Christmas at St. Paul's Indian Mission Is A Moving Event

(STORY AND PICTURES BY JANET ALLISON)

By JANET S. ALLISON

The road to Christmas swoops down past the strange hills called The Three Sisters, bends around the village of Hays and stops in the snow beside the old buildings of St. Paul's Indian Mission. There, at the foot of the Little Rockies with the Bear Paws towering up from the high bench into the northwest sky, they keep real Christmas.

Christmas at the Mission has been observed since 1887 when the school in charge of two Ursuline Sisters was formally opened Sept. 14 by Father Frederick Eberschweiler, S.J. The mission stands on land set aside from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation by the Gros Ventres chiefs for providing Christian education for their children.

Until 1925 only eight grades were taught and the school was a boarding school. Then the girls' dormitory burned during the Little Rockies' forest fire, the Ursulines were recalled and the School Sisters of St. Francis consented to take over the school. "We arrived two weeks after the fire," said Sister M. Giswalda, O.S.F., school principal, "and the air was still smokey. The fathers and the boys had moved into the gym so their building could be used for the school. With men and boys in it all those years you can imagine what it was like. We had to wait till after Labor Day because they wanted to clean up and fix up a little. When we saw it after they had fixed it up I wondered what it must have been like before!"

The three - story sandstone building is a well-known landmark on the reservation. Its wooden floors are warped with age, massive staircases rear from floor to floor, the high-ceilinged classrooms this Christmastide are bright with angels, the rosy faces of children and the glorification of God. Twelve grades are taught, the first senior high school class graduating in 1941. The high school was accredited by the state of Montana that year and has kept its accreditation despite ever rising standards of education and the obstacles faced by the school staff. Mission High is still the only high school on the reservation.

Ninety children are enrolled in the grade school, 26 in high school. Grade school teachers are Sisters M. Benno, grades 7-8; Jarento, 5-6; Theresa, 3-4; Janice, 1-2. In the high school are Sr. Giswalda, English, mathematics and home economics teacher, principal and guidance counselor; Sr. Clare, Spanish, business and science teacher and librarian; Father Edmund Robinson, S.J., English and history teacher. Father Joseph Brown, S.J., St. Paul's pastor, teaches ethics.

Sister M. Felix is the homemaker, preparing the school hot lunch for the students and meals for the staff and attending to the necessary laundry and ironing. Brother Ryan, S.J., is the auto mechanic and handyman. Sr. Felix is assisted by Mrs. Mary Stiffarm Jones, a school alumnus. Until recently the school did not have a janitor. James Stiffarm is now custodian.

Students are brought to school by bus, the fathers driving the bus. High school students are charged tuition of $1 per semester and $1 per year breakage fee; no tuition is charged in the grade school. The school hot lunch is free. "We went into the question of charging," said Sr. Giswalda, "but some families have as many as eight children in school. Lunch would cost them $2 a day. They simply can't afford it. And this is the only balanced meal some of our children have." Sr. Felix receives some assistance from the school lunch program.

St. Paul's is a school mission, founded as part of the Pioneer Education Association. In addition to the school the mission priests serve 650 parishioners at Hays with two services every Sunday, 35 at Zortman with Mass twice a month and 175 at Lodgepole with Mass every Sunday. "The purpose of the school missions is the service of the Indian community," said Fr. Brown. The pastor of St. Paul's is a Blackfeet, a huge man of gentle speech and sharp mind. "This was DeSmet's original purpose and we are not phasing out or dying off. We're building it up and expanding it!"

"Our people are fully 50 years ahead of some Montana reservations," Sr. Giswalda asserted. Since there are three tribes on the reservation, English has been adopted as the common tongue. "So the children here do not come to school speaking nothing but Indian. There is a little discipline problem at first. Most Indian parents are very loving and want their children to love them and they are not punished at home. When they come to school they hear, 'No.' But I see the improvement from year to year, the change in the things they require as a matter of course. One of the girls has a cold today and there is a box of Kleenex on her desk. When we first came, a child wiped his nose on the back of his hand and shook it off. We had to teach them how to blow their noses.

"At first the sisters had to do everything. Now our alumni can take over lots of jobs. Like being Santa Claus for the Christmas party. They are very faithful about coming back. Young men bring their girl-friends to show off the school to them. Parents bring their babies back to St. Paul's to be baptized. It makes us very happy when a graduate boy marries a graduate girl; then they can both start even toward making a good marriage and a good home."

St. Paul's is a day school. "It is selfish parents who send their children to boarding school," Sr. Giswalda said. "When a school child is living at home, the parents have tasks that he gets up, gets to school and so on. Our students take home what they are learning day by day."

The school offers refresher courses to graduates who may need additional training to procure a job. The Parent-Teacher Organization meets every month at the school. School problems are discussed, an educational program is presented and one of the classrooms always entertains. "And we have had a married man graduate from the high school," Sister Giswalda said proudly. "He was in the service, came back married and entered high school as a freshman. His daughter is a junior here now. One of his sons just graduated."

The mission's service of the Indian community is clearly apparent in projects undertaken at Christmas time. The obstacles to the work are as plain.

"One of our biggest difficulties is absenteeism," Sr. Giswalda sighed as she excused a distressed high school girl who had been called home from class. "The children are kept out of school to help wash clothes, haul water, get wood from the mountains and cut it, to babysit -- some parents don't care. However, many are beginning to realize you have to have a high school education at least. They see our graduates getting good jobs; many of our alumni are employed now by the BIA at the Agency. When we first started here we saw these people at the Agency who were really making their living from the Indians. This high school was started to enable the Indians themselves to hold those jobs."

Finances are an ever-present struggle. The Bishop of Great Falls sends $18,000 a year. The mission farm lease earns another $500. Perhaps $500 is collected in the church. Such expenses as gas heat for the rambling, draughty buildings, milk for 116 children, bus transportation for the children, recent installation of a $2,000 dishwasher in compliance with health regulations and car maintenance all bite deep. The sisters receive some aid in their work from the Catholic Indian Bureau in Washington, D.C. For their small personal needs they are dependent on their families and friends. Such extras as new books are managed by sale of donated clothing and novelties and sale of student projects made in school. A big bake sale was held at Thanksgiving. Easter baskets are sold in the spring. At the spring quilt and style show, quilts, rugs and animal cakes made by the high school students are sold. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons the sisters sell clothing for 5 and 10 cents a garment or give clothes to those who cannot pay.

Staffing can also be a problem. The school has a craft shop for boys. State Home Economics Supervisor Flora Martin, Helena, gave the first $100 to start the shop and recently donated a wood lathe. Last year a VISTA volunteer took over the shop course, coming every day and training three to four boys per class, but this year there is no shop teacher. The school also owns band instruments and at one time had a good band. Then the brother who taught band died and the instruments have been packed away since. Sister Giswalda who, with Sr. Clare teaches the school choir, has managed to procure some xylophones and tonettes for student use. No funds are available to the school to pay teachers.

"But our chief problem is communications," said Fr. Brown, "a matter of public relations. Our own people know we are here. The people who sell us things like gas and milk know we are here, though perhaps they see us a little differently. But the people of the general community seem to know very little about us." This is due in part to the isolation of St. Paul's, 40 miles from Harlem, 60 miles from Chinook, and the inability of the Sisters to drive, though Sisters Theresa and Janice are now learning. "When people do realize what is going on at the mission they are more than willing to lend their time and talents. But," added Fr. Brown, "there are the two groups, Indian and white, and each group fears the other."

At Christmas the distance and fear shrink a little. North Montana businessmen donate for the candy sacks given to each child the last day of school. Harbolt Agency, Chinook, was the first 1967 donor. An annual Christmas donation from Mr. and Mrs. James G. Holland, Havre, is used to furnish a movie and Christmas remembrances to adults and children at the December PTO meeting. "Most of our parents don't see a movie very often and we always have a good one," said Sr. Giswalda. "Years ago we couldn't think of a movie. Why, even the cheapest costs $12.50!"

But Christmas is more than receiving. Within ingenuity born of long years of "make do," the sisters contrive to open the joys of Christmas giving to their pupils.

The seventh and eighth grades have made potholders and Christmas card balls as presents for their parents. Said Sr. Benno, "Sister Giswalda and I have often said if we had a patent on all the things we've made from old Christmas cards we'd be millionaires. But often we don't have enough cards."

Grades five and six made candy boxes, quart milk cartons covered with brick-patterned paper and trimmed with white paper to represent snow-capped chimneys, and Christmas tree centerpieces made by folding down the page corners of Readers Digest. "My sister sent me these Digests," said Sr. Jarento, "so we have enough to go around." In addition to using magazines for class projects, the sisters disburse them among the Indian community for few have magazine subscriptions, though they read anything they can get.

The Christmas season at St. Paul's was ushered in the second Sunday in December with a Christmas songfest in the gymnasium. The stage was decorated with store decorations contributed by Leroy Christensen, Safeway manager at Chinook, two Christmases ago. After the song program, Christmas fruitcakes made by the boys and girls of the home crafts class were sold to parents and friends.

Proceeds from the fruitcakes and from the sale of banana bread and Christmas cookies made by the home crafts class go to make more bread and cookies, then the students pack Christmas boxes for the aged and shut-ins. Just before Christmas, sisters and students pile into family cars borrowed by students for the occasion and make Christmas visits to deliver the boxes.

The home crafts class meets in the Little House of Loretto, the unique and self-supporting practice house donated to the school to give students practical homemaking experience. Christmas is observed in the House of Loretto with a Christmas Eve dinner held before school recesses for the holidays. This year the girls in the class will cook the dinner for the 12 class members and Fathers Brown and Robinson. The menu is eight roast chickens and accompanying dishes. Because the boys are always so hungry the girls and Sr. Giswalda have resolved this year they are going to be filled up.

At every plate at this dinner is a little figure from the Nativity scene. When all have eaten, each takes a figure and all go in procession to the decorated Christmas tree in the living room where a crib is set up. While everyone sings "Silent Night," each places a statue in the crib. Then the group sings a round of Christmas carols. Under the tree which the students decorate themselves are the wrapped boxes of Christmas cookies and fruitcakes they have made as gifts to their parents. This year Sr. Giswalda measured 1/3 cup wine into each cake.

Every Christmas the high school boys' club, the Aquinas Club and the girls' club and the Fatima Club undertake Christmas projects for the needy, ill, aged and lonely. Sister Clare is moderator for both clubs. Last year the boys made cardboard stables and plaster Nativity statuettes and took them to the Harlem Rest Home. The girls bake cookies at home and make up boxes for the Rest Home, the Agency hospital, Old Town or wherever a need is seen.

"When our people have money they are generous, they give willingly," Sr. Giswalda said. "This year we and our students have just finished packing 20 boxes of clothing to be shared with people who are poorer than we are -- those overseas. We had some clothing here at the school and Father announced in church to bring clothing for the poor. And people brought from their meager stores."

On the last day of school, each school child is given a sack holding an apple, an orange, a popcorn ball, candy and peanuts and one or two new pencils that have been donated by local merchants. Sister Felix always prepares a Christmas dinner for school lunch that day, serving turkey or chicken. When the students return in January they have Christmas all over again, each child receiving a toy or small gift wrapped in Christmas paper and candy. This custom was started by the sisters because many children have no Christmas at home.

Christmas Day is observed with 9:00 Mass and a community Christmas party in the Hays Community Hall. For many years this party was held in the school gym. For a year or two after moving it to the hall no party was given, but it has been revived this year because it is the only Christmas in many cases for the children too little to go to school. It is sponsored by a community committee which has worked during the year to raise money for the event. "We had a big Christmas tree," Sr. Giswalda reminisced, "and every child got a big sack of candy and so on. Santa Claus came and passed out the sacks and then danced a jig, and after that there was Indian dancing."

The mission Christmas trees come from the nearby forest. This year Charles Work, Peter Morin and Gaylord Quincy went to the mountain during study hall and brought in jack pine to be used in the gym and the big outdoor crib. On their own time they went back to get three perfect little firs for the House of Loretto, the sisters' house and the fathers' dining room. The outdoor crib is set up in the snow on the south side of the school, life-size figures made and painted by the high school boys. As Christmas nears in the evenings the sisters set a phonograph near the window with the speaker outside. A concert of carols reaches across the snowy flat to raise sweet echoes against the mountains. The afternoon before Christmas the sisters are busy with last minute requests for gifts -- "Though we haven't any for sale this year" -- and harried callers who need shoes or a coat or dress to wear that evening.

Then it is Christmas Eve. By 11:30 the church is nearly filled. "At first there were only teams and wagons around our church," said Sr. Giswalda, "but now it is cars, maybe not new cars but clean and kept up." During the half hour before midnight carols are sung with Sister Clare at the organ. This year, because Sister Clare is ill, Mission High alumnus Clarence Moreau will play the organ.

At midnight the carols end and in the silence the angel procession enters the church. One big angel -- always a senior girl, and it is a great honor to be chosen as the big angel -- leads the procession carrying the statue of the Infant on a pillow. Ribbons hang from the pillow corners, Four little cherubs hold the ribbons. Other angels and six small acolytes follow, Father Brown meets the procession in front of the church, takes the Infant, places it in the crib and Masses it. Then Midnight Mass is celebrated.

And that is how they observe Christmas there.

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DANCE OF THE SNOWMEN -- While a third and fourth grade chorus sang "Frosty the Snowman" during the Mission School Songfest, the song was enacted by snowmen, from left, Mike Doney, Eddie Hasley, Kim Norquay, Sherman LaValle, Franklin Doney and Evan Morin. Sister M. Theresa stands behind the snowmen.

NATIVITY PLAYERS -- During the Christmas Songfest, Mission School first and second graders portrayed the Nativity and sang songs including "Robin in the Tree" and solos "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" by Eddie Fliesteed and "Jingle Bells" by Joey Kirkaldie. From left, back row: Sr. M. Janice Wingert, Joey Kirkaldie, Linda Allen, Eddie Fliesteed, Cheryl Buckey, Annette Big Leggins, Ann Work, Neil Work. Middle row, Lee Allen Manual (king), Kathy Main (Golden star). Front row, Kings Alvin and Andrew Main, twins; Dorothy Kirkaldie (Mary), Montague Fox (Joseph), Evelyn Doney, Kathleen Doney. Note the angels' halos; each angel wore bright crepe paper wings to match his halo color.

BOXES FOR THE POOR -- Parishioners of St. Paul's Mission contributed clothing for Christmas giving to the poor overseas. School Sisters of St. Francis and students packed 20 boxes like this one being carried into the school entry by Charles Work (left) and Duane Gone while Leon Stiffarm holds the door.

MISSION STAFF -- From left, standing, Sister M. Giswalda, O.S.F.; Father Edmund Robinson, S.J.; Sister M. Felix, O.S.F.; Father Joseph Brown, S.J.; Sister M. Benno, O.S.F. Seated from left, Sister M. Jarento, O.S.F.; Sister M. Theresa, O.S.F.; Sister M. Janice Wingert, O.S.F. Not present for the photograph were staff members Sister M. Clare, O.S.F., who was in the hospital, and Brother Ryan, S.J.

CANDY FOR CHILDREN -- In Mission High School's basement storeroom, gifts of Christmas goodies are packed by the Sisters for their students. Filling sacks from left are Sisters M. Benno, M. Jarento and M. Giswalda. Each bag is labeled with the student's name.

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