



Sr. Agnes Clare Thiel

Birth: October 2, 1909

Death: October 17, 2006

Father: Frank King

Mother: Edna King

Sr. Agnes Clare Thiel was born near Ludington, MI, on the “clay banks of Lake Michigan.” The site where the family’s log cabin once stood is still referred to as “King’s Canyon.” Sister Agnes’s two older brothers and one younger sister were all deceased by the time of this interview, November 6, 1999.

When Sister Agnes was 5 years old, the King family moved to Saginaw, MI. She was enrolled at St. Joseph School, across the street from their home, and completed all 12 grades there. In high school, Dominican Sisters were her teachers. She graduated in 1927.

On September 9, 1927, Sister Agnes entered the novitiate at Marywood in Grand Rapids, MI. She had made arrangements with the priest and nuns of St. Joseph to continue her education there. She traveled alone on the train from Saginaw to Grand Rapids. When she arrived at Marywood, she saw a convent for the first time.

Between 1927 and 1929, Sr. Agnes earned her teaching certification by teaching in Bay City, MI. Then, she earned a bachelor’s degree and a specialist degree in Administration by going to Central Michigan University in the summers.

Sr. Agnes taught high school for 17 years and then was a high school administrator for another 23 years. In 1949 she was appointed superintendent of high school and director of schools in the Saginaw Diocese.

In 1973, Sr. Agnes retired from secondary education and moved back to Grand Rapids with the intention of working with the older sisters at Marywood. But Dr. Norbert Hruby, president of Aquinas College at the time, had other ideas for her. He asked her to learn about adult education,

so Sr. Agnes went to Drake University to do as she was asked. When she came back, she set up and became the first director of Aquinas College Emeritus Program. This program was aimed at the adult learner and is now called Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI).

In 1979 Sr. Agnes became involved with the steering committee that started the Area Agency on Aging in West Michigan. When the board was formed, she became the first president and served in that position for 17 years. For about 15 years she was also involved with Senior Power Day and Michigan Senior Advocate in Lansing, MI. Eventually, she became the chair of Senior Power Day.

In 1981 and again in 1995, Sr. Agnes attended the White House Conference on Aging in Washington, DC. For the first conference she was elected by seniors in Michigan. Many seniors knew her work not only in Lansing and Grand Rapids, but also in Kent County as she had started the Senior Citizens Senate there. In 1995 she was appointed by Senator Carl Levin to attend the White House conference.

In addition to these activities, Sr. Agnes also started the Grand Rapids Area Activities Coordinators Association, which primarily helps nursing homes' activity directors to network and learn about their jobs. She helped to start the Council on Aging in Grand Rapids. She also influenced the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce to start Senior Leadership GR, an off shoot of its Leadership GR Program. The purpose of this new program was to give those 50 years or older an opportunity to share or learn leadership skills through volunteerism. Finally, she was appointed by the governor to the Michigan Council on Aging.

Beginning in 1987, Sr. Agnes began "harvesting the years," as she referred to the many awards that she received. First, she was chosen for the Distinguished American Older Volunteer award by the National Association for the Aging. In 1988, she was selected as the Outstanding Alumna by Aquinas College. In 1990, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan presented her with the first Senior Services Award (a tribute in memory of the late Senator Claude Pepper). Finally, in 1991, she received two awards: one, Citizens Insurance Co. chose her as the Concerned Citizen of the Year; two, the Saginaw Diocese elected her into its Nouvel Hall of Fame.

Other Resources

<http://www.grdominicans.org/sister/agnes-clare-thiel/>

<https://www.aquinas.edu/about-aq/heritage-traditions/more-information/oral-history>