

Orphanage yields treasures



FROM THE ALTAR TO THE SCRAP HEAP — A pulpit from the chapel in St. Joseph's orphanage rests obscurely amid the rest of the scrap lumber accumulated during the demolition of the orphanage.

By **NORMA TIRRELL**
IR Staff Writer

The old St. Joseph's orphanage at the corner of Montana and Custer is being struck down. The demolition process has already begun. But from the destruction have come treasures that reach as far back as 81 years into Helena's history.

Three weeks ago the demolition contractor, Alden Armstrong of Great Falls, uncovered the cornerstone box on the southwest corner of the giant, old building on North Montana Avenue.

Last summer, behind a cabinet, he found a letter from a girl he judged to be about 14 or 15. The letter, presumably written during the 1935 earthquake told "a mother or a friend" of the "terrible tumbling of walls" and of buses coming to rescue the orphans.

Armstrong said he has found a number of other letters above rafters and behind radiators, as well as "hundreds of religious medals," rosaries, scissors, marbles and jacks.

The autumn observations of a younger writer were found on the third floor: "One autumn day Mary Ellen and Granny were busy getting ready for winter."

The copper cornerstone box, emplaced in 1892, has preserved its contents well. In addition to several photographs of some of the higherups in Helena's Catholic community toward the end of the last century, some well-worn coins and religious medals and three newspapers were found.

A comfortable home

A story in the Sept. 8, 1892, Daily Independent had this to say about the then new orphanage:

"Bishop (J. B.) Brondel will lay the cornerstone of the new orphan home this afternoon at 3 o'clock.



PRE-DEMOLITION DESTRUCTION — Several of the orphanage's statues were destroyed, presumably by vandals, before the tearing down process began last April. The orphanage closed in 1964, 72 years after construction began in 1892. (Staff photos by Norma Tirrell)



AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN — The Armstrong Construction Co. of Great Falls has quite a bit of work yet to do on a two-year

demolition contract to tear down the old St. Joseph's orphanage north of Helena. The orphanage's chapel, pictured above, is about to go.

Several of the secular and regular clergy will assist his lordship, and the ceremonies promise to be very solemn and imposing . . . It (the building) measures 160' x 80', will have four floors, all modern accommodations, and bids fair to be the finest orphan asylum on this side of the Mississippi. It (construction) should continue until the poor little ones are sheltered under the hospitable roof of the asylum, and until Montana can say to the world that every fatherless and motherless child in Montana has a comfortable home where the tenderness and love of the Sisters of Charity will make the sore hearts forget that their parents are no more."

At the bottom of the box, buried beneath papers and photos, is a tiny, tarnished silver locket. Inside, on a

red satin background, is a tinker nugget of gold.

When the orphanage closed in 1964, it had only three floors. The top floor was "shaken off" during the earthquake, according to Armstrong. Though only 13 orphans lived in the home when it closed, St. Joseph's once housed 373 children.

The home appears to have been self sufficient, with a separate school house, a huge barn, a laundry, garden space and underground storage. Though much has already come down, more is yet to fall. Armstrong has a two-year demolition contract that began last April.

The future of the site has not yet been determined, according to Armstrong. But the contents of the cornerstone will go the owner of the property — the Montana Power Co.