

## **Thoughts and reflections on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Sister Mary Augusta Carrico, a Clinton Franciscan and noted music teacher.**

It was August of 1943 when I first met Sister Augusta. She had just arrived in Toluca and had taken over the choir of our parish, St. Ann. I was ambivalent about this new director since Sister Jean Marie Hand had just left and I was very fond of her and admired her ability to turn our choir into a professional group. Even the Archbishop, when he came for Confirmation, said he had never heard better even in the Sistine Chapel. Adding particulars: the organ was out of commission and all the music the choir did was a'capella.

Little did I know at that point that Sister Augusta had trained Jean Marie and all of the music teachers from Mount St. Clare. Thus there was the unique Augusta sound. I heard it again in the 50s when choirs of the Diocese of Davenport came to St. Ambrose for a festival. As I walked through Ambrose Hall, there it was, that SOUND again wafting through the building. I gasped and said to myself, "Sister Augusta is here." Sure enough, it was a joyous reunion. Then in 2006, just after I returned to Chicago from South Bend where I had lived for 6 years studying at Indiana University, I moved into a +50 building owned by St. Luke Lutheran Church which had yearly Bach Cantata Concerts. At the first one I attended, I heard it again...the soprano was singing with Augusta's sound. I met her after the performance and asked where she studied and she said Northwestern with Elizabeth Fischer. Elizabeth, from Dubuque, was a student of Augusta's for many years. She had attended Mount St. Clare. Augusta was fond of her and her husband; they owned Monastero's, a noted Italian Restaurant on Chicago's north side.

My father died in July of 1950 and when I returned to Davenport, I decided that I very much wanted to see Sister. After letters and phone calls, we decided on a date which was in late November. I took the bus to Clinton and a city bus to MSC and found Augusta in her studio, which was always tastefully decorated. We talked and sang for hours. When I had to go catch the bus back to Davenport, much to my surprise it was snowing - a real blizzard. I was scared. Would I make it back and ON TIME? With prayer, we did. After this meeting we did not meet for some years; Sister had a mission in CA and loved it there.

Now I return to her coming to Toluca. She taught there for three years. Early in the fall of 1943, she had me come to the convent to sing often and eventually told me she thought I "had something" and wanted me to study with her. I said I would need to ask my parents. She, of course, always had the right plan. She invited my parents and me to the convent after Mass on Mother's Day and had me sing for them. They were in awe after the work Sister had done with me. She had me sing "To My Mother," a beautiful piece. My dad was blown away and was all for me studying; mother not so much but Augusta always had the winning card. She convinced mother that singing would cure, or at least help, my asthma condition due to the breathing exercises. So off we went. I loved it. I learned many wonderful songs - both religious and art songs. She called me her John Charles Thomas. I sang many solos on Sunday at Mass along with several other voice students. We were also chosen by young couples to sing for their weddings. During the week, Sister divided the choir into small groups to sing daily Mass. Many priests in those days always had Requiem Masses but our pastor followed the Roman Ordo and had the Mass of the Day. Thus we learned the Propers for weekdays, as well as Sundays using the books by Tozer. On Requiem Mass days and funerals, we sang the entire Requiem Mass, Dies Irae and Offertory in entirety. Most churches sang only a few verses of the above.

This was during WWII and my dad was working in Seneca, IL in a shipyard making LST boats for the war effort. He left very early so I had to walk 6 blocks to Mass in the dark and then home for breakfast and then to school; walk home for lunch and back for choir practice, which we had daily at 12:30. Practice was either in the music room of the school, the church choir loft, or in bad weather in the convent foyer. On one occasion in the loft, Nancy and a few older girls got a bit sassy to Augusta; she scolded but they kept on. She took off her glasses, pulled the cord and up they went under her wimple and she strode out of the loft, down the stairs, several

steps creaking as they still do, and we heard the church door close. We were petrified. After a long time, the guilty ones decided to go downstairs and see if she was waiting to punish them...but she was gone so we all went back to class in the school. The guilty decided that they should confess to Sr. Anarita (also a Carrico) and she sent them forthwith to the convent to apologize to Sr. Augusta.

During her Toluca years, the music was glorious both in church, the annual recital and special times, e.g. the dedication of the war memorial in the town square when Mrs. Axle (Grace) Peterson sang with us. She had sung with the Chicago Opera company. Sister convinced her to sing, and very few could refuse Augusta. Grace was the wife of Dr. Axle Peterson, a longtime Toluca physician. Sister had great support from her longtime friend Marie Supan Ghiglieri, organist of the church for more than 50 years. She had met Augusta when both were students at Mount St. Clare. Years later I would be organist and soloist for Marie's funeral. "Let All My Life Be Music" by Gilbert Sprague was the closing solo.

There was another parent teacher meeting just before our recital in 1945. This time it was to show off my new voice. Augusta had used her magic to work my voice down to that of a young man; the boy soprano was gone. My parents were shocked, but happy; there were no "cracks" or any other manifestation of a boy voice in change.

While in Toluca, Sister taught both piano and voice. She established very quickly a stellar reputation. She had students of all ages and religions - the children of the Lutheran pastor, soloists from two Protestant churches. One, Irma Rankin, loaned her grand piano for a recital giving us two grand pianos for two piano works. My cousin Juanita and I played the two piano arrangement of "Waltz of the Flowers." About 450 people attended our recitals. Sister also came to the rescue of the Toluca fathers who had been duped by a scam to have a concert by the famous Phil Spitalny Girls Orchestra. Sister learned that this was a scam so she contacted her friend, Maestro Bohumir Kryl, who had an all-girl orchestra in Chicago and they came to Toluca and gave the concert. It was standing room only.

When Sister did not return to Toluca the fall of 1945, several of us did not know what to do. Eventually we found Jane Woodman in Peoria and several of us made weekly trips to Peoria for lessons, and also to shop. Just before Augusta left Toluca, the San Carlo Opera Company scheduled performances in Peoria. Sister told me I should hear at least one performance. My parents were less convinced but eventually came around and I heard my first opera, Carmen. It was an exciting experience and I was singing my version of several arias ever after. Thus Sister had opened the door to a very important part of my life. I would hear Aida in Chicago a couple of years later, then came Lucia with Lily Pons and the Met from New York in Minneapolis, when I was a student there, and much later I became a member of the Lyric Opera Chorus, as well as the Chorus of the Chicago Symphony.

Both Sister and I were not totally happy with Mrs. Woodman as my teacher so Augusta prevailed on my parents to consider a well-known teacher in Chicago, Thomas N. MacBurney. Sister had studied with him. We all met in Chicago and I auditioned with Mr. Mac and he said yes, and that began a new relationship. I loved my weekly trips to Chicago on the train and Mr. Mac's studio at 410 S Michigan, the Fine Arts Building which is still there and little changed including attendant run elevators. That day the four of us had lunch and Sister suggested going to Toffenetti's. Much to our surprise, we were met by Mr. Toffenetti who treated us to lunch. It seemed Sister knew someone EVERYWHERE. Mr. MacBurney wanted me to come to Northwestern and study with him, but I chose Notre Dame and continued study with Mr. Mac. I was chosen to be a member of the Notre Dame Glee Club.

As schooling and life progressed, I saw little of Augusta except for a summer visit to MSC, letters, and phone calls. Following in Sister's footsteps, I organized a 40 voice boys' choir, an adult choir, and an ecumenical choir in Ottawa. I continued organ study in Chicago with Edward Eigenschenk and he came to dedicate the new organ

for St. Columba Church. Sister knew Dr. Eigenschenk and admired his teaching. There were other transitions in my life which temporarily brought a time in retail.

One day, I was shocked to be told a phone call was waiting for me from a Sister Augusta. I have no idea how she found me. She soon got to her point of asking me to come to Clinton to sing for her Diamond Jubilee. This started numerous trips to Clinton to visit, and practice. It also started yearly trips on January 26 for Sister's birthday. I gave a big party for her 99<sup>th</sup>. When she turned 100, I was ill and she had a reception and book signing. My friend Bret and I went out to Clinton a few weeks later and we did our usual lunch and Sr. Carmel Jacobs came too, but I could tell Sister Augusta was not herself. She did not want to prolong the visit and somehow I knew it would be our last. I had an empty feeling as we drove away from The Alverno.

We kept in touch by phone as she declined until the day of her death. After not reaching her by phone, I had a premonition that the time had come. Much to my surprise, a beautiful rainbow appeared in the sky over the lake. Carmel called later to confirm what I already knew. We were there for her funeral, and to inject a bit of humor. Sister did not like the Foster song "My Old Kentucky Home." Much to my surprise, some of the sisters started singing it at the grave. She liked "Sleep Kentucky Babe," so I was quietly singing it as the other sounded through St. Irenaeus Cemetery.

Thus ended a facet of history - the reign and teaching of the great Augusta Carrico. A girl from Fancy Farm Kentucky; a southern belle; a Colonial Dame; a Sister of St. Francis; an inspiration and friend to many; and one of the two most significant persons in my life.

P.S. She lives! Recently a former choir boy of mine, now 60+, mentioned to me that he remembers many of the metaphors I used in producing the sound I wanted from the boys: e.g. "open your mouth on the inside as if you had a mouthful of hot mashed potatoes and keep your lips closed."  
Oh yes, on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday I phoned Sister and said today I am 60 and I am having a real hard time with that number (now I am 83.) Sister said, "Oh for Heaven's sake, Bill, numbers don't mean anything." She was 96 at the time.

*The above article was written by Bill Schumacher, D.M., M.Ed., B.A. of Chicago. It is a part of a book he is preparing. He can be reached at wschue5555@aol.com.*