

S0192 Dismas House (1959-)
Records, 1919-1978
238 Folders, 2 Volumes (On Microfilm), 10 Tapes

MICROFILM

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Reverend Fred Zimmerman, S.J., director of Dismas House, donated the records of Dismas House to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-St. Louis on July 14, 1982.

An additional 33RPM record was donated by Tim Lloyd in March 2015.

Reverend Charles Dismas Clark, a Jesuit priest, and Morris Shenker, a prominent St. Louis attorney, founded Dismas House as a halfway house for ex-convicts in August, 1959.

Clark was born in Pennsylvania in 1901, one of thirteen children of a coal miner. St. Mary's College in Kansas ordained him in 1932. Clark taught at St. Louis University High School during the 1930s, served as an Army chaplain during World War II, and conducted missions and retreats in the midwest from 1945-1959. He met Judge D.W. Fitzgibbons of the Court of Criminal Corrections of St. Louis in 1933. Fitzgibbons invited Clark to visit the courtroom to see the "hopelessness and suffering of the offenders brought before the bench." This visit led to Clark's interest in the problems of prisoners. He began visiting jails and prisons and advocating prison reform and rehabilitation programs. By the time he decided to open a halfway house, prisoners and ex-convicts had affectionately nicknamed him the "hoodlum priest."

A Russian immigrant, Shenker became a nationally known defense lawyer in the 1950s. He felt that prisons did "one thing very well, they make criminals better criminals." He met Father Clark in the courts and both men realized they had the same perception of the criminal justice system.

In 1959 Clark received permission from the Missouri Jesuit Province to open a halfway house. Shenker offered financial assistance and bought the former Jefferson school building at 905 Cole street for \$42,000 from the St. Louis Board of Education. Clark and Shenker renovated the school into a home for sixty men. They named it "Dismas House", after St. Dismas, the good thief who died next to Jesus. In spite of its name, and Father Clark's priesthood, the house was non-sectarian.

Dismas House opened on November 1, 1959. Clark and Shenker envisioned a place where "friendless, homeless, powerless men could have lodging, food, clothes, and a helping hand until they got a job." They accepted primarily men from the Missouri penitentiary, but also men from other prisons. Parolees and flat-timers (those who had completed their sentences) who had been approved by parole boards, prison officials, and the directors of Dismas, were accepted. Clark believed parole was the best way to rehabilitate prisoners because of the

lower recidivism rate among parolees versus flat-timers. Alcoholics, drug addicts, and psychopaths were not admitted, because of the special counseling they required. Clark saw himself and Dismas House as a liaison between the ex-convict and society. It offered counseling to help the released prisoners readjust to society and an employment agency to help them find jobs.

Father Clark and Dismas House received a lot of publicity, not all of it favorable. Local newspaper editorials criticized the halfway house approach and neighborhood residents complained about criminals living in their midst. Clark's charismatic personality ensured publicity, especially when he criticized the criminal justice system and called judges worse criminals than the men he served. He received his greatest notoriety after the release of the movie, "The Hoodlum Priest." United Artists produced the movie and Don Murray played the part of Clark. Location shots were filmed in St. Louis and the premiere of the film opened at the Loew's State Theater on February 28, 1961.

By the time of Clark's death in August 1963, over 2000 men had passed through Dismas House, and 95-98% of them had been successfully rehabilitated. Criticism had turned to praise and halfway houses were being established all over the country. The "hoodlum priest" was mourned by prisoners across the country.

Father Fred L. Zimmerman, S.J. became the director of Dismas House after Father Clark's death, and continued his predecessor's commitment to the former prisoners. Dismas House originally had relied on charitable donations from individuals. The Teamsters supported Dismas House with contributions, including a benefit show in 1965 which starred Frank Sinatra. As this kind of support diminished, Dismas House became more involved with federal and state correctional agencies. It was accepted by the Federal Bureau of Prisons in 1969 and the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1971 to take pre-releasees men who were released several months prior to parole and served the remainder of their sentences in halfway houses. Dismas House also applied for grants from the Missouri Law Enforcement Council and the Missouri Council on Criminal Justice. Father Zimmerman served as an advisor to both groups.

In 1972 Dismas House moved to 5025 Cote Brillante. Over 11,000 men had been helped through counseling, shelter, or job placement. Dismas House continues the philosophy of Father Clark, rehabilitation takes place in society, not behind bars.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Dismas House Records, 1919-1978, document the activities of the Dismas House from 1959 to 1978. The collection is divided into four series, arranged chronologically: (1) Records, 1919-1978; (2) Scrapbooks, 1956-1961; (3) Artifacts and Photographs, 1959-1978; (4) Tapes, 1961-1967.

The records series reflects Dismas House's fund--raising efforts, rehabilitation programs and its contacts with various government agencies, private foundations, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, other halfway houses, and individuals. Notable correspondents are Morris Shenker, Robert F. Kennedy, Jimmy Hoffa, Thomas Eagleton and Richard Nixon. The correspondence is particularly valuable for the insight it gives into Dismas House's relationship with the Teamsters, Anheuser-Busch and other private funding sources.

Testimonial comments from ex-convicts who were helped by Dismas House and newsclippings on the problems of ex-convicts are included. The series also contains material for the film, "The Hoodlum Priest."

The records series also shows Father Clark's successful attempts to publicize his work. Brochures, circulars, public relations letters and other literature published by Dismas House explain its mission and make appeals for funds. It also includes magazine and newspaper articles about Dismas House from 1956 to 1963 as well as articles written by Father Clark on corrections reform. Material from Father Clark's administration ends with his death in 1963.

Under Father Zimmerman's direction, Dismas House became increasingly involved with the Missouri Law Enforcement Assistance Council and the Missouri Council on Criminal Justice, two state agencies created to deal with problems of the criminal justice system. Material from this period includes grant applications, correspondence, funding requests and award notices from these agencies pre-release contract agreements with the federal government, and tax reform memoranda. The records series also contains annual reports from 1966 to 1972 and board of directors minutes from 1971 to 1973.

The scrapbooks include newsclippings on the activities of Father Clark as well as material on the premiere of "The Hoodlum Priest" film. Artifacts includes posters, certificates of appreciation, and a St. Dismas medal. The photographs include shots of Father Clark and Father Zimmerman, "The Hoodlum Priest" film premiere, the Dismas House building, the memorial dinner for Father Clark and the Teamster Charity Show. Tapes of interviews with and about Clark and his lectures are included.

There are two folders that predate the founding of Dismas House, containing Father Clark's military records, 1919 to 1952, and newsclippings from 1956.

SERIES DESCRIPTION 1. Records, Folders 1-228, 1919-1978. Arranged alphabetically. Correspondence, financial records, annual reports, minutes, newsclippings, bylaws, brochures, circulars, publications, articles, Clark's appointment calendars, reports, grant applications, pre-release agreements with prisons, fundraising material, and programs, premiere invitations, and correspondence from "The Hoodlum Priest."

2. Scrapbooks, one roll of microfilm, 1956-1961. Contains newsclippings about Father Clark's activities, Dismas House, and "The Hoodlum Priest."

3. Artifacts and photographs, Folder 229-238, 1959-1964. Posters, St. Dismas medal, certificates of appreciation, and photographs #5765-5948 (#5927-3934 are located in the mapcase).

4. Tapes, T-748-757, 1961-1967. Lectures by Father Clark and interviews with Clark and former residents of Dismas House.

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