

MONTE CASSINO, METTEN,
AND MINNESOTA

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MONTE CASSINO, METTEN AND MINNESOTA

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(1) In following the development of civilization through early **European** history it is necessary to dwell at some length upon the Rule of St. Benedict. This rule, better described as a **con-**stitution for the government **of** men living under **certain** conditions, is known as one of the great **governmental** documents of history. It came into being during the critical years when the old Roman Empire of the West was breaking down and western Europe was coming under the rule of those vigorous but untaught tribesmen from the North known as the Teutons. Among the Romans at that time there was an intense interest in the Christian religion. For some time hundreds, and even thousands, of people, persons of wealth, of prominence, and of social position, as well as persons of the humbler walks of life, had renounced the affairs of the world and had turned their thoughts exclusively to the attainment of eternal salvation, which they hoped more certainly to deserve through a life of self-denial.)

This spirit of **self-denial** is one which all ages have lauded. Asceticism had begun in the East and was already a century old when the West took it **up**. Even in the East the thought had arisen that this practice required some organization and should be made of some service to society. It remained, however, for the **West** to realize this thought in its fullest form. This was the work of Benedict of Nursia, a Roman, to whom **suc-**ceeding centuries have reverently paid their respect under the title of St. Benedict. Benedict was of that race of Romans which had conquered and ruled nearly all the civilized world for upwards of five hundred years. Something of the genius **of** his race was apparently preserved in him. The problem

¹ Read at the state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society at St. Cloud on June 16, 1927. *Ed.*

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of ruling others was not of his seeking. It was thrust upon him by the **many** persons who crowded around him to learn to live as he lived — **a life** of perfect self-denial. After several unhappy experiences with such groups, one of which nearly cost him his life, he finally devised a form of government which, while it satisfied the spirit of selfdenial in quest of individual salvation, also struck most dearly the less **selfish** note of service to humanity.

According to tradition, this form of government, known as the Rule of St. Benedict, was finally formulated at **Monte Cassino** in the year **529**. In Benedict's community, among the mountainous hills to the south of Rome, with the blue waters of the Mediterranean off in the distance, this rule proved its excellence during the remaining years of his life. **For the benefit of his sister, Scholastica, Benedict made some slight modifications** in his **rule to suit the needs of women following a religious life**. Thus were founded the first two Benedictine communities for men and women. The Rule of St. Benedict is a masterpiece in the art of government. Others have drawn up on paper regulations which, if followed, would constitute a counsel of perfection. The world has seen many **such** — Benedict's rule was not that. It was, instead, a form of government under which men of religious' zeal could live and work harmoniously together day in, day out, through the changing seasons of the year and the changing outlook of passing years without losing their zest either for religious salvation or for service to humanity. In its provision for work as well as prayer, in its recognition **of** the varying needs of illness and of health, in its adjustment to the changing seasons, and **in** its appreciation of human nature, the rule laid down a form of government which men could follow, whether among the heaping snows of the arctic circle or under the glaring sun of the equatorial zone, whether in southern Italy in 529 or in central Minnesota in 1927. And under all these conditions the ideals remained the same, personal salvation and humanitarian service.

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Monte Cassino, however, is as far away as southern Italy and as long ago as fourteen hundred years. It was a religious community in which Romans were striving for salvation and incidentally helping people within a radius of not more than eighty miles and usually not more than ten. Perhaps another chapter of history may help to make clear what connection that community has with Minnesota.

Everybody knows of Gregory the Great. He too was a Roman. Threequarters of a century had elapsed since the Rule of St. Benedict was formulated, and the times, in Italy at least, were even more out of joint than they had been in **Benedict's** day. Nevertheless the community at Monte Cassino still continued, though Benedict had been dead nearly half a century. Other communities had been formed under the government of this rule. Gregory himself had chosen early to follow a religious life. He used the vast estates to which he had fallen heir for the purpose of founding monasteries, and in all of them the Benedictine rule was observed. When Gregory became pope he decided to extend the sphere of usefulness for which Benedict had provided. He sent Benedictine monks as missionaries to regions not yet Christian. The St. Augustine and forty **companions** whose memory is so dear to English Christians in all lands today were Benedictine monks, and the community they founded at **Canterbury** was such a community. In fact the missionary movement that converted the Anglo-Saxons was a Benedictine service. From the monasteries that grew up in England other monks went out to carry on the work among their kinsmen on the continent. It was a Benedictine monk from England who succeeded in carrying Christianity to the heathen folk of Germany, and German Christians today are as grateful to the Anglo-Saxon Boniface as the English are to Augustine. The textbooks for the training and guidance of converts which Boniface carried with him to Germany were written by the Venerable Bede. The work which Boniface began so successfully was continued after his time, and for the next four centuries the advance of **Christian-**

ity northward **and eastward** on the **continent** was marked by Benedictine monasteries.

In their work in **England** and even more in Germany the Benedictine monasteries realized the ideals of service which their founder had set before them. The people among whom they worked were not yet civilized and the life they led was still a semiraving one. The Benedictine monks had to **teach** these people not only the fundamentals of the Christian **religion**, but also the fundamentals of civilized life. The **monastic** clusters of **buildings** which the monks themselves literally built gradually became the nuclei of permanent villages and towns.. In fact some of the cities of Germany today owe their **origin to these early monasteries.** **From the monastic center the Benedictine monks went out to convert, the heathen and to minister to those already converted.** At the monastic **center the monks** taught the growing **youth** letters, and taught both them and adults agriculture, industry, and, **in general**, the arts of civilization. The importance of their work early won the recognition and support of the great **Carolingian** kings. Charlemagne's father and Charlemagne were especially interested in them. The cooperation of these two rulers **with** the Benedictine monks is best illustrated in the case of the Saxons and Bavarians, the most vigorous and turbulent of the German people. The taming of the Saxons, so far as they were tamed, was accomplished more by the planting of Benedictine monasteries than by the crashing of Charlemagne's sword.

One trait of the **Benedictine** rule for which Benedict himself had provided is fully revealed by the spread of Benedictine monasteries through the north of Europe. Though the monasteries sent out missionaries, and these founded new communities, the latter were cut off from **organic connection** with the parent community almost as soon as they were self-sustaining. Sentiment and tradition often preserved the memory of the earlier connection more or less fondly, but there remained no

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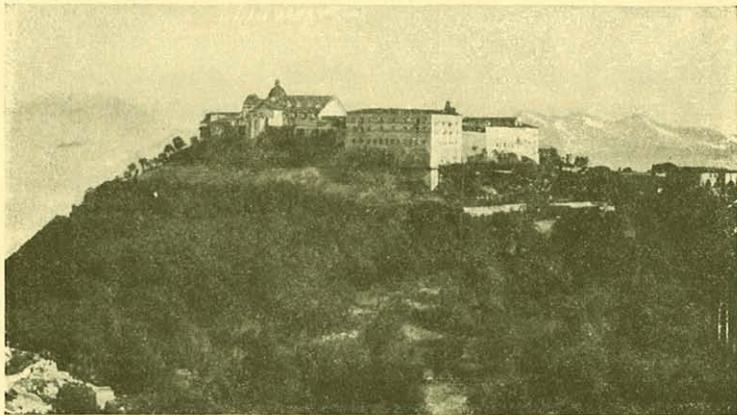
authoritative bond. This has sometimes been spoken of as a defect of the Benedictine rule, and later new orders arose in which an organic connection was maintained between scattered communities. Whether a defect or not, the fact remains that each Benedictine community became essentially a part of the region in which it was located. There were undoubtedly many advantages in this fact. The people of the region would not continue to look upon the Benedictine community as **foreign**. The original monks would quickly be replaced by others **who** had been born and reared in the region, and thus the feeling of community between the people and the monks would facilitate both the work of conversion and more material education. Whether for good or ill, this Benedictine characteristic of the separate entity of each monastery is an important fact in the history of the order.

One of the monasteries established during this great missionary period was the Monastery of **Metten**. This was built on the northern side of the Danube Valley some miles east of Ratisbon in the year **801**. Charlemagne then ruled that territory, and the monastery was in a sense built under his auspices. The people among whom it was built were Bavarians, already Christian, but on the border of Bohemia and the land of the Avars. The work it did in the early years was **exactly** the kind of work that the greater monasteries established **by** St. Boniface were doing. It trained missionary priests, taught the arts of peace, and, in general, served as a force for improvement in the region round about. About a hundred years after its founding its buildings were destroyed by the great invasion of the Hungarians, then a wild people recently come from Asia. It was rebuilt, and, when Otto the Great **finally** defeated the **Hungarians** and established the Ostmark as a protection against them, **Metten** embarked upon a more peaceful career. **Presumably**, some of the monk-priests it trained took part in the **missionary** work among the Hungarians and Slavs, but that work was soon accomplished. **Sec-**

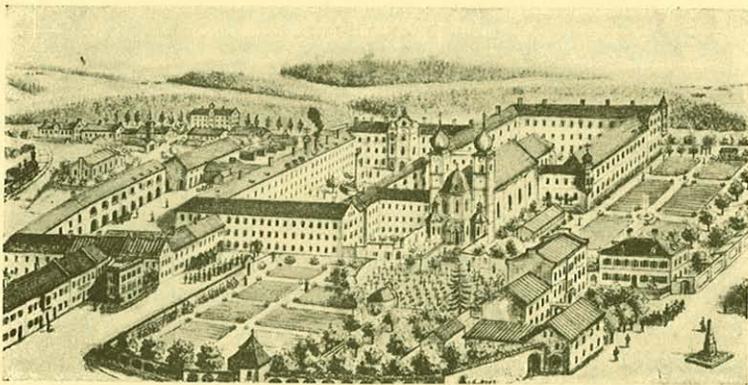
ular hierarchies were established there and the missionary duties of **Metten** came to an end.

Metten was never one of the largest, nor was it the most important of the Benedictine monasteries. From the tenth century on it was a Bavarian institution essentially, **contributing its services** to the locality about it. The **centuries** came and went and **Metten** continued to render its services. Its fortunes fluctuated with those of the region in which it stood. There were times when its abbots were unusually able, when its community was unusually large, and **its influence radiated** out over all Bavaria. There were other times when **its** community was small and its abbots neither **distinguished nor** important. There were times when the chief interests of the **monks** were apparently concerned with the administration of their properties, which had grown considerably, and other times when **Metten** was a leader in learning and art and zeal.

A few specific incidents will illustrate the fluctuations in the career of **Metten**. Its destruction by the Hungarians in the tenth century has already been mentioned. Early in the thirteenth century its buildings were destroyed by fire and years **were** required to repair this damage. Two hundred years later, in the fifteenth century, **Metten** was famous for its beautiful manuscripts and ornamented books, some of **which are** still preserved as models of calligraphy. Two hundred years after that, **in the** seventeenth century, the abbot of **Metten** stands forth as a leading figure in the religious organization of Bavaria. The **great** church with its two spires, which so impresses visitors today, was built in the eighteenth **century**. In 1803, almost **exactly** a thousand years after it was founded, **Metten** and its properties were confiscated by the state and its twenty-three monks scattered. **This** was in the days of Napoleon and under his influence. Almost a generation passed before it was reestablished around one of those twenty-three monks who still remained. **Since** then it has again grown, and upon the outbreak of the World War it was famous for



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its **school**, and **its** community consisted of seventy members, mostly priests.

The establishment of Monte Cassino in **Italy** in **529** thus marks the foundation of an order whose influence was widened by the work of Pope Gregory the Great and later by that of St. Boniface and other English monks. We have seen **this** rule spread with the help of Frankish kings until it led to the **foundation of Metten** in eastern Bavaria in **801**. That monastery was to continue under the Benedictine rule right down to the present day. **Monte Cassino** and **Metten** are **linked**, and **529** has been brought into touch with **1927**, but we are still some distance away from Minnesota.

Visitors to St. Paul are usually shown what is called "the old German church," the Church of the **Assumption**, as one of the most picturesque of the older sights of that picturesque city. **And** tourists as they drive along the highway **that** leads westward out of St. Cloud marvel at the church at St. Joseph, which seems too large for the little village that clusters about it. They are yet more puzzled by the church steeples that peer out over the trees four miles beyond, at **Collegeville**. Yet **all three** and many more spots in Minnesota and the Northwest serve to establish the connection between Minnesota and **Metten** and Monte Cassino.

There are doubtless people still living in St. Cloud and its vicinity who remember a little group of three priests who arrived there in the spring of **1856** and built themselves a wooden structure on a farm some two miles south of that city. **Less** than a year later the territorial legislature of Minnesota passed a law recognizing as a "body **politic** and **corporate**" the members of the religious order of St. Benedict — **Demetrius Marogna**, Cornelius Wittmann, Bruno Riss, and Alexis, Roetzer being mentioned **by** name — and their associates and successors in office. The bill **recognized this** order "as **instituted** for scientific, educational, and **ecclesiastical** purposes" and authorized them to establish an **institution** or seminary to be

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known as "St. John's Seminary." This seminary was actually opened on November 10, 1857, having one professor and five students.

Thus began in Minnesota a community living according to the Rule of St. Benedict and dedicated like Monte Cassino to the two-fold ideals of religious salvation and humanitarian service. It is perhaps fitting in light of the title of this paper to note that the leader of this little band was originally an Italian nobleman. The connection of Minnesota and Monte Cassino is thereby made a bit more intimate. The Very Reverend Demetrius Marogna, however, was not an abbot. His title was that of prior, and his community a priory of the Monastery of St. Vincent in Pennsylvania. The latter had been founded only a few years before by Benedictine monks from Metten in Bavaria. It was there that Father Demetrius had entered the novitiate and from there he had been sent to Minnesota. The Minnesota priory was not long kept under tutelage. The parent monastery cut it adrift in 1858. Scarcely well enough established to be recognized as a monastery, it justified the confidence of its parent by toddling along as a canonical priory until 1865, when, through the efforts of the abbot of St. Vincent, it was raised to the status of an abbey or monastery by the Pope. It is interesting to note that the name of the monastery at this time was "St. Louis on the Lake"

The coming of this little band of monk-priests was due indirectly to the efforts of an interesting missionary priest, Father Pierz, who had worked among the Indians and whites of this Northwest for many years. Father Pierz was one of those rare individuals who thrive on hardship that would kill most people. He lived to be ninety-five years old, though he had spent many of those years in tramping the forests and fields of the region in an age when there were no roads to ease the journey of the weary traveler and very little shelter, to temper the rigors of subzero winters. Father Pierz came

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to love this region, to regard it as God's own country. In his enthusiasm he saw in the woods and lands, the lakes and streams of Minnesota an abundance of natural resources even beyond the vivid imagination of later realtors. When settlement began up here Father **Pierz** launched an eloquent epistolary campaign through German Catholic newspapers of the country urging Germans who were Catholics to settle here. It was his enthusiastic urging that attracted the early settlers of this race and religion. When they arrived he sought to minister to them, but found the work too great for his **declining** energy. He was then already past seventy years, and he sought for others to carry on his religious work. One of his assistants, a young priest, returning from an emergency service in midwinter, was frozen to death. The authorities really did not require such an incident to convince them of the need of special help. There was need both of persons who were trained to endure hardships and of persons who understood **the language** and customs of these settlers. Bishop Cretin of St. Paul **finally** wrote to missionary societies in Bavaria for aid, and was by **them directed** to the Monastery of St. Vincent in Pennsylvania, which had been established under the **leadership** of Father Sebastian Wimmer, himself a monk-priest from **Metten** in Bavaria.

With the establishment of the Benedictine foundation in Minnesota, additional members continued to come for several years. Some of these had entered the order at **Metten**, others at St. Vincent. It was not long, however, before the **community** was recruiting its new members from Minnesota and surrounding regions! Indeed, the second abbot of the institution, Father **Alexius Edelbrock**, was a boy in St. Cloud when the first fathers came there. He had been one of the first students of old St. John's Seminary, but because his father **opposed his** desire to become a priest and monk **he had** gone to St. Vincent to enter the order. When his education was completed the abbot there bent him back to Minnesota, and he be-

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came one of the strong personalities in the history of the **community** as well as an interesting and important figure in the history of the state and the Northwest. Of pioneer stock, accustomed from earliest boyhood to pioneer life in Minnesota, he was eminently fitted to cope with the problems that arose. Under his leadership the monastery **grew** in membership, in **material** resources, and in influence. He was one of that iron **age** of strong men in Minnesota, the age of James J. Hill, Archbishop Ireland; and Bishop Whipple, with all of whom he was well acquainted and among whom he **occupies** an honorable place.

It is not the **purpose** of this paper to present a systematic history of the community in Minnesota. That, would be too long a story, and it is better left to others more familiar with the detailed development of the community and the Northwest. Only a few of the more salient features of its work and importance can **be pointed** out here.¹

That first community had barely begun its work when it realized the need of added help from women in educational work. So a call was early sent to Bavaria for wpmen who were willing to undertake educational work under the hardships of pioneer life: The first group of Benedictine sisters responded to this call in 1857, **just** a year after the arrival of the fathers, and thus was founded the Convent of St. Benedict, now flourishing at St. Joseph. It was their work to care for elementary education, minister to the sick, and serve as a refuge for those in need. As at Monte Cassino, so here in Minnesota, the Benedictine **monastery** and **convent** grew up within a few miles of each other, and both contributed to the development of a wide locality. The central establishment at

¹ For information about the Benedictine community the writer is indebted to a volume by Father Alexius Hoffmann entitled *St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of Its History* (Collegeville, 1907); to a manuscript history of the monastery by the same author, which the writer was permitted to read, in the library of the university; and to the kindness of the Abbot Alcuin.

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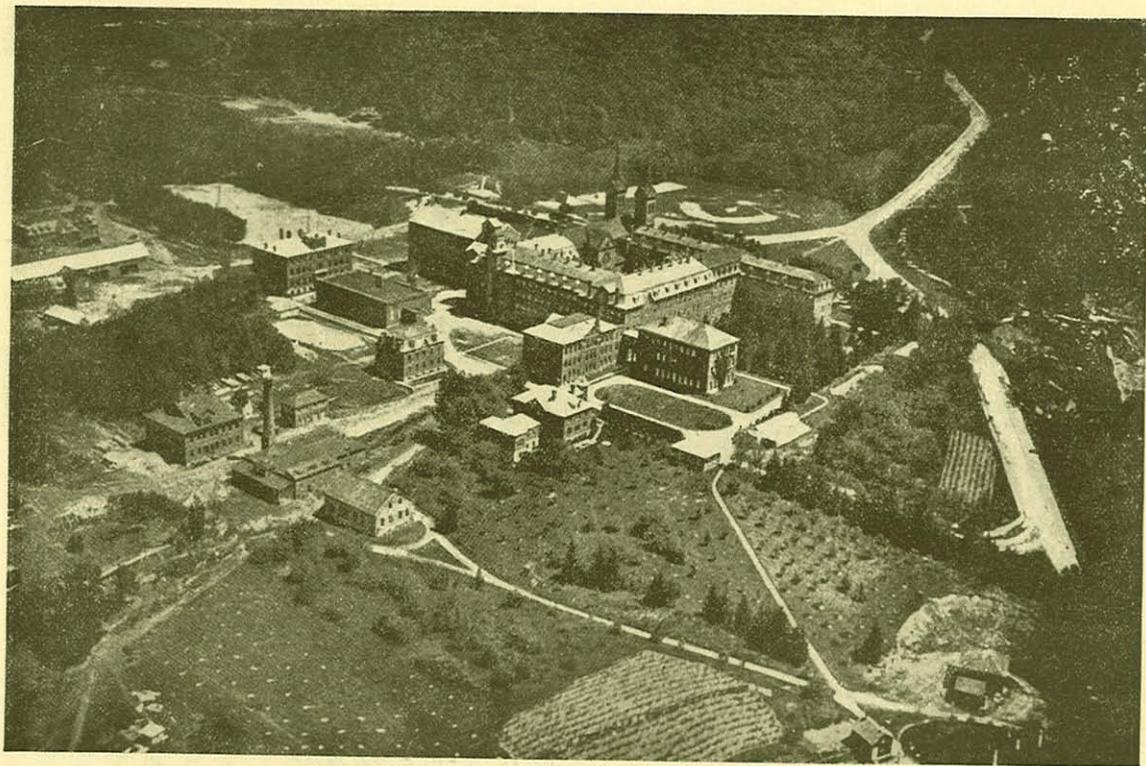
Collegeville, with its large and growing community of priests and brothers, was not only a shelter for the priests but also a school center. It offered opportunities for higher education in communities which in themselves could not have afforded even an elementary school. The sisters looked after the primary instruction, going out to settlements large enough to maintain school buildings of their own, or receiving at their convent the children of people in smaller settlements or on scattered farms. The fathers performed this service in higher education. The chief function of the latter was religious. They journeyed out from the monastery to conduct services in small and scattered settlements. Where the community was large enough to support a resident priest, fathers were sent to remain for extended periods, sometimes years. While most of their work was among the white people, they did important work also among the Indians and still carry on their work on the Indian reservations in the state.

The distance to which the work of these Benedictine communities was extended seems almost incredible. The monastery has helped to serve needy communities as far away as northwestern Canada and even the Pacific Northwest of this country. The sisters have supplied elementary teachers and nurses almost as widely. The Canadian work of the men has now reached a stage where it supports an independent monastery, whose present abbot was in charge of college work at St John's just a year or so ago. The sisters, too, have seen their work increase to such proportions as to warrant the separate establishment in 1900 of a community at Duluth, the Convent of St. Scholastica. The sisters there carry on both educational and nursing work, just as do the sisters of St. Benedict at St. Joseph. Even so, there are more than nine hundred professed members of the latter community, the largest Benedictine community of women in the world.

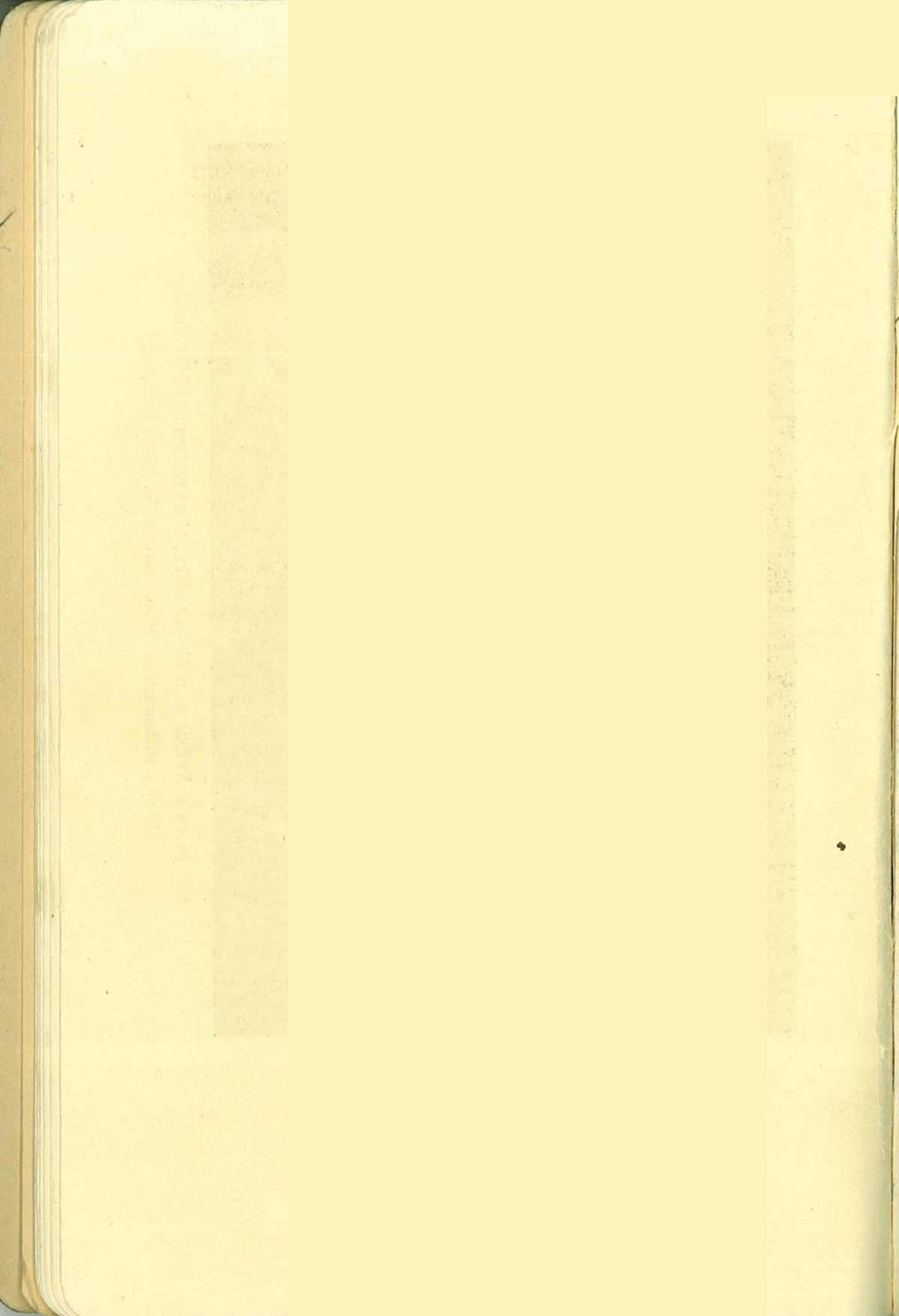
To the historian of early European history it is peculiarly interesting to watch the growth on Minnesota soil of an institution whose work he has so often followed in those earlier

years of European civilization. It is **amazing** to find repeated here so much of what occurred around Monte Cassino, or at the monastery of the Venerable Bede in Anglo-Saxon England, or at **Fulda** in western **Germany**, or at **Metten** in eastern Bavaria. Only the names and dates are different. The successful qualities of **those** earlier monasteries, particularly in **England** and **Germany**, where the work was of a pioneer character, reappear in **the** Minnesota **community**. Like **them**, the **Minnesota** monastery was peculiarly fitted to cope with pioneer problems. It was practically as **self-sustaining** in the material needs of life as were they. Its priest members **could likewise** serve the scattered small groups of their flock over a radius of many miles.

It is interesting also to note how truly the Minnesota communities have run the course of the older **monasteries** in identifying themselves with the localities in which they were established. Originally the monks came **from Germany** to serve the needs of the German Catholic settlers of this region. They **spoke** German as their native tongue, both monks and settlers, and they conducted their work among the adults in German. But from the very opening of their seminary in 1857 they carried on instruction for their **younger pupils** in English. Many of the fathers still speak German fluently, but it is already apparent that most of them speak English more readily. Where English was the acquired tongue in 1857, German has become the acquired tongue for those of the present generation. In this, both monastery and convent have served a very important function in easing the transition of these settlers from their German origin to American society. The composition of the communities reflects a similar development. Whereas the earlier membership was almost exclusively of **German** origin, the present membership, while it still has many German names, probably a majority, embraces also Irish, Czech, Polish, French, English, and even Scandinavian names. This is still more true of the students enrolled in the schools. One infers from newspaper accounts of St. John's University



ST. JOHN'S ABBEY AND UNIVERSITY, COLLEGEVILLE, MINNESOTA
[From a photograph in the possession of St. John's University]



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that the students there engage in football, basket **ball**, and base-ball games, probably have trained coaches for the purpose, and have a very creditable record of competition with **other** colleges of the state. In other words, the institution has **be-**come within little more than half a century an integral part of **the characteristic** life of the state. This impression is all the more strongly **fixed on** the mind of the visitor as he gazes upon a large portrait of the late Senator **Knute** Nelson which hangs upon the wall of the dean's **office** — a mark of the high regard in which the late senator is held by the monks.

Their part in the cultural life of the state is no less impressive and no less typical of Benedictine traditions. They did not rear an imposing Gothic or Romanesque or Renaissance edifice on the prairies **when** they arrived in **1857**. Their first community dwelling and seminary or college was a log house measuring some twelve by twenty feet. As their needs required, the building was enlarged and new buildings added. The location was changed several times, and on their present location the cluster of buildings reflects further stages in growth. Those buildings give some evidence too of the influence of an education that is in touch **with ideas** of Europe as well as of Minnesota, but mostly evidence of a close connection with Minnesota and the Northwest itself. Architecturally, the buildings are, and presumably have been since **1857**, like and just a little in advance of the general taste of the surrounding society.

One cannot visit St. John's without becoming aware of the regard for art and science prevailing there. It is present in the care with which the grounds are kept, and trees, shrubs, and flowers planted; and in the location and character of the buildings. Within the chapel the vestments and other articles of religious service reveal this taste and interest in art. The library is a truly impressive one, and, while dominated by the interest in theology and church history, it has a considerable number of more secular works. It is quite evident that the **tra-**ditional intellectual interests of the Benedictine Order are not

forgotten. There is, therefore, nothing surprising in the fact that the horticultural experimentation of some of the fathers there has resulted in the development of several fruits adapted to this climate. Nor is it surprising to find, among the many protests against the so-called anti-evolution bill which confronted the legislature last winter, a series of vigorous resolutions from St. John's university. In both art and learning this monastery has held an active and important place in the history of Minnesota.

Or, putting it in another fashion, one may think of the Roman Benedict and the equally Roman Gregory back there in Italy of the sixth century, or the Anglo-Saxon Bede and the equally Anglo-Saxon Boniface of the eighth century, or the Frankish Charlemagne at the opening of the ninth, as well as of that long line of Bavarian Benedictines at Metten as contributing to the history of Minnesota or even to that of Stearns County. Each of them took part in forging the chain which links Monte Cassino and Metten and Minnesota. The Benedictines of Minnesota are neither Bavarian nor Anglo-Saxon nor Italian; they are American and Minnesotan, but they carry on the traditions of a glorious past which links them to the rest.

This survey is only a reminder of the fact that our civilization is composed of the achievements of the past, particularly of the European past. As our legal institutions hark back to English history, even farther back than Magna Charta; our common language to the England of Chaucer, Wycliffe, and Shakespeare; so many of our social and economic institutions and most of our religious institutions were fashioned in the various countries of Europe anywhere from one hundred to more than two thousand years ago. The Benedictine strand from Monte Cassino to Metten to Minnesota is but one of the many strands from which the multicolored warp of Minnesota and western civilization is woven. It is this multicolored and multiform character of our civilization which distinguishes us from any of the countries of Europe today.

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Although the Monastery of St. John and the Convents of St. Benedict and of St. **Scholastica** are very definitely linked with their European past, much more important to us is their part in the development of Minnesota and adjacent regions. Just as Monte Cassino contributed to the maintenance of Roman and Italian civilization, Canterbury and Wearmouth to the making of English civilization, **Fulda** and **Metten** to that of German civilization, so St. John's has definitely contributed to the making of Minnesota as we have it today. It served to stabilize that first scattering German Catholic element which came here in the fifties. Its establishment encouraged other Germans to come here, and it is probably one of the most important, if not altogether the most important, factor in explaining the great influx of those settlers into this region. From its very beginnings in this state the Benedictine community set about the problem of teaching these German people the arts of American life. It had the two-fold problem of learning those arts itself and then of imparting them. The great strides which have **been made** toward this goal in this section are in no small measure due to the work of the Benedictines. The thorough identification of the interests of these monks and nuns with those of Minnesota and the nation is further **illustrated** by their intelligent and effective cooperation in dealing with other problems of the region, such as the Indian problem and various phases of educational work. Their contributions to domestic science and art, and their work in hospitals and care for the sick are noteworthy. Their connection with a long, definite past renders them somewhat more picturesque, but their real importance to Minnesota **lies** in their work as a Minnesota institution. While perhaps they have not yet given us a Minnesota Bede or Roswitta, they have already made modest contributions in both fields of endeavor suggested by those illustrious names, and their past efforts are dearly an earnest of even greater efforts in the future.

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