

Town's last teaching nun retires

from St. Mary's

By Peggy Foster July 3, 1995

When school closed for the year last week, it was the end of an era at St. Mary's School on Pine Street South.

Sister Shirley O'Rourke, 56, the last teaching nun in Port Hope, retired from her job of 33 years.

And my how times have changed.

When Sister Shirley started teaching in 1962, sisters still wore full black floor-length habits to the floor.

"I remember having 45 Grade 5s in my class and the rows were close together," she said. "I had a cross hanging down one side (of the habit) and a cincture (a rope belt with tassles on the end) on the other side. They would catch on the desks and I could hardly get down the aisles."

By 1967 the long black robes had been replaced, first by shorter versions of the habit in blue, grey or black. Later the nuns were allowed to wear ordinary street clothes.

Vast changes have also happened in the classroom, she said, from children sitting in desks in neat rows, learning the same things at the same time, to students learning at their own pace and working in small groups.

"Society has changed. People are living differently," Sister Shirley said. "There is more violence on (television) and in the world."

When she entered the convent in Peterborough in 1956, nuns were either teachers or nurses, she said.

"People couldn't support themselves at teaching, so we did it."

For many years nuns teaching in private schools were unpaid, and those working for school boards received 85 per cent of what other teachers earned. Gradually religious teachers' wages reached par.

The trend for nuns to serve the community in other ways than teaching in schools is universal, she said. When she started teaching in Peterborough there were 50 teaching sisters and now there is only one there.

As well as teaching at St. Mary's for the last 12 years, Sister Shirley served as vice-principal of the junior school for four years. She taught in Ottawa for 12 years and spent a year teaching in a native village in Labrador.

One of her most vivid memories of St. Mary's School is the time four years ago when the school had to be evacuated after a gas line was ruptured during construction on Pine Street. First teachers were told to take all of the students to Our Lady of Mercy Church, then when that was also deemed unsafe, buses had to be called to take the 240 youngsters to St. Anthony's School on Toronto Road.



Fond farewell — Grade 2 students at St. Mary's School said goodbye to Sister Shirley O'Rourke with a big cake.

Photo by Ted Amsden

When radon gas invaded St. Mary's earlier this year students once again had to be moved to St. Anthony's for a week.

Sister Shirley will be moving to Toronto from the convent at 168 Walton St. later this summer. At one time 10 nuns lived in the convent and taught at the school, but their numbers have dwindled to just four. With so few residents, there is a possibility the large brick house, formerly owned by the Burnham family, will be sold, she said.

The Sisters of St. Joseph have lived in the large home for the last 30 years.

While Sister Shirley is retiring from St. Mary's, she is not planning to sit back and put her feet up.

"I've done the same thing every day of my life and I promised myself every day would be different when I retired," she said.

Life will not be dull for the sister, who plans to have an apartment at Yonge and College streets in Toronto as her base for volunteer work in several areas. She will teach English as a second language at a women's integration group, tutor youngsters at the Hospital for Sick Children, offer courses at Jessie House, a home for unwed mothers, volunteer at the Evergreen Mission, a drop-in centre for street kids, and work with the homeless.

Last Tuesday afternoon parents and students at St. Mary's gave Sister Shirley a farewell party.

"They've been telling me at the school to wipe the grin off my face for the last few weeks," she said.

July 25-1995 The income tax

On this date in 1917, the first Canadian income tax was imposed. It began at 4 per cent on incomes exceeding \$2,000, in the case of unmarried men and childless widowers. A super-tax also kicked in: 2 per cent on incomes of \$6,000-\$10,000, rising to 25 per cent of incomes greater than \$100,000. Ottawa estimated it would raise \$15-million to \$20-million, to fight the Great War. The Globe, welcoming the "belated" move to distribute the burdens of the conflict more equitably, said "let the mobilization of the resources of the country proceed."