

## II – *Woodlands Mission*

*“The woods are lovely and dark, and deep...”*

During the 9<sup>th</sup> Frontier War the English Government sent three men into Pondoland<sup>1</sup> to ask Chief ‘Mhlonhlo<sup>2</sup> to be loyal to the white people. The request was granted and the messengers, overjoyed at their success, bartered beads and knives for oxen and gave the Pondos a feast. ‘Mhlonhlo could not be present for he had recently lost his first wife. Court etiquette, however, allowed him to witness the feast from a neighbouring hill. When all had eaten their fill a dance was started. What was the horror of the Chief when he recognised a war dance closing in on the unsuspecting visitors. From his coign of vantage he shouted: “My children, stop! If you harm these men you kill me! ...” By this time, however, mass hysteria had upper hand and, in spite of cries from ‘Mhlonhlo, two Europeans were killed; one escaped. Naturally this was regarded by the British as an act of treachery. A price was placed on the head of the Chief who fled and for twenty years led the life of a vagrant.

In the course of his wanderings he arrived at Roma, Basutoland – now Lesotho. There, after some instruction in the Christian Faith, he put away his many wives and was baptised. He now threw prudence to the winds and one day, when crossing a river, he was recognised by some men and handed over to the police. There was little hope for the so-called traitor. He was imprisoned at King William’s Town. When the Basotho authorities heard of this, they communicated with Father John Fagan, telling him that, though the man was baptised he had not yet made his First Communion. As the priest could not speak the Native language he engaged one of his African teachers to instruct the prisoner. After some time Father Fagan asked that two Sisters from Izeli be sent to examine him in Christian Doctrine.

The unenviable task fell to Sister Benigna Osterberger and Sister Isidore Widemann. The nuns themselves formed a great difficulty to the poor man, for he had never met nuns before and was doubtful about trusting these strangely clad ladies. He had also heard that there were 22 witnesses to testify against him; where these perchance two of them? Then, very hesitantly he asked: “Are these two people Christians?” Father Fagan’s hearty laugh reassured him, and the Sisters introduced themselves to him in the Xhosa language. At their first meeting Father Fagan had told ‘Mhlonhlo about the Blessed Virgin and the prisoner said he would implore the intercession of the Lord’s Mother at his trial. Even before he made his First Communion he received an unexpected summons to Grahamstown for trial. The 22 witnesses contradicted one another and ‘Mhlonhlo’s simple story was such evident truth that the prisoner was set free. However, he could not return to Pondoland as another chief now held his place. He was then given choice of residence at a mission and chose Izeli, for he already knew two of the Sisters. Mother Clare Huber welcomed him and gave him a hut near the mission school but he longed for land and cattle of his own. He had learned to trust Sister Agnes Vordermayer as a friend. She it was who approached Mr Peter Mullin to give the Chief some acres of land on his farm in the beautiful area of Woodlands, 12 miles from King William’s Town. She hoped, in this way, to give the former Chief a sense of independence. Mr Mullin agreed but before the transfer was implemented ‘Mhlonhlo’s sons brought word that he was wanted in Pondoland as one of their chiefs. Sister Agnes was sad when she heard the news for she had hoped to form a mission at Woodlands and this seemed to give a death blow to her scheme.

In 1905 Mother General Lucy Kaltenstadler bought fifty acres of land from Bishop MacSherry at the Pirie, as Woodlands was also called. Mr Shannon, who had been living at the spot in three huts, vacated them for the Sisters. One hut was made into a chapel, the second became the convent and the third the store room. Sister Agnes was appointed the first superior with Sister Isidore Wiedemann as her assistant. So the mission at Woodlands was begun. This took place in 1906. The surrounding farmers were delighted for they would now have Sunday Mass nearer home. Mr Mullin supplied the Sisters with milk, Mr Eberhard gave bread and Mr Shannon sent them meat. The kind people kept this up until the

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<sup>1</sup> *Territory of a tribe of the Xhosa nation in the Eastern Cape.*

<sup>2</sup> *Pronounce ‘Mshlonshlo’*

Government paid the Sisters a small sum of money for the maintenance of the three Native orphans they accepted at the mission.

By chance two Australian Priests were in the vicinity. They offered to give a three-day mission to the farmers. In theory it was a grand suggestion but where would they be housed? Missionaries must be rich in initiative, so the chapel hut was divided by hanging a sheet from the roof; thus one half of it became priests' house. The Fathers shared the simple fare of the Sisters and probably quite enjoyed themselves. During Mass, tables and chairs were stacked on the beds and this half hut continued to be presbytery until a separate hut could be built. How the ten heathen, the farmers and few stray visitors squeezed into the chapel section of the rondavel was a mystery. All knelt on the mud floor.

The Sisters had no alarm clock and feared they might not waken for the early Mass, so Father Henry agreed to fire his gun at five o'clock as a rising signal. So, as long as the two missionaries were there, the nuns rose like soldiers at the first shot of the gun.

On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1906 the first resident priest of Woodlands, Father Daniel Flynn, arrived, bringing with him Sisters Ferdinand Faisst and Humberta Kaiser and on the next day the mission officially opened. Soon after this a near-disaster occurred, for the only cow the nuns had escaped through a hole in the shack that had been rigged up to protect the animal from the rain and wind. Sister Isidore immediately went in search of her, found her and near her a woman, weeping bitterly. Upon enquiry as to the cause of the tears the woman said she had heard of God and longed to be a Christian but her husband and children would not allow it. Kind Sister Isidore soon dried her tears; and some time later the woman and her entire family were received into the Church. So the temporary loss of the cow and Sister Isidore's long walk were well repaid.

The Mission was still spoken of only as "Woodlands" and had no patronal name. One day Mother Lucy and Mother Eleonora wished to pay the little mission a surprise visit. The convent phaeton and Father Fanning's horses were thus harnessed and took the two Reverend Mothers to the foot of the hill. They decided to prove their hardihood by walking up the hill and were sure they had only to follow the foot path. Alas! They did not know the South African veld. Soon there was no path to follow and they were lost, hopelessly so. Likewise women they prayed and decided to call the mission "Maria Hilf" (Mary, help of Christians) if only they could find it. Soon they met a piccanin in the forest. He understood the words "Sisters" and he signalled them to follow. Thus the mission got its name by which it was known for many years.

Father Flynn had to learn the Xhosa language which the Sisters, by this time, spoke fluently. When he had mastered somewhat of a vocabulary he would often illustrate his meaning by making drawings, even in the sand. When he went on missions two Sisters used to accompany him as interpreters. The priest never opened a gate; his horse, Prince, leaped every one and also every fence, while tame Bob and Sally carried the Sisters in a more leisurely manner. Thus the trio brought Christianity to Woodlands.

One day they met a woman; she was supposed to be a centenarian who wanted to be a Christian, but she objected to receiving baptism on the score that she had never sinned. Original sin was something she could not grasp. The missionaries were at a loss what to do. Then she said: "No sin" – all day I say to the devil: 'Voertsek! Voertsek!'<sup>3</sup> ... God my friend. The devil, no!" There was no further hesitation; the old woman was baptised and she died a few days later.

To show how dangerous visits to the heathen could be one of many stories may be cited here: In 1914 Sister Camilla Klostermaier and Sister Paschalia Haindl had taken the daily visiting. They had heard of a heathen woman in a dying condition and innocently thought this would be a grand day for them if they could send her soul to heaven purified by the waters of baptism. On arrival they found a group of men squatting round the central fire of the hut where the patient lay. Sister Camilla explained in Xhosa that she wished to pray with the woman before she died. They listened in gloomy silence, occasionally emitting sounds that marked disapproval, but no word was spoken. Then, still in silence, they left the hut and went

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<sup>3</sup> South African expletive to chase away a dog. Said to be an abbreviation of "Voort, sê ek" (Away, I say!)

to the kraal.<sup>4</sup> Sister Camilla endeavoured to talk to the patient who was extremely ill, but a woman sitting next to her warded the Sisters off. They finally went home.

Next day Mr Mullin told the Superior that her Sisters must exercise more caution in their visits, for it was only thanks to the presence of one of his retainers in that group that the two nuns were not corpses on that day. He explained that the men had gone to the cattle enclosure for their assegais and were prepared for the murderous act when his servant persuaded them that these were only two harmless women who desired to do good to the sick.

The end of May 1917 was a great day for the Woodlands Mission when Mother General Clare Huber bought from Messrs Patrick and Peter Mullin about 185 acres of ground; this made the total area of the convent farm 235 acres. The Sisters persevered in their missionary task so that hardly a day passed without some work of mercy being done among the Black people, even though sometimes there was no resident priest to dispense the Sacraments.

The Sisters' first teaching was all outdoor work under a large mimosa tree; then a mud hut was built as their first school. Attendance in the early days depended on whether the children were needed at home to work in the fields or to help carry their produce to the market. How unlike all this was the roll call of 215 children by 1958.

In 1925 a school for European children was also opened at Woodlands. It was called Fairview School from the name of the adjoining farm which the Congregation eventually acquired in 1947. In the pioneering days the school was 3 Km. from the Convent and, in bad weather, made awkward travelling for the Sisters, so a one-horse trap was used to reach the school. A small Government grant, given to the Principal, Sister Matthew Kramer, brought in a tiny income. The Saint Vincent de Paul and the Child Welfare Societies sent neglected white children here and paid a small remuneration for these.

Gradually brick and mortar buildings replaced the huts and the wood-and-iron structures.<sup>5</sup> In 1933 one of the large huts was turned into a temporary novitiate for potential African postulants, for Mother General Augustine had received several applications from African women desirous to enter the religious life. Domitilla Dlamini, a Zulu girl, was the first Bantu woman to offer herself as a postulant among the "King" Dominicans. However, her delicate health made it necessary for her to give up the religious life as too strenuous for her, though she continued teaching in one of the other mission schools. With Sister Benigna Osterberger as Mistress of Novices, two postulants, Caroline Mbentsela and Coletta Mfaladi, were received into the Order in June 1933. In religion their names are Sister Mary of the Holy Rosary and Sister Anna of the Holy Cross respectively. Bishop MacSherry presided at the ceremony, assisted by Rev Father P Graeff S.A.C., and Mother General represented the Mother House. In 1938 these two Sisters made their vows for life.

Mother General Augustine could tell some amusing anecdotes about an early candidate, Rose, who was of African and Indian parentage. This girl was quite a character: One afternoon Rose was told to catch one of the roosters roaming the convent farm. It was to be killed for the dinner of the feast day on the morrow. Obediently the neophyte set out on her errand in good time, but it took longer than expected to capture the agile bird. She had no sooner caught the cock than, to her dismay, the bell rang for the postulants' hour of instruction. Novices are expected always to answer each summons promptly and Rose thought she could not place the cock in the coop and still be punctual for her lesson with Reverend Mother; so she hastily tied the bird's feet and kept it concealed under the wide cape of her uniform and so entered the Superior's room just in time to escape censure. All went well until the cock became restless and muffled crowing sounds emanated from where Rose was sitting...

At some time prior to Rose's arrival at Woodlands Convent she had lost two front teeth. One day Mother General received a letter from the candidate in which she wrote: "... Oh, Mother, do be a dear to me and please close my 'big gate'. You see I can't pray the Office nicely without my teeth as I can't pronounce

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<sup>4</sup> Cattle pen.

<sup>5</sup> The farm was managed by Mr Carl Brueckl for a time; later by Sisters Friedbertha Seibel and Pachomia Bucher. The latter drove the tractor and worked like a man so that she became known as "the Nun Farmer".

the words properly... “; and she signed herself “Your Rose without a thorn! Although the candidate was permitted to visit the dentist she did not qualify for the religious life and finally returned home.

There followed at about this time a period of building when all the pioneering work at Woodlands was remodelled and improved. A mission helper from Germany, Mr Koetting, in 1936, built a large underground tank to augment the water supply of the mission. A simple single-storeyed convent was erected to form two sides of a quadrangle. The mission church formed the third side of the rectangle. An outstanding feature of the building is the square tower of the church, giving prominence to the settlement in the surrounding landscape.

Until 1936 the district had always supplied sufficient day pupils for the two-teacher school at Fairview; but in the following year it was deemed advisable to admit boarders so as to make up the required number of scholars for the two teachers. As stated before, the Child Welfare and St Vincent de Paul Societies sent boarders here, but many other children came without bringing any remuneration whatever. Thus Woodlands experienced years of struggle and poverty when the Prioress General had to supplement the finances. It was decided in 1956 to close down the Fairview School. That meant also the withdrawal of the teaching and hostel staffs.

Despite the ideal situation of the African Noviciate in a proclaimed Bantu Area, it was thought that the climate at Woodlands was not very suitable for girls coming from warmer parts of South Africa. Goaded by this consideration the nuns applied to the Bishop of Port Elizabeth to grant them the house at Lilyfontein, near the coast, where the climate is milder. In 1950 the priest’s house on this site was given to the Dominican Congregation and the nuns in turn built a new house for the priest and a Noviciate for their African Sisters was established at Lilyfontein...

About 30 Km. from East London a pleasant country road leaves the main coastal highway and winds over undulating countryside finally to emerge upon a small bell tower looming against the sky. The charming little church of Our Lady of Fatima was built by Monsignor JB Schmidt<sup>6</sup> with the help of neighbouring farmers whose needs he served. Perhaps the outstanding example of the priest’s devotion is symbolised in the hours he spent carving the altar for his beloved church. Although he dreamed of founding a convent here some day he did not live to see it become the Noviciate of African Sisters.

The new convent was built in 1950 by Mr Vogelzang of East London, to accommodate the increasing number of African women who wished to lead the religious life. Previously candidates were accepted and instructed on various mission stations, but this was found unsatisfactory as the routine of a mission often did not allow sufficient time for neophytes to learn prayer and contemplation. Coming from all parts of South Africa, these nuns are representative of varied African peoples: Zulu, Xhosa, Basuto, Botswana and some others. Some of them have left their homes to join the convent against the wishes of their families. The custom of “lobola”<sup>7</sup> means that the loss of a daughter to the Convent is not welcomed in the rural home.

With the establishment of a house of formation for young Sisters a resident Priest at Lilyfontein became a necessity and so Father P Prendergast became the first priest in charge, combining his duty as chaplain to the Convent with that of pastor of the Catholics scattered around Lilyfontein and Komgha.<sup>8</sup>

In 1938 another problem arose: The apparently incompatible decision of Rome urging the establishment of an indigenous clergy and sisterhood on the one hand, with the South African Government’s policy of separate development of the various races, on the other. Finally the Congregation of King William’s Town was constrained by circumstances to part with its African Branch and to establish them as an

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<sup>6</sup> *He lies buried in the little church-yard of the mission*

<sup>7</sup> *A Bantu custom by which the bridegroom pays a price of cattle to the parents of his future wife. The practice is still observed in the rural areas, but cattle are now often replaced by payment in cash. Lobola is not regarded as purchase.*

<sup>8</sup> *A small town near King William’s Town; originally an army camp during the Frontier War in 1847. The town was established in 1877 during the Galeka War. It is now a wool and farming centre.*

independent Diocesan Sisterhood known as the “Sisters of Saint Martin de Porres”<sup>9</sup> under the Bishop of Port Elizabeth, Right Rev EA Green D.D.

At this time the Dominican Sisters liberally passed on to this youngest branch of their Order the fruits of their labours in the way of 46 Sisters that included 19 teachers and two nurses. Materially too much praise is due to the generosity of the Mother congregation for equipping the new mission with bore-holes, tanks, outbuildings and other requirements essential to the running of a mission station.

The Convent of Our Lady of Fatima was pioneered by that quiet-spoken, gentle woman, Mother Anna Kugelmann, who was completely wrapped up in her task of guiding “her children”. She had made her own religious profession in 1924. Coming out to South Africa, she spent the greater part of her life on mission stations and now spoke the Xhosa language like a native. Her sympathetic, understanding nature has won for her the deep love of the African people. Asked about her early days at Lilyfontein, Mother Anna would relate that one of their greatest benefactors was Lt Colonel George Cole who lived near Kwelera on his farm Byletts. On hearing that the mission was short of drinking water he supplied them with fresh water until the bore-hole was made. Later he also made them a present of three cows to ensure they had milk. “In the beginning the Novices milked and fed the cows themselves; a work not usually performed by African women”, said Mother Anna. There were also two very tame heifers that would come when their names were called, should they have strayed too far from the Convent while grazing.

“One day a Catholic farmer and his wife brought a piglet to Lilyfontein. The African Novices who looked after it named it Symphorosa. “...She grew big and fat and became quite tame. Because the sty was defective the animal sometimes escaped and ran about the yard. The Novices and Postulants enjoyed nothing more than to chase after Symphorosa in order to herd her back to her sty. It was quite a tragedy when Mr Brandstatter, the farm manager, slaughtered her one day.”

The nuns of the Convent of Our Lady of Fatima were responsible, among other duties, for the education of the African children of the neighbourhood. The teaching was done in a little school-house that stood on the slope of the hill a few hundred metres from the Convent. The children were eager to learn and their attendance was good although some of them had to travel a good distance on foot each day.

Instruction to the neophytes was given in English. Mother Anna had another friend, a Priest in America, who sent her pamphlets and religious books for her convent library. The Superior was also greatly helped by her own family in Germany, who collected money and other donations for the mission.

The Novices adjusted well to their new mode of life which was, however, vastly different from the life into which they were born. They were a vigorous and happy group, characteristic of their race. The Mistress of Novices also saw to it that her charges continued their education, even by correspondence course. Some Sisters were sent to hospitals to train as nurses and others qualified as teachers. Within the confines of the Convent there was an air of serene efficiency. Duties were performed with quiet dignity and good-fellowship prevailed among the nuns who have had one loyalty and one purpose instilled into them by Mother Anna: to serve God and their own people.

In 1970 the Sisters of St Martin de Porres petitioned Rome to re-unite them to their Mother Congregation of King William’s Town. A special Chapter was convened at Woodlands Convent. The presence of the Apostolic Delegate, Most Reverend Archbishop John Gordon D.C.L., at the opening of the official session on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1971, added a note of solemnity to the occasion and put the seal of the Church on the union. These two religious Congregations were convinced that, by drawing closer together in the Lord, they would be better able to carry out the apostolic missionary services that they were rendering the church individually.

These African Sisters would henceforth form a separate autonomous Province of the “King” Dominican Congregation and be known as the Province of St Martin de Porres. They are governed by Mother Prioress Provincial Regula Schelle, with her Council elected from among themselves. At this time Mother

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<sup>9</sup> *A holy Dominican Lay-Brother, born in Peru of a Spanish gentleman and an indio. He was the overseer of the infirmary of the monastery in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.*

Anna Kugelman reached retiring age so the Novitiate was brought back to Woodlands and placed in the care of Sister Beatrix von Felten.

Bishop Green had expressed the wish to establish a school for Deaf African children of his diocese. As His Lordship had, for many years, taken a keen interest in the Deaf this project was to be for him a real labour of love. When the struggling school at Fairview was closed down a scheme of helping the Bantu Deaf was mooted. However, nothing materialised for a few years until the idea was revived in 1961 and permission to use the former school buildings at Fairview was granted. Formal application was made to the State and a notice in the Government Gazette of 15<sup>th</sup> September 1961 announced that the St Thomas' School for the Deaf was recognised as from the first of that same month.

Woodlands of today is quite different from that of even only two decades ago. It was formerly a lonely mission, peeping shyly from the bush and forest on the green mountain-side. Difficult to approach at the best of times, it was often inaccessible when the rains came and isolated the area entirely for days on end. But fairly recently the site was catapulted into the modern age of hustle and bustle when the National Road from East London to the North was laid down to pass on the very doorstep of the settlement.

“Maria Hilf” Mission was renamed the “Convent of St Martin de Porres” and it is now the headquarters of the African Sisters of our Congregation. Today this mission comprises four distinct departments:

1. The Bantu School and Hostel, founded long ago, is still a private institution but is now under the Welfare Organisation in Pretoria. It caters for the African children of the neighbourhood. Toc-H and other benevolent people provide the children with a Christmas party, etc. each year.
2. The “Crèche” was founded out of a desperate need in a dilapidated house. In time a plain but serviceable new building was provided by benefactors. Under the Social Welfare Department it is at once an orphanage and a Home for Committed Bantu Children. The need for this institution is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that half of the ninety children are pre-school age. Many are still mere infants, but are already the victims of parental neglect and abandonment. Here the African Sisters ‘mother’ these waifs and they attend the Mission School on the premises.
3. The clinic was established to help the people of the district. It is assisted and regularly visited by the District Surgeon of King William’s Town. Two African Sisters, who are well trained in both nursing and midwifery, have charge of this clinic.
4. St Thomas’ School for Deaf Xhosa Children was officially opened on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1962. Sister M Conrada Foerg was freed from St Vincent School, Johannesburg to be the Principal here. Sister Guzmana Gfroereis was sent as assistant teacher. These two formed the nucleus of the future staff, where more nuns have joined them. Several African Sisters, as well as Black lay teachers, are being trained on-the-job and by correspondence courses for the Diploma of Teachers of the Deaf. The school is now fully subsidised by the Bantu Education Department.

The School’s tenth birthday was marked by the formal opening of a new Home craft Training Centre for deaf girls. The building was due entirely to the generosity of the Director of Mines’ Labour Organisation (Deferred Pay Interest Fund). Before a large gathering, which attended the function, tribute was paid to the staff of the school and, in particular, to that small, courageous band who began the institution and helped it grow from a very insignificant beginning to its present stature. The children’s Speech Choir, the Zulu Dances, the Drill Display and other items were designed, not only to entertain the guests but, to enlighten the audience about the work that is done with deaf children.

There are at this school, also flourishing, Boy Scout and Girl Guide Troops as well as several kinds of sport to be played. Pupils are drawn from nearly all over the Eastern Province and the roll has risen to 240 in fifteen years. The Bantu Education Department is subsidising yet another building in order to enlarge the school to accommodate 300 pupils. The National Council for the Deaf of South Africa takes special interest in this school that is giving these deaf children a chance to take their rightful place in our society. Inspectors of the school all remark on the generous self-giving of both the African and European members of the staff. The Sisters of St Martin de Porres staff a few more centres, namely, The Convent of the Sacred Heart, Swartkops near Port Elizabeth and the Convent of St John Bosco, Kwa Zakhele, on the

outskirts of Port Elizabeth. These two latter convents were begun during the time the African Sisters were independent of our Congregation. For this reason the origin and growth of these institutions are not recorded in this book.