



Student nurses taught by Sister deSales stand at the main entrance to St. James Mercy Hospital's old building in this early photo.

## SISTER MARY DE SALES: A Nurse Retires After 72 Years

After 72 years — a lifetime of service to St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell, and to its school of nursing — Sister Mary deSales Reilly, RSM has left the hospital to live with the retired sisters at the Mercy Motherhouse, Rochester.

Sister deSales went to St. James Mercy Hospital in August, 1900. August, 1972 she retired at the age of 92.

She was the director of the first School of Nursing at St. James Mercy and directed it for over 40 years. She also supervised the operating room for 64 years.

The late Dr. William J. Tracy of the staff of St. James Mercy Hospital, praised Sister's integrity, industriousness and good sense of humor. In a 1955 tribute to Sister M. deSales, he called her "one of the most devoted and endearing persons in all the history of St. James Mercy, a truly real pioneer for the good of all."

He also said, "Sister is a most capable surgical nurse, assistant to the surgeon, and indeed could finish an operation in necessity."

Sister deSales was born in a small town in County Cavan, Ireland, the youngest of 11 children. Arriving in the United States in 1898, she joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Hornell.

On Aug. 31, 1900, Sister deSales was received into the novitiate and journeyed across town as a novice to the hospital.

Three sisters were in full charge of the hospital, caring for the sick, cleaning, supervising and, occasionally, cooking.

The training period for Sister deSales, one of the first three students, lasted about two years and consisted mostly of on-the-job learning. A member of the staff of St. Mary's hospital, Rochester, and the staff doctors were responsible for the teaching.

Sisters and lay nurses alike worked more than a 12-hour shift and then were on call.

"I wasn't a nurse," Sister deSales recalled. "I had never been in a hospital until I came here. In Ireland, no one ever went to the hospital except to die."

Sister deSales recalled a particular nurse would

cry terribly whenever a patient died. "I used to say to her, 'Didn't you do all the things the doctor ordered? Did you neglect the patient? Then why cry? The Lord wanted the patient.'"

In reminiscing, Sister said, "One thing I never liked was having patients die at night. I never liked washing them and straightening their hair, dressing them and calling the undertaker when I was alone."

When another Sister came as a novice, five years after Sister deSales did, Sister recalled, "I used to tell her to call me at night if anyone died. I remembered how I felt."

Sister deSales, along with her operating room nursing and cleaning duties, assumed responsibility for the nursing school in 1912.

There had been three graduate nurses in charge of the students before this. All had left.

"I don't know why," Sister deSales commented. "Never had time to ask. Maybe because they came from bigger schools and had more to work with. We had nothing."

"Then I lived with the nurses. As a matter of fact the only time I ever lived in the convent was from March to August of 1900. I've lived in the hospital ever since!"

Sister deSales had to perform a variety of duties. With the exception of maternity care, she supervised all branches of nursing and in emergencies she was even found on duty in the delivery room.

With a short Irish chuckle, Sister once said, "Humph! I laugh when I hear people complaining about work and equipment. We never heard complaints in those days. Too busy, I guess."

Dr. Tracy called Sister deSales "the most impartial woman I have ever known. In times of difficulty or doubts, she was always just, practical and honest."

Reflecting upon the past Sister deSales said recently, "I'd live it all over again. I can't even remember an unhappy day."

"You know, if I thought I was going to live this long, I'd have kept notes and things so I'd know all that happened. But there just wasn't time. Besides, I guess I know, really, all that happened."