

School bell and teacher spirit survived fire, but they're not enough

By MARK STEWART
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HAYS — Even Frank McCann can't.

Despite the efforts of McCann and other members of the faculty at St. Paul's Mission, the school's existence will end this spring.

McCann, a 22-year-old Fordham University graduate, has been serving as a volunteer at this Fort Belknap Reservation school since last September.

The high school and grade school burned down last Dec. 5, and since that time the 35 high school students have been sitting at home.

"The only thing they salvaged out of the fire was the school bell," said McCann, who keeps body and soul together as basketball coach-athletic director-physical education instructor as well as teaching geometry, history, Indian studies, and woodshop.

"I also used to teach third and fourth grade penmanship," laughed McCann.

For all his responsibilities, McCann is paid \$30 a month.

"But I live with the priests

and eat with them, so I don't really need money," McCann hastened to add.

McCann and the other four faculty members have a place to teach for the remainder of this year because of the volunteer work of local citizens.

"The tribe owns three old Air Force trailers and they are being put together by the people here, free of charge. It's just like the Old West. The improvised school should be ready by Tuesday," said McCann.

Times have been tough for St. Paul's lately.

In addition to the school's burning down, half of the nuns' convent was burned. The nuns have been living in a converted garage, according to McCann, without running water.

The school's books were donated by Great Falls Central High School which closed last spring.

McCann has a difficult time getting practice time for his team. The mission's gym is filled with what was salvaged from the convent so the team practices when the Hays grade school gym is open.

McCann, who attended Fordham on a track scholarship, is starting a track team this spring. Since the

school doesn't have a track, the team will be working out on the road.

McCann's old teammates at Fordham, having heard of the financial plight at St. Paul's

contributed \$62 to buy jerseys for the new track team.

That doesn't sound like a lot of money, but it's more than one-third of McCann's current \$182 budget to run the basketball team as well as girls' and grade school teams.

McCann has learned to be pretty tight with a buck.

"We take the bus on our road games and the teams we play feed us when we get there. We recently went to Turner for a game. We took our cheerleaders, team and pep squad, the gas and \$1 each for the kids to get a meal on the way back only came to \$23," said McCann.

McCann said he truly enjoys his association with the school:

"These kids are the best ever. We take trips with me and the bus driver as the only adults along on a bus full of kids and never have discipline problems. Oh, I might catch a kid smoking, but if I tell him to put it out, he does it."

Two faculty members at St. Paul's share a unique distinction according to McCann:

"The two nuns who live in the

converted garage, Sisters Giswalda and Clare, were adopted into the tribe 10 or 15 years ago, the only white people ever so honored. They've both been there since 1936 when the school opened. They are amazing women. Sister Giswalda was named Northern Montana Woman of the Year last year. These two elderly nuns are hauling their own water," said McCann, who refused to reveal their ages.

McCann said he learned of the need for volunteers at St. Paul's while he was attending Fordham.

"There I was, sitting on the steps of the Fordham gym and wondering what I was going to do with my life. Three weeks later I arrived in Hays, Montana," said McCann.

He continued, "I was really lonely for a while, but then I had so much to do I got over it. I was home for Christmas, but the hectic pace in New York City really bummed me out."

McCann said he enjoys life at the mission, with one exception:

"I really like Montana but in this part of it we only get one

television channel. Half the time there's no sound on that one."

One of the things that makes McCann sad about the school closing will be the end of its athletic history.

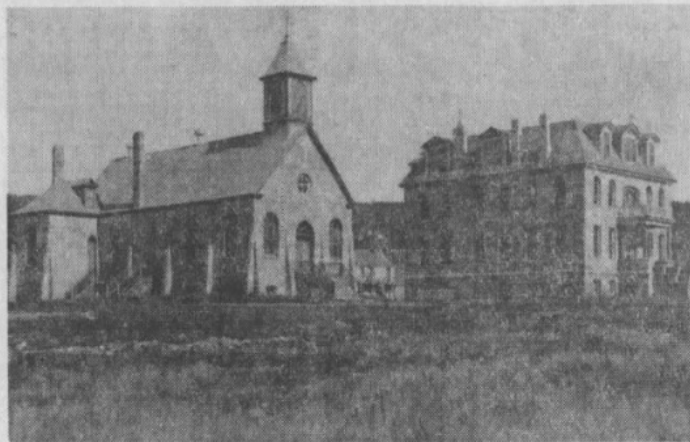
"They've played basketball here ever since the school started. The St. Paul's teams of the 1940s were good enough to make the state tournament. But our game with Dodson Feb. 8 will be the last home game ever for St. Paul's," said McCann wistfully.

McCann was asked what the future holds for the students now attending St. Paul's and replied,

"The school is definitely broke. It's a Catholic school, so we can't get help from the government. The state has approved the building of a public high school in Hays but it still hasn't cleared the federal government. If the new school isn't up in time, the kids here will take a bus 40 miles to Harlem next year for school."

And what will McCann do?

"Well, I'm out of a job after this year. The way I do things, I'll just put on my hat and go."



THE GOOD OLD DAYS — This picture, taken in 1954, shows the St. Paul's Mission church (left) which was built in 1900 and the Ursuline convent (right) which came one year later. Last December the convent was half-destroyed by fire, forcing two elderly nuns to move to a converted garage without running water. Burned to the ground in the same fire were the Fort Belknap Reservation's high school and grade school. (Tribune Photo)