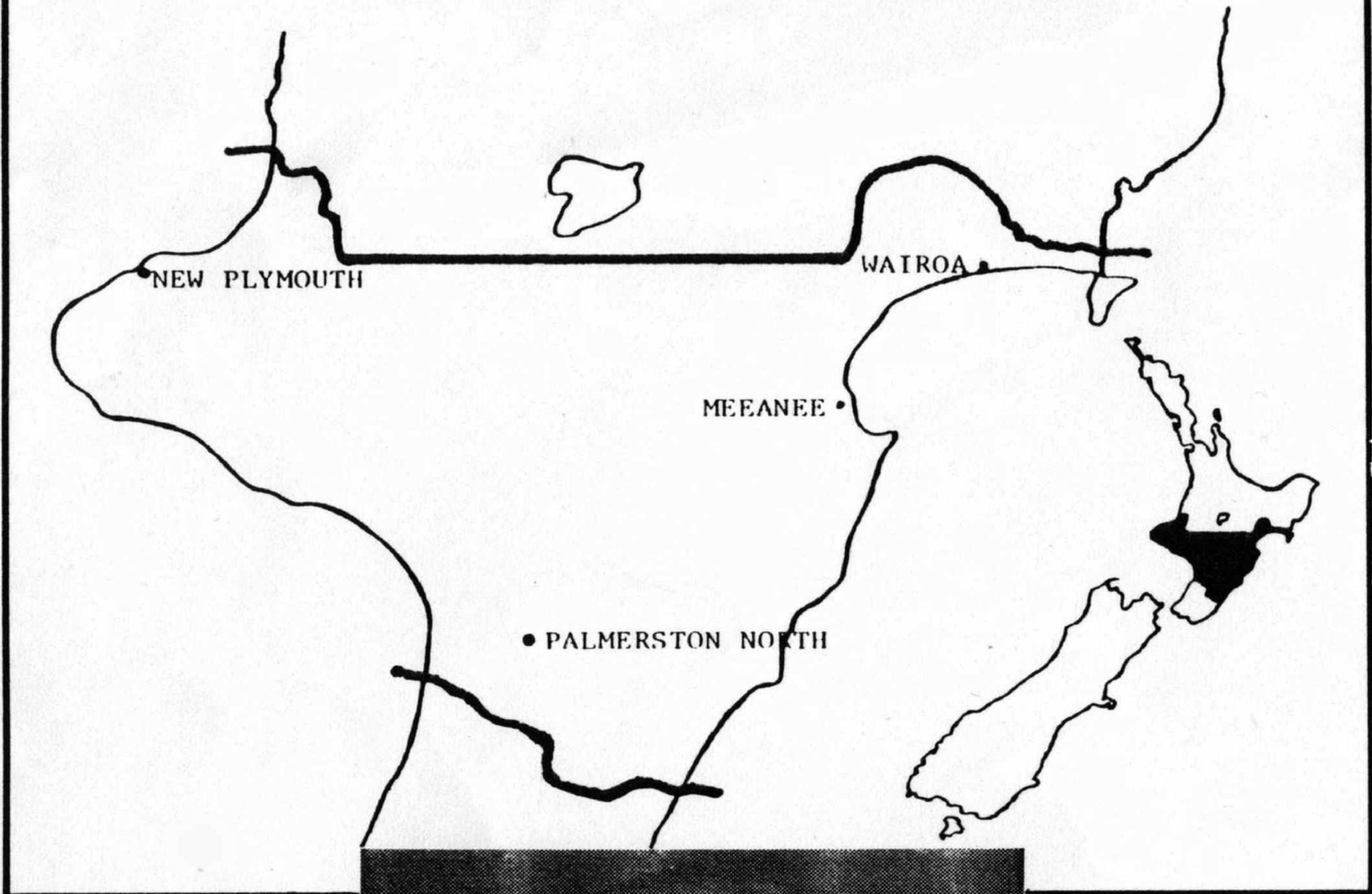


DIOCESE OF PALMERSTON NORTH



Bishop Peter J. Cullinane D.D.

MEEANEE 1886 — 1924

Meeanee, with its soft musical name of Indian origin, is on the outskirts of the thriving city of Napier. Because the area is extremely low-lying, flooding was common from the nearby Tutaekauri River. The Sisters of St Joseph worked in Meeanee for a period of thirty-eight years.

Dr Reynolds, Bishop of Adelaide, had sent two Sisters of St Joseph to New Zealand to collect funds for the relief of his diocese. In the course of their New Zealand travels they visited Hawkes Bay, where they met Father Yardin S.M. That meeting with the Sisters encouraged him to request persistently of Mother Mary that she send Sisters "to take direction of his schools."

In Mother Mary's correspondence, we find the first mention of Meeanee in a letter to her from Father Yardin dated 8 September 1885, in which he also mentions the visit of the two Sisters. His letter which follows gives a picture of Catholic education in Meeanee at that time.

Dear Revd Mother,

When Sisters Ignatius and Bega were collecting in my district (not without success) I informed them of a project conceived long ago of having the Sisters of St Joseph to take the direction of our schools. They gave me to understand that you could and would send me some Sisters without much delay. That encouraged me to hope and to inform you at once of the state of our schools.

They are well known in our provincial district of Hawkes Bay under the name of St Mary's College. They are situated in a beautiful plain, six miles from Napier, and are composed of two large buildings, with two large classrooms, dormitories for about thirty boarders, outhouses, etc., rooms for three or four Sisters with other rooms capable of being adapted to a convent. The parish schools are attended by fifty pupils, boys or girls;

besides these day scholars we have now ten or twelve Maori boarders maintained by the Government at the rate of £18 a year — but their number may increase or diminish, or even cease entirely, according to the view of the Government which does not seem very favourable to so small a native school. All the furniture, etc., belongs to the parish priest who has built and furnished everything.

The General Meeting of the parish agrees to have Sisters. I have the authorisation of the Administrator of the Diocese. I want only your decision. We want three efficient Sisters, one of them at least capable of conducting the children to the fourth or fifth standard of the New Zealand Code, another, or the same, able to teach music and singing and the needlework to girls.

Our Catholics are poor and cannot give more than the fees for their children, with, of course, fees for special lessons; but you have also a right and duty to let me know your conditions and you will oblige me and our people by letting me know them as soon as you can.

We have given notice to the present schoolmaster to quit at Christmas, so that the Sisters could begin at the re-opening of the schools about a fortnight or three weeks after Christmas. Small repairs and accommodations will be necessary, but I think that it would be better to await the arrival of at least one Sister to give directions...

Father Yardin's next letter is written to Sister Josephine Carolan, who was visiting the New Zealand Convents as Mother General's official delegate visitor. She was obviously on her way from the South Island to Auckland on one of the steamers that plied the coastal route in those days.

3rd October 1885

Dear Sister,

I regret very much to be unable to go on board. Your telegram came too late. Meeanee is six miles from Napier, and many persons wait this afternoon for Confessions, being the eve of the Most Holy Rosary.

If you wish to land, Brother Martin will accompany you; but if you cannot wait a fortnight for another steamer going to Auckland, send me a few words and let me know if I can hope for Sisters for January next. Brother Martin will give you all the information about the school and the place you may desire. I am sure the Revd Mother will be very sorry to refuse my request.

There is not much money to be got, but we may with sacrifice raise about £100 including fees, till the school is self-supported and the Sisters will do (this) soon by their exertions.

The Government gives 1/- a day for each Maori boy; that is little but it gives an opportunity to make collections even among Protestants for what

is wanted in repairs, clothing, bedding, etc. If we had but Europeans, two Sisters could do enough, but with Maoris and perhaps boarders, a third Sister, or a servant, would be required for cooking and the gross work; you could easily keep a cow for milk and butter, which is a great saving. If the Sisters have no time for such work, there are nothing but dairies in Meeanee...

He wrote again on 9 October. His zeal and perseverance merit admiration.

...The place is certainly fine for climate and products...our Catholics are poor, rather indifferent in matters of faith and education, and yet exigent. Your Sisters will have to exercise a real apostolate and I am confident they will succeed by winning the hearts of the children and of their parents. There will be plenty of work to do, some crosses to bear, but you will have, besides the grace of God, our hearty co-operation.

I would not object at all to receiving the young lady you have spoken of...I would only submit two observations. If the young lady came before, she would be alone and feel miserable in a large house like St Mary's College. If she came with one Sister, that would be all right, but in that case, do you think it would be proper to give her a veil of any kind, like a novice's, because my intention is to receive the Sisters with some solemnity, and the people would be surprised to see only a young lady — you understand me. Some black dress and something of a veil — we may begin the schools in that manner.

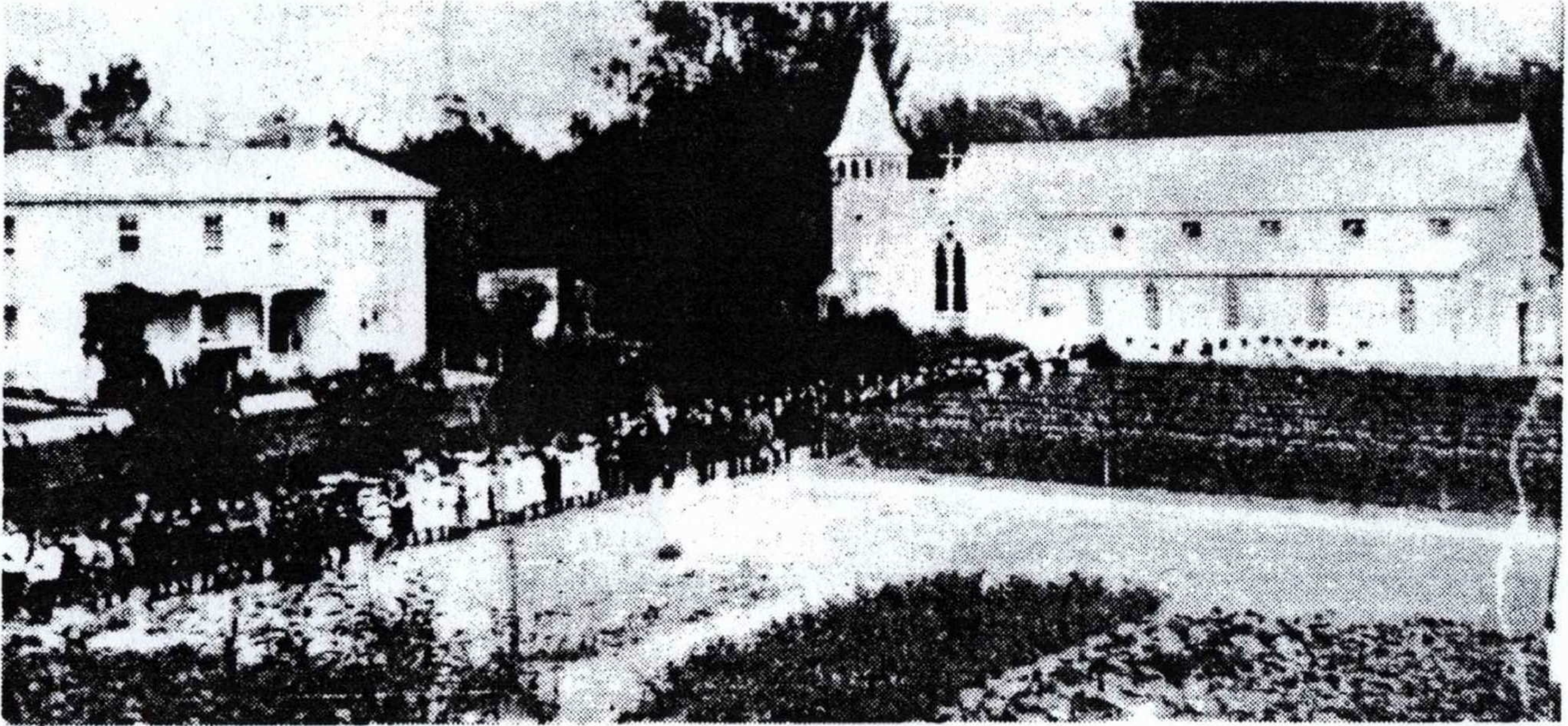
About the Maoris — we have only nine at present, and I am not sure the Government will consent to support so small a school. For my part, I should not be sorry. We want a good disciplinarian to keep our school in order.

I must add that as soon as the school of Meeanee is well known, we shall open another at Hastings, in the city of the Ahuriri Plains...

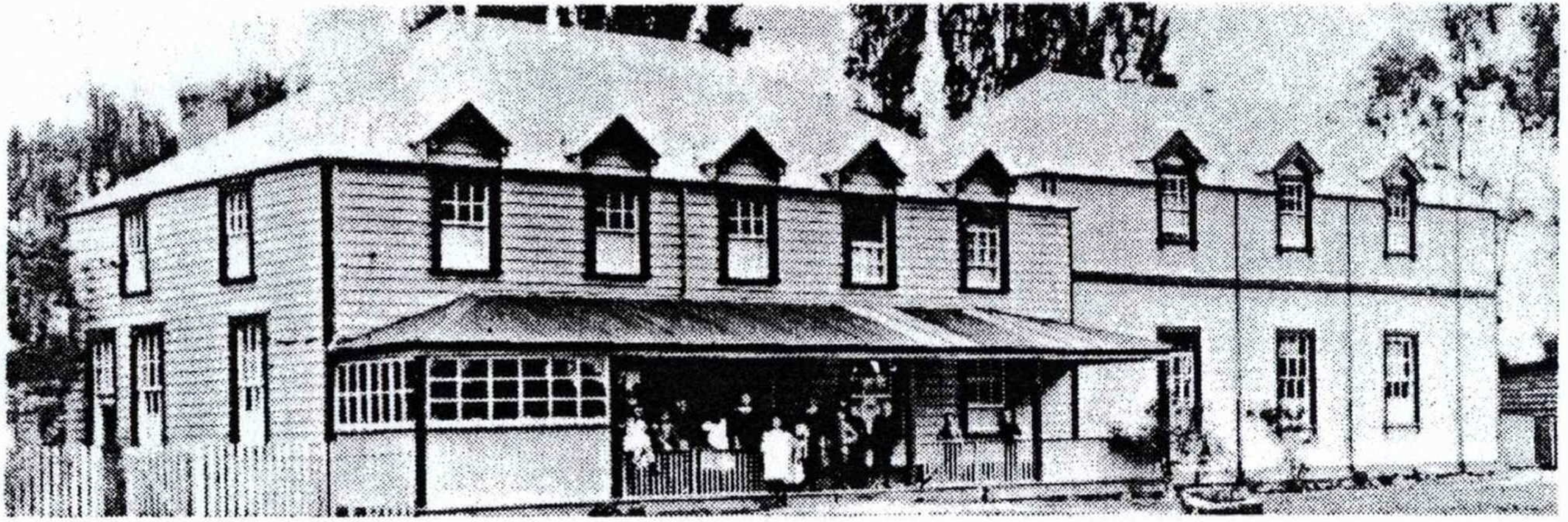
In less than a week, the good Marist was again penning a letter to Sister Josephine, who would, of course, send off all his communications to Mother Mary. In fact, we know from the postscripts, that she did so. On 14 October, he wrote:

I think I can do with two Sisters, even with a Sister and a postulant; because it is very probable that we shall have no Maori boys in our school. We shall have more room for boarders from the surrounding district...

My intention is to close the school at the end of November and to begin the necessary repairs and appropriation...Is it possible to ask you for one of your postulants till the Sisters come? I have found two difficulties. 1st, she could not live alone in our big school, even if she had to take her meals in our house, nor do I know how I could find a suitable girl to live with her. 2nd, as we expect Sisters, it would be better to begin our schools with them, that they may take at once their position in the parish...



Procession in seminary grounds about 1890.



Above: Meeanee convent and school about 1896. It was formerly St Mary's College, a boarding school for Maori boys.
Below: Sister Cletus Burke, then a postulant, with Meeanee pupils in 1909.



↑
CECILIA MCGLOVE,
2nd FROM END (RIGHT)

The school was opened on 6 February 1886 by Sister Josephine, who brought with her two secular teachers until the Sisters should come from Sydney. It would be interesting to know how those two young ladies were dressed!

With the school under way, Father Yardin wrote again to Mother Mary on 12 February 1886:

...Sister Josephine opened the school last Tuesday with two young ladies who will remain until the arrival of the Sisters. Please delay not to send them, or, if you are embarrassed to find Sisters fit for the management of sixty children at least, besides boarders, kindly authorise Sister Josephine to remain here till you are ready. I am convinced that young ladies, however able they may be, will not succeed well by themselves alone... They have not the prestige of the religious habit, and many families, even Protestants, who send their children to our school, would be disappointed if that school were conducted by *seculars*. They want nuns, and to nuns alone they will give all their confidence...

Sister Josephine has already won the confidence of families etc., etc.

His letter was supported by one from Father Sauzeau S.M., writing from Wellington on 15 February:

...The congregation expects Religious, real Sisters, and nothing short of that will satisfy them I am afraid.

Reinforcements were not long in coming. The *Daily Telegraph* (Napier) of 27 February 1886 has this item in its shipping news:

From the Passenger List: Sisters of St Joseph (2)

In September of that first year, Sisters Collette Carolan, Denis Malone and Bernadette Goodwin arrived from Sydney. For a time before they arrived, Sister Cyril Walsh helped out at Meeanee and Sister Immaculata Norman, who had been in Temuka, stayed for a time on her way to Sydney. Sister Josephine in her capacity of Visitor had to go South in January 1887 to open the Rangiora Convent and with her she took Sister Denis Malone for Temuka. Other early staff members at Meeanee were Sister M. Pierre O'Shaughnessy and Sister Aloysius Ferricks. The former did not remain very long, and the latter stayed at Meeanee for many years. When Sister Pierre left, Sister Josephine replaced her and was still at Meeanee in 1892. Sisters Collette and Aloysius went to Palmerston North from Meeanee, but returned to Meeanee when Palmerston's brief history came to an end.

It is certain that the Sisters knew hard times in Meeanee, though they had the great consolation of having good friends in the Marist

Fathers close at hand. In the first years, the parishioners paid rent for their seats in the church in order to make up the Sisters' salary, for the pupils who could so do paid only sixpence per week in school fees.

Undoubtedly, the greatest hardship was caused by the frequent winter flooding which inundated the flat country where the school and Convent were situated. From the booklet "Meeanee Parish" (Kay Mooney) we have a record of devastating floods from the year 1864 onwards. The Sisters of the Mission at the Napier Convent have the following in their records:

The poor Sisters of St Joseph at Meeanee were among the sufferers. Their Convent was flooded to a depth of six feet, and they took refuge in the upper storey. When the water subsided, it was unsafe for the Sisters to remain in the damp unwholesome house. They had lost their means of livelihood — their pupils were unable to get to school through the many feet of mud and silt on the roads. They were very grateful when we suggested that they should be our guests for a few weeks.

The flood to which the Mission Sisters referred above occurred in 1897. Again and again, some years worse than others, the Sisters endured the experience of floods. In spite of the adverse effects of these, some of which were the lengthy enforced absences of the children from school, the inconveniences caused by flood damage, the expense of replacing books and equipment, the school at Meeanee continued to give satisfaction to the State Inspectors. The following is the report given by F.H. Hill, School Inspector in 1900:

MEEANEE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Examined 21 August 1900

Staff — Sister Aloysius, Principal

Sisters Coleman, Bernadette, Martina

Role — 90 Present — 84 Passed — 54

Remarks: This school has always been diligent in its efforts to do well, and the past year's work has accomplished a very fair meed of success. From Std 1 upwards there is evidence of careful teaching and diligent preparation and the passes, though made by the Lady Principal, have been separately tested by me and meet with my full approval.

Progress all along the line is manifest and with the exception of slight defects in Writing and Drawing, the full requirements in Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 have been very fairly met.

As a whole I was pleased with the general behaviour of the children and with their evident anxiety to do well. Altogether the progress made since my last visit is quite satisfactory.

Year followed year and nothing was done to alleviate the conditions under which the Sisters were working. The effect on the health and morale of the Sisters continued to be of great concern to the Provincial, Sister Laurencia. The following, taken from the Parish Records, emphasizes the state of affairs at that time:

INVENTORY OF THE PARISH OF MEEANEE, SEPTEMBER 1919

The parochial school building, under the same roof as the Sisters' residence, is very old (portion of it built in 1873) and in parts very unsound. It is proposed to build a new residence for the Sisters on the site acquired last year in Taradale, and to transfer to the same site the sounder portion of the school building.

There are fifty children in an almost equal number of boys and girls attending the parochial school which is taught by two Sisters of St Joseph. The work of the school has been much hampered in recent years, two severe floods in 1916, two still more severe in 1917, and the influenza epidemic of 1918 causing serious breaks; nevertheless, the report of the Government Inspector in August 1919 is very creditable. Subject to the qualifications made, the scholars are regular in attendance. Only a few children attend the State school if we except those living at some distance from the Catholic school. The understanding with regard to remuneration of the Sisters is that they shall collect school fees from the children, and the parish shall supplement the amount so collected so as to bring the total amount to £100.

Unfortunately, good intentions were not sufficient to keep the good work going. The maintenance of the Convent was neglected. Sister Sixtus Frnech, an ex-pupil of the Meeanee school, on a visit to her home town, was struck by the run-down state of the buildings. She noted that the only support on the staircase was a thick rope doing duty as a handrail!

Sister Laurencia, realizing that the situation at Meeanee had gone on far too long, informed the Parish Priest that she would be forced to remove the Sisters if nothing were done to remedy matters before the next flood. She insisted that the Convent must at least be habitable.

The flood came — inevitably — nothing had been done. In 1924 the Sisters were withdrawn.

The last Sisters to live and work in Meeanee were Sisters Mary Louis Hoare, M. Chrysostom Stack and Irenaeus McDermott.

In 1926 a new school was built in Guppy Road, Greenmeadows. The Sisters of the Mission provided the staff, travelling out daily from Napier until their new Convent was built. This Convent was severely

damaged in the Napier earthquake of 1931 when one of the Sisters of the Mission lost her life.

It is fifty-nine years since the Josephite chapter in Meeanee closed, but the memory lingers on. On 30 October 1972, at a Thanksgiving Mass for the Senior Parishioners of Meeanee, a Mass of Commemoration, the homily included the following tribute:

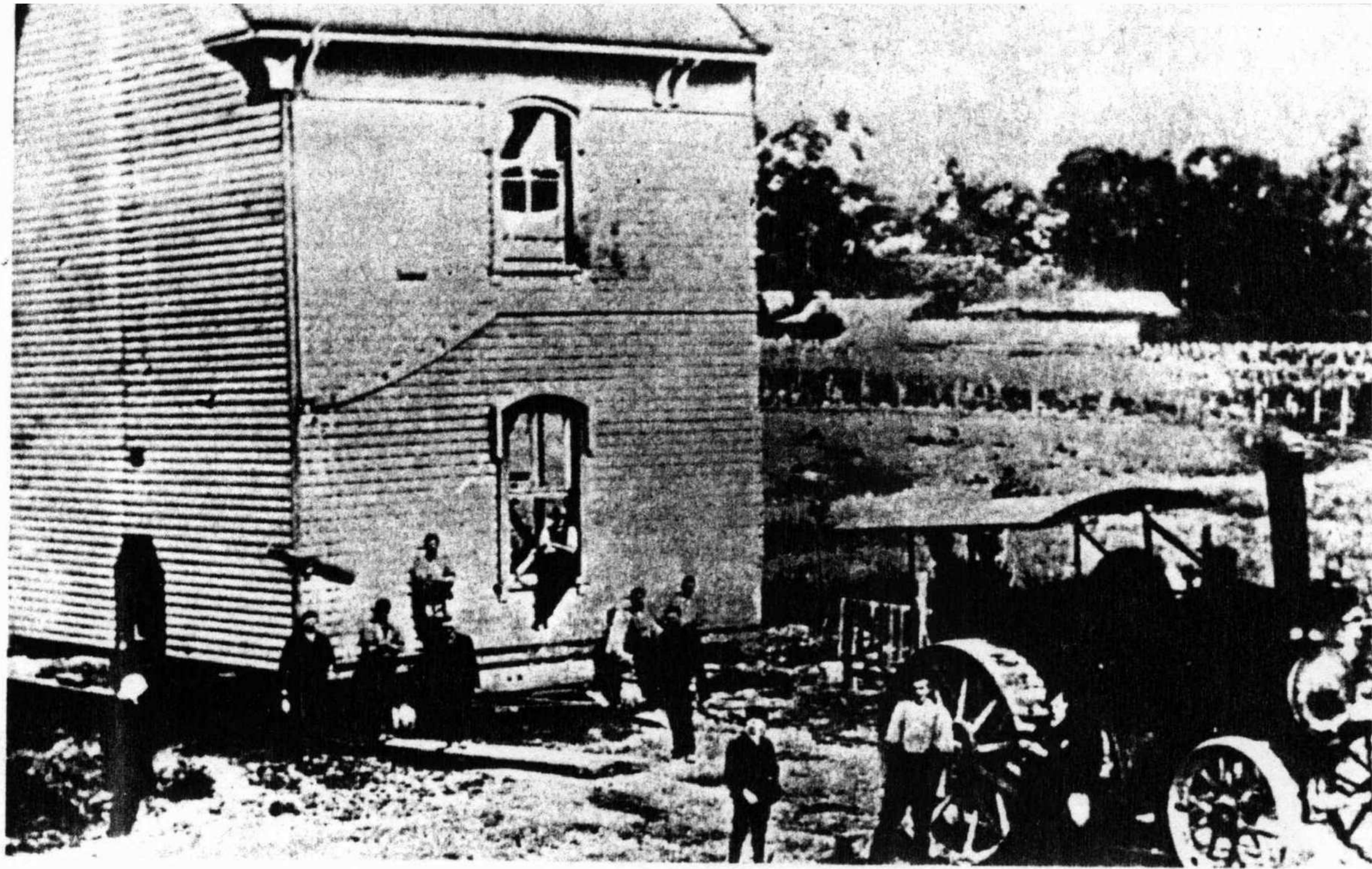
Meeanee also received another Foundress in its midst, if only for a short time. This was Mother Mary MacKillop who founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart and who visited the community of her Sisters who laboured in this parish with such devotion from 1886 to 1924.

· Very precious to the Sisters who laboured in Meeanee would have been this simple tribute from the heart of a very elderly Sister of the Mission living in Wealdstone, Middlesex, England, and written on 13 September 1979:

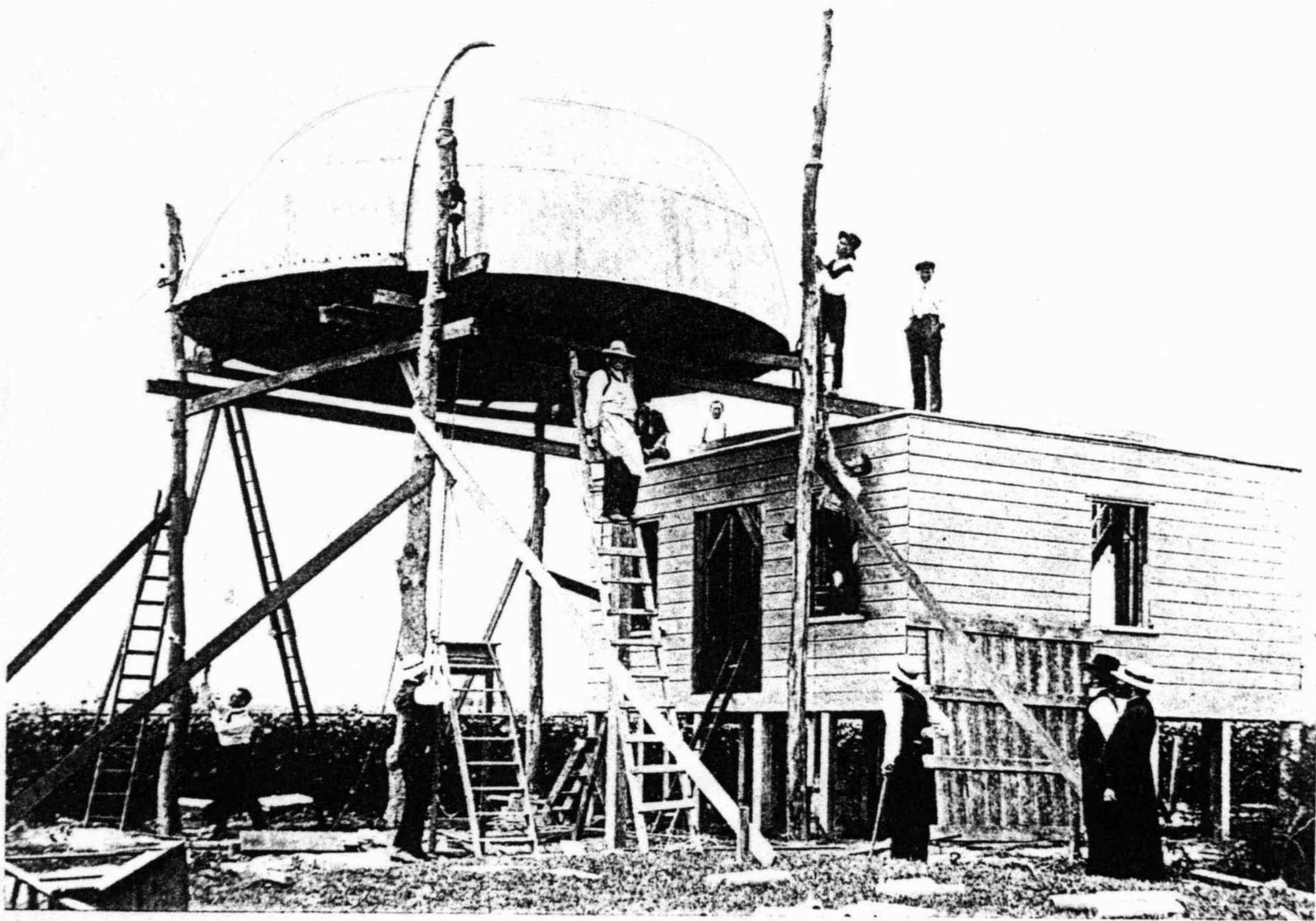
Your letter was like a voice from the past bringing me back to early childhood days when I attended the Convent school at Meeanee. I was only there for the space of two years, 1906 and 1907, at the ages of five and six years old.

At this stage, I can only write about my childish memories of the good Sisters of St Joseph there during those years; in particular their deep concern for the religious instruction and training of their pupils. From this statement I wish to convey that, apart from the fact that I made satisfactory progress with my schoolwork, the Sisters definitely had a spiritual influence on me at that early age. This I experienced when I stayed at the Convent as a boarder. I can recall those evenings before going to bed when the Sister in charge of us would take the younger children into the oratory for night prayers. I remember Sister saying to us, 'Jesus is there and he loves you very much.' The red light caught my eye, but the joy and delight of that information was the beginning of my devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which intensified as the years went by. The seed of God's love was planted and today, in my advanced years, I still derive joy and comfort from the fact that Jesus is still there in the Blessed Sacrament, and His love has not changed since I discovered it in the Convent chapel at Meeanee, many long years ago.

Why I mention this incident, which could be one in the life of any small child, is to testify in some small way that I personally benefited by my contact with your Sisters, who were no doubt answering to the call of your saintly Foundress, whose apostolic spirit they had deeply imbibed...



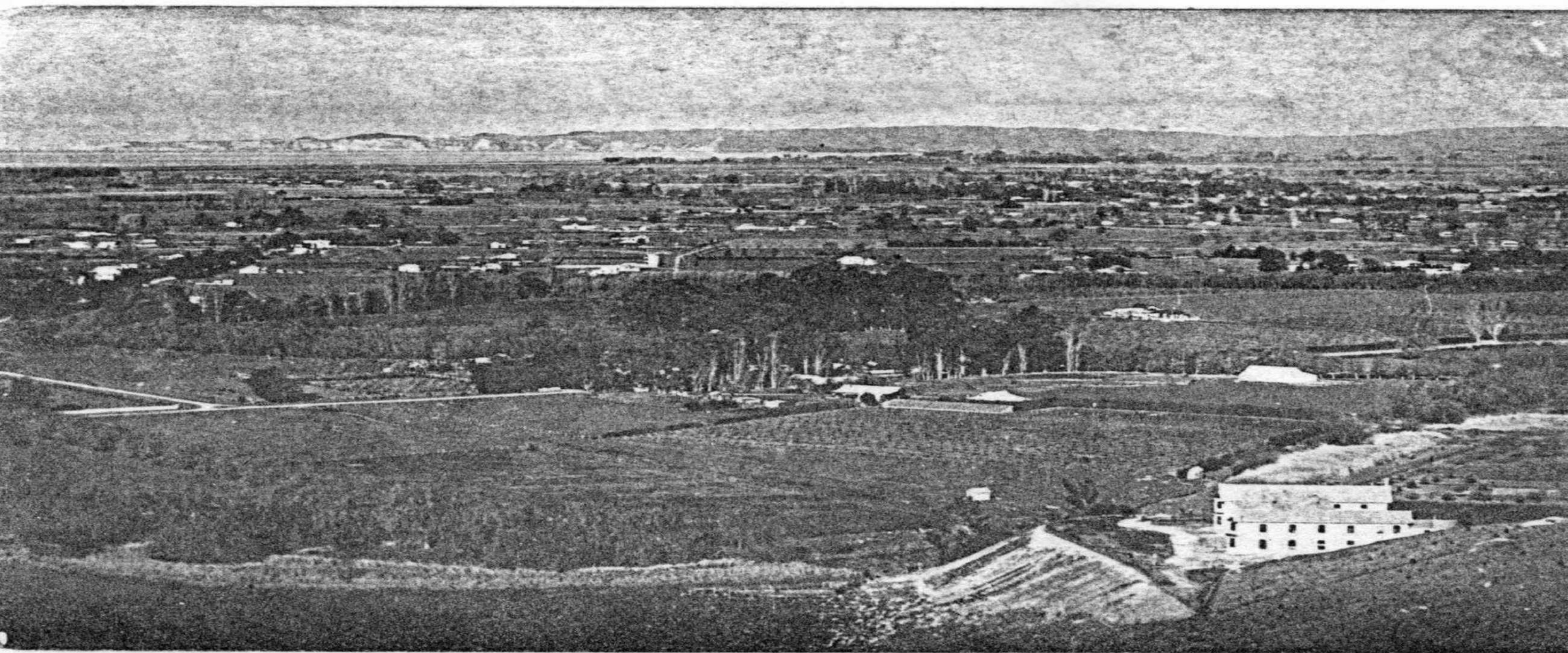
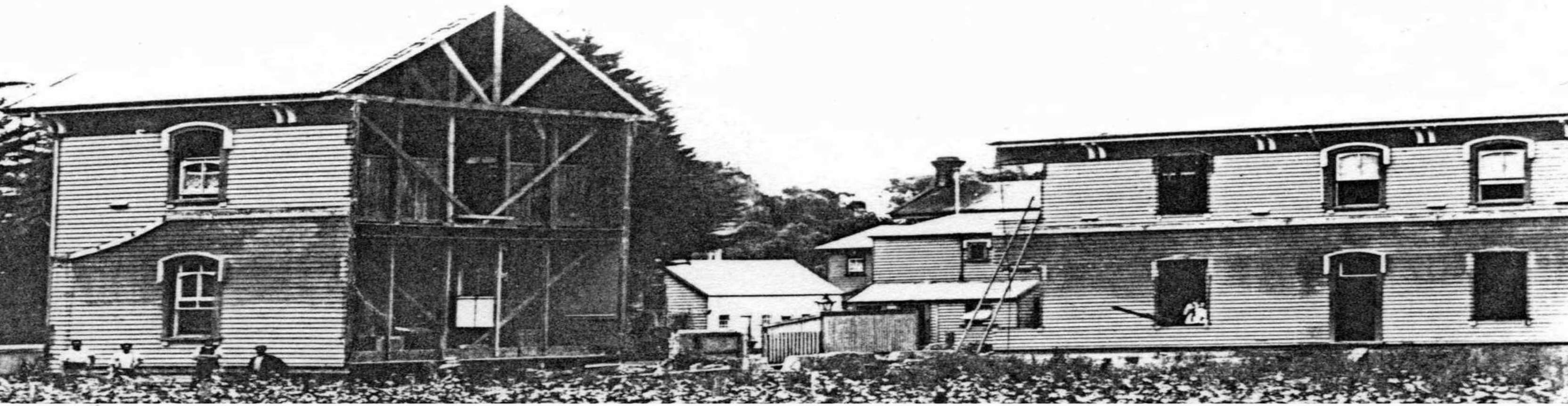
Sections of the old Seminary at Meeanee being moved to the new site at Greenmeadows, 1910. (H.B. Herald Tribune)



1900: Meeanee Observatory at the turn of the century. Built by brothers of the Society of Mary, the building was at the corner of Meeanee Road and Powdrell Road. The observatory carried out astronomical observations and supplied meteorological information. It fell into disuse when the scientific members of the seminary staff, Dr David Kennedy and Father Joe Cullen, were transferred elsewhere. The nine-inch telescope was sold to Carter Observatory where it is still in use. In 1910 the observatory was the centre of attention when Halley's Comet was photographed in a now-famous set of pictures. In this picture the dome is being hoisted into position. Father Joe Cullen is on the ladder.







Meeanee

In the early days of settlement Meeanee was a place of great promise. The road north from Clive up into the hills passed right through it.

Some members of the Provincial Council were strongly opposed to the plains being owned by a few runholders who counted their acres in thousands and regarded everyone else as 'cabbage farmers'. Instead, they advocated making land available for small agricultural holdings. This was accomplished in Meeanee. Many small farmers and market gardeners worked their own land and took their produce to market in Napier and, later, Hastings.

In the 1850s the Marist Mission bought land at Meeanee and broke it in from a wilderness of tall raupo and flax through which their cattle wandered, wearing bells or clappers. The Mission moved over the river and settled on its Meeanee property in 1858, after the last tribal war on the plains had ended.

Over the years a large complex was built up. It comprised a church, presbytery, school, college, seminary for the training of priests, stud farm, medical clinic, vineyards and even an astronomical observatory of national reputation. However, all the



1890s: The Marist establishment. In the background is the church which still stands but is now used as workroom and saleroom by a group of potters. In its time, it was the mother church of every Catholic church in Hawke's Bay. When this photograph was taken the complex of buildings looked set to stand firm for another century, but within a few years after several disastrous floods, most of the buildings were moved away to safer sites.