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Creche Dates to 1800s

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This fall, an old Nativity set in a sacristy cabinet of the Immaculate Conception Chapel turned sacristan Kathy Sales, also a professional librarian, into a history detective.

With the help of Rachel DeHart and Sandy Braman in University archives, she turned up some clues that give convincing evidence that the crèche has been at UD almost as long as the 1869 chapel itself.

"The earliest picture I found is labeled 'Christmas at the Chapel, 1895,'" Sales said. "When you use a magnifying glass, you can see outlines of the same figures. I don't know when we actually received it, but 1895 is the first picture. ... There are absolutely no markings of any kind on this set."

The 17-piece plaster crèche — including Sales' favorite piece, a dog - is still in excellent shape for its age, said Sister M. Jean Frisk, S.S.M., director of art and special projects for the Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute. Some paint is chipping, and bits and pieces have been knocked off over the years. Restoration should be fairly simple, Sales said.

Though it's well-preserved, the crèche is still relatively fragile and will not be on display this Christmas, Sales said, "but there is great interest in restoring the pieces and then displaying them in the chapel."

The chapel renovation and expansion committee is discussing the matter, and Frisk is preparing it for safe storage until restoration begins. In the meantime, the chapel will continue to display the set made by Brother Don Smith, S.M., in the early 1970s, Sales said.

Alas, the angel that was shown suspended over the Holy Family in the old crèche's 1895 photograph is missing, probably a casualty of gravity — not an uncommon fate for Nativity scene angels.

But it's much better than a fall from grace.