

Nuns have many avocations.

Mother Hank Raises The Roof

Kenny Joel

MOTHER CATHERINE HENRY of the Religious of the Sacred Heart was teaching the First Communion Class in the private school on the campus of Duchesne College, Omaha, on January 13, 1962. Her Superior tapped on the classroom door, entered, and whispered, "The editor of *The New York Journal American* is on the phone and insists on speaking to you." Mother Henry almost expected her to add, "What have you done?" Instead she said, "I'll take your class."

Mother Catherine hastened to the phone and heard, "Mother, we want some dope to go with your picture." "What picture?"

"The one the Associated Press just put on the wires. It's a corker, but the caption is skimpy."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about."

* While clerk of the works for the erection of the Francis P. Matthews Memorial Hall at Duchesne College, Omaha, Neb., Mother Catherine Henry, R.S.C.J. taught the true meaning of Ecumenism—and got the building up, too.

"Listen. Last night *The Omaha World Herald* ran a photo of you wearing a hard hat labelled HANK. Then the AP—"

"Oh! No! He told me he wouldn't show it to anybody!"

"Well, he did—and it's now on its way around the globe, so why not make sure we got all the names spelled right?"

Within a week clippings were being airmailed to Duchesne from all over the world with captions in many languages—Paris and Quebec papers called her helmet *doublement coiffée* (double head-dress). None of the papers, however, explained how Mother Henry came to be clerk of the works, or liaison between contractor and client, for the construction of the Francis P. Matthews Memorial Hall.

It all began in the early '50s, when Sister while teaching chemistry and physics in Seattle volunteered to do something about a situation very irksome to the faculty. Washington State

Law requires that a licensed engineer be on duty whenever a steam boiler is in use. The nuns did not like the way their engineer refused to do anything else whatsoever. So Mother Henry took a correspondence course in heat engineering from a Lutheran College. An oil engineer named Sylvester Schifskey coached her in learning the 20 lessons.

After a 2-hour written exam, followed by an hour oral exam, Mother listened to the decision of the examining board of 4 engineers:—"You have done very well—and you sure had a good teacher." She was awarded what is called a Third Grade Certificate as heating engineer which entitled her to operate the school's boilers.

In 1958 she lost her job as boiler engineer when she was transferred to Omaha.

One day when she saw the Superior studying blueprints for the new elementary school building as if trying to decipher something in Sanskrit, Mother Henry studied the plans for a while, and then casually said:—"Look at this sewer-drain! The elevation of the land at the street level is higher by one whole foot than at the point where the pipe leaves the building." The amazed Superior asked, "What else can you see?"

From then on it was not unusual to see Mother Henry with a slide-rule in one hand, a spirit-level in the other, and a roll of blueprints under her arm. As a result, when the com-

munity began to consider the erecting a much needed dormitory for the collegians Mother Henry was appointed to the building committee. The other committee members spoke of familiar things as colors, coverings, furniture and fixtures. But Mother Henry was more interested in site planning, layout, elevations, electrical and mechanical installations, concrete and masonry, unions, subcontracts and insurance.

"She did not try to run the committee," says Mother Constance Campbell, president of Duchesne, "but most questions just seemed to gravitate naturally in her direction. I'd hate to be involved in any building project without Mother Henry around. She has a natural bent for such things and always takes the long range view such as, how the building is going to stand up 75 years from now."

Mr. Al Williams, regional supervisor of the Federal Housing and Home Agency, arranged a loan to the college to finance the building. "I have seldom seen any project," he says, "where everybody was so enthusiastic. This was due in great part to Mother Henry, our unofficial superintendent. Her spirit was contagious, so that everybody on the job was doing his best and having a good time.

"I don't mean she was just a cheerleader. She kept an eye on everything. In fact, she was the most knowledgeable female about construction I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. For instance, the plans

called for a package type boiler with several units or increments that could be opened up one after the other. For several reasons, all of them good, she didn't like this. She tackled the architects and got a conventional-type boiler.

"Don't ask me why, but whenever I had to write to the head office in Chicago about changing the plans and putting a little chapel in the building I always got faster and more favorable answers than on any other project. Everybody had the greatest confidence in Mother Henry."

The weather during the fall of 1961, when construction began, was marvelous but a tough winter was forecast. Nevertheless, Mother Henry promised Architect Leo Daly and Contractor Eldon Butler that Our Blessed Mother would help them continue the work day by day—without any stoppages.

They began to pour cement on December 8th—under a sky that did not look exactly friendly. About 10 a.m. a snow flurry began to swirl. "Look at that!" exclaimed a cement man who was a pious Protestant. "It is snowing!"

"Don't worry about it," said Mother calmly. "Our Blessed Mother will make it stop."

The man looked at her popeyed. He thought she was referring to the Superior whom he had met on several occasions. "Do you mean to say she controls the snow, too?"

"Don't worry about it," said the clerk of the works.

It stopped snowing, and from then on the man showed greater deference to the Superior whenever she made a tour of inspection.

Mother Henry's main job was to make sure the college got what it was paying for. But as the work progressed, the architect and contractor enlisted her help.

The ceiling of one lounge area was supposed to be finished off with firm plaster, yet the plans called for 21 access-doors in the same ceiling to get at hidden pipes. Mother Henry suggested acoustical tiles that could be moved and replaced without any trouble.

No architect could be expected to know how much nuns love lots of closet space. Mother discovered usable space for closets at the foot of stairwells and elsewhere. It got so that no empty space was sealed up without first asking her if she wanted it for a closet or something.

Nobody cared much for the lighting fixtures for the main reception room of Matthews Memorial so Mother Henry searched through dozens and dozens of catalogues until she found just the right fixtures to please everybody.

Various trade unions were terminating their contracts in the spring of 1962—and Contractor Eldon Butler held his breath. But work on the building was never interrupted. The steam fitters went on strike in Omaha but kept working at Duchesne. Other

construction sites in the city were picketed but Al Williams says, "It was the only project in my territory that was right on schedule."

Mother Henry gave out plenty of holy pictures and blessed medals but she did more than that. Since the corps of builders was predominantly non-Catholic (for no particular reason) she explained who Saint Joseph the Worker is, and why everybody should carry his medal and why a handful of such medals go good in the cement.

Even though there was danger that the project might be hit by a strike, Mother kept after the men to get to all Union meetings. She also acquainted them with appropriate quotes from the Social Encyclicals.

When one of the workers, a colored man, became a father for the tenth time, Mother Henry had a hand-knit sweater ready for the baby. When another man, a non-Catholic, left his wife and children, Mother talked to him on the side and then communicated with his wife, and got them back together again.

One thing the men will never forget is the unusual group of sidewalk superintendents she brought along to inspect the work once a week, the boys of her First Communion Class.

"I promised, if they were good for a whole week, I would take them on a tour of the new building. They responded beautifully. One day Mr. Butler saw us coming and he yelled

down to someone working in a deep hole, 'Hey, Les! Look who's here!' When the man climbed up and showed his head, all my boys bowed from the waist and said, 'How do you do, Mr. Les.'

"One of the boys was so impressed that after the fifth trip he said, 'You know, I think I'll be a priest.' When I asked why, he said, 'Because they're always building churches and schools and things like that.'

"I asked them to draw pictures to represent Confirmation, Extreme Unction, Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders. For Holy Orders, Terry Sullivan drew two tablets of stone, looking like tombstones on which he wrote the numbers from 1 to 10. The 10 Holy Orders! Isn't that a wonderful way to think of the Commandments?"

After Bill Ramsey's picture of Mother Henry in the steel helmet went out on the AP wires, the Superior with an eye to fund-raising said: "You'll just have to swallow your humility. This may be just what is needed to boost our financial drive."

The Stars & Stripes published the photo in both editions, the regular and the Pacific. News clippings arrived from Japan and Okinawa, from Ireland and England, from various cities in Africa and Asia. Letters followed.

The most pathetic one was post-marked "Bremen," and addressed to "Catherine Henry Religious of the Sacred Heart, Omaha, U.S.A." In it Mrs. Sophia Tenz related that she had

seen the picture and had recognized the name "Omaha." Many years ago her brother had written her from that city; but then they had lost track of each other. Mrs. Tenz wondered if by any remote chance Mother Henry might possibly know if her brother was alive or dead. She gave his name, one which is as common in German as Smith in English.

The quest seemed utterly hopeless.

But Mother Henry and a nun who could speak German sat down at a phone with a list of over 200 numbers. They found the missing man. After he communicated with his sister, she again wrote to Mother Henry:—"I am not a Catholic. I will never be able to thank you enough. I did not know there was such Christian charity left in the world." ●