

The Abbey in Iowa

Toward the end of July, 1848, Father Bernard McCaffrey and Brother Anthony Keating set out from Mount Melleray to seek a new home in America. They inspected a site in Pennsylvania but it proved to be unsatisfactory and the mission failed. During the following January two more emissaries were sent to find a desirable location for a monastery in the United States. They were as unsuccessful as their predecessors.

When it seemed that further efforts to establish a branch of the Mount Melleray community in the New World would be futile an unforeseen incident turned the whole trend of events. Late in 1848 it happened that Bishop Loras of Dubuque, who was travelling in Europe, paid a visit to the Abbey of Mount Melleray and, learning of the unsuccessful attempt to found a Trappist monastery in America, offered the Abbot a tract of land in Dubuque County. Dom Bruno decided to accept the offer if the situation appeared suitable and wrote at once to Father Clement Smythe and Brother Ambrose Byrne, his representatives in America, to view the land. Father Clement sent Brother Ambrose to examine the tract, who, after a careful inspection, decided that the place met

the requirements. Remote from the noise and distractions of the world yet it was sufficiently near a city for all necessary intercourse; it was located in an attractive setting of hills and timbered valleys and had an abundant supply of water.

The generous offer of Bishop Loras was therefore accepted and Abbot Bruno set out for America accompanied by Father James O'Gorman and Brothers Timothy, Joseph, Barnaby, and Macarius. They arrived by way of Dubuque, and on the sixteenth of July, 1849, Abbot Bruno of Mount Melleray, Ireland, laid the foundation of New Melleray, Iowa. Father James O'Gorman was appointed Superior and Abbot Bruno returned to Ireland, leaving the small band of pioneer monks housed in a small frame building.

Work began immediately upon the construction of a monastery to accommodate the expected emigrants from the mother house. On the tenth of September, 1849, sixteen more members of Mount Melleray left for the new home in America. They sailed from Liverpool and disembarked at New Orleans. Thence they proceeded up the Mississippi by steamboat to Dubuque. Six of the group died of cholera on the river trip and were buried at different spots along the bank.

While part of the community engaged in breaking the prairie for the next year's crop, the others devoted the time not occupied by their religious duties in building the frame abbey which still

stands in a good state of preservation. Work on this building was pursued diligently during the fall and it was consecrated and occupied on Christmas day of 1849. Neither the sad fate of the brothers who had died on the trip nor the hardships of the journey prevented a third detachment of twenty-three from coming to New Melle-ray in the following spring. Thus in the course of a year the new monastery had relieved the congestion in the mother house and had begun a vigorous existence with nearly forty members in the new State of Iowa.

During the next ten years careful attention was given to improving the estate, which was enlarged by the purchase of an additional tract of five hundred acres. The prairies were broken and prepared for the seed that yielded bountiful harvests. The land was fenced and stock was purchased. Agricultural development was slow, however, for there was no revenue except from the sale of surplus products. Paying for the land, buying farm implements and stock, and building farm improvements exhausted the yearly income.

After the first decade, however, the community began to prosper. The land was fenced and under cultivation, over a hundred head of stock of the better breeds grazed in the extensive pastures, and the treasury showed a surplus. The brothers began to plan improvements. The year 1861 saw the erection of the mammoth barn — a two-story

frame building fifty feet wide and three hundred feet long built on a limestone foundation. It was capable of holding three hundred head of stock and a thousand tons of hay. Twice since it was built disastrous fires have destroyed the superstructure. Only last spring the great barn was burned to the ground leaving the strong foundation still unharmed upon which the structure will be rebuilt.

The sale of cattle during the Civil War was so profitable that the monks decided to use the money in fulfilling the long cherished wish to build a monastery which would be a worthy reflection of the zeal and piety of the Order. The plans provided for the erection of four large stone buildings in Gothic style around a rectangular court one hundred feet wide and two hundred feet long. Each wing was to be approximately thirty feet wide and thirty feet high with a gable roof of red and gray slate, cupolas or belfries, ornamental buttresses, vaulted ceilings, and pointed arches for windows and doors. Ground was broken on March 8, 1868, and the building was occupied in 1875. Only two of the four wings have been finished, and the rough ends of limestone blocks still await the hoped-for day when a sufficient increase in new members will make it necessary to complete the monastery.

The north wing contains the dormitory, sacristy, and three small chapels above; the guest rooms,

tailor shop, library, wardrobe, and storeroom below. The east wing houses the church above, while on the first floor are the chapel — dedicated to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin — and the chapter room. An extension to the north contains the study rooms for the choir brethren, the water-tower, and the bath rooms. The refectory, scullery, and kitchen are located in the basement, while the cloisters extend around the inside wall of the two wings.

The improvements outside the enclosure include a saw mill, a blacksmith shop, a carpenter shop, cement feeding-pens, a corn crib, cow barns, and wind mills. The farm buildings are well constructed, painted, and equipped with modern appliances. In agriculture and stock raising the brothers are still leaders in the neighborhood.

A red brick parish church, situated about three hundred yards from the monastery on the road leading to the main highway, affords a place of worship for the neighboring farmers most of whom are of the Catholic faith. One of the monks, Father Placid, serves as the parish priest.

Amid these surroundings the Cistercian monks or Trappists perform their daily round of labor, prayer, and meditation. For seventy years the ancient austerities of Citeaux and La Trappe, modified somewhat by the Holy See and the Constitution of 1902, have been practiced in Iowa.

When Abbot Alberic of New Melleray died in

1917 after a rule of twenty years Father Bruno Ryan was appointed Superior. The Abbot wears no insignia of his rank except a plain ring on his finger and a simple cross of wood suspended from a violet, silken cord about his neck. He has no better food, wears no richer dress, nor has he any softer bed than other members of the Order. He presides in the chapter room, assigns employments, and imposes penances. He sets an example of piety; while on his business judgment and that of his Procurator rests largely the temporal prosperity of the abbey. He is assisted in his many duties by a Prior and a Sub-Prior.