

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. — *St. Columbus, Queen Isabella, and Leo XIII.*

Annals from the Archives

Sister Mildred Mary McDevitt [Sr. Marie Margarita]

Sister Mildred Mary McDevitt
1897-1978
SND New England Archives
2014.17



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Written by

Nancy Barthelemy, Archivist

nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org

sndbostonipswich.wordpress.com

boiparchives.omeka.net

—To many of her Emmanuel students she was simply “*ma soeur*.” To others, she was Sister Marie Margarita, one of the founders of Emmanuel College in 1919. What an incredible responsibility it must have been for a twenty-two year old to be charged with the creation of the first French Department at Emmanuel, especially because she had just graduated herself from Trinity College a few months previous. Less than two months after receiving her Bachelor’s degree, she took her first vows as a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur in Cincinnati, Ohio on August 13, 1919. A week later she was sent to Emmanuel to begin the work to found the first French Department at the college. But during her long career, Sr. Marie Margarita never seemed to hesitate in taking on greater and greater challenges.

Sister Mildred Mary McDevitt was born on Feb. 21, 1897 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the third of four children of William H. and Sarah (Simpson) McDevitt. Her father owned a clothing store in Pawtucket and Mildred attended the local public schools along with her two older brothers and younger sister. It seems she was first introduced to the Sisters of Notre Dame in 1915 when she was accepted into Trinity College to major in English and French. In 1917, she entered the Sisters of Notre Dame, taking the name Sister Marie Margarita. During the next two years of her novitiate, she continued her classes at Trinity and received her Bachelor’s Degree in English and French in 1919. Her abilities must have been extraordinary for the congregation to send her to Emmanuel just a week after taking her first vows.

Though the task of teaching and creating the new department surely was exhausting, Sr. Marie Margarita soon began work for her Master’s Degree at Emmanuel in English, Spanish and French, which she completed in 1926. Her Master’s Thesis was titled “*Etude de L’Esprit Catholique Chez Les Meilleurs Representants du Roman Catholique de la France Contemporaine, 1914-1925.*” Soon after, she began work on her Doctorate in French, with minors in English and Latin Literature. She received her Ph.D. from Boston College in 1934.

From 1919 until 1957, Sr. Marie Margarita served as the chair of the French Department at Emmanuel. During the mid-1950s, she decided that Emmanuel needed a Russian Department and finding no one qualified to take on that work, began taking Russian herself at Yale, Georgetown University, Harvard and Middlebury College. She lived with a Russian family for a year to immerse herself in the language. In 1959, she received a second Master’s Degree in Russian from Middlebury College. With those qualifications, she founded the Russian Department at Emmanuel in 1960 and served as its chair until 1969. In 1954, she wrote the lyrics for the hymn “*Greater Love*,” was a visiting fellow at Harvard in 1955 and also at Yale University in 1956, teaching Slavic Languages. During those many decades, Sr. Marie Margarita wrote poetry in both French and English. In 1969, her book of poetry, *Pocket Poems* was published by Vantage Press.

In 1969, when she learned that many black colleges in the south had need for qualified faculty to develop certain degree

programs, she immediately applied. From 1969 to 1971, she taught French literature at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. During the next four years, she taught in the Modern Language Department at Talledaga College in Alabama.

In February of 1974, while at Talledaga, she attended a conference on the Equal Right Amendment [ERA] to call for its ratification. She joined with other women in the Talledaga area to canvas neighborhoods in Alabama in an effort to gain support for the amendment. While in the midst of that work, she was asked by the executive secretary of the Women's Advisory Council to run for the state legislature in Alabama. At first, she was hesitant, but after some thought, she finally agreed. Her goal was not only the passage of the ERA, but also to push for the improved education of students and better training for teachers in the state of Alabama. In the end, she lost the election, but she told others that the campaign had been a rewarding experience for her.

During the summer of 1974, she returned to Emmanuel for a vacation. While there, she wrote about her experiences in politics to share with an acquaintance in Alabama. Unfortunately, during that time of rest from teaching and her campaign for the Alabama legislature, she suffered a severe heart attack. Though she expected to die and prepared herself for it, she ultimately made an amazing recovery and returned to Alabama for another year of teaching. In 1975, she retired to the Lake, but found herself too restless to stay more than a short time there. Instead, she joined the retirement community in Lynn for the next three years.

Sr. Mildred Mary McDevitt died on Aug. 28, 1978 at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston.

Below, Sr. Mildred dancing at wedding



Below, Sr. Mildred and friend arriving in Mexico



Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ SND Entrance Records, 1877-2017. SND New England Archives, 2017.
- ◆ Sister Mildred Mary [Marie Margarita] McDevitt Papers. SND New England Archives, 2014.17.