

Assumption

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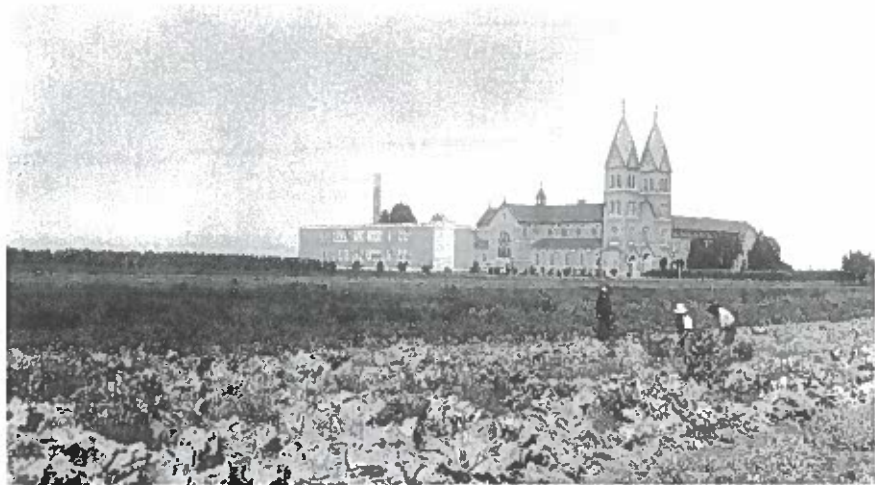
Richardton, ND 58652

April, 2020

The Abbey Garden

From the moment Vincent Werhle founded a Benedictine monastery in North Dakota, one of his major concerns was feeding his monks. A farm was established immediately and the requisite livestock for pioneer needs was acquired. As soon as the ground warmed that spring of 1894, a garden was planted. There exist no details about what was harvested, probably because gardens were taken for granted back then. Even though in mercantile stores canned vegetables were available, in those days most people in North Dakota ate out of their gardens, and they put up food for the winter the old-fashioned way, in the root cellar.

The Abbey always had a garden, but any notes that monk-gardeners kept were not given to our archives, again probably because gardens were taken for granted, and such details were considered too common for history. Venerable seniors, Fathers Damian, Denis and Odo, remember Brother Stephen Martin who was in charge of the garden from 1944 to 1984. Stephen came to the community in 1942 and left after a few short months because he was assigned to the farm. Only



Assumption Abbey Archives

Father Julius Locnikar, Brother Stephen Martin, and an unidentified monk, out in the Abbey garden sometime in the late 1940s. Corn stalks grow on the horizon to the left, a potato field opens out behind the workers, and Brother Stephen hoes long rows of cabbages. The garden looks immense, but it was probably never more than five acres.

when he was assured that he could work in the garden did he come back, and he persevered in the life of a lay brother, working all his monastic life in the garden, and in the Abbey orchards with Father Reinhard Kaufman. During long winter months he kept night-watch in the powerhouse, feeding the boilers with coal.

Novices and clerics weeded the seemingly endless rows that Brother Stephen planted. In those days, novices had no other assignments, except for the first novice in seniority who cleaned the quarters of the Novice Master, and the second novice who cleaned the Prior's rooms. The third novice cleaned the recreation room of the fathers.

Otherwise, novices were at Brother Stephen's disposal, and although he could be a taskmaster at times, Stephen never bore up well under the summer heat—according to Father Denis Fournier—and occasionally took the young monks down to the lake for a quick swim. When they felt scruples and wanted to rush off to inform Father Norbert, the Master of Novices and Clerics, Stephen always said, "No. You're assigned to the garden. I'm in charge of the garden. We're going swimming!"

Back in the 1950s there were always plenty of novices and clerics, and due in large part to them, Brother Stephen harvested big crops of vegetables.

All of that produce was processed by the kitchen staff. The Abbey schools were still very much up and running and a large kitchen crew was required to keep students and monks fed. Their job included canning, a task most of them were familiar with, having been raised on farms. The Abbey farm, garden and orchard supplied nearly all the food needed for the monastic community and the students up until the mid-1960s when government regulations prevented serving any milk, eggs or meat to the public without government inspection. The public meant students. And so the Abbey dropped its hog and dairy productions. The chickens soon disappeared also.

For a time, the garden seemed immune to these changes, as long as there were novices and clerics enough to weed. In addition to cultivation on the escarpment, a small garden and orchard plot was located down by the farm, to the west of the present Ranch Barn. Even today, abandoned apple trees are there, and horseradish grows among the weeds. But the bulk of the garden was located across the street to the southwest of the Abbey church. In the late 1950s, part of the hayfield west of the city of Richardton was seeded in potatoes. Students helped with the harvest.

When Abbot Cuthbert insisted upon *statio* for the monastic community—as it was practiced at St. John’s Abbey—a doorway was cut through the east wall of the church to the monastery hallway so that the



Assumption Abbey Archives
Left to right: Fr. Francis Wehri, Br. Stephen Martin, Fr. Sebastian Schmidt and Fr. Denis Fournier planting garden seeds in the 1950s.

monks could gather there before liturgy and march in together as was required. And as a secondary development, the parish began using the monastery washroom on the first floor. Not needing their own primitive facilities, the parish outhouses across the street came down, to the south of the church, and the empty lots were then cultivated by Brother Stephen. He produced huge crops of asparagus and lettuce there. The garden



Assumption Abbey Archives
Fathers Benedict and Anthony in the garden in the summer of 2000.

seemed gigantic under Brother Stephen, but altogether, he probably never had more than five acres. As was said, his work was made easier by novices, and also by horses that were hitched to a plough, and then to a wagon in autumn in order to carry his mighty vegetables to the kitchen. He was proud of producing football-sized beets and golf ball-sized radishes. He loved carrots the size of baseball bats and cabbages as big as bassinets. In the 1950s, a cub tractor took the place of the horses, which was probably an improvement, but tractors don’t know their way to the root cellar, and they “eat” gasoline and oil. Horses occasionally get sick, requiring attention, but so do tractors, so perhaps little was gained.

Brother Louie Bachand entered the community in 1983 and the very next year took charge of the garden after Brother Stephen passed away. Asparagus was harvested south

of the church, but the next year Brother Louie seeded that area in potatoes. By 1986, Brother Placid Gross was planting grass in those lots because the garden was too large, and the gardener otherwise employed: in addition to growing vegetables, Brother Louie was assigned to the farm, the garage and the orchard. From 1987 onward, the garden was confined to lots west of 5th Street North. Potatoes were rotated from year to year because the soil was, and still is, alkaline. Brother Louie remembers that, back in the 1980s, because of good weather, he did not have to worry about watering. Before him, Brother Stephen did not worry about watering either. Around 1990, things changed: sprinklers were needed to get the seeds up. And back in the 1980s the ground was warm enough to plant lettuce in April which was harvested in time for the community retreat at the end of May. Today, because of climate change, lettuce is a luxury. The soil is too cold in April. One has to wait until June to plant, and the seeds must be watered to sprout.

Brother Louie's responsibilities were more comprehensive than Brother Stephen's: in addition to preparing the soil, planting, weeding and harvesting, Brother Louie also canned tomatoes, pickles and beets. And he processed corn, beans and peas for freezing. Only squash and pumpkins were taken care of by the cooks. The kitchen no longer had the large staff that was required when the schools were in existence, and the one or two



Assumption Abbey Archives

Brother Louie Bachand harvesting corn.

cooks were occupied with getting a meal on the table. Brother Louie was also making jams and jellies, and processing crabapples. Nowadays, Brother Alban as Kitchen Manager makes the jellies and jams. He began doing that when Brother Louie was busy mowing the empty lots where the garden used to be, south of the church, lots that lie within city limits where there is an ordinance on keeping lawns mowed.

By the year 2000 the garden was cut down by half when a large area was seeded in grass behind the houses on Wehrle Drive. The reason for this cut was due to the fact that some of the very best weeders—Fathers Bartholomew, Terrence, Roman, Denis, Sebastian and Mark—were leaving this world for their heavenly reward, or getting too elderly-challenged to save acres of vegetables from creeping jenny. In 2005-2006, Brother Louie stopped growing cabbages because of the changing weather: they would not head out until July when they should

have been finishing, and leaf hoppers would appear and destroy them. The broccoli became bitter. Crops need to mature ahead of the leaf hoppers.

In 2010, because of a lack of monks to hoe and keep weeds down, Brother Louie stopped planting potatoes. Then, in 2015, after growing exasperated by the changing weather, Brother Louie stopped putting in onions: dry weather in spring necessitated watering them, then the onions would stop growing in the heat of the summer, and rain at the very end of summer caused them to awkwardly start growing again when they should have been harvested.

Lately, the Abbey has been enjoying excellent spring and summer weather for musk and watermelons. The future looks good for such crops. And with soaking hoses and hot temperatures, vine crops such as cucumbers and melons do well. In addition, timers have been set on the hoses so that watering takes place at night, causing less stress on the plants.

These days, carrots, beets, squash, pumpkins, lettuce, radishes, tomatoes, green peppers and muskmelons are the Abbey's garden staples. Even so, one might ask, is it worth keeping a garden? Brother Louie says that depends. "If we have people to weed, it's good. But even with weeders, we don't have a local farmer's market to sell items. And the vegetables we grow still have to be processed by someone." He looked rather

weary. "I could never really enjoy gardening because I had so many other responsibilities, on the farm, the orchard, the garage, the sacristy. You can't put your focus on plants. It's always hurry, hurry, hurry!"

For a monk, gardening—and farming and ranching for that matter—is not quite the same as it is for our neighbors. The tower bell rings several times a day for a monk, and he must drop everything and go to the choir where the Divine Office is being said. He lives the monastic life first. Being a gardener is second, or third or fourth.

Brother Symeon Rubbelke, who came to the Abbey in 2014, has helped Brother Louie since his arrival, and took over the garden last year. Currently, he plants a garden only half the size that Brother Louie cultivated when he left it, a plot approximately forty by forty feet. In it, Brother Symeon grows corn, peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, beets, kohlrabi, squash, pumpkins, green beans and radishes. He wants it to be a no-till plot. Rather than hoeing, which seems to bring up weed seeds which then germinate and run wild, he sets organic matter on top of the soil in autumn that rots before spring, adding an organic layer into which garden seeds are planted and sprout. "There's no such thing as a weed-free garden," he explains, "but it certainly is possible to cut way back on the weeds."

Brother Symeon holds a number of associate degrees in horticulture, one of them being

Greenhouse Management. Would a greenhouse be an asset to the Abbey? "There are problems with indoor planting," he says. "Insects, such as spider mites, are worse in greenhouses. If we had a medium-sized greenhouse, solar energy might be used to heat it, but someone would have to keep an eye on it all the time. Pest control and a fussy watering system would be critical." Yet the prospect of a greenhouse makes him smile. "Spinach is a perfect crop for a modestly heated greenhouse," he says. "Spinach loves cool temperatures." He thinks that someday the Abbey might start with a small greenhouse, to discover just how it works out in harsh North Dakota climate, and greenhouse planting might expand from there. And anyway, for now, Brother Symeon is a full-time student at the University of Mary; even if the garden is his summer job, his attention will be divided between the garden and other duties. Nevertheless, he remains keenly interested in gardening and loves the prospect of growing heritage varieties. "Commercial varieties utilize smaller and smaller gene pools that make them less resistant to disease," he says. "Heritage varieties are exotic and interesting."

For Brother Symeon, the efficiency of a garden depends entirely upon what one expects of it, alongside the planning that goes into it. If one expects a modest yield, then one *must* plant modestly. "At any rate, it's good to have a connection to the soil," he says. "Planting

means paying attention to the seasons, paying attention to the spiritual. Gardening is, of course, a holy occupation. One can become very close to God as a gardener."

Novice Stephen, who has a Bachelor of Science in Botany from NDSU, is interested in the systematic study of growing things. "For some people, a garden is not important," he says, "but for me it's a good way to learn about the natural world and to be involved in it. There are other ways to learn about the world, of course, but I *do* love plants." It's a given, he believes, that Benedictine monks ought to have some connection to the land they live on, for their souls, and as an example to their neighbors. Not all Richardton citizens keep a garden, but nearly everyone in North Dakota can understand the benefits of cultivating beefsteak tomatoes, carrots, green beans, radishes, peppers, kohlrabi, beets, cucumbers, melons, squash, pumpkins and corn. Wonderful vegetables, when homegrown, are nature's precious gifts and have a unique taste, from local soil.

The homegrown garden might have its analogy to monastic life itself, if things be stretched a bit. Do monks grow spiritually better in a hothouse environment than they do exposed to the harsh elements of our frenzied contemporary culture with all of its distractions? Perhaps, with plenty of watering in the form of prayer and *lectio divina*, monks may grow strong and produce plenty of spiritual fruit.

At the same time, it's very likely that there are plenty of spider mites in the greenhouse, in one form or another, and various forms of spiritual insecticide might be required to save plants so that they can, in fact, yield abundant harvests. And, when all is said and done, everything depends upon the weather—the grace of God—if it rains or not, if nicely sprouting plants are spared pummeling hail.

In an age when everything comes off the truck and fewer people know just how vegetables grow, the calm work of weeding and caring for productive plants in a home-grown garden is both inviting and a spiritual lesson. □



Brother Symeon Rubbelke with novices Stephen Johnson and Craig Thorgeirson.

NOVEMBER CHRONICLE

November 1: The Troops of St. George are back to help us with raking leaves in the front yard. They join us for the Liturgy of the Hours and for Mass. The TSG is a Catholic scout organization for boys, with men as their troop leaders.

From the Archives:



Assumption Abbey Archives

Brother George Erdin, sitting on the bull, was born in Gansingen, Switzerland, in 1897. He wanted to emigrate to Africa, but came to America instead in 1920 when he was twenty-three. He joined the Abbey and remembered a young student at the Abbey school named Lawrence Welk. Brother George left in 1925 when his triennial vows expired. He joined again and professed in 1933, working in the dairy and as beekeeper. George left the Abbey again in 1950 and moved to Wisconsin where he finally learned to speak English. He worked for the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters for a time. He died in Platteville, Wisconsin, in 1977.

And, unlike the Knights of Columbus Squires, they are an outdoors group: camping, backpacking, campfire cooking, fishing, rappelling, sailing and the like, while also modeling themselves on chivalry and the art of being gentlemen. One might question whether or not raking leaves is proper work for a gentleman, but it certainly is generous, and we thank them. ❖

November 4-8: Bishop-elect Austin Vetter is here on a private retreat before his ordination. Although he is not the first priest from North Dakota to be selected to become a bishop, it can be said that such a thing does not happen very often. And this might bring one to wonder why not. We have many excellent priests in North

Dakota. Must be because not everyone is willing to undertake the daunting task of leading a diocese. ❖

November 7: The carpet cleaners are here to scrub the hallway floors and the floors in the community room. Because of it, the humidity inside the building climbs up to somewhere around *normal* as the furniture sighs with relief from the desert dryness that is a result of keeping those spaces heated. With the steam scrubbing, our old double pane windows, installed fifty or more years ago, fog over, while the new windows, installed recently, collect no humidity at all. ❖

Continued on page 6

November 9: Four wild turkeys visit the east yard every day to peck and scratch beneath the statue of St. Benedict. This happens at exactly 2:00 p.m. They know where to look for fallen crabapples. Evidently turkeys can tell time! Or at least they are fully aware of where the sun is to mark their route through the property. ❖

November 14: Quiche is served for lunch today, good fare for a meatless Friday. It is, of course, savory quiche; when Brother Gregory is asked how he is enjoying it, he says, "It's not sweet enough." No doubt he is comparing quiche to his favorite dessert: lemon pie. ❖

November 15: Amazing, how deer disappear during deer hunting season. Where do they go? Answer: into town, because they know what's good for them. No hunter can shoot at them there while they munch on shrubs and exposed lawn. ❖

November 22: There are deer fatalities in town, however, and the mother of two fawns is hit by a car at the intersection of 3rd Street North and North Avenue West. The fawns, although still small, have lost their spots and have not been suckling for weeks. Together they will probably do alright. ❖

November 28: It is Thanksgiving, and a big community like ours has eaten through two thirty-pound turkeys. That is amazing, considering all the trimmings, along with pumpkin pie and ice cream for dessert. One might think that we starve on regular days. ❖



Education is always a part of Benedictine formation. Candidates and novices are given classes to aid them in their understanding of the exulted life they are embarking upon. In the words of our *Customary*, initial formation "explores the content of Sacred Scripture, Liturgy, Catholic doctrine, Benedictine documents (the Holy Rule, the *Constitutions* and the *Directory*, the *Customary*) as well as monastic history before and after Saint Benedict, along with other appropriate course offerings."



Brother Symeon Rubbelke studying

Education is ongoing for Benedictine monks, and a natural part of their life which is composed of prayer, work and study. Benedictines are naturally eager to read books of biblical commentary, Christian spirituality and prayer. But professional preparation is required for ministry in many areas: priesthood, spiritual

Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

direction, teaching and nursing, academic study as distinct from monastic formation, yet integrated with it. Brother Symeon Rubbelke, who very recently pronounced solemn vows, has returned to school at the University of Mary, hoping to earn degrees in Philosophy and Theology. Father Benedict Fischer is at work on his dissertation for a Ph.D. in Theology. Other monks will take advantage of courses available throughout the year, though they might not be working toward a specific degree. We are fully committed, as a community, to supporting their studies until they are completed, and hope that you, too, will give them encouragement by way of support. Our Easter appeal this year is geared toward building up our reserve of funds for educational opportunities for monks. We use the interest from this corpus for educational expenses. May God bless you for your kindness to us! □



Father Benedict Fischer in his office.

DECEMBER CHRONICLES

December 5: Ahead of the high school Christmas concert, the choir loft and bell towers are vacuumed and dusted in case seating is too tight in the body of the church. Amazing, how, left to itself, the bell towers seem to collect millions of dead bugs at any time of the year. They rain down from the tower floors above. ❖

December 7: Christmas Open House at the Abbey. One year, not long ago, Father Terrence was assigned the Visitor Center phone during Open House. A lady walked into the Visitor Center, opened her purse, and emptied all the money in the offering jar into it. She chose the right time: Father Terrence said or did nothing as she went on her way. He told us about it later, though. "If she needed it, she could have it," he said. ❖

December 13: It is the feast of Saint Lucy but no one here is wearing candles in his hair. No doubt the custom is reserved to ladies and not gents. Besides, none of us has much hair. The celebration of light in Scandinavian countries is said to help one get through long winter days. The name Lucy comes from the Latin word for light: *lux*. ❖

December 25: We celebrate Christmas without stockings, since we do not have a chimney. Nevertheless, people are very good to us, even if Santa Claus can't find his way into the Abbey through a flue. ❖

December 31: Nearly the entire community shows up to watch the Alfred Hitchcock movie "North By Northwest," and they stay, even though it is two hours and sixteen minutes long. Without explosions or bloodbath the film is riveting, a lesson for current producers and directors who seem to believe that no one will watch their movies unless they are soaked in violence. □

From the Library

By Br. Michael Taffe



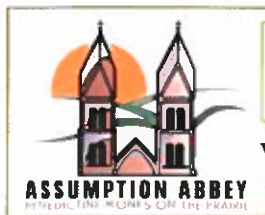
Not surprisingly, we have a lot of books in our library about monasticism. These books cover such areas as history, rules, important practices, and commentaries. We also have some books on prisons; generally addressing issues of justice. Be that as it may, we do not often have books that join the two together! A book that I have found to be quite provocative is *Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives* by Jane Brox.

The focus of this book is on silence and to explore this concept the author looked at two types of institutions that make use of silence: prisons and monasteries. Brox begins by telling us about how prisons were typically set up in Europe and America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Most everyone was haphazardly put together with little concern for age, gender,

crime, etc., and these places were very noisy and chaotic. In 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was built to provide a new approach: conversion through silence. All inmates were to be in separate rooms without knowing who was around them and with very limited contact with others, all the while enveloped in silence. They were given material to learn how to make shoes. Frankly, silence and solitary confinement did not work so well.

The silent prison was then contrasted with the monastery and Brox uses Thomas Merton's writings about the need for silence in a monastery. Silence is one of the important elements of what makes a monastery a monastery, though there are no vows of silence. However, a major difference with a prison, as envisaged by that in Philadelphia, is that community is just as important. Silence does not work without community and community does not work without silence. We need periods of silence in our lives along with periods of time spent with other people.

Often, as in a prison, silence is used as a punishment and a way to break down an individual. Silence for a monk is to open the monk up to God and others, to provide a place of refreshment, wonder and conversion. The book left me thinking about my own use of silence: when I use it well and when I don't. Brox's point is that we all need silence, but how we use it and when we use it becomes an important consideration. □



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Benedictine Saints

Saint Vitalis of Assisi was born in Bastia Umbria one hundred plus years after Saint Francis of Assisi. During his youth he too sowed his wild oats and then went on pilgrimages in an attempt to assuage his guilt and expiate his sins. Eventually he returned to Umbria and became a monk at the Benedictine abbey in Subiaco. Late in life, he became a hermit of Santa Maria di Violenza near Assisi and lived there in such extreme poverty that all he owned was his tattered habit and a cup he used to drink water from a nearby spring. His reputation for holiness spread only after his death in 1370. He is patron saint against sickness

and disease affecting the bladder and genitals. A hair tonic is named after him that can still be purchased through Amazon. According to Wikipedia, on May 29, 2011, his head—preserved as a relic—went to auction in County Meath, Ireland, and was purchased by Billy Jamieson for 3,500 Euros. In November of 2016 it was sold to an oddities collector and resides in a private gallery somewhere in the United States. His feast day is May 31.

Saint Gertrude of Nivelles was born around 628 in Landen, a town located in what is now the Belgian province of

Flemish Brabant. When she was ten years old, her father hosted the king at a banquet and attempted to give his daughter away as a bride for the sake of worldly ambition and mutual alliance. Gertrude, however, refused. Indeed, she lost her temper, and vowed to remain celibate as a spouse of Christ the Lord, which went down well with the suitor who could not, of course, trump Christ. But as a consequence, her sister Begga was given to the Carolingian duke, a marriage that produced Pepin the Middle, the great-grandfather of Charlemagne. When Gertrude's father died, Itta, her mother, tonsured Gertrude in order to dissuade violent abductors who knew that she was thus marked for a life of religious service. Nevertheless, there was a constant flow of suitors until Itta established the Abbey of Nivelles and both mother and daughter retired there. Christianity was not widespread in Gertrude's time. The establishment of monasteries in the 7th and 8th centuries did much to spread the faith. Gertrude knew pages of the scripture by memory, and as abbess of Nivelles devoted herself to the care of the sick, elderly and the poor, perhaps to imprudence because she died at 31 years of age in 659. She instructed the nuns to bury her in old clothes. Instead, they made a grand reliquary for her body that was blown apart by a German bomb in 1940. The 337 fragments were reassembled. Her feast is March 17th. She is patroness of travelers, gardeners and cats, and protects against mice and rats, and mental illness. □