

Alexandra Tempus

History 460 - Place Paper

T.A. Ariel Eisenberg

24 November, 2008

No Trespassing

There is something dead about the novitiate. The land is absolutely still and eerily quiet, save the rushing torrent of Freeborn Falls. Trees stand aligned in unnaturally linear patterns, as if expecting the arrival of someone who will never come. The white majestic beauty of the mansion reveals an ashy interior devastated by fire and neglect. The structure's immense foundation is bound to the soil, but in all its seeming permanence there is something lost about the novitiate, too. It sits, as it has sat for years, with no real purpose and no living soul to inhabit its space or wonder at its grandeur.

Yet life did happen here. It gave of itself to carry out a dream. It sacrificed in the name of humanity and forged ahead in the name of God. It deliberated passionately and wavered in ambiguity. It altered the environment profoundly. Today, one can follow paths on the novitiate land that lead to nowhere and kick at foundations of buildings no longer in existence. Long intended as a place of healing, this plot along Wisconsin's Red River has instead become a wound, an abandoned symbol of social discord that sits empty still, awaiting new life.

A House for Jane

The destiny of the property now known as "the novitiate" changed forever when Jennie Peters purchased it in November of 1938. The land, situated along Red River in a rural area between the city of Shawano and the town of Gresham in northeast Wisconsin,

was owned by the Wisconsin Paper and Fiber Company, which sold it to Peters for \$6,000. Peters, the widow of a high-ranking National Biscuit Company executive, intended to build a home there for herself and her chronically ill adult daughter Jane. For Peters and her daughter, the land was ideally close to Jane's beloved childhood governess Anna Schulte, who had recently married Frank Schulte and moved with him to a farm in the area.¹

It is not known for sure if the riverside location of the property was a deciding factor for Jennie Peters. The mansion eventually built there, however, features what were once enormous windows and an oversized second floor balcony made to overlook the stunning view of Red River's Freeborn Falls. It may have been that the sights and sounds of this natural phenomenon were considered therapeutic for the ailing Jane Peters. In the heart of an area known for the export of timber, the falls are said to be named for a man named Freeborn who was either injured or killed in a logging accident at the falls.² But before the logging industry set in, the river served entirely different purposes, according to lifelong Red River area resident Joel Kroenke, a campus planner for the College of Menominee Nation. Kroenke had the opportunity to speak with a member of the Schulte family who showed Kroenke authentic Indian arrowheads he had found on the novitiate property, indicating a history of Native American activity in the area. As recently as the age of exploration, Kroenke explained, Native Americans would travel up the river to hunt salmon. Places along the river such as Freeborn Falls and the neighboring Gilmer Falls were effective points of harvest.³

Regardless of the longstanding human presence in the area, the land before the Peters' purchase would be described as "low and swampy, and one of the few areas along

the river that was still wilderness.”⁴ Before construction on the mansion could begin, trees and other brush were cleared out as tons of filler were hauled in. A trio of architects were called upon to design the building, with whom Jennie would frequently meet to discuss plans. While her future home was in the midst of construction, Jane Peters died on December, 13, 1939, at the age of 39. After burying her daughter in New York, Jennie Peters returned to the Red River property, and progress on the mansion continued. When the thirty-five room Georgian estate was complete, Peters moved in and remained there throughout the 1940s. She frequented nearby communities, entertained friends and shared the home with a butler/cook and chauffer/caretaker. Although the third floor of the mansion was a servant’s quarters, a separate caretaker’s home was later built on the property. In the late 1940s, Peters decided to return to New York.⁵

The Novitiate

In 1950, Jennie Peters made arrangements for the Alexian Brothers to inherit her Red River property. The Alexian Brothers, a Catholic order with a base in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, have been associated with care of the sick since the Black Plague era in Europe. It was determined that the Alexian Brothers would build an additional cloister walk and chapel onto the existing mansion, converting the residence to a novitiate, a training ground for Alexian novices.⁶ After several years of planning, the Brothers broke ground for the construction project on April 19, 1954. The winter season was relatively mild, and construction continued throughout the year.⁷ In comparing photographs from before and after this construction period, a substantial number of trees were visibly removed from the east side of the mansion to make way for the massive addition. Pencil renderings of the novitiate from after its completion show young pine trees and deciduous

saplings planted around the new perimeter of the structure. Today, these trees remain, planted in patterns circling phantom buildings.

Work on the novitiate was finished in May 1955. The pamphlet from the building's dedication headlined a page of photographs "Once but a Dream...Now a Reality." Descriptions of the photographs detail the intensive process and glowingly praise those who labored on the structure. "The outstanding features of the building are beautiful architectural lines in an artistic setting, maintaining a monastic simplicity throughout as shown by the lengthy cloister walk, arching windows and quarry tile floor. The new novitiate is truly a memorial to all who participated in its development and construction."⁸ The chapel, known as the Abbey, was adorned with an Italian marble altar and stained glass windows. Upon the dedication of the building, the Alexian Brothers received numerous letters of congratulations. Stanislaus Vincent Bona, Bishop of Green Bay and founder of Wisconsin's Silver Lake College, wrote to Alexian head Brother Florian Eberle, "It is our sincere hope and prayer that the Novitiate will be blessed with the response of many young men who, hearing the invitation of Christ, will answer the call and join the ranks of the Alexian Brothers."⁹

The novitiate operated self-sufficiently for thirteen years. Its premises included a farm, a barber shop, an infirmary, a vegetable and canning department, a music room and recreational facilities, among other amenities.¹⁰ The community on the novitiate's picturesque grounds seemed idyllic to outsiders and insiders alike. As a child in grade school, Joel Kroenke said he would occasionally witness the young men in training at the novitiate proceeding along the countryside, linked together and singing aloud.¹¹ In his documentary about the novitiate, former Alexian novice Patrick Rick reminisced, "The

remote location insulated us from distraction, the bitter cold and even our neighbors.”¹²

This period of harmony and learning continued until the Alexian Brothers relocated in 1968, returning occasionally to the Shawano County novitiate on retreat.

Deed or Death

Joseph Plonka was appointed the interim superintendent of the novitiate upon the Brothers’ departure from the facility. Plonka was to live in the caretaker’s home with his family until the Alexian Brothers made definitive decisions concerning the property.¹³ Around midnight on New Year’s Day 1975, a group of armed Menominee Indians broke into the Plonka home, taking the family hostage and claiming the land as Indian property. The front page of the Shawano Evening Leader newspaper was dominated with the headline “Indians Hold Alexian Brothers Novitiate.” The article detailed the incident, reporting that “The Indians moved into the monastery early Wednesday morning, and said they are demanding that the religious order turn the land over to them. They said laws made by white men provide that the facility be returned to the Indians if it is no longer in use as an educational or religious institution.” The article identified the Indians as the Menominee Warrior Society, previously unknown to the public majority. The Plonka family was released around 2 a.m. that morning.¹⁴ The takeover marked the beginning of a 34-day occupation of the novitiate property by the MWS. The incident sparked heated debate on all sides across the nation, making headlines in the New York Times and attracting noted civil rights activists to the area.

At first, about 70 local law officials secured a perimeter around the premises, forbidding the passage of any person or thing. It was determined that about 50 “militants” occupied the novitiate. The MWS stated that they had enough food to last them two

weeks, an indication of their intentions to hold out until their demands were met. It surfaced that the official Menominee tribal governing body, the Menominee Restoration Committee, had been in talks before the takeover with the Alexian Brothers about converting the novitiate into a rehabilitation center for the tribe. Lead by Ada Deer, the Menominee Restoration Committee made attempts to distance itself from the MWS. The Shawano Evening Leader reported that Deer "... said the Indians involved in the takeover apparently were a group of dissidents that failed to get control of the restoration committee last month. She discounted claims by the dissidents that the land involved in the takeover was Indian land."¹⁵ Yet large numbers of tribe members rallied in support of the MWS, marching and picketing outside the novitiate with signs reading "Free the Menominee Warriors."¹⁶ The novitiate takeover served as a catalyst for internal debate within the Menominee tribe about the nature of land and its ownership.

The Wisconsin National Guard was called to the novitiate on January 7th. "The sole purpose of the National Guard presence at the besieged Alexian Brothers Novitiate...is to remove the Menominee Warrior Society from the premises," the newspaper reported. The National Guard relieved weary local officials who had maintained the perimeter since New Year's Day. Investigating the intentions behind the takeover, officials searched property records. "The Menominee Indians occupying the building say that the land on which it was erected originally was tribal land however county authorities say a search of records back for more than a century show that it never was a part of tribal land."¹⁷ The MWS stated that it wanted the novitiate land for use as a hospital.

The occupation of the novitiate was a time of intense turmoil for the surrounding communities; fear influencing the polarized sentiments on both sides of the debate. Joel Kroenke remembers hearing gunshots from his nearby family residence and seeing National Guardsmen move strategically across the countryside once walked by peaceful Alexian novices. To get to his home during the occupation, Kroenke was forced to stop at two checkpoints.¹⁸ Photos published in the Shawano Evening Leader depicted large army vehicles delivering groups of heavily armed Guardsmen. Al Popp of Shawano told the Leader, “If you don’t stop them [the Indians] here, they’re just going to take the rest of the land around here.” His feelings were echoed by many others in the predominantly white surrounding communities.¹⁹ Meanwhile, inside the novitiate, MWS member Buddy Chevalier, Jr. wrote in a letter to fellow Menominee Albert Fowler that the group was only taking back what belonged to the tribe in the first place. “It is not our way to start trouble or fight, but our lands, our people, and our free way of life is being stolen from under our very own eyes, and many of us do not see it.”²⁰

Alexian head Brother Florian Eberle stated on January 6th that the lawless violence of the takeover had tainted the rapport between the Catholic order and the Menominee Tribe. “If they would have come to me in peace...I would have presented it to the provincial council of the brothers for their consideration. We would have looked favorably on that request.” Eberle predicted that the Brothers would not consider a transaction with the tribe.²¹ However, after a month of refused offers, town meetings and protests on all sides, the Alexian Brothers and the Menominee Warrior Society came to an astonishing agreement. “Members of the Warriors agreed Sunday to an offer from the Alexian order that turns the abbey over to the Menominee tribe for ‘\$1 and other

considerations.”²² The property had been previously valued by the Alexian Brothers at around \$750,000. On February 4th 1975, after 34 days of occupation, the 39 MWS members inside the novitiate were escorted in handcuffs off of the grounds.²³

The Fallout

Though no lives were lost in the 1975 occupation, the emotional battle that occurred at the novitiate perhaps forestalled further progress on the land. The Menominee people were forced to give up the property they had so passionately fought for due to tribal politics and lack of funding. The mansion was ravaged by fire later that year, and the Alexian Brothers found another buyer. One owner attempted to make it a tourist attraction, but was hindered by illness. In the spring of 2003, the novitiate was demolished by wrecking ball and dynamite. The original Peters mansion remained, along with the caretaker’s home, which was later demolished as well.²⁴ Now owned by Whitewater-Gresham Estates, LLC, the property is listed with Hilgenberg Realtors in Shawano. In 2005, the company attempted to auction the land in several parcels to be made into upscale riverside residences. That endeavor, like others before it, never came to fruition. Ken Fish, a Menominee who participated in the occupation, said would like to see the building restored and used as a museum.²⁵ Joel Kroenke thinks that the mansion would best serve the surrounding communities as an arts center.²⁶ In 2005, the Town of Richmond said they would “welcome the increased tax base” from potential residents of the area.²⁷

The mansion is a relic of dreams realized and dashed again, seemingly permanent and yet ever changing. Jennie Peters envisioned the land as a place of rest and revival for her sick daughter. The Alexian Brothers considered the land a blessing from God, a

refuge at which they could carry out their dedication to healthcare. The Menominee hoped the land would be the site of a tribal hospital. It sits now not quite beyond the line of sight from Butternut Road, behind a fence that has long since fallen away. A gravel path forks one way to nowhere and leads in another direction to the remnants of a circular drive still etched before the mansion's sweeping entrance. In front, a once-grand stone gateway to the property is barred by metal, labeled simply, "No trespassing." In back, Freeborn Falls rushes on as ever, a witness to the passions of man played out on the bank of Red River.

-
1. Buettner, Vicki. "The House That Jennie Built." *Voyageur* (Winter-Spring 1999): 56-61.
 2. See note 1 above, 61.
 3. Joel Kroenke, interview by author, Shawano, WI, October 24, 2008.
 4. Killeen, S.M., qtd. in Buettner, "The House that Jennie Built," 57.
 5. See note 1 above.
 6. See note 1 above, 59.
 7. Dedication, Alexian Brothers Novitiate, Gresham, Wisconsin, October 30, 1955.
 8. See note 7 above.
 9. Bona, S. V. 1955. Letter to Florian Eberle. *Dedication of Alexian Brothers Novitiate*. August 27, 1955.

-
10. See note 1 above, 59.
 11. Joel Kroenke, interview by author, Shawano, WI, October 19, 2008.
 12. *The Novitiate: A Contemporary Cavalry, Indian and Missionary Story*, documentary, Directed by Patrick Rick. Produced by Counterfeitbill Productions 14 mins., 2003.
 13. See note 1 above, 59.
 14. United Press International, "Indians Hold Alexian Bros. Novitiate," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 2, 1975.
 15. United Press International, "Standoff Continues at Alexian Brothers Site," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 3, 1975.
 16. United Press International "Tribe Members Reject Offer," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 4, 1975.
 17. United Press International, "National Guard to Clear Indians From Novitiate," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 7, 1975.
 18. Joel Kroenke, interview by author, Shawano, WI, October 19, 2008.
 19. United Press International, "Area Residents Will Confront Lucey on Novitiate Takeover," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 7, 1975.
 20. Chevalier, Jr, Buddy. 1975. Letter to Albert Fowler. *Shawano Evening Leader*. February 3, 1975.
 21. United Press International, "Alexian Brothers Say Indians Ruined Chances by Takeover," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Jan. 6, 1975.
 22. United Press International, "Shooting Breaks Out Near Novitiate, Sign Agreement," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Feb. 3, 1975.
 23. United Press International, "Indians Evacuate Alexian Novitiate," *Shawano Evening Leader*, 1, Feb. 4, 1975.
 24. See note 12 above.
 25. Tempus, Kent and Cody Kucharcyk, "Gresham Mansion, Land To Be Sold," *Wisconsin State Journal*, sec. B1, Aug. 15, 2005.
 26. Joel Kroenke, interview by author, Shawano, WI, October 19, 2008.

27. See note 25 above.