80-year-old nun still active at Fort Belknap

By KAREN McGRATH

The older Indians, most are dead; the young must speak for them instead. Most young people do not care, their Indian way of life to share. If you see the Indian way is lost, they will not share, at any cost. Now, when the good in cultures past could save this trouble world at last, so few are left to spread the word—to mention it, they think absurd. I plead with you, dear Indian youth, preserve the culture of your birth.

—Sister M. Giswald Kramer, O.S.F. 1979

Even as a little girl in Wisconsin, Sister M. Giswald Kramer had a feeling she would devote her life to being a nun. After all, she walked around with a towel hanging from her head, pretending that the impractical headpiece was a nun's veil.

At the age of 16, in the middle of her junior year in high school, she entered training at the Order of Saint Francis' mother house in Milwaukee. At the age of 18, she took her vows, and became a nun, the only nun who would come out of her family of four sisters.

"I was a teacher right from the start," Sister Giswald says today. "I come from a whole family of teachers. The first teacher I ever had was my own aunt."

This Friday, Sister Giswald celebrates her 80th birthday, and the fact that she's 80 is surprising. She's spry and witty, and extremely light on her feet. Eighty years old she may be, it's more like she's eighty young.

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After a rest of six years away from the mission, Sister Giswald returned there, and has remained there ever since.

"I was adopted into the Gros Ventre-Fort Belknap tribe," she says. "I've lived my life through and with these people."

So she has. The Gros Ventre of the Fort Belknap Reservation obviously respect and love her. They gave her the Indian name of "Pipe Woman," a name that symbolizes how much the Indians think of her—for the Gros Ventres, the pipe is sacred, and it signifies peace.

Sister Giswald has taught classes from first grade on up in her years at the mission. Now, she teaches only one home economics class per day. The rest of her day is spent in administrative duties.

But, not all has been peaches and cream at the mission. On Dec. 5, 1973, the mission's high school and other buildings burnt to the ground. "It's a school was devastated, and half the convent was burnt beyond repair. Despite 1973's fire, a new school and convent were reconstructed.

Her days now are somewhat routine; she says, "I get up at five, and say my prayers," she says. "I take an hour or more for that. I like a lot of time. I go Mass at seven, and go to the school at quarter to eight and open the building and meet the children. I turn on the P.A. system and play some good music, some classical music, just to open the children up to it so they know there is that kind of music. They don't need that bing, bing all the time. Then I make phone calls and go around to all the rooms. The mornings go all too fast."

Her afternoons are spent in her office, and she goes home to the convent at about 5 p.m. "I get tired at the end of a school day," she says, "but that's my right."

Sister Giswald has started several pen pal friendships throughout the country. One pen pal of hers, Walt Goldworthy of Three Lakes, Wis., started correspondence with her when his son became ill.

"He was very ill," Sister Giswald says. "Walt called our church and asked for him. He got better."

Goldworthy says, "I have never met the good sister. However, she has been a faithful pen pal for the last five years. I admire her courage, her spirit and her dedication."

Dedication is the word. Sister Giswald is totally dedicated to the Gros Ventres of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

"Montana is my adopted state," Sister Giswald says, "and the Indians are my people."