One of the Adrian Dominican Sisters to come out of America’s Southwest was Sister Madonna Marie Black, born Marian Loretto Black on March 15, 1926, in Kingman, Arizona.

Marian was the third of Arthur Francis and Mabel (Van Marter) Black’s ten children. The other children – five girls and three boys – were Virginia, Don, Leo, Viola, Katherine, Charles, Mai, Helen, and Fran. Katherine died suddenly at age three.

Arthur came to Kingman from Kansas, while Mabel was born in California. When the two first met, she was teaching in a one-room schoolhouse and he was working in a local mine. After they married in 1916, she gave up her teaching career to raise their family.

Both Mabel and Arthur were artistically and musically talented. As a girl, Mabel played in the Van Marter Juvenile Band, an ensemble directed by her grandfather that consisted of young family members and other Kingman residents. She played cornet and was the only girl in the band. In her married life, she sang and played piano, while Arthur could play violin and harmonica.

“Home life, in my ‘growing-up’ years, was like living in a Music Conservatory and Art Studio – all at the same time – with lots of family competition for me!” Sister Madonna Marie wrote.

Besides his musical capabilities, Arthur clearly had an entrepreneurial streak, for he became very well-known in Kingman for his transportation companies. He owned and operated the Boulder Dam Line bus company and started the first taxi, freight, and school bus services as well. Later on, he became Arizona’s highway commissioner.

Marian attended public school for all twelve years of her primary and secondary education. In high school she did everything she could involving music, as well as developing her skills in painting and sculpting.

She also ended up being involved with her choir at St. Mary’s Church in quite an unexpected way. When she was just a high school freshman, she found herself with what she called a “golden opportunity”: the parish’s adult choir disbanded and she asked the pastor if she could form a new choir. He enthusiastically agreed, and she invited all the local high school and grade school teachers to come and sing with the choir whether they were Catholic or not. She also spoke with the chaplain and choir director at the local Air Force base, and they sent twenty-one cadets. “All of the Air Force soldiers [sic] had wonderful voices and were so happy to see some ‘girls’ once again!” she wrote. Also part of the choir were her mother, who sang lead alto, her sister Viola, and Nelda Klein, who went on to become the Congregation’s Sister Ellen Dolores.

And so, at the age of fifteen, Marian was directing an adult mixed choir every Sunday as well as at the Air Force base occasionally for special Masses. This lasted until she graduated from high school in 1944 and went off to college, Georgian Court College (now University) in Lakewood, New Jersey, to study music. Some of the airmen she had come to know over her four years directing the choir even came to wave goodbye as she left by bus for New Jersey.

She only was able to spend one year at Georgian Court because her mother had serious surgery and she returned to Kingman to help out. It was during her time back home that she first met the Adrian
Dominican Sisters, including Sister Maria Inviolata (Sister Marjorie Delaplane), who would later be her sponsor in entering the Congregation.

Her sister Viola was the one who actually entered first, becoming a student in the Congregation’s “prep” school after graduating from eighth grade. Viola went on to be Sister Rose Regina.

Inspired to follow in her sister’s footsteps, Marian wrote to Mother Gerald Barry, and received a telegram from her saying “Come now – if you can!”

With very little preparation but with the encouragement of her parents, she left Kingman by bus on June 30, 1945, just three weeks after Viola’s departure and again with some of the airmen there to see her off.

Three bus accidents and other delays later, she finally arrived, exhausted, in Adrian on July 3. She wrote in a section of her life story that she knew so little about the sisters that she thought she was entering a cloister for a deeper, contemplative prayer life. Instead, of course, she became a teacher.

Incidentally, Viola and Marian were followed into the Adrian Dominicans by the family’s two youngest girls, first Fran and then Helen. Fran enrolled in the prep school as well and later became Sister Rose Madonna, while Helen became Sister Virginia Marian. Viola, Fran, and Helen all eventually left the Congregation.

Sister Madonna Marie spent twenty-eight years in teaching ministry. After completing her canonical novitiate year in January 1947, she began teaching music and religion at St. Mary High School in Adrian, remaining there for the rest of the school year. Her subsequent ministries took her to St. Gabriel School, Detroit (1947-1948); St. Brendan School, San Francisco, California, as a teacher (1948-1959) and then principal (1959-1965); Sacred Heart School, Santurce, Puerto Rico (1965-1966); St. Jude School, St. Petersburg, Florida (1966-1967); St. Martin De Porres High School, Detroit (1967-1969); Queen of Heaven School, Albuquerque, New Mexico (1969-1970); Bishop Amat Memorial High School, La Puente, California (1970-1971); and Queen of Angels School, Los Angeles (1971-1975). In all of these schools, her duties included teaching music, art, or both.

Along the way, she completed her bachelor’s degree in music at Siena Heights College (University) in 1952 and her master’s in music from the University of Southern California in 1961.

Queen of Angels ended up being her final classroom ministry. After her four years there, she spent a year at Pictured Rocks Retreat House near Tucson, Arizona, where she was able to pray, paint, and write poetry. The experience marked a shift for her into parish liturgical and music ministry, which took her to St. Mary Parish, Kingman, Arizona (1976-1977), St. Paul Church, Phoenix, Arizona (1977-1978), and as an administrative assistant and music minister at Mesa Community College, Mesa, Arizona (1978-1979).

She moved back to her family’s Kingman home in 1980 to care for her mother (Arthur having died in 1971) and ministered in music at St. Mary Parish. Mabel died in 1987, but Sister Madonna Marie stayed in her ministry for three more years until emergency surgery forced her retirement. She remained in Kingman, however, writing poetry, helping write the history of St. Mary Parish and gathering material for the Mohave County Museum and the Route 66 Museum, and assisting her sister Fran after Fran went into a care facility. She also formed a weekly non-denominational prayer/meditation group that led to a telephone ministry.

And, finally, she was finding the time for contemplation that she had thought would be hers when she left Kingman for Adrian all those decades earlier. In a letter to friends at St. Brendan, she wrote:
I am now greatly enjoying a quiet, contemplative lifestyle in the same home I left fifty years ago … to enter the convent in Adrian, Michigan. At the time I thought I was entering a cloister for a deeper prayer life. It seems as though God is now allowing me to fulfill the desire for what I set out to accomplish at age nineteen.

Finally, declining health led her to return to Adrian to live in 2013. She died at the Dominican Life Center on February 15, 2020, aged ninety-three and in her seventy-fourth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

“I have always been happy and very proud to be an Adrian Dominican Sister,” she had written as part of her life story. “Never have I regretted my ‘quick and sudden decision’ to enter and follow Mother Gerald’s ‘telegram call’ to ‘Come now if you can’!”

Among the many remembrances shared after her passing was one sent in by her sister Helen. “Your spirituality will stream through my consciousness along with those you have touched,” Helen wrote. “How fortunate and life changing for me is the music of the spheres that you cherish and luckily left in my care. … Your job now is one of great service to those of us remaining who love you. … We know that you will be with us always. Fly high, Share your music, your love. We shall unite again.”
Right: The four Black daughters who were in the Adrian Dominican Congregation – from left, Sisters Virginia Maria (Helen), Madonna Marie (Marian), Rose Regina (Viola) and Rose Madonna (Fran) – stand behind their parents, Mabel and Arthur.

Right: Postulant Viola Black and Sister Madonna Marie Black stand in front of the bus that will take them West.

From left: Sister Madonna Marie in Kingman, Arizona. Faculty members at St. Brendan School, San Francisco, 1953-54 were: back row, from left, Sisters Madonna Marie Black, Catherine James Madden, Margaret James Sieberman, and Jane Celeste Fries, and front row, from left, Sisters Mary Roseen Maier, Jean Immaculate McNamara, Elizabeth Clare Schindler, and Rose Regina Black.
Right: From left, Sisters Virginia Kleckner, Mary Noella Osentoski, Norita Marie Barrett, and Madonna Marie Black celebrate Jubilee in the chapel in Henderson, Nevada, April 14, 1996.

Members of the 2015 Double Diamond Jubilee Class are: back row, from left, Sisters Anne L. Lindquist, Margaret Mary Heinz, Attracta Kelly (Prioress), Jeanne Marie O’Laughlin, and Therese Margaret Roberts, and front row, from left, Sisters Jane Quirk, Donna Wencel, Marcelline Fouchey, Madonna Marie Black, and Marie Sheila Beatty.