

Booting Leather at Notre Dame

PROVINCE OF HOLY CROSS
PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES
Notre Dame, Indiana

By MARIE LAUCK

Lakeville. Nor would the shoes look warped and ugly. If only the child's father could take him to Chicago! Brother Columba's eyes flecked from the leather to his own mended feet, thence to the Feet of the Sacred Heart. He did not halt his work but his heart made a little bow along with the candle's flame.

When the man came for the shoes some weeks later, he grasped the good Brother's hands. "Oh, Brother Columba! She is well! My daughter. The doctors couldn't help her. But you prayed for her!" Brother Columba only laughed. "No, no! It wasn't me. It was the Sacred Heart!"

That was the first prodigy. Or anyway, the first one people learned about. The story comes from contemporaries of Brother Columba, but it is purely one of recollection. No one dreamed of making records of such a small incident.

Word traveled. After a visit to the shoemaker of Notre Dame, a man sent his crutches from Canada, writing that he was cured, to the amazement of his doctors. Bother Columba gave the crutches to a local man with rheumatism that crippled him painfully. He was told he would soon get them back again!

The path to Brother Columba's shop was worn by the feet of the suffering. Families wheeled crutches there, led the blind, carried in cancerous cases, consumptives, children bitten by mad dogs, lock-jaw patients. To each Brother Columba gave consolation. He would pray for them. He gave them badge or medal of the Sacred Heart.

In 1913 Brother Columba estimated the students of Notre Dame at over 900, in a letter. He proudly remarked their devotion to the nine Fridays.

Religious Communities are 'pretty chary of chat about miracles. Should there be delusions the stigma can make a public laughing-stock of the Church. And so about this time his Superiors were viewing with alarm the national publicity.

Brother Columba himself was mystified by his new role. In the community rooms he was still the bluff, humorous Brother who neither sought notice nor receded hermit-like from view. But by mail he kept in touch with his old spiritual adviser, the good pastor of his home parish who had been elevated to monsignor and resided in Iowa. From these letters the simple records of some episodes convey Brother Columba's humble, unquestioning acceptance of God's Will: "A sixteen-year-old boy was cured of lock-jaw. He was fierce looking. His mouth opened in two days. . . . Many people come every day. What a cross our Lord put on me! By no means can I ever feel proud. I know He honors me but He humbles me, at the same time."

"Doctor wanted to remove eye. Doctor told her after we talked she was getting better."

. . . "A young man on crutches two years (7 weeks in bed) with a hip disease. After November he walked ten blocks without crutches, sent me the crutches!"

. . . Young girl in Iowa walked after seven years. Suffered from a spinal trouble which caused her back to be misshapen and legs useless. Sent a badge and one morning she astonished her family by rising from bed and walking about the room."

An episode that caused Brother Columba the most

(Continued on page 56)

Brother Columba brought
fame to Notre Dame . . .
his devotion to the Sacred
Heart brought the halt,
the lame, the blind . . . and
wondrous cures:



he offered himself for duty in the Bengal missions. He volunteered to help the lepers with Father Damien at Molokai. He accepted without comment the undramatic cobbler assignment.

A few years of shoe-patching, and there came a day when Brother Columba clumped his deformed feet to Chicago, never to clump again. He walked back, operated upon by a famous surgeon. His slight limp he successfully camouflaged. His soul never ceased praising God for his new wholeness.

On a day near the turn of the century, Brother Columba squinted up from his leather work to see who had entered. The customer looked harassed. "I come up from Lakeville, Brother, to see if you'd make some shoes for my son. He's a cripple."

Brother Columba took the nails from his mouth. His pale blue eyes clouded a moment. He hefted his ample frame, accepted the sample shoe offered. Brother Columba wasn't looking at the shoe, though. He wasn't in business. He just did the Community's shoes.

"Why don't you take the boy to Chicago and have shoes made there? Maybe you could have something done for the boy there, too." The voice of Brother Columba was high and gentle, not like the voice you'd expect from a red-headed Irishman who looked like he could win the heavyweight title. The faintest reflection of a brogue flavored his words. But the stranger only sighed, "I can't afford it, Brother. It takes all I can save to care for a sick girl I have. I've paid hundreds of dollars but nothing seems to do her any good. She has convulsions."

So Brother Columba took the order for shoes. His eyes kept vigil at the feet of a diminutive Sacred Heart. From a deep corner of the cupboard-like shop, the statue still held a commanding position. A pinpoint flame of candle flicked at the Feet of the Sacred Heart.

Casually the big hand of the Brother reached out a little red badge.

"Tell your daughter to wear this in honor of the Sacred Heart," Brother Columba smiled. It was a sincere, true smile. He continued: "And I will pray for her. Perhaps we may help her in that way."

Time in the shoemaker shop never dragged. It hampered with the rhythm of the cobbler's busy tool. It swept with the sweep of the draft as the little candle bowed its head at the feet of the Sacred Heart. Between half-soles and leather heels for the Community, the great-hearted cobbler sewed at soft leather that yet was durable.

This leather would not hurt the feet of the small cripple of

FILLING the chore of cobbler on campus at Notre Dame was Brother Columba's assignment. Brother Columba himself had a very special pair of feet, custom-tailored by his Maker for the special purpose of humbling their possessor. Brother Columba was born clubfooted.

As a child, Brother Columba—then John O'Neill—learned the distinguishing qualities of charity. Charity is recognizable when you're on the receiving end. Small John, a poor lad, learned to face out bullies' taunting cries. He learned fearless acceptance of Ladies Bountiful and their public bewailing of his deformity. He learned the give and take of precarious family life. He was fifth of six children. As a little boy he helped earn by hand-sorting shale from coal at the mines where his father was employed.

The boy's concerns were ever close to the lowly consideration of pedal extremities, in his daily walk—or limp. His folks were hardly able to buy special shoes for the crippled boy. By the time he was fourteen, John had earned a place as cobbler's apprentice. John O'Neill felt himself called to serve God in religion. But a clubfoot? An unschooled clubfoot? Where could he enter the service of God? In those days a good cobbler was awaited with hope and anticipation in isolated regions. Often saving the best hides for good shoes, people watched for the coming of a shoemaker, passed on the news of his presence to neighbors, and sent him to them in turn. Of course, neighbors were miles distant from one another in the rural areas.

And so John's stumbling feet carried him across the great prairie into far California. Again the young cobbler met with degrees of charity in his travels. But he was welcomed even as his deformity elicited sympathy. For he made shoes, something the people needed, sacrificed for. There were other needs in these struggling isolated homes, spiritual needs, comforts for the soul, solace for the aching hearts yearning for God in the mire of daily materialism. Could he some day add these needs to his services?

John O'Neill was himself aware of spiritual need. Miles out on the lonely wastes there was no Mass on Sunday. Far away from priest or spire, death came into desolate homes. Shallow graves were left in unmarked, unblest soil. Distant from nuns' gentle care, pain paralyzed, disease struck, accidents maimed, children were born and hurt and screamed and sometimes needlessly died.

The young O'Neill heard about a new Community's heroic qualities in terms of the thing he knew best. For a story is told of a time when the struggling Community had not even enough shoes. So that in winter months if one priest went out another had to remain indoors. In any case, John O'Neill learned of Notre Dame through a chance meeting in the Midwest with a fellow shoemaker. He had formerly apprenticed in the shoemaking trade at Notre Dame's manual labor school. Himself, John O'Neill gave credit to the Blessed Virgin for guiding him to the Community which accepted his humble application for membership.

John was twenty-six years old when he became Brother Columba in 1874. As a working Brother,

boys in the many buildings on Notre Dame's campus."

Plans for Brother Columba's log chapel meetings were interrupted in January of 1917 when the dread flu epidemic took down Brother Columba and many others. He was among those considered about to die. From the man to whom thousands looked as a consolation, this brief comment in Brother Columba's shaken hand is revealing: "They thought me nearly gone—dreadful sickness—I was old. I guess the prayers saved me. It will teach me to have some feeling for others."

Brother Columba's tremendous vitality never did fully return. But his collaborator's shop claimed attention while yet his frame shuddered from the effects of the epidemic. And the halt, the lame and the blind once more clogged the paths across the tree-lined campus to the long low service buildings near the rear. The little Sacred Heart statue again held forth at its place of honor overseeing boots and shoes.

On the first Sunday in May, 1917, Brother Columba met his people at what he calls in his letter the renovated log chapel. Although Brother Columba said the log chapel was "fixed up fine," he was never quite satisfied.

A Sacred Heart shrine of magnitude should be under way, he felt. He was not personally desirous of having the

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shrine, for he said, "Our Lord and St. Joseph had no shrine; the shoe shop is enough for me." But he wanted a way of showing forth the grandeur of the Sacred Heart.

People came by crowds now, many seeking respite from the toils of materialism. Brother Columba commented on the devotion of Protestants in the search for faith. He never lost his wonder at what went on around him, casual though he seemed, "I notice some cured, some not," he wrote, "some half-cured. A paralyzed girl was brought here and a boy consumptive of one family—Protestants. The two are cured. Protestants nearly all get it."

Brother Columba's presence was in demand elsewhere. Trips to cities not too far distant were undertaken. Brother Columba never indulged in oratory. In fact, according to his descriptions by letter, he wouldn't say anything about conversion to religion. He'd just "teach them devotion to the Sacred Heart and tell of the cures. I let the Sacred Heart do the rest."

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usually meant leaving unaccountably cured patients behind when he left a town. Enough!

In time a shrine was built, the wing of Moreau Seminary being dedicated to the Sacred Heart. Here Brother Columba had so many followers that testimonials stacked up too fast to be ac-

Fulfillment

The old peach tree was naked and gnarled And through it the March winds bitterly snarled;

It made a sad pattern of shivering pain, All crazy and crooked and dripping with rain.

But the cold March winds blew away at last,

And the wee bud-popping of April passed—

And then one day, standing near, I heard The tiny peepings of a baby bird!

The old peach tree is a glory now

With its leafy cloak—and a busy plow

Has made a brown backdrop of the hill—

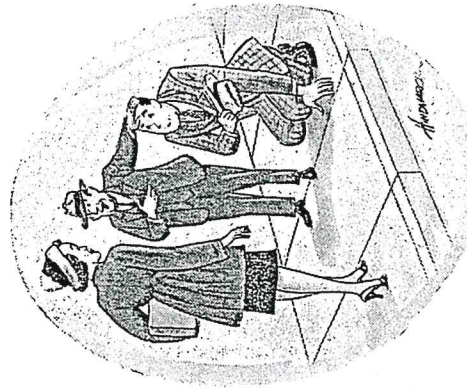
O God! give me grace to await Thy will!

—Francis X. Maynard, O.F.M.

knowledge. Brother Columba's cramped hand tried to keep up. Some of the seminarists visited the shop and his shrine, and helped with the correspond-

ence. The demeanor of the Brother gave the lie to over-piety. Brother Columba's charm lay greatly in his human kindness and his human bluntness. His humor never flagged. In the letters, some quoted here and there in part, written to his one-time pastor, whenever he lists the astonishing cures or the incredible numbers of people and testimonials received, he exclaims, "No, don't laugh!" Once he recounts the cure of a boy with spasms and fits whose mother said he did not have a spell in thirteen months, and remarks: "It took a longer time to tell me!"

The incident affords an insight to the patience needed by the good Brother, who had to listen to long descriptions of symptoms, the many medical opinions received, the terror, the fruitless treatments and at last, the means by which Brother Columba was approached,



"This is my nephew, Willie. I haven't seen him since he was so high."

and how long the cure had taken. This, while others waited outside. And while unattended shoes curled at their toes waiting Brother Columba's hammer. Yes, Brother Columba offered more than his prayers, though he never intimated such a thing.



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