

MARQUETTE'S FIRST WOMEN STUDENTS

A Short Road to Co-education

By Thomas Jablonsky

From its founding in 1881 until the spring 1907, Marquette College was a small liberal arts school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Although the school's annual catalogue had dropped most of its Ratio-based terminology by 1907 (for example, the first year was the freshman year rather than the humanities year; the classical and religious reading lists for each academic year were no longer presented in detail), Marquette's only degree program, a bachelor of arts, remained quite traditional.

In May 1907, Father Alexander Burrowes, president of the college, negotiated an "affiliation" with the Milwaukee Medical College (MMC), a proprietary corporation with degree programs in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy (and a diploma program in nursing). At least six women were enrolled in MMC's medical department at the time of the merger. After its affiliation with Marquette, the medical college continued to openly recruit both women and men. The merger precipitated the name change to Marquette University.

In the spring 1908, a year after affiliation with MMC, Marquette purchased two proprietary law schools. As a result of these transactions, one additional female student joined the university's student body. The female students at MMC attended classes in a set of buildings (which included a hospital) three blocks from Marquette's lone college building, Johnston Hall. The law student, however, took her classes in Johnston beginning in 1908, although she arrived late in the afternoon since the law school offered only an evening program. In June 1909, four women from the medical department became the first female graduates of Marquette University: three earned M.D. degrees and one a Bachelor of Science degree. A year later, the law student received her degree from MU.

Also in June 1909, Father James McCabe, the new president, planned to open the first summer session in the history of Catholic higher education. It was intended for young men whose work schedules delayed their academic progress. Late in that spring, however, McCabe received a

report that predicted a dire future for Catholic elementary and secondary education in the Badger State. The religious sisters who made up the bulk of the teaching staff at those schools could not earn college degrees in Wisconsin because there wasn't a single Catholic women's college in the state.

McCabe acted with remarkable resolve. On his own authority, he opened summer classes to both nuns and laywomen. They then joined their male classmates in Johnston Hall, which during summers was only used by a handful of Jesuits residing on an upper floor. The provincial of the Missouri Province, Father Rudolph Meyer (a well-known traditionalist and a former president at Marquette) ordered Father McCabe to stop the registration immediately. Instead, McCabe appealed to his superiors in Rome. When no answer was received by the following summer, another co-educational summer program was offered. The same was true for 1911. In early 1912, Rome approved the enrollment of "ladies and even nuns" in Marquette's summer school. The first nun graduated in 1913. By that time, McCabe was long gone, having been replaced in 1911.

Before he left, however, McCabe had approved the introduction of two additional programs for the fall 1910: business administration and journalism. Both units were open to women and men, both required their students to take classes in the College of Arts and Sciences (the curricular incarnation of the Ratio at MU), and both used classroom space in Johnston Hall. Co-education was now in place. In 1926, frustrated by failed attempts to establish a Catholic women's college affiliated with Marquette, Father Albert Fox officially admitted women to the College of Arts and Sciences. Henceforth, the institutional challenge became gender equity, not co-education. ■

Thomas J. Jablonsky, a history professor, has just written a new history of Marquette University.