

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

**Sister Michael
Thomas Watson, O.P.**

Oral History of Sister Michael Thomas Watson, O.P.

conducted by

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and filmed by

Edward Feldman

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Interviewer: *Today is June 13th, 2013. We're in the chapel of St. Rose de Lima Hospital in Henderson, Nevada. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. We're interviewing Sister Michael Thomas Watson as part of the Henderson Oral History Project of the Henderson Libraries. Thank you so much for participating Sister Michael.*

Sr. Michael: It's my pleasure and honor today, thank you.

Interviewer: *I'd like to begin by hearing a little bit about when and where you born and raised and what your family was like.*

Sr. Michael: I was brought up in a military family. I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and I'm the oldest of five siblings. Out of those—and my father was a military man for thirty years and we traveled in many states. We lived in thirty states and two years in Yokohama, Japan before I entered this congregation.

Interviewer: *Wow, you moved around a lot!*

Sr. Michael: We moved around a lot, even as a youngster, very small. And my Dad was stationed in different areas of the country, and in the summertime we usually went there to be with him and everything.

Interviewer: *What was it like living in Japan?*

Sr. Michael: It was very interesting. I had a very wonderful job. I was secretary to a Major Knowles from Chicago and I had a Civil Service position, worked in the Finance Department. I did that all the time I was in the Orient. But then another wonderful thing that happened to me is that I came very close to be a white capped Charity Sisters from France. And they—at St. Joseph's Church, they had a small orphanage. And it was there that I became acquainted with the sisters and helping to see their needs, not only for themselves but also for the children. So I

got a group together from my office staff and we worked with the sisters providing blankets and clothing and food. Just anything we could do in order to help the sisters because there were fifty children in the orphanage at that time. Of course, they were a mixture of Americans and also of the black community, so I did that work all the time that I was there. That was one of the things that I really, truly enjoyed.

Interviewer: *Well that's great that you were involved with that.*

Sr. Michael: Right.

Interviewer: *And then you all moved to Henderson. Why did you come to Henderson?*

Sr. Michael: Well, you see, my father—after we came back from the Orient, my father was sent to the Los Angeles area, and while he was in Los Angeles he received an appointment to come here and [become] head of the Recruiting Department here. And it happened at the time that my dear sisters opened up a school, St. Joseph's School, right across the street from where we lived. And as a result my brother Edward and my sister Caroline went to the sisters there. And that's how I became acquainted with them. They would need transportation to go to different places because they couldn't drive and so my Father was very wonderful. He'd let me have the car and I would bring them even out here to Rose de Lima to visit some of our sisters. So I became very close to them during that year.

Interviewer: *What was Henderson like when you first came here?*

Sr. Michael: Well, it was a very small community. And naturally at that time we just had the one section of our hospital. It was very small, only so many beds. And now today it is expanded and of course we have 139 beds here in the hospital now. But it was very small at that time and

when our sisters arrived here. Henderson was really beginning to grow at that time. It was beginning to grow.

Interviewer: *What led to your decision to become a nun and how did you choose your order?*

Sr. Michael: Well, as I said, I became very familiar with the sisters through my association with them and taking them places and everything and I had no idea that that's exactly what God wanted me to do, but I think it's because of my association with the sisters in Japan and seeing the work that they did it impressed me so and when I met the Dominican Sisters they were so friendly and so wonderful that I said, "Well, I think that's what I want to do." But my mother wasn't very pleased with me, but my father was, so that's how my story begins, and everything. So on November the 5th, 1949, I was ready to go to Adrian and my father took me to the train and the last thing he said to me was, "Now, Dear, if this is not for you, you are to feel free to let me know and I'll send you the money to come home." But I was there and I loved it.

Interviewer: *And that was in Chicago, right?*

Sr. Michael: No, Dear, it wasn't Chicago; my mother house is in Adrian, Michigan.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Sr. Michael: It's in Adrian, Michigan. So that's where I entered.

Interviewer: *What was it like living in Michigan? It must have been cold!*

Sr. Michael: It was cold. It was very cold, yes, but we had some exciting times in the wintertime there, too, going down the hills and mountains in inner tubes and things like—

Interviewer: *Oh, you did have some fun! [laughter]*

Sr. Michael: We did have fun, we did! We did.

Interviewer: *Yeah, neat. How many years were you there?*

Sr. Michael: I was there from 1950 until 1951 when I made profession. And at that time I received the name of Sister Michael Thomas. I was told by our Mother General that I had two great saints to live up to: Michael the Archangel and Thomas Aquinas the great Dominican theologian. So that was what went on at that time when I was firstly professed. And it was wonderful because my family—while I was there in those years, my family did not come to visit me. So every single Sunday when we had Visiting Sunday I was always asked to be a companion to one of the other sisters. Which I did, but then Mother Gerald was kind enough, because I came from the West, she said, “I’m going to send you back to the West.” And that’s what she did, so my parents were extremely thrilled. So I was sent to Oakland, California to teach my first years.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Sr. Michael: And I was there for—in the Bay Area teaching. I taught at St. Louis Bertrand for eight years and then I taught—the rest of the time, I was at St. Paschal Baylon and I taught there seven years. So I loved it. I loved it. Usually I had the youngsters, the second graders; I taught them for about fifteen years. But I’ve also taught other grades, too, and everything, and it isn’t that I just stayed with the babies, but I loved them.

Interviewer: *That’s a fun age to teach.*

Sr. Michael: It is a fun age; it is a fun age, right, right.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that’s neat. So when did you begin working for St. Rose and why?*

Sr. Michael: All right, I received a call from my superior and I was at the time in Adrian, Michigan. And she asked me if I would consider coming to the West again. And I said I’d love to. And so she said, “Well, I’m going to send you to one of our hospitals.” And right away I thought

she was sending me to Dominican Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz Hospital because I had been there as a principal and I taught there and I knew quite a few people there. And also the sisters—I knew all of the sisters there at our hospital. But she said, “Oh, no, I’m sending you to St. Rose de Lima. I’m sending you to Henderson, Nevada. They need sisters there and I’m going to send you there.” And I said, “Wonderful. Whatever you do is fine with me.” So I came here in July of ’98, but I didn’t start here at the hospital until September of ’98, because I had to get my residence. I had to bring furniture to get my residence all ready and get myself settled before I started here at the hospital. So I’ve been here since 1998.

Interviewer: *And when you came here were you living in that neighborhood that the sisters live in behind the hospital?*

Sr. Michael: Well yes, the sisters live on Church Street and that’s where I reside. I reside on Church Street. That’s like—the Dominican sisters that—most of the Dominican sisters that work at de Lima live on that street.

Interviewer: *That’s neat that they were able to acquire that housing.*

Sr. Michael: Right, right, Dear.

Interviewer: *What was your assignment when you first came here?*

Sr. Michael: Well my assignment has been what it has been. Ever since then I’ve been a volunteer—and when I first came they said, well, we’re going to make you a volunteer supervisor. So that’s what I have been all these years. They don’t want to see me coming! [laughter] No, I’m just teasing. No this hospital is like a family. We’re like a big family here. It has a very warm atmosphere. You get to know your employees. You get to know your staff, the

doctors; it's a wonderful hospital. I really, truly enjoyed my years here immensely. It's been a blessing for me. It's been like a second home for me, too.

Interviewer: *Yeah it does seem like that from the people that I've met. Tell me about some of the people that you've worked with over the years.*

Sr. Michael: Well, let's see, I worked in many parishes, but most of all I started, when I had finished with my schooling and then I was, as I said, I was in quite a few other places as a teacher, an educator, and then in 1980 I decided that I would retire from teaching and I would do something differently. So I—three of my sisters I lived with were Sister Ann Philip Cotta and Sister Margaret Sorich and we decided to go into Pastoral Care. And as a result we first started out in Victorville at St. Joan of Arc Church. So we were there for one year and then we went to Hemet, California and we were there in Hemet, California at Our Lady of the Valley for seventeen years. And at that time, I was in charge of twenty-one Eucharistic ministers and eleven convalescent homes. I took care of that on a weekly basis and then I also went around and visited about sixty people a week. Some days I would travel in a radius of twenty five miles giving communion and visiting the sick.

Interviewer: *You were going all the time!*

Sr. Michael: I was going all the time. And I did hospice care, too. Later on I became involved with hospice and I did hospice care, too, visitations and everything. That was a very joyous time for me, too. I did that for five years.

Interviewer: *It's interesting that you've gotten to perform in so many different roles.*

Sr. Michael: Right. I have been blessed that way. I have been blessed that way.

Interviewer: *What are some of the memorable things, events that you can remember happening at St. Rose?*

Sr. Michael: One of the biggest events, I think is that when we sisters are privileged to have the bishop come and visit us and for Mass, that's always been one of the outstanding things here at St. Rose. And then also when we have our sisters who are visiting, who have never been here and never seen the hospitals. And it's always nice because they usually bring them to St. Rose first and we're always happy about that and to welcome them. And the nicest part is that on Church Street we have a hospitality house, so we can offer that to our sisters that are visiting us. And then I think another thing for me is the different events that transpire as part of the hospital, that come about at different times of the year. And one of the outstanding ones that I truly enjoy so very much, too, is going to the Mardi Gras because at that time, it's a wonderful time for the sisters and for our hospitals because we have so many people from Las Vegas and Henderson who attend that and so many donations are made in regards to the different areas and technologies, things that need to be done in the hospitals and people contribute to that.

Interviewer: *I think one time you auctioned off a car!*

Sr. Michael: Yeah, we did at one time, that's right. In fact many years ago, one of the places I have taught here in Nevada, I taught over at St. Francis de Sales, a Catholic school. I was there for two years before I went down into Arizona. So the three states I've taught in have been California, Arizona, and here in Nevada.

Interviewer: *So you were gone from Henderson for a long time before you came back to work at St. Rose.*

Sr. Michael: Yes, Dear, I was, many years.

Interviewer: *Were you shocked at the way Henderson had grown when you returned?*

Sr. Michael: I was—I really couldn't get over the size of Henderson because I was so used to it being such a small community. But what I find about Henderson is the people here are very hospitable. And when you get to know them, they remember you and you really appreciate that. It's a lot of places that I go to that I meet up with a lot of those wonderful people. I was at one dedication for a Benny Binion and—I was at that and at that time, many, many years ago, and I met a lot of the different people that ran Las Vegas at that time. So it was something for me, way back in the '60s, so you were able to do that. And we needed a car at that time, so I was out soliciting for a car for our school. I visited all the casinos! I started in November; I finished in February.

Interviewer: *Were they surprised to see you? [laughter]*

Sr. Michael: [laughter] They were surprised when I was standing by the cashiers cage to get my donation for the car! So, no the people were wonderful to me, too.

Interviewer: *I'm sure they were. That's neat. What is your typical day like, or week like here, these days?*

Sr. Michael: My typical day? All right, I'm here from eight o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. I changed my scheduling since the beginning of the year and now I take one day off, which is a Friday. But otherwise I'm here, as I said, from eight to four, and during that time I'm around, I visit all the areas of the hospital except certain ones that I don't go to—it would be the Lab and Radiology and places like that. And then I visit the patient's room, have visitation, I'll get a notation or a call to come and visit a person who probably knows me and I'll go and meet them and visit them. Or I will take communion to the sick. I do that. Now today is

my day to take communion to the sick. So I start out at twelve-thirty and then end up about two or two-thirty depending on my list. And that's how my scheduling begins. Then I'm always available for the employees or for any of the relatives who come in and might need some help or assistance. I'm there for them, everything, so.

Interviewer: *Are you the only one here doing the communion, or are there other people?*

Sr. Michael: Yes, no I have lay persons. I have lay persons who are very faithful and they come during the week to help me out. Yes. And then we have scheduling for the Sundays. The only day that we do not give communion out is on a Saturday. But otherwise we're covered. And then on Sunday I come in—even though I don't have to—I come in from eleven to one and I visit the floors and I give communion then. I give communion to all of our nurses who are not able to get to communion on Sundays. So I gather them all in one place and I give them communion on the different floors. So I do that every Sunday.

Interviewer: *Yeah, I thought that was really neat that you do that.*

Sr. Michael: Because they just don't have a chance to get to church, bless their hearts, and they want to!

Interviewer: *Right, they work all the time, yeah. That's neat. What do you like most about working for St. Rose?*

Sr. Michael: Well, to me, as I said, it's a blessing because it's like home. These employees and the staff, they mean a great deal to me and they have become such a part of my life! And I just enjoy knowing them and hearing their stories and sharing with them. And most of all their hospitality is wonderful. I can't go up on any floor that I don't—the nurses don't come to me and say, "Sister, it's so nice to see you," or "Good Morning," or so forth and so on. They've even

asked me at times—this is kind of funny though to a certain extent, but yet it isn't—they will come and say to me, "Oh, Sister, could you please come up and bless our floor? We're really having a hard time today. Some of our patients, well—just come up and bring some holy water!" [laughter] So I'll go around and take the holy water and bless the rooms. [laughter] And the nurses will say, "Oh, thank goodness you're here. Thank goodness you're here!" [laughter]

Interviewer: *Oh, that's great. I'm sure they really appreciate your support!*

Sr. Michael: As I say, they really support me. And if I don't come or something like that, they'll say, "Oh Sister, were you sick or was there something wrong?" I say, "Oh, no, no," you know. And if I'm going away to visit my brother which I do at Easter time and Thanksgiving, or if I'm away at Christmas time to visit a dear friend who lives in Phoenix, they'll say, "Well where were you? You weren't sick were you?" They're very anxious to know why I wasn't here, or where was I. So, I have to get an account of my stewardship! [laughter] Before I leave.

Interviewer: *That's right, they miss you quick! What advice would give to someone considering a vocation as a nun or a sister that you wish someone would have told you when you were first considering the vocation?*

Sr. Michael: Well, the thing is this. I think the most important thing is if you are looking into a vocation you have to really get to know the sisters. That's very important. And if you can get to know them and their reaction to you and how hospitable they are to you, and they can sit down and talk to you and visit with you and you feel comfortable in their presence, right away you're going to know, "That's the congregation I want to belong to." Because I like the Sisters because of their joy. I like the Sisters because of their hospitality. And there are so many things I know about them. That's what makes it so very special.

Interviewer: *And you have that great advantage of getting to drive them around all over town to get to know them that way.*

Sr. Michael: That's right, I did. I did. It was a wonderful experience.

Interviewer: *How is being a nun or sister today for you different than it was in the past?*

Sr. Michael: Years ago when I was teaching, at the beginning of the year we were assigned our classes, and then at the end of the year we all gathered together in what you would call a family room but we called the Community Room and there the sisters would be given an appointment for the next year. So you did not really know if you were going to be at that same convent the next year or you were going to be transferred someplace else. So that went on all during our religious life until just in the latter part I'd say, probably in the—maybe in '70s or something like that, it changed and we didn't receive any information like that anymore. Fact is probably sooner, but I think it was around the '70s that that began to dwindle down and we didn't have all that "appointments" and everything. You were called and asked, or told that you were needed at this school or where, you know, and so as a result we went there. We never questioned it; we just went.

Interviewer: *And now do you get more of a say in where you are assigned?*

Sr. Michael: Yes, yes they are very understanding. They are very understanding and so if a climate or something like that would not agree with one of our sisters they could just say it, and, you know, "I don't think that would be the right thing for me." There's communication that goes on and you're not really pressured into going there. You are asked to go.

Interviewer: *Is that something that's across the board for all the orders? Or is that yours in particular?*

Sr. Michael: I think a lot of the orders have changed, Dear. There—a lot of those things that happened years and years ago have changed a lot. There's been a lot of changes going on in different congregations, and they look more today at the person and the individual, too, and at their gifts and what they can give, and where it would be best suited for them. That's another thing.

Interviewer: *Well that's good management, too, to make sure the person fits the position.*

Sr. Michael: Right. And one of the things I'd like for you to know, too, is the fact is that we had one of our sisters here that was so wonderful and she did so many wonderful things for the hospital, and so in the end and everything, we were able to have a school named after her here in the city. So that was one of the nicest things that happened. And we're just really—we're thrilled about that.

Interviewer: *And that was Sister—*

Sr. Michael: You know what? I got a blank there! Isn't that terrible? I'm sorry. But she was our dietician, one of our Sisters was a dietician and very, very well known here in this area for all the things she did, because she set up like a dietary program for the children, she'd go to the schools, she would teach in the schools and everything else. She did all that and everything. In fact I have a booklet that tells all about her and I'll give that to you and then you can insert her name. How's that! [laughter]

Interviewer: *Yeah, I don't know if we have that in our records, we should get a copy of that.*

Sr. Michael: I have a copy of that. I'll see that you get it.

Interviewer: *That's great, thank you. What have you enjoyed most about living in Henderson?*

Sr. Michael: Well, I have enjoyed it because the fact is, as I've said before, I think that the people here are very hospitable, I've had the pleasure of meeting the mayor, Mayor Andy, I've had the pleasure of attending one of the City Councils, and so it's been very edifying to meet and visit the people and talk to them.

Interviewer: *Do the Sisters—you said you visited City Council—do the Sisters ask the City to do things for the hospital?*

Sr. Michael: No, Darling, we didn't ask the City to do anything for us. It was just that we were supporting St. Francis of Assisi Church for Father John who wants to build his church out there and so forth and so on. So they asked us to attend that meeting and we were there to give him support. And then we also received an award from them, too, from the City Council, for our presence here, so it was quite a festive evening.

Interviewer: *It sounds like it, sounds great. What else would you like to share with us about your experience in Henderson and St. Rose?*

Sr. Michael: Well I think all the experience I've had, people that I've met who've been so wonderful to me all these years, and they have touched me deeply. And I know that if and when the time is that I have to leave here, which I hope it will never be, but when it is I know that I'm going to take a lot of fond memories with me from Henderson. I know that. Everything, so. I would really miss it deeply. I really would. Because as I said, it's become like home to me. It's like another home and I just really love it very much.

Interviewer: *Well it sounds like a wonderful place to live and work.*

Sr. Michael: Right. It is. It is. And when you go around to the different departments and you see the different people that work in the different departments, their dedication moves you deeply.

I think that's one of the things that really is outstanding is the fact that—our dedication to healthcare: that we have a very deep concern for all of our patients who come into this hospital. And we want to see them get well. That's our main objective is their health and wellbeing. And I think that's what our hospitals strive to do is to bring that compassion and the care and the love that is needed to make them well again.

Interviewer: *And I see a real commitment to that in the new Rehabilitation Center renovation.*

Sr. Michael: Right, absolutely, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: *Well, Sister Michael, it has been so nice talking with you this morning.*

Sr. Michael: Well thank you, it's been my pleasure and as I said, it's been an honor for me to do this for you, Anne Marie, because this is my first and probably my last interview! [laughter]

Interviewer: *Well I don't know, when people see this interview, they may want to interview you too. [laughter]*

Sr. Michael: I doubt that very much.

Interviewer: *Thank you.*

Sr. Michael: Oh, you're welcome. It's been my pleasure, again. Thank you for being here and know that you're always welcome. The door is always open.

Interviewer: *Well, thank you so much.*

Sr. Michael: You're welcome. You're welcome.