In 2014 we mark the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the ministry of the Sisters of St Joseph at the wheat belt towns of Dalwallinu and Trayning in Western Australia, both located in the Abbacy of New Norcia.

The Depression years of the 1930s were a difficult time for many families living on small pioneering farms in isolated settlements in the wheatbelt. Despite their challenges the Catholic families around Trayning and Dalwallinu were welcoming and made every effort to assist the Sisters of St Joseph who came to provide a Catholic education for the children of rural families.

At Trayning the local people built a Convent for the Sisters which was blessed and opened by Lord Abbot Catalan of New Norcia on 25th February 1934. This was followed in 1936 by the addition of a dormitory, ablution facilities, recreation and dining room enabling the Sisters to take in boarders from outlying rural areas. In the first years the classes were held in the brick church where the pews had writing platforms that folded away to allow for Sunday Mass. The classes were divided with Years 1 to 4 with one teacher, and Years 5 to 10 with another. In the late 1940s a two room converted house became available for use as the school and then in 1962 new brick buildings were constructed.

The education provided by the Sisters was very well regarded and excellent results were achieved in formal government examinations. A number of non-Catholics attended the convent school, particularly for the secondary years, as there was a lack of a local government secondary school in the area. The Sisters are remembered as making every effort to assist the students by providing lessons before and after normal school hours to deliver extra tuition to students facing examinations. Music classes were provided and these were also well received by the wider community. The Sisters were well supported by the local parish. The Convent school had a very co-operative relationship with the local government school and from 1946 both schools operated with the support of one Parents’ and Citizens Association.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Sisters based in Trayning, assisted by others who came from other convents, held “Bushie schools” during the May school holidays. Children from families who lived in surrounding districts and otherwise would not have received any religious education came and stayed with the Sisters for a few days to be prepared for the sacraments. Up to 60 children would attend these events.

Trayning was served by a priest from the Benedictine community at New Norcia. In addition to their school duties the Sisters supported the priest by providing him with a midday meal each day and assisted with church and parish activities.

In 1973 the difficult decision was made to cease secondary classes and in 1975 the school closed. From 1974 to 1980 Trayning was used as the base for Sisters working with the Motor Mission.
While a number of former students of St Joseph’s Convent School in Trayning have had notable careers one of those who is especially remembered is Irene McCormack. She had her early education and sat her Junior exams in 1952 under the supervision of the Sisters, before completing her final two years of secondary education in Perth at Santa Maria College. Irene was professed as a Sister of St Joseph in 1959 and then taught in a number of mainly rural schools throughout WA. In 1986 she was missioned to Peru to work amongst the poorest rural people. It was here she was killed in May 1991.

At Dalwallinu the Sisters of St Joseph began their ministry in July 1934 based in a substantial brick building located on a rise a little distance from the main town. The building had been used as a boarding house for men and had been left in a very poor condition. With the work and assistance of local families the building was made suitable for use as the Sisters convent, school and boarding facility.

Music classes offered by the Sisters were well received. Concerts were held which were special occasions for both those participating and the audience. In the 1930s Bushie school gatherings were held.

In the early years the Sisters had a cow which was milked for them by a local man, and chickens.

Snakes were always prevalent around the Convent building and the Sisters became experts at quickly despatching them!

In the early years the town did not have a Catholic Church or a resident priest and the Sisters sometimes only had Mass once a month. An area used as a school room during the week was converted into a chapel for Sunday Mass. By the 1960s a separate school building had been built next to the Convent. For a time the northern verandah of the school was used for Sunday services.

The numbers attending St Joseph’s Dalwallinu reached only about 45 students with up to about 20 being boarders. In 1966 the decision was made to close the school at Dalwallinu. In the final School Inspection Report the inspector commented “The teachers are congratulated upon the fine work they have done at this school.”

The schools at both Dalwallinu and Trayning served the Catholic community in the wheat belt at a time of need. As farms in these areas were amalgamated to become larger enterprises resulting in reduced local populations; government schools were improved in rural areas; and transport improved making access to larger metropolitan boarding schools more possible, the needs of the population changed.

The ministry in both Dalwallinu and Trayning is remembered fondly by the Sisters who served in these locations and they continue to keep in contact with former students and their families.
Sister Anita Gallagher, the most senior Sister in Western Australia was a postulant in 1937 at Dalwallinu and returned there as a music teacher between 1946 and 1948, and again in 1952. She is regularly visited by several former students who recall their time at Dalwallinu with Sister Anita as their teacher.

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Archivist