Sisters of St. Joseph celebrated the rich heritage of their home and land with nearly 70 guests who “strolled through time” on June 18 in Baden, PA.

The threat of thunderstorms did not deter local history aficionados, curious neighbors, newcomers to the Baden grounds, and those with fond memories of the Sisters from participating in the mile-long historic walk.

The tour, coordinated and led by Archivist Kathleen Washy, was planned in concert with the Year of Consecrated Life during which Pope Francis has asked sisters, brothers, and priests throughout the world to remember their past with gratitude. In opening remarks, Kathleen set the tone for her talk, saying:

You are standing on the grounds of the home of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Many of you may think of the stereotype of a motherhouse as being a quiet place, a drab and dour place. This place is truly a wonderful place for meditation and spirituality - I know that my soul feels at peace every time that I set foot on these grounds - but it is also a place that has always been full of life, fun, and vitality since the days that the Sisters of St. Joseph moved here. This place is truly a treasure, for anyone who comes on the grounds.

Visitors learned about the beginnings and growth of the Sisters in Baden in the context of emerging industries and modes of transportation surrounding them. Highlights of the tour included background on the original structures, statues, and property, which initially served as a dairy farm. When the Sisters moved from Ebensburg to Baden in 1901, they continued to maintain the farm with chickens, pigs, cows, horses, and a variety of crops.

Among the guests was John Bates, a member of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, who summarized his tour experience:

I’ve been on a lot of tours, including Catholic and historic ones, locally and elsewhere. The Baden tour was truly exceptional — the initial vibe in the crowd waiting to start the tour, the friendliness of the Sisters of St. Joseph during and after the walk, and the great anecdotes that archivist Kathleen Washy recounted from the archives. All of that brought the Sisters to “life.”

Though the tour covered the buildings and their history, there was no “institutional” feel to this trip through time. Rather we experienced the joie de vivre that must have attracted and sustained the many women who joined the Sisters of St. Joseph over their more than 100 years in Baden. That spirit was ably communicated and truly demonstrated during and after the tour.

Following the tour, guests gathered for conversation with the Sisters, light refreshments and historic photo exhibits in Medaille Hall in the Motherhouse. One woman wanted to see the setting where her father had attended the former Mount Gallitzin boarding school for boys. Parents whose children now attend the Baden Academy Charter School attended to learn more about the property and buildings. A first-time visitor, Paul Bronder, who maintains a grape arbor in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, expressed great interest in the orchard and grape arbor on site and offered to share his recipe for grape jelly with the Sisters.

As the tour group meandered up the pathway toward the cemetery, Kathleen said some Sisters recalled singing as they walked along the same route years ago. In a diary entry dated May 2, 1927, Mother Genevieve Ryan not only seemingly confirms that ritual, but also attests to the beauty of God’s creation that the Sisters continue to preserve and sustain today. To missionary Sisters in China, Mother Genevieve wrote:

As we wended our way to and from the cemetery, one could not but raise our voice of joyous thanksgiving to the Giver of Gifts for, as far as eye could reach, the country was shrouded in green, our own surroundings beautiful. Each year, the place grows more attractive.

This article has been reprinted with permission from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. It originally appeared in the summer 2015 edition of the sisters’ Dear Neighbor magazine.