

# The Middle Years

This is the second installment of a series of preprints from *The University of Scranton: A Centennial History*. The book, written by Dr. Frank X. J. Homer '64, professor of history, chronicles the life of the University of Scranton in words and pictures. This segment recalls the faculty and staff of St. Thomas College, as the institution was known before 1938.

## St. Thomas College In Its Prime: Faculty and Staff

While the College continued to grow through the 1930's, the number of Christian Brothers assigned to their community in Scranton remained relatively static, never exceeding fifteen (including those teaching in the high school). Their services were supplemented not only by diocesan clergy who had been teaching at the College since its inception, but also by an increasingly large lay faculty and staff whose numbers grew from sixteen in 1926 to forty-three by 1940. Unlike their lay colleagues, many of whom were to remain with the College and later the University for decades, the Brothers, including the presidents of the College, were subject to regular reassignment by their provincial superiors. There were, however, at least two Brothers who enjoyed lengthy tenures at Scranton and whose contributions to the College's development deserve special mention.

When he assumed the presidency of St. Thomas College in September of 1931 Brother Denis Edward, F.S.C. had already served two previous tours of duty at Scranton, teaching mathematics in 1899-1900 and returning as professor of philosophy from 1924 to 1927. Having served earlier as president of St. John's College in Washington and La Salle College in Philadelphia, Brother Denis Edward was an experienced administrator, and his nine years as president of St. Thomas until 1940 were marked by a vigorous effort to broaden the College's offerings and strengthen its standards. While he intensified efforts to recruit qualified students, he also moved to raise entrance requirements and sought to increase the size and caliber of the faculty. Unfortunately, the lack of fund-

ing in the midst of the Depression caused his reach at times to exceed his grasp; nonetheless, he was to leave a more lasting imprint than any other president while the College was under the administration of the Christian Brothers.

Another Brother closely identified with the development of St. Thomas during the 1930's was Brother Emilian of Jesus, F.S.C., who served in Scranton for over ten years beginning in 1929. During much of that time he was dean of the College providing valuable assistance to Brother Denis Edward in the administration of the College, but Brother Emilian is best remembered for his dynamic work in the classroom as an inspiring philosophy teacher. When alumni who attended the College at this time are asked to recall the faculty members who made the most lasting impression on them, Brother Emilian's name is the one most often mentioned. As a means of encouraging academic excellence he initiated efforts to establish the first honor society at St. Thomas in 1935 which three years later adopted the Greek letters Phi Gamma Pi.

For many decades the College enjoyed the services of diocesan clergy assigned by the bishop to teach religion and the classics. These were often the "best and the brightest" among younger priests, many of whom were themselves graduates of St. Thomas and would go on to hold prominent positions in the administration of the diocese, including the Revs. John J. Featherstone, Thomas J. McHugh, John J. Vaughn, and Henry T. Klonowski, the last later became auxiliary bishop of the diocese.

Among the growing number of lay



*Brother Denis Edward, F.S.C., had taught mathematics at St. Thomas College in 1899-1900 and returned as professor of philosophy from 1924-27. His tenure as president, beginning in 1931, marked nine years of effort to strengthen the College.*



*Frank O'Hara came to St. Thomas as a high school freshman in 1917. On his graduation in 1925 he became the College's first registrar. Before his death in 1977, he served variously as secretary to the trustees, bursar, director of alumni relations, alumni society moderator, and, for one month in the summer of 1942, as caretaker president during the transition to Jesuit administration of the University.*



*Phi Nu Sigma fraternity in 1928 — the first fraternity at St. Thomas College, founded in 1926.*

faculty and staff members who served St. Thomas College in its prime, the name of one man clearly stands out far above all others: Francis John O'Hara, whose contributions to the College and University over more than a half-century are not likely to be equaled, let alone surpassed. The son of a school superintendant in Throop, Pennsylvania, Frank O'Hara began his association with St. Thomas in 1917 at the age of fourteen as an entering high school freshman. Once in the College he was a member of the first class to receive degrees under the College's own charter in 1925. As a student he achieved notable success both academically (his grades over four years averaged a remarkable 98.4) and in extracurricular activities as editor of *The Aquinas* and a founder of the College's Dramatic Society where he was particularly adept at performing female roles (a particularly useful talent at an all-male college). Immediately upon his graduation Frank O'Hara was appointed the College's first registrar, a position he held for the next thirty-two years. From 1957 until his death in 1977 he served as Director of Alumni Relations and Alumni Society Moderator.

Over the years Frank O'Hara assisted the Brothers in their administration of the College in numerous ways, as secretary to the trustees, bursar, and even on occasion in the classroom teaching Latin or history. For one month in the summer of 1942, when the Brothers withdrew from Scranton, he acted as a caretaker president while ownership of the University was being formally transferred from the diocese to the Jesuits. Frank O'Hara's most important legacy, however, came from his dealings with the students as registrar. Not only did he prepare the class schedule of every student in the College, but he also came to know virtually every one of them personally,

often going to great lengths to help ensure that they could complete their studies. When economic hardship caused by the Depression made it difficult for many to meet even the modest tuition charged by the College, Frank arranged for deferred payments or a series of installment payments, even at times allowing some students to barter for their education by providing goods or services to the College in lieu of tuition. One such instance, often cited as a prime example of Frank O'Hara's generosity, involved a student who was paying his tuition by providing haircuts to members of the Christian Brother community. When the local barbers' union set up a picket line in front of Old Main protesting the College's employment of an unlicensed barber, Frank O'Hara himself sat for state licensure, obtaining a license that he later described as one of his fondest possessions and that was still hanging on his office wall the day he died.

Frank O'Hara's labors continue to bear fruit in the form of generous benefactions to the University from alumni who were the beneficiaries of Frank's personal concern for students. In his later years he frequently declared that the only way to cultivate generosity on the part of alumni was to nurture their affection for their alma mater while they were still students. His own attachment and loyalty to St. Thomas College and to the University were remarkably infectious, and the depth of his interest in the welfare of its students and graduates knew few limits. It was no coincidence that the University's first alumni directory was published only after Frank O'Hara's death. His memory was far more comprehensive than any directory could ever be.

The number of dedicated lay faculty who served St. Thomas College and the University of Scranton under the Christian Brothers makes it impossible to mention each one in this relatively brief history; nonetheless, there were several whose contributions helped lay important foundations for the future. Dr. Aloysius P. Walsh, who served on the faculty from 1920 until his death in 1941, was closely involved in the development of the College's night school which, beginning in 1924, provided the opportunity for local elementary and secondary teachers to complete their baccalaureate degrees. The first night school graduates received their degrees in 1927. "Doc" Walsh, as he was affectionately known to countless Tommies to whom he taught the classics and history, was probably the first faculty member to complete twenty years of

service. Although the University did not establish its Vicennial Award, the *Pro Deo et Universitate* medal, until two decades after Dr. Walsh died, both his widow, Mrs. Virginia Walsh, and daughter, Mrs. Mary Spellman, were later to be among its recipients in recognition of their services as members of the University's professional staff between the 1940's and 1980's.

The natural sciences were the object of considerable academic development at the College during the "golden years". The national reputation in this area enjoyed in recent years by the University owes much to the efforts of several men who came to Scranton a half-century ago. Despite cramped and often inadequate laboratories, they began a tradition of teaching excellence that has been maintained ever since. Under the leadership of Dr. Gordon H. Pritham the chemistry department was expanded and strengthened, while Dr. E. Gregor Reinhard, Prof. John T. Maloney, and Dr. Charles E. Thomson, Jr., in the biology department presided over the development of a pre-medical program that would, over the years, become one of the most highly regarded in the country. Dr. Thomson, a practicing physician who also served as team doctor to the College's athletes, was stricken fatally ill in the fall of 1937 while attending a football game between St. Thomas and St. Joseph's College in Shibe Park in Philadelphia. He was replaced on the faculty the following spring by Dr. Leonard N. Wolf, whose energetic direction of the biology department spanned the next three decades. Over the same period the physics department also grew under the leadership of Dr. Joseph P. Harper.

The arts and humanities, always at the core of the College's curriculum, were no less the beneficiaries of the work of several noteworthy faculty members. One of these was Dr. Austin J. App who came to St. Thomas in 1935 as a professor of English and remained on its faculty until World War II. He joined with two of his colleagues, Eugene Willging, the College's librarian after 1933, and Dr. Wolf of the biology department, in the founding of *Best Sellers*, a book review publication designed to evaluate the moral as well as literary quality of current books, both fiction and non-fiction. It quickly attracted a loyal readership, especially among librarians at Catholic schools. Initially operated as an independent enterprise by its founders, ownership of *Best Sellers* was transferred to the University in 1948. Sadly, declining

circulation led to the publication's demise in March, 1987.

Other notable humanists among St. Thomas's faculty during the 1930's included Professor James A. Driscoll, a classmate of Frank O'Hara's in the charter class of 1925 whose three decades of service to the school combined the talents of a skilled teacher with those of an engaging raconteur and musician; Professor Constantine Diaglou, a native of Greece who taught both modern languages and European history for over fifteen years before he moved from academia into military intelligence after World War II; Professor Felix M. Gatz, who arranged to have the University host the first American Congress of Aesthetics in April of 1939 and whose work in organizing and directing local operatic productions presaged the important role the latter-day University would play in the cultural life of Northeastern Pennsylvania; and Professor Alexander Goulet, who in the summer of 1938 offered the school's first foreign tour to Europe in which participating students could earn academic credit.

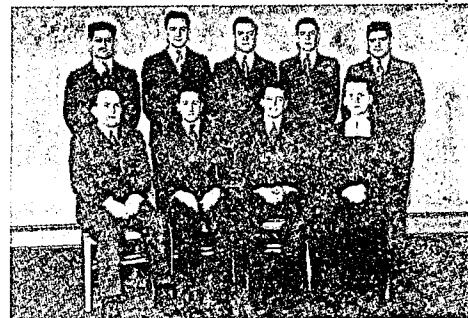
In 1933 the College initiated a degree program in business under the auspices of what was initially announced as a "College of Business and Finance," but which in reality was simply a new academic department. Professors Sheldon Curtis, William F. Dobson and Donald S. Gates guided the early development of the business program, which attracted a growing number of students and, forty four years after its inception, eventually became a separate School of Management. In 1939 a "School of Social Action" was inaugurated, operating as an extension service with lectures given at the Town Hall in Scranton, as well as in Wilkes-Barre in cooperation with College Misericordia. After three years, however, enrollment in this program fell off and it has been discontinued by the time the Christian Brothers left the University in 1942.

The College's non-teaching staff also included a number of individuals whose faithful service extended over many years. From 1927 onwards Joseph T. Diskin acted as Frank O'Hara's assistant until 1944 when he became registrar at the newly-opened Scranton Preparatory School. John M. Cuff served as public relations officer for the College and University from 1928 to 1941. Art Zimmerman was a fixture at the school over four decades vigilantly presiding over the maintenance of its physical plant — a worthy predecessor to the University's present-day maintenance

staff whose labors are evident in an impeccably clean campus.

The influence of the faculty who served the College and University during this period remained long after they and the Christian Brothers had departed, thanks in large measure to the fact that several of their students themselves returned to the University as faculty or staff members. Over the past half century these individuals, some of whom remain in active service as the University celebrates its centennial, have represented a living link to the St. Thomas College of the 1930's and have helped preserve its traditions of dedicated teaching and concern for the student. They include Drs. Martin Appleton, '39, and Umbay Burti, '35, both architects of the University's highly regarded chemistry program; Professor Edward F. Bartley, '38, long-time chairman of the mathematics department; Professor Frank C. Brown, '37, an historian who before his death in 1976 had been recognized as the school's finest classroom lecturer; Professor Frank Cimini, '39, who for years directed the University's modern language department; and Professor John McLean, '40, who now holds the Alperin Chair of Management. The very last class graduated by the University under the Brothers in 1942 produced two men who continue to serve the school today, Dr. Joseph Evans, who assumed direction of the pre-medical program after the retirement of his mentor, Dr. Wolf; and John R. Gavigan, who in 1976 became the University's first Vice President for Student Affairs after directing the school's public relations and development operations for over a quarter-century.

The continued presence of such men as these who were products of the College and University of a bygone era was all the more important since, beginning by the late 1930's, the school was to undergo a series of changes that would by the 1960's virtually eliminate all physical evidence of its earlier existence. A new name, new ownership and finally a new campus would completely transform the University so that only its older alumni remain as reminders of its past. This was, perhaps, as it should be, since St. Thomas College always took more pride in its people than its physical plant. Brother Paul, Provincial of the Christian Brothers' Baltimore Province, provided an apt epitaph for the old St. Thomas when on a visit to Scranton in 1940 he observed: "I like to come to Scranton. Though you have not erected monumental buildings here, you have created monumental men." [5]



*The Varsity Debating Team, 1931-32. Seated : Prof. Richard McNichols, coach; Dominick Motsay; Robert O'Brien; and Brother Emilian, moderator. Standing: Arnold Coplan; Carl Haarmeyer; John Dell Amico, president; Thomas McDonnell, manager; and Emanuel Laster.*



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