



**CHANGING HABITS** — No longer nuns of the Glenmary Order after Aug. 20, Big Stone Gap "sisters" are just getting used to their secular names

again — from left: Monica Kelly, Ann Leibig, Maureen Linneman and Deborah Prenger. (Times-News Photo — Betty Bishop)

## FOUR NUNS LEAP

# 'Over The Wall'

By **BETTY BISHOP**  
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**BIG STONE GAP** — Hattie doesn't care what they call themselves in the house on Wyandott Street in Big Stone Gap. Just like she could care less whether the white paint is grey with age or there are bare patches in the lawn.

All that matters to Hattie is that when she knocks on the screen door she'll hear Ann somewhere inside call out "Hattie's here. She come to help us."

**AND HATTIE KNOWS** that "the ladies" who live there could care less that most of her teeth are gone, and her hair needs washing, and her clothes came from a rummage sale.

She knows Monica will hug her and say oh, Hattie, I'm glad you came today, and Deborah will ask, please, Hattie, will you clean the chapel for us, and Maureen will say, Hattie, I wrote a new song I want you to hear.

the young girl who doesn't have any clothes for the baby she's expecting.

**AND IT'S BECAUSE** of people like these that Anne Leibig, Monica Kelly, Deborah Prenger, and Maureen Linneman will no longer be called "sisters" after Aug. 20.

The old man drinking coffee at the restaurant never did call them sisters anyway. He had "heard something about" them withdrawing from the Glenmary Sisters, a Roman Catholic order, but he'd been in Big Stone Gap a long, long time and he'd always known them as "the ladies who don't ask any questions like the Welfare does when you need help."

All "the stuff in the paper" didn't mean much to the waitress. She'd "never been down there to the house," but the people there "liked 'em 'cause they done so much good."

She says it was "one of their kind up at St. Mary's hospital that made her baby well."

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how something kept telling me go to St. Mary's, go to St. Mary's. The doctors had said my baby was going to die, but I got in my car and got up there as fast as I could with my baby.

"One of the ladies took my baby out of my arms and held her way up in the air saying, 'Lord, if it's thy will, please let this baby live.' And you know, the next morning my baby was cooing and laughing as well as could be."

The old man sitting in front of the cab stand points his cane down the street. "I been a Methodist ever since I been on this earth, and I'm a 'telling' you, them ladies are good Christians. Ain't nobody beginnin' to know how much good they do up in the hollers 'round here."

A "STEP UPWARD in Christianity," the former nuns give as their reason for withdrawing and forming a lay group to be called the Federation in Community Service.

"We're stepping toward something rather than running away from something," says 26-year-old Ann, a nun for eight years. "What we are doing and what we want to do is our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. We see it as a deeper religious involvement."

Ann, is the idea person, the one who says provocative things then laughs. The one who motivates the group by pointing out the Christian approach to what needs to be done. For the past year she's worked in the parishes in Big Stone Gap, Norton, St. Paul, and Gate City, Va.

"WE'VE BEEN living in a realm of special permissions," says Maureen, 22 years old, a nun for five years. "Now, as lay persons, we're not bound by canon laws, we are free to do what we feel needs to be done for people in this area."

Maureen, the musician, isn't "the singing nun type" just because she plays the guitar and writes songs, but she thinks about things, has a sensitivity about people, their situations, and what's happening inside of them.

Her aim is to help create a sense of community and communication between

people through such things as art and recreation programs and rummage sales.

"Our life and dedication will remain the same even though we'll make a new commitment Aug. 20," says Deborah, the 'balancer' of the group and at 35, the oldest. "We want to continue to live a celibate life, but as a lay group we will find different freedoms which will lead us in different directions and individual choices."

"I chose to live with this group and lead a celibate life, but I'm not rejecting marriage. Some will choose to marry, others will help each other lead a celibate life."

"WE HAVEN'T WORN the long habit for three years. This is our uniform," says Monica, the 30-year-old whom the others accuse of 'building herself up in the morning so she can bounce cheerfully down the stairs.'

"I suppose our uniform will be similar to these," she says of her grey skirt and white blouse. "As a lay group, we'll be able to wear clothes like everyone else. I'm a great one for bargains I'll probably have fun shopping for clothes to express my personality."

Monica has a way of summing things up, and her enthusiasm for her work and people is contagious. She thinks of herself as a plugger because she won't give up when she wants something done. "And she makes us do it, too," laughs Deborah. It's Monica who's responsible for the philodendron growing in the iron pot on the coffee table because she likes to grow things.

"INTERESTING," Ann muses, "I've never really noticed what women wear. Guess I'll have to pay more attention now. There has been this apartness. Like maybe people are putting us on a pedestal. . . as though we didn't have the same feelings as all women. . ."

"That's why we are becoming a lay group. We can reflect to other women. So we can relate to them," Deborah says. "Clothes will probably make a difference. I can see it as a good thing. Maybe they'll no longer look on us as different."

All of the bishops in the five states where the Glenmary Sisters operate have approved the "secularization" of the order. A few sisters have disagreed with the decision of the majority, and will remain nuns.