

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ursuline Nuns Project

The Ursuline Nuns

O.H. 60

Sister Marie Hughes

Interviewed

by

Donna DeBlasio

on

April 10, 1975

SISTER MARIE HUGHES

Sister Marie Hughes was born November 27, 1915 in Youngstown, Ohio . Her parents, James and Anna Philbin Hughes, came to Youngstown from Ireland in the early 1900's.

She was a graduate of Ursuline High School and continued her education at Youngstown State University, where in 1950 she received a Masters Degree in Theology. She received a B.S.E. Degree in 1957 from St. Mary College, Notre Dame, Indiana. She furthered her studies in education at Catholic University of America during the summers of 1958, 1959, and 1960.

Previously, Sister Marie was employed as a teacher at various parochial schools in Youngstown, Girard, Struthers, and Boardman. Later, in her career, she held the position of principal at St. Nicholas of Struthers and at Holy Family of Poland. She was also employed as a Diocesan Supervisor in the elementary schools of the Youngstown Diocese from 1957 until 1962. She was Directress of Education for the Ursuline Sisters beginning in 1960 until 1972.

Sister Marie is a member of the International Reading Association and the National Catholic Education Association. She presently resides at 4250 Shields Road in Canfield, Ohio.

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INTERVIEWEE: Sister Marie Hughes
INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio
SUBJECT: The Ursuline Nuns
DATE: April 10, 1975

D: This is an interview with Sister Marie Hughes by Donna DeBlasio for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Ursuline Nuns. It is April 10, 1975 at 1:30 p.m. at Holy Family School, Poland, Ohio.

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

H: I was born of Irish immigrants. Both of my parents came over from Ireland when they were very young. I think they came over in the early 1900's, perhaps, between 1900 and 1910. I would say that they're hard working people. My father was a machinist at Republic Steel and my mother did housework, as did many other people that came over on the first boat.

As for my educational background, I was graduated from St. Patrick's Elementary School about 1930, and from Ursuline High School in 1934. I was in the first co-education class at Ursuline, if you want to call it that. I graduated from Youngstown State University in about 1950. I received an M.A. in Theology from St. Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana about 1957. After that I attended Catholic University for two summers to be certified for supervision and administration in the elementary schools. I also attended Fordham University in New York City where I took courses in educational television. I attended Marquette University for one summer.

D: What influenced you to enter the religious life?

H: I ran around with a group of girls at Ursuline that were oriented that way. We had a lot of fun and we were active in our class activities. I belonged to a club consisting of five girls that were thinking about entering the convent. All of us, more or less, followed the leadership of the present Sister Jerome Corcoran. She was a strong leader and I remember her, at one time, telling us that if Catholic high schools couldn't produce religious persons then who would? That stuck with me and I liked the Ursuline Sisters I had at Ursuline High School.

In addition to that, I came from a really good Catholic family. They were strongly religious people. I'd say the Irish faith is a pretty strong faith and that had an influence on me, then. I always felt that I had a call, a personal call to be a sister, and I thought because I had that personal call to be a sister, I had a responsibility to answer that call.

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

H: When I first entered the Order in 1935, our days were scheduled for us. I entered the Ursuline Convent on Wick avenue and there were six of us. We were called postulants for our first six months training. A typical day, at that time, ran something like this: we got up about five o'clock in the morning, dressed, and then walked down to Rayen avenue for Mass. We went to Mass, had our breakfast there, and we started out for school between 7:30 and 8:00. We arrived at school and I think, at that time, our school started between 8:30 or 9:00 and ended at 3:30. The boys and girls, then went home for lunch. There was no such thing as coming to school on a bus or going home on a bus. Most of the travel was by foot, so our days were longer. After school we came home to our convent about 4:30. We had prayers from 5:00 until 6:00, we ate at 6:00, did the dishes, had recreation together, and night prayers. After we said night prayers we had study and went to bed about 10:00 p.m.

D: How would you say this has changed throughout the years?

H: Since Vatican II there has been a big change from legalism to responsible freedom. Now we schedule our own day. Interestingly enough, sometimes the days end up to be about the same. However, I think

we get up a little bit later and go to bed a little later. Right now, at my convent, I get up about 6:15 a.m. We have prayers about 6:45 a.m. Formerly, sisters always began the day with Mass in the morning. Now we schedule Mass at various times during the day. For example, our Mass now is at 4:45 p.m. We do not have the extra activities that we had as sisters long ago. We used to take care of the church, the altar boys, and the choir. Anything and everything that was connected with the church, the sisters took care of. Those duties, now, are being taken care of by lay people. Now, we administer parochial schools, teach in these school, coordinate religious education programs in the parishes, and perform duties that are directly related to these jobs.

So, I'd say in summary, that now we make our own decisions. We do many of the same things that we did before, but we do them at different times, times of our own choice. The schedule today is made by us or we might say that the schedule today, is made by the nuns in one particular convent, I live at St. Nicholas Convent. We met at the beginning of the year to make our own schedule, that was unheard of years ago.

D: What have your duties been since you've been an Ursuline Sister?

H: I began teaching years ago at St. Nicholas School in Struthers. I remember my first year of teaching. I had grades four, five, and six in one room. There were between fifty and sixty students. Now, people might gasp or raise their eyebrows at this, but it was true in most schools, public as well as parochial. The classes were very large. I taught at St. Charles in Boardman, seventh at St. Nicholas in Struthers, and seventh grade at St. Rose in Girard. I substituted for awhile at Ursuline High School and I taught religion at Cardinal Mooney; but for a big part of my life, twelve years, I was Directress of Education for the Ursuline Sisters. In this capacity, I was responsible for the teacher training program for the young Ursuline Sisters and for the in-service training of all Ursuline Sisters. Previous to my being Directress of Education for the Ursuline Sisters, I was a Youngstown Diocesan Elementary School Supervisor.

D: What did your duties entail as a diocesan supervisor?

H: As diocesan supervisor, my duties dealt with many things, but one of the things that I remember best was working with new lay teachers. For example, I interviewed

people who wanted to be teachers and I recommended people for parishes to subsidize their education, at Youngstown State University. I taught method courses in education to people who were going to be lay teachers in the Catholic schools.

As I remember, one of the most enjoyable things that I ever did was teaching adults. It wasn't necessary to motivate adults. They knew what they wanted to learn and they were willing to do more than the required work. As a result, they stimulated me to be a better teacher. This was a very rewarding experience.

D: Could you describe a typical day, perhaps here at Holy Family?

H: Well, right now we arrive at about 7:45. The teachers are required to be here at 7:45 also. At 8:00 they are required to be in their classrooms, but between 7:45 and 8:00 we socialize more or less and talk about things that have gone on and perhaps plan a little bit about the future. School starts at 8:15 and at 8:15 I begin to make my rounds through the school, just to see what's going on and to see that the property is in good condition. At 8:45 I come to my office, at which time, I take care of organizational or administrative duties. These duties vary from day to day, of course, but they include such duties as composing teacher bulletins, parent bulletins, placing business phone calls, planning new programs, etc. Since the Catholic Schools have been receiving money from House Bills, I have spent a great deal of my time assessing our needs so that the money can be spent wisely and well.

Another block of time is spent on planning and executing parent conferences. Now that the parents have the right to see their children's records, I have held weekly meetings during which parents have held their child's records in their hands and I have explained the contents to them. This has been very successful. We began with parents of eighth graders and, maybe, the next day I'll have parents of third graders in.

Still another block of time is spent on keeping my finger on the work of the staff personnel. This year, our staff consists of fourteen classroom teachers. There is a fulltime music teacher, physical education teacher, guidance counselor, librarian, and reading improvement teacher. Our staff also includes a part timespeech therapist, school psychologist, and

learning disability teacher. I feel that it is my obligation to know what each is doing.

D: What do you remember about the Ursuline Academy?

H: I was fortunate enough to spend a few weeks substituting there when I was a postulant. Sister Norbert, a fifth and sixth grade teacher was ill and I took her classes for her, I remember, I thought it was a high class school. The children were very lovely, very easy to deal with, and eager to learn. I think they may have been from well-to-do families from the north-side of town.

D: At Ursuline High School, could you describe the building that was used when you were there as a student?

H: When I was there as a student, the building was half the size that it is now. If you look at it you'll see there is a difference in the architecture and in the building material. The original building was the one with the white brick. The classrooms were large and very high. The desks were on runners and it was a typical school for the 1930's and 1940's. The halls were wide, and I remember, we did have a very fine gymnasium that was converted to a theatre, at times, by putting up folding chairs. I remember the physical education program as being a very good one. Our physical education teacher was Miss Ella Deibel.

D: What types of classes did they offer, at that time, in the academic or business areas?

H: They offered the academic and the business courses. It was everything that a student, today, might select. Perhaps, we didn't have as many different subjects from which to select, but I remember taking Ancient History, which today might be called World Civilization. I remember American History, I took Latin I and Latin II; four years of English, French I, French II, Algebra I, Algebra II, Trigonometry, Solid Geometry, and Plane Geometry, plus Physics. I remember Religion I, II, III, and IV. I think the classes were not really very large, maybe, thirty to forty students were in each class.

We had a fine music department headed by Sister Veronica, who was an excellent musician. It seemed, to me, that Ursuline was a very fine school. Perhaps the boys and girls who went there were academically inclined and were college preparatory. There was typing because I did take typing and shorthand, but other than that I'm not sure

what other business courses were offered.

D: What teachers did you have there that stand out in your memories?

H: Sister Perpetua, who is still with us, stands out as one of the kindest and most beautiful personalities I've ever met. Mother Blanche was a very efficient, managerial-type person and she was very inspiring. Sister Kathleen taught commercial subjects and is now working downtown. I remember she taught my typing class and I liked her very much.

Mother Bernard was principal and I remember Sister Margaret, the history teacher. Sister Rosemary, the French teacher, had outstanding patience. I also remember Sister Charles, who was an Ancient History teacher. She was a very, very fine teacher. I recall that she was outstanding in fairness and she was loved and admired by many people. She taught recently at Cardinal Mooney until she died.

D: Was there any special dress code?

H: Oh yes, we had blue uniforms and the length had to be a certain number of inches from the floor. That's quite different from today, but that was a long time ago. I went to Ursuline High School between 1930 and 1934.

D: How did you feel about the boys being allowed to come to Ursuline?

H: I think we were all very happy about it. They brought new spirit and new life to the place. You know when you have a football team and a basketball team, it's possible to have spirit that you wouldn't have otherwise. It was a different type of spirit. We liked it a lot; we really did.

D: What type of extracurricular activities did you have?

H: I remember belonging to the French Club. We read French books, I think we put on a French play, but it was such a long time ago. We went to all the football and basketball games. I think we had the other types of clubs also, but right now I don't think I can name them.

D: Was there a feeling of superiority, do you think, about going to Ursuline?

H: I really don't know. I went to Ursuline because I won a scholarship there. The rest of our family all went to South High School. It's odd that my brother and I, both, became religious and the others never thought of it.

It's been really something to remember. I think the religion courses and the atmosphere that permeated Ursuline was a very, very religious one. It was possible to be caught up in it and to be a better person because you were there. I feel that I'm a better person because I was there, because of the people that I met there, and because of the people that I associated with since I left Ursuline. Right now, my best friends are the friends that I graduated with at Ursuline High School. Five of us from one class entered the Ursuline Convent.

D: Do you remember what your feelings were on graduation day?

H: We graduated at the old Keith Albee Theatre downtown. It is no longer there but I remember we liked it a lot. We were proud of the fact that we could graduate from there. I think I was sad at departure, very sad, because at the time, it was during the depression. We really didn't have much to look forward to. Jobs were very scarce and money was scarce at that time, too. We were lucky if we could go through the town and spend five cents for a Coke. Often, we'd walk through town just window shopping. If there were any boys and girls who had money to spend or had more money than we had, we didn't know it because we were all in the same boat. Yes, I'd say that we were very sad at departure, but I'd also say that I have kept in touch with many of the graduates and I am still in touch with them today.

D: Going back to the Ursuline sisters, could you describe how special occasions were celebrated, such as Christmas and Easter?

H: I think the one that stands out most in my mind is the celebration of Easter. Easter was always a big feast in the convent, probably because it climaxed the forty days of Lent- a time of preparation for it. Lent was a time to do penance- a time when all Catholics were obliged to fast and say special prayers. Holy Week, the week immediately preceding Easter, was an even more penitential time. Sisters kept silence from the evening meal on Wednesday night until Saturday at noon. During this time, we said a special Holy Week Office and performed many acts of self-denial. By Saturday noon, we were ready to burst forth into Easter joy, peace, and gladness. This was a good experience for us. Today, the laws of fasting and abstinence are no longer imposed upon us. We choose our own practices for Lent, but we often find ourselves going back to these older practices and profiting much from them.

D: What unique things do you remember about other convents that you've lived in?

H: Well, I lived at the Wick Mansion. It was formerly the McAndrew's Mansion on Bryson Street. It was torn down about two years ago, but I remember living there when I first entered. Previous to our taking it over, the third floor was a ballroom and there were three or four very large rooms up there. In order to make use of it, the nuns put up curtains and made it into a dormitory. One of our young sisters was showing this dormitory to a girl who was thinking about entering, and she said, "This is just a temporary arrangement." It was funny because it really wasn't temporary: it remained like that throughout twenty, thirty, or forty years. We laugh about it now, because Sister Mary John, the one who was doing the describing, was trying to make an excuse for the dormitory. She thought she was making the other sister feel good by telling her it was just a temporary arrangement.

We had many, many good times in this convent. We always celebrated holidays with parties. As postulants, we always gave plays, made up entertainment, and did many creative things for the other sisters. We looked forward to sisters coming home from summer school, because they had a lot to tell us about their studies during the summer.

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

H: I remember serving under Mother Blanche Klempay. She was a very efficient person and a very productive person. She was the type of manager that we needed and at the time she was Superior. She was Superior for fifteen years. I also served under Sister Edna Marie Brindle and Sister Mary Conroy. Both were women of unusual leadership qualities.

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

H: I think the part that stands out more than anything else was the time that I was at the diocesan office. That part stands out because I worked very, very hard. I received a wealth of experience there. I met a lot of people who broadened my outlook on life. I learned a lot in the five years that I was there. The things that I learned I've used since then, especially in my administrative duties.

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

H: I have some very fine friends that stand out in my memory. I've spent a lot of time with the sisters that entered with me. They were Sister Mary Agnes Convery, Sister Jerome Corcoran, Sister Mary Catherine Doran, and Sister Anne Lynch. There was another Sister, Sister

Mary Conoboy, but she has died since. These sisters were very, very lovely sisters. They were nice to be with all the time. We enjoyed many good times together and when one of us was depressed or sad, we could always count on the encouragement, the friendship, and the advice of the others in our group. I think that I can truthfully say that we have always been friends. It's been their companionship that has made me very happy.

D: What changes have you noticed when you first entered the order until now?

H: There have been numerous changes. First of all, changes in the Catholic Church at large have affected us through changes in the liturgy, changes in organizational structures, changes in attitudes, changes in emphasis and changes in methodologies. There has been much more emphasis on the importance of the person, the uniqueness of the person, and the contributions of the individual person.

Within the convent a rigid legalism has given way to a responsible freedom. With this new freedom, many sisters have chosen to leave us and we find our numbers decreased. Those who have stayed have been challenged to develop a maturity that will accept a changing future. Personally, I feel that convents must change or die out.

People outside the convent might say the the biggest change has been in the area of dress. We no longer wear a long habit and a large headdress. We wear a black and white dress, resembling a secular dress, and a headdress with a black veil. We wear this habit when we are performing our apostolate, when we attend liturgies, and when we represent our Community at formal gatherings.

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

H: I think the thrust of the Ursulines will always be education of some type. That education may not always be in the Catholic school, but it may be, in the area of adult education, CCD, or pastoral ministry. It could even be pastoral work in the hospitals. However, I hope that we always hold on to the key positions in the Catholic elementary schools, because I, for one, think that they are a very important instrument in spreading the Gospel message and in witnessing Gospel values.

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

H: I think it's difficult to get women to enter religious life today, because the type of a girl who would dedicate her life to this commitment has to be a very mature type of a girl. Sisters, today are living in situations that are harder to handle. It's harder to make decisions and live by them. We have to search for ways to make our life appealing to the mature girl, because I feel sure God is still calling for persons to lead dedicated lives in religious orders.

D: Do you have any other comments about the Ursuline Nuns?

H: I would like to say that I'm very proud to be an Ursuline Sister. I've given everything that I have to the Ursuline Sisters and I've never regretted giving it. I hope and believe that the Ursuline Order will continue to hold leadership roles in the administration of the Catholic Church.

END OF INTERVIEW