

## Interview with Sister Carmen Madigan (CM)

Conducted by Betty Meyer (BM)

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**BM:** Today is July 28, 1998 and I am Betty Meyer, a volunteer interviewer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection of North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo, ND. It is a pleasure to have, visiting with us, Sister Carmen Madigan. And we are in Mankato, MN at the Good Council. And so, we're going to get started with the interview and I'm going to have you say your name so we get it right.

**CM:** I'm Sister Carmen Madigan.

**BM:** And the date of your birth?

**CM:** November 26, 1917. I'm 80 years old.

**BM:** It's unbelievable. Where were you born?

**CM:** I was born in Madison Lake, a small town in Minnesota, about nine miles from Mankato.

**BM:** Where you born in a hospital or were you born at home?

**CM:** No, I was born at home.

**BM:** Was there a midwife then?

**CM:** No, there was a doctor.

**BM:** Oh, there was a doctor. What's your nationality?

**CM:** I'm Irish.

**BM:** All Irish? One hundred percent?

**CM:** Yes...third, I guess, generation of American. My great-grandparents and one great-great [grandparent] came from Ireland.

**BM:** And did they come to Minnesota?

**CM:** I think, at first, they worked on the Burlington Railroad and that group that worked there traveled and finally settled around by St. Peter and Madison Lake, Mankato.

**BM:** What was the name of your father?

- CM:** Henry.
- BM:** Henry Madigan. And your mother's maiden name?
- CM:** Was Nell. I think Ellen was probably the official one, but she was called Nell.
- BM:** And her maiden name?
- CM:** Brown.
- BM:** Did you have any siblings? Brothers and Sisters?
- CM:** Oh yes. I am from a family of six, so I had two sisters and three brothers.
- BM:** And what place where you in the family?
- CM:** I was oldest.
- BM:** Very oldest?
- CM:** Yes.
- BM:** Were there other members of your family that went into the religious life?
- CM:** No.
- BM:** You were the only one?
- CM:** I think some cousins that I didn't know very well, of my mother's, [went into the religious life].
- BM:** Were your parents supportive of you going into the sisterhood?
- CM:** They didn't really support it, but they didn't fight it. It's just like...you know. [Laughs.]
- BM:** Were you influenced by anybody to enter the religious life?
- CM:** Well, influence, but in the right way. I don't mean pressured or spoken to in a real direct way. I went, really, because of the role model of the Sisters who taught at that school at Madison Lake, which by the way, is still in existence. I think it's over 100 years old, the Catholic school.
- BM:** And so, were they the Sisters of Notre Dame?
- CM:** Right.
- BM:** So they were the role model for you, then, to go into [sisterhood]. Did your local pastor have any influence?
- CM:** Really, no. He was very remote.

- BM:** So there is none of your other siblings that have followed you into religious life?
- CM:** No.
- BM:** Did you ever think about what you were leaving behind?
- CM:** Oh yes, I thought of it.
- BM:** Social aspects. How old were you when you [left]?
- CM:** I was just eighteen. I had just graduated from high school, which now, would almost be intolerable because now the women who join our order are required to have their degree or else some career be established. But in those days, the rest who entered the convent with me were all about eighteen, seventeen.
- BM:** When you came to the convent then, you weren't too far away from home. So you didn't have distance, but were you able to visit your family at any time after you came in?
- CM:** We had what they call 'visiting Sundays'. We entered August 27, and we were not permitted a visiting Sunday, like, [in] September because it was too close to when we came. So the first time we could visit was October, and it was very structured. We could visit, I think it was from one to four [o'clock] in the afternoon, which – well, for me it didn't make that much difference. But some of the other young women who were in the class with me had parents in the Twin Cities and their parents, because of the public transportation, didn't even own cars. So they had to come by train and the train didn't get here when our visiting hours started. And so, they were – I always felt so bad for them, because they were really cut off in the length of time they could visit.
- BM:** Did your brothers and sisters then come and visit, too?
- CM:** Oh yes, at the permitted time. Not everybody every time, because they all had their obligations.
- BM:** Do you remember what items you brought with you to the convent?
- CM:** Oh, we weren't permitted to bring very much of anything. No. We wore black dresses and they did have a stock list of things to bring. [They were] very difficult to find, like black cotton stockings and that. So my mother said she'd have nothing to do with it. [She said] that I should buy them up here, so she hauled it; which, really, meant I didn't bring any clothing along that I had used.
- BM:** Do you recall what the daily schedule was after you got here?
- CM:** It was very early and very structured. By hindsight, I'm not sure when we got up, but I know it felt very, very early. We had Mass, I believe, at eight o'clock. After which we had breakfast, and then immediately after that, we started our classes for the day. And the classes pretty well filled the day. We had recreation in the evening from 6:00 to 7:00. We ate our supper from 5:30 to 6:00.
- BM:** Did you go to bed early, then, if you had to get up early in the mornings?

**CM:** Yes, we really did. I believe we were supposed to be in bed by 10:00. I think we went upstairs – I think our study hall was until 9:30. No, until 9:00, and then we were to be in bed by 9:30.

**BM:** Did you have friends that you left behind that you wrote letters to?

**CM:** Oh, I had friends I left behind, but no. We weren't permitted to write letters to friends. So it was hard to keep in touch, but we did.

**BM:** Remember getting homesick?

**CM:** Oh yes.

**BM:** You did?

**CM:** Uh-huh.

**BM:** What did you do then? Did you get busy with something else?

**CM:** We didn't do anything special about it. No, it wasn't really recognized any great extent. We just worked through it.

**Interviewer 2:** Since you graduated from high school, what was your curriculum like when you say classroom instructors, classroom studies.

**CM:** In the school that I graduated from?

**Interviewer 2:** Yes, what were your studies?

**BM:** Here in the convict you mean?

**CM:** Oh, here in the convict. We started out - it was rather backwards - but we started with 101 Philosophy. Really, we were all too young for that, but I sort of liked it. And we took German as a foreign language, which I didn't like at all. And I had History, English Literature, Convent Life, Theology...

**BM:** I would imagine you had quite a bit of studying with some of those subjects?

**CM:** Very much studying. And we had Math. We had Calculus.

**Interviewer 2:** Getting into the heavies right away! [Laughs.]

**CM:** Oh yes.

**BM:** Which makes me ask a question: when you got into those kind of heavy subjects, were you ever asked to move out of a class or was the class too much for you?

**CM:** No, I guess I wished I had been asked to move out! [Laughs.] No, I had good preparation and I had good high school education. My first three years of high school, I was in a private, Catholic high school in Madison Lake, [where] they had a small Parish of Catholic high school. It was small and it closed the

summer before I was a senior. So then, I went to Mankato High School. At that time, we just had one high school in Mankato. Now they have two, but it was just one.

**BM:** That's interesting. Philosophy and Calculus are not easy subjects. [Laughs.]

**CM:** Without good teachers, everyone would have floundered.

**BM:** Who was the priest?

**CM:** He taught the Philosophy class, the chaplain up here. Father [A096] taught that. And calculus was a Sister – well, they all were Sisters or Priests - Sister Dabota, who is an excellent mathematics teacher. So then she began and led up to it in such a way that it could be comprehended. It was challenging.

**BM:** What is the steps and the length of time for a [A099] did you go through.

**CM:** We stayed here for one year, the year that I entered. We entered [in] August and we stayed here through that first year. We had some classes in the summer also. And then the next year, you did your student teaching. That was the summer of preparation, [which] was what little bit we had for student teaching. I did student teaching the next year, after which the program [stated] that you prepared to go to the [A105] and stay with the [A105] next year. I, however, didn't feel prepared to go to the [A106], so I did a second year of student teaching. And then, after that year, I went to the [A107].

**BM:** And where did you do your student teaching?

**CM:** I did that at St. Francis School in St. Paul.

**BM:** So then you came back here and went to [A108] for one year?

**CM:** That's right. After one year of classes, two years of student teaching, and a summer of preparation, then I went to [A109].

**BM:** That whole year was spent here then, at Good Council?

**CM:** That's right. Yah.

**BM:** When did you say your final vows then?

**CM:** In 1946 was my final vows; in 1940, my first vows. We took vows for three years, and then had a decision time, and another retreat. Then we took the second three years. So it was 1940, 1943, and 1946. And 1946 was my final vow, but I had already then – at that time, I had been teaching for six years. In addition to that, the two years of practice teaching. But I had been teaching on my own for six years.

**BM:** All at St. Francis?

**CM:** No, after my student teaching. And then I went through [A118] and took my vows. After that, I went several places. I taught most of the time at St. Agnes High School in St. Paul.

- BM:** And you taught what?
- CM:** I'd been an English and Speech Teacher until I started working part-time administration.
- BM:** Do you recall the ceremony that you went through when you did your final vows? The spiritual part of it and the physical part of it?
- CM:** It was preceded by the entire summer of preparation. We came into the mother house in June, I think, sometime in June. And our retreat was usually sometime mid-July. I actually took my final vows on July 22. So, the time from school out until July 22 was spent in intensive preparation. The same was true of first vow.
- BM:** Now let's go to – you said you spent one year at Strasburg, North Dakota. Now you had come from St. Agnes, which is a high school in St. Paul. Was it more or less middle class?
- CM:** I think so.
- BM:** And then you went to the rural community in Strasburg. What was the contrast between those two?
- CM:** My first years of teaching at St. Agnes, it was wartime. See that was from 1940 to '43, '44, and then '45, about. And at that time, there was scarcity of many products. Like, I can remember for paper used in school, they even used the backs of calendars and everything like that, because there was real scarcity, real awareness that our country needed all the help we could get. There was a real spirit like that in the students, in the parents, the Sisters. And we were sending care packages to our Sisters in Poland and Germany, I think. Wrapping those – I remember just wrapping those. I don't even remember what was in them. I do know we sent them. Then by the time I got to Strasburg, that was the year of '47-'48. By the time I got there, the war had ended and so the whole country was a bit more prosperous. I don't remember if that affected me much at all, but it was a situation. When I left St. Agnes, I had not finished my degree because we had a certificate to teach, which was a wartime certificate. Many of the men teachers, and women too, had gone to war and to service, and so there was a very great scarcity of teacher. And we were urged, if we were pursuing college degrees, to get one of these certificates and to teach. The need for teachers was great. I have that. I was attending St. Catherine's college on Saturdays and sometimes, like, Wednesday nights as well as teaching five English classes with 30 in every class, 150 total. And I never had any time to prepare for my classes at St. Agnes until Friday night, so that was an intensive night of preparation you may be sure. Then I went out there and I was gone almost all day. By hindsight, you don't know how you did it, but when you do it – your young, so...
- BM:** So when you were in Strasburg then, was life a little simpler, or was it harder? How did you find living in the convent there? Were there other Sisters?
- CM:** Oh yes. We had a convent of Sisters. I don't know for sure, but I think something like eight might have been there. In fact, we had almost no lay teachers in the school, if I remember correctly. Usually, there was a man to teach Phy. Ed. or something like that. There may have been some, but I just don't remember. It was basically all Sisters.
- BM:** Did you have a language problem? You said you took German in high school. Did you have a language barrier when you got to Strasburg?

**CM:** The German that I took had faded completely out of my mind. That was about seven or eight years away. And uh – no, I felt that I have a right to speak English and if you want to speak German, go ahead, but I can't join. [Laughs.] But in school, of course, we did. There were many ways in which it did, indirectly, effect me. The students came from homes that had been Germans, that were German speaking. And it set them back because, I know, our first grade teacher - who was an excellent teacher, Sister Anna Friedt [sp?, A178] - said that she couldn't begin even the preschool work until the semester of the first grade. She knew German, so she was able to go on both directions, but they hadn't spoken any English at all. So that, you know, that meant she was working – it wasn't that the children weren't bright enough to get it, but she was working behind schedule almost all the way. And I think – I know there's a big question of bilingual, but I really do think the way it was done there, it was bound to make it academically difficult for the students. We had, in addition to the regular parishioners and so on in the school, I don't know of anybody that wasn't Catholic that was Russian-German. I don't remember there was, but we had some Dutch Reformed students. Dutch Reformed was their religion. They must have been from some little town around. I don't know that they lived in Strasburg, but they were English speaking, totally, all the way through and fine students, and also, very good people to deal with. They added, in my estimation, they added a lot to the school. They were better students, just overall; now not just everyone. But overall, they had the advantage of English speaking parents and, [themselves], speaking English. So, I think there was a little jealousy there by the other students. They thought these students were being a mark advantageously. [Laughs.] It wasn't true at all.

**BM:** There are still a lot of the Dutch Reformed families there.

**CM:** That's interesting. Are they farmers?

**BM:** Uh-huh, very much so. Nice, clean farms.

**CM:** Because I do remember them from school.

**BM:** The farmers now, though, are struggling more, I'm sure, then from previous years. Did you have any interactions with parents when you were there?

**CM:** As I thought back on that question, almost none. When I think of parent-teacher conferences now and so on, we never had anything like that at all. I'm sure there were 90 percent of the parents I never met.

**BM:** Did you teach there during the summer then?

**CM:** No, I didn't. During the summer vacation – well I did have my degree by then, but I took summer school classes or something. They had classes here. No, I didn't stay there all summer.

**BM:** Let's go into some of the anti-garb. I know you were before the anti-garb, but you must have experienced some of the effects of it. Now, North Dakota was the only state that had the ruling that Sisters had to wear street clothes at a certain year, but you were there before that year?

**CM:** Correct.

**BM:** Do you remember if there was any activity going on before that in preparation for the anti-garb?

- CM:** We had no preparation. I didn't even know it was a possibility at the time. I had heard nobody talking about it. If we used even communications from the state, I don't remember it. Of course, you said North Dakota was the only state that happened, and that is true, but nowhere else were Catholic schools, public schools identical, because I was in a public school. But one would never know it, because everybody there was Catholic, except these Dutch Reformed students. Everybody else was Catholic. And consequently, they had to follow the laws of state in that regard. But nowhere else was this being done. There was no precedence for it at all in our lives or, I think, the lives of anybody else.
- BM:** So where did you go after the year in Strasburg?
- CM:** I think I went to St. Michael, MN. There's a high school there and that's north of Minneapolis a ways.
- BM:** And you were not affected by any of the garb change then?
- CM:** No.
- BM:** Until when? Cause you look very nice now in your street clothes. You switched then. When did you switch?
- CM:** Oh, there were many, many years in between. This was after Vatican II, when the advice was that the Sisters should move into more comfortable, less conspicuous clothing. This happened a little bit gradually, but it was 1973 before we started wearing street clothing. I mean, we had the option.
- BM:** Did you take that option?
- CM:** I believe I did.
- BM:** You did. But some of the Sisters didn't and still don't?
- CM:** Correct.
- BM:** I've often wondered if, when you went out teaching, you wore street clothes, and then when you came back to the convent, if you changed back into your garb?
- CM:** No, [not] in my experience. They probably did that in Strasburg, where they had to wear separate clothes to school.
- BM:** Yes, early on.
- CM:** No, we never did anything like that.
- BM:** Is there some other stories that you'd like to [share] that I haven't asked or questioned about?
- CM:** I would like to tell you about this. First of all, several things that shocked me or baffled me, I don't know. It's a mixture of the two words. [Laughs.] When I was in Strasburg, in addition to the fact that I came from an area where nobody ever spoke anything but English, and to hear that. Well that, I was a little prepared for, because the Sisters had talked about it. But, as I got to get the feel of the community - and this is strange and a small thing that really shocked me - [I noticed] that the children didn't have their



teeth cared for. There was no dentist in Strasburg. And even some of the high school students had dental dentures, and the students' teeth were just in terrible condition. As I gathered, a part of this was from the water, but I think something could have been done...something. I always thought some dentist could get a Ph.D., or a scientist, if they come here and studied that water. But if they had had dental care constantly, I don't think it would have been that bad. There were a few people who – I believe they'd been in Linton or something before that and then moved in. I don't know it was whether their teeth were cared for in advance, but they didn't have that problem. The Sisters never had that problem after we lived there.

**BM:** Do you recall, was there a dentist in town?

**CM:** No, there was no dentist. Anyone who went to a dentist went to Linton, and usually, that was to have a tooth pulled. No matter how young you were. Now that was enough to shock.

**BM:** Yes, it was.

**CM:** It really was.

**BM:** I'm trying to recall my own situation. I guess the dentist that I had pulled my teeth too when they were badly decayed. And as teenagers, sometimes that happens. That's interesting. I had never heard that before.

**CM:** That was very shocking to all the Sisters. I don't know what impact it had on some, but I know that it was unbelievable. Never had I even heard of or thought of high school students having a denture.

**Interviewee 2:** It's amazing that now the city Strasburg water is literally condemned. And they had special treatments put over their water and they are finding arsenic and also some other very toxic elements found in the water. So your assumption there, or finding, was very founded. In fact, there was something wrong with the water.

**CM:** I felt so sorry for those students. I know their parents were in the same condition, but somehow the students were the ones I dealt with and I thought their whole life is ahead of them. To wear a denture for a whole lifetime seemed a very shocking thing to me. And not to get constant dental care and dental examinations, even though it was a long time ago from the time I had been a child. We went to the dentist every year before school started, and we didn't have money, nothing like that, but you just went to the dentist.

**BM:** How about healthcare, physical healthcare? When they got sick, they didn't have a doctor in town then either.

**CM:** No. I don't remember a nurse at school either, or a nurse visiting the school. I don't think we had any of that. And if it was in the state, we would have had it, because we were a public school. That was something that really shocked me and I don't know if I should say shocked or baffled or surprised or what.

**BM:** It was just one of those conditions that-

**CM:** One would not expect it in the United States, but it exists there. And another thing that I found very shocking was that there were families - and I knew that from the Sisters - where first cousins married each other with the result of children who had birth defects. I remember seeing one man, and I saw him because he's a relative of the house Sister there who was from the Strasburg area, and I think his hand came out about here. He didn't have this part of his hand at all. There were very, very mysterious things like that. And I do remember - see, the sermon was first in German, and then in English. And in that sermon, the translated one in English anyway, there were strong warnings, like, from the bishops and priests against this. And that, of course, was new to any of us. I knew, genetically, it was not acceptable. We all knew that from a scientific point of view, but I didn't know it entered the church teaching, but it did. And it was in the church teaching because it was correct scientifically, so that the priests weren't trying to influence people. It has its religious tone, there's no doubt about it. It really isn't right to have that high of possibility of bringing very defective people into the world. And there were mental effects because of that, too. We have lots of Sisters from the Strasburg area, and not one of them was affected in that way, but there were people that were. So that I found very, very different.

**BM:** Do you realize that you're the first one that has brought those two things on?

**CM:** Really?

**BM:** Yes, that's really addition to observations that we've had.

**CM:** I did learn to understand the Russian-Germans of the area. I went to an elder hostel a few years ago. It was at Crookston, [MN] and Ethnic Groups in the Midwest was the topic. There was a professor from - I forget whether it's University of Fargo or Fargo State University.

**BM:** North Dakota State University?

**CM:** North Dakota State University. And this professor spoke on that. It was just a wonderful enlightenment. He took the Russian-Germans, he took the Ukrainians, and Swedes. I think there was some Lithuanians, but not in that area, but I think that was one group that he did talk about. I met him at an intermission one time and I said, "You know, I'm really hurt." "Oh," [he said]. I said, "You take all these other national groups. You haven't said one thing about the Irish." He said, "They stepped off the boat integrated." [Laughs.] Oh, I like that. I know it was because of the language. Yah, because the Irish came speaking English and it made a whole difference.

**BM:** Plus the fact that the Germans that are here, they were colonized. That was their way of life in Russia, and that's the way they did it here, too. You know, they came from Strasburg, Germany and they went to Strasburg, Russia. They came from Strasburg, Russia to Strasburg, ND. So, they've always grouped. How many generations?

**Interviewee 2:** Many.

**BM:** Have always been colonized and always intermarried, you know, within the community.

**CM:** I assume that would have been perfectly acceptable, genetically, if the group was big enough so that relationships... That was one thing that helped me. And another emphasis that he gave was that they were defending their culture madly and consequently; became very provincial. I don't think the students that I had at Strasburg at that time ever really got out and, let's say, got a job in Bismarck. I don't

remember that, or even in the Twin Cities: St. Paul, Minneapolis. I do think that that ended right about that time, but I know that it was not true that they pushed out into any other areas much at the time that I was teaching there. But I'm sure it happened afterwards. The one probably opening that would be different was some of the young men became benedicton priests. Then, they went to St. John's and that opened up the whole world to them. And some of the girls went to convents, the Benedicton or the Sisters of Notre Dame or something, and that got them out of this real provincial area.

**BM:** Another thing I think probably broke through was the war.

**CM:** That's right. And this teacher did emphasize that. He said there was no holding the young guys who came back from war, and really experienced different things. They wanted to work on engineering or something like that. They recognized.

**BM:** Plus, they had the opportunity to go onto school and have it paid for and got a G.I. Bill and they were able to, then, go onto college. And that took them away from the farm, so to speak.

**CM:** There was one family that was an exception. I think their name was Wagner, I'm not sure, but they sent their girls to St. Benedict's College. And I don't know if they had any sons or not, but I do remember that. I think they had moved into the area. And I also remember - this woman I talked to as a parent - and I remember that she went to Bismarck to get dental care for her children.

**BM:** So she was a little more progressive.

**CM:** She felt the same way as I did about the dental care. I enjoyed that. And I enjoyed that speaker and his classes on this [A391] thing. The Ukrainians: many, many things were the same, but they had different emphasis, like, in art and everything like that. We had a Ukrainian dinner at the University, cooked by our directors by this same professor. I believe he was Ukrainian.

**BM:** He was Ukrainian?

**CM:** I think so. Otherwise, I don't think he'd get into cooking in Ukrainian.

**BM:** No, because that's something that's a learned part of your culture.

**CM:** That just came to my mind when I got this questionnaire; brought it back. I haven't thought of it for years. Probably not from Strasburg, but from that area, there are a number of girls who entered our convent and, with the younger ones, it was all the same. But with older people, I think, with the older sisters who came from there, I always felt very bad, because they came without any, even high school, education. And because they hadn't had that advantage, [they are] very brilliant people who are not educated. They just said they didn't want to go to school or they thought that they shouldn't, or I don't know how it went, and they started doing housework right from the start. They didn't even finish high school and, much less, go to college. And they became, what we call them, house Sisters or housekeepers.

**BM:** Do you think that could be contributed to their parental emphasis from home?

**CM:** Probably. Education just wasn't emphasized in their lives. I think that some of them just have a natural brilliance, but [it] never was developed. And it comes through in other ways as they educate themselves.

And then, at home, their counterparts who didn't come to the convent, I'm sure they were the same way. Maybe the men got educated later on or something, I don't know.

**BM:** I'm not sure if they were educated because education was not a valued part of the Germans from Russia culture. I'm sure there are exceptions, but I'm sure, even as we looked at North Dakota rural schools, there's been some research done on that.

**CM:** Currently you mean?

**BM:** No – well, yes. It was brought out and last year it was published.

**CM:** In the schools right now?

**BM:** It was done from the state and uh, they went way, way back to the beginning of the rural schools and they were finding that schools in some of the agricultural areas valued it less than, we'll say the Scandinavian counties. They valued it much more.

**CM:** Well, the Irish has a big emphasis. We had never as much money as the Germans of the area or other people. We were always more prosperous, I would say. But there never was a question of our going to college and I'm 80 years old. My mother went to Fairbow [sp?, A453] to high school. They had an academy in Fairbow. Then, after that, she came back and she went to school here in Mankato. It was called the State Normal School at the time. She went there for two years and qualified for teaching at that time. You could do it in two years. And my dad went to Business College here. I don't know how long, but they had a background considerably better than many other people.

**Interviewee 2:** There was never a question if we go to school; it's when you go to school.

**CM:** That's right. And we went right from grade school to high school in the same building there and then from [A458] high school. After that, my sister went to college here. She's a year younger than I am. And I didn't go anywhere else since I went to the convent then for school. My brothers were drafted into service at that time, so what education they got in service and then when they came home on the G.I. Bill. And my sister graduated from St. Benedict's.

**BM:** You all went to college?

**CM:** Uh-huh.

**BM:** Thank you so much Sister. It's been great. You've given us some new insights that we have not discussed before and so it's really been a very good experience. Thank you again.

**CM:** You're welcome.