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## OUR WILDERNESS HOME: IMAGES OF HOME AMONG THE BROWN COUNTY URSULINES

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One afternoon in 1976, I made my first trip from Cincinnati to the Ursuline convent in Brown County, Ohio. Driving along a state highway, I saw from a distance the half-mile lane, lined with towering ash trees, that led to the convent grounds. Rising out of cultivated farmland, that lane of trees signaled a European presence that seemed out of place along asphalt Ohio State Route 251. I drove up the lane, passing *Sancta Ursula*, a larger-than-life statue which guarded the entrance to the convent grounds. A legendary Nordic princess with thick braids and royal robes, Ursula stood with her arms extended, holding wide open her ankle-length cloak. Beneath the sheltering sweep of her arms on either side huddled a dozen girls in bas-relief.

Ahead was a maze of trees and lakes, and beyond, the labyrinth that was the red-brick convent. I parked my car, climbed the colonial portico, and rang the bell. Minutes later, a nun ushered me into a formal parlor. By now I was certain that I had entered a foreign world-an island of elegance, hospitality, and learning that was alien to anything I had ever experienced. I had no notion that summer afternoon that these nuns would become my mentors, this convent would become my spiritual home, and twenty years later I would still be trying to understand its hold on me.

I was in every way an outsider. Raised a Methodist, I'd never been in a convent before, never met a real nun. My images of nuns were shaped by movies like *The Trouble with Angels* or the 1960s TV show *The Flying Nun*. As I settled in at the Brown County convent for my week of silence, I was completely enchanted by what one person described as "an elegant little French world out in the middle of the woods" (Larkin). In the coming years I returned for many more solitary retreats and came to regard Brown County as a spiritual oasis.

When, in 1982 (eight years later), I learned that the historic convent and boarding school were scheduled for demolition, I decided to help preserve its history. My decision led to lengthy research: I stayed in the convent dozens of times, recording oral histories of the retired nuns and sorting through dusty archives. I sought out former sisters and alumnae of the boarding school and interviewed them. I read virtually everything that had ever been written about the Brown County Ursulines. All this research deepened my appreciation for the Brown County convent, reinforcing my sense that there was something almost magical about the place.

Initially, what made the strongest impression on me were the sisters themselves. I became acquainted with them first through chats in the dining room, and later through walks around the convent grounds and even taped interviews. I especially enjoyed getting to know the several retired sisters. I met, for example, Sister Dorothy, a stout and talkative woman in her seventies who delighted me with stories of her work as "mistress" of the younger children in the boarding school. In the course of fifty years in religious life, she had taught, entertained, and mothered many hundreds of elementary-aged girls, often sleeping in quarters adjoining their dormitory. Now in retirement she was trying to write books for children and sought my advice about publishing.

Or there was Sister Imelda. In her eighties, she took pride in the enormous convent flower garden which she had expanded year by year for maybe twenty years. Surrounded by tall privet hedges, the garden was off limits to all outsiders; I knew Sister Imelda trusted me when she gave me a key to her garden gate. Less than five feet tall, Imelda's elfin countenance made me think of Yoda of *Star Wars*' fame. She often spoke in riddles which tried the patience of other nuns. She told me the secret to her longevity was avoiding the "three Ds--the doctor, the devil, and the dumps." She gave me a book of prayers once in which she inscribed, "Count that day lost / Whose slow-descending sun, Finds from Thy hand / No worthy action done."

I worked closely with Sister Mary John. As assistant to the community's Superior, she controlled access to the community archives. Sister Mary John shared my fascination with historical documents. With her high forehead, sparkling blue eyes, and lilting Irish voice, she was one of the most charming women I had ever met. She had entered religious life late-in her thirties, after work in the theater-and spent happy decades teaching English in the boarding school. Now in her seventies, in addition to tending the community archives, she nurtured the convent cats, a hobby which earned her the nickname "Frisky" among the sisters. Or there was Sister Ann Maureen, a pretty and gracious woman in her thirties who gave me guidance on prayer and physical exercise and told me that "self-esteem is the beginning of true humility," a baffling insight to me at the age of twenty-four. She later pursued graduate studies in psychology and also served as a leader in the community.

Most memorable of all was Sister Miriam Thompson, a woman whom I eventually adopted as a mentor and spiritual director. She had served for many years as the "directress" of the boarding school and in her seventies and eighties ran a large-scale food bank for the rural poor. With her full-length black habit, glasses, and penetrating blue eyes, Miriam was a striking figure. She was known among the sisters and to many people far beyond the convent as a mystic because of her deep spirituality and her skill at providing spiritual counsel. A woman both brilliant and loving, Miriam soon told me fascinating stories about the history of the convent. Later she supplied me with books and documents about it.

I learned, for example, that the Brown County convent had been founded by an English woman named Julia Chatfield. Born in 1809 of distinguished Anglican parents, as a young woman Julia was sent with her six younger sisters to an Ursuline boarding school in Boulogne-sur-Mer in northern France, to complete her education and refine her French accent. According to Sister Miriam, Julia was so moved by the faith and kindness of the French Ursulines that she soon wrote her father of her desire to become a Roman Catholic. In response, he immediately brought her back to England and introduced her to London society. Julia held fast to her faith, the story goes, and her father disowned her. She worked briefly as a governess then ran away to Boulogne, this time planning to join the community as a novice, a choice which led to a permanent break from her family. Her biographer writes, "It seemed to the girl that she had stepped for a brief space into the realm of spiritual existence which she had always craved . . . the reality of Christ with all its throbbing life" (Maginnis 26). After a few years of initiation, in 1837, Julia Chatfield took her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the special Ursuline "fourth vow" of dedication to teaching.

Later Julia began to dream of becoming a missionary to America when she heard the preaching of a charismatic young American bishop, John Baptist Purcell, who was touring Europe to recruit religious communities to come to America to serve the growing Roman Catholic population. Purcell spoke with zeal about the beauty of the Ohio valley and the seething immigrant life that was springing up there. Especially pressing was the need for teachers and priests. The movement toward free public education was not yet firmly underway, and many of the schools which did exist discriminated against Catholic pupils. Soon Julia's good friend, Amédée Rappe, the convent chaplain, did go to America. For the next few years he wrote to Julia Chatfield encouraging her to come.

It took several years for her dream to become a reality, but finally in 1845, at the age of 36, Sister Julia led a group of eleven nuns to Ohio, intending to establish a girls' academy. Once the group of Ursulines arrived in Ohio, Purcell, now an Archbishop, gave the nuns a wooded tract of land (about 400 acres) fifty miles east of Cincinnati. Originally military lands donated to the bishop after the Revolutionary War, the property had been used for a time as a seminary but the remote location made it untenable. In 1846 the nuns built a motherhouse and an Academy for Young Ladies which lasted for a century. While parochial schools served all children, academies were geared to more privileged girls, sometimes boarding students. Girls came from all over the United States to receive what their families believed to be a superlative education. Early letters from Julia Chatfield suggest that she was very reluctant to accept the remote location; the nuns were used to a refined way of life, not primitive living conditions in an isolated area. But they adapted and in time were able to make a success of the location where the priests could not.

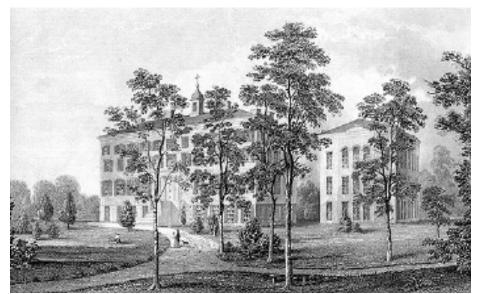


Figure 1. Original Brown County "Convent of the Ursulines and Academy for Young Ladies," ca. 1850. Collection of Trudelle H. Thomas.

Initially, the nuns constructed a building one hundred feet by one-hundred-twenty feet, four stories high (Figure 1). Over the first thirty years, they made additions to the main structure, including a large neo-gothic chapel, a "commencement hall," and a "play hall." They also added numerous out-buildings-barns, sheds, ice house, and stables-and for many decades the convent was a self-sufficient farm. Though the Brown County Academy attracted students from all over the United States and recruited nuns from Europe as well as the U.S., the community always remained small.

When I first visited the Brown County convent in 1976, the future of the

academy had grown uncertain. Boarding schools for girls were no longer in style and enrollment was low. In 1981 the boarding school closed and the nuns deliberated the future of the gorgeous, rambling, costly-to-heat building. As a group, they came to the decision to raze the main building except for the adjoining Sacred Heart chapel and to construct on the grounds "Brescia"-a new, compact and comfortable building that would serve as a residence for the retired nuns, including those who were having health problems. (Brescia was named for the town in Italy where Angela Merici, founder of the Ursuline Order, had lived in the 1500s.)

The decision to raze the motherhouse was traumatic for many of the nuns. For some of the older ones, the place had been their home for five or six decades. By this time, the convent had also become a kind of second home to me, a "secular," and I mourned with them when the buildings furnishings were auctioned off and the building itself was leveled by bulldozers. We all felt bereft of our spiritual home. As time passed, I marveled at the older nuns' resilience as they adapted to their new home in Brescia. I became a regular visitor there, though I missed the secret hallways and Lady Chapel and the impressive public spaces of the old convent.

As I came to know the Ursulines, I was struck again and again by how consistently the sisters used the imagery of home when they spoke of their community. To outsiders, the motherhouse was a school, an institution-not a home. Yet the nuns, in their conversation and in their published records, consistently spoke of their "convent home" or their "wilderness home." One poster that I often saw during my visits bore this message: "If you open your hearts to the presence of the Lord here in this holy spot, in the midst of our wilderness, there is no limit to what he can do through you and with you." I was struck by the odd juxtaposition of "this holy spot" and "wilderness" and by the strange promise that opening one's heart to the presence of the Lord would lead to personal power and accomplishment. Though the poster did not actually use the word "home," it hinted that this place was both a haven and a hub.

As I pondered the way the Ursulines spoke of the wilderness, the concept of a "wilderness home" began to make sense, to seem less an oxymoron. Before coming to America, Julia Chatfield and her sister-nuns back in France had fantasized about risking their lives as missionaries on the American frontier; they had hoped to emulate Marie Guyart, a French Ursuline and mystic who had become famous for her work with Native Americans in Canada in the 1600s. Those first sisters never made it to America's western frontier, but where they did end up was no less forbidding: an isolated, unsettled, poor tract of land in rural Ohio. Forty-eight miles outside Cincinnati, Brown County is still rural today and remains one of the poorest counties in Ohio.

According to an early travelogue, when the nuns arrived there in 1845, it appeared desolate and uninhabitable. Surely they wondered why the Archbishop would assign them, cloistered nuns from France, many of them from privileged families, to this wooded, barren property out in the middle of nowhere. Still, those first Brown County Ursulines settled into the rough buildings that had once been a seminary and set about decorating their log church. Instead of deploring this wilderness tract, the nuns made up their minds to make a home of it. Indeed, the "wilderness" soon became part of their communal myth.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade observes that many religious groups see their environment as a foreign and hostile place- "a chaotic space peopled by ghosts, demons, and foreigners" (29). As newcomers to this strange terrain, the nuns saw it as a threatening wilderness, but in time they also began to see it as a gracious wilderness. Hadn't the children of Israel communed with God in the wilderness for forty years as they sought the Promised Land? Hadn't John the Baptist and later even Christ Himself withdrawn to the wilderness to wait, be tested, and receive special graces? The Brown County Ursulines responded to the wilderness by making it a home, their wilderness home, a place of grace.

But what sort of home might this be? A home without parents, certainly a home without fathers-with virtually no men at all. A home with no young children (the school started with six-year-olds). It was a home with no kitchen table, no living room, no actual bedrooms--a home with few of the creature comforts most humans associate with home. Neither did it offer much in the way of privacy or personal possessions. On the face of it, the convent was an institution, not a home at all. Yet the metaphor of home persisted more than 150 years, from 1845 to the present.

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I gained insight into the Ursulines' understanding of home by reading Helen Fiddymont Levy's *Fiction of the Home Place* (1992). A work of literary criticism, *Fiction of the Home Place* traces an ideal female community that Levy sees as an alternative to the American myth of the individual male who competes and dominates. Drawing upon the work of several twentieth-century female novelists, Levy outlines the attributes of this mythic "home place." It is a small, stable community characterized by what she calls "local language" and located in an ideal pastoral and

domestic setting. This ideal community is rooted in a sense of history, a history that celebrates a lineage of female creativity, and in this community materialism and possessions are downplayed. This community provides care for the young, old, sick, or discouraged; community members place great value on such caretaking. Finally, an elder "wise woman" presides over the entire community.

In *Fiction of the Home Place*, Levy is describing a fictional ideal-not an actual community, let alone a convent. But in reading Levy's book, I was struck by how many of these attributes belonged to the Brown County convent. It was a relatively small community--small as convents go, usually numbering between thirty and sixty nuns and under one hundred pupils (often far fewer). It was also very stable in that nuns who entered the community were likely to stay for life; nuns seldom were sent from the Brown County convent and, prior to the 1960s, few nuns left the order. And the community was made up entirely of women.

While the Ursulines at Brown County never practiced strict cloister, the convent was considered semi-cloistered; as a means of protecting the integrity of the community, the comings and goings of all individuals were strictly monitored. Nuns could not leave the convent grounds without permission and outsiders followed a prescribed procedure when visiting. The presence of men in particular was carefully regulated; in many parts of the convent and boarding school, no man ever set foot. Exceptions might be made for hired workmen (who ate in a separate workers' dining room), for visiting priests (who stayed in a nearby "priest's house" used for this purpose), or for a visiting father of a pupil (who might converse with Mother Superior in the parlor). Though men might visit briefly, the Brown County convent was a world of women.

This world of women was also a remarkably self-contained world, one with a distinctive identity. The church, school, work- and living-spaces all existed literally under one roof; except on family farms, this fusion of work and home would have become rare in the late nineteenth-century. Women and girls prayed, studied, did chores, ate, relaxed, and slept all in the same building. They developed an idiosyncratic and specialized vocabulary for talking about the various places on the convent grounds; any novice-member or alumna would be sure to know the location of "The Long Walk" or "St. Anne's Gallery" or "Sunnyside" or "Solomon's Run." Such language contributed to a sense of belonging.

Like the fictional "home place" that Levy describes, Brown County convent was located in a rural and somewhat idyllic environment. What had been desolate woods were transformed by the nuns' building, landscaping, and farming efforts; by the time I visited in the 1970s the convent boasted Canadian geese, cattle, and horses, in addition to landscaped slopes, lakes, trees, and flower gardens. Though Cincinnati, the only city nearby, had greatly expanded, the Brown County location was still rural.

Moreover, over the decades, the nuns had consciously set out to sanctify the convent grounds by the use of various blessing rituals, including Corpus Christi processions through meadow and woods, May crownings, and the ceremonial blessing of buildings. The nuns also placed shrines throughout the grounds and nearby woods. The unexpected presence of statues in fields and woods made even those places seem familiar and domestic. At the same time, the relative lack of statues inside the convent made it seem less like a convent and more like a home.

Within this idyllic setting, the Brown County convent was steeped in a sense of history, particularly in a lineage of female creativity. As a matter of course, both nuns and pupils were schooled in American history, European history, and Roman Catholic church history; they also celebrated historical events with pageants and parties, year after year. More importantly, they identified with a tradition of women, writing plays and poems to celebrate achievements of women such as Saint Ursula (legendary twelfth-century patroness), St. Angela (sixteenth-century foundress of the Ursulines), Saint Joan of Arc, foundress Julia Chatfield, and various other heroic women.

Although this tradition was limited to women recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, it valued women's contributions more than did secular institutions of the time.

In addition to writing poems and producing plays, women at Brown County found numerous channels for their creative energy: they sang and performed on musical instruments; they embellished furniture and the chapel walls and pews with their own intricate wood-carvings; they grew flowers to adorn the altars; they perfected needlework of every sort (Figure 2). In the 1880s, one farsighted nun, Sister Eulalia Dunn, drew up all the original plans for the Sacred Heart Chapel and oversaw its erection in 1885; the chapel is said to be, even today, the only Roman Catholic church in America designed by a woman (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Hand-carved door to Lady Chapel (Photo courtesy of Eric Weinberg.)



Figure 3. Interior of Sacred Heart Chapel, ca. 1984, still in use (Photo courtesy of Eric Weinberg).

Even as they celebrated a lineage of female creativity, nuns at Brown County de-emphasized materialism and personal possessions at times when the larger culture was increasingly materialistic. All the nuns took vows of poverty. The community itself actually was poor, unlike some religious groups which accumulated community wealth even though individual members took vows of poverty; Brown County convent's poverty was caused by its isolation and small numbers. In addition, the sisters did their best to downplay materialism among the pupils as well by discouraging extravagance in dress and in other possessions.

Like the ideal "home place" that Levy describes, the Brown County convent provided care and nurturance for women of all ages and conditions, ranging from six-year-old school girls to elderly nuns. The care and education of children was the academy's reason for existence. According to Sister Miriam, many of the academy's pupils regarded Brown County as a second family and second home, and it was not unusual for an alumna's daughters and even granddaughters to attend. Even now, most nuns who have spent their lives at Brown County return there to die, cared for by their sister Ursulines throughout their final hours.

Finally, an elder woman presided over the Brown County community: Mother Superior was seen as wise and, at times, inspired by God. From the time she led the first Ursulines to Brown County in 1845 until her death in 1878, Julia Chatfield served as Mother Superior and was known then and thereafter as "Notre Mere." Following Chatfield's death, the community was led by a series of Mothers Superior, respectfully addressed as "Mother." Whoever she might be, Mother Superior was advised and assisted by the Community Council, a group of women elected from among the ranks of the nuns. Important decisions were made by all the nuns together, voting at yearly "chapter meetings." (In recent decades, formal titles such as Mother have been dropped and leadership has become less hierarchical.) While Mother Superior presided over the community of nuns, another woman presided over the academy as the Directress.

Even as her successors assumed community leadership, Mother Julia Chatfield is seen as an important influence in the community, even today, a hundred years after her death. In their documents and in conversation, nuns often voice the belief that she is still alive, in spirit though not in body, and is able to offer guidance. For example, at times when I was wrestling with a problem, whether personal or scholarly, Sister Miriam routinely suggested that I pay a visit to Julia Chatfield's grave in the convent cemetery and "talk it over with Julia." On occasion, I have heard many other sisters casually make remarks about communication with Julia, Monica, Hyacinth, Augusta, and other important community leaders no longer alive. Initially I found this strange but in time I came to understand that the sisters believe the dead are part of the "communion of saints," alive in spirit though not visible.

The nuns' own sense of their "convent home" has changed over the decades. Early on, the nuns made a conscious effort to make the convent school an inviting, comforting home for the girls who attended the Academy. Early brochures advertising the school emphasized its home-like qualities and the motherly kindness of the nuns themselves. Julia Chatfield had inherited from her father, a London art dealer, good taste and a love of art, qualities she passed on to her successors. Displaying art, including the sisters' and students' own art, had the salutary effect of making the building more home-like and familiar.

In addition to being a home for the students, of course, the convent also was a home for the nuns who came there to spend their lives-to live, work, die, and be buried there. After her profession, a nun would not return to her family home.

And the nuns also desired that their convent and school should be a center of action for outsiders. According to Sister Joan Brosnan, even in Julia Chatfield's time the nuns felt a commitment not just to their boarding students but also to "the village" of St. Martin. Early on, the nuns operated in the convent a "day school" that served the local children. "The convent was never an island," says Brosnan. "We have always been committed to people in the local area, especially to women. We reached out to them, and we welcomed them." This commitment was more manifest in some decades than others. Beginning in the 1940s the Ursulines sponsored annual "Ladies Retreats" for adult women on the convent grounds, and in later decades they offered summer camps for girls.

The most significant change, of course, came following the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-65). In response to the Council's call to re-discover their founder's charism, the Ursulines, like nuns throughout America, entered a period of great upheaval, beginning with the change from the Latin liturgy to the vernacular and the change from long black habits to more relaxed dress for the nuns. As a result of the council, nuns who formerly had been forbidden to visit their family homes were now permitted to do so. Nuns began not just to visit their families, but also to work and eventually to live outside the convent walls. Brosnan was Superior of the community (1973-1979) during this period of change and recalls the nuns deciding to invite local people to use their facilities such as the play hall and the swimming pool. Rules about cloister relaxed during this time; access to places like the parlors and the nuns' refectory was less restricted than in the past. Eventually most traces

of cloister died out altogether.

The last twenty years have seen the most dramatic change in the Ursulines' idea of home. Now that the boarding school has closed, most of the nuns live in their own apartments and houses and only visit the old convent grounds for meetings or retreats. Still, among the nuns and others there remains the sense that Brown County is a spiritual and symbolic home. One old document (ca. 1920s) observes, "There is in dear old Brown County something that lives in its atmosphere, that draws hearts closely together; that gives the home feeling; that inspires faith in Divine Providence. . . . The Spirit that dear Notre Mere left us, our richest inheritance" (Necrology 4). The form and meaning of this "home feeling" continues to evolve. Even as I write this essay, a dwelling beside the chapel has been renamed "Springer House" and is being renovated as a house of prayer to be used for retreats. The nuns point out that the building I had always known as the "Priest's House" was in fact originally commissioned in 1865 by an alumna named Jenny Springer who wanted to visit the convent often and "keep alive the happy memory of my school-days." Soon it will serve as a haven for myself and others who consider Brown County their spiritual home.

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While Levy's literary emphasis sheds light upon the Ursulines' "wilderness home," further insights come from the sociology of architecture. Sociologist Daphne Spain observes that the use of architectural space shapes social life. Human beings' view of themselves and their relations with others is not only reflected in but is also shaped by their use of physical space. Space is a good indicator of what a group of people values, she says, and these values are preserved by the way a building's floor plan influences daily activities. The way that the Brown County Ursulines used the interior spaces of their buildings says a great deal about their values as a community and thus about the nature of their "wilderness home."

In her book, <u>Gendered Spaces</u> (1992) Spain points out that, in contrast to contemporary American architecture, homes built in the nineteenth century tended to have highly specialized spaces. Where a modern American home might have a living room or a multi-purpose "great room," affluent homes of the last century would have had a ladies' parlor, a library, and perhaps a smoking room or billiard room. Built in 1845, the Brown County motherhouse was similarly characterized by the specialized use of space. One example is the Ursulines' use of their two parlors to receive outsiders; such use of parlors was a long-standing tradition in many women's religious communities, dating back to the Counter-Reformation (perhaps further). Here Mother Superior might confer with parents or a merchant, for example, or a young girl might visit with her family.

At Brown County, two formal parlors flanked the vestibule where all visitors entered the convent. These parlors were elegantly decorated with carved chairs, velvet sofas, Oriental rugs, and large oil paintings in gilded frames. The tradition of formal parlors has roots reaching back through centuries of European convents; according to the Ursuline Rule, convents might boast up to four parlors, and nuns would speak to outsiders through a grille (a screen which separated insiders from visitors). This more relaxed American convent had no grille in the parlor, but formal behavior was still expected. Pupils entered the parlors only when invited, and were forbidden to wear aprons there. They curtsied when greeting guests.

Other parts of the convent were also highly specialized in purpose. The Commencement Hall (added to the main building in 1860) served as a combination library/auditorium. Here the commencement "awarding of premiums" was held each spring, wherein pupils were given recognition for their academic, artistic, and moral accomplishments. There were two different chapels as well. The small, intimate, and softly lit "Lady Chapel" served as a place for personal devotions, especially to the Virgin Mary who was represented by a prominently

placed life-size plaster statue. The vastly larger Chapel of the Sacred Heart was a gathering place for daily mass and for large liturgical gatherings, including choral performances.

The large and beautiful spaces set aside for public gatherings contrasted strongly with the almost complete absence of space for individuals. The nuns slept in tiny unadorned cells and spent all their waking hours in common rooms. The pupils slept in dormitories on the top (fourth) floor of the convent; long open rooms were divided by white curtains into small "efficiency alcoves," one per girl. Each alcove contained a bed, a bedside cabinet and little more. Bathrooms were communal and clothing was distributed from a nearby laundry storage room.

The values of the women living in the Brown County convent were clearly reflected in the way they appropriated their physical space. The presence of lush and elegant parlors suggested a gracious hospitality, albeit a hospitality carefully contained. The message of the convent parlor was not "Come in and make yourself at home," but rather "We're happy to see you but please keep your distance."

Similarly, the Brown County community placed tremendous value on large communal gatherings. These gatherings celebrated the life of the convent-community and sometimes welcomed outsiders as well. Such celebrations included public performances (such as choral and theatrical events), ceremonies associated with academic achievements, and, most of all, communal worship. Irene Mahoney, an Ursuline novelist, describes a convent chapel as seen through the eyes of a young sister. Although Mahoney is from another community and the scene is fictional, her description could well apply to the Brown County Sacred Heart Chapel:

When their efforts to live angelically had worn [the nuns] to depression . . . they had the reaches of worship to set them free from their own limitations and immerse them in the splendor of adoration. Their chapel-with its aspiring arches and brilliant stained glass windows, its marble sanctuary and rich ornaments-had provided them with a beauty that compensated for their small unpainted cells and the dismal barrenness of their common rooms. Even that austerity [the young nun] had loved, glorying the fact that all the beauty that they knew was vested in the worship of God. (Mahoney 90)

The contrast between the ornate chapel and the "small unpainted cells" highlights the lack of value placed upon individuality, privacy, and personal relationships. What was valued at the Brown County convent was the life of the community, and even more, the worship of God.

I find it particularly interesting to examine the Brown County convent buildings in light of what they reveal about gender identity. Since time immemorial, cultures and societies have organized space around gender. According to Daphne Spain, nineteenth-century Victorian homes were highly segregated along gender lines. The design of such homes puts women in parlors, kitchens, and boudoir, while men inhabited the library, the study, and everywhere else. Such containment of women based on gender, according to Spain, cuts them off from access to knowledge and power. She argues that it results in a diminishment of women's power and status.

The all-female world of the Brown County convent challenges Spain's observations. Isolated by geography and church rules of cloister, the Ursuline women nonetheless exerted tremendous influence on the world around them. Within the convent, nuns certainly had power: Mother Superior, the Academy Directress, and the Community Council ran the entire school, farm, and convent. In this self-contained world, women and girls had access to every place in the communal buildings, while men had none.

It is true that, for much of its history, the nuns and the young women in their care were not directly involved in

public life, at least not in the arenas of business or politics. But through their work as caretakers of children and young women, and as educators, the nuns exerted powerful influence that radiated out from the convent. Because their pupils were continually in their care, day and night, throughout the school year, the nuns had the opportunity to shape their characters, tastes, and attitudes. Most alumnae went on to raise families of their own, often passing on the values they absorbed at Brown County. Because many of the pupils were daughters of the middle and upper classes, once they left the academy, many married into socially prominent families. Many also became active in volunteer and church organizations. The nuns' influence as nurturers and educators, though limited in scope, was tremendous in impact.

In addition to their roles as educators of young women, the nuns also lived lives of prayer, praying and singing Gregorian chant at several appointed times throughout each day. They believed that such prayer affected events and people beyond their convent walls. I agree with Spain that segregation based upon gender is an important influence, but in the case of the Ursulines such segregation did not undermine their power as women. Rather, segregation intensified it.

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Having observed and pondered the life of the Brown County Ursulines over the last two decades, I have come to appreciate the complex ways that the convent became a home to the women living there, whether during a pupil's school-years or during a nun's lifetime "in religion." The sense of home derives in part from the belief that inhabitants of Brown County are in a special and holy place. A priest speaking at an alumnae celebration at the Brown County convent in 1910, described it this way: "I see the Dove of Peace and the Phoenix of Rejuvenation hovering tonight over the confines of this sacred enclosure, consecrated to God and sanctified by the lives of so many daughters of St. Ursula" (*First Alumnae Year Book* 14-15).

Religious historian Mircea Eliade speaks of this sense of "sacred space" in a wider context when he observes, "The sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacity [sic], the source of life and fecundity. [Our human] desire to live in the sacred is in fact [our] desire to take up our abode in objective reality" (28-29). Nuns and perhaps pupils as well saw themselves as living in "the sacred . . . the real . . . the source of life and fecundity." It was the grounding in a larger or deeper reality that gave the inhabitants a sense of home, an "abode in objective reality."

While nuns and church leaders might speak of home in theological terms, they actually experienced home in ways that were emotional and familiar. Novelist Anna Quindlen writes of "that greater meaning of home that we understand most purely when we are children, when it is a metaphor for all possible feelings of security, safety, of what is predictable, gentle, and good in life" (213). The security, gentleness, and predictability of life at Brown County did much to reinforce a sense of home.

With time I have come to appreciate the allure of the Brown County convent. Its sense of home had its source in the way it echoed a mythic or even archetypal ideal. Life at Brown County embodied an imaginative alternative to the individualistic, competitive, male model with which we are all too familiar. The same yearning for a mythic "home place" that inspired the novels in Levy's study also drew women and girls to the Brown County convent. The control of architectural space, through the use of cloister and specialized interior spaces, served to heighten the sense that this was a special, important, even sacred place. Theological associations and emotional reverberations all contributed to a multi-layered and complex conviction that the Brown County Ursuline convent was indeed a very appealing "home in the wilderness."

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## **OUR WILDERNESS HOME: IMAGES OF HOME AMONG THE BROWN COUNTY URSULINES**

Trudelle H. Thomas Xavier University

One afternoon in 1976, I made my first trip from Cincinnati to the Ursuline convent in Brown County, Ohio. Driving along a state highway, I saw from a distance the half-mile lane, lined with towering ash trees, that led to the convent grounds. Rising out of cultivated farmland, that lane of trees signaled a European presence that seemed out of place along asphalt Ohio State Route 251. I drove up the lane, passing *Sancta Ursula*, a larger-than-life statue which guarded the entrance to the convent grounds. A legendary Nordic princess with thick braids and royal robes, Ursula stood with her arms extended, holding wide open her ankle-length cloak. Beneath the sheltering sweep of her arms on either side huddled a dozen girls in bas-relief.

Ahead was a maze of trees and lakes, and beyond, the labyrinth that was the red-brick convent. I parked my car, climbed the colonial portico, and rang the bell. Minutes later, a nun ushered me into a formal parlor. By now I was certain that I had entered a foreign world-an island of elegance, hospitality, and learning that was alien to anything I had ever experienced. I had no notion that summer afternoon that these nuns would become my mentors, this convent would become my spiritual home, and twenty years later I would still be trying to understand its hold on me.

I was in every way an outsider. Raised a Methodist, I'd never been in a convent before, never met a real nun. My images of nuns were shaped by movies like *The Trouble with Angels* or the 1960s TV show *The Flying Nun*. As I settled in at the Brown County convent for my week of silence, I was completely enchanted by what one person described as "an elegant little French world out in the middle of the woods" (Larkin). In the coming years I returned for many more solitary retreats and came to regard Brown County as a spiritual oasis.

When, in 1982 (eight years later), I learned that the historic convent and boarding school were scheduled for demolition, I decided to help preserve its history. My decision led to lengthy research: I stayed in the convent dozens of times, recording oral histories of the retired nuns and sorting through dusty archives. I sought out former sisters and alumnae of the boarding school and interviewed them. I read virtually everything that had ever been written about the Brown County Ursulines. All this research deepened my appreciation for the Brown County convent, reinforcing my sense that there was something almost magical about the place.

Initially, what made the strongest impression on me were the sisters themselves. I became acquainted with them first through chats in the dining room, and later through walks around the convent grounds and even taped interviews. I especially enjoyed getting to know the several retired sisters. I met, for example, Sister Dorothy, a stout and talkative woman in her seventies who delighted me with stories of her work as "mistress" of the younger children in the boarding school. In the course of fifty years in religious life, she had taught, entertained, and mothered many hundreds of elementary-aged girls, often sleeping in quarters adjoining their dormitory. Now in retirement she was trying to write books for children and sought my advice about publishing.

Or there was Sister Imelda. In her eighties, she took pride in the enormous convent flower garden which she had expanded year by year for maybe twenty years. Surrounded by tall privet hedges, the garden was off limits to all outsiders; I knew Sister Imelda trusted me when she gave me a key to her garden gate. Less than five feet tall, Imelda's elfin countenance made me think of Yoda of *Star Wars*' fame. She often spoke in riddles which tried the patience of other nuns. She told me the secret to her longevity was avoiding the "three Ds--the doctor, the devil, and the dumps." She gave me a book of prayers once in which she inscribed, "Count that day lost / Whose slow-descending sun, Finds from Thy hand / No worthy action done."

I worked closely with Sister Mary John. As assistant to the community's Superior, she controlled access to the community archives. Sister Mary John shared my fascination with historical documents. With her high forehead, sparkling blue eyes, and lilting Irish voice, she was one of the most charming women I had ever met. She had entered religious life late-in her thirties, after work in the theater-and spent happy decades teaching English in the boarding school. Now in her seventies, in addition to tending the community archives, she nurtured the convent cats, a hobby which earned her the nickname "Frisky" among the sisters. Or there was Sister Ann Maureen, a pretty and gracious woman in her thirties who gave me guidance on prayer and physical exercise and told me that "self-esteem is the beginning of true humility," a baffling insight to me at the age of twenty-four. She later pursued graduate studies in psychology and also served as a leader in the community.

Most memorable of all was Sister Miriam Thompson, a woman whom I eventually adopted as a mentor and spiritual director. She had served for many years as the "directress" of the boarding school and in her seventies and eighties ran a large-scale food bank for the rural poor. With her full-length black habit, glasses, and penetrating blue eyes, Miriam was a striking figure. She was known among the sisters and to many people far beyond the convent as a mystic because of her deep spirituality and her skill at providing spiritual counsel. A woman both brilliant and loving, Miriam soon told me fascinating stories about the history of the convent. Later she supplied me with books and documents about it.

I learned, for example, that the Brown County convent had been founded by an English woman named Julia Chatfield. Born in 1809 of distinguished Anglican parents, as a young woman Julia was sent with her six younger sisters to an Ursuline boarding school in Boulogne-sur-Mer in northern France, to complete her education and refine her French accent. According to Sister Miriam, Julia was so moved by the faith and kindness of the French Ursulines that she soon wrote her father of her desire to become a Roman Catholic. In response, he immediately brought her back to England and introduced her to London society. Julia held fast to her faith, the story goes, and her father disowned her. She worked briefly as a governess then ran away to Boulogne, this time planning to join the community as a novice, a choice which led to a permanent break from her family. Her biographer writes, "It seemed to the girl that she had stepped for a brief space into the realm of spiritual existence which she had always craved . . . the reality of Christ with all its throbbing life" (Maginnis 26). After a few years of initiation, in 1837, Julia Chatfield took her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the special Ursuline "fourth vow" of dedication to teaching.

Later Julia began to dream of becoming a missionary to America when she heard the preaching of a charismatic young American bishop, John Baptist Purcell, who was touring Europe to recruit religious communities to come to America to serve the growing Roman Catholic population. Purcell spoke with zeal about the beauty of the Ohio valley and the seething immigrant life that was springing up there. Especially pressing was the need for teachers and priests. The movement toward free public education was not yet firmly underway, and many of the schools which did exist discriminated against Catholic pupils. Soon Julia's good friend, Amédée Rappe, the convent chaplain, did go to America. For the next few years he wrote to Julia Chatfield encouraging her to come.

It took several years for her dream to become a reality, but finally in 1845, at the age of 36, Sister Julia led a group of eleven nuns to Ohio, intending to establish a girls' academy. Once the group of Ursulines arrived in Ohio, Purcell, now an Archbishop, gave the nuns a wooded tract of land (about 400 acres) fifty miles east of Cincinnati. Originally military lands donated to the bishop after the Revolutionary War, the property had been used for a time as a seminary but the remote location made it untenable. In 1846 the nuns built a motherhouse and an Academy for Young Ladies which lasted for a century. While parochial schools served all children, academies were geared to more privileged girls, sometimes boarding students. Girls came from all over the United States to receive what their families believed to be a superlative education. Early letters from Julia Chatfield suggest that she was very reluctant to accept the remote location; the nuns were used to a refined way of life, not primitive living conditions in an isolated area. But they adapted and in time were able to make a success of the location where the priests could not.

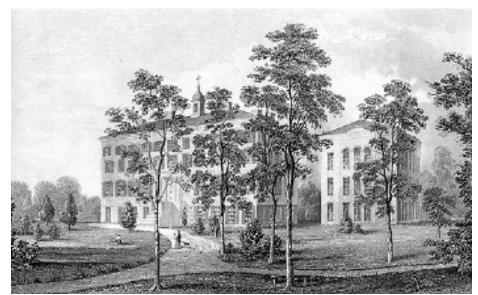


Figure 1. Original Brown County "Convent of the Ursulines and Academy for Young Ladies," ca. 1850. Collection of Trudelle H. Thomas.

Initially, the nuns constructed a building one hundred feet by one-hundred-twenty feet, four stories high (Figure 1). Over the first thirty years, they made additions to the main structure, including a large neo-gothic chapel, a "commencement hall," and a "play hall." They also added numerous out-buildings-barns, sheds, ice house, and stables-and for many decades the convent was a self-sufficient farm. Though the Brown County Academy attracted students from all over the United States and recruited nuns from Europe as well as the U.S., the community always remained small.

When I first visited the Brown County convent in 1976, the future of the

academy had grown uncertain. Boarding schools for girls were no longer in style and enrollment was low. In 1981 the boarding school closed and the nuns deliberated the future of the gorgeous, rambling, costly-to-heat building. As a group, they came to the decision to raze the main building except for the adjoining Sacred Heart chapel and to construct on the grounds "Brescia"-a new, compact and comfortable building that would serve as a residence for the retired nuns, including those who were having health problems. (Brescia was named for the town in Italy where Angela Merici, founder of the Ursuline Order, had lived in the 1500s.)

The decision to raze the motherhouse was traumatic for many of the nuns. For some of the older ones, the place had been their home for five or six decades. By this time, the convent had also become a kind of second home to me, a "secular," and I mourned with them when the buildings furnishings were auctioned off and the building itself was leveled by bulldozers. We all felt bereft of our spiritual home. As time passed, I marveled at the older nuns' resilience as they adapted to their new home in Brescia. I became a regular visitor there, though I missed the secret hallways and Lady Chapel and the impressive public spaces of the old convent.

As I came to know the Ursulines, I was struck again and again by how consistently the sisters used the imagery of home when they spoke of their community. To outsiders, the motherhouse was a school, an institution-not a home. Yet the nuns, in their conversation and in their published records, consistently spoke of their "convent home" or their "wilderness home." One poster that I often saw during my visits bore this message: "If you open your hearts to the presence of the Lord here in this holy spot, in the midst of our wilderness, there is no limit to what he can do through you and with you." I was struck by the odd juxtaposition of "this holy spot" and "wilderness" and by the strange promise that opening one's heart to the presence of the Lord would lead to personal power and accomplishment. Though the poster did not actually use the word "home," it hinted that this place was both a haven and a hub.

As I pondered the way the Ursulines spoke of the wilderness, the concept of a "wilderness home" began to make sense, to seem less an oxymoron. Before coming to America, Julia Chatfield and her sister-nuns back in France had fantasized about risking their lives as missionaries on the American frontier; they had hoped to emulate Marie Guyart, a French Ursuline and mystic who had become famous for her work with Native Americans in Canada in the 1600s. Those first sisters never made it to America's western frontier, but where they did end up was no less forbidding: an isolated, unsettled, poor tract of land in rural Ohio. Forty-eight miles outside Cincinnati, Brown County is still rural today and remains one of the poorest counties in Ohio.

According to an early travelogue, when the nuns arrived there in 1845, it appeared desolate and uninhabitable. Surely they wondered why the Archbishop would assign them, cloistered nuns from France, many of them from privileged families, to this wooded, barren property out in the middle of nowhere. Still, those first Brown County Ursulines settled into the rough buildings that had once been a seminary and set about decorating their log church. Instead of deploring this wilderness tract, the nuns made up their minds to make a home of it. Indeed, the "wilderness" soon became part of their communal myth.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade observes that many religious groups see their environment as a foreign and hostile place- "a chaotic space peopled by ghosts, demons, and foreigners" (29). As newcomers to this strange terrain, the nuns saw it as a threatening wilderness, but in time they also began to see it as a gracious wilderness. Hadn't the children of Israel communed with God in the wilderness for forty years as they sought the Promised Land? Hadn't John the Baptist and later even Christ Himself withdrawn to the wilderness to wait, be tested, and receive special graces? The Brown County Ursulines responded to the wilderness by making it a home, their wilderness home, a place of grace.

But what sort of home might this be? A home without parents, certainly a home without fathers-with virtually no men at all. A home with no young children (the school started with six-year-olds). It was a home with no kitchen table, no living room, no actual bedrooms--a home with few of the creature comforts most humans associate with home. Neither did it offer much in the way of privacy or personal possessions. On the face of it, the convent was an institution, not a home at all. Yet the metaphor of home persisted more than 150 years, from 1845 to the present.

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I gained insight into the Ursulines' understanding of home by reading Helen Fiddymont Levy's *Fiction of the Home Place* (1992). A work of literary criticism, *Fiction of the Home Place* traces an ideal female community that Levy sees as an alternative to the American myth of the individual male who competes and dominates. Drawing upon the work of several twentieth-century female novelists, Levy outlines the attributes of this mythic "home place." It is a small, stable community characterized by what she calls "local language" and located in an ideal pastoral and

domestic setting. This ideal community is rooted in a sense of history, a history that celebrates a lineage of female creativity, and in this community materialism and possessions are downplayed. This community provides care for the young, old, sick, or discouraged; community members place great value on such caretaking. Finally, an elder "wise woman" presides over the entire community.

In *Fiction of the Home Place*, Levy is describing a fictional ideal-not an actual community, let alone a convent. But in reading Levy's book, I was struck by how many of these attributes belonged to the Brown County convent. It was a relatively small community--small as convents go, usually numbering between thirty and sixty nuns and under one hundred pupils (often far fewer). It was also very stable in that nuns who entered the community were likely to stay for life; nuns seldom were sent from the Brown County convent and, prior to the 1960s, few nuns left the order. And the community was made up entirely of women.

While the Ursulines at Brown County never practiced strict cloister, the convent was considered semi-cloistered; as a means of protecting the integrity of the community, the comings and goings of all individuals were strictly monitored. Nuns could not leave the convent grounds without permission and outsiders followed a prescribed procedure when visiting. The presence of men in particular was carefully regulated; in many parts of the convent and boarding school, no man ever set foot. Exceptions might be made for hired workmen (who ate in a separate workers' dining room), for visiting priests (who stayed in a nearby "priest's house" used for this purpose), or for a visiting father of a pupil (who might converse with Mother Superior in the parlor). Though men might visit briefly, the Brown County convent was a world of women.

This world of women was also a remarkably self-contained world, one with a distinctive identity. The church, school, work- and living-spaces all existed literally under one roof; except on family farms, this fusion of work and home would have become rare in the late nineteenth-century. Women and girls prayed, studied, did chores, ate, relaxed, and slept all in the same building. They developed an idiosyncratic and specialized vocabulary for talking about the various places on the convent grounds; any novice-member or alumna would be sure to know the location of "The Long Walk" or "St. Anne's Gallery" or "Sunnyside" or "Solomon's Run." Such language contributed to a sense of belonging.

Like the fictional "home place" that Levy describes, Brown County convent was located in a rural and somewhat idyllic environment. What had been desolate woods were transformed by the nuns' building, landscaping, and farming efforts; by the time I visited in the 1970s the convent boasted Canadian geese, cattle, and horses, in addition to landscaped slopes, lakes, trees, and flower gardens. Though Cincinnati, the only city nearby, had greatly expanded, the Brown County location was still rural.

Moreover, over the decades, the nuns had consciously set out to sanctify the convent grounds by the use of various blessing rituals, including Corpus Christi processions through meadow and woods, May crownings, and the ceremonial blessing of buildings. The nuns also placed shrines throughout the grounds and nearby woods. The unexpected presence of statues in fields and woods made even those places seem familiar and domestic. At the same time, the relative lack of statues inside the convent made it seem less like a convent and more like a home.

Within this idyllic setting, the Brown County convent was steeped in a sense of history, particularly in a lineage of female creativity. As a matter of course, both nuns and pupils were schooled in American history, European history, and Roman Catholic church history; they also celebrated historical events with pageants and parties, year after year. More importantly, they identified with a tradition of women, writing plays and poems to celebrate achievements of women such as Saint Ursula (legendary twelfth-century patroness), St. Angela (sixteenth-century foundress of the Ursulines), Saint Joan of Arc, foundress Julia Chatfield, and various other heroic women.

Although this tradition was limited to women recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, it valued women's contributions more than did secular institutions of the time.

In addition to writing poems and producing plays, women at Brown County found numerous channels for their creative energy: they sang and performed on musical instruments; they embellished furniture and the chapel walls and pews with their own intricate wood-carvings; they grew flowers to adorn the altars; they perfected needlework of every sort (Figure 2). In the 1880s, one farsighted nun, Sister Eulalia Dunn, drew up all the original plans for the Sacred Heart Chapel and oversaw its erection in 1885; the chapel is said to be, even today, the only Roman Catholic church in America designed by a woman (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Hand-carved door to Lady Chapel (Photo courtesy of Eric Weinberg.)



Figure 3. Interior of Sacred Heart Chapel, ca. 1984, still in use (Photo courtesy of Eric Weinberg).

Even as they celebrated a lineage of female creativity, nuns at Brown County de-emphasized materialism and personal possessions at times when the larger culture was increasingly materialistic. All the nuns took vows of poverty. The community itself actually was poor, unlike some religious groups which accumulated community wealth even though individual members took vows of poverty; Brown County convent's poverty was caused by its isolation and small numbers. In addition, the sisters did their best to downplay materialism among the pupils as well by discouraging extravagance in dress and in other possessions.

Like the ideal "home place" that Levy describes, the Brown County convent provided care and nurturance for women of all ages and conditions, ranging from six-year-old school girls to elderly nuns. The care and education of children was the academy's reason for existence. According to Sister Miriam, many of the academy's pupils regarded Brown County as a second family and second home, and it was not unusual for an alumna's daughters and even granddaughters to attend. Even now, most nuns who have spent their lives at Brown County return there to die, cared for by their sister Ursulines throughout their final hours.

Finally, an elder woman presided over the Brown County community: Mother Superior was seen as wise and, at times, inspired by God. From the time she led the first Ursulines to Brown County in 1845 until her death in 1878, Julia Chatfield served as Mother Superior and was known then and thereafter as "Notre Mere." Following Chatfield's death, the community was led by a series of Mothers Superior, respectfully addressed as "Mother." Whoever she might be, Mother Superior was advised and assisted by the Community Council, a group of women elected from among the ranks of the nuns. Important decisions were made by all the nuns together, voting at yearly "chapter meetings." (In recent decades, formal titles such as Mother have been dropped and leadership has become less hierarchical.) While Mother Superior presided over the community of nuns, another woman presided over the academy as the Directress.

Even as her successors assumed community leadership, Mother Julia Chatfield is seen as an important influence in the community, even today, a hundred years after her death. In their documents and in conversation, nuns often voice the belief that she is still alive, in spirit though not in body, and is able to offer guidance. For example, at times when I was wrestling with a problem, whether personal or scholarly, Sister Miriam routinely suggested that I pay a visit to Julia Chatfield's grave in the convent cemetery and "talk it over with Julia." On occasion, I have heard many other sisters casually make remarks about communication with Julia, Monica, Hyacinth, Augusta, and other important community leaders no longer alive. Initially I found this strange but in time I came to understand that the sisters believe the dead are part of the "communion of saints," alive in spirit though not visible.

The nuns' own sense of their "convent home" has changed over the decades. Early on, the nuns made a conscious effort to make the convent school an inviting, comforting home for the girls who attended the Academy. Early brochures advertising the school emphasized its home-like qualities and the motherly kindness of the nuns themselves. Julia Chatfield had inherited from her father, a London art dealer, good taste and a love of art, qualities she passed on to her successors. Displaying art, including the sisters' and students' own art, had the salutary effect of making the building more home-like and familiar.

In addition to being a home for the students, of course, the convent also was a home for the nuns who came there to spend their lives-to live, work, die, and be buried there. After her profession, a nun would not return to her family home.

And the nuns also desired that their convent and school should be a center of action for outsiders. According to Sister Joan Brosnan, even in Julia Chatfield's time the nuns felt a commitment not just to their boarding students but also to "the village" of St. Martin. Early on, the nuns operated in the convent a "day school" that served the local children. "The convent was never an island," says Brosnan. "We have always been committed to people in the local area, especially to women. We reached out to them, and we welcomed them." This commitment was more manifest in some decades than others. Beginning in the 1940s the Ursulines sponsored annual "Ladies Retreats" for adult women on the convent grounds, and in later decades they offered summer camps for girls.

The most significant change, of course, came following the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-65). In response to the Council's call to re-discover their founder's charism, the Ursulines, like nuns throughout America, entered a period of great upheaval, beginning with the change from the Latin liturgy to the vernacular and the change from long black habits to more relaxed dress for the nuns. As a result of the council, nuns who formerly had been forbidden to visit their family homes were now permitted to do so. Nuns began not just to visit their families, but also to work and eventually to live outside the convent walls. Brosnan was Superior of the community (1973-1979) during this period of change and recalls the nuns deciding to invite local people to use their facilities such as the play hall and the swimming pool. Rules about cloister relaxed during this time; access to places like the parlors and the nuns' refectory was less restricted than in the past. Eventually most traces

of cloister died out altogether.

The last twenty years have seen the most dramatic change in the Ursulines' idea of home. Now that the boarding school has closed, most of the nuns live in their own apartments and houses and only visit the old convent grounds for meetings or retreats. Still, among the nuns and others there remains the sense that Brown County is a spiritual and symbolic home. One old document (ca. 1920s) observes, "There is in dear old Brown County something that lives in its atmosphere, that draws hearts closely together; that gives the home feeling; that inspires faith in Divine Providence. . . . The Spirit that dear Notre Mere left us, our richest inheritance" (Necrology 4). The form and meaning of this "home feeling" continues to evolve. Even as I write this essay, a dwelling beside the chapel has been renamed "Springer House" and is being renovated as a house of prayer to be used for retreats. The nuns point out that the building I had always known as the "Priest's House" was in fact originally commissioned in 1865 by an alumna named Jenny Springer who wanted to visit the convent often and "keep alive the happy memory of my school-days." Soon it will serve as a haven for myself and others who consider Brown County their spiritual home.

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While Levy's literary emphasis sheds light upon the Ursulines' "wilderness home," further insights come from the sociology of architecture. Sociologist Daphne Spain observes that the use of architectural space shapes social life. Human beings' view of themselves and their relations with others is not only reflected in but is also shaped by their use of physical space. Space is a good indicator of what a group of people values, she says, and these values are preserved by the way a building's floor plan influences daily activities. The way that the Brown County Ursulines used the interior spaces of their buildings says a great deal about their values as a community and thus about the nature of their "wilderness home."

In her book, <u>Gendered Spaces</u> (1992) Spain points out that, in contrast to contemporary American architecture, homes built in the nineteenth century tended to have highly specialized spaces. Where a modern American home might have a living room or a multi-purpose "great room," affluent homes of the last century would have had a ladies' parlor, a library, and perhaps a smoking room or billiard room. Built in 1845, the Brown County motherhouse was similarly characterized by the specialized use of space. One example is the Ursulines' use of their two parlors to receive outsiders; such use of parlors was a long-standing tradition in many women's religious communities, dating back to the Counter-Reformation (perhaps further). Here Mother Superior might confer with parents or a merchant, for example, or a young girl might visit with her family.

At Brown County, two formal parlors flanked the vestibule where all visitors entered the convent. These parlors were elegantly decorated with carved chairs, velvet sofas, Oriental rugs, and large oil paintings in gilded frames. The tradition of formal parlors has roots reaching back through centuries of European convents; according to the Ursuline Rule, convents might boast up to four parlors, and nuns would speak to outsiders through a grille (a screen which separated insiders from visitors). This more relaxed American convent had no grille in the parlor, but formal behavior was still expected. Pupils entered the parlors only when invited, and were forbidden to wear aprons there. They curtsied when greeting guests.

Other parts of the convent were also highly specialized in purpose. The Commencement Hall (added to the main building in 1860) served as a combination library/auditorium. Here the commencement "awarding of premiums" was held each spring, wherein pupils were given recognition for their academic, artistic, and moral accomplishments. There were two different chapels as well. The small, intimate, and softly lit "Lady Chapel" served as a place for personal devotions, especially to the Virgin Mary who was represented by a prominently

placed life-size plaster statue. The vastly larger Chapel of the Sacred Heart was a gathering place for daily mass and for large liturgical gatherings, including choral performances.

The large and beautiful spaces set aside for public gatherings contrasted strongly with the almost complete absence of space for individuals. The nuns slept in tiny unadorned cells and spent all their waking hours in common rooms. The pupils slept in dormitories on the top (fourth) floor of the convent; long open rooms were divided by white curtains into small "efficiency alcoves," one per girl. Each alcove contained a bed, a bedside cabinet and little more. Bathrooms were communal and clothing was distributed from a nearby laundry storage room.

The values of the women living in the Brown County convent were clearly reflected in the way they appropriated their physical space. The presence of lush and elegant parlors suggested a gracious hospitality, albeit a hospitality carefully contained. The message of the convent parlor was not "Come in and make yourself at home," but rather "We're happy to see you but please keep your distance."

Similarly, the Brown County community placed tremendous value on large communal gatherings. These gatherings celebrated the life of the convent-community and sometimes welcomed outsiders as well. Such celebrations included public performances (such as choral and theatrical events), ceremonies associated with academic achievements, and, most of all, communal worship. Irene Mahoney, an Ursuline novelist, describes a convent chapel as seen through the eyes of a young sister. Although Mahoney is from another community and the scene is fictional, her description could well apply to the Brown County Sacred Heart Chapel:

When their efforts to live angelically had worn [the nuns] to depression . . . they had the reaches of worship to set them free from their own limitations and immerse them in the splendor of adoration. Their chapel-with its aspiring arches and brilliant stained glass windows, its marble sanctuary and rich ornaments-had provided them with a beauty that compensated for their small unpainted cells and the dismal barrenness of their common rooms. Even that austerity [the young nun] had loved, glorying the fact that all the beauty that they knew was vested in the worship of God. (Mahoney 90)

The contrast between the ornate chapel and the "small unpainted cells" highlights the lack of value placed upon individuality, privacy, and personal relationships. What was valued at the Brown County convent was the life of the community, and even more, the worship of God.

I find it particularly interesting to examine the Brown County convent buildings in light of what they reveal about gender identity. Since time immemorial, cultures and societies have organized space around gender. According to Daphne Spain, nineteenth-century Victorian homes were highly segregated along gender lines. The design of such homes puts women in parlors, kitchens, and boudoir, while men inhabited the library, the study, and everywhere else. Such containment of women based on gender, according to Spain, cuts them off from access to knowledge and power. She argues that it results in a diminishment of women's power and status.

The all-female world of the Brown County convent challenges Spain's observations. Isolated by geography and church rules of cloister, the Ursuline women nonetheless exerted tremendous influence on the world around them. Within the convent, nuns certainly had power: Mother Superior, the Academy Directress, and the Community Council ran the entire school, farm, and convent. In this self-contained world, women and girls had access to every place in the communal buildings, while men had none.

It is true that, for much of its history, the nuns and the young women in their care were not directly involved in

public life, at least not in the arenas of business or politics. But through their work as caretakers of children and young women, and as educators, the nuns exerted powerful influence that radiated out from the convent. Because their pupils were continually in their care, day and night, throughout the school year, the nuns had the opportunity to shape their characters, tastes, and attitudes. Most alumnae went on to raise families of their own, often passing on the values they absorbed at Brown County. Because many of the pupils were daughters of the middle and upper classes, once they left the academy, many married into socially prominent families. Many also became active in volunteer and church organizations. The nuns' influence as nurturers and educators, though limited in scope, was tremendous in impact.

In addition to their roles as educators of young women, the nuns also lived lives of prayer, praying and singing Gregorian chant at several appointed times throughout each day. They believed that such prayer affected events and people beyond their convent walls. I agree with Spain that segregation based upon gender is an important influence, but in the case of the Ursulines such segregation did not undermine their power as women. Rather, segregation intensified it.

\* \* \* \*

Having observed and pondered the life of the Brown County Ursulines over the last two decades, I have come to appreciate the complex ways that the convent became a home to the women living there, whether during a pupil's school-years or during a nun's lifetime "in religion." The sense of home derives in part from the belief that inhabitants of Brown County are in a special and holy place. A priest speaking at an alumnae celebration at the Brown County convent in 1910, described it this way: "I see the Dove of Peace and the Phoenix of Rejuvenation hovering tonight over the confines of this sacred enclosure, consecrated to God and sanctified by the lives of so many daughters of St. Ursula" (*First Alumnae Year Book* 14-15).

Religious historian Mircea Eliade speaks of this sense of "sacred space" in a wider context when he observes, "The sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacity [sic], the source of life and fecundity. [Our human] desire to live in the sacred is in fact [our] desire to take up our abode in objective reality" (28-29). Nuns and perhaps pupils as well saw themselves as living in "the sacred . . . the real . . . the source of life and fecundity." It was the grounding in a larger or deeper reality that gave the inhabitants a sense of home, an "abode in objective reality."

While nuns and church leaders might speak of home in theological terms, they actually experienced home in ways that were emotional and familiar. Novelist Anna Quindlen writes of "that greater meaning of home that we understand most purely when we are children, when it is a metaphor for all possible feelings of security, safety, of what is predictable, gentle, and good in life" (213). The security, gentleness, and predictability of life at Brown County did much to reinforce a sense of home.

With time I have come to appreciate the allure of the Brown County convent. Its sense of home had its source in the way it echoed a mythic or even archetypal ideal. Life at Brown County embodied an imaginative alternative to the individualistic, competitive, male model with which we are all too familiar. The same yearning for a mythic "home place" that inspired the novels in Levy's study also drew women and girls to the Brown County convent. The control of architectural space, through the use of cloister and specialized interior spaces, served to heighten the sense that this was a special, important, even sacred place. Theological associations and emotional reverberations all contributed to a multi-layered and complex conviction that the Brown County Ursuline convent was indeed a very appealing "home in the wilderness."

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