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# Sister Heidi: From Opulence To Charity

## South End People

by Lynne Potts

Sister Muriel Heidi remembers when the whole family used to gather in New York City for a grand Christmas reunion at her paternal grandfather's brownstone on West 69th Street during the opulent second and third decades of the twentieth century. It must have been quite an occasion. Heidi was one of eight children in her family alone—all of whom, by the way, are still living.

Heidi came to the South End in 1973 to work with a group of Hispanic women in a project that eventually became an adult learning center for the Hispanic community in Boston.

Heidi was born in 1916 in New York City and grew up in a sprawling apartment on Riverside Drive overlooking the Hudson River. She remembers well the "huge apartment" with its long hallways and high-ceilinged rooms. At one point another half apartment was added to the tenth floor spread to accommodate the growing family and its retinue of cook, maids, and a chauffeur.

In a way it's a typical American story. Her paternal grandfather was born in Germany, the sixth of seven sons. His father was mayor of the small town, but her grandfather felt his prospects in the old country were not bright enough. He came to America, bought a horse and buggy as soon as he could earn the money, and started selling candy on the streets of

Manhattan. Eventually he owned a whole block of buildings on Houston Street where he made candy that was sold all over the city, and finally all over the country. The Heidi name is still in fine print on that box of Juju beans that almost everyone has nursed at some time or other during a thriller at the movies.

Her maternal grandfather was born in this country, became a lawyer and, Heidi says, used to tell stories of when he was a little boy and remembered attending the funeral of President Lincoln. But the most significant influence of Heidi's life was the fact of her strong Catholic family. "I knew probably as early as seven years old that I was going to be a nun," she says, "I never played a lot with dolls much but I once remember I was playing with some friends and I held a doll and said to myself, 'This will be my child.' Another time when I was 12 years old my friends tried to get me to smoke. I wouldn't so they teased me and said 'I'd be a nun. I said that I was never going to be a nun, but as I was saying it I knew I was going to be.'"

Heidi says that it was an odd combination of traits that led her to the decision—"a sense of humor, and an attraction to prayer." The family was then typical of a certain privileged set in New York. The children dressed for dinner, and meals were served punctually by the maids. "Father's word was the last one," Heidi explains. Her mother managed the household, saw the children were properly chaperoned and buggy as soon as he could earn the money, and started

the daily details of family, school, and entertaining. They had a large house on the New Jersey shore where the whole family lived in the summer. Heidi says she wore her hair in the classic Dutch Boy and remembers waiting past the post office and the soda fountain for her father's commuter train to roll in on summer nights at the shore. "It was those years living in New York overlooking the Fall-sades from our house, and those

else. Candy, one forgets, is a luxury. "We seemed to go from riches to rags overnight," she remembers. "I had to wear dresses after only two years in college she left home and went into the convent. In another 2 1/2 years she made her "first vows" and began a "chief apostolate in education." "I made my 'final profession' in 1944 in Albany, New York," she says. "We couldn't go to Rome because of World War II so I went to Kenwood in Albany."

After that she moved back to New York and taught in a convent school on East 91st Street, while she studied for a master's degree in English at Fordham University. "In those days we were what they called 'semi-cloistered.' Oh, we didn't have grills on the windows, but we were not allowed to go out, even for funerals. Although my family lived only a short distance from where I was, I was never allowed to go and see them, even at Christmas.

"I think it's better now," she explains. "It's more humane and it's kinder to the families. But in those days the concept of the cloister and the fact that things should not be contaminated was pervasive. I came through that tradition of cloistered life for women."

In fact, Heidi recalls, the nuns were kept in a "strict rule of silence" which meant that they were not allowed to talk to each other, even at meals. They had one hour of "recreation" a day, half of which was spent in special reading and the other in monitored conversation. Heidi says "the minor seminaries then were a tragedy;

summers at the ocean that left me with a love of beauty that has sustained me my whole life." Of course the Depression hit the Heidi family as it did everyone else. Candy, one forgets, is a luxury. "We seemed to go from riches to rags overnight," she remembers. "I had to wear dresses after only two years in college she left home and went into the convent. In another 2 1/2 years she made her "first vows" and began a "chief apostolate in education." "I made my "final profession" in 1944 in Albany, New York," she says. "We couldn't go to Rome because of World War II so I went to Kenwood in Albany."

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## Heidi

(continued from page 12)

the young people were so isolated." She must have risked saying something about it at some point, however. She recalls once beginning to speak during recreation when the head nun said, "And now we'll have a word from the loyal opposition."

Those years between 1938 and 1964 Heidi spent mostly teaching in schools of her order, The Religions of the Sacred Heart. She taught in Newton Academy for five years, then in New York while she finished her M.A. degree. After that she taught in Greenwich Country Day school and then Norton High School in Connecticut. When she went to Rochester, N.Y., to teach fourth grade she became the school's treasurer and then went back to the convent school on 91st Street to become their treasurer for the next seven years.

In 1964, she made a dramatic change in her life. She applied and was sent to the Instituto Pedagógico, National des Mejures in Lima, Peru. It was a women's university owned by the government but run

by the nuns of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. Heidi was assigned to build up the English Department and to establish an English library. She didn't speak a word of Spanish when she left.

"I had always thought about being a missionary, ever since I was a little girl—and in a way the years in Peru were the culmination of my life's dreams," she says. "But I went through great culture shock and I had a difficult identity crisis. Everything was hard to get used to. I remember I had trouble forcing myself to stand closer to people when I talked, for example. The Peruvians like to stand close to you when they are speaking and I kept instinctively backing up. One time a friend told me I shouldn't walk with my head in the air. I got homesick just to see a typical American male stride."

Heidi, who with her own 5'11" stride is not given to despair, laughs and says she finally had a breakthrough. "I finally realized not only could I never become a Peruvian—but that I was probably just the opposite—a German-American."

She stayed eight years in Peru, working often up in the slum hills around Lima in conditions which

she says were "horrible." In 1972 when the military took over Peru, the nuns were sent home.

Heidi was 56 years old when she came back. Vatican II had dispensed with all but "strict cloister" and life for nuns had changed radically in the U.S. It was no small adjustment. "Suddenly I was back in the States, and for the first time since I was a girl, I was wearing street clothes," she says. "That alone was no small change."

She spent one year at Knollwood, a Catholic girls school in New York, but was not happy. She wanted, after Peru, to work with less fortunate people, and to use her Spanish. Eventually she and Sister Carol Putnam came to the South End where a group of nuns began teaching classes to Hispanic women in a house on Pembroke Street. The "living-room lessons" expanded and became a school. Heidi stayed for eight years, working as a teacher and finally as the Center's bookkeeper. She retired in 1979.

But she has a new project now. "I am working as a homemaker for the Women's Industrial Union," she says. "I think the question of what kind of communities people want to live in as

senior citizens is an important one. People live longer now. The older nuns used to be between 70 and 83 years, but now they are between 80 and 95. I think we need to think about where and how these people will live. I want to look around at both religious and non-religious groups." Heidi has already taken a course at Boston University on social and personal

problems of aging, and a seminar on the subject at Boston College.

Heidi now lives with others of her religious community in a house on Shawmut Avenue. But she isn't often "retired." She is around the neighborhood, usually in a pair of slacks and a jacket, organizing neighborhood kids for a cleanup, or off to look after someone "elderly" in the South End.