“I am very happy here and like it here very much,” wrote nine-year-old Willie Schmidt to his parents as he settled into his new school. The year was 1883 and he was writing from Mt. Gallitzin Seminary, a boys boarding school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in the town of Ebensburg, Pennsylvania. For three years of his life, Willie lived and attended school at Mt. Gallitzin. Within the pages of letters he wrote home, he left a record of that life.

Willie’s Early Upbringing

On Saturday, February 7, 1874, Mary Lavinia O’Brien Schmidt gave birth to George William (Willie) Schmidt, Jr. Born during the years of a national financial depression, Willie was fortunate to belong to a well-established household. His father, George William (G.W.) Schmidt, Sr., was the co-owner of Schmidt & Friday, a family liquor and wine importer located on Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh. During Willie’s early years, his parents experienced sorrow: in 1875, his older brother Henry, at age 3, died from scarlet fever; in 1876, a new brother Lawrence was born only to die from a head injury the following year.

As a means to deal with her grief over these deaths, Mary Lavinia and her surviving son Willie set sail from New York to Liverpool on the S.S. Baltic in 1878. They traveled to London and Paris before ending up in Freiburg, Germany, where they visited with extended family members for several months. When Mary Lavinia became ill with “acute rheumatism,” Willie’s father joined them to help attend her. However, on July 4, 1878, Mary Lavinia died and four-year-old Willie now faced life without a mother.

Father and son returned to Pittsburgh, bearing the body of Mary Lavinia, and buried her in the family plot at St. Mary’s Cemetery. Over the next year, Willie was raised by the family’s cook and housekeeper, who reportedly doted on the young lad. Within a year, his father had found a new bride, Ellen Josephine Howley, whom he married on September 18, 1879, in Sacred Heart Church, which at the time was located in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood. As a girl, Ellen had attended St. Xavier’s Academy, a girls boarding school run by the Sisters of Mercy in Latrobe, about 45 miles east of Pittsburgh.

Over the next couple of years, the Schmidt family expanded to include two girls – Mary Lavinia born on August 3, 1880, and Edith Theresa, born on October 15, 1881. When Ellen was pregnant with yet another child, the decision was made to enroll Willie in a boarding school. On September 17, 1883, “Master Willie Schmidt, Aged 9 Years,” entered Mt. Gallitzin Seminary in Ebensburg, which would be his school and his home for the next three academic years.
The Founding of the Sisters of St. Joseph & Mt. Gallitzin

Fourteen years earlier, in 1869, three Sisters of St. Joseph – Mother Austin Kean, Sisters Hortense Tello and Xavier Phelan – arrived in Ebensburg from the Brooklyn diocese in New York. They came in direct response to an appeal by Father Richard Christy, pastor of Ebensburg’s Holy Name Church. Already acknowledged as the founder of the Brooklyn congregation, Mother Austin Kean served as the leader. Sharing a common background, Mother Austin and Father Christy both grew up in the nearby town of Loretto and both were influenced by Father Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin, known as the “Apostle of the Alleghenies.”

A member of the Russian aristocracy, Prince Gallitzin (1770-1840) emigrated to the United States in 1792. Once in America, he resolved to devote himself to the Catholic Church and in 1795, he was ordained a priest. The following year, during a visit to the Allegheny Mountains, Father Gallitzin envisioned the establishment of a Catholic settlement there. In 1799, he was assigned as resident pastor for the town, which he named Loretto. The Russian prince-priest served this area until his death in 1840.

Born and raised in Loretto, Elizabeth Kean (1824-1905) received her sacraments from Father Gallitzin. In 1850, she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia and received the name Sister Mary Austin, a derivative of the name Augustine in deference to her connection with Father Gallitzin. Having professed her final vows in 1852, Sister Austin’s initial ministry was as a nurse at the sisters’ hospital. In 1856, she was chosen to lead a group to the Brooklyn diocese, where she established a new foundation in the town of Flushing, New York. Serving there as Mother Superior until 1865, Mother Austin oversaw the opening of several parochial school missions, the establishment of a girls academy, and the move of the motherhouse from Brooklyn to Flushing.

A few years younger than Mother Austin, Richard Callixtus Christy (1829-1874) was also born and raised in Loretto, and he, too, received his sacraments from Father Gallitzin. Ordained as a priest in 1854, his first assignment was as pastor of St. John in Clearfield. During the Civil War, Father Christy served with Pennsylvania’s 78th Regiment and became known as the “Fighting Chaplain.” After the war, he was assigned as pastor of Holy Name Church in Ebensburg in 1867.

By 1869, Father Christy had determined that a boys school was needed in Ebensburg and an invitation was extended to the Sisters of St. Joseph from Flushing to address this need. Coincidentally, the previous year, Reverend B. M. Kerr, a Presbyterian minister, had established a girls school in town. When the Sisters of St. Joseph agreed to come, Father Christy moved forward on publicizing this new school. As early as April, the town was awaiting the new school: “It has… long been a matter of surprise that Ebensburg has no school for boys in which an elementary education could be obtained preparatory to their admission to a higher institution.”
On September 2, 1869, the Sisters of St. Joseph established this new community in Ebensburg and found themselves embraced by the area’s Catholic Church. At the parish level, Father Christy reportedly worked to make them comfortable. From the diocese, their arrival was met with first a letter and then two visits from Pittsburgh’s Bishop Michael Domenec, during which he “encouraged” them “to continue the good work [they] had undertaken….”

Also, fellow women religious welcomed them, with the Sisters of Mercy in Loretto extending an invitation to them to join their Feast of Our Lady of Mercy (September 24). A week after their arrival, the “finely educated” sisters officially opened their boys boarding school that was “especially intended for children deprived of a mother’s care, and [was] a philanthropic enterprise, well worthy of imitation elsewhere. In honor of the pioneer priest, it [was] called Mount Gallitzin Seminary.” The combination of the sisters’ presence and the school’s setting in the mountains would prove to be selling points:

Situated not far from the summit of the Alleghenies, the Seminary of Mt. Gallitzin is surrounded by a physical atmosphere, the purest and most bracing that could be desired, and under the constant watchfulness of the devoted Sisters, and the perfect peace and absence of temptation in a quiet mountain town, the moral atmosphere is no less healthy.

By the fall, the sisters had also established a day school in the “old church building.” Initially, this school, which was called the Academy of the Holy Name, was for “young ladies and little girls,” but by 1878 became co-educational, and the students from the two schools, Holy Name and Mt. Gallitzin, interacted at times.

The Sisters Settle In

In December of that first year, Sister Xavier returned to Brooklyn, leaving Mother Austin and Sister Hortense with the fledgling congregation, one that was starting to attract new vocations. The first was Catherine Beiter, a young woman from Pittsburgh who had family in Ebensburg. Her relationship with the sisters began with her helping them with household chores. For this first postulant, Mother Austin sent her to the Philadelphia motherhouse in McSherrytown for training. In April 1870, Catherine received the habit and the name Sister Daria; her final profession was in July 1872.

Additionally, during that first year, two lay teachers, Maggie Burke and Kate Leavy, from New York, came to live and teach alongside the sisters in Ebensburg. In the case of Maggie, who was born in Ireland, the Flushing motherhouse had sent her there. In March 1870, she officially entered as a postulant in this new foundation. That December, Maggie received the habit and the name of Sister Joseph, with final profession taking place two years later, for during those years formation was a two-year process. As for the other
lay teacher, there is a record of a Kate Leavy who entered the Sisters of Charity in Manhattan in June 1871.\textsuperscript{17}

By early 1871, Mother Austin was not on the best of terms with Father Christy and there was tension within the community.\textsuperscript{18} Acknowledging that there was a “very strong misunderstanding between Mother Austin and Father Christy [sic], and between Mother Austin and the other only Sister,” Bishop Domenec endeavored that the sisters remain, and he was doing “every thing [sic] in [his] power that it should be so.”\textsuperscript{19} In the end, after appointing Sister Hortense as Mother Superior, Mother Austin returned to Flushing in March 1871.

During these years, the sisters also faced anti-Catholicism. The \textit{Cambria Freeman} reported that their presence was opposed by “some of whom better was expected.”\textsuperscript{20} The newspaper went on to report on how the sisters handled this issue:

> But the good Sisters are well instructed in the principles of their holy calling, and petty persecution is a cause of great joy to their hearts, and if they were even temporarily crushed in their efforts, it would not make them sad, for they well know what their Saviour said: “Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of things falsely, for my sake rejoice and be exceeding glad, etc.”\textsuperscript{21}

By the end of the second year, Mt. Gallitzin was home to twelve boarders and celebrated its first commencement in July.\textsuperscript{22} Laboring “so assiduously and efficiently for the spiritual and temporal welfare of their youthful pupils,” the sisters taught in a manner that was considered to be “implanted with a delicacy and tenderness.”\textsuperscript{23}

An 1872 account of Mt. Gallitzin portrayed the “good Sisters” as “devoted” and their efforts as “unceasing,” in teaching the boys both in academics and in “good conduct.” As for the way the sisters interacted with the boys, the article stated: “The system of discipline adopted by the good Sisters is so skillfully adapted to the wants and feelings of very young boys, that the Seminary resembles a peaceful

and pleasant home.”\textsuperscript{24} Within the Pittsburgh diocese, the school was well endorsed, with references available from the bishop, the clergy at St. Paul Cathedral, the Sisters of Mercy, and a list of five fathers of existing students.\textsuperscript{25}

With the growth of the school and the congregation, the sisters were running out of space and construction on a new small frame building was undertaken that same year.\textsuperscript{26} The following year, in 1872, the sisters purchased from Aline Maguire the main property on which they resided.\textsuperscript{27} In October 1873, they made their final payment on the property, the timing of which coincided with the beginnings of the Panic of 1873 and the nation moving into a period of financial depression.\textsuperscript{28} By the end of 1873, they were not able to “claim” their money that was in the local bank and they borrowed money from friends and family; it was not until the end of summer 1874 that the bank returned the frozen account money.\textsuperscript{29}

By that time, in spite of the nation’s economic downturn and tight finances on their own end, the sisters were moving forward with construction on a new chapel, which was completed by the end of 1874. In May 1875, Father Henry McHugh of Wilmore dedicated the chapel to Our Lady of Lourdes, and received the profession of final vows by three sisters, bringing the number of professed to nine. Two more women received the habit that day, bringing the number of novices to seven.\textsuperscript{30}

Even while these events indicated a sense of permanence, the sisters were considering leaving Ebensburg. With the exception of Mt. Gallitzin and Holy Name, they had no other missions to bring in money to accommodate their increasing vocations. Everything changed in 1875 when the pastor of St. Mary in New Castle, Pennsylvania, asked the sisters to staff the parochial school there. With the addition of this new mission, the sisters were able to retain their new foundation.

Over the next few years, the sisters were expanding into other towns. In addition to their mission in St. Mary in New Castle, they also served at St. Mary in Hollidaysburg, where they established a boarding school for young ladies.\textsuperscript{31} In October 1874, Father Christy retired to the Diocese of
Columbus, and within a couple of years, the sisters were in demand in Ohio, including St. Joseph’s Seminary in Columbus (1876), St. Lawrence in Ironton (1878), and St. Augustine in Straitsville (1879). In 1881, the sisters began staffing St. Patrick School in Gallitzin, located ten miles from Ebensburg, and, and they also were hired as teachers for Gallitzin’s public school students.

With the growth of the congregation and the school, Mother Hortense looked out for the health of this community of sisters and boys by purchasing a 2.5 acre plot of land only a few blocks from the motherhouse, what would become known locally as “The Sisters’ Field.” With a cost of $85 in 1878, the sisters now had a space that would serve both as a garden and as a pasture for their cow “Stella,” which had been a gift from the Brothers of St. Francis of Loretto. Mother Hortense felt that the sisters and the boys at Mt. Gallitzin would benefit from the fresh milk and vegetables.

While teaching was their primary mission, the sisters ministered in other ways in communities in which they served. At Holy Name Church in Ebensburg, their participation in the church choir was noted. For those awaiting the gallows in the Cambria County jail, the sisters’ presence was felt – condemned prisoner John Murphy referred to them as “ministering angels of mercy,” and Michael Murray, although refusing to “receive consolation” from the sisters, continued to allow them to visit him. And in Gallitzin, their return after the 1884 summer recess was welcomed as “their kindly presence [was] now felt among the sick in our neighborhood, as well as by the children, who seem[ed] overjoyed at their return.” It was to these sisters and their Mt. Gallitzin that Willie was sent in 1883.

**Learning and Playing at Mt. Gallitzin**

Within four days of arriving at Mt. Gallitzin, Willie wrote a letter to his parents, detailing his first few days as a whirlwind of activity. In this first letter, he touches on every aspect of a boy’s life at Mt. Gallitzin: coursework, recreation, schoolmates, the sisters, and religion:

Mt. Gallitzin Seminary
Ebensburg Pa
September 21st, 1883
My Dear Papa and Mamma,

I am very happy and like it here very much. Sister gave me a catechism[,] Second reader[,] speller and Slate; I am going to be a good boy and study very hard this year. We go to mass every morning in the sister’s Chapel; I am going to learn to serve. Tuesday evening we had a nice time in our play room; dancing and playing all sorts of games until it was time to go to bed. Wednesday Sister took us to the woods[;] we enjoyed it very much. The boys are very kind and polite. Duke Phelan and I are always together; yesterday his brother and sister called to see him and treated us to candy and nuts. To day [sic] all the boys are writing letters. School commences at half past eight and dismisses at half past eleven[,] at which
time we take dinner, prepare our toilet, and are ready to return to class precisely at one where we remain till three. How is my dear little sister Mary? I hope well. Now dear Papa and Mamma[,] I am getting tired, so must end my little letter with much love and kisses. I remain as ever,

Your loving little son,
Willie

P.S. I am preparing to make my first confession.39

Throughout this and subsequent letters, Willie’s writings portrayed a boy’s view of life at Mt. Gallitzin.

For coursework, Willie related how classes were held for three hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoons, with a break for lunch in between. Sitting at desks with attached seats, the boys had the use of slates on which to do some of their work.40 Subjects studied by the boys included reading, grammar, spelling, history, geography, “mental arithmetic,” and, as this was a private Catholic school conducted by women religious, catechism.41 While Willie was drawn to history and geography, one of the highlights of his coursework was writing with ink. “As this is my first letter written with pen and ink, I hope you will keep it for me,” was Willie’s request to his parents.42

Historically, music was one of the subjects for which the Sisters of St. Joseph were known, and the boys at Mt. Gallitzin benefited from these lessons. Willie began his music lessons in January 1884 and soon wrote that he was practicing an hour on the piano daily.43 For his tenth birthday, his parents sent him a music book to use.44 For Willie and the other boys, the lessons were an opportunity to learn music; for the sisters, an opportunity to earn money. As early as April 1871, advertisements appeared in the local newspaper, advertising the availability of the sisters to teach music on either the piano or the “cabinet organ.”45 Through teaching music, the sisters were able to supplement their meager earnings that they received as schoolteachers.

As Mt. Gallitzin was a boarding school, outdoor recreation factored into the daily lives of the boys. With its location in a small town in the mountains, the sisters frequently took the boys out in the fresh air. Adjusting to his new life, Willie realized that his clothing was not appropriate for playing in the outdoors. Less than two months into his first term, he asked his stepmother to provide him with “two coarse pairs of pants as the ones I am wearing are entirely too fine to run around in.”46

In this letter home, Willie asked his mother to send him his Buffalo Bill gun and Cassell’s Book of Sports and Pastimes.

Source: Sylvia Francis

Entry for Willie Schmidt in Mt. Gallitzin Register

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives
According to Willie, the Mt. Gallitzin boys had periods of merriment: “We have lots of fun during play hours playing all sorts of games. We play ball nearly every day.” Taking advantage of nearby woods, the boys found themselves “playing deer hunting, Indian,” and leapfrog. Additionally, the sisters often took them for walks, even taking them to a pond to fish, where Willie “had a delightful time and caught quite a number.” In the winter, sled riding was a major activity for the boys, so much so that Willie’s parents sent him money with which to purchase his own sled.

Holidays served as a great diversion for the boys. Willie’s description of his first Halloween at Mt. Gallitzin included visitors bearing gifts for deserving boys, punishment for undeserving boys:

Halloween we had a delightful time; two old Negroes Adam and Even [sic] came to see us each carrying a basket of nuts to distribute among the good boys and an old stick to whip the lazy boys – who had been dilatory in getting their lessons. I thought I would never stop laughing. A great many of the boys received boxes containing nuts, candy, cakes, etc. We had quite a feast. I am well and as happy as a bird.

While Halloween was an unofficial holiday, Thanksgiving was nationally recognized, having been established by President Abraham Lincoln twenty years earlier. For his first Thanksgiving at Mt. Gallitzin, Willie’s enthusiasm focused on the food: “Tomorrow will be Thanksgiving. We are all going to have a jolly time hurrah! for mince pie and turkey.”

With the approach of the Christmas, Willie wrote home that some of the other boys would be staying at Mt. Gallitzin for the holiday:

I cannot realize Christmas is so near at hand. A great many boys are going to remain as Santa Claus pays a visit to Mt. Gallitzin every year.

Santa Claus come to me
Bring me whatever you please
Though but a little the gift may be
And no one shall call me a tease.

In a later letter, Willie inquired as to where he would be for Christmas: “My dear Mamma…Please write to me and tell me what I will do, stay here or come home for Christmas?” In the end, he went home for the Christmas break and returned by train in mid-January.

Within Willie’s letters, he referenced two other holidays that had been recently established: George Washington’s birthday (President’s Day) and Decoration Day (Memorial Day). In 1879, Congress recognized Washington’s February 22 birthday as a legal holiday, and for Willie in 1883, it was a day off for the boys: “Yesterday being a national holiday we were allowed to dispense with studies so you may rest assured we enjoyed ourselves.”

Decoration Day was tied to the Civil War. In the aftermath of that war, General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief for the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), issued a proclamation in 1868 for the observation of Decoration Day annually. By 1869, the town of Ebensburg was celebrating this holiday and recognized it annually afterwards. For Decoration Day in 1884, the sisters took the boys to Gallitzin where they played a baseball game; Willie wrote that his team won and “were full of joy” while the other boys “took it hard.” In his account, Willie recorded the score as “45-16,” while the Altoona Times reported a score of 16-14; no matter what the true score was, both accounts gave the win to Ebensburg.

Part of Willie’s enjoyment of his recreation was spending time with the other boys: “We have a dear little play house which we play in during the day, and at night we amuse ourselves playing games and reading story books.”

According to a visitor in 1884, the boys thrived at the school:

Any one of them might be taken by any artist as a model for a picture of health, and the many way in which they greet a visitor to their schoolroom, as well as the bright answers … they give goes to prove that in their case the mind is as well cared for as the body.

For the boys, friendship among their peers was a large part of the school experience. From the very beginning, Willie
became fast friends with Alexis “Duke” Phelan: “Duke Phelan and I are great friends; he is [a] dear little boy.” The son of a Pittsburgh merchant, Duke was eight years old when he arrived from Pittsburgh in October 1881, so 1883 marked his third year at the school. Willie was fortunate to find such a friend who would be able to help him to adjust.

Another schoolmate was Gilbert Fetterman, the son of a lawyer. He was from Allegheny City and he arrived soon after his father’s June 1883 death. That October, Willie looked forward to Gilbert’s birthday: “We are going to have a jolly time tomorrow. It will be Gilbert Fetterman’s birthday. His mamma sent a treat for all the boys.” Gilbert was not the only boy without one of his parents. Soon after Willie’s arrival, he wrote to his family: “We have another new boy a dear little fellow only SIX YEARS OLD. His mamma is dead.” Among the other schoolmates mentioned were Thomas Walsh, age 6, and Stephen Walsh, age 4, who were nephews of Father M. Powers of the Immaculate Conception Church in Lockhaven, Pennsylvania.

The boys shared with each other the joys of their families. Upon receiving news of the birth of his baby brother, Willie wrote home of the excitement of the school:

How delighted little Willie is to think he has really a little baby brother; please treat him kindly and do not send him away. My little companions appeared as delighted at the good news as myself and gave three cheers for the little jumbo as you called him.

While Willie was generally happy about his life at Mt. Gallitzin, he naturally had his moments of longing for home. During the winter months, after two weeks of bad weather, he wrote about how he looked forward to summer at home: “hurrah just to think nothing to do but play and romp around for two long months.” At the same time, he wanted to share his life at Mt. Gallitzin with his family, asking his sister to “Please coax Mamma to bring you up to see me when she is coming.”

**Life with the Sisters**

When Willie returned to Mt. Gallitzin after his first Christmas break, he rode the train to Cresson and was met there by “Mother M. Joseph, Sister Mary Frances and all the boys. They were delighted to see me.” References to the Sisters of St. Joseph are scattered throughout Willie’s letters.

An early account of Willie’s touched on the sisters’ work on imparting manners and academics to the boys: “I like it here very much [] We are taught to be nice, kind little boys and to act like little gentlemen. Sister Mary Thomas teaches us[,] She is very strict. We must know our lessons.” Soon after, Willie placed a request to his stepmother from that “strict” sister: “Mamma please send me my picture to give to Sister Mary Thomas.” After the Christmas break, Willie brought the wished-for photo back with him: “The sisters were pleased to have my picture.”

The sisters’ sense of humor comes through in his letter when the topic of a name for Willie’s new baby brother came up: “So you are at a loss what to call him. Mother Joseph said to call him Joseph and Sister Mary Thomas would like him called Thomas after St. Thomas of Aquinas.” And the warmth of the sisters is evident in the celebration for Willie’s first birthday celebrated at Mt. Gallitzin, about which he excitedly wrote:

School was dismissed at two o’clock and then hurrah! For Willie Schmidt’s tenth birthday, oh what a pleasant time we had. Sister Magdalen made me a nice cake in the shape of a man. The boys laughed heartily at dinner when they beheld him standing near my plate with a piece of paper in his hand these words written: (Three cheers and hurrah for Willie Schmidt’s birthday) oh what a racket the boys did make.

The names of Sisters Mary Thomas McDonald and Magdalen Alexander, along with Mother Joseph Burke, Sisters Mary Dunlevy and Mary Frances Pearl, crop up in Willie’s letters over his first year. These five represent different aspects of those early years of the Ebensburg community.

“Every week we go out walking with Sister [Mary Thomas] and have a very pleasant time,” wrote Willie to his parents. The 26-year-old Sister Mary Thomas, whose birth name was Charlotte McDonald, was a sister who had come from
Brooklyn and entered in 1881. On August 16, 1883, only a month before Willie’s arrival, Sister Mary Thomas had just professed her final vows and had the least seniority of the sisters he named. While Sister Mary Thomas was a sister during Willie’s years, she ended up leaving the Sisters of St. Joseph in Ebensburg at a unrecorded date.

Two of the other sisters mentioned were 25-year-old Sister Magdalen and 41-year-old Sister Mary Frances, who had the distinction of being lay sisters. The practice of having a tiered system within a religious congregation stemmed from Europe. In this system, the choir sisters handled teaching and administration and the lay sisters carried out domestic duties. Dating to the Middle Ages, the work of the lay sisters within the household made it possible for the choir sisters to be free to pray the Office and other prayers. Within this European tiered system, the lay sisters were not equal members to the choir members.80

With the initial foundation being in France, the Sisters of St. Joseph also had lay sisters. In Ebensburg as in other foundations such as in Flushing, the lay sisters wore different habits and had no voting rights. In 1898, the sisters in Ebensburg voted to end the use of a different habit as well as accord the lay sisters with their rank but it was not until over twenty years later that the distinction fully ended when the congregation voted to provide full status to the lay sisters by enabling them to vote.81

When Sister Mary Frances entered the congregation in 1876 at the age of 34, she was not only entering religious life at an older age but also unique in that she was a widow. Born in Ireland, Sadie Halligan had married John Pearl and had become the stepmother to his son from a previous marriage. After becoming a widow, Sadie entered the Sisters of St. Joseph as a lay sister, taking the name Sister Mary Frances, and she was permitted to bring her stepson to be raised at Mt. Gallitzin.82

There were two other sisters who figured in Willie’s accounts: 38-year-old Mother Joseph Burke and 29-year-old Sister (later Mother) Mary Dunlevy. Both of these women became part of the administrative history of the congregation. During Mt. Gallitzin’s first school year when young Maggie Burke was first teaching alongside Mother Austin, she could not have envisioned that she would be the first elected Mother Superior, succeeding Mother Hortense when she returned to Flushing in 1880. Mother Joseph was the first to be elected Mother Superior and she served a total of 12 years (1880-1889; 1898-1901).

Catherine Dunlevy, a native of Pottsville, Pennsylvania, was orphaned at a young age, and then raised by the Philadelphia Sisters of St. Joseph in their orphanage. While she was from Philadelphia, she entered the Ebensburg congregation, receiving the habit and the name Sister Mary in 1873, and pronouncing her final vows in 1875. In 1889, at the age of 34, she would have the distinction of being the youngest elected superior and, in the end, she also served the most years of all of the congregation’s leaders – a total of 19 (1889-1898, 1904-1910, 1916-1922). Thus, the women who cared for and taught Willie represented lay sisters, sisters who left the community, and sisters who were leaders.

Along with the focus on academics and conduct, the sisters also ensured that the Catholic religion was part of a boy’s life at Mt. Gallitzin. As recorded by Willie, daily morning Mass in the “Sisters’ Chapel” was part of a normal day for both the sisters and the boys.83 Another normal activity was confession. For Willie, his first confession took place a little over a month after he arrived at Mt. Gallitzin. He relayed the event to his family: “Today I’m going to make my first confession. I hope it will be a good one as I am going to try very hard to be a better boy.”84 For his subsequent confessions, he would assure his family that he “did not forget to pray for you all.”85 He often thought of his family, sending an Agnus Dei to two of his siblings, including one “sealed with a
kiss” to his new little baby brother to “welcome [the] little stranger.”

While at Mt. Gallitzin, Willie not only went to his first confession but also received his first Communion and became an altar server. When he served his first Mass, Willie related his nervousness when he wrote, “To-morrow [sic] I am going to serve at Mass for the first time. Hope I will not make any mistakes.”87 A month later, he was a little more confident in his serving abilities: “Dear Mamma, I did not forget to pray for you all while I was serving at Mass. Sister said I did very nicely.”

Devotional events and feast days were also a part of life at Mt. Gallitzin. Along with the other boys, Willie had his throat blessed on the Feast of St. Blaise.89 He noted Mass on Ash Wednesday and the plan to have Stations of the Cross every Friday during Lent. Taking the Lenten season seriously, he wrote: “I am going to try to be a very good boy during this holy season.

In the middle of March and the days leading up to Easter, the sisters held Forty Hours Devotion in their chapel and the boys took part. For forty hours, starting Wednesday, March 12, 1884, continuous prayer took place before the Blessed Sacrament in solemn exposition. Mt. Gallitzin was part of a chain of churches where Forty Hours Devotion was scheduled, keeping the devotion continuous within the diocese.91 When the devotion was ended, Willie wrote home: “Today the forty hours devotion closed. Oh! How I wish you could have seen our chapel; the Altar looked very beautiful with its choice flowers and its lighted tapers.”92 During Willie’s time at Mt. Gallitzin, the sisters held another Forty Hours Devotion on March 17, 1886 and so he experienced it more than once.

For the Sisters of St. Joseph, the March 19 Feast of St. Joseph was a day of celebration for the congregation as it is the feast day for their patron saint. For Willie’s first St. Joseph Day, he wrote of the holiday atmosphere: “Wednesday was St. Joseph’s Day. We had no school. I wish you were here to see how we boys enjoyed ourselves that evening. We laughed, danced, and romped about until we were tired out.”84

St. Joseph’s Day celebration dominated Willie’s last extant letter, which was written in March 1886. This St. Joseph’s Day came on the heels of a Forty Hours Devotion. Willie wrote:

Mt. Gallitzin Sem.
Ebensburg, Pa.
Mar. 20th 1886

My Dear Papa + Mamma

I received the tops on Tuesday, the letter on Thursday and the flowers arrived on Thursday evening [w]hich I return many thanks for the tops and was very glad to hear from you and the flowers were just beautiful[]. The altar was decorated with flowers from the top of the Tabernacle down to the floor, it was magnificent. All the Sisters from Hollidaysburg were up and all the Sisters from Gallitzin were up. There were twelve sisters up altogether and there were a great many people from this town who came to attend to the Forty Hours.

We gave Mother Joseph a grand surprise on Saint Joseph Day. We had some very nice plays[,] you ought to have been here. We had two Platforms fixed so as to form a stage[,] we then rang the bell to call the sisters into the school room the stage was fixed very
nice. We had three plays which took very well. We had been practicing in secret.

The first play was a scene in a Backwoods School…. The second play was Advertising for a Husband…. And the third was Recess…. I forgot to tell you that it was opened by an address made by Walter Hallahan and there was a Jig danced by Joe Sauers and Willie O’Dea played Tamobourine [sic].

My Dear Papa and Mamma as I am getting tired I guess I will have to close with love and kisses to all

I remain
Your fond son
Willie

P.S. Please send me a good lively ball and bat soon.

And so ended the window that Willie Schmidt’s letters offer on these early years of Mt. Gallitzin Seminary.

After 1886
After completing his final term at Mt. Gallitzin, Willie returned home and continued on the path that had started at Mt. Gallitzin. The Pittsburgh Catholic provided a perspective of Mt. Gallitzin students, one that Willie modeled in his post-Mt. Gallitzin years:

They can hardly fail to be good boys, and grow up good men, who, showing themselves faithful children of the Church, and worthy citizens of the Republic, will always be living witnesses of the excellence of Catholic education.

The household to which he returned had naturally changed. During the years he was at school, his stepmother had given birth to another baby, Helen, in 1885. By the end of the century, Willie’s parents had given him five more siblings; sadly, his baby brother Harold died in 1889.

The home that he had left in 1883 had been on Penn Avenue; the home to which he returned in 1886 was a mansion named Sans Souci on Centre Avenue in Shadyside.
Continuing his studies, Willie attended the recently established Shady Side Academy, which at the time was located on Ellsworth Avenue, only a few blocks from his family’s home. After Shady Side Academy, he spent a year at Hopkins Grammar School in New Haven, Connecticut, most likely in order to prepare for his entrance exam to Yale. While there, one of his activities was the HGS Battalion, which was the school’s military drill team. In 1893, he entered Yale University as part of the class of 1897, but during his junior year, he became ill with tuberculosis and left university. After returning home, he became a director in his father’s company. With the onset of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Willie joined Battery B Pennsylvania Light Artillery, serving as a corporal with the First Army Corps during the Puerto Rico campaign.

After his stint in the military, Willie once again returned home to work as a director for the G.W. Schmidt Company, living at the family home on Center Avenue and attending Sacred Heart Church down the street. By 1904, Willie had contracted tuberculosis again. Following the prescribed treatment of the time of living in a warmer climate with fresh air, Wille spent time away from home – in New Mexico, South Carolina, and North Carolina – but in the end, he lost the battle. At 2:00 a.m. on Saturday, April 1, 1905, George William Schmidt, Jr., age 31 years, 1 month, and 24 days died at the Blue Ridge Inn in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The funeral took place at his family’s Pittsburgh residence on Center Avenue and he was buried in St. Mary’s Cemetery, near his mother.

As for the Sisters of St. Joseph and Mt. Gallitzin, by the end of the nineteenth century there were changes on the horizon. Running out of room yet again, the sisters replaced their 1871 frame building with a four-story brick structure in 1888. By 1894, the name of Mt. Gallitzin had changed from Seminary to Academy and, that same year, the sisters, led by Mother Mary Dunlevy, made the decision to relocate their expanding school and motherhouse closer to Pittsburgh. They purchased property in Crafton but soon sold it, as then-Father Regis Canevin (later bishop) advised the sisters to do so as a water conveyance structure had been installed adjacent to the property.

In 1898, the sisters, now led by Mother Joseph Burke, purchased property near the town of Baden. This location met their requirements as it was close to a railroad line and to Pittsburgh. The new academy and motherhouse were soon constructed on this property along the Ohio River. The sisters moved in December 1901 and Mt. Gallitzin Academy convened there after the winter recess in January 1902. While in Ebensburg, they had a small pasture and garden; in Baden, the sisters had a full-size farm to sustain the motherhouse and the school. At the time of Willie’s death in 1905, the congregation numbered over 150 and were missioned at 18 parishes as well as at a hospital that they had established in 1904.

The years that Willie’s life intersected with the Sisters of St. Joseph were ones of learning, sharing, and experiencing life at Mt. Gallitzin. Those years were preserved by his family, passed down to his niece, Sylvia Francis, who shared this rich legacy with the Sisters of St. Joseph of today.

Endnotes:
1. Cambria Freeman, July 18, 1873.
2. Willie Schmidt to G.W. and Ellen Schmidt, September 21, 1883, Transcripts from the Private Collection of Sylvia Francis (PCSF). Willie Schmidt varied as to who he addressed his correspondence; while his parents were constant, he frequently included his sisters Mary, Edith, and his brother Harold, who Willie initially called “little baby brother without a name.” For simplification, hereafter, all references to these letters will be listed as Willie Schmidt.
The Indians, "Cambria Freeman, August 29, 1870. Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, Diocesan Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph, Box 1, Mother de Chantal Keating to Bishop John Loughlin, Bishops Loughlin and McDonnell, Correspondence, Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling, to Brooklyn's Bishop Loughlin, this woman is listed with her arrival in Ebensburg from Brooklyn in 1869, reception in the register of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling, there is an entry for a Sister Mary Jerome, who was a lay sister with no recorded baptismal name, who had received the habit in Ebensburg on January 12, 1870; transferred to Wheeling August 27, 1870; and left the community in January 1874. 


From 1869 to 1902, from time of entering to final vows was two years. After 1902 the number of years increased initially to six. Congregational Register 1869-1892, CSJ Baden Archives. 


Bishop of Brooklyn, Bishops Loughlin and McDonnell, Correspondence, Sisters of St. Joseph, Box 1, Bishop Michael Domenec to "Sister", January 13, 1871. Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, Diocesan Archives. 

"Sisters of St. Joseph," Cambria Freeman, April 1, 1871. 

Ibid. 

Ibid. 

Ibid. 

Ibid. 


Mr. Editor," Pittsburgh Catholic, November 18, 1871, 5. Cambria Freeman, May 4, 1888. 

On August 6, 1872, Aline Maguire conveyed a parcel of ground by deed to Mother Mary Hortense Tello that consisted of a little more than the Northern half of lots Nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8 on Horner Street. Prior to the sisters arrival in 1869, there is a record of Father Christy paying R.L. Johnston (brother-in-law of Aline Maguire) an amount of $500 for property but there is no indication of a deed transferal. Property Records and Financial Journal, CSJ Baden Archives. 

Financial Journal, October 1873, “Last payment on Property” to Aline Maguire, CSJ Baden Archives. 

Financial Journal, Recapitulation 1873, August 1874, CSJ Baden Archives. 

Cambria Freeman, September 18, 1874; Cambria Freeman, May 28, 1875; Cambria Freeman, June 4, 1875. 

"Boarding School for Young Ladies," Cambria Freeman, September 1, 1876. 

Father Christy's five-year-old nephew, Walter, became a boarder at Mt. Gallitzin in June 1871. In March 1871, Father Christy and his brother, Andrew, took Walter to visit family (primarily grandmother and aunt) in Loretto. Walter became sick on March 18 and was dead two days later. Mt. Gallitzin Seminary First Register, CSJ Baden Archives. Father Christy retired to Columbus because of the relationship between his Civil War General William Rosencrans and Bishop Sylvester Rosencreans. 

"An Important Decision Respecting the Public Schools," Pittsburgh Catholic, February 23, 1884, 1. 

Cambria Freeman, July 5, 1878. Property Records & Historical Information, CSJ Baden Archives. 

The sisters purchased another piece of property that was adjacent to the cemetery in 1882. Property Records, CSJ Baden Archives. 

Cambria Freeman, May 4, 1872. 


"Gallitzin Gleanings," Cambria Freeman, August 28, 1884, 4. 

Willie Schmidt, September 21, 1883, PCSF. 

Ibid: "Our school room is fitted up nicely, we have new desks with seats attached." Willie Schmidt, October 27, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, October 18, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, March 21, 1884; Willie Schmidt, March 28, 1884 & April 24, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, January 19, 1884; Willie Schmidt, February 1, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, February 8, 1884, PCSF. 

Example of advertisement, see Cambria Freeman, September 7, 1871. 

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, July 6, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, March 28, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, October 12, 1883, PCSF. 

Reference to two-mile walk: Willie Schmidt, June 7, 1884. Reference to fishing: Willie Schmidt, May 2, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, November 20, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, November 29, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, November 29, 1883, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, December 13, 1884, PCSF. 

Willie Schmidt, January 19, 1884, PCSF. 


Willie Schmidt, February 23, 1884, PCSF. 


Willie Schmidt, June 7, 1884, PCSF. "Ebensburg Etchings," Altoona Times, June 2, 1884, 1.
Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF.


Along with his friends and the sisters, there was also a servant, the middle-aged, Irish-born Terence O'Laughlin, to whom Willie referenced in one of his letters: "Terry was more than grateful for the pipe and tobacco." By the 1900 census, 72-year-old Terence was listed as a gardener. Willie to home, January 19, 1884, PCSF. For a record of Terence: Federal Census, Year: 1880; Census Place: Ebensburg, Cambria, Pennsylvania; Page: 479C; Enumeration District: 209.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF. The "jumbo" nickname is in reference to Ringling Circus's elephant, Jumbo, Sylvia Francis in discussion with the author, August 26, 2019.

Willie Schmidt, October 19, 1883, PCSF.


Willie Schmidt, October 19, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF. The “jumbo” nickname is in reference to Ringling Circus’s elephant, Jumbo, Sylvia Francis in discussion with the author, August 26, 2019.

Willie Schmidt, February 16, 1884, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, April 4, 1884, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, January 19, 1884, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, October 19, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, January 19, 1884, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, February 8, 1884, PCSF.

These were the sisters mentioned by Willie. Other sisters in Ebensburg would have been those who were in initial formation, ranging from those who had just entered to those who had just completed their novitate. There were six women who professed final vows between 1883 and 1886 and another nine who were in various stages of initial formation when Willie left Mt. Gallitzin. Congregational Register, CSJ Baden Archives.

Willie Schmidt, October 19, 1883, PCSF.


Lay Sisters Historical Information, CSJ Baden Archives.

McCann Family History, Sister Martha McCann’s file, CSJ Baden Archives.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, October 27, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883; Willie Schmidt, February 23, 1884, PCSF.

Traditionally, the Agnus Dei is a wax disc embossed with the lamb bearing the cross. In August 1883, Agnus Dei “wax cakes” were blessed and consecrated by the pontifical sacristan, and “given to the faithful, and to the multitudes of devout pilgrims who come to Rome.” See “The ‘Agnus Dei,'” Pittsburgh Catholic, September 22, 1883, 1. Willie Schmidt, November 8, 1883, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, January 19, 1884, PCSF.

Willie Schmidt, February 1, 1884, PCSF.

Ibid.

Willie Schmidt, February 29, 1884, PCSF.

The sisters held their first Forty Hours devotion in January 1879. Bishop of Brooklyn, Bishops Loughlin and McDonnell, Correspondence, Sisters of St. Joseph, Box 1, Sister Hortense Tello to Bishop John Loughlin, January 16, 1879. Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, Diocesan Archives. Willie Schmidt, March 7, 1884, PCSF.