The Monastery Immaculate Conception sits atop a large hill overlooking the small town of Ferdinand. A narrow, red-brick pathway leads up the hill to the entrance.

The monastery resembles a castle from a storybook. Surrounded by acres of green grass and trees, it is silent other than the far-off “caw” of the crows and the gentle billow of the wind. Taking a deep breath, we walk through the towering archways and open the carved wooden doors.

A small, silver-haired woman wearing a navy sweatshirt with a giant Italian flag and “Italia” embroidered across the front greets us with a smile. Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone” plays in the background. Maybe she’s a volunteer who helps out in the main office, we think.

She asks the purpose of our visit and assures us the communications specialist will be out shortly. About five minutes later, a woman in her 40s, wearing blue jeans, a pink shirt and a black fleece jacket, introduces herself as Sister Briana. Yet another surprise.

Where we expected no-nonsense nuns dressed in habits or sensible clothing we find a group of women both welcoming and fun. With almost 150 members, this Benedictine community of sisters is one of the largest monasteries in the country and will celebrate its 150th anniversary in October. Some traditions, like their dedication to prayer, have remained the same. But their once-strict and silent lifestyles have changed dramatically as social and economic forces from the outside world reached the monastery on the hill.

Today’s Benedictine sisters bake, play instruments and work in the monastery’s beauty parlor. In their free time, they might play euchre, pickleball or cornhole or even sled down the snow-covered hill. This formerly reclusive group now annually hosts around 12,000 visitors of all faiths, ages and races. The monastery’s Kordes Center offers lodging for all types of guests, even those making the nine-mile drive to Holiday World in Santa Claus.

“It’s a Benedictine value that you’re supposed to treat every person like it’s Christ, so it doesn’t matter who or what sex you are,” Sister Michelle Mohr says. “We administer help to whoever is in need.”

That commitment has prompted the nuns to adapt some of their older buildings for new purposes. Benet Hall, a former dormitory, is undergoing renovations to become affordable senior housing. The 15 two-bedroom apartments will open in November, and all faiths are welcome.

The monastery follows St. Benedict’s advice to listen to all members in the community, youngest to oldest, because everyone has a special piece of wisdom. The sisters have what they call “Stable Tables,” a randomly assigned group of sisters, to decide the monastery’s long-term projects. During meetings, each sister sits with her group to discuss personal views. The tables remain in place for the year so the sisters can get to know one another on a deeper level.

“What’s really nice, too, is I have friends that are older, my age and younger, so it’s not like the age groups stay together,” Sister Mary Philip Berger says. “We’re all together. Society doesn’t always think of relationships like that.”

This strong sense of sisterhood is deeply rooted in the past, to a day 150 years ago when four young women left the safety of their home in Kentucky to create a new monastery in Southern Indiana. It was 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War, when the four Benedictine sisters traveled by boat, train, and horse and buggy to Ferdinand, where the local pastor needed German-speaking nuns to teach the children of German immigrants. With very little knowledge of their new home but a lot of faith, the sisters, aged 19 to 33, set out to establish the Monastery Immaculate Conception.

Farmers gave them produce and meat products. The sisters lived simple lives and wore floor-length habits. “When they came, they started out in a little house, which was at the foot of the hill,” says Sister Mary Andre, the monastery’s historian. “It wasn’t long before women started wanting to enter, and so rather than keep adding on to that house, they got land up here on the hill and built what we call the Quadrangle.”

Celebrating 150 years of sisterhood at Ferdinand’s historic monastery

By Kaitlyn Chamberlin and Alexis Daily

The roles of women were changing, and the world was changing, too.

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The 20 groups of 10 sisters for stable tables transformed into nine groups of seven or eight sisters. Classes of postulants dropped from 25 to around five.

Though the community is smaller today, the monastery remains true to its values. “Community life is still sustaining,” Sister Mary Andre says. “It’s the beginning and ending of our lives,” Sister Mary Andre says.

The sisters pray by candlelight or daylight. “We got up when it was light and went to bed when it was dark,” Sister Mary Andre says. “The day to day is just our lives,” Sister Mary Andre says.

**Kitchen work past and present. /Photos courtesy of Monastery Immaculate Conception and by Kedlyn Chamberlin.**

**Why I entered:** I became a religious because I wanted to see what it was about, because it was different. I wanted to get it out of my mind.

**How my family reacted:** I came home after my junior year in high school, which, at that time, was not unusual. I came home from one Sunday, I walked in the kitchen and I said, “I’m going to the convent.” My dad said he thought I would only last two weeks. When we were driving in to the monastery, my dad said, “Connie has her castle now,” because when I was younger, I wanted to live in a castle. Connie is my name. I love the flow of life. I played clarinet in my high school band, and we played solos for the sisters. Even then I knew I could be a music director. I have terrible handwriting. I have a degree in business and worked in administration for a long time. It’s whatever your talents are. We all have different backgrounds.

**What I do for fun:** If it snows, we go sled-riding. There’s lots of walking around the grounds, too. We play a lot of card games, like Egyptian rummy, bridge, bridge’s head and euchre. We also play corn hole every once in a while.

**Someone who loves me:** My mom.

**Doing things that I like to do:** I do theatre, I teach music and I sing with the choir.

**Favorite thing about living here:** We have beautiful grounds and wild animals such as deer, foxes, opossums, groundhogs and raccoons. Additionally, our community has drawn out talents I didn’t know I had.

**What I do for fun:** I like to draw, sew, paint, garden, walk and read. I also enjoy playing pickleball, and I like to sing with a lot of people who love me. I love the peace that I feel. I love exploring all the different places, and I love that my life is different, and I’m doing what I think I’m supposed to be doing.

**What I do for fun:** I like to read, watch movies, play music, be outdoors, laugh, hang out with friends, play games, do things that you like to do for fun.

**Mary Philip Berger, 74**

**Vocation director**

**Age when entered:** 25

**Why I entered:** I became a religious because I wanted to see what it was about, because it was different. I wanted to get it out of my mind.

**How my family reacted:** They were supportive. Some of them thought I was a little crazy. They all had questions, and a lot of them knew a long time before I entered and ended up doing something like that.

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**Briana Craddock, 43**

**Communications specialist & bakery manager**

**Age when entered:** 23

**Why I entered:** I became a sister because I felt God was calling me to religious life. I felt at home from the first time I visited, even though I had never met any of the women before.

**How my family reacted:** My family was not too pleased that I chose to enter a community in Indiana since I was living with them in Southern California at the time. My mother was angry. My sister is over 10 years younger than I am, so she missed me a lot.

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The ladies of the night

At night, the monastery's grotto shines by candlelight, and a feeling of peace lies in the air. Inside, three women from Winamac paint a lower-level floor a deep red. They are St. Benedict's "Ladies of the Night."

When farmer Diane Kolish, 53, saw a flyer from the monastery asking for volunteers, she shared it with friends Linda Webb, 52, a nurse, and Julie Chapman, 55, a pharmacist. They decided to make the journey to Ferdinand for a weeklong visit during the summer of 2014. "What we thought was our getaway ended up being a blessing for all of us," Webb says.

Tasked with painting the archive's floor, the women began working in the night so to not disturb the sisters. They painted from dinnertime until around 10 p.m., earning their nickname.

"Immediately we were impressed by how welcoming and friendly the ladies, and even the staff, was," says Webb. "They made sure that you felt like you belonged and that you were part of the community.

During the days, volunteer coordinator Sister Mary Philip has small projects to keep them busy, like cataloging paintings. Sister Mary Philip taught them to play the card game dirty canasta, which the women now call "canasta the Benedict way."

"It doesn't feel like you're doing service," Webb says. "You feel guilty because you're having such a wonderful time."

They already have the dates picked out for their third trip. The pamphlet calls the monastery a sacred treasure, Kolish says. "But surely those sisters are the real treasure."

People of all age and faiths are invited. "We're always happy to have them," Sister Jane says. "And I think that when people get here and see the campus and have a chance to experience it, they find it very peaceful."