



From 1945 until her death in 1953, Sister Mary Constance ruled her eighth-grade class at St. Bonaventure with an iron hand. She knew that her students were at a crossroads in their lives where hormone-infested impure thoughts could condemn those innocent children to lives of hedonistic decadence - - away from God's love and grace.

Sister watched over her class of 31 boys and girls (18 sprouting girls and 13 testosterone- infested young boys). A few of the girls were already experiencing "the curse" and enlargement of the "bosoms." Some of the boys were sprouting "manly" hair and began to sing in the "tenor" section of the choir. She even knew that some of the girls were sporting "falsies," while some of the boys were faking the lower tenor voices.

Sister knew what to do though. She segregated the boys from the girls. She inspected the girls' skirt lengths each week with her ruler, and woe betide any girl whose skirt extended past the top of the middle of the knee.

She was also ever vigilant of boys who had a tendency to "touch themselves" in church or during long, boring afternoons in class. She also kept a lookout for hanky-panky in the boys' restroom.

Against this backdrop of preadolescent sexual repression and constant vigilance, Sister Mary Constance, a mediocre teacher at best, tutored her class in the "three-R's" and a smattering of history (from the perspective of the Catholic Church, of course. For instance, Martin Luther, the leader of the so-called Reformation is doomed to suffer in Purgatory until Judgment Day.)

However, Sister's favorite subject was Catechism. Each day, right after lunch, she would begin her rote recitation drills:

"Who made us?"

"God made us."

"Why did God make us?"

"God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us everlasting happiness in Heaven."

And so on.

However, Sister Mary Constance's religious training and anecdotal illustrations were not restricted to Catechism class. In fact, her favorite theme was the "fall-from-grace," where pure, virginal girls were seduced the night before entering the convent and died in an accident before going to Confession.

In Sister's stories, the way to the fall varied, but the ending was always the same: The girl comes back and appears to her mother in a dream telling the mother that she (the fallen virgin) was in Hell.

Sister's favorite allegorical tale was the infamous "tragedy of the picnic by the lake." From talking with last year's students, her class knew this one was coming as the annual eighth-grade class picnic approached. The tale went something like this:

The eighth-grade class was at its annual summer picnic by the lake. Their teacher, Sister Mary Barbara, was ill, so the class was under the supervision of one of the parents, a woman of well-known libertine and permissive tendencies.

No one knew for sure everything that went on that tragic day, but a few students testified that the chaperone mother was nowhere to be seen. Hints and innuendoes of drinking and the woman's passing out in the bus spread throughout the community.

Likewise, no one would admit whose idea it was for a community skinny-dip. Those students who declined (mainly the flat-chested girls and soprano, hairless boys) could only look on in prurient shock and shame as the more mature boys and girls frolicked naked in the lake.

At this point in the story, Sister Mary Constance would take on an almost beatific countenance as she described the earthquake that opened a fissure in the lake bed that flushed the students into the very bowels of the earth, never to resurface for a proper, Catholic burial.

No one could miss the moral of Sister's story. It did vary from the rest of her repertoire to the extent that none of the lost children came back to tell their mothers that they (those skinny-dipping young sinners) were burning in Hell.

By no coincidence, Sister Mary Constance always saved her picnic-by-the-lake story to the week before the actual class picnic at Lake Elsinore. The picnic was a milestone event for 8th graders at St. Bonaventure, a sort of rite of passage as the students matriculated to the St. Mary's Catholic High School to continue their religious education, and hopefully go on to Notre Dame, Holy Cross, or some other reputable Catholic University.

As an eagerly anticipated rite of passage, permission to attend the picnic was Sister's major tool and incentive to promote good behavior and hard work on the part of the students. The absolute worst punishment an 8th grader could receive would be banishment from the picnic by the lake.

The year Sister Mary Constance drowned in Lake Elsinore was unique in one respect. She had banned four boys in the class from the picnic. No one

knew precisely why, but it was known that she had burst into the boys' restroom and found them doing "something sinful."

Chester Todd was one of the boys banned, but he claimed that he was an innocent bystander. Sister would have none of it. In lieu of expelling the boys, she simply banned the boys from the picnic, a terrible punishment indeed.

It was Chester's idea for the prank that would get even with "that witch." Chester, who was undersized and still had a high soprano voice, took the bus shuttle from town to the lake. Donning his mother's blond wig and his sister's swimming suit, Chester, a good swimmer, entered the water when no one was looking. He waited for Sister Mary Constance to stroll out to the end of the swimming pier and swam within her line of sight.

"Help me, Sister, I have a cramp!" Chester cried in his high soprano voice.

Sister Mary Constance, not a good swimmer, but with no regard for her personal safety, dove into the water. As she entered the water with her heavy nun's habit, she knew immediately that she had made a mistake. She tired quickly, as Chester treaded water and subtly opened distance between him and the foundering nun.

Chester, realizing the prank had gone too far, decided it was time to give Sister a hand as she went down for the third time in ten feet of muddy lake water. The rest of the class, who were in the picnic area, looked on in frozen horror, as Chester dove beneath the murky lake water hoping to be able to drag Sister to the surface.

Groping in the low visibility along the bottom, Chester snagged his upper body on Sister Mary Constance's giant wooden-beaded rosary wrapped around her ample waist. When the drowned bodies of Chester and Sister Mary Constance were dredged from the lake bottom, they were locked in a macabre embrace and pinioned together by the sturdy rosary chain.

Sister Mary Constance's successor was Sister Mary Elizabeth. Her favorite religious anecdote was about the sinful Chester Todd, who, in the final moments of his life, repented and tried to save the saintly Sister Mary Constance.

Sister Mary Elizabeth's story always had a happy ending: Chester Todd appeared to his mother in a dream and told her that God had shown forth his goodness and that he, Chester, was sharing everlasting happiness in Heaven.