

heritage series

those early years~~
the seeds are sown

1908 ~ 1919



Class of 1912



--- 75 years ---

The festivities for D'Youville's first commencement in 1912 were week-long and well remembered by Buffalo's educational and social circles. The week opened with a student performance of "As You Like It." Class Day followed with its gracious presentation of graduates in flowing dresses amid flowers and music. Commencement itself took place on Saturday evening, June 8. All these events, of course, were set in what is now the Kavinoky Theatre. A solemn pontifical Mass was the Sunday morning event. A faculty banquet on Monday evening closed the celebration.

All this let the world know that another college had entered the ranks of institutions of higher learning. Actually, only five degrees were conferred during that week of elaborate ceremonies. There were three B.A.'s, one M.A. and an honorary doctorate of music. The college charter empowered the institution to grant:

. . .such honors, degrees or diplomas as are granted by any college or seminary of learning in the State of New York, . . .but nothing in this act shall be construed to give the power to confer any degree or right to practice law or medicine. The master's degree shall not be conferred upon any person who has not already received the baccalaureate degree from said college department or from some other college or seminary of learning authorized to grant such degree

More important than the panoply of that first commencement was the fact that this new college was the first institution in Western New York to grant baccalaureate degrees to women. D'Youville had focused on the need for higher education for women at a time when such a movement was considered not only unnecessary but foolhardy and presumptuous. But there was support. The Courier, for example, said, "The opening of D'Youville College marks an epoch in the history of education in Buffalo, for this magnificent new structure erected through the enterprise of the Grey Nuns is the first college for higher education of women to be established in this city."

When Professor William Martin, director of studies, spoke at that first commencement on the "Aims of D'Youville College," some of his remarks had a rather modern ring:

. . . All but philistines and barbarians and misogynists, I feel sure, believe that higher education for women is, in these days, not only desirable but necessary, that, to use the brutal words of business, it pays and it pays well . . .

. . . As the problems of life are becoming more and more complex, women must be better prepared to meet their work with competence and confidence . . .

. . . It is to be expected that there must be many generations more before the male belief shall finally die that woman's path to paradise lies over a road strewn with antimacassars, samplers and bread like-mother-used-to-bake.

These observations, remember, were made in 1912 by a lay faculty member at a time when women did not yet have the right to vote. (Prof. Martin's complete address is available in the archives.)

Another distinction for the new college came from the fact that D'Youville was the second local institution to grant baccalaureate degrees. Canisius College was first. The University of Buffalo, founded in 1846, was a collection of professional schools and did not confer baccalaureate degrees until 1920. Buffalo State College, an outgrowth of a teacher-training institution housed in the present Grover Cleveland High School, did not grant degrees until it moved to its present campus on Elmwood Avenue.

There was also a third distinction. D'Youville was the second Catholic college for women in New York State. The College of New Rochelle had opened four years before.

As time moved on, the new college laid foundations and set directions judiciously and with vision. Three strong threads emerged and remain evident today: (1) a stress on liberal arts and culture, (2) involvement in the local community, and (3) movement with the times.

Courses, exclusively in liberal arts fields, were consistent with the catalog statement that the college has for its purpose "the training of young women for higher efficiency in intellectual and social work." Required subjects for freshmen and sophomores included: religion, Church History, logic, English, Latin, science, French or German, metaphysics, history and mathematics. These called for an average of 24 hours a semester and translated into more than 160 credits for a degree. A further requirement of the B.A. was that all candidates be able to read German or French at sight. The course of study was approved by the State Education Department in 1911.

Writing skills were so important that the catalog stated: "No candidate[for admission] will be accepted whose work in English is notably deficient in spelling, punctuation, grammar or paragraphing." The quality of literary performance was evident in the D'Youville Magazine, the first issue of which--72 pages long and beautifully printed--appeared in November 1908. Contributors included not only college students (there were nine) but faculty and alumnae of Holy Angels Academy.

(continued)

The importance of music can be gauged from the 1918 catalog where for the first time there was a listing of faculty. Of the 26 members, eight were instructors and professors of singing, music, harp and art. Theater, too, was important. Despite the small student body, Shakespearean plays were produced as part of the commencement events and were highly praised by press and audience. Surely in those early years and for decades after, D'Youville was a center of culture.

Before long, there were other needs to be met. In 1909 extension courses in the late afternoon were offered to part time students and later to public school teachers. Soon a program was implemented for music supervisors in the public schools. Summer sessions started in 1914. A winter lecture series, open to the public, continued for many years. The first series included 17 lectures by faculty and well known scholars, men and women, from other areas.

Then came World War I. When the solidly liberal arts curriculum was found lacking, a degree in secretarial studies was instituted. (The catalog added, "Students will be given training in business correspondence in French and German.") Students and faculty bought and sold Liberty Bonds and War Savings stamps and became active in the Red Cross.

With the onset of the twenties, D'Youville was no longer a fledgling institution.

+ + + + +

December 8, 1982

D'Youville College

Sister Sheila Driscoll GNSH, archivist