

## **St Stephen's Indian Mission Bishop McGovern**

[196] St. Stephen's mission was started in the year 1884 and has charge of the Arapahoe Indians who occupy the southeastern part of the Wind River and Shoshone reservation. The mission is situated near the center of Fremont county in the western part of the State of Wyoming and is about 175 miles southeast of the Yellowstone National park.

Originally dwelling in Minnesota, the Arapahoes moved across the Missouri river about the same time as the Sioux and the Cheyennes. In the year 1840 they made peace with the Sioux, Kiowin and Comanche Indians, but were always at war with the Shoshones, Utes and Pawnees, until they were at last confined to reservations. In 1851 Fr. DeSmet spent two weeks in the plain of the Great Council, where many tribes were assembled. These begged him to explain to them the sacrament of baptism, and after the instruction asked him to baptize their infants. Many of these died in a plague that followed shortly afterwards. In all he regenerated 1,586 of whom 305 were Arapahoes. By the treaty of Medicine Lodge the Southern Arapahoes together with the Southern Cheyennes were placed by the government on a reservation in Oklahoma. [197] In 1876 the Northern Arapahoes were assigned to their present reservation on the Wind River in Wyoming, but only after making peace with their hereditary enemy the Shoshone, who were to live on the same reservation.

As a people the Arapahoes are brave, but kindly and accommodating. They are much given to ceremonial observances. The annual Sun Dance was their greatest tribal ceremony. They buried their dead under ground unlike the Cheyennes and Sioux, who deposited them upon scaffolds or on the surface of the ground in boxes. The Northern Arapahoes in Wyoming are considered the mother tribe and so retain the sacred tribal articles, viz., the tribal pipe, one ear of corn and a turtle, all carved out of stone.

From 1876 to 1884 practically nothing was done to civilize these Indians. But in the latter year the government began to build a boarding school for the children of the Wind River reservation. Most Rev. James O'Connor, D.D., of Omaha had already collected \$5,000.00 to do something for them and, on hearing of the projected school offered this money to the government for fitting out the interior of the building. It seems that the government accepted the bishop's offer and had given him permission to take over the school and to provide it with teachers. Accordingly Fr. John Jutz of the Buffalo mission, a branch of [198] the German province, was appointed by his superior to take charge of this government school, situated near Fort Washakie, and the Franciscan sisters of Buffalo, were already selected as teachers. He started on his journey April 17, 1884, but when at last, after many hardships, he arrived at Lander City, he learned from Fr. Moriarty, (Rev. D.W. Moriarty, first pastor of Lander), who was stationed there at the time, that the government school had already been given over to an Episcopalian minister, the Rev. John Roberts. His disappointment, of course, was great. There had been too long a delay between the bishop's offer and Fr. Jutz's arrival. The minister had found a lodging place near the school and began teaching some Indian children, as soon as the first class room was ready. So very naturally the government gave the Episcopalians full charge of the new boarding school. First come, first grind. The setback was, nevertheless, providential. For the original plan would most probably have involved St. Stephen's in much fiercer battles than those she has had to fight. But what was poor Fr. Jutz to do? He consulted the agent, reminding him of the bishop's offer and the understanding with the government. The agent was very kind, but could only advise opening another school for the Indians wherever he pleased. Then Fr. Jutz remembered that the Arapahoes occupied the [199] eastern part of the reserve, and that they were said to be more inclined to culture than the Shoshone, having already sent some of their children to Indian schools in the East. So he resolved to begin his missionary activities among the Arapahoes. The Episcopalians have since given the Jesuits credit for great shrewdness in this choice. Having purchased a little pony

from one of the soldiers and a small tent from an army surgeon, he started at the end of May for his new mission situated on the delta formed by the Little and Big Wind rivers. “Fr. Moriarty and myself,” writes Fr. Jutz in vivid reminiscence, “set out from Lander early in the morning. My belongings and a few old boards found behind the store, were piled up in a wagon. On the way we picked up my pony and the tent and reached the country of the Arapahoes shortly after midday. My chattels were unloaded and after a brief respite the priest returned to Lander by a short cut, leaving me all alone with my Indians. I began at once to pitch my tent and to put up an altar for Mass on the following morning. Chief Black Coal was my next door neighbor, so I invited him and his two wives and two children to watch me during the Mass. He and his family sat down upon the ground before my tent and witnessed with awe the celebration of the Divine Mysteries. The Mass was my only spiritual missionary occupation as I did not understand [200] the Indian language, nor they mine. I next enlarged my habitation by making another tent out of the extra canvas which is usually spread over the tent itself. My sleeping apartment was in a corner of the tent and my bed a mattress made of hedge branches covered with buffalo hide. My kitchen was a hole in the ground into which I laid a few stones. During the first night I was awakened by the sound of a big bass drum and the ghostly incantations of the medicine men who were plying their skill at the home of a sick woman. I can hear that weird incantation to this very day, it left such an indelible impression upon my memory. “

After a few days Fr. Moriarty was recalled from Lander and after that Fr. Jutz said Mass there and at Fort Washakie on alternate Sundays, returning to his mission on Tuesday. One Saturday morning he started for the agency intending to say Mass there the next day, but by some mishap his pony, which had been borrowed from a friend at Lander, got away from him, carrying along all the requisites for Mass. An obliging Indian lent him another pony and on arriving at Lander, to his great joy and surprise, he met Brother Ursus Nunlist who had been sent out to him as a helper. The good brother’s surprise and joy were even greater than

his own, for he had been assured that the father had most likely been thrown [201] from his horse and drowned, for the pony had returned to Lander saddle and Mass-bag soaking wet. Then after a few days' shopping at Lander, they hired a wagon to carry the brother's luggage as well as other necessaries and returned to the mission.

Immediately after this plans were drawn up to build a suitable mission house 24x24 with four rooms on the ground floor, a chapel, a private room for the fathers, a kitchen and dining room, and the fourth a living room and work shop for the brother. The timber for the house had to be hauled from the mountain forests, thirty-five miles away. The walls were to be built of brick which would have to be made by hand, the consecrated hands of Fr. Jutz. He described this tiresome performance in a letter to the bishop, and the same appearing in the public papers later on, brought an offer first of \$500.00 and then of \$5,000.00 from Miss Katharine M. Drexel, > Later foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.> who henceforth became the real foundress not only of St. Stephen's but of many other Indian missions and institutions for the negroes. Meanwhile the attic of the house was fitted up into a fifth room for the priest who was soon to come to take charge of Lander and Fort Washakie. The priest, Rev. John Brenner, S.J., arrived in due time. He was very successful at the two stations, until one day when he gave a lecture to the soldiers [202] at the government post on the laws and obligations of marriage. That fatal lecture ended his usefulness. They would have no more of him, and even forbade him to come there after that. Then meeting with great difficulties in Lander itself which was known in those days as the Hell Hole, the good father lost his nerve completely, and giving way to discouragement, returned to Buffalo to report to his superior the condition of affairs in far off Wyoming. His superior then sent him to the bishop at Omaha to give a detailed account of his experiences, and to ask his excellency to give up the mission. But this the bishop absolutely refused to do, even reproaching the fathers with being unworthy successors of their heroic ancestors. Father Jutz vigorously protested against this accusation, declaring that he was

perfectly willing to remain at his post if his superior let him. A few months later, however, by orders from headquarters, Fr. Jutz and Brother Nunlist, after selling all their movables, and leaving the house in charge of the Indian Chief, returned to Buffalo.> Archives of the diocese of Omaha.> Then the bishop begged the new superior who had just been installed, to have Fr. Jutz return to St. Stephen's but being again unsuccessful the bishop now appealed directly to Fr. General in Rome, with the result that the Missouri province had to send out the old and tried Indian missionary, Fr. [203] Paul Ponziglione. He was accompanied by Brother Kilcullen who also had had long years of experience among the Pottawattamies in Kansas.

They arrived at the mission on June 30, 1886, and found it prudent, if not necessary, to give Chief Black Coal \$30.00 to get back the mission property, as he claimed it as his own by right of prescription. Then having renovated the house erected by Fr. Jutz, Fr. Ponziglione laid the corner stone for a sisters' convent on Sept. 29, 1886. On that same day Fr. J.H. Kuppens arrived on the scene as superior and began at once to erect the brick convent. He also secured from the government a title to 160 acres of land for the new mission, and set to work at once to have it cultivated. On the spiritual side he himself undertook the task of instructing the Indian children in Christian doctrine.

In the spring of 1887 it was found that the brick walls of the new convent had gone to pieces, having been built upon sand. Then, a new and higher site, about a mile west of the old one, where the walls would rest upon the solid rock, was selected, and here the stone and brick convent, which even to this day is a noble monument to the memory of Fr. Kuppens, was erected. Begun in March, 1887, the convent was ready for occupation by January, 1888, and during the year as many as ninety children were enrolled. They were taught reading and writing and instructed in religion [204] and after some time quite a number of them received the sacrament of baptism. Then in the beginning of July all the children returned to their homes.

In the following September, 1888, a number of difficulties arising in connection with the course of studies to be pursued, Fr. Kuppens thought it best to postpone the opening of school for a time. In February of 1889 he was replaced in the superiorship by Fr. Ignatius Panken, and Fr. Ponziglione returned to take charge of Lander and Fort Washakie. There had been no school from June, 1888, to January, 1890. Six Sisters of Charity arrived in the fall of 1888 to take charge of the school, and opened classes in Jan., 1890, with 85 boarders (both boys and girls) in attendance. Early in 1890, the Sisters of Charity, probably on account of difficulties and discouragement, were recalled to Leavenworth to return no more. Then as some other sisters of a different order who had been promised did not arrive, three women of Lander were hired to take charge of the girls, while Rev. Cornelius Scollen, a secular priest, was to teach the boys and so school opened again on the 1st of September, 1890. It soon became evident, however, that these people were not equal to the sisters in managing the children, and so, although there had been about ninety children enrolled, classes broke up in the beginning of May, 1891, and the children again, returned to their homes.

[205] On August 22d of the same year Rev. T.C. Quinn of Concordia, Kansas, arrived with five Sisters of St. Joseph to step into the breach. Then, on August 30, 1891, Fr. Panken handed over his superiorship to Fr. Aloysius Folchi of the California Rocky Mountain mission, a branch at the time of an Italian province. The Missouri province had taken charge of St. Stephen's mission only temporarily.

As the girls and boys had thus far lived in the same building, Rev. Philip Turnell, who had just succeeded Fr. Folchi, began another building for the use of the boys. In June, 1892, the Sisters of St. Joseph, after teaching just one year perhaps by previous agreement, were called away and replaced by six Sisters of St. Francis, who arrived on August 18, 1892, from Philadelphia. They had been sent out at the earnest request of Fr. Van Gorp of the Rocky Mountain mission, and Fr. J.A. Stephan of the Indian Bureau at Washington. After a few weeks three more sisters

arrived, making nine in all and these sisters have stood by St. Stephen's even to the present day. One of the original nine, Sister Liberata is still at her post, thirty-two years after her first arrival. The sisters "Records" of those days contain many thrilling incidents of their early experience and hardships, their disappointments as well as consolations. On Sept. 6th, their first school year began and lasted to June 30, 1893. [206] On the day previous the first communion was recorded in the person of Maggie Coal, the chief's daughter, and on the same day nineteen children were baptized.

In July, 1894, Fr. Turnell was succeeded by Fr. Bartholomew Feusi, who remained until 1901. During his long stay at the mission many improvements were made and the school was brought to a very flourishing condition. Many of the older Indians were baptized, and the farm was greatly enhanced in value by an irrigation ditch five miles in length which had been put in at a great expense by Fr. Feusi. Then there arrived in rapid succession as superiors, Frs. Sansone, Van der Velden, Durgan, and again Fr. Feusi, and in 1905 Fr. Wm. McMillan and after him Fr. J.B. Sifton. The latter was the first to learn the Arapahoe language, said to be one of the most difficult. He mastered it so well that he could even preach in their tongue and in consequence made many conversions among them. In the first years of the mission conversions had been few and far between, owing partly to the language difficulty and partly also to the indifference of the older Indians themselves. Then too, it had to face the financial difficulty of lodging, feeding and clothing an average of one hundred children, with no fixed income, depending entirely on what could be obtained from the farm and in the way of charitable donations. Mother Katharine Drexel took upon herself a heavy [207] part of this burden, until the government in 1911 agreed to apply a part of the tribal fund to the education of the Indian children, an annual per capita allowance of \$108.00. Nevertheless Father Sifton managed, even during those strenuous times, to erect the present laundry building and to furnish it with modern equipment. It must also be remembered that until 1906 all freight, express and even mail had to be

brought to the mission by stage, either from Rawlins or Casper, a distance of 150 miles in either direction.

In regard to the spiritual fruits of the mission we find in a record of 1904 that “up to date the number of baptized Indians still living is 360.” Later records show that the total number of baptisms from 1904 to 1924 was 973, and the total number of confirmations during the same period was 417. Episcopal visits to the mission have been as follows: June 13, 1897, Most Rev. Thos. H. Lenihan made his first visit and confirmed 58 persons. May 28, 1908, Most Rev. J.J. Keane made his first visit and confirmed 145 persons.

Bishop McGovern has administered confirmation every five years. All the priests of the diocese also visit the mission every three years for their retreat. They evidently consider it the quietest place in the State and always declare themselves well pleased with the accommodations. In 1922 the mission had the great honor of a visit from the Most Rev. Archbishop Hanna [208] of San Francisco, who conducted the priests’ retreat that year. So St. Stephen’s mission is really on the map.

In June, 1912, Fr. Sifton was notified that St. Stephen’s and the Dakota missions were to be given over again to the Missouri province in compliance with an order from Rome. The principal reason was that as this province had taken over the Buffalo mission and many of the priests who had toiled on those missions, she could more easily take care of them now than the California province. Fr. Sifton belonged to the latter, but was to remain at St. Stephen’s long enough to break in the new superior. This was Rev. P.F. Sialm who arrived on August 22, 1912. On Sept. 2d, Fr. Sifton, to the great regret of his community and all his Indians, departed for Alaska. Fr. Sialm’s term of office lasted only two years and although he had labored hard for the good of the mission and really accomplished a great deal, did not, however, satisfy the Indians who loudly demanded the return of their “good Father Sifton.” But as he belonged to another province and was sorely needed in Alaska, he was

of course, beyond recall. So Rev. A.J. Keel replaced Fr. Sialm on Sept. 2, 1914. Fr. Keel, who had arrived at the mission the previous year and had shrewdly sized up the whole situation, captivated the Indians from the start, and ever after inspired them with fear, reverence and obedience. [209] Among the whites for miles around the mission of St. Stephen has always had a reputation for honesty, uprightness and good will, and this has had the effect of engendering a feeling of friendly cooperation with the school on the part of all the other educational and welfare agencies on the reservation. The notable additions to the mission plant during these later years have been the erection of a large and commodious play hall for the children in the evenings or in bad weather and it serves as an ideal place for their basketball games and picture shows. Then the entire renovation of the cow barn and poultry house as well as the building up of a fine dairy herd of Holsteins. The whole county talks of the mission garden and the excellent work done in raising plants, vegetables, and flowers. Of course, wide awake Brother Perry comes in for his share of credit in this connection. Then, too, a large, new pump has recently been installed at no little expense, but supplying excellent water. And where, it may be asked is the income that corresponds to this immense, even though necessary outlay? It simply does not correspond, especially in these times of H.C.L. The government allowance is now \$125.00, and the mission's expenses for food, clothing, fuel, electricity, improvements, repairs has to be squeezed out of this and the income from the farm. We can only [210] hope that private charity, in a steady and generous stream, will flow into the mission funds.

On February 16, 1922, head superiors seeming to think that Fr. Keel's term of office was getting rather top heavy, appointed the Rev. M.J. Hoferer as superior. Fr. Keel, however, still retained charge of the school property by reason of his skill and long experience in manipulating government red tape.

Of all St. Stephen's superiors, up to date four stand out prominently on account of the indelible marks they have left on the progress of the

institution; these are: Frs. Kuppens, Feusi, Sifton and Keel. But the most widely known missionary, who ever came to St. Stephen's was, perhaps, Fr. "Mac," the Rev. S.E. McNamara. He had charge in 1914, of all the outlying mission stations and up to this time the herculean trips to these places had to be made either by horseback or buggy. But Fr. Mac soon found his way into the hearts of the people of Riverton, then a new and booming town, and so he was "forced" to accept the present of a new "flivver," and thereby hangs a tale. You will hardly find a spot in Wyoming, even though the most remote and inaccessible where the people, Protestants as well as Catholics, will not introduce themselves to you with the question, "Do you know Fr. McNamara? He was a particular friend of mine." Nothing will perhaps show the checkered career of [211] St. Stephen's mission more strikingly than the long list of names of those who have lived and labored here during the last forty years, 1884-1924: Frs. Jutz, Brenner, Ponziglione, Kuppens, Panken, Scollen, Folchi, Turnell, Vasta, Sansone, Feusi, Post, Valponini, Kouffrant, Van der Velden, Durgan, O'Connor, Keel, Hoferer, and Homan. Brothers: Nunlist, Kilcullen, Kelly, Lachner, Paruzynski, Hurley, Wells, and Holland. Provinces of Jesuits: The German, the American, the Italian, and again the American. Sisterhoods: the Sisters of Charity, of St. Joseph, and the Sisters of St. Francis.

We have just learned as we write that Rev. John Jutz, the founder of St. Stephen's passed to a happy eternity in Buffalo on March 21, 1924, forty years almost to the day, since his first arrival in Wyoming.

Until February 11, 1923, the spiritual needs of the parish of Riverton, were cared for by the Jesuit fathers of St. Stephen's, but on that day, Fr. William J. Short, a diocesan priest, assumed charge of the parish. The Jesuits had asked to be relieved of caring for Riverton.

On August 20, 1925, the Rev. A.J. Keel, S.J., in turn succeeded the Rev. M. J. Hoferer, S.J., as superior at St. Stephen's.

On September 16, 1925, Sister Mary Lucinda, O.S.F., was burned to death while attempting to light the gas in the oven of the bakery. She was a young, energetic, devoted religious, and zealous in her work with the Indian [212] children. Her death was the first to occur in the sisters' community at the mission during the thirty years of their devoted labor among the Arapahoe Indians.

A fire of unknown origin, about eight-thirty o'clock on the morning of January 20, 1928, completely destroyed the mission church, the boys' building containing the fathers' quarters, and the boys' recreation hall. Very little of the contents was saved except from the office and the church. To make matters worse, an epidemic of spinal meningitis was widespread on the reservation and the children had to be kept in school. Through the kindly aid of the National Guard, and the officials of the Indian agency and government school, cots were provided for all left homeless by the fire and every available nook in the building saved was occupied.

The problem now was how to rebuild, where to look for the great amount of money that would be necessary to replace what had been lost. The insurance carried on the destroyed buildings, fifteen thousand dollars, would be only a small portion of the necessary amount. Monsignor William Hughes, director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions helped to the full extent of his meager resources. Fr. Flynn, of the Marquette League, solicited funds wherever he could hope for a donation. Friends of the Indian missions, learning of the distress of St. Stephen's, subscribed what [213] they were able, until, in all, including the insurance, a fund of thirty-five thousand dollars had been raised.

Brother Andrew Hartmann, S.J., was sent from St. Francis' mission, South Dakota, to plan and superintend the erection of new buildings. Work was begun on the excavation for the church and school building on March 17, 1928. However, lest funds should be lacking, only the foundation of the church was put in and the work on the school building

and recreation hall was continued. The latter was so planned that it could be used as a temporary church. This was completed on September 1st.

The priests of the Cheyenne diocese and their bishop, the Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D.D., assembled at St. Stephen's on July 16, for their retreat, which was conducted by his excellency, Archbishop Edward J. Hanna, of San Francisco. On July 19th the archbishop blessed the corner stone of the new church, the completion of which was, at that time, very uncertain, since funds were needed to finish even the building that was to be occupied by the fathers and the Indian boys.

Bishop McGovern appealed to his Eminence, Cardinal Mundelein, president of the American Board of Catholic Missions, stressing the urgent need of the mission and his Eminence graciously allocated twenty thousand dollars from the funds of the board; ten thousand [214] dollars to be advanced immediately, because of the emergency, and ten thousand dollars to be given in 1929. Without this generous assistance the work could not have proceeded, and even the school building, in which were also the living quarters of the fathers, could not have been completed. With it, the work was pushed forward, and on October 20, the boys' building was finished and occupied. The building of the church was continued, and the joy of a large congregation of Indians was evident when they assisted at the first Mass offered in the new, but still incomplete church on Christmas day, 1928.

While the work of reconstruction was going on, Sister Mary Liberata, a pioneer at St. Stephen's, passed to her well earned reward. She had come to the mission in 1892, watched it grow and saw much of it destroyed by the fire. She did not, however, have the pleasure of seeing it rebuilt; for on May 22, 1928, she died, after thirty-six years of devoted labor among the Indians whom she loved.

On Sunday, April 28, 1929, the chapel was solemnly dedicated to the service of God by the Most Rev. Patrick A. McGovern, D.D., bishop of

Cheyenne, who also preached a suitable sermon to the whites and Indians who filled the edifice. The day was perfect, and many Catholics and non-Catholics had come out from Riverton to witness the ceremonies. Solemn high Mass was [215] celebrated by the Rev. A.J. Keel, S.J., assisted by the Rev. John Mullin, of Casper, as deacon, and the Rev. Martin Kennedy, of Lander, as sub-deacon. The Rev. Joseph T. Lannon, S.J., was master of ceremonies. Fully 500 persons were present, and the choir of Indian boys and girls came in for a large share of praise for the admirable manner in which they rendered the sacred chant.

In 1932 Rev. Aloysius Keel, S.J., was transferred to an Indian mission in South Dakota. He had spent nineteen years at St. Stephen's, and had endeared himself to the Indians, the whites and the clergy of the diocese. The strain of these many years had undermined his health, and he failed steadily, until finally after a protracted illness God called him to his eternal home at Pine Ridge, S. D., July 12, 1936. His arduous labor, his devotion to his flock, and his saintly life, have left an enviable record among Indian missionaries of the present day.

In succession to Fr. Keel, and the heir to his virtues, came Rev. A.C. Zuercher, S.J., who has proven himself a faithful and prudent steward in the management of the mission's many-sided affairs. Through the charity of Catholics in various parts of the country several chapels have been erected to replace the shacks in which the Divine Mysteries were formerly celebrated. A respectable log chapel has been built at Ethete, a [216] frame church at Mill Creek, and a beautiful log chapel at Fort Washakie, the last dedicated by Bishop McGovern May 30, 1939. The chapel at Pilot Butte has recently been moved to Morton, a location more convenient for both clergy and people.

At St. Stephen's two Masses are celebrated every Sunday, at Fort Washakie one; while at Morton Mass is said once a month, and in the other chapels twice a month. Besides the sodalities which have been functioning for years, Fr. Zuercher has organized the Tekakwitha

Temperance Society (1936) to counteract the evil of drink. Sixty are enrolled, and the members take the pledge in public. As far as is known, only one has broken his pledge; for the Indians have always regarded a solemn promise as sacred and binding.

Speaking of material improvements at the mission, there is another worthy of mention. The old log barn, built in pioneer days to house the live stock, had become dilapidated with age and the walls were much out of plumb. Under the direction of Fr. Zuercher a fine, commodious, concrete barn has been constructed in its place, and will long serve the purpose for which it is intended.

In September, 1939, by order of the U.S. Indian Bureau, and in accordance with a new policy which it had inaugurated, the mission school was changed from a boarding to a day school. The number of children [217] enrolled was 201; during the preceding year the first two years of high school had been added to the grades.

As we write, we learn with deep regret that Fr. Zuercher has been transferred to Florissant, Mo. (Jan. 1 1940). This leaves the personnel of St. Stephen's as follows: Rev. George P. Prendergast, superior; Revs. A.C. Riester, Thos. Cummings and Leo Doyle, all of the Society of Jesus. Ten Franciscan sisters of Pendleton, Ore., have charge of the girls' school and the domestic arrangements.

Bishop McGovern has administered confirmation to the Indians as follows: June 8, 1913, 70; Oct. 20, 1919, 37; June 1, 1923, 63; Nov. 1, 1928, 62; May 17, 1934, 72; May 4, 1938, 74. The number baptized in 1939 was 64. The total number of Catholic Indians on the Wind River reservation is 716 (mostly Arapahoes >From 50-60 are Shoshones>), of whom 532 are practical and 184 not practical.