



AGENTS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

The Benedictines at White Earth

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ALMOST EVERY major conflict between Indians and white people in American history occurred over land — and who should possess it. To Indian people, land which was held in common ownership was synonymous with existence: a source of subsistence, shelter, food, and beauty. Just as important, land symbolized “a sacred relationship between man and his universe.” Europeans also saw land as a source of subsistence, but under individual ownership and as a resource to be exploited. Such differing attitudes provided a trigger for continuing conflict.¹

Systematic removal of American Indians from their ancestral lands began in earnest after the War of 1812 with an “aggressive government policy that was designed to solve quickly the problem of extinguishing Indian title to all land east of the Mississippi River.” President Andrew Jackson signed into law on May 28, 1830, a removal bill that forced tens of thousands of Indians in the south and southeastern United States to move west to lands remote and strange to them.²

During the 1840s and 1850s, removal was slowed and in some instances suspended, as sectional strife between North and South increased, culminating in the Civil War. By and large, the Indian “problem” was put on the back burner during this time, returning to the forefront only after 1865, when the federal government forced onto reservations those Indian tribes not yet “removed.” This was done for a number of reasons, among them to protect Indians from depredations of white people, but

more important, to open up vast tracts of former Indian-held land to white settlers. By the 1870s almost all Indian tribes were penned in on reservations.³

In Minnesota both Dakota and Ojibway peoples had been forced to cede large areas starting in the 1830s, though small parcels had been sold as early as 1805. In 1850, however, “the Ojibway still controlled most of the forested northern third of the state, and the Dakota remained in possession of the prairie southern section.” In the 1850s the drive to place those tribes on reservations began; it continued into the mid-1870s. The Dakota relinquished most of their land in treaties signed at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851. Various Ojibway bands ceded much territory between 1854 and 1867, as the United States government attempted to consolidate all of the bands on a few large reservations. In the latter year, “leaders of Mississippi bands agreed to

¹ Edgar S. Cahn, ed., *Our Brother's Keeper: The Indian in White America*, 69 (Washington, D.C., 1969).

² Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Leadership*, 178, 179 (New York, 1961).

³ Edmund J. Danziger, Jr., *Indians and Bureaucrats: Administering the Reservation Policy during the Civil War*, 5, 14 (Urbana, Ill., 1974). Indian problems were not on the back burner in Minnesota, however: see Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862* (Revised ed., St. Paul, 1976).

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occupy jointly a large block of land located in Becker, Mahanomen, and Clearwater counties and known as the White Earth Reservation."⁴

An exact count of Minnesota Ojibway in the 1860s is not available, though an 1855 source reported 5,000 Ojibway in the state during the 1850s, and other sources listed 7,566 in 1866. The federal census of 1866 counted 2,166 Ojibway in the Mississippi bands, not all of whom were willing to go to White Earth. "Most of the Pembina, Otter Tail Pillager, and Mille Lacs bands resisted relocation," but the government forced some of them onto the reservation in 1873, and all Ojibway were on reservations two years later.⁵

THE IMPETUS that carried the Ojibway and other Indians onto reservations pushed far beyond the relatively simple process of moving groups of people from their homes to a new and strictly delimited piece of land. The American government and concerned sectors of white

society wished to remake Indian people in their own image.

The federal government, aided by church-sponsored missionaries, marched steadily toward its goal of assimilation for Indians. The drive was particularly strong between the 1880s and the 1930s, propelled by the thinking of such men as Captain Richard H. Pratt of Pennsylvania's Carlisle Indian School and Thomas J. Morgan, commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1889 to 1893. Their aim was the detribalization, individualization, and "Americanization" of the American Indian.⁶

Pratt's school at Carlisle, which opened in 1879, revolutionized public opinion by demonstrating the adaptability of the Indian race and by picturing assimilation as both desirable and possible. An 1892 book of rules for Indian schools summarized the federal government's methods of educating Indians during Morgan's tenure: "the training of the hand in useful industries; the development of the mind in independent and self-directing power of thought; the impartation of useful practical knowledge; the culture of the moral nature, and the formation of character. . . intelligence, industry, morality, manhood, and womanhood are the ends arrived at."

Although most cultures, including the Ojibway, provide their young people with precisely that type of training, the whites in charge of Indian affairs at the time were not proceeding on that assumption. Whether or not they acknowledged the existence of an Ojibway culture, they set about systematically to replace traditional ways with European-American values and life styles. In order to understand one of the ways in which this transformation took place on the White Earth Reservation, through the offices of a Roman Catholic mission and school, a brief examination of Ojibway culture as it had evolved up to reservation time seems appropriate.

ANTHROPOLOGIST A. Irving Hallowell summarized the Ojibway world view as a unified one, perceiving no dichotomy between natural and supernatural. The concept of "person" transcends human appearance. There is belief in metamorphosis — the possibility of change in outward appearance which, in turn, colors attitudes toward individuals. The Ojibway thus caution against judging mainly by appearances; "It makes them cautious and suspicious in interpersonal relations of all kinds."⁷

Since all creation is one, the Ojibway try to communicate with all of life. The main doorway to this communication is through dreams, an ability cultivated from earliest childhood. Parents admonished children to "try to dream and remember what you dream" in order to prepare the child for vision-pursuit at puberty. Another student of the Ojibway explained that "Ojibwa tradition created its intensest religious expression through this pursuit of a private guardian spirit who revealed (or yielded) himself in 'dreams' or visions. In the 1930s,"

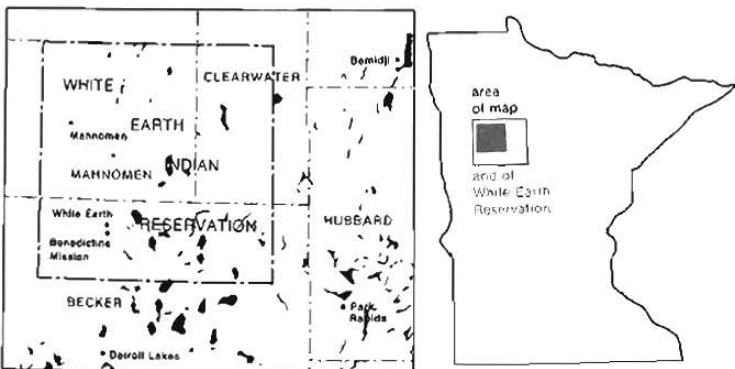
⁴Mitchell E. Rubinstein and Alan R. Woolworth, "The Dakota and Ojibway," in June D. Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, 18, 20, 21, 23 (St. Paul, 1981); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:192 (Revised ed., St. Paul, 1969).

⁵William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 64 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1970); U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, roll 388, National Archives Record Group 75, Washington, D.C.; U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1866, p. 350; Rubinstein and Woolworth, in *They Chose Minnesota*, 23, 25.

⁶Here and below, see Thomas J. Morgan, "Statement on Indian Policy," and Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," in Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian," 1880-1900*, 74-76, 260-271 (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, *Rules for Indian Schools — A Manual*, 3 (Washington, D.C., 1892).

⁷Hallowell, "Ojibwa World View," in Roger C. Owen, James J. F. Deetz, and Anthony D. Fisher, eds., *The North American Indians: A Sourcebook*, 210, 227 ([New York], 1967).

THE LAKE-studded area of the White Earth Reservation





OJIBWAY residents of White Earth near St. Benedict's mission church and rectory about 1885

she maintained, "the visionary guardian was still sought and made to manifest himself among the Ojibwa I knew, against the heavy pressures of Christian society and civilization."⁸

At the approach of puberty, the individual male would seek a vision to assure him of the guardianship of a good spirit. By means of an extended fast, the boy would prepare himself for this vision. One anthropologist underlined "the value of this vision experience at a time when a boy's character was being formed. The lack of it in boarding schools," she wrote, "seems to me to have been one cause of Indian demoralization." Nor was this experience the only important one denied to an Indian torn from his or her family as a child or an adolescent. As significant was the lack of opportunity to learn the legends and history of the tribe and the clan.⁹

Through stories firmly rooted in tribal identity, the Ojibway expressed social and religious beliefs, teaching the oneness of life and the importance of goodness, though not necessarily exclusive of mischief, such as in the tales of Nanabozho, a great *manitou* who combined in himself mortality and divinity. Grandparents were the usual transmitters of such tales, which, taken together, give an Ojibway view of the world.¹⁰ Ignorant of this world view, missionaries — even the more tolerant ones — failed to perceive the depth of spirituality in Ojibway beliefs.

There has always been a veneration of a ruling spirit pervading all of life, albeit accompanied by a multiplicity of lesser spirits. A 19th-century Ojibway author referred

to this Great Spirit as Ke-che-man-e-do and described the respect accorded "his name in their Me-da-we and other religious rites . . . an address to him, however trivial, is always accompanied with a sacrifice of tobacco or some other article deemed precious by the Indian. They never use his name in vain, and there is no word in their language . . . equivalent to the many words used in profane swearing by their more enlightened white brethren."¹¹

Along with their belief in and reverence toward a Great Spirit and intermediary divinities, the Ojibway had an elaborate cosmology that gave them a sense of sacred space rather than merely physical dimensions. Cosmic time, set not by clocks but by periods of important events, was the rule. This disregard of chronological time was a source of irritation to white people — missionaries included.¹²

"The central goal of life for the Ojibwa," wrote one

⁸Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Religion and the Midéwiwin*, 8 (Madison, Wis., 1968).

⁹Ruth Underhill, "Religion Among American Indians," in *North American Indians*, 102.

¹⁰See, for example, Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life* (Madison, Wis., 1977).

¹¹Warren, *Ojibway Nation*, 64.

¹²Carl F. Starkloff, *The People of the Center: American Indian Religion and Christianity*, 102 (New York, 1974). See also Underhill, in *North American Indians*, 101.

scholar, "is expressed by the term *pimádäziwin*, life in the fullest sense, life in the sense of longevity, health and freedom from misfortune." However, "this goal cannot be achieved without the effective help and cooperation of both human and other-than-human 'persons,' as well as by one's own personal efforts."¹³

Shamans and medicine men were empowered to aid in achieving contact with these other-than-human persons. The Midéwiwin, or Grand Medicine Lodge, was an academy of shamans that existed to move the society toward the central goal of *pimádäziwin*. It thereby also became a controlling force over tribal social organization, although shamans practiced their skills outside the Midéwiwin as well as within it. The whole of Ojibway religion is much more than any of its parts, yet the Midéwiwin must be given a primacy of sorts for its pervasive reach. And for white people, it was perhaps the most salient feature of Ojibway religion. It was certainly so for the missionaries at White Earth.¹⁴

One avid student of Ojibway customs at the turn of this century described the Grand Medicine Lodge in positive terms: "The ethics of the Midéwiwin are simple but sound. They teach that rectitude of conduct produces length of life, and that evil inevitably reacts on the offender." Missionaries, including those at White Earth, were most vehement opponents of the Midéwiwin, calling it devilish. To them the Indian rites and corresponding dances were pagan and had to be stopped. One priest described requiring baptismal candidates to turn over their medicine bags to him; another time he burned almost a wagonful of such "heathen" items. Converts to Catholicism who went back to these Indian dances or to the medicine man were refused the sacraments.¹⁵

The government also frowned on the Midéwiwin but took no formal action to suppress it until the 1920s. At the prodding of missionaries and of the Indian Rights Association of Philadelphia, Charles H. Burke, commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1921 to 1929, "instructed his superintendents to limit the duration of Indian dances and to put a halt to certain 'degrading ceremonies.'" In a 1923 order, Burke "forbade persons under the age of fifty to attend these dances," but as early as the 1890s anthropologists had noticed that few shamans were attaining the highest degrees of the Midéwiwin, "partly also because the missionaries, and in many instances the Indian agents, have done their utmost to suppress the ceremonies," regarding them as a "direct opposition and hindrance to progress in Christianizing influences."¹⁶

During the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, a peace policy was promulgated to foster the "civilization" and Christianization — often seen as synonymous — of the Indians. One historian has described its aims as follows: "place the Indians on reservations" where they could be untainted by frontier settlements and "taught the arts of agriculture and other pursuits of civilization; punish outrages," abolish "native habits and practices; procure 'competent, upright, faithful, moral, and religious' agents; provide churches and schools [to] lead the Indians to understand and appreciate Christian civilization and . . . be prepared . . . to [take on rights and] duties . . . of citizenship." The Quakers were the first religious society to accept charge of a reservation under Grant's peace policy, but they were soon followed by others — principal among them Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, both of whom had missions at White Earth.¹⁷

A 1911 description of the White Earth Reservation by United States Attorney Marsden C. Burch is effusive in its praise. "I have traveled over it only in part," he noted, but "I have never seen a more beautiful stretch of territory. . . . It contained lakes and streams, prairies and forests, timber enough of white pine . . . to build all the elegant buildings that might have been needed for centuries to come." He spoke of "marshes and lakes wherein they [the Ojibway] could fish, and . . . hunt and gather wild rice for their sustenance; and the richest of prairie lands imaginable, high, rolling, healthy — everything that could be desired for the last stand of a great race." Burch's paean to White Earth's beauty seems an instance of romanticizing. Descriptions by 19th-century observers — Indian and white people — agreed there were magnificent woods and plentiful water, but they also noted that the soil was poor for agriculture. The land then, as it is now, was hilly and rocky in many parts with a powdery soil in some places.¹⁸

Whatever the good and bad points of the reservation,

¹³ Hallowell, in *North American Indians*, 232.

¹⁴ Landes, *Ojibwa Religion*, 72.

¹⁵ Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 87 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1979); P. Aloysius Hermanutz, "St. Benedict's Mission and School," in *The Indian Sentinel*, 1911, p. 29, 30, an annual publication of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM), Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Lawrence C. Kelly, "Charles Henry Burke, 1921-29," in Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola, eds., *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824-1977*, 259 (Lincoln, Neb., 1979); W. J. Hoffman, "The Midéwiwin or 'Grand Medicine Society' of the Ojibway," in J. W. Powell, *Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1885-86*, 202 (Washington, D.C., 1891).

¹⁷ Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900*, 31, 47, 56 (Norman, Okla., 1976).

¹⁸ Burch may have been exaggerating the beauty of the reservation, the better to condemn the stripping of its forests by timber companies against which he was testifying; *Report . . . of the Investigation of the White Earth Reservation*, 1911-12, p. 8, in 62 Congress, 3 session, *House of Representatives Calendar*, no. 357 (Washington, D.C., 1913).



THE VILLAGE of White Earth on Chippewa Lake about 1915

the Ojibway people who moved there tried to carry on their lives as they had done before, but they were foiled to some extent by government and church missionary policies. The story of one mission to White Earth, that of the Roman Catholic Benedictines, is an example of how and why Ojibway life changed on the reservation.

At that reservation, competition between Catholics and Protestants for control of the federal agency was fierce. Despite early mission work there by the Episcopalian convert, John Johnson Enmegahbowh, the Congregationalists received formal control of the agency

ENMEGAHBOWH, Ojibway minister, photographed about 1872, probably at White Earth



from the federal government in 1870. They in turn gave it over to the Episcopalians in 1874 in exchange for an agency in Dakota Territory. Under the leadership of Bishop Henry Whipple, the Episcopalians selected civil service and church employees for the reservation. The bishop, who called for a nationwide end to political patronage in the placing of Indian agents, citing the need for generous, God-fearing men, could not have expected the furor that would break out between an Episcopal agent and a Catholic priest at White Earth.¹⁹

Father Ignatius Tomazin, a Catholic priest who arrived at White Earth in 1873, clashed repeatedly with government agent Lewis Stowe, an Episcopalian, accusing him of prejudice against Catholic Indians. Agent Stowe was no laggard at criticism himself. In a letter to the commissioner of Indian Affairs, he wrote: "Ignatius Tomazin. . . preaches to the people who are naturally superstitious that their children will surely go to hell if they attend the [government] school. . . His purpose seems to be to keep up an excitement among the Indians all the time."²⁰

Whatever the merits of each man's case, the discord on the reservation was becoming too great to be ignored in Washington, D.C., either at the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs or at its Catholic counterpart, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM). Both men were removed by their superiors — though Tomazin's bishop,

¹⁹ Henry E. Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860-1890*, 96-102 (Philadelphia, 1963).

²⁰ Tomazin to Schurz, October 15, 1877, Stowe to Hon. J. Q. Smith, March 8, 1877, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Papers, University of Marquette Archives, Milwaukee.

convinced of his innocence, fretted at having to find a replacement for him because he spoke Ojibway fluently. White Earth was visited only intermittently by itinerant priests until the Benedictines arrived in 1878 to set up a mission and school.²¹

The honor of opening the first school at White Earth goes to neither Episcopalian nor Catholic. That claim belongs to Julia Spears, previously a government day-school teacher at Crow Wing in 1867 and 1868. After moving to White Earth in the fall of 1870, she opened the first school on the reservation, enrolling some 40 students. In 1871 an industrial boarding school established

by the government enrolled 50 pupils, half girls and half boys. Two years later, Mrs. Spears wrote, an industrial hall was built, "where the Indian women were taught housework, including cooking, sewing, knitting, carpet-weaving, etc. Miss Hattie Cook, niece of E. P. Smith, the agent, was the matron in charge." The domestic arts would be a major focus in the curriculum of the later Benedictine mission school as well.²²

IN THE SPRING of 1856, five Benedictine monks arrived in Minnesota. They lived in St. Cloud until 1864. Then, seeking space for an expansion of their monastery and school (later St. John's), the monks moved to a location near the present Collegeville station and by 1866 were settled on the shores of Lake Sagatagan.²³

Then-Abbot Rupert Seidenbusch ruled St. John's Abbey from 1866 to 1875, remaining attentive all the while to the needs of the growing parishes in the area. In 1875, he was named Vicar-Apostolic of the newly created Vicariate of Northern Minnesota. The new bishop was charged with taking the gospel to the large Indian population, barely reached by the heroic and far-flung efforts of Father Francis Pierz and a handful of associates. Abbot Alexius Edelbrock, successor to Seidenbusch at St. John's, responded to the bishop's appeal for mission help. Along with Mother Aloysia Bath, superior at St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, he agreed to staff a mission on the White Earth Reservation.

The Benedictine Sisters had arrived in Minnesota in June, 1857, settling in St. Cloud for the first six years. In 1862 they began a parish school in St. Joseph and in November the next year moved their convent to the village. The 1870s saw St. Benedict's Convent, like its counterpart at St. John's, expanding in membership and holdings of land and buildings. By 1878 Mother Aloysia was able to co-operate with the Abbey in sending missionaries to the White Earth Reservation.²⁴

Three Benedictines — Father Aloysius Hermanutz, Sister Philomene Ketten, and Sister Lioba Braun — arrived at White Earth on November 5, 1878, beginning what would be 50 years apiece of missionary labor among the Ojibway. They came with much good will and zeal but little training for their long years of service. Like many missionaries after them, they would learn much simply by living among the Indians.

Father Aloysius was born in Wuertemberg, Germany, on June 10, 1853. An 1896 passport described him as "5 feet, 10 inches; a high forehead, gray eyes, straight nose, medium mouth, normal chin, dark hair, dark complexion — a 'regular face.'" The priest's eyes were weak, the result of a childhood accident that left him nearly blind, one associate recalled; in old age he was unable to read at all and had to say Mass from memory. She also described his character, writing, "I never met a more kind and generous person — always had something good



TEACHER Julia A. Spears (in hat), sister of Ojibway historian William W. Warren, posed with members of her family about 1905. Another brother, Truman A. Warren, organized the early removal of Ojibway people to the White Earth Reservation.

²¹ White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's Abbey Archives, Collegeville.

²² Julia Spears, "History of White Earth," in Gerald R. Vizenor, ed., *Escorts to White Earth, 1868-1968: 100 Year Reservation*, 150 (Minneapolis, 1968).

²³ Here and below, see Colman J. Barry, *Worship and Work*, 30, 44, 126, 136 (Collegeville, 1956).

²⁴ Here and below, see Sister M. Grace McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, 22, 59, 232 (St. Joseph, 1957).



SISTERS Lioba Braun (left) and Philomene Ketten with a student in the 1880s; Father Aloysius Hermanutz in 1895.

to say about people, especially his Indians. . . . He was highly respected by government officials," she continued, "as well as the poor on the reservation. He had a fine sense of humor and could laugh at his own limitations." Father Aloysius was also an accomplished musician, and he spent many evenings playing classical and folk music on the organ in the parish house.²⁵

Sister Philomene, born in Luxembourg in 1855, moved with her family to America two years later. She made perpetual vows at the age of 19 and was sent to Rich Prairie (now Pierz) where she worked with Father Pierz for three years. From there, she went to Minneapolis and Shakopee until her appointment to White Earth. Called the "Baby Sister" by the Indians, Sister Philomene was 5 feet, 2 inches tall and weighed about 120 pounds. She had a round, cherubic face with dark skin and "dancing black eyes." A simple, childlike person, Sister Philomene was probably the most courageous of the three. A later White Earth missionary wrote of her and her associates: "In the early days of their mission Sister Lioba was often ready to give up, looking for excuses to leave the place. Even Father couldn't see his way through the early hardships. At such times little

Philomene found a solution — a way of overcoming difficulties and held the three together. I doubt if the Mission would have survived without her."

Of the three, Sister Philomene and Father Aloysius were volunteers; Sister Lioba not only had not volunteered but had expressed fear of the Indians, a fear which left her gradually during her first year at White Earth. Born in Wilmore, Pennsylvania, in 1853, Sister Lioba was professed early in 1873; she taught in St. Cloud between 1875 and 1878 and from there moved to White Earth. The Ojibway called her the "Tall Sister" in contrast to Sister Philomene — a reference to their 2½-inch height difference.

Sister Lioba was a superb business manager and took charge of the mission funds. Because of his poor sight, Father Aloysius relied heavily on her for all financial transactions. And her courage became every bit as notable as her business acumen. "She was fearless in [the]

²⁵ Here and three paragraphs below, see White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's Abbey Archives; Sister Mary Degel to author, April 26, 1980, and other material in White Earth Mission Papers, St. Benedict's Convent Archives, St. Joseph.

face of danger," wrote a colleague. "I saw her standing with unflinching eyes before an Indian almost twice her size and who had raised his arm to strike her. She said nothing but stared at him until he lowered his arm and walked away."

Accompanied by their superiors, the abbot and the prioress, and veteran missionary Father Joseph Buh, the three arrived in White Earth on a cold, wintry day. The sight that greeted them on that November afternoon must have been enough to daunt even a hardened pioneer. The convent historian described the scene: "the party came in sight of the mission and started making the long climb up the road leading to the summit of the hill on which the mission buildings stood. On the very summit," she wrote, "was the graveyard; down from it on the sloping side was the log church, the house, school, barn, and garden and down still farther in the valley was the spring. Even Father Buh accustomed to hard times, was aghast at the poverty of the place."²⁶

The church was unplastered and had no ceiling, while the house, also a log structure, was bare of any furniture except two rusty stoves. One room was given to Father Aloysius for office and living space; the second was used as a general living room; and the third, closet-sized room became the chapel. The sisters' bedroom was the garret.

Fortunately the three missionaries were young and strong, for that first winter tested their mettle. Their

attempts to patch holes and fit doors were partly foiled by lack of lumber, which had to be carried two miles from the agency store. They chinked the logs with mud and covered the walls inside the buildings with newspaper, but "the wind blew through the cracks, leaving little heaps of snow in patches on the floor and table." Sister Philomene developed pleurisy, and Sister Lioba had a bout with the grippe that winter, but the pioneers stayed remarkably healthy during the next 50 years.

These early Roman Catholic missionaries devoted most of their time and energy at White Earth to the building and upkeep of a school. Within six days of their arrival on the reservation, they opened a day school with an enrollment of 12 girls and 3 boys. A week later, the students numbered 40 — 17 boys aged 6 to 17 and 23 girls, among them children of the Parker, Jourdan, Morrison, and Fairbanks families. Chief Hole-in-the-Day's daughters also attended.

Space was scarce at the mission, and in January, 1881, Father Aloysius received a welcome surprise visit from Abbot Edelbrock, who promised help in building a new church and convent school. On July 11, 1881, the abbot returned to White Earth to lay the cornerstone of the church, a 40-by-80-foot building with a basement. A year later, on June 11, 1882, Bishop Seidenbusch dedicated the church and confirmed 250 Indians. Most of the money for these buildings came from St. John's Abbey, with a small donation from the Ludwig Missionsverein — a Catholic mission aid society — of Munich, Germany.²⁷

By 1885 the mission school, then called St. Benedict's Orphan School, numbered 27 children, of whom 25 attended under government contract. The Office of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior set all

²⁶ Here and three paragraphs below, see McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, 232-235.

²⁷ McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, 237; Barry, *Worship and Work*, 138, 139; White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's.

ABBOT Alexis Edelbrock (with crucifix) and Reverend Aloysius Hermanutz, photographed with White Earth Ojibway men in 1881, probably at the dedication of the new mission church

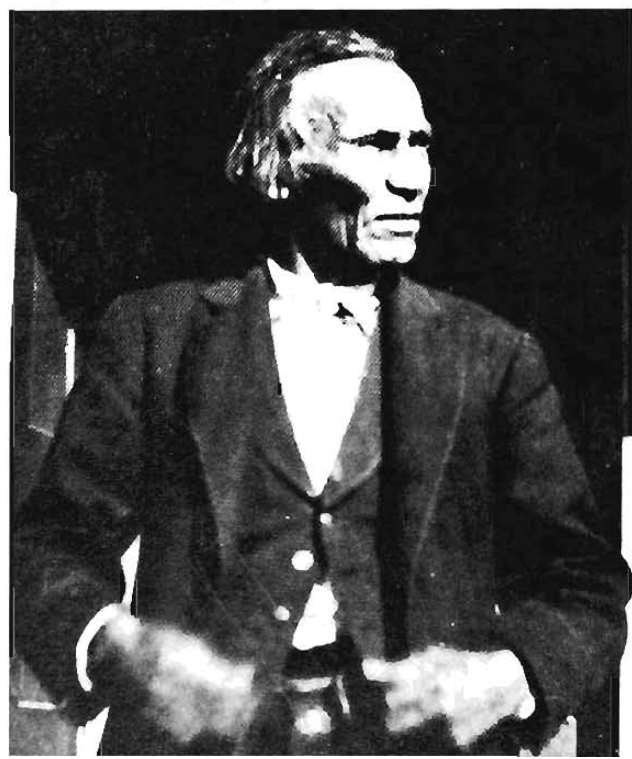


regulations for the contract schools. Negotiations between that office and the individual Catholic mission schools were handled by the BCIM.²⁸

Contract school regulations required that the school provide lodging, subsistence, care, medicine, and all necessary facilities and appliances for the Indian children covered by the contract. A further regulation, which caused a strain on the White Earth mission's attempts to be generously inclusive, stipulated that no children having less than one-fourth Indian blood and no child under the age of 6 or over the age of 21 could be included under contract without special permission from the commissioner of Indian Affairs. Although it depended on the individual commissioner and the general political milieu, this permission was usually not easy to get. The White Earth mission school managed to support several under- and over-age children chiefly with the aid of donations from friends and from contributions by those Indian families able to give a little toward the upkeep of their children.²⁹

Appreciation of the missionaries' work was evident among the Indians of White Earth. Head chief Wa-ba-na-quat, for example, wrote a letter signed by over 100 Indians to Abbot Edelbrock in which he praised the Benedictines. He specifically mentioned the sisters and their work in the school: "That the good Benedictine Sisters did and are doing noble work in the line of education and otherwise is frankly admitted by all, and there is a general sad feeling not only among the Indians & Half-breeds but also among the white people, no matter of what creed, to know that no compensation or encouragement whatever is thus far given by the government to the Benedictine Sisters." The chief requested the abbot

WA-BA-NA-QUAT (White Cloud), photographed in the early 1890s wearing a formal suit and vest



to forward a petition to the "Great Father in Washington" to give the sisters a fair salary.³⁰

With a government contract allowing \$108 per student — and only for those having at least one-fourth Indian blood — the mission school at White Earth was hard put to supply its needs. Quarterly reports signed by the school principal and countersigned by the United States Indian agent at White Earth show what and how many supplies the pupils used during a three-month period. The March 31, 1886, report listed:³¹

440 lbs. fresh beef	60 lbs. lard
100 lbs. pork	50 lbs. rice
12 sacks flour	½ box soap
25 lbs. dry apples	52 lbs. peas
¼ barrel sugar	5 gallons syrup

Four years later the quantities had increased considerably:

34 sacks flour	80 lbs. dried apples
2 bu. beans	¼ barrel sugar
47 bu. potatoes	317 lbs. lard
24 lbs. coffee	675 lbs. fresh beef
10 lbs. tea	205 lbs. salt beef
42 lbs. rice	32 lbs. butter
¼ box soap	

BY THE LATE 1880s, the White Earth mission was pinched for funds and space. All the attempts to scrimp and to squeeze more and more students into the same amount of space could not solve the problem. Then help came from an unexpected source: the Philadelphia heiress, Katharine Drexel, daughter of millionaire banker Anthony B. Drexel. From childhood, she had had an interest in the fate of the Indians. As a youngster "she loved to read about the Indians in the early days of American History," she later told a reporter, "and even then she had come to her own conclusions: the real reason Columbus had discovered America was to save the souls of the Indians."³²

An invitation from Father Joseph A. Stephan, director of the BCIM, brought the Drexel sisters, Katharine, Louise, and Elizabeth, on a tour of the Indian missions in the Dakotas and Minnesota. Impressed with the work being done at White Earth, Katharine promised funds for a new and larger school building there and also for

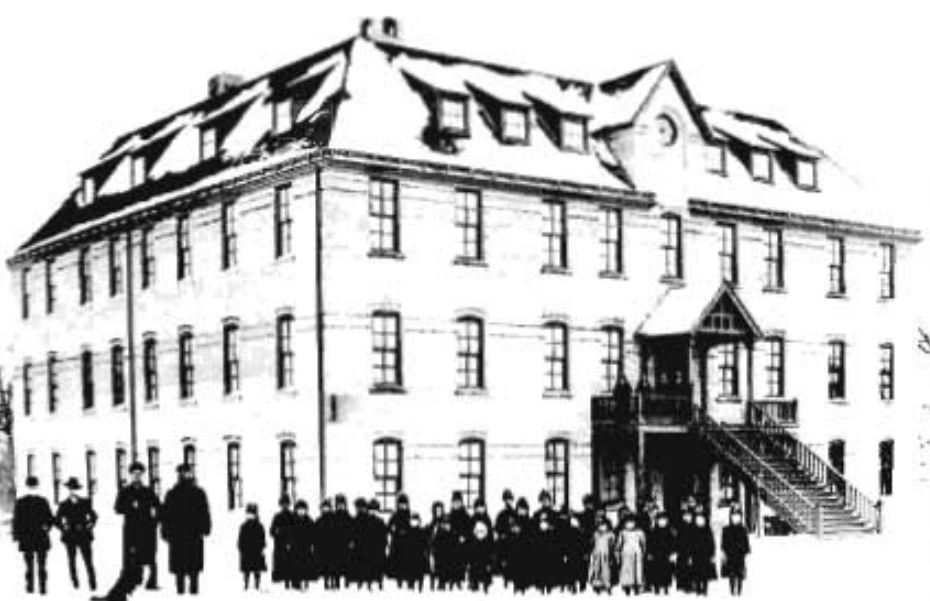
²⁸ Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1868-1912*, 1-3 (Lincoln, Neb., 1979); White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's.

²⁹ White Earth Mission Papers, St. Benedict's Convent Archives.

³⁰ Wa-ba-na-quat to Edelbrock, September 1, 1883, in White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's.

³¹ Quarterly reports of St. Benedict's Orphan School, in White Earth Mission Papers, St. Benedict's.

³² Here and below, see Sister Consuela Marie Duffy, *Katharine Drexel: A Biography*, 79 (Philadelphia, 1966).



BOARDING SCHOOL students posed as their teachers looked on from the porch of the new school building in 1892; Mother Katharine Drexel (right) provided funds for its construction.

the neighboring Red Lake mission if a resident pastor and sisters were placed there.

Construction of the new mission school began at White Earth in 1889 and by early 1891 was almost completed. In a letter to the now-Mother Katharine — head of her own religious order, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Colored and for Indians — Father Aloysius wrote that the sisters and pupils would move into the new school on February 10. "What the sisters are in need of," he added, "are school furnitures, especially desks — also some house furniture as benches for the dining tables and others.

Receive my and the venerable sisters thanks for all the good you have bestowed upon our Mission," he concluded. "Sister Philomene, the mission farmer, sends you special regards."³³

A three-story brick building, with a staff of seven sisters, the new school could house 150 children and generally did. Again the government contracted to pay the school \$108 per child each quarter. With the bigger school the sisters could take in and touch the lives of almost twice as many students as before, although beginning in the 1890s only girls were accepted as boarders. Many were classified as orphans — the term in some cases being used in its broadest sense. Some had one

parent living but unable or unwilling to provide a home. In other cases, both parents were dead or the children were rejected. State-employed social workers often brought abandoned children to the mission — some as young as 4 or 5 years old — but for the most part the student body ranged in age from 6 to 17.³⁴

The school at White Earth became the heart of the missionary endeavors. In Minnesota, as throughout the country, there was a strong belief in the use of education as a tool for assimilating Indians into the cultural mainstream. One Indian Affairs official articulated that view in 1881: "If the Indians are to be civilized and become a happy and prosperous people, which is certainly the object and intention of our government, they must learn our language and adopt our mode of life. The Indian must be made to understand," he continued, "that if he expects to live and prosper in this country, he must learn the English language and learn to work." Under that premise, the Benedictines taught in the English language, and their curriculum was similar to that of white schools across the nation.³⁵

But no White Earth correspondence from the 1880s and 1890s indicates a drive to eradicate the native language there. Of the Benedictine trio who started the mission, Father Aloysius learned to speak Ojibway well enough to use it in sermons at Mass and in giving the sacraments. Sisters Lioba and Philomene knew the language on a rudimentary level, but for many of their colleagues writing and speaking good English was a sufficient struggle without the additional task of coping with

³³ Hermanutz to Drexel, February 6, 1891, in White Earth Mission Papers, St. John's.

³⁴ Author's conversation with Sister Mary Degel, spring, 1981, notes in White Earth Mission Papers, St. Benedict's.

³⁵ Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, 156, 157 (Lincoln, Neb., 1975).

the Ojibway language. A study of the long list of sisters who taught at the boarding school from its start in 1878 to its close in 1945 shows a predominance of women of German birth or descent. Of the dozen sisters who served from 1878 to 1900, for example, ten were of German parentage and two were Irish. For the German sisters, as for their pupils, English was a second language.³⁶

Schooling Indians to assimilate into the mainstream of American culture was, however, only part of the reason for the Catholic missions at White Earth and elsewhere. The missionaries viewed the bringing of Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, as a vital part of their task. Father Aloysius' notes recall the hard times and the successes and failures of the Christianizing activities during the early years. "We made no wholesale conversions among these Indians, such as we read of being made in Asia and elsewhere," he wrote. "Soul after soul had to be gained by hard fight, patience and prayer, and many of these were converted from their heathen views and practices only after years of hard work." Recalling his greatest accomplishment, he continued, "The largest number baptized by me on one day was seventy, and this after a preparation of one week with the help of four catechists."³⁷

Yet, conversion to Christianity was steady during the 1880s and 1890s. The 1892 census of the Duluth diocese put the total number of Ojibway Indians there at 7,416, of whom 3,755 were listed as Catholics, 315 as Protestants, and 3,346 as pagans. Sixteen years later, the director of the BCIM gave some useful statistics for the White Earth mission: 1,500 of the White Earth Ojibway were Catholic, two of them catechists; nine adults and 69 children had been baptized that year; 20 males and 22 females had made their first communions; 18 couples were married by the priest, and 30 people had "Christian burials." There are no records of the number of Indians who "fell away" from Christianity, though Father Aloysius alluded to some Indians returning to their traditional beliefs.

Administrative worries also plagued the White Earth missionaries. From 1891 to 1896, the St. Benedict Mission School was only one of hundreds of contract schools that received subsidies from the federal government for each Indian student in attendance. Many schools had been receiving such aid since the 1870s, but by 1890 heated debate had broken out about the constitutionality of the church-state partnership on the reservations. The Board of Indian Commissioners, one of many to deal with the church-state issue, reported in 1890 that three-fifths of the appropriations for contract schools went to Roman Catholic facilities. Critics of the appropriations, including the American Protective Association, seized upon this fact to attack the Catholic schools.³⁸

The American Protective Association, begun in 1887,

regularly attacked the Roman Catholic church as being the tool of a foreign power and therefore un-American. One of the major charges against Catholic mission schools was that they were "foisting upon the people of this country schools that do not belong to the civilization of today." Yet such schools were far from untouched by the theories and actions of the federal government as it pushed steadily toward the goal of assimilation for Indians.³⁹

Under the leadership of the director of the BCIM, the church fought back in court and through the press to defend federal support of denominational schools. But a succession of commissioners of Indian Affairs ruled against such aid, and Congress agreed in 1896. Direct funding of church schools was forbidden, although a plan was accepted for the gradual phasing out of contract schools. All appropriations, however, were to cease in 1900. For the Catholic Indian schools, compensatory funds from Mother Katharine Drexel took up the slack.⁴⁰

AS A RESULT, the White Earth school flourished in the early 1900s. Enrollment averaged 100 and sometimes reached as many as 125. A 1910 letter from the sisters to the new director of the BCIM reported, "We have our crowd of ninety-four and expect about ten more this week so when all come in we will be well-crowded. We have not many full-bloods," the sisters noted, "but our children are nearly all orphans who otherwise have no one to look out for them and we feel obliged to give them a home also." Most of these orphans generally spent their entire childhoods at the mission, not having homes to return to even during Christmas or summer vacations. The sisters, surrogate mothers and fathers, found themselves imparting knowledge and honing skills for which parents or grandparents would normally have been responsible.⁴¹

There are few indications that mission children ran away, but some did and, of those who did not, surely many experienced homesickness. One sister, who taught at White Earth for 31 years between 1910 and 1945,

³⁶Sisters' Records, Record Group 16, subgroup 1, St. Benedict's Convent Archives.

³⁷Here and below, see Hermanutz, in *Indian Sentinel*, 1911, p. 29; Sister Bernard Coleman and Sister Verona LaBud, *Masinaigans: The Little Book*, 201 (St. Paul, 1972); Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, *Report of the Director for 1908*, 16, 17 (Washington, D.C., [1909]).

³⁸Prucha, *Churches and Indian Schools*, 3, 18; Board of Indian Commissioners, *Twenty-Second Annual Report*, 1890, p. 98 (Washington, D.C., 1891).

³⁹Congressman William S. Linton, quoted in Prucha, *Churches and Indian Schools*, 29.

⁴⁰Prucha, *Churches and Indian Schools*, 27-40, 52. The Drexel Fund "regularly" contributed over \$100,000 annually as compensation for the cutoff of federal funds.

⁴¹Sisters of St. Benedict, White Earth, to Father William H. Ketcham, September 24, 1910, in BCIM Papers.

observed that parents had "a great love for their children and the little ones are very fond of their parents. This is very evident when the children start school. It is heart breaking for them to leave their homes even though it might be a poor hut. Many tears are shed the first days of school because of homesickness," but "after they are in school awhile they learn to love it and enjoy the companionship of other children who may have at first been complete strangers."⁴²

There was little time allotted for such feelings as homesickness. A typical day at the school in 1911 — and indeed for 30 years of the school's existence — went as follows:⁴³

6:00 A.M.	Rise
6:30	Mass, Breakfast
7:30	Work detail
8:30	Classes
10:15	Recess
12:00	Lunch
1:15	Classes
2:15	Recess for lower grades
3:30	End of school, recreation for all
4:30	Needlework and chores
6:00	Supper, recreation
7:30	Bed for younger children, study for older children
8:30	Bed for older children

The sisters taught much more than the three R's. Good homemaking skills were also a major goal, so the older girls learned to prepare meals, to can food, to wash and iron clothes, and even to butcher meat. One teacher wrote that "Butchering was always a great time. We killed as many as 40 hogs at one time. There were tubs of sausage meat ground and ready for the casings by evening," when the reward came. "After the work was done, the cook fried pans of sausage all everyone could eat and what fun we had."

Fun and hard work were constants at the White Earth school throughout its history, but by the late 1920s the mission's golden age was past. The pioneer trio — Father Aloysius and Sisters Philomene and Lioba — were gone, only Sister Lioba surviving into retirement. Sister Philomene died in 1928 and Father Aloysius in 1929. Sister Lioba lived out her days at the mother house in St. Joseph. The boarding school lasted 17 years after the deaths of Sister Philomene and Father Aloysius, closing its doors in 1945, the year Sister Lioba died.⁴⁴

The White Earth mission school was facing numer-

⁴² Sister Ladislaus Twardowski, *Memoirs*, n.d., Sisters' Records, St. Benedict's.

⁴³ Here and below, see Sister Mary Degel to author, April 10, 1980, in White Earth Mission Papers, St. Benedict's.

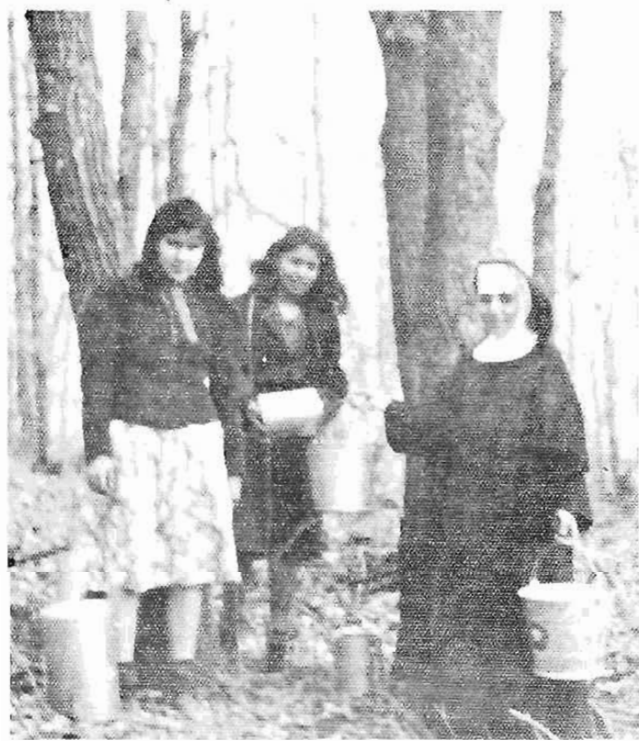
⁴⁴ McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, 246; Sisters' Records, St. Benedict's.



A LAUGHING nun covered her ears as the St. Benedict's children's band performed about 1910; the drummer and the horn player wore traditional Ojibway beaded clothing.

ous problems, some new, some old, by the early 1940s. Enrollment was declining, funds were short, and teachers were harder to get and to keep. The principal wrote to the director of the BCIM in 1941, telling him that the pastor was worried about keeping the school open. The "Indian Council is planning to withdraw all Indian funds for education in the future," she observed. "It is rather a depressing thought to have the mission schools closed after they had served the Indians for so many years. On a whole the sentiment, even from non-

TWO STUDENTS and a sister gathered maple sap in the woods north of the school in the 1930s.



Catholics, in the White Earth community at least, is in favor of the Mission school."⁴⁵

The shortage of funds once again combined with a lack of space. In the summer of 1941, the principal and the pastor agreed to renovate part of the old church for additional classrooms. But by the spring of 1945 a new pastor recognized the need to change the boarding school into a day school. "I am determined if I must continue to work in this community to have this school turned into a grade day school, if it is possible," he wrote the BCIM's director. "That way, it would be possible to do more effective work. . . . If all the Catholic children would attend our day school, then only 40-50 pupils would remain for the public school." The new priest then speculated about funds: "I wonder if any help could be expected through the Indian Bureau?" No further help was forthcoming from the Indian Bureau and, in the fall of 1945, the St. Benedict mission school became a day school.⁴⁶

DURING their many years at White Earth, the pioneer trio of Benedictine missionaries grew to know and re-

spect some aspects of Ojibway culture, but their own goals, like those of most of their fellow Americans working with Indian people, were directed strongly toward change. Perhaps if they had been introduced to Indian traditional religion and culture, if they had had a sense of their own positions as agents of cultural change, and if they had considered the idea of missionary adaptation to Indian culture as well as to the ideals and aims of Indian mission work, the process of change might have been different for both the Ojibway and the missionaries.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sister M. Hermina [Fleischhacker] to Rev. J. B. Tonnely, February 18, 1941, BCIM Papers.

⁴⁶ Father Valerian Thelen to Father Tonnely, March 22, 1945, BCIM Papers.

⁴⁷ Sister Francis Mary Riggs, "Attitudes of Missionary Sisters Toward American Indian Acculturation," 25, Ph.D. thesis, Catholic University of America, 1967.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on pages 158, 164 (left), 167 (right), and 169 (bottom) are from the St. Benedict's Convent Archives at St. Joseph; the one on page 164 (right) is from the St. John's Abbey Archives, Collegeville; all others are in the MHS audiovisual library.

A 1926 VIEW of the Benedictine buildings at White Earth from across Mission Lake





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