi, she was standing here at the door talking to me when this happened and the transom fell on her, now she is hurt. There is blood on her collar". So I went off looking for Sister DePazzi. Then word came that everyone was to go out of the place - everyone - and up to St. Joseph's Hill. It was December and the weather was cold, so we got out shawls or some extra wraps and went up the hill and congregated around St. Joseph's statue. At that time it was a little higher than the present St. Joseph's statue. In building the college, they took off the top of that hill. It is the same statue, though it was restored after the building was finished.

Looking toward town, we saw flames and I remember being very much disturbed about Sister Teresa Maria and other Halifax Sisters and novices. They would all know more about what was happening. Father O'Reilly came out from town and came up the hill to us and told us what had happened. Then other people began coming, and we got word that people in Halifax had been told to go to the Commons; that babies were being born there and that all the North end had been flattened. What had happened, was the collision of two ships, one of which was a munitions ship. We stayed out on that sunny, beautiful winter day, until we received word, about 12:00, to go back to the House.

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Meanwhile, the Sisters in the kitchen had stayed or come back and there was hot soup for everyone. We went to dinner and afterwards, we were all assigned with volunteers to go do the things that needed to be done, whatever they might be. The first need was to sweep up glass; the second was to tack up on the windows (every window in the House) the tar paper which Sister Maria Joseph (who had gone to town, walking most of the way), had picked up and brought back, along with nails and hammer. I remember

meeting Sister Rose Catherine in a carpenter's apron with pockets in it, the pockets full of all sorts of things, a hammer in her hand, and tar paper already cut to go onto the windows. I met somebody in the pharmacy (St. Frances Rita, I think). Since she was alone there, I said, "Do you need any help?" She carried the trays for all the sick in the House. She said, "I'm so glad to have someone", and I stayed with her for the duration of that time.

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The next day, we continued the same work. On the third day, December 8th, we woke up to find the place in the throes of a blizzard, and the snow had begun to drift in through the open spaces in the tar paper. We had been told not to go near the novitiate, and to keep away from that whole section of the House. The tower section and Chapel were unsafe and the novitiate as well. We could go to the vestry but not the towers. The Science room, which had been used as a classroom up on the 4th floor, was converted to the novitiate.

Sister Miriam Concepta had been scheduled to make her vows and to be professed on the 8th of December and she did so in the main vestry while the novices occupied the small vestry and out into the corridor. Sister Miriam Concepta made her vows on the steps of the vestry, then she was sent immediately after, to breakfast, which was as simple as could be; then into St. Theresa's retreat, because all our institutions in town were being filled up with refugees. Sister went there right after breakfast and she stayed for 33 years.

Beds were in the corridors and everywhere. We worked on the windows which were a constant care. We swept glass and tried to keep them covered. I was sleeping over the laundry with the other novices. In all, we were quite comfortable, but of course, we didn't have a lot of space. We were already crowded and they got more and more beds in and put more novices over there. The mistress was with us and she did all she could by trying to keep up the novitiate program. So, we were quite happy. Fortunately another classroom became available. I remember the brave attempts to make Christmas joyful for us. We all got little gifts, little presents, stationery and that kind of thing, from the community.

Of the Mount building, not much had actually been destroyed, except the windows. The structure was badly shaken. By the opening of the new year, though, classes began right on schedule and we went on to write whatever examinations we were going to write. The Greek class began every morning at 9:00 and there were the other classes during the day. The academy girls had been sent home the day after the explosion. Now they came back again, at least, some returned after Christmas holidays. Some didn't return at all for the rest of the year.