

School & Convent History by Martha Kuennen Elsbernd
(written in 1987)

Now, I'd like to tell you about going to school my first day. I will never forget it. Since everyone was Catholic in our neighborhood, we all went to the Catholic school, an old wooden building between the sisters' convent and the church. The day before my first day in first grade (no kindergarten then) which was a Sunday, my dad showed me which road to take and asked me if I'd know the way tomorrow. When dad was with me, it seemed easy to know but the next morning, as I was walking the two miles all alone, when I got to the crossroads, I wasn't sure which way to go. I felt afraid and unsure. Had I chosen the road to my left, it would have taken me to Fort Atkinson rather than to Festina. But eventually, guided by my guardian angel, I chose the right direction. Imagine going the first day of school all alone and walking! There were no school buses in those days. When I got as far as where Ron Buchheit now lives, I could see the tall church steeple of our Festina church, and I was so glad because then I knew I was going the right road. There were no school lunches at that time so each child carried his own little lunch pail, bringing lunch packed in the morning or the evening before. Walking to school was the usual way. Everybody walked, some as far as four miles. Everybody went to the Catholic school which was a wooden framed building having two rooms on the first floor and two on the second floor. Each room had two classes or grades and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from La Crosse staffed our school with four teachers. There were six sisters in all. One was the music teacher and the other was the housekeeper for the other sisters. I liked school, and I really treasured the holy pictures the sisters gave me. To this day, I have saved them.

Because we had only horses for transportation to go to school in winter, many children were boarded at the sisters' house. We'd go there on Monday and go home on Friday. We only had two big bedrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls. We had one long counter where each of us lined up with a wash basin. Sometimes in the winter, there was ice in the water in our basins. At one time, there were 40 children staying and the housekeeping sister fed us all. People would bring things like meat and potatoes that would help provide for us. There were no snowplows so farmers helped each other shovel snow and make the road passable with sled and horses. Sometimes they cut fences and the sleds went through the fields. Children boarded also with other residents in Festina during the school days of winter.



Pictured: Convent, School and Church early 1900s