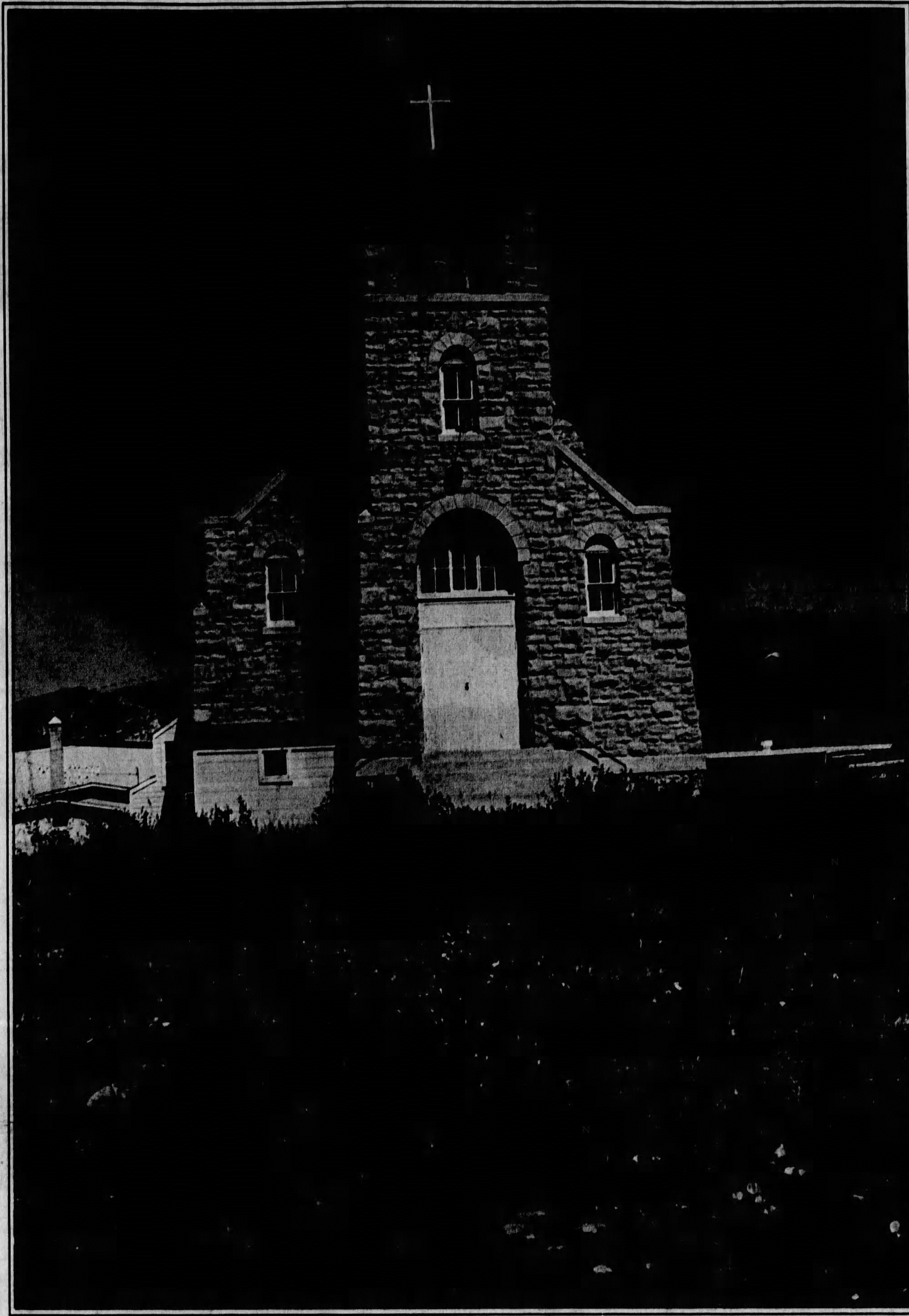


Big hearts in the Little Rockies



"The people we've educated have become leaders, council members and teachers, and that's a beautiful change for these people" — Sister Clare Hartmann.



Sister Clare Hartmann, standing, and Sister Giswalda Kramer have been serving the St. Paul Mission School on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in northern Montana since the late '30s. The mission was founded in 1887 by Jesuit brothers and Ursuline sisters.

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

Story and photos
 By LINDA CARRICABURU
 Tribune Regional Editor

HAYS — A bright red wall of flame reached to the heavens, brilliantly lighting the early morning sky. Below, a small group of Franciscan nuns watched horrified: their St. Paul Mission School would not be saved.

As the fire raced through the school and part of the adjoining convent, the sisters made a last ditch attempt to save valuable records. But the efforts were in vain as the fire engulfed the dry wood buildings. One sister collapsed, overcome by smoke.

The fire trucks raced south from Malta and Harlem on the icy roads to Hays. Sister Clare Hartmann recalls the temperature was below zero that December morning in 1973. By the time the pump trucks reached the fire, the water within them had frozen.

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

The tragic fire left 80 students without a school and the sisters homeless. But the sisters saw the event as merely one more hardship to overcome.

With prayer and faith, they reasoned, the Good Lord would provide. This too, they would overcome. They immediately went to work soliciting help and aid to reopen the school.

For half a century, Sister Clare and Sister Giswalda Kramer have been at the mission here on the southern edge of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which encompasses 654,000 acres south of the Milk River from west of Harlem to Dodson. The sisters have run the Mission School and ministered kindness and comfort to their neighbors.

Their neighbors are the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Indians — historical enemies who smoked the peace pipe when they learned they would be forced to settle together on the Fort Belknap Reservation. They have worked for decades to scratch a meager existence from the dry soil. Some years they were not so fortunate.

The St. Paul Mission was established in 1887 by Jesuit brothers and Ursuline sisters. The sisters, with their flowing black habits and pearly rosaries, set up school aside the Jesuits' sturdy rock mission, nestled against the timbered mountainsides of the Little Rockies. The well-constructed buildings stood in sharp contrast to the drafty, makeshift homes of their proverbial flock.

In 1932, the mission was also struck by fire. That time, the building used by student girls and the building that housed the sisters were destroyed. The Ursulines moved into the cramped boys' quarters and made do. Four years later, however, superiors from the mother house called the sisters in: they were needed elsewhere.

Sisters from the Franciscan order agreed to replace the Ursulines, coming in 1936. Among the first contingent of four nuns was Sister Giswalda, who had already been active in the order for 11 years. Sister Clare, also an 11-year veteran of the order, followed in 1939.

From the relatively progressive cities of the Midwest, they moved to a community of small log homes and few public services, where horse and wagon were still the common means of transport. They found a gentle people, whose spirit had been sapped by hunger and a sometimes oppressive government. And mostly they were Catholic, converted by the Jesuits and Ursulines over the five previous decades.

For the next half century, Sisters Clare and Giswalda, now 79 and 85 respectively, carried on the work of education — both within and without the schoolroom walls. In 1936, the Mission School, which had classes through eighth grade, was changed from a boarding school to a more conventional day school. The sisters found the change allowed students to bring their education into their homes and gave families a better opportunity to share the new ideas.

Sister Giswalda was distressed her first year to learn that students from the school had given up taking the state-required examinations at the end of the eighth grade because none of them ever passed. She immediately implemented changes in curriculum and a rigorous system of tests and drills to prepare them for the exams.

At the end of the year, the students were taken to Hays Public School for the tests. When the results were in, the sisters were overjoyed: all eight students had passed and had passed with high marks. And for the first time, the state Department of Public Instruction awarded the school a superior rating for education.

The sisters vowed to continue the precedent and the very next year, as the Mission celebrated its Golden Jubilee, the school was expanded to include a high school. The sisters worked to see the students had as many of the opportunities offered outside the reservation as possible. Typing classes were started; a band was formed; a student magazine was published.

In 1946, the House of Loretta was established, named for the home of the Blessed Virgin. In the house, the sisters had students form mythical families — Mr. and Mrs. Christian and their children. The "families" set up housekeeping and took lessons in home economics and child-rearing skills. A nurse came out every three weeks and taught first aid, using "ailing" family members as patients.

The House of Loretta was operated until late 1973. That year, the fire struck. The school was totally destroyed. Much of the convent was in ruins. The sisters accepted an offer from a Hutterite colony to the north to stay there until they had suitable living quarters.

"The local people offered to let us stay," Sister Clare said, "but their homes were so small and their families so large that we knew we'd be posing a hardship on them."

Sister Clare is effusive in praising her Hutterite hosts. "They are very, very devout in their religion and very, very kind and charitable," she said. "If there's charity in any community, it's theirs."

The more than 40 students stubbornly refused to attend public schools, so portable classrooms were set up at the Mission. Several cars were sent to Great Falls, to haul back books and materials donated by Central Catholic High School, which was closing.

The sisters returned to live in the House of Loretta and soon there was a semblance of normalcy at the Mission as

'Sisters'

From I-E

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."