Hospital Sisters of St. Francis
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From: Brian C. Blasco
Director of Communications and Archivist - Assistant Coordinator of Community Life
Date: July 18, 2024
RE: Sister Henriette Berkemeier, OSF

Birth	February 22, 1841, in Voerden, Germany, and named Antoinette
Parents	Heinrich and Elisabeth (Eckermann) Berkemeier
Entered HSOSF	April 22, 1865
Profession of First Vows	February 1, 1868
Missionary to the USA	October 1875 at age 34

Assignments

East St. Louis, IL	St. Mary's Hospital	November 8, 1875
Springfield, IL	St. John's Hospital	1876
Highland, IL	St. Joseph's Hospital	1879
Effingham, IL	St. Anthony's Hospital	1880
Springfield, IL	St. John's Hospital	1883
Effingham, IL	St. Anthony's Hospital	1889
Springfield, IL	St. John's Hospital	1892
Chippewa Falls, WI	St. Joseph's Hospital	1893
East St. Louis, IL	St. Mary's Hospital	1898
Decatur, IL	St. Mary's Hospital	1899
Litchfield, IL	St. Francis Hospital	1899
Lincoln, IL	St. Clara's Hospital	1903
Streator, IL	St. Mary's Hospital	1904
Sheboygan, WI	St. Nicholas Hospital	1905
Springfield, IL	St. John's Hospital	1907

Entered Eternal Life (age 76)

December 29, 1917, and buried in Crucifixion Hill Cemetery (Springfield, IL)

East St. Louis, December 2, 1875

P.b.J.Chr.
In all Eternity

Dear Reverend Mother!

At first receive kind regards from me. A long time I was longing to write a few lines to you. There is so much preying on my mind, where shall I start. How we fared during our voyage you know. I, dear Reverend Mother, cannot tell you how much I feared and endured during the whole trip. I did not suffer much seasickness, however I suffered much spiritually. Sometimes I myself cannot grasp it, because we had such a heavy storm and rough sea. The boat reeled from one side to the other, then I trembled all over and always feared the boat might capsize and the ocean would bury us. Last Saturday in tears I told the Mother Virgin my anguish and prayed a rosary. She would take this agony from me, and after that it improved and I did not suffer such fear again. The Mother Virgin helped. Thanks be to her. Oh, dear Reverend Mother, it is such a difficult journey one would not believe it. The only comfort is obedience, that makes it easy. The dear Lord has tested us and I am happy that we have survived it. If now things don't turn out as one hoped, then one can remember the voyage and one can be comforted. It already was too late in autumn when the ocean is rough and you cannot imagine how we ruined our habits. I did not take my second habit along. I walked about the most on board, from one cabin to the other to take care of the Sisters who were not well, what I certainly wanted to do. The Rules for the Day one could not observe on the ship, as you easily can understand, and mostly I failed against the Silentium.
In Alton we are well accommodated and were solemnly received by the Bishop. The Most Reverend Bishop appears to be very religious and friendly, and the first four days we received from him communion and took part in his Holy Mass which was of great joy to us. This joy lasted not long. His Eminence and the Vicar General visited us Sunday afternoon and announced that we would be

sent to different houses. The same week we all left. Thursday, November 11 I and the Sisters Aurelia, Cassiana, and Rolendis left Alton and we now are three weeks here. This city is only about one hour by train from Alton. It is separated by a river from the big city St. Louis which half an hour from here. The big city you can see from here. You probably have not heard about it. It is called St. Louis and has 10,000 inhabitants. The city is pretty big and not quite finished building. Here are many poor people, most of them are English, a few German .

We have to study English now, otherwise we cannot deal with the people. O, dear Mother, what pleasant things shall I write about, I know nothing but poverty, neediness, and privation. I don't want to complain, be it far from me, but I write as it is. We also lack things, but I did not miss it in the convent, now we live here. I pictured America quite differently. The Pastor told me right away that we would have a difficult start. Times are very bad. Last year a bad flood happened and much fruit spoiled and two years income was lost. The German catholics built a church and are $15,000 in debt. For this church is one catholic Priest. For the English catholic church are two Priests who don't seem to be for us. This week the English School Sisters arrived and the Priests are for those, and as one is told, they want to establish the Motherhouse. Our Priest has already asked me whether we go to collect. I told him we had never done that yet. He answered that the Most Reverend Bishop also does not like it, but it appears that otherwise we shall not be able to manage. It certainly would be very hard for us, but that the people would of their own accord donate something, they have never heard of. In the past three weeks four to five people have donated something and we have not had patients, which is very hard for us. What we eat, we have to buy in the store and everything is so expensive. Our provisions are 25 yet (?) left of what was supplied us. To save on rent we live upstairs with a christian family this winter. We have three rooms for us. They are kind

people and are German also. We had to start with nothing, the rooms were bare and we had to go to town immediately to buy the essentials. It was very hard but the Priest had good intentions.

Oh, dear Mother, how I felt these few weeks, I cannot describe. Some bitter tears I have shed and uttered my complaints to the dear Lord in church; where else could I go? This thought keeps me going. That the Lord has imposed this upon me and one deals obediently with it and not by one's own will. In the past I longed for America because I thought I could further my professional intention for God and my fellow-citizens' spiritual welfare, but up till now we have no prospect, although I must not forget the Lord's Prayer and our dear Savior, even when our chances seem so poor. The heavenly Father leads us and knows what is best for us. It is quite sad that we cannot take care of patients in our house. We would be happier if we could take care of patients privately but we have to study English first and that is not easy. A catholic teacher from town is very nice and she daily teaches us one hour. Then we don't have time for homesickness, we have to rack our brains. Without knowledge of the English language, we cannot survive, the Bishop told us that too. Oh, how often, dear Mother, do my thoughts travel to the Motherhouse and only now I understand what a large sacrifice we made and I frequently think of Loeningen. There I worked very hard but we had enough food and we suffered no privation and had enough patients, and what delighted me the most that everything was in order with linens and the chapel. Things that were donated I joyfully prepared and nothing was too burdensome for me.
The Lord decided otherwise, I shall bear my cross and bring joyfully Him my sacrifice. What thoughts cross my mind, dear Mother, when you see the shortages everywhere, then you remember what you left. It would not be that hard, if we had a

hospital with patients then one could work professionally and then you don't notice what the Sisters eat and thus they could live better than now. We presently have to economize a lot and that we can do since we don't do heavy work or night-duty. One can be glad that one can practice holy poverty. I am happy to sacrifice but, dear Mother, one has to consider our other Sisters who cannot adapt as well. One morning I said: we all eat bread and butter in the morning although it is against the Church Rules since during Advent Wednesday is a day of abstinence. I was a little uneasy, but the problem was dealt with, especially by Sister Cassiana, about which I was surprised. I had good intentions when I said it and I believe one can abstain from some things, what do you think, dear Mother? I took once some bread and butter in the morning, if I have to take some at ten o'clock. I cannot shake a bad cough since I left the ship, there I caught a cold. I have used some remedies, but the cough persists and here you cannot get anything for relief. Everything is unfamiliar. The dear Lord has to help.

During these weeks we have sewed a lot for the church: five ALBEN (?) several altar-cloths because everything was so torn and dirty, you just cannot imagine. I also took over the church laundry, thus we temporarily have some work. I was very much surprised about the dust and dirt at the altar and several times have gone there and dusted. This work was very necessary. First we work for our dear Savior and it was most needed. I hope the dear Savior will bless us richly for this work.

In the spring they intend to build a hospital here. St. Joseph has to provide money or it will not happen - if only we had money. Then we could not be busy with sewing of linens and habits for the house. I'll have to call upon the Priest some time, it all is so needed, it has to be.

Now, dear Mother, I have informed you about everything. I wish you with all my heart a very happy Christmas and implore you to write a few lines, then we again will take courage. Please greet

all Sisters. Commending myself for your prayers and the holy heart of Jesus and Mary I remain in love and obedience

Sister Henriette

[illegible] St. Louis 22 December 1875

[illegible]

John Flowerdew

SR. HENRIETTA

"I heard a promise gently fall
"I heard a far-off Shepherd's call
"The weary and the broken-hearted
"Promising rest unto each and all."

She belonged to the old-timers of '75, rugged, hale and hearty, never shrinking from work, mostly nursing in private homes by night, and doing manuel work in garden, greenhouse and kitchen by day. She presided for some years as Superioress over St. Anthony's Hospital of Effingham, besides this she was active at Lincoln, Litchfield, Chippewa Falls, East St. Louis and Highland. Wherever seen or met she would be murmuring prayers which she had copied during spare hours and which she tried hard to commit to memory. Mother Paula remarked of her one day: "Sister Henrietta is surely a walking prayerbook". During the latter years of life the dear old soul became afflicted with lung-trouble which on Dec. 29, 1917 hastended her end. Sister Henrietta served with distinction as nurse on the battlefields of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-'71, displaying great valor and heroism. Many a wounded soldier became indebted to her motherly ministrations for his return to health and home.

Our subject who was Antoinette Berkemeier before she entered the Convent came into the world at Voerden on February 22, 1841, was admitted a candidate April 22, 1865, and took holy vows February 1, 1868. R. I. P.