

The Way We Were
(A Herstory of Trinity College of Vermont)
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The 1920's

It wasn't an easy birth. The Sisters had to convince the local men with money that a women's college was good for the community and, equally important, good for business. While business was booming, local underwriters still watched the bottom line. Approval was needed from various boards of education for Trinity to become an accredited school. Trinity College was finally granted its charter on April 25, 1925, after years of hard work by the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters had plenty of real help from local citizens who recognized the value which would be added to the community by encouraging the education of young women. The 1920's was the decade between World War 1 and the Great Depression. WW 1 had ended, business was good, the war to end all wars was finished, new ideas were welcomed; it was a perfect time to introduce a women's college for the children of 'ordinary people.' Starting the college was a quagmire of forms and requests and puzzling bureaucratic mazes. Stephen Roth's excellent book, A History of Trinity College, further defines the requirements for the school charter to be presented to the various Vermont and New England boards of education. It would be complicated even with today's on-line support services; it must have seemed daunting to the Sisters in the 1920's. But the Sisters of Mercy persevered as we expected they would. They followed the mission set out by Catherine McAuley to provide for the education of women.

The written record of Trinity lists ten student graduates in the period from 1926 through 1929. They were Gonzaga O'Brien, (listed as the first graduate of Trinity, class of 1926, who became a Sister of Mercy.), Helen Gibault, Helen Bishop, Marg Moriarity, Helen Cross, Bridget Cumisky, Dorothy Houghton, Mary McCarthy, Helen O'Keefe and Helen Pell. They are our pioneer women who, if you will, blazed the trail and helped put Trinity College on sound footing. They made it obvious to concerned parents that young women were in good hands with the Sisters of Mercy. Parents could send their daughters to Burlington with confidence. Three of the students joined the Sisters and have RSM next to their names on the logbook. Five of them have married names on the log; the remaining two names do not list a married name. All presumably are deceased. All presumably transferred in to Trinity. Miss Mary Ready was the first woman to apply to Trinity as a freshman. She became Sister Carmel, known to many as a valued teacher and librarian.

Helen Pell, class of 1929, passed away in 1984 in Burlington. Her death certificate says that she lived at 214 North Prospect Street and retired from Trinity College. She never married, however, her brother did. Thirty-one years later, Helen's niece, Joan Pell, was a member of the Trinity Class of 1960.

During the 1920's the knitting mills were running full steam ahead in Vermont. Most mill workers were women who would work for less than a man's wage and were universally expected to do so. For a family to exempt their daughters from the mills and, instead, pay to send them to college was an extraordinary act of love and sacrifice.