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## Introduction: Saint John's Through the Years

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## ***Saint John's Through the Years: Photographs from the Archives***

edited by Michael Crouser, SJU '85, with an introduction by CSB/SJU Archivist Peggy Roske, CSB '77

### **Introduction:**

Stability. Stewardship. Reverence for God and God's creation. These values, brought by the Benedictines from Bavaria, Germany, are part of the 1500-year heritage of the writer of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, and are the essence of this book.

In 1856 the Benedictines arrived in central Minnesota even before it was a state, establishing a priory on the Mississippi riverbank courtesy of a pair of German bachelors, the Rothkopfs, who donated their claim in exchange for the monks' care for them in their old age. One hundred and fifty years later, the monks' arrival and the history that followed were being celebrated as the Saint John's "sesquicentennial" in 2006-2007. It was my first year as fulltime CSB/SJU archivist, after the former SJU archivist, Brother David Klingeman, resigned to manage the Abbey's new Guesthouse while continuing as Abbey Archivist. It was through the efforts of Brother David, previous archivist and history professor Father Vincent Tegeder, Brother Linus Ascheman, Mary Ann Haws and others that many of the photos in this book were initially selected, digitized, researched, dated (when possible) and captioned for the sesquicentennial.

Having viewed those framed photos displayed all over campus, I found it incredibly gratifying to see Saint John's history come alive, visually. It is an experience that Michael Crouser and I hope is shared by everyone who pages through this book.

All of us are likewise the beneficiaries of the foresight of Peter Engel, OSB, abbot from 1894-1921, whose surname, attached to the first and then the second science hall on the campus, is honored for his role in promoting scientific inquiry at Saint John's. He advanced the study of what would today be labelled "STEM" – science, technology, engineering and math – and is credited with establishing, among other things, Saint John's first astronomical observatory, weather station, telegraph, and photographic lab. Because of this photo studio, especially when it moved to the skylight-equipped third floor of Wimmer Hall, we have rich photographic evidence of what life was like at Saint John's. Many of the photos are posed, in the studio, preserving images of students, clerics, athletic teams and local families. Others were taken outdoors, giving us glimpses at life and the landscapes of bygone times. The Abbey Archives has a rich collection of glass plate negatives of these and other images that preserve Saint John's history.

No photograph exists of that Saint Cloud Priory, nor of the two-story log building and the frame house in "Indianbush" that comprised Saint John's for two years before the 1866 move a mile or so south to the shores of Lake Sagatagan. In the first of many examples of Benedictine "recycling" of buildings, the frame house was taken apart and reassembled near the lake, providing space for a chapel and carpentry shop while they completed the Old Stone House for housing and classrooms. Neither building survived into the 1900s, but photographic evidence of them did: both can be seen in a few of the oldest photos,

including the cover photo, taken in 1883, when the south, central and east sections of the Quad had already been constructed, as had the steepled first Abbey Church, better known now as The Great Hall.

Other campus features and vistas no longer extant – and now almost beyond living memory – can also be seen in the photos selected for this book, including the handball courts, the barn, the first Stella Maris Chapel, the first Abbey Church’s interior, the golf tee boxes, the bowling lanes in Benet Hall’s basement, and the unobstructed views of the impressive Quad across the prairie – “High Above the Sagatagan” (as celebrated in song by the Men’s Chorus at every SJU commencement).

Relatively few people are pictured, but the students and workers who are may be ancestors of those who hold this book in their hands – any archivist can attest that a photo becomes infinitely more beneficial when its “metadata” is known; all too often, the names of those photographed are not recorded for posterity or get lost over time.

Other photos enlighten us about things that do still exist: a Benet Hall dorm room, Frank House, Brother Clement Frischauf’s painting in the apse of the old church, Alcuin Library (pre-addition) by night, the Breuer church and bell banner, and the Chapel across Lake Sagatagan.

Michael seemed especially drawn to vistas showing the Quadrangle from every side and in various stages of completion: framed by tree branches, seen far across the Sagatagan, or looming stark and tall above the bushes and lake. Though the building of course still stands and, with the exception of the spires, is relatively unchanged, the mature trees all over Saint John’s obstruct most of these views from us today. (For any readers interested in learning more, details about every building can be found on the Archives website. The Quad’s historical description there is lengthy, as was its seventeen--year construction, occurring in phases between 1869 and 1886.)

I have always been especially fascinated by the aerial photos, several of which are in the book, and have put a sampling on the SJU Archives website. Using the chronological list of buildings, also on the website, one can date photos based on what they do or do not show. What’s not (yet) in an aerial photo – or no longer there – can be just as informative as what is. Does it show the Old Gym directly in front of the science hall, nearer to Benet? (It was moved 150 feet west in 1937.) Where is Joe Hall? Are the church spires under construction? – or even removed? Is there a baseball diamond northwest of the church?

An inexpensive drone today can get a bird’s eye view of the campus, but these sights were a rarity when it involved plane flyovers and a professional photographer leaning out of the window to get an unobstructed shot. And they were impossible for Saint John’s first fifty years. Thus we have no photograph to show what preceded that ball field, namely, the Exhibition Hall and the first cemetery.

While it may not have been Michael hanging out of that plane window nor under the camera hood in the Wimmer Hall photo gallery, it is his skill and keen eye that bring all these photos to us, with incidental defects removed, details that are exquisitely clear, and subjects that are honored and preserved for future generations. The future will of course bring more changes. This book preserves and reveres the past. Enjoy!