

By PETER N. PAULA

You can learn a lot about Sr. Ann Thomasine Sampson, CSJ, just by looking around her bright, cozy office at St. Joseph's provincial house, St. Paul.

On one wall hangs an award from the National River Academy making the Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet an honorary master riverboat pilot. Near it hangs her master's degree in music from Northwestern university.

Across the room is a picture of the log Chapel of St. Paul, where her great-grandparents were married, and a lantern from one of the river boats she traveled on.

Nearby are mementos of the year she spent teaching and traveling in Europe and books on some of her special interests — the history of her Religious order, genealogy and music.

The nun is a "river rat," an oral historian, musician and teacher, just to name a few.

But Sr. Ann Thomasine, 62, insists she's not doing anything outstanding.

"I'm just doing the best I can," she told me with a hearty laugh.

The Minneapolis native has traveled more than 12,000 miles by towboat on American rivers in recent years. Now she is in the third year of an oral history study in her order after teaching history, religion and music for 33 years in schools in the Twin Cities and North Dakota.

And Sr. Ann Thomasine believes the credit should go to her order. "I've been asked to adapt. The Sisters discovered in me talents I didn't know existed. They asked things of me with the confidence that I could do them," she told me. "I think that's one of the best things about the Religious life."

That's a lesson she learned over and over again in the oral history project. "The Sisters have a pioneer spirit, a



tremendous sense of humor, a spirit of faith and they came to give of themselves," Sr. Ann Thomasine said.

In the Religious life, "you don't call all the signals," she told me. "It's like the words of the Lord: 'I've come to do the work of my Father.'"

She said that the project, spurred by the International Women's Year and the Bicentennial, was designed to "bring to the forefront the work of 2,247 Sisters of St. Joseph who served in Minnesota since 1851."

The work, which started as a tribute to the pioneering Sisters, also includes extensive research on current developments. She wants to have "enough stories on what's happening right now to provide good information for future historians."

So far, some 200 Sisters have met with Sr. Ann Thomasine for taped interviews, which are outlined, transcribed, filed and cross-referenced according to a careful

## profiles in faith 'River rat' burrows into Sisters' history

system.

"Every Sister has got a tremendous story to tell, but she might not think so," Sr. Ann Thomasine said, noting that every interview opens up new areas to explore.

She has uncovered stories about how women came from Canada's Prince Edward Island to join the order and how faculty members at St. Agatha's Conservatory, St. Paul, left their classrooms and took up china painting to help raise money for the Sister's growing schools and hospitals.

Sr. Ann Thomasine also learned that the four pioneering Sisters who came to St. Paul from St. Louis in 1851 paid a total steamship passage of \$46.

Learning about that trip started Sr. Ann Thomasine on a voyage of her own. In 1972 she set out to retrace their trip on the Mississippi River.

Arrangements were made for her to travel on the towboats that push barges along the nation's river systems. The

towboats are the only practical way for her to travel on the river, Sr. Ann Thomasine noted, since pleasure boats are very expensive.

Now, after five trips, Sr. Ann Thomasine has earned the nickname "river rat." With 600 slides and 200 pages of diaries, she hopes to write a book about her experiences. In the meantime, she gives lectures on river life, ecology, industry and trade to a wide variety of groups.

"It's a world most people know nothing about," she told me.

"The companies gave me permission to sail on their towboats as a guest. And the men didn't quite know what to expect," she said. "Most of them had never seen a nun before and I think they were expecting something like the flying nun or the singing nun."

"But it all went very well," Sr. Ann Thomasine said. "They knew I wasn't afraid to lend a hand when I could."

One of seven children, Sr. Ann Thomasine grew up in southeast Minneapolis and attended St. Lawrence school and St. Margaret's academy.

That background plus her work in the Church have made Sr. Ann Thomasine believe that this is the "most exciting period in the history of the Church."

"We can't get upset. We have to keep our eyes and ears open, pray and read," she told me.

And she believes that a little optimism is long overdue. "We'll come out of this period with a much stronger faith. The Lord didn't tell us to be pessimistic. We're supposed to be filled with happiness."

On the door to her office is a little card with the quotation Sr. Ann Thomasine has adopted as her motto: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

I bet she "lights a candle" every day!