

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ursuline Sisters

Experiences as an Ursuline Sister

O. H. 41

SISTER BERNADINE FICKERS

Interviewed

by

Donna M. DeBlasio

on

April 19, 1975

SISTER BERNADINE FICKERS

A member of the Ursuline Order of nuns, Sister Bernadine Fickers was born in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, on February 24, 1912. Her parents were Anthony and Maude Wagner Fickers. She first attended St. Francis School in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, until her family moved to Youngstown, where she finished her elementary school at Immaculate Conception. After attending Ursuline High School, she entered the Ursuline Order on February 2, 1926. Sister Bernadine received teacher certification from a normal school and continued her undergraduate education at Sisters' College in Cleveland. She also received a B.S. degree from St. John College in 1943 and an M. Ed. from Marquette University in 1948.

Sister Bernadine taught in the Youngstown Diocese elementary schools, including Immaculate Conception, St. Anne, St. Nicholas, and St. Charles. She also served as principal at each one of these schools at different times during her teaching career. Between 1963 and 1973 she taught at Walsh College in Canton, Ohio, and since 1973, she has been supervisor of a Human Development Day Care Center in Canton.

DONNA DEBLASIO
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INTERVIEWEE: SISTER BERNADINE FICKERS
INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio
SUBJECT: Experiences as an Ursuline Sister
DATE: April 19, 1975

D: This is an interview with Sister Bernadine Fickers for the Youngstown State University Project on the Ursuline Sisters, by Donna DeBlasio on April 19, 1975, at 3:30 p.m. at the Ursuline Motherhouse.

D Sister, could you tell us a little about your family and your educational background?

F: Well, I always think of myself as a kind of water baby. My mother always talked to me about my birthplace in Sunbury, Pennsylvania, beside the Susquehanna River, and then we lived in Pittsburgh, on Ohio River Boulevard, along the Ohio River. We talked about the rivers so much; we had a truly romantic notion about them. Edward, my only brother, four years younger, was born in Pittsburgh, too.

Dad began as a school teacher in Dayton, but decided teaching was not for him. He next became a railroad clerk with the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie in Pittsburgh. A promotion for him brought us to Youngstown in 1921. He was storehouse superintendent at the Struthers roundhouse from then until he retired in 1951. About that time the site became the first railroad yard to convert to the new electronic operation.

Something of family interest is the atmosphere in which we lived. Dad was Catholic, my mother was not. Later she did become a convert. Naturally we all respected the religions of our relatives and friends. The ecumenical movement we are going through now is not at all new to me. I lived my whole life in that respectful Christian attitude toward all religions.

Until the third grade, I attended St. Francis School in McKees Rocks. There I had the Sisters of Charity from Greensburg. They are the ones whose founder, Elizabeth Seton, will be canonized this summer to become the first North American-born saint.

Then we moved to Youngstown where I attended the Immaculate Conception School and Ursuline High School until I entered. I was with the Ursuline Sisters all of that time and that is probably how I came to think of the Ursuline Community. I was better acquainted with the Ursulines than with any other community and of course the real factor was that as long as I can remember, I wanted to teach. Since the Ursulines are a teaching Order, that was a very deciding factor for me. As far as a question as to what helped me to make that decision to enter the religious life, I think it was just because I lived in a very comfortable, Catholic atmosphere and we were very active in the Church. My father had always been choir director at some church or another and my mother was also very involved in Church work. I remember particularly how many hours Mother spent during the Depression when they used to have the meals for the children at Immaculate Conception School. I know they also prepared meals for those families who were in very bad circumstances. Our family didn't feel that at all, because Dad was a railroader and never missed a day's work all during the Depression.

D: What educational experiences did you have beyond high school?

F: After I entered the Ursuline Community on February 2, 1926, I was prepared to be a teacher. In those days, two years of training was required for certification for normal school, and then later I continued my undergraduate education at Sisters' College in Cleveland. Incidentally, Monsignor Robert Navin, whose ancestors were Youngstown pioneers, from St. Ann Parish, was president of the college for almost twenty years. Later, when I was to go into administration in 1932 I went to Marquette University in Milwaukee for a Masters in Education. There I also collected the required credits in psychology to be eligible for certification as a school psychologist in Wisconsin. Later I learned that I also fulfilled the Ohio requirements, so I hold one of the earliest certificates in Ohio-- a permanent license PK 29, in 1959. That was when Father, now Bishop Malone, was superintendent of Youngstown diocesan schools. He assigned me to psychological services in the Youngstown area.

In the summer of 1954, Sister Regina, my favorite teacher, and I were granted NCCJ scholarships in Human Relations at Western Reserve University. That was one of the most remarkable experiences I had in my entire life.

I had the opportunity to study with Father Jenks at Catholic University in Washington the summer of 1962. He was a pioneer in special education in New York City. Dr. Harmon's workshop in Personality at St. Louis University in 1958 was another treat. My focus is upon personality, mental health, and special education, so I took advantage of every opportunity to improve in these areas.

D: Could you describe the typical day when you first entered the order?

F: Well at that time it meant rising very early because the young sisters, the novices and juniors, lived on the site of Ursuline High School in an adjoining mansion, the Andrews Mansion. We had to rise about quarter to five and walk to the Motherhouse which was on Rayen Avenue across from the Cathedral. That was always our early morning jog before we had Mass there. We then walked to our school, taught our pupils, then returned to the Juniorate as we called it. We had a typical school day as every school teacher would. We of course, included in our day, religious observances, as we have personal religious duties.

D: How did this change throughout the years?

F: The pattern is somewhat the same. We still have the religious aspect of our lives that we adhere to and with all the changes in our mode of life and the adjustments that have been made now during the church renewal, it still is the all-important thing during our day. We begin our day with our religious customs and Mass and go out to our work, whatever it is. I think our work has become much more diversified, for instance, as my own. I started out as an elementary school teacher and went on into administration. I was in administration for fourteen years. From there, I was in high school for a few years, then I went to Walsh College as a full-time assistant professor. I had been teaching there part time for five years prior to that. By the way, I taught for two summers at Youngstown State University, too. After ten years as a full-time staff member at Walsh, I decided to see whether or not all the psychology I was teaching to some of my young students really worked.

When they advertised for a supervisor for a day care center, I took that position. I've been with that now for two years in February. As I said, I was a consultant there, I had some idea of what it was all about, but these two years certainly have convinced me that all our lectures aren't always the most practical in the world.

D: Where have you taught?

- F: I first taught in my home parish, Immaculate Conception on the East Side and later I returned there as principal. I was principal at St. Ann's for seven years. I closed that school when the highway came through. The Youngstown Board of Education warehouse is on the very site of the old St. Ann's Church. Sister Charles and I opened St. Nicholas School in Struthers in 1928. I was there for the opening of that school, then I returned in 1932 as principal. The thing about beginning at St. Nicholas is that we had only three classrooms; I had three grades in the one room. When I went back as principal, I had sixth, seventh and eighth grades with forty-eight children in that class. Eleven girls and thirty-seven boys was quite a challenge. I think that was an unusual situation. It was the only school we ever had where we had three grades like that, that I know of. About ten years later St. Nicholas School had 1200 students enrolled.
- D: As a student at Ursuline, what can you remember about the high school?
- F: Well, it was quite different from East, Rayen and South high schools in the city. I know many of my friends were attending East but Ursuline was an all-girls school at the time. It did not become co-ed until three or four years after I was out of it already. My brother Ed was in the first class of boys who went completely through Ursuline high school. The class of 1935 I think, that's why I remember only particulars geared completely to girls and girls' activities. There didn't seem to be anything beyond a girl's world and that's all there was to it.
- D: Why did you go to Ursuline?
- F: Well, I was already in the community of Ursulines, I entered from the eighth grade.
- D: Is there any type of uniform that you had to wear when you went to Ursuline like the girls do now?
- F: I actually don't recall. I know I had to wear my postulant uniform, so I wasn't even aware of clothes. I know they did not wear them right in the very beginning, the uniforms came later.
- D: What was a typical day like at Ursuline High School, or at the academy?
- F: The academy was essentially the same as the elementary school days except that we changed classes. They were fifty-minute periods with a little time to move from class to class and that was all. The only difference was having different teachers for different subjects.

- D: What kind of classes did they offer?
- F: It was not geared to anything except college preparation. Next they added business classes to prepare the girls for office work, but they did not at that time, have home economics. They had art and more of a typical liberal arts program. The leading input was religion, refinement and scholarship.
- D: Can you describe the surroundings, the building, the grounds?
- F: There is still a part of that building remaining, the part that faces on Bryson Street That is the building as I knew it. I can remember going to the dedication of that building, Bishop Joseph Schrembs dedicated it. Opposite that, but closer to Madison Avenue, is the old, old academy, which at one time was Andrew's barn and storage building. The gray building that still is used over there is where the gym and music classes were held. That's where they went for band practice. They did have glee club, dramatics and gym.
- D: Do you recall any outstanding teachers you had in high school?
- F: Well, strangely, the year I graduated from Immaculate Conception, my eighth grade teacher, Sister Regina, went to the high school as a science teacher. I had had her in fourth, fifth and eighth grade in grade school, so it was just like moving on with her practically. My seventh grade teacher had also been assigned to the high school by that time, so I felt very much at home there with them. Sister Charles was my seventh grade teacher and she became head of the art department there at the high school. Incidentally, she was the one with whom I opened St. Nicholas School in Struthers. She was in the high school for a few years and then she was sent out to be the principal to open a new school in Struthers. Sister Regina remained on for years and years and she was one of the top science teachers in the county.
- D: What are your duties now; what position are you in now?
- F: Now I am supervisor at the day care center in Canton. I work under the Human Development Council. We are not actually federally funded, but we are sort of under the blanket of the Human Development Council. We maintain a license for 118 children and we average about 80 children a day. We have in our advertisement, we say, infants from four weeks through thirteen and at the present time we have 44 infants and toddlers in that component and the youngest is two months old now. We have them from 6:00

in the morning until 8:30 at night, on a staggered program depending upon the needs of the working parents. We accept only children of working parents.

D: What's a typical day like?

F: A typical day means opening the site at 6:00 in the morning, being there to receive the children who are either brought in by their parents or they are picked up in a van. They are picked up at their homes, many of them. It means serving breakfast to them, having to shuttle students out to school by van about 8:00, then going on with the regular developmental program for the children who remain behind. Again, about 3:30, the school children return to us, and we give them their complete cooked meals and prepare them again for the van to return home. We do give nine-hour service to any child in the course of the day, which means that child receives all the care he would receive at home. He receives his meals and is cared for in any way that is necessary, and above all, he lives the curriculum for the full developmental program. It is not baby-sitting.

D: What unique things do you remember about any of the convents you have lived at?

F: I think the mansion on Logan Road was the most unique. At this time of the year it's one of the most beautiful places in the whole city, with acres of gorgeous jonquils, dogwood, magnolia trees, and beautiful foliage. That tremendous terrace in front of the mansion was a popular dance spot in Youngstown before we purchased the property. The building itself was of Tudor architecture, but we moaned about the Tudor plumbing. It had been built for maybe a half dozen people, and we were about fifty upstairs at the time. Everybody admired the magnificent, diamond-shaped windows. Practically the whole side of the building had diamond-shaped windows that we had to clean so regularly. Of course, when it came time for house cleaning, those of us who were brave enough, got on scaffolding and did our own ceilings and staircases. We often laughed, too, about the beautiful stairways that everyone admired, but we all knew that we enjoyed plenty of stairways, but who could sleep on a stairway! We were very crowded in our dormitories. I also remember the elevator shaft that was empty when we were there because the Wicks had removed the elevator. We had a little of the Old World down in the cellar where they had the wine cellar, and there were gratings on the door for ventilation and protection. I suppose these were servants' quarters. It was really a typical mansion, the kind you read about.

D: Could you describe special occasions you celebrated?

F: The liturgy, the religious aspect, was always the greatest part of any of our holidays, for instance, during Christmas. I can remember the fatigue and the thrill of a Christmas morning, because we had all of our own cleaning, preparation, decorating, and things of that kind to take care of. Those of us who were engaged in preparing for the activities of the parish Church always had so much preliminary work before Midnight Mass and so on, preparing choirs. I had choirs, children's choirs, for over thirty years. That was a task filled with sighs from practicing, but finally, we had inspiring church services. We had the dramatic Christmas Eve pageants and that meant much preparation. We always had the full liturgy at the Convent and then we would go out to Church and have the same thing with the parishioners, which was really a thrilling thing. I always think a lot of music, beautiful decorations, and throngs of children are involved in it. I can remember my first Easter as a nun being absolutely and utterly thrilling. I thought I was in heaven; some of the older nuns had magnificent voices. I can remember Sister Agnes, our Superior, had a rich soprano voice and Sister Irene was a lyric soprano. Sister Charles and Sister Cyril blended the alto. I couldn't believe they could harmonize that way. That was thrilling to me.

D: What years of your own religious life stand out and why?

F: That I could never answer. People ask that for various reasons and I can't think of any particular phase of my life that was outstanding. I think my life has been rather varied and my teaching career has touched all ages. I've taught all grades, I've been in administration, I've supervised elementary teachers and student teachers in elementary school and high school, taught psychology in college and now in the Day Care Center. As I look back on it, I can't think that I favor one any more than another. I often say that as I got into each one, I became absorbed in it and I never feel as though I've ever done anything else. I just feel so comfortable with it. I make adjustments rather easily and I don't look on any one phase as larger or better than another.

D: What sisters stand out in your memory and why?

F: Well, I still think that Sister Regina and Sister Charles were my models as teachers, and I think possibly it's because of my close association with them, having had them both in grade school, high school and having lived and worked with them for so many years. I was stationed with both of them, as I said through grade school, high

school and on the college level. I taught with both of them in those areas and we were just life-long friends. They both are deceased recently. I think those are two people I've admired the most.

D: How would you say the Depression affected the order at the time?

F: I think the Depression probably made us very aware of our commitment to poverty. I think that some of us thought we were keeping the vow of poverty by being very frugal in everything, and no one really related to us that we just didn't have any more to spend. Our funds were very, very limited. I know that there were parishes that for years could not keep up with the meagre salary we received then, so that we probably were initiated into a very frugal way of life that was genuine for people who were supposed to profess poverty. I don't think we ever separated the two. I know that at that time I never did. I just thought it was the regular vow of poverty; I was never totally aware of the Depression part of it.

D: What was memorable about the Mothers under whom you served?

F: You are referring to the Superior, the Mother Superior?

D: Yes.

F: Sister Agnes was the Superior at the time that I entered and she was a genuinely warm creature. She was just beautiful, that's all there was to it, energetic, she worked ceaselessly, she was a dynamo! I always think of Sister Holy Angels Laughlin who was a very scholarly, very conservative person and Sister Vincent Connelly was a very delicate person who served the community well. I think of Sister Paul Townley as the one with the most foresight. I suppose you'd say she had a little gambling blood in her because she was willing to take risks to get things accomplished. We are still profiting, you might say, by what she negotiated. She would have been perfect in this era now. She was a little more daring, innovative, determined and a bit more original in her approach to things, I think. Sister Blanche Klempay was the next Superior and she was a very energetic worker, quite an organizer. Sister Edna Marie Brindle was the next one, the one who negotiated and brought about this Motherhouse at Shields Road that we needed so desperately. If she were not here in the community, she would have been quite a career woman, another dynamic person, I think. She was remarkable in her flexibility and her realistic attitude toward the changes that were brought about. If we had had someone too rigid or unwielding in her approach to all this renewal, we probably would not have come through as well as we have. Sister Mary Conroy who is a younger, very scholarly, and perceptive person is carrying us through the remaining years of the renewal, probably.

D: Why do you think it's difficult to get modern women to enter a religious life?

F: I think it's the uncertainty of a large portion of our whole world at the present time, that there isn't the same kind of security offered to anyone. On the other hand, too, I think there isn't a strong family spirit in the world today, there isn't the same kind of encouragement or awe of religious life. I think the very fact that our numbers have dwindled is because young girls are never as well acquainted with nuns. Take for instance, grade school, you'll have a youngster who will go all through the eight grades and maybe meet two sisters as teachers along the way; the same in high school. There just isn't the same acquaintance, the same intimate acquaintance with nuns that there used to be. As I said, it's probably the total uncertainty of everything at the moment.

D: What changes have you noted from when you first came into the order to the present?

F: I suppose the matter of attitudes. In the early days everything was so certain, everything was prescribed. You just almost inhaled and exhaled according to the schedule and that was it. There was very little that was left to your own initiative. You went according to a very detailed pattern of life. I think it was good. I think we had to exercise a lot of inner discipline and this, to go back to your preceding question, there's a great lack of inner control or inner discipline in people today. I think that's one of the most necessary things there is, if you're trying to fulfill a vocation, not just a religious vocation, whatever you choose to go into. It's up to the individual and unless that individual has inner strength from the self control, the self discipline, not too much can be accomplished. You can go along with society and let each one do his own thing, but in reality, regardless of what career you choose, there is a certain amount of drudgery that goes into a successful life and if a person is not geared to that and does not have any inner discipline, he can't accomplish that and be successful.

D: What do you think is the future direction of the Ursuline order?

F: Well I think we have been rather fortunate in our leadership. People have not been greatly inhibited, and they've been allowed to experiment. There's been great flexibility and there's been a great awareness that people's personal needs and personal desires must be met at times. The Superiors have been very aware and have permitted people to experiment. I think the individuals themselves are

finding that they need the stability, they need the security that community life offers. I don't foresee that we will encounter any great difficulty. One thing that is unfortunate is that we do not have more people interested in religious vocations at the moment, but I think that will come. I think we are going through a period when we just have to wait for things to gel again. As I said, there's much uncertainty in the whole world, not just the religious community, and I think we are feeling this also.

D: Do you have any other comments you would like to make?

F: A final comment is that I am looking forward to what I believe will be a remarkable endeavor for me. In November I shall begin Parish Ministry at St. Stephen Parish in Youngstown. In that position, I'll give whatever services are expedient. I shall be on the Parish Council, resource person for the religion teachers, give convert instructions, work in Youth Ministry, marriage counseling and visit the aged and ill of the parish.

At the end of that time, I shall have experienced the joys and trials of as many facets of my profession as is possible in a lifetime.

END OF INTERVIEW