

The Doll's Cradle - A Memory of My First Day at St Norbert's School

by Maureen (Doyle) Sanders

While I was the oldest of the eight children in my family, I was always the smallest, reaching my final height of five feet nothing by the age of 16. Sometimes I hated being so short, especially in my teens, as I was always taken for younger than my age. At other times I worked it to my advantage - like the time I was a stony-broke college student but desperate at half-term to travel the 180 miles from college in Southampton to my home in Scunthorpe. I tied my hair in pig-tails, wore knee high socks and a school skirt, bought a child's train ticket and travelled with a much taller friend pretending to be my sister. I was 18 at the time hiding warily behind a tattered Enid Blyton storybook, while my accomplice successfully handed off her full price and my "under-15 yrs" train ticket to the Inspector.



But that escapade was far into my educational future. In the late summer of 1951, I was a much more innocent and rather shy five-year old when I set off for my first day at school. I probably looked no older than three and a half or four.

On that glorious September morning, with the sun splitting the trees as my dad liked to say, my mother walked me up the three streets from our house to the bus-stop on Doncaster Road. My cousin Michael O'Connor who lived next door and was a year older and already attending school came along with us. As I skipped along beside my mum she assured me that "You're going to love school and you'll soon get to know all the other girls and boys." I was anxious about

this exciting new step in my life, but so proud of my new school uniform - green gymslip, crisp white blouse with green and yellow striped tie, wool knee-socks that already slouched around my ankles, and brand new Mary Jane shoes. It was an outfit bought at a considerable cost to my parents who, as recent Irish immigrants and with three other children under five at home, had little money to spare for extras. But it did give me that little boost of confidence needed to face this new challenge.

We were greeted at the bus-stop by Pauline Pogson, the helpful teenager who had promised to look after me on the 10 mile bus trip to St Norbert's School in Crowle. On future days she would pick me and my cousin up from my house, monitor my bus rides and see us safely home at the end of the day. The bus ride that first day seemed never-ending, stopping at various points along the way to pick up other children. We went down the Guinness Straight, across the Keadby Bridge straddling the River Trent, and on past the flat fields, farms and villages of North Lincolnshire. Finally we arrived in the small town of Crowle at the old Tythe House building on Vicar's Walk, now St

Norbert's school. It was a long journey twice a day for a small child. I could quite easily have gone to the local Henderson Avenue school with the girl next door, but my parents with their solid Irish Catholic roots wanted me to have a Catholic education. So off I was sent, to be educated by the nuns!

It was a small school, opened only 4 or 5 years earlier by the Presentation Sisters. They would soon build a brand new modern school in my home-town and I would transfer there when I was eight years old. But I would spend my first 3 years at school in this old building. As Pauline walked me into my classroom, my first impression was of a rather cramped room, lined with desks and chairs – many already occupied - and crammed fairly close together. I glanced shyly around the room, impressed by the alphabet letters lining the walls, along with bright pictures and hand-drawn posters. There was a bookshelf packed full of books and a play area, too, with building blocks, games, dolls and a lovely old wooden doll's cradle in the corner that a girl was rocking gently to and fro. It was an inviting room.

Suddenly, an apparition dressed head to toe in voluminous black robes, glided towards me saying in a broad Irish brogue "Ah little Maureen Doyle, welcome to my class!" And she scooped me up in her arms saying "Now let's find you a desk - right here near the front next to Glennis Green." This was my introduction to Sister Bernard who was to be my teacher for the year. She had a rather severe, though not unkind face, with a white band covering her forehead, and a white bib-like garment across her chest. And her entire body was enveloped in those flowing black robes.

The rest of the day passed in a satisfying blur of colouring pictures, tracing names over dotted letters, singing nursery rhymes, and counting as high as we could go. Glennis who had started school a term earlier and was already an expert gave me little tips throughout the morning about what to expect next, what happened at playtime, when we would get our free bottle of milk, and where we would go for our hot school dinners – always served with puddings such as apple pie, syrup sponge and custard, or rice pudding with jam. As the day wore on, she also told me we'd have afternoon playtime before it was time to take the bus home.

Then suddenly Sister Bernard was looming over me again, like a huge black bird, her robes rustling and her rosary beads clacking at her waist. She swung me into the air, her face above her white wimple smiling broadly. "You look tired little Dolly Doyle, has it been a long first day for you" she laughed. And waltzing over to the doll's cradle in the corner she placed me carefully into it exclaiming "There you go now, have a nice little rest" and she gave the cradle a push to set it swinging. I could hardly believe what had just happened. Was I really lying in the doll's cradle? What was I supposed to do? I was mortified and conscious of a dozen or more pairs of eyes on me, so I instantly closed my own - and then the room and its hum of voices slowly faded...

Some 45 minutes later, a gentle whisper told me that it was time to catch the bus home. I had missed the afternoon playtime and even the story-time afterwards.

In coming days, I was embarrassed to be teased a little by the other children about my doll's cradle nap and my new Dolly Doyle nickname, but eventually I grew to like the name, as it had a nice ring to it. I came to see that Sister Bernard could be a bit of a tartar, especially with a few unruly boys, but I always felt that she had the best interests of her pupils at heart. She never put me in the doll's cradle again, thank goodness, but she was only ever kind and encouraging to me and this stood me in good stead down through my many years of formal education. I wonder if I would have remembered my first day at school quite so vividly without that rather startling experience of a 45 minute nap in the doll's cradle?



Three Doyles at St Norberts school 1951-1954 LtoR Maureen, John, Sarah

6th October 2020