

The Ministry among the Apaches after 100 Years

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Foreword

This brief epistle is not meant to be a definitive study of any one aspect of our work among the Apache Indians for the past 100 years. Nor is it an attempt to enhance, excuse, blame or second-guess the gains and/or losses we have experienced.

However, honesty dictates that as we look back in an effort to view or consider our ministry from the perspective of a learning experience, we must point out our mistakes. Mistakes by Boards, executives and those in positions of authority in Milwaukee. Mistakes by men in the various fields on both reservations. Mistakes of commission and omission. Mistakes by good men—veterans of many years of faithful service during very trying times; and mistakes by novice young men, often unwilling to temper their enthusiasm with common sense, or becoming frustrated by events deeply involving them. Events and decisions that often unfold more rapidly than the line of communication, either the U. S. Postal Service or AT&T, could deliver.

Much of the material will reflect the feelings, experiences and viewpoints, though possibly jaded at times by personal experiences, of the author.

The material in this paper comes primarily from a lifetime spent among the Apache Indians on the Fort Apache Reservation and also to a degree, among the San Carlos Apache people. Humbly, I can state that I was privileged to live during the prime years of the giants of both Reservations, both Apache and White. I was and am a living witness of their tireless, caring, effective and loving work. I can attest to the successes, failures and above all, their devotion to and respect toward the Apache people. These personal experiences and associations I will treasure for the rest of my life.

The list of names—the honor roll of those giants of the past—beginning with the first hardy pioneers, pastors, teachers, wives, interpreters, consecrated and devoted laymen and women, both Apache and White, have tragically never been engraved and displayed on a polished brass plaque...but they must never be forgotten.

My life and ministry gave me the blessed opportunity to be influenced by not only my sainted father but also to a degree by Pastor Al and F. U. Uplegger, “Uncle” Henry Rosin, Ernie Sprengler, “Tubby” Nieman, Art Krueger, and Teachers Walt Huber and Art Maier. One must be very careful when naming names but in this instance I speak only for myself, and must include Field Secretary Ray Zimmerman and the venerable Edgar Hoenecke. On the other side of the coin we find names of Apache Christians, again both men and women, who also must never be forgotten. They also are part of my link with the past. We dare never forget Rankin Rogers, Lon Bullis, Tom Friday, Walter Williams, John Williams, A-1, H-8, B-3, Coyote, A-4, Y-24, Alfred Burdette, and the list could go on.

Let us never forget as we celebrate the 100 Years of Grace what the Lord has given us here in Apacheland, that we have a great heritage, We have a legacy of self-sacrifice, dedication and devotion that has to be a source of pride and gratitude, and a challenge to continue to build upon the foundation they dedicated their lives to—The Word and Sacraments in Apacheland, as taken from God’s only revelation of His Word and Will for all mankind...the Bible.

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The People

Just who were and are the Apache People whom the early missionaries met 100 Years ago and we work with today?

Most all ethnologists and cultural anthropologists agree that the Apaches are descendants of the *nomadic Athabaskan* wanderers who migrated south and east and finally south and west from the area around the Great Slave and Bear Lakes region of western Canada. The fur traders of the Hudson Bay Company met them there a long time ago. The first real record that we have of their having settled in the Southwest was compiled by Castaneda, the chronicler for Coronado on his greedy hunt for the Seven Cities of Cibola.

The fact that they were nomads played no small part in causing the early missionaries to adjust their thinking as to what was the best way to do mission work among them. They definitely were not a sedentary people like their neighbors, the Pimas, Papagos, Pueblos or Hopis. Also it must be noted at the outset that they were not a tribal people in the sense of the upper Midwest Indians; i.e., Sioux, Blackfoot, Ojibway, Menominee, etc. These nomadic newcomers to the deserts and mountains of the area that comprises the land between the Colorado River in the west to the Rio Grande in the east, the high plateau to the north and the Sierra Madre Mountains of northern Sonora, Mexico, were made up of many small *clans*. Each clan was presided over by a natural leader, to be followed by one chosen and trained to replace the older individual in the event of death or incapacity.

These clan leaders were more often than not the Shaman or medicine man trained from youth in the chants, songs, incantations as well as the various roots, leaves and berries used in curing ceremonies. He was also the true religious leader and as such dictated the spiritual beliefs and practices of the clan. He was a very powerful man who definitely had to be reckoned with and stood up to by the early man.

Today there are no real "Medicine Men" trained in the old way. They have been replaced by cunning "singers" and pseudo "healers" and leaders of the "Sunrise Dance". They are not as powerful as in the early days but still a thorn in the flesh of our missionaries today.

These early forerunners of the Apache of 1893 and of today possessed no *written language* and had no alphabet. Theirs was a conversational language only. Thus they were unable to record for posterity their history, culture, religious beliefs and practices. When a group can only pass on vital facts through oral communication there is a good chance that events, rituals, stories, methods, dates and other "vital statistics" will be changed, enhanced, deleted, embellished or lost altogether. This also made it rather difficult for the early men to communicate with the people, even through an interpreter. One word could mean a phrase and often a whole sentence would be necessary to express one small but vital thought. How could they get across the idea of justification, sanctification, repentance, forgiveness, etc.?

Then when we add to this the fact that they were very *superstitious* you have a real problem. It has been my contention that when a person does not understand something or cannot explain something a certain amount of fear, foreboding and superstitious thoughts take over. Our early missionaries must have had a real struggle with superstition; i.e., The Owl, The Snake, Lightning, Darkness, Dust Devils, Types of Sickness, etc.

On the other hand we must remember that the Apache of yesterday along with his contemporary descendant were *very religious*.

True superstition, fear and ignorance played a great role in their religious practices and songs but they did, I feel, have a more positive religion in many ways than the Romans, Greeks

and many Modernists today. When a man arose in the early light of dawn from his tepee which had been constructed facing the East, he would raise his hands assuming an attitude of prayer. From his lips would come words of praise, thanks and supplication to the “Giver of All Life”—*Bik’ehgo’ihi’dan*. This supreme, mystical spirit being was the source of all things.

Facing the East and praying toward the morning sun did not mean praying *to* the sun. The sun only represented the Giver of Life for without the sun there could be no life.

The early missionaries were able to take this “heathen” practice and turn it into a real object lesson for the doctrine of the First Person of the Trinity—God the Father, the Creator.

Much, much more could be written and discussed on the subject of the native religion of the Apache of yesterday and how it influenced the work of the early pioneer missionaries. Much could be written concerning its influence that is still prevalent, in a corrupted form, today. This could be a study in itself.

We must also remember that the Apache of the 1890’s was *poor* and *scattered*. These two facts also did much to dictate the “Mission Practices” of the early men. There were no textbooks, no doctrinal theses, no precedents to read, study or follow. A Midwest-born and bred White, middle-class, Protestant, Lutheran, German-speaking, doctrinally sound, Wauwatosa-educated Greenhorn to the Southwest must have suffered a real “cultural shock” getting off the train in San Carlos or off his horse at Fort Apache.

No real town. Just scattered small tepees or wickiups constructed of cedar poles covered with bear grass, tied with cactus rope. A Tus for carrying water, Burden Baskets for carrying corn, flour, salt, Jerky, coffee, Yucca, Bananas, wild onions, acorns, walnuts and anything else. A scrawny horse and a couple of patient donkeys. Little ones with matted hair, bare feet and ragged clothing. These were to become his “congregation” Did this early White intruder from the East feel in his pocket for what just might be a return ticket? What were his thoughts in the face of this poverty—those people scattered all over the desert and mountains? Were they really included in the commission to “Go, make disciples—?”

It also must be remembered that the *white men who came* before the missionaries were men not interested in the souls of the Apache. They were miners, trappers, farmers, cowboys and soldiers. All wanting to take, dig, till, graze, trap and if necessary, kill. This period of push, take-over, round-up, kill and deport lasted for 40 years and only ended in a shaky “peace” in 1886, just seven years before the first Lutheran missionary began his work.

Oh, there was “*Peace*”—if you could call it that. Deportation, round-up and resettle, rations and robbery, subjection and whiskey. Does this all make for a happy interaction between conqueror and the conquered? Robbed of land, robbed of freedom to roam, robbed of a way of life and offered a strange combination of the open hand of friendship and then the closed fist of domination.

Because of this paradox which caused so much confusion, there had to follow a natural *mistrust* of all white man. This last condition to me was one of the major obstacles that had to be overcome by the early men.

One had to gain the confidence of the Apache before it would be possible to offer a substitution for the native religion. Without this trust the situation would be hopeless. Too often the Apache had been lied to. Too often he had received the short end of the deal.

History tells us that the success or failure of the early men rested upon, to a great degree, their ability to exhibit a combination of *love* and *patience*. Some possessed these two traits and again others just did not have the ability to wait out a situation. This is something maybe we all should think about in our work even today. Gustav Harders, Al Uplegger, Art Krueger, Uncle

Henry, my Father are examples of this type of love and patience ministry. They were instrumental to a great degree in overcoming the mistrust that had become part of the Apache culture as a result of the treatment they had received at the hands of others.

These are my thoughts in brief concerning the people called Apache with whom we have been working and for whom we have been working since 1893. So much more could and should be written so that those coming after us will be better equipped to understand the Apache of today in the light of the Apache of yesterday.

The Missionaries

The early men who stepped off the Southern Pacific at San Carlos or the Santa Fe in Holbrook were absolutely *untrained* and unprepared for what they were about to undertake. This is not said to discredit them or point a finger. This is a fact of history. We, the Synod, were new at this. There were no textbooks or manuals to study to prepare the men for their work. The only job description was simple: "...We need a man in Arizona—Will you go?" No special training—no linguistic studies. No philosophy of Indian Missions. Just "Go" and, prayerfully, do the best you can.

Some went, failed and got back on the train as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Some went and tried, gave their best and failed. Others tried, failed, tried again, improvised, gave of time, talent, love, patience, health and even life, and succeeded. It was "on-the-job training", then pass on the results of your trial and error.

To be untrained was bad enough but there was a progression of problems. One of the basic problems that led to others was the *isolation* and this led to *loneliness*. Think back to those early days.

No town—no roads—(just paths following the game trails on the way to the water holes or the contour of the land). No neighbors, no phone, no hospital, no big stores. Shortages always of even the staple goods. When I think of Mrs. Plocher, a dainty, slim, china-doll of a lady living in a half-cave with an ocotillo fence for a door. No running water—no sanitary facilities. My own Mother with T.B. isolated at East Fork giving birth to 9 children without the benefit of a doctor. Mrs. Harders—skimping, saving, sharing at the expense of herself. All these and many other factors must have been a heavy burden on the early men.

This affected their wives and thus it became a vicious circle. Then add to this the illness that struck pastors, wives and children. The graveyards on both reservations bear mute testimony to the ravages of illness, malnutrition and accidents that could and often break the best.

These points must be remembered and taken into consideration when we discuss the ministry among the Apaches during this Centennial Year. The men and women who left so much, traveled so far and gave so such were truly pioneers. Even those who for personal or physical reasons left to return to more comfortable and familiar surroundings gave of their best. They also must be judged only in the light of the facts prevalent. In their own way they contributed what they could. They may never be remembered as we remember the giants but they must be remembered fondly.

When one considers all the obstacles the Devil placed before our early efforts and our own inexperience, it is a wonder that any progress was made. Trial and error—Blunders—Experiment. Work and Pray. Above all, allow the Holy Spirit to be a partner. It all began to jell.

Progress

The mistrust soon turned to the *trust* so necessary in this type of work. When the trust became a reality much of the old superstitions, fears and phobias began to fade. These “white men” truly came to help. These men with the Great Book came to give—not take. A new-found friendship developed based upon this trust. On this foundation a mission could be begun, a church could be built.

On the other hand, it would be impossible to move ahead as one would back in the Midwest. *Improvise* was the word. Necessity dictated. The tried and true just would not work in the Territory of Arizona on the San Carlos and Fort Apache Reservations.

This being called upon to improvise came as quite a shock to the born, reared and educated in the upper Midwest missionary to the Apache, and yet they came through.

Harders built a church with linerboards from railroad box cars and mine timber scraps. Carl Guenther salvaged Tufa stone from buildings demolished at old San Carlos to build a new school building to replace the mud building. Apache men and women assisted in building a small church at Lower Cibecue in 1911. This building, still standing, was constructed of mud bricks and grass mixed on the site. E. Edgar Guenther, following orders to “start a school”, constructed desks and benches from scrap lumber while his wife Minnie typed out his lessons and “textbooks” on an old Oliver typewriter.

Dresser drawers and dried fruit boxes served as cribs for little orphans in one room of the Guenthers’ 30 x 30, 4-room house.

When driving over the hot sand on the way to Fort Huachua Rev. Guenther cut the bead off of old tires and slipped the carcass over the tires on his Model T to prevent blisters from forming on the tires. The list goes on and on.

But, you say, what has this to do with the “Ministry among the Apaches—?” Frankly, if these hardy men and women could not or would not improvise, many aspects of the work would have stalled, slowed down or even stopped.

Remember, even the necessities ordered from Montgomery Ward in Kansas could take three weeks to get to Holbrook by train and Fort Apache by Army freight wagon.

This ability to “make do” carried over into camp calls, Bible Classes and sick calls. Which of you gentlemen listening to this paper have been called upon to visit a sick member—only after catching skunks and rendering the oil, having your wife tear up anything flannel, obtaining cans of Epsom Salts and rolls of tar paper. After packing these items on a pack horse, riding out in the chilly air of a winter morning, to give those sick with the flu a dose of Epsom Salts, two sheets of tar paper for under the pallet, a poultice of skunk oil on the chest and a wrapping of flannel? This expression of love and the ability to help in the face of tragedy did much to help the bodies and spirits of the Apache. Good public relations, to say the least.

However, there had to be some *continuity* if true progress was to be accomplished. When we consider that just *four* men gave a total of 200 years to the mark and then add the 30-odd years of Ernie Sprengler and another 25 of Pastor Hartzell, Sr., you have true continuity.

Finally, the *love* and *respect* of the Apache had to follow. All our work, study, preaching, teaching would avail nothing without the love and respect of the people.

Thanks to the work, sacrifice, love and effort of so many dedicated men and women—pastors teachers, wives, Boards and Field Administrators—we gained their love and respect. *This is a heritage we must pass on.*

Conclusion

I think that we all agree that the life and work of the early pioneer missionaries was difficult, to any the least. The culture and way of life of the people, the mistrust as a result of the treatment at the hands of the white man, the language barrier were definite factors. We also must admit that the early men were ill-equipped to carry out the terms of their calls and/or assignments.

Now the question arises, in view of all this how did they accomplish anything? Or did they accomplish what was expected of them? Both questions are difficult to answer without the reports, evaluations, memoirs, eyewitness accounts or other sources of information. I will not attempt to answer or evaluate, or pass judgment.

However, I will state that from my personal knowledge of the pioneers, pastors, teachers, wives and workers, they all overcame great personal and environmental odds to carry out their responsibilities in respect to the Great Commission. They visited the camps, baptized the children and adults, instructed the young, comforted the sick and buried the dead. They gave much of their personal strengths and worldly goods, often at the expense of their health and their families.

Maybe what my father wrote in 1947 about Pastor Myerhoff's mission work just about sums up the work of most of the early men. I quote:

“He talked to the Indians of the true ‘Giver of Life’! He showed them the Book in which the Giver of Life had His Word to man written down. He explained to the Indians that their own sins made them so fearful and superstitious, and that these sins separated them from the Giver of Life who is just and holy. Then he told them other things which I liked best of all to hear. He told them the story of Jesus, the Son of the Giver of Life, who had once lived on the earth and had been punished for just those things that separated people from the Holy God. And the news that the Son of God rose from the dead, still lives, and wishes to rule in the hearts of all men, pleased me most of all.”

They preached Christ. As my father told me 45 years ago: “When you talk to the Indian put the Bible between you and the Indian. Let your whole dealings be between the Indian and his Lord and His Word, not between the Indian and the missionary.”

Where are we after 100 years? The people are still here. Their skin is dark, their hair is black. The Word is the same. We are still white and we are still trying to give them the true Giver of Life.

Times change, conditions change, pressures change, in fact almost everything changes—except needs and solutions. The needs of the Apache are still with us. We still have the solutions in the Word and Sacraments.

Does this sound too simplistic? After 100 years isn't there more to it than that? I don't think so. The Apache is still here. The need is still here. We are still here. The Word is still here. May it be thus a hundred years from now.