

St. Raphael's Seminary

It was the summer of 1839 and the little mining town of Dubuque was bustling with raucous vigor. Steamboats were arriving and departing every few days. New residences and other buildings were going up, some of logs, others of frame, a few of stone or brick. Lead mining was flourishing. The taverns were full of travelers, the barrooms were crowded with laborers, mostly miners. Yet, in a year or two, John B. Newhall, the author of *Sketches of Iowa*, was to find this town possessing distinctive claims to culture.

Among the buildings being erected, was a large one of brick and native rock, near the little Dubuque stone cathedral. Its architect and building superintendent was the illustrious Dominican missionary, Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli. Its sponsor was Mathias Loras, the newly-arrived Catholic Bishop of Iowa. The building, while serving as the episcopal residence, was to house the diocesan seminary. What made the town of Dubuque a favorable center for a Catholic institution of higher learning was the fact that almost half of the three thousand Catholics in Iowa Territory lived in or near this mining settlement and

the prospects for more inhabitants were exceedingly bright.

Bishop Loras was an experienced college builder: in France he had erected the buildings at the Meximieux and L'Argentière seminaries and had served successively as president of both institutions, and in 1830 at Mobile, Alabama, he had built his third educational establishment, Spring Hill College, and been its first president. To his mother he had then written: "I see from my room, even from my desk, a joyous company of Negroes, naked to the waist, toiling bravely in the broiling heat of the summer sun, at a work whose importance they are far from realizing. What satisfaction it is to see the third seminary rise up before my eyes!" And now in 1839 Bishop Loras saw in Dubuque his fourth college rising before his eyes.

In January, 1838, the legislature of Wisconsin Territory, then in session at Burlington, established with a great flourish a number of academies in Iowa. The first of these to be authorized, on January 15th, was a seminary at Dubuque. Within four days, seven more seminaries and a manual labor college were created by legislative enactment! But most of them failed to materialize, and the few that were started soon perished.

The institution at Dubuque "for instruction of young persons of both sexes in science and litera-

ture" was organized in September, 1838, under the direction of Alonzo P. Phelps. This "seminary" was probably rather elementary and apparently short-lived.

Among the names of the seven incorporators of the Dubuque Seminary were those of two prominent Catholics of Dubuque, Patrick Quigley and Peter A. Lorimier, both of them friends and parishioners of Father Mazzuchelli. They were anxious to establish some local facilities for higher education, preferably under Catholic auspices. The opportunity came in the following spring with the arrival of Bishop Loras.

Thus ran the course of events: on April 19, 1839, Bishop Loras stepped from a steamboat into his tiny see city of Dubuque, "college minded", if ever a pioneer bishop was. His versatile vicar-general, Father Mazzuchelli, one of the most capable architects in the West, was fully as college minded as his bishop, and was prepared for any building venture. Equally college minded were the leading Catholics of Dubuque: Patrick Quigley and Peter Lorimier of the incorporators of the Dubuque Seminary, and Timothy Fanning, who was later added to the list of the original promoters of the seminary.

Of these, Patrick Quigley was the most enthusiastic. He had been a member of the Wisconsin

Territorial legislature which had chosen Father Mazzuchelli as its chaplain in 1836 and had helped to pass the enactments creating the Wisconsin University of Belmont (1836) and the Wisconsin University of Green Bay (1837), both of which never eventualized. He had seen the plans for higher institutions of learning in Iowa, which he had so zealously aided in 1838, sink into failure. A seminary at Dubuque was his hope. His four sons, Daniel O'Connell, Andrew Jackson, Michael, and John, after finishing Father Mazzuchelli's grammar school, should enter some advanced institution of learning. If public aid could not be procured, private assistance would have to be forthcoming. He, himself, donated the ground upon which the joint seminary and bishop's residence was to be erected.

With this generous gift of land from Patrick Quigley, with helpful donations of money from other sources, with native stone and brick found in the Dubuque quarries and kilns, and with the architectural talent of Father Mazzuchelli to serve him, Bishop Loras launched his first institution of higher learning in the vast Territory of Iowa. The work of construction went on during the late spring and summer of 1839. Quigley and his friends saw their dream of the long-hoped-for seminary of Dubuque evolve into the handsome

brick and stone structure of St. Raphael's Seminary, under the capable hands of the artistic Italian missionary. Funds came in from French, Austrian, and German mission societies, to buttress the rising walls of this diocesan college. On Saturdays and Sundays Father Mazzuchelli served his parish of Galena in Illinois across the Mississippi, but on Mondays was back in Dubuque again in his official capacity of superintendent of construction. By August 15, 1839, the building had advanced far enough to receive its roof. The combined two-story seminary and bishop's home measured forty by fifty feet. Most of the building was devoted to school purposes — class rooms and dormitory — and the basement was fitted up as a dining room and kitchen.

On the following ninth of September, Father Mazzuchelli wrote to Pope Gregory XVI, with whom he had been acquainted in Italy, that the establishment was about completed. "We have accomplished many things in the six months since the arrival of the Bishop," penned the young Dominican on the banks of the Mississippi to the grave, old Pontiff on the banks of the Tiber. "The Bishop has built here the Seminary, recommending to me, both as its architect and as superintendent of works, the greatest economy. We have lived in the meantime in a very wretched and extremely

small log house, having two rooms which served as study, as bed-room, as drawing room and as kitchen."

Father Mazzuchelli, at this time a fluent English conversationalist and orator, served only occasionally as a teacher and lecturer in St. Raphael's Seminary, from 1839 to 1843, and was useful principally to help the foreign college students, studying for the American priesthood, master the language of their adopted country. Of the other members of the original faculty it may be said that it is doubtful if in the Mississippi Valley in 1839 two other men could have been found to surpass them in teaching ability, educational leadership, and experience.

Mathias Loras was the founder and principal professor of the Dubuque college. Distinguished son of an old and aristocratic family of Lyons, France, he became the pronounced champion of American institutions in his sermons and writings. A cousin had preceded him to America to fight for freedom in a regiment under the Marquis de Lafayette during the Revolutionary War; an older brother had been a Bonapartist Republican and, while acting as a division commander's aide-de-camp in Spain, had lost his life there in the Peninsular War. On the other hand, his father and sixteen other members of the Loras family had

been guillotined because of their loyalty to the Faith and the *ancien régime*.

The Abbé Joseph Cretin, the third member of the teaching trio, was the son of a well-to-do bourgeois family of France; his uncle had been executed during the Revolution, and his mother had been imprisoned for a short while during that hectic period for concealing *émigré* priests in her home. Graduating with marked distinction from famed St. Sulpice at Paris, he later won his "Bachelier" in letters from the University of France. He taught for a short time at the Meximieux college and then for eleven years served as the teaching president of the "Pensionnat", the junior college for young men in Ferney — Ferney, that had been the home of Voltaire. The Abbé Cretin was president of St. Raphael's Seminary from 1839 to 1850, when he became the first Bishop of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Fortunate was the Dubuque college to have these distinguished educators as her founders and the nucleus of her faculty. And happy was she in her other instructors. J. J. E. Norman, Philadelphia born, acted both as a professor and as the organist in the Dubuque cathedral for several years. But the most dynamic of all the lay educators in the diocesan college in the forties was Dennis A. Mahony, who became an historic figure in

Iowa of the Civil War days. Educator, lawyer, legislator, he became notorious as editor of Iowa newspapers, and especially of the Dubuque *Herald* which he made an uncompromising foe of Lincoln. His bitter denunciation of the government and disloyal activities caused his imprisonment in 1862.

The student body of St. Raphael's, however, was of a strange quality entirely different from the calibre of the faculty. From his fruitful experience as president of Spring Hill College, Bishop Loras knew that in this new college on the Iowa frontier he could not expect an exclusive theological seminary as in France, nor a strictly maintained college as in the older and more settled sections of the country. He expected — and he was not disappointed — that his students would be of all ages, of all grades of education, a melange of theologians, seminarians, collegians, and high school students.

These students were, of course, not numerous in the earlier years. Very few of the advanced students were Americans; the greater number of these (three in 1839) came from abroad — from France, Germany, Ireland, and Luxembourg — to the Dubuque diocese to complete their theological courses before being ordained to the priesthood. The Americans formed the majority of the non-

clerical students, of the younger lads, and of those in the lower classes. In fact, two of these were aboriginal Americans — two Sioux youths from near Fort Snelling, whom Dr. Loras thought he might some day educate for the priesthood and use as missionaries among their savage kinfolk. They were also to teach the Sioux language to the seminarians who were preparing for the Indian missions. Their stay in the Dubuque school was not long enough even to leave their names behind, but it was sufficiently long to excite the interest of the competing Protestant missionary societies in the Minnesota country who closely studied the short-lived experiment. Of students of mixed Indian and white blood there were several at various times. Alexander Faribault and other sons of Jean Baptiste and Oliver Faribault — the founders of the Minnesota city that bears their name — were students at St. Raphael's Seminary. So was Napoleon Brisbois, the son of Joseph Brisbois of Prairie du Chien; and in 1847 his board and tuition at the diocesan school were paid out of Bishop Loras's own funds. Louis Latourelle was another with aboriginal American blood in his veins, for his mother was Charlotte Masello Latourelle, a half-breed Mdewakanton Sioux and prominent member of the Cathedral parish.

Among the youths from Dubuque were Hugh Treanor, Thomas and John Murphy, Dennis Langton, and the Quigley boys. Also educated at St. Raphael's was Daniel O'Regan, the first native-born Iowan to enter the Catholic priesthood.

That the discipline at the college among this wide variety of students must have been very lax at least occasionally is apparent from the explanation by the president, the Abbé Cretin, in 1844, to Bishop Loras, of the reason for the withdrawal of the Faribault sons: they had too much liberty at the Dubuque college; M. Faribault was sending his boys to the Jesuit college at St. Louis (now St. Louis University) where they would be under stricter surveillance.

A student who came to Dubuque from France in 1846, and who in later life recorded a few reminiscences of his college days, was Louis De Cailly. He wrote of St. Raphael's Seminary in the forties: "As to the daily food, which Dr. Loras took with his seminarians in the basement of the house, it was not princely, but of the poorest kind, and we anticipated at one time a great treat by the arrival on the first boat in spring of a barrel of molasses to spread on our daily bread. But alas! the bung having got out in the yard, when the Abbé Cretin perceived it, he requested us to gather from the sand the precious sweetness that was saturat-

ing the yard, and which, being filtered through an old flannel shirt, gave us for a whole winter some kind of consolation, such as it was."

The same correspondent, a grand-nephew of the Bishop, also related that Margaret, the college housekeeper, "had been expressly imported from Alsace, as being old and ugly, so as not to disturb the pious thoughts of the students. She literally filled the bill." De Cailly was inclined to believe that tradition, "because he heard the good bishop at High Mass, in presence of his students, tell the young ladies of the city never to go to the upper story of his house, because the students lived there. Oh, happy simplicity of the Father!"

Bishop Loras wanted to enlarge the seminary. In hope of making the school self-supporting, at least in part, he purchased a large tract of land a few miles south of Dubuque. Two buildings to serve as chapel and dormitory were erected in 1849. To Mount St. Bernard's College, as the new school on Table Mound was called, were transferred the students of St. Raphael's Seminary. By December, 1850, Bishop Loras reported that seventeen students were attending, and work on the main building was begun in 1851. His fifth college was rising before Bishop Loras's eyes!

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