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Final Period

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Only Memories and Monuments Remain

By Gerry Boyle '78

When I first left my job as a long-time editor and columnist for the *Morning Sentinel* to edit *Colby* magazine I was eager to find stories as far-flung as Colby alumni themselves. But the first story caught my eye before I'd even hit the campus. It was right here in Waterville and had been for decades.

This was on one of my first commutes to Colby. The route leads up Mt. Merici Avenue toward Millet Alumni House, past the lawns where the plaid-clad students at Mt. Merici School sometimes play. Beyond the school is a brick dormitory-like building where, I had a vague idea, nuns live. Beyond that building is a cross with Jesus on it, nearly life size. Arrayed in front of the cross like supplicants are rows of gravestones.

That much I could glean from the car; to learn more I went to the door of the Ursuline Sisters Care Center and rang the bell. Sister Mae Doucette answered and invited me in.

We went to the library at the back of the building and looked out the window at the cemetery and the nearby stone grotto with its statue of the Blessed Mother. If I had come earlier I would have seen a statue of St. Bernadette as well. "For the winter, we put her away for a little rest," Sister Mae said.

She said the remains of some members of the order were buried under St. Francis DeSales Church in Waterville. Then the Mt. Merici cemetery was established, and the remains were removed there. Sister Mae said there were others who knew more about the history of the cemetery, that Sister Martha Helen, who works on the archives



The cemetery at Ursuline Sisters Care Center.

for the order, was away. But the delegate superior, Sister Patricia Couture, was home. Sister Patricia soon had Sister Martha on the phone and had located a short history of the Ursuline Sisters, published in *The Church World*.

The article said the order came to Waterville in 1888 from Trois Rivieres, Quebec, the move approved by an African-American bishop who had been born a slave and would be the new order's first superior. The sisters taught Franco-American children and young women who worked in the city's mills. At the Ursuline order's peak, in the 1950s, there were more than 150 members teaching in schools in Maine and Massachusetts. "God has been good to us in many, many ways," Sister Mae said.

But the nuns' numbers dwindled with the passing years. In 1965 there were about 180,000 nuns in the United States. Now there are about 83,000. Their median age is 68.

Nuns like Sister Mae lived through the heyday of this way of life. The mid-20th century saw a boom in the numbers of women

becoming nuns in both teaching and contemplative orders, said Debra Campbell, associate professor of religious studies at Colby and a specialist in American Catholicism. Campbell, educated herself at Convent of Sacred Heart in Buffalo, N.Y., said becoming a nun offered American women security, refuge, independence and a way to answer a spiritual calling. "It was a powerful feeling," Campbell said.

But then the boom turned to bust. As the country went through tumultuous changes—Vietnam, the Sexual Revolution, Vatican II for Catholics—what had been fervent interest in Catholic vocations for women turned cold. There were new models for Catholic women to emulate as doors opened in everything from the Peace Corps to social work. "It was this huge watershed," Campbell said. "Everything changed. . . . By the 1970s the convents were decimated."

In recent months, at least one order has started recruiting. Its poster shows a hand holding a cell phone. The poster reads: "Do you have call waiting?"

Thought about answering it?"

There was no ad campaign when Sister Mae entered the convent. She grew up in Sanford, the youngest of five children. She said she has few memories of her mother, who died when Sister Mae was very young. Her father worked in a mill. "He vowed he would do the impossible to keep us together," she said.

He did that, and in 1940 Sister Mae entered the convent. "When you entered the front door, that was something," she said softly. "Oh, yes. All those moments. It was built on faith and prayer and the help of friends and families."

Sister Mae went on to a career in teaching, mostly in elementary schools. Now she is retired. The wood-framed Mt. Merici Academy she remembers has been razed. Its site is marked by a statue of Jesus. The lives of many of the nuns are marked nearby, silent testimony to a way of life that soon will pass. In places like Mt. Merici, the monuments to nuns who have passed outnumber the nuns who are living.

On a knoll overlooking the woods of the Colby campus is the resting place of Sister Mary Gonzaga, Sister Marie Beupre, Sister Pauline Jansen, Sister Cecille Ouellette and others. The oldest grave is that of the Waterville order's founder, Sister Marie Emma Buisson, whose brief inscription is in French: "decedee 5 Fevrier, 1893."

The stones look like churchgoers, lined up in prayer. But from another angle, the markers for the graves of all these teachers look like desks, arranged in orderly rows in a still and tranquil classroom.

BRIAN SPEER