

The Nun Who Played for Keeps

By Dennis Payton Knight

She was kneeling as you would expect any nun to do, but her youthful fingers weren't working their way through rosary beads. Instead she was bent forward, low to the ground, shooting marbles. Sister could talk the lingo, even a little smack. She was a master of shooters, aggies, steelies, mashies, mibs and ducks, and she could knuckle down with the best of 'em. She was a straight shooter and no one ever accused her of fudging, but she played for keeps.

Sister Lucien Marie of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth was the seventh grade teacher at St. Laurence School. We were a small class of maybe two dozen, including typical Catholic school girls who excelled at penmanship and spelling, and us boys who worshiped Sister as if she were the Pope's designated successor to Crazylegs Hirsch.

Like teachers everywhere, the nuns who came to Laramie from the Motherhouse in Leavenworth, Kansas had different skills and personalities. We feared some and loved the others. My least favorite was Sister Mary Thomas who taught fifth grade and functioned as the coordinator and disciplinarian of the altar boys. Lord help us if she got word from Monsignor that one of us had failed to show up to serve the morning's six o'clock mass. She would march into the classroom and lead the sinner by the chin out to the hall to deliver a personal sermon of fire and brimstone that resounded down the corridors and through the transoms. I know, because it happened to me. Once.

Although I don't recall many of my other teachers at St. Laurence, I do remember Sister Mary Sarah in the eighth grade fondly because we enjoyed a mutual sense of humor. She even thought my mistakes were funny. I would blush and she would laugh again.

Best of all was Sister Lucien Marie. Dressed in the long black habit of her order, her face framed in the whitest of white without a wisp of visible hair, Sister would at any challenge draw a circle in the dirt, drop to her knees and take on any kid in the school yard who was willing to risk his marbles. With a few shots she could clear the ring. She would whip us in groups or whip us one at a time. She would sound an immodest whoop, drop her personal shooter back into a hidden pocket of her habit, scoop the ducks from outside the perimeter where they had gone to die, and carry them back to the classroom to add to her collection.

When the last day of school finally rolled around, Sister brought out coffee cans filled with her bounty. She passed the marbles out to every comer regardless of which of us poor saps she had actually relieved them of. Sister Lucien Marie, the coolest nun on the planet, *had* to do that because she was, after all, under a solemn vow of poverty.