

Barat College

By now almost everyone knows that Barat College has closed its doors. The institution, once for women only, had just celebrated its centennial last year. In 2001 Barat merged with DePaul University in a last, unsuccessful attempt for survival. This historically significant school, originally founded by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, had counted among its many famous graduates former Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne and actress Susan St. James. Its 1904 main building and 1924 chapel are listed in the National Register Historic District.

Mother Madeleine Sophie Barat was born in the 18th century before the French Revolution. She joined the Order of the Sacred Heart nuns, whose aim was to create Catholic girls' private schools that stressed both spiritual and intellectual growth. Through Mother Madeleine Sophie never left Europe, she was instrumental in establishing an academy for young women in Chicago in 1858. In 1904 the school relocated to Lake Forest.

Entries from a handwritten journal told of the faithfulness to the mission, the strength and devotion, and the religious faith of the Sacred Heart nuns who arrived in Lake Forest on July 27, 1903. Those brave women arrived to what must have appeared to them a barely inhabited wilderness. The building that was to shelter them was without heat. Birds had easy access, as did passing tramps and itinerant workmen. It is rumored that Mother Superior kept a gun handy to discourage the uninvited "guests," whether four or two-footed. Conditions were crowded and inconvenient. When the furniture arrived for the convent rooms, the 36 nuns unloaded it themselves. The workmen hired to finish the convent quarters seldom arrived at the promised time. So, the nuns sanded the floors by hand and then oiled, waxed, and polished them.

When it appeared that the beds, mattresses, and stands for the student dormitories might not arrive before the students, the nuns decided that they themselves would give up their own beds. Fortunately, as one journal entry records, "...the furniture arrived on time. Then followed a never-to-be-forgotten scene. The wagons were unloaded in the lower passage. A line of religious, headed by Reverend Mother, was formed from the door of the dormitory, and the stands were passed hand-to-hand up two flights of stairs. The mattresses and beds were taken to the elevator shaft, hoisted by the men, received by the nuns and disposed in the different dormitories."

In the coldest weather, water froze in pitchers and ink bottles, and pipes burst. Yet the nuns managed to worship, teach, and live by the ideals set by Mother Madeleine Sophie Barat. Reportedly, they found that their keen appetites were developed by the invigorating air, the exercise of manual labor, and dedication to their vocation.

The memory of Barat and the vision of Mother Madeleine Sophie and her dedicated fellow nuns will be fondly remembered and cherished by all those women (and later, men) who passed through the historic halls of the college.