

**Saint Stephens Indian School**  
**Bob Spoonhunter**

**SAINT STEPHENS INDIAN SCHOOL**

[1] Saint Stephens Indian School has a long history of service to the residents of the Wind River Indian Reservation. The school is the result of many years of hard work by the Franciscan nuns, the Jesuit priests and brothers and many Arapaho and non-Arapaho lay people. Father John Jutz, a Jesuit priest from Buffalo, New York, began Saint Stephens in 1884. Father Jutz had come west to establish a school on the Wind River Indian Reservation. When he arrived he found that the Episcopal Church had already begun operating a school at Fort Washakie, so Father Jutz went to the eastern side of the reservation to the Arapaho camp. Some of the Arapaho families had already sent their children to schools in the East, so Father Jutz's plan to open a school was well received.

[2] Father Jutz had bought a horse from a soldier at the Fort for his trip to the Arapaho camp. In his diary, he wrote of his arrival at the Arapaho encampment: "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 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 the Indian language. 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 huge branches covered with a buffalo hide. My kitchen was a hole in the ground into which I laid a few stones."

[3] A few days later, the priest set out for Fort Washakie, intending to say Mass there. Some mishap befell the horse borrowed from a friend in

Lander, and it got away carrying all the things needed for Mass. Father Jutz was then helped by an Indian who lent him another horse to go to Lander. When he reached Lander he found not only his horse but also Brother Ursus Nunlist who had been sent as a helper.

Soon the two men erected more suitable quarters, a building 24 feet by 24 feet with four rooms. They hauled timber from the mountains 35 miles away and made bricks for the walls. Writing to Bishop O'Connor in Omaha of their labors brought a gift of \$5,000 from Catherine Drexel of Philadelphia. This donation of money launched the Mission financially.

After some time, Father Jutz was recalled east, and Father Paul Ponziglione replaced him. It became evident that the original site was unsuitable as structures began to sag due to the sandy soil. The new Mission then moved to a place a little more than a half-mile westward onto more solid ground, where building began anew. The convent, begun in 1887, still stands and is still used by the Franciscan nuns.

[4] With the new convent up, educational work for the Indian children began in 1888 with as many as ninety present. Various orders of sisters came and went in those early years. Finally in August 1892, the Sisters of Saint Francis came from Philadelphia. At Rawlins, Wyoming, they took the stagecoach to Lander. At Beaver Rim, the tough whiskey-drinking driver warned the Sisters to walk down the hill for their own good as the company would not be responsible for their safety if they remained in the vehicle. A buggy met them at Lander and took them to the Mission. These dedicated women have remained at Saint Stephens to this day. One of the original nine, Sister Liberata, spent thirty-six years at Saint Stephens, dying at the Mission in 1928.

[5] A few weeks after the Franciscan Sisters had arrived, two of them, accompanied by Chief Lone Bear, went among the people to see if children would come to the Mission school. The sisters and Chief Lone

Bear recruited a number of students for the school. Because of the distance between the school and their homes, it was necessary for the children to board at the Mission. Parents were able to visit at various times, and on Sundays the students spent the day with their own families.

[6] As time passed, the Mission continued to grow. New Jesuit quarters were built, in addition to a boys dormitory, church, laundry building, play hall-gym, farm out buildings, corrals and poultry houses. Though never totally self-sustaining, the Mission personnel produced many products. Hay, wheat, corn, oats, barley, beef cattle, hogs and chickens were raised. A large Holstein herd provided milk for the children. About the turn of the century, a five mile irrigation ditch was built which greatly contributed to the productivity of the Mission.

In those days, school activities were divided into academic studies and work. Mornings were spent in the classroom where students studied History, Math, Reading and other courses. The afternoon was spent working around the Mission and the Mission's farm. Girls were taught weaving, sewing, cooking and other homemaking skills. Boys helped around the farm with planting, harvesting, caring for the livestock and helping with maintenance of the Mission buildings and grounds.

[7] Besides classes and work, the students also participated in other activities such as band and a drill team. Some of the girls learned marching routines and would travel to Lander and Riverton to perform in parades and other holiday festivities. The students also acted in pageants and small stage productions in school.

[8] Religious education was also a major part of the school curriculum. The priests and sisters taught the children the Catholic religion and prepared them to receive the Sacraments. First Communion and Confirmation days were major events, with the children's families

traveling great distances to attend the celebrations. After the services, receptions were held for the children in the Dining Room.

[9] On the morning of January 20, 1928, near disaster struck. With temperatures at 13 below zero, a fire destroyed the church, boy's dormitory, the hall-gym and the Jesuit residence. Help came from many people in the area as beds, cots and blankets were brought in. In just a few months, however, new buildings began to rise from the ashes with the help of the local people. Soon, a new and larger church, a gym, and a combined Jesuit residence and boys dormitory replaced the destroyed buildings.

In 1939, the boarding of the children at the Mission ended. The Mission obtained buses and was then able to pick up the students at their homes in the mornings and return them at the end of the day. Since then, Saint Stephens has operated as a day school.

[10] In 1955, the Keel Memorial Gym was built to provide for expanded athletic events. Basketball had been a favorite sport of the students since the earliest days of the school.

In 1957, a full fledged high school was opened in a new building. Because of an increased enrollment, the high school had to be expanded the next year. The high school was staffed by Franciscan nuns and Jesuit seminarians and boasted a high degree of excellence in both academics and athletics. The sports program became a valuable educative element, with the boys playing on the teams and the girls organizing pep clubs and cheering squads. In 1959-1960, the high school basketball team were the State Class B champions with a record of forty-six straight wins.

[11] Tragedy struck in 1966 as the high school closed for various reasons, with financing being the most notable. The Mission continued to operate a grade school through the eighth grade.

In January, 1975, the Mission Administration realized that there was not enough money to continue operating the school. Meetings were held with all concerned people and the crisis was brought to their attention. After a great deal of study, effort and organization, the Saint Stephens Indian School Education Association was formed in April. The Education Association Board of Directors then sought and received unanimous support for the Arapaho and Shoshone Business Council for their efforts at securing an Indian controlled school at Saint Stephens. The Education Association then submitted a proposal to the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs for the operation of the school by the Indian corporation.

After many months of work and negotiation, the Association received a contract from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to operate Saint Stephens Indian School. The Mission then relinquished control of the school to the Saint Stephens Indian School Education Association. The change was of historic proportions, having ended nearly one hundred years of direct service by the Mission School.

Although Saint Stephens Mission no longer operates Saint Stephens Indian School, the school continues to maintain the high standards of the previous administration. The Franciscan Sisters are still teaching in the school, having been employed by the Education Association. In addition to the Franciscans, the Education Association has also employed Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and many lay people.

[12] A major factor in the establishment, growth and success of Saint Stephens Mission, and now Saint Stephens Indian School, has been the local people. Chief Black Coal and Chief Lone Bear stand out as welcoming the first Jesuits and Franciscans in 1884 and 1892. Other Arapaho people who were loyal followers in the early days include Chief Sharp Nose, Broken Horn, Little Ant, Runs Behind, Runs Medicine, Charles Whiteman, Jerome Old Man, Dominick Old Man,

Plenty Bear, Goes In Lodge, Six Feathers, Wolf Elkins, Sara Broken Horn and many others.

[13] The services of the religious staff have become legendary among the Arapaho people. Some of the people who are constantly remembered are Father McNamara, Father Sifton, Sister Clementina, Sister Edna, Father Keel and Father Kurth. There are many others whose services were invaluable and whose work the Mission staff carries on today.

Saint Stephens Indian School is also a continuation of the work begun by the early priests and sisters. It is a tribute to all of them that the local Indian people are now able to continue the tradition of educational excellence in Saint Stephens Indian School.

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[16 edited] Saint Stephens Indian School by Bob Spoonhunter