Montana parade
Big hearts in the Little Rockies

Faith, education have been tools of Franciscans in half century on reservation

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The Montana parade was a grand event, bringing the community together under the bright morning sky. Below, a small group of Franciscans were gathered outside the St. Paul Mission School, which would not be far behind.

As the tour wound through the school and part of the adjacent convent, the sisters made a last ditch attempt to save valuable records. As the areas were not as far as the fire engulfed the dry wood buildings, creating a fierce flame, the attention was on the women. The women of the town had gathered to watch the school's destruction.

"I remember they moved one truck up next to the fire to cool the water, but instead, all the lights on the truck caught on fire," Sister Clare Hartmann recalled.

The tragic fire hit 80 students without a school and the entire community. But the sisters saw the event as an opportunity to reunite.

With prayer and faith, they reassured, the Good Lord would provide. "They were completely without work saving their lives and were happy to return to the school at once." Sister Clare Hartmann stated.

For the past 17 years, Sister Clare and Sister Giwolka have been serving as the St. Paul Mission School on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in northern Montana since the late 70s. The mission was founded in 1887 by Jesuit brothers and Ursuline sisters.

Sister Clare Hartmann, standing, and Sister Giwolka Kramer have been serving the St. Paul Mission School on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in northern Montana since the late '70s. The mission was founded in 1887 by Jesuit brothers and Ursuline sisters.
rebuilding began. Once again, faith and prayer pulled them through, they said.

In the spacious home that now houses Sisters Clare and Giswalda — along with relative newcomer Sister Germaine Werth, who has been at the Mission for 23 years — the nuns look back on their half century of work among the Indians. Sister Giswalda, who has been ill, has difficulty speaking. But she nods along with Sister Clare, who describes their neighbors as a “truly gentle” people who have lived in often miserable poverty.

Sister Clare recalls hard winters when families barely had enough to eat and were forced to pull up floor boards to use as firewood to keep their small homes warm. Still, she said, the white-run reservation government often refused to admit problems existed.

“The Indians have always accepted the white people who came here, but the whites were not so kind,” the diminutive Sister Clare says earnestly. “The racism has come from outside, from people who wanted to Americanize the Indian, make him cut his hair and forget his ways. What a shame.”

The key to change, she says, is education. And that is where the sisters felt they could do the most good.

“When we first came here, all the government jobs were held by white men and the council members were just token ‘yes-yes men’ who had no power,” she said. “The people we’ve educated have become leaders, council members and teachers, and that’s a beautiful change for these people.”

The sisters, who insist on wearing the semi-traditional habits of their faith, say the Catholic religion has meshed well with the Indian beliefs and customs.

“The Indian pipe is not prayed to or worshipped as a god, it is used to reach God, like our rosary,” Sister Clare explains. “The pipe fit into our religion and our beliefs fit into theirs. It’s actually very harmonious.”

The sisters’ home is furnished with an eclectic assortment of furniture, appliances and religious figurines. It is a testimonial to the generosity of others: everything has been given to the sisters.

“We’ve always prayed and our prayers have always been answered,” Sister Clare says, as she describes how the school, the convent and the homes of area families have often been the beneficiaries of others.

In the harsh winters of the ’30s and ’40s, the sisters wrote to their families and other friends of the needs on the reservations. Soon, blankets, curtains and even food flooded the mails. The tradition has continued. A group of Ohio women has provided a lawn mower and a snow blower. Others have brought in beds, dishes, whatever was needed.

“One day at the door there was a package with a VCR in it, and we still don’t know who it came from, but we sure needed it,” Sister Clare said.

The VCR, like many of the donated gifts, was turned over to the school. The Mission School no longer offers high school classes — there simply weren’t enough teachers to hold them — but there are still 70 to 80 students who return each year.

The sisters say they are “completely committed” to staying in Montana and keeping the school open. But they admit the task may not be easy. Both Sisters Clare and Giswalda are aging and say they’d like to retire. But there simply are no new sisters available to replace them.

“Who’s going to take our place when we die or can’t do this anymore?” Sister Clare asks. “That’s why we don’t retire and just keep hanging on.

“The future doesn’t look very bright to us … I think maybe when we go, the school may go,” she said. But, there’s always reason for hope, she adds: “The good Lord provides, you know.”