

Villa St. Josep in its many stag reflects Cobourg's



thousand
d home.
vent on
quently
pray or
ip, quiet
welcome
Sister
Villa St.
on, co-
of his
Grant,
s; fur-
w rem-
s well-
bs are
igh the
Sister
nds as
id lay
h the
tually-
resort-
ed and
e was
er as
nance
ounds
Joseph
met
the
years
Villa
L
tran-
were
girls

to
of
in

Villa St. Joseph was built in 1836 by Winkworth Tremaine

By JODY FARRELL

Tucked in among the large fir trees at the very end of Tremaine St. south, sits a house whose past is as varied as the history of Cobourg itself. Once the home of wealthy American socialites and prominent Canadian citizens, the 146-year-old structure was named "The Hill" because of its majestic location above the sandy shores of Lake Ontario.

Sister Vincentia of St. Joseph's Convent, Cobourg, is quite familiar with the home of such historic names as William Weller, the

famous stagecoach operator, and Nellie Sartoris, daughter of American General and one-time president Ulysses Grant. This beautiful old mansion with its large varandah and lush, green landscaping and gardens, was once the sister's home too. She moved there in April, 1922, when, after The Hill had been purchased by the Sisters of St. Joseph, Peterborough, it opened its doors to homeless young girls from across Ontario.

She remembers how, in 1921, at the overcrowded orphanage in Peterborough, the children were

told that some would be transferred to this new location. At the time, nobody knew which group, boys or girls, would be chosen to move.

"We argued back and forth with our brothers over who would be the lucky ones," Sister recalls. However, when the girls first discovered they had been chosen to leave for this unknown place, "we weren't all that crazy about it" she says.

'The house looked like a castle left untouched'

Fifteen girls aged 3 to 11, as well as the Superior and three other nuns, were given the royal welcome on April 16, 1922, when they finally arrived in Cobourg. The Knights of Columbus and local residents met the group at the train station. They were escorted to their new residence in a carpeted bus, until then used exclusively for patrons of the posh British Hotel. Once at the orphanage, Sister Vincentia remembers how she and her playmates marvelled at the long, shaded driveway and fine-cut lawns. How first glimpse of the beach and waves sent them running to Mother Superior, pleading for permission to go down to the water. And how, once they opened the doors of the house, it appeared as though they were walking into a perfect castle which for years had been left untouched.

"It seemed like whoever was there last had walked out, locked the door, and left the furniture and every accessory behind," Sister says now.

On that first day, Mother Superior had gathered the girls around the fireplace and told them about General Grant; that he had actually visited the house when it belonged to his daughter, Nellie. They were particularly thrilled when, later, they were given a tour of their new home and shown the general's very own carved ivory table and mahogany bed. The 28-room house contained eight fireplaces and was beautifully furnished: each bedroom contained a large floor mirror, and a bigger, magnificent wall mirror reflected the lake in the bayroom on the main floor. This same room had once been a stable for Miss Allen, a previous owner who loved to ride her horses across the spacious 10-acre property.

The home, then named the St. Joseph's orphanage for girls, Th

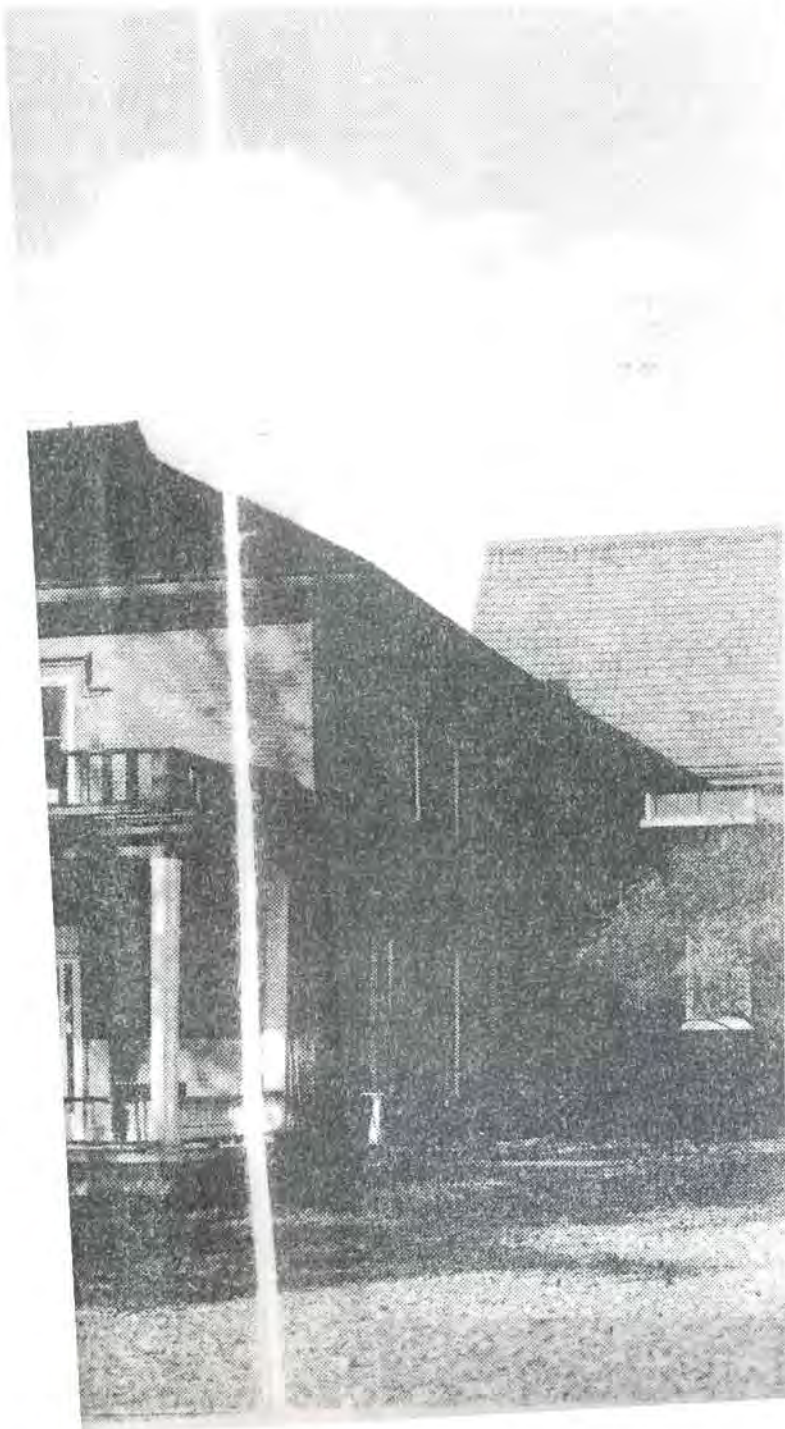


VILLA ST. JOSEPH - Sister Margaret Shannon (left) and Sister Mary Agnes now live at the Villa, located on the corner of Tremaine and Monk Streets. The 146-year-old house, once the home of William Weller and the daughter of General Ulysses Grant, is now a restful retreat spot for visitors from throughout Ontario.

A-Weller Family 08-05

, 1983.

Joseph, stages, urg's past



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES – Sister Vincentia remembers the day she and the other children of St. Joseph's orphanage got together and bought this statue of the home's patron Saint. The chapel, where the statue is located, had been a ballroom when the house belonged to General Grant's daughter.

The Sisters of St. Joseph
bought the house in 1921,
turned it into an orphanage

would be tran-
w location. At the
ew which group,
ould be chosen to

ck and fort) with
who would be the
Sister recalls.
the girls first
ad been chosen to
nown place. "we
azy about it," she

**looked like
untouched'**

ed 3 to 11, as well
and three other
ven the royal
l 16, 1922, when
ved in Coourg.
lumbus and local
group at the train
escorted) their

a carpeted bus,
exclusive for
sh British Hotel.
phanage, Sister
ers how she and
arvelled at the
way and fine-cut

glimpse of the
sent the run-
perior, plading
go down to the
nce they pened
use, it appeared
e walking into a
h for years had

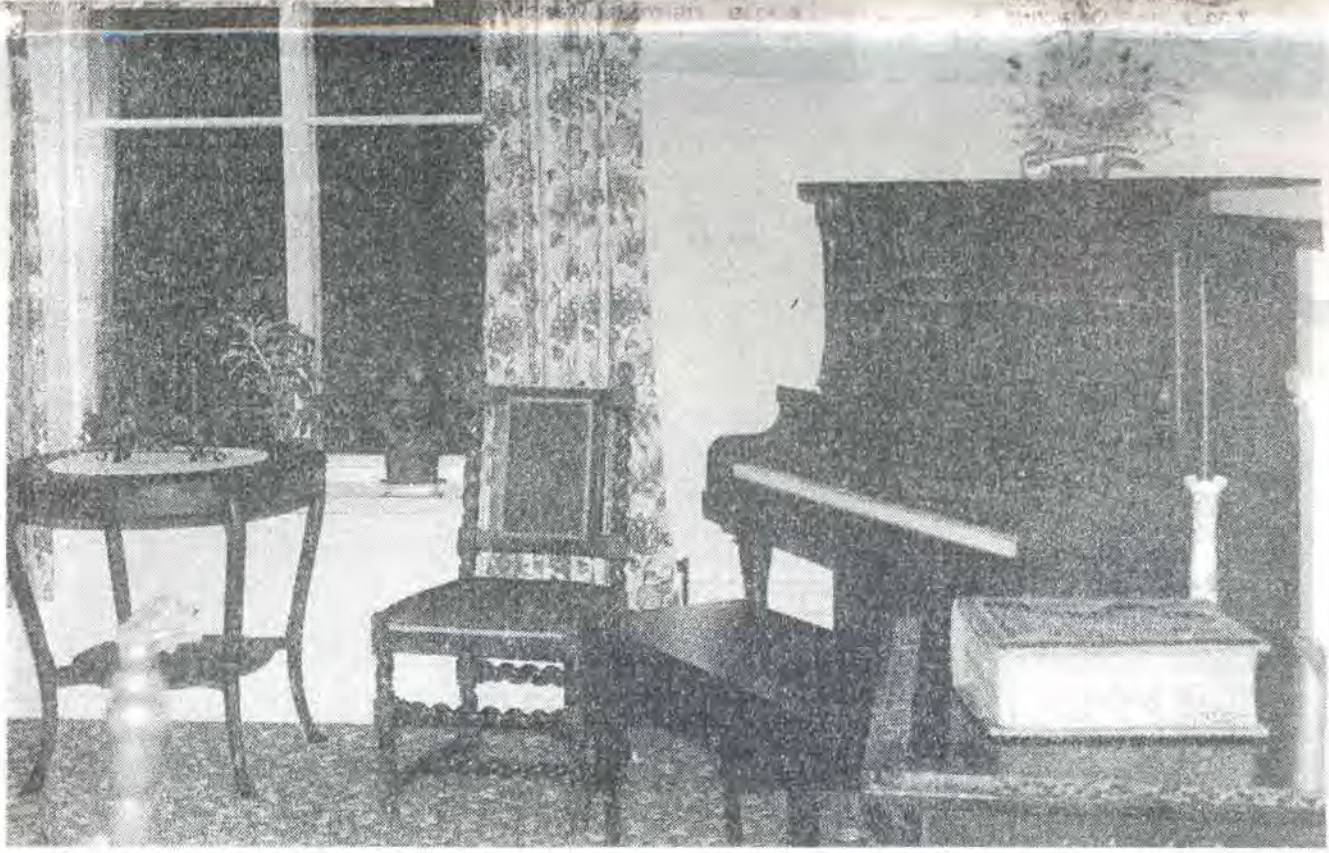
whoever was
ked out, ocked
ie furniture and
behind," Sister

day, Mother
ered the girls
e and tol them
nt; that e had
house when it
ughter, Nellie.

ularly irilled
re giver a tour
and sho n the
carved ivory
y bed. he 28-

ained eight
as beautifuly
edroom con-
mirror, and a
l wall mirror
i the ba room
his sam room
able fo Miss
ner who loved
s across the
perty.

amed ie St.
e for girls,
nges to lit its



RESTORED HOME - There are still several precious antiques which once belonged to previous owners located in Villa St. Joseph. On the wall in this living room hangs the wedding picture of General Grant's granddaughter. Much

of the furniture and ornaments had been left in the house when it was purchased by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1921. Some have been transferred to the Sisters' convent in Peterborough.

new tenants. The ballroom was converted into a chapel. The Stations of the Cross were erected and an organ donated. And on May 15, 1922, The Hill held its first Mass.

The orphanage was really quite self-sufficient, Sister Vincentia recalls. With two Holstein cows and hen-house, there was never a shortage of milk and eggs. There was also a large vegetable garden to the east of the house.

"We always thought we were hard done by, having to eat fresh vegetables," Sister says.

The Mother Superior during those years was Sister Perpetua.

"They couldn't have chosen a better person to run the orphanage," Sister Vincentia says today.

Mother Superior was a nurse, seamstress

A nurse and a seamstress, Sister Perpetua was well trained to care for and clothe the children. Although most of the clothing was second-hand, given to the orphanage by mothers throughout the community, the girls did not wear it until it had been taken apart by the Mother Superior and several local seamstresses, and redesigned to a new, colorful pattern.

The children were taught independence as well. If they needed

new shoes, Mother Perpetua would send them on their own to the store. She would call ahead and have the shoemaker set up a little table containing comfortable shoes at a good price. The girls would arrive and each select and purchase their own.

There were duties for the older children, including Sister Vincentia, who was 11 years. She was responsible for getting the little ones to school and back each day. Years later, neighbors told her what a treat it had been to watch the whole group marching towards school, hand in hand.

"I would be late for classes every day, and would have to stay after school," she laughs.

In the years that followed, the orphanage grew. Sister Vincentia left to attend high school in Lindsay, and when she returned to visit in the 1930s, St. Joseph's housed 34 children. It was not as pleasant as it had been when less than half that many had the run of the house, Sister says.

"But it was always home, and I was always welcome to come back."

In 1945, St. Joseph's closed as an orphanage. With the advent of government baby bonuses, there were no longer as many mothers who felt unable to care for their children as there had been during

the Depression. The young girls who had not left the old house were either placed in homes or transferred back to Peterborough.

The property became the Villa St. Joseph, and for many years after, was used throughout the warmer months as a summer home for the Sisters of St. Joseph. However, the building and grounds required a lot of maintenance work. They were no longer as beautiful as when the house was lived in year-round.

But in 1972, it was renovated and converted into a peaceful resort-style home, providing spiritually-oriented retreats for both the Sisters of St. Joseph and lay people. Today, the Villa stands as proud as it did when, in 1922, Sister Vincentia first drove through the gates. Its grounds and shrubs are trimmed, and the house is well-kept. There are still a few remnants of its former owners; furniture belonging to General Grant, and a wedding picture of his daughter Nellie.

Sister Margaret Shannon, coordinator of the now Villa St. Joseph retreat house and Sister Mary Agnes are there to welcome people looking for friendship, quiet reflection, or just a place to pray or be. Sister Vincentia frequently comes up from the convent on Havelock St. to visit her old home. "It will always hold a thousand memories," she smiles.