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The Prison Play of Father Hartke

by J. Michael Finn

While searching for information regarding the Catholic chaplains at the Ohio State Penitentiary, I ran across a story in the biography of Father Gilbert Vincent Hartke, O.P. (1907-1986) regarding his authorship of a play dedicated to the memory of two of the penitentiary's most illustrious Dominican chaplains. The story of how the play was written in 1933 and the play itself are interesting additions to our diocesan history.

Father Gilbert Vincent Ferrer Hartke, O.P. was born on January 16, 1907 in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. In 1921 he enrolled at Loyola Academy. During his time at Loyola he was both a football player and an actor for the Loyola Community Theater. Following high school, he attended Loyola University in Chicago before transferring to Providence College. It was at the latter that he decided to enter the Dominican order.

He entered the order and made his profession in 1929 at St. Rose Priory, Springfield, Kentucky. He studied at St. Rose until 1930 when he relocated to the Dominican House of Studies in River Forest, Illinois. In 1933 he began his theological studies at St. Joseph Priory near Somerset, Ohio. In 1934 he moved to the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C. where he was ordained to the priesthood on June 16, 1936.

Inspired by the pioneering work in theater by Father Edward Urban Nagle, O.P., Father Hartke became convinced that it was his mission to create

a Catholic theater program. Following his ordination he continued his education at the House of Studies and completed his master's program at Catholic University of America. At this point he began his very long career in education at Catholic University. In 1937 he founded the Catholic University of



*Father Hartke and actor Jimmy Cagney
(Courtesy of Catholic University of America)*

America's Department of Speech and Drama. He directed over 60 major productions at Catholic University and several more for the National Players, a touring company he created.

He wrote a total of five plays and toured his students on five continents and across the United States. Becoming known as the "show-biz priest," he was a teacher and friend to celebrities such as Jimmy Cagney, Helen Hayes, Jon Voight, and many more.

Well-known and highly regarded in social, business and political circles, he played an active role in the fight against racial discrimination in Washington, D.C., and served on the board of the Ford's Theater. He was a close friend and confidante to politicians and U.S. presidents. In 1963 he was one of two Catholic priests dispatched to the White House to remain with the body of assassinated President John F. Kennedy until the funeral.

In October, 1981, Father Hartke was named "one of the most powerful men in Washington, D.C." by the *Washingtonian* magazine. Beginning in 1985, his health began to decline rapidly following an early heart attack. He would succumb to heart disease on February 21, 1986 at Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C.

The Prison Play

Father Hartke's connection with the Ohio Penitentiary began when he was still a novice brother at St. Joseph's Priory near Somerset in the late summer of 1933. He was summoned to the office of the Master of Students, Father Clement A. Drexelius, O.P. "Hey, I understand you've got some playwriting abilities," said Father Drexelius. Hartke, known then by his religious name Brother Vincent Ferrer, had already written two plays.

In February, 1932 Father Francis Louis Kelly, O.P. had died. Father Kelly was the longest serving Catholic chaplain at the penitentiary, serving 29 years. Then, in June 1933, about the time of Brother Vincent's arrival at Somerset, Father James Albert O'Brien, O.P. died unexpectedly. Father O'Brien had been the Catholic Chaplain during the 1930 Ohio Penitentiary fire where 322 inmates had lost their

lives. He had distinguished himself as a hero of that fire (Father Drexelius was one of several Dominicans who assisted Father O'Brien on the night of the fire). The Dominicans were looking for a way to commemorate the selfless work as prison chaplains of both Father Kelly and Father O'Brien.

Father Drexelius explained that it had been decided that a play should be written about a prison chaplain to commemorate Fathers Kelly and O'Brien and that Brother Vincent had been selected to write the play. Father Drexelius directed the novice to go to St. Patrick's Church in Columbus. There the Catholic chaplain at the prison, Father John A. Sullivan, O.P., would let Brother Vincent work at the penitentiary and follow him on his daily duties to get a feel for what life was like inside the walls. Father Hartke wrote later, "Within a week, I had a title and a story for the play."

Father Hartke described the three-act play in his own words, "I titled the thing *Pastor of a Gray-Walled City*, which I later changed to *Within the Walls*. It was not very original, but it fit. The story was about a chaplain who is very close to the inmates. Some of the inmates notice that the chaplain's car is one of the few cars that come through the prison gates without being challenged. So through corrupt guards they send word to the outside to have guns hung inside the running board of the chaplain's car while it is parked by his rectory before he leaves for work at the prison. Then when they're cleaning up the prison grounds, the inmates gradually take the guns and hide them. The priest gets into double trouble when the leader of the inmate gang becomes terrified and seeks out the chaplain for confession. In the confessional he tells the priest what's happened, but since the priest can't break the seal of confession, he can't defend himself in the investigation. All the officials know is that the priest's vehicle was used. For a time it looks as though the chaplain is finished. In the end the investigation proves he is innocent."

He also described the three acts of the play in a letter to Father Edward Urban Nagle, O.P. on January 1, 1934: "The second act has the nastiest prison break possible. The third act is a high



Father Hartke

pressure investigation which keeps the Chaplain under suspicion until shortly before the curtain drops. Oh, the first act? Technical preparations which give an insight into the Chaplain's job of interviewing his prisoners."

Performing the Play

The three-act play was first performed at St. Joseph's Priory in Somerset on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, Thursday, December 28, 1933 at 2:00 p.m. The play, under the title *Pastor of a Gray-Walled City*, was dedicated "...to the memory of our departed Brothers, Father Louis Kelly, O.P. and Father Albert O'Brien, O.P., prison chaplains who brought souls to Him who promised paradise to the penitent thief."

Brother Vincent not only wrote and directed the play; he also played the lead role of Father O'Malley, the play's prison chaplain. The other thirteen parts in the play were filled with Dominican Brothers, some of whom also had staff responsibilities such as carpenter, electrician, properties, etc.

Following is a list of the cast from the original 1933 program:

- Tom Campbell (Chaplain's Secretary).....Brother Martin

- Bill Smith (A Prison Tailor).....Brother Thomas A'Kempis
- Al Kenny (Chaplain's Librarian)..Brother Wilfred
- Father O'Malley.....Brother Vincent Ferrer
- Don Burke (Burglar)..... Brother Dominic
- "Rocky" Torrence (Gangster).....Brother Walter
- "Nails" Johnson (Thief) Brother Theodore
- "Chief" Leverski (Racketeer)....Brother Anthony
- "Stooge" Webber (Gangster).... Brother Ignatius
- Hon. Thos. Lowell (Warden)....Brother Reginald
- Mr. Angus McDermott (Visitor)....Brother James
- O'Toole (Guard).....Brother John Dominic
- Jones (Guard).....Brother Charles
- Hon. Phineas Sheldon (Chairman of the Parole Board)..... Brother Basil

The only details of the first performances are provided in the *Chronicle of St. Joseph Priory*, a daily diary. The job of Chronicler at the priory was generally assigned to a student brother, who is anonymous (the typed version of the Chronicle was provided by Father Richard Ambrose McAlister, O.P.).

According to the Chronicle, "Attending were all the Sisters from Somerset, several families from the parish, the farmhands and community of Brothers. All were generous with praise for the production and players. At eight o'clock a second performance was given for about sixty guests, friends and benefactors from various parts of the State. The Fathers attended. The play was enjoyed and praised."

It was decided that the play was to be performed again at St. Mary's of the Springs in Columbus. Preparations for the performance began the next day on Friday, December 29, 1933 when, according the Chronicle, "Father Drexelius, Brothers Vincent Ferrer and Justin drove the DeSoto, followed by Brothers John, James and Michael in the Ford, to St. Mary's of the Springs. They spent the day and night there preparing the stage in the beautiful college theater."

The Chronicle continued on Saturday, December 30, 1933, "A day to be remembered. Two large busses, the St. Mary's School carry-alls,

arrived at the Priory shortly after 9:00 AM. At 9:45 AM the brothers and Miss Anna Coffey, Brother Reginald's sister, accompanied by Miss Pauline Green, began the journey (to Columbus) over the ice and snow. An enjoyable uneventful drive, brought all to St. Mary's at 11:00 AM. The 'actors' inspected the stage and were pleased with the perfect setting arranged for the play."

The chronicler continued, "An incident of interest was the kindness of Mother Stephanie [Mother Stephanie Mohun, O.P.] in bringing Miss Dorothy Green, the postulant from St. Joseph's, to greet each brother."

"At 2:45 PM the heavy velvet curtains parted and an audience of well over two hundred, settled back to see the play. Mother Stephanie was hostess to all the teaching Sisters in and around Columbus—Sisters of St. Joseph, Franciscans, Holy Cross, Charity, and others. A small group of lay people were also present."

From Father Hartke's biography we know that among that "small group of lay people" included the warden of the Ohio State Penitentiary, Preston E. Thomas; the state parole board; and "the entire staff of the Ohio State prison." According to Father Hartke they all came backstage after the performance to congratulate the actors. No newspaper coverage of either the two Somerset performances or the Columbus, Ohio performance has been found.

According to the Chronicler also among the attendees at the play were, "...the relatives of Brothers Thomas A' Kempis and Reginald. A pleasant return home trip ended a happy and memorable day."

Other Performances

As far as is known the December 30, 1933 performance at St. Mary's of the Springs was the last performance of the prison play in Ohio.

In his description of the play Father Hartke noted that he afterwards changed the name of the play to *Within the Walls*. His decision to do this seems to have been made immediately following the

performance at St. Mary's of the Springs. In a letter to Father Edward Urban Nagle, O.P. on January 1, 1934 Father Hartke noted, "The title is to be changed to *Within the Walls*." In a second letter dated November 10, 1934 he mentions the re-titled play and notes, "Father Carey has the carbon of my three-act gripping, wonder-piece, '*Within the Walls*.' He may use it. It's a rewritten version of my *Pastor of a Gray-Walled City*." How much of the original play may have been "rewritten" before the subsequent performances is unknown.

There is also some evidence in the January 1934 letter that he attempted to have the play published by Samuel French, Inc., a prominent publisher of plays. This effort, Father Hartke wrote, was based on the many positive comments he received from the Sisters after the St. Mary's of the Springs performance. In the letter he complained that the "French people" were not getting back to him regarding the publishing. It does not appear that the play was ever published.

In 1934 Brother Vincent was transferred to the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C. to complete his 2nd and 3rd year theology studies prior to his ordination. The next performance of the prison play, under the title *Within the Walls*, was held on the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December, 28, 1934 at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C. This was the first anniversary of the first performance in Somerset. The cast was almost the same as the original performance, according to the 1934 program. Brother Michael replaced Brother Walter as the Gangster, "Rocky" Torrence. The director and lead actor remained Brother Vincent. Other than the program, no other details about this performance have been found. One interesting note in the program under "Grateful Acknowledgements" was that Father Hartke thanked the Columbia Broadcasting System, which could indicate that the play may have been broadcast or recorded.

After the anniversary performance, according to Father Hartke, "I repeated it with the Harlequin Club at Catholic University in 1936 when I was still Brother Vincent Ferrer (i.e. before his ordination).

And Father Louis Maurice O’Leary, O.P., a Dominican, also did a production of it in the spring of 1936” (from 1936 until 1942 Father O’Leary was serving at Catholic University and the Dominican House of Studies where he taught sacred eloquence). That would mean there were at least two performances of the play in 1936 in Washington, D.C. possibly both of these at Catholic University.

Further documentation has been found that the play was also performed on May 23, 1937 in Wisconsin at St. Lawrence of Brendisi College, a preparatory high school operated by the Capuchin Order at Mount Calvary, Wisconsin. The play was performed by the students at St. Lawrence. No other evidence has been found of any further performances of the play.

Reading the Play

Although Father Francis Louis Kelly and Father James Albert O’Brien are mentioned only in the dedication of the play, the author does make allusions to them in the actions and character of Father O’Malley, the chaplain in the play. Anyone reading the play or hearing it performed would likely not pick up on these unless they were familiar with the personalities of the two Dominican chaplains. Following are a few examples:

1: In the play Father O’Malley is well known as being a formidable force around the State House. Father Francis Louis Kelly was well known around the Ohio State House. On several occasions during his 29 year career, when he was unable to get what he wanted from the prison administration, Father Kelly would go to the State House and meet with State Legislators. He was quite successful in using this tactic to gain the legislative reforms he felt were necessary. In the following excerpt, Father O’Malley meets with a member of the State Parole Board, Mr. MacDermott:

MacDermott: How do you do, Father. I’ve been hearing quite a bit about you at the state house.

Father: Is that so?

MacDermott: Yes, indeed. But, to be frank, I must

say that you don’t look as pugnacious as some said you were.

Warden: He has his company manners just now, Angus. (laughs) But, if you should be in my office when Father is making some just demand for the boys you wouldn’t need to alter your previous opinion.

2: In the first act there are several references made regarding the weak health of Father O’Malley. It is known that Father O’Brien suffered from kidney disease before the 1930 prison fire and that his health had been significantly weakened by his exertions during the fire. In the beginning of the play Father O’Malley is returning to work after an illness.

Campbell: Are you really better?

Father O’Malley: Do you think a slight cold could lick an Irishman?

Campbell: It might lick anyone whose lungs were about ruined by smoke.

Father O’Malley: Aw, Tom, forget the big fire. You blame if for every little illness that comes my way!

3: During the second act a prison riot and escape attempt takes place. Father O’Malley is in personal jeopardy in the chapel, being held at gunpoint by one of the prisoners. He forces his way out of the chapel to help in the prison yard in the event any of “his boys” are injured. When the Deputy Warden tells him to stay in the chapel he replies, “Oh, Lord, no I can’t do that! — My place in out there! — But, I tell you the boys’ll need me out there! — Don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right.” This willingness to risk his life to help was certainly characteristic of all of the prison chaplains, but this feature of Father O’Malley’s character is specifically reminiscent of Father O’Brien’s willingness to put his life at risk more than once to attend to the physical and spiritual needs of the prisoners during the 1930 fire.

4: In one scene in the play a prison guard, thanks Father O’Malley for obtaining an autographed baseball for his son. Anyone familiar with Father Kelly would know that he was a huge baseball fan.

In 1915 he qualified in a competition sponsored by major league baseball to select the biggest baseball fan. Father Kelly was also responsible for having baseball introduced as a recreation for prisoners.

Overall, the prison play represents an honest look at the daily work of the prison chaplain in the 1930s with enough dramatic elements added to keep the reader guessing as to the eventual outcome. After a great deal of searching, a copy of Father Hartke's play was found in his files at Catholic University and a copy is now on file in the library of the Catholic Record Society.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

Father Hartke, His Life and Legacy to American Theater, by Dr. Mary Jo Santo Pietro, PhD, Catholic University of America Press, 2002

Chronicle of St. Joseph Priory, November 13, 1933 to August 12, 1941, by a Student Chronicler, Typed transcript of December 28, 1933 through December 30, 1933 provided by Father Richard Ambrose McAlister, O.P., Providence, R.I.

Programs of *Pastor of a Gray-Walled City* (December 1933) and *Within the Walls* (1934) provided by the Dominican Archives with the kind assistance of Father Richard Ambrose McAlister, O.P.

Sheboygan Press, Sheboygan Wisconsin, May 21, 1937

Correspondence between Father Hartke and Father Edward Urban Nagle, O.P. on January 1, 1934 and November 10, 1934.

Within the Walls, a play in three acts, (originally titled *Pastor of a Gray-Walled City*) by Father Gilbert Vincent Ferrer Hartke, O.P., 1933. A copy of the unpublished play was provided by the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, Rev. Gilbert Vincent Ferrer Hartke Collection, Catholic University of America, 101 Aquinas Hall, Washington, D.C.

St. Joseph Parish near Somerset Baptisms, 1834-1850

(Continued, from Vol. XXXIX, No. 2)

1847, continued

Mar. 3, Rosanna Mary, born Jan. 28, daughter of Joseph Flowers and Ann Clark; spon. John Metzger and Sarah C. Farley. James Whelan
Mar. 10, John Albert, born Feb. 26, son of John McKearnon and Ann Keaton; spon. John J. Black and Anna Agnes Beck. JW
Mar. 13, Margaret, age 30, daughter of William Malone and Margaret Cenight; spon. Ellen Maher. A. P. Anderson
Mar. 9, conditionally, Elizabeth Isabel, born Mar. 2, 1836, daughter of Thomas D. Spare and Isabel McCleish, spouses; spon. Ellen Maher. APA
Mar. 14, William, born Jan. 12, son of George

Flowers and Anna Burgoon, spouses; spon. William Green and Sarah McKearnen. JW page 175

March __, Francis, born Jan. 17, son of James Gainer and Mary Deckoe; spon. Francis Deckoe and Mary Myers. JW

Apr. 1, Henry, born Mar. 11, son of Michael Wagner and Magdalen Stuter; spon. Francis Galagher and Mary. JW

Apr. 2, James, son of James McNulty and Ann Bayley, born Feb. 14; spon. George Brunstetter and Mary Brunstetter. JW

Apr. 3, Albert Leo, born Mar. 28, son of Joel Dittoe and Ellen Wellen; spon. Frederick Wellen and Rebecca Dittoe. JW

Apr. 25, Charles Bernard, born Apr. 19, son of John Wade and Mary Iveory, spouses, of St. Joseph congregation; spons. Edward Crossen and Elizabeth Dittoe.

May 11, Mary, born May 8, daughter of William Bennet and Mary Ann Fitzsimons, spouses; spons. Robert Bennet and Sarah Horahan. APA

June 12, James Sylvester, age 13, son of James McCreery and Rachel; spons. Michael Phelin and Rose Crossen. APA

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June 20, Clara Elizabeth, born May 19, daughter of George Kintz and Margaret Foncannon, spouses; spons. Charles Kintz and Elizabeth Kintz. JW

July 4, Helen Elizabeth, born May 20, daughter of Jacob Eckenrode and Mary Beaver, spouses; spons. William Beaver and Elizabeth Litchey. JW

July 4, John Thomas, born July 12, 1846, son of Leonard Wathen and Elizabeth Werthen, spouses; spons. Henry Werthen and [blank] his wife. JW

Oct. 13, Sarah Ann, born Oct. 11, daughter of Jacob Fink and Mary Louise Griffin, spouses; spons. William Dittoe and Alice Dittoe.

[blank], Helen, daughter of John Mutter and Mary Ann Stolter, spouses; spons. Francis Folder [Stolder?] and Mary Stakley. JW

Nov. 13, James, son of M. McGonigle and Catherine Loretta; spons. Michael Shiels and wife Cassaly.

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1848

Jan. 24, Martha Cecilia, born Dec. 26, daughter of Jacob Dittoe and Rebecca Dittoe, spouses; spons. Michael Dittoe and Barbara Dittoe. Franciscus Cubero

Jan. 24, Mary Joan, born Dec. 11 [interlined in a different hand: daughter of George Redmond and Mary Lynch]; spons. Michael Dittoe and Barbara Dittoe. FC

Jan. 27, Emily Frances, born Dec. 31, daughter of Lewis Snider and Ann once Deen; spons.

Catherine Snider. FC

Mar. 24, John Vincent, born July 20, 1845, son of George Benet and Elizabeth Benet, spouses; spons. Louis Flowers and Mary Hains. FC

Apr. 12, Elizabeth, born Apr. 6, daughter of William Dittoe and H. [or N.?] Dittoe; spons. James Hanlon and Elizabeth Brady. Sadoc Vilarrasa

Apr. 22, [blank; the date is written in Father Vilarrasa's hand]

Feb. 20, Henry Martin, born Feb. 15, son of Louis Luibig and Catherine Gramfort; spons. Martin Huarth and Magdalen Hyness. SV

June 5, Mary Elizabeth, born June 3, daughter of Daniel McCristal and Mary Martin Susan Linch; spons. James McGonigle. SV

July 16, Caroline, born July 4, daughter of James Cain and Mary Decco; spons. Jacob Zahm and Mary Ann Silverrich. Fr. J. Albert Bokel, O.P.

Aug. 22, Ellen, born Aug. 11, daughter of John Higgins and Margaret Slim, spouses; spons. James Higgins and Ellen McName. Fr. Thom. Josephus Ryan, O.P.

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Sept. 17, Raymond Jerome Stine, born Sept. 16, son of William Dominic Stine and Ann Kintz, spouses; spons. Linus Dittoe (son of John) and Elizabeth Dittoe (daughter of Miles Cluney). Eugene H. Pozzo

Sept. 2_ [28?], Bridget Cecilia, born Sept. 22, daughter of James Barn and Barbara Forker, spouses; spons. John Crossen (son of Patrick) and Bridget (daughter of Francis Forker). EHP

Oct. 5, Ellen, born June 22, daughter of Edward Malloy and Bridget McManus, spouses; spons. Patrick Friel (son of Denis) and Ann Friel (daughter of Denis [smudge]—fery).

same day, Elizabeth, born Sept. 28, daughter of George [smudge] and Mary Malloy, spouses; spons. William Megonigle (son of Richard) and Elizabeth Hillis (daughter of "Eliz." Hillis).

same day, William, born Dec. 10, son of William Biddison and Margaret Forker, spouses; spons. John Forker (son of William) and Joan Forker (daughter of William Wilson). EHP

Nov. 8, Sarah, born Nov. 6, daughter of Henry Martins and Catherine Griffin, spouses; spon. John Crossen (son of Edward) and Susan Crossen (daughter of Tully Slevin). EHP
Nov. 8, Catherine Sebilla Biver [interlined Beaver], born July 14, daughter of Thomas Biver and Febe Elizabeth Boyer; spon. Thomas Conlon and Elziabeth Riffel. J. Albert Bokel page 179

1849

Jan. 21, Caroline, born Jan. 16, daughter of Joseph Flowers and Mary Ann Clark, spouses;

spon. Jacob Zam (son of Nicholas) and Ann Clark (daughter of John Clark).
same day, Margaret, born Dec. 30, daughter of Adam Beaver and Mary Tharp, spouses; spon. Peter Zam (son of Nicholas) and Ann Beaver (daughter of Nicholas Zam). EHP
Feb. 11, Lucy Zahm, born Feb. 1, daughter of Henry Zahm and [blank]; spon. Jacob Zahm and Margaret Zahm. SV

(To be concluded)



Another Priest from Old Perry Co.: Father John O'Halloran

Perry County has been a seed-bed of women's and men's religious vocations, especially Dominicans but many others besides. Recently we came upon the notice of the death of another one, previously unknown, in the necrology appearing in *Sadlier's Catholic Directory* for 1880. Father John J. O'Halloran died in St. Louis Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 14, 1879. He was a priest of the diocese of Alton, stationed in Jacksonville, Illinois. According to the directory, he had been born in Zanesville, Ohio, on March 1, 1849 and ordained on June 24, 1875. Thus, he was only thirty years old and four years a priest when the good Lord took him to his reward.

Although Zanesville can claim Father O'Halloran's birth, in all else he was a son of Perry County. His baptismal record at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Zanesville verifies his birth date and indicates that he received that sacrament on March 4, 1849; the parents were Thomas "Halloran" and Jane "Shearon" or Sheeran. All the other records of this family are found near Somerset and New Lexington. The parents were married by Father J. H. Clarkson, O.P., on July 21, 1840 and the sacrament was recorded at St. Joseph Church near Somerset. Daughters Mary Jane and Margaret Helen Halloran were baptized at St. Joseph's in 1841 and 1843.

By the time John was one year old the family moved to New Lexington: they appear in Pike Township in the 1850 census under the name O'Holland. A younger daughter, Sarah, was baptized at St. Patrick's (Junction City) in 1852. In 1853, it is recorded, Thomas O'Hallaran of Pike Township visited the shanties of the Irish railroad construction workers at Somerset as a "spy" when a campaign was afoot to return the county seat from New Lexington to Somerset. Thomas was "a zealous New Lexington man." The family was still living in Pike Township in 1860. In 1870, Thomas and Jane with Mary and Sarah were living in Reading Township.

Little else is known of John, except that he was a student at St. Joseph's Seminary at Bardstown in 1870. He had only one niece, Gertrude Patton Pritchard, who lived in Laurelville and had a family; but she had not been raised in the Church. His sister Sarah, the widow of Charles Leo Murphy, lived in Somerset, where she died at the age of 76 years in 1928.

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