How life has changed! On the farm during the Great Depression I never had a birthday party. Kids from neighboring farms would have loved to come to a party, but their parents, like mine, couldn't afford to buy presents, so birthday parties were unheard of in those days.

Instead, our birthdays were family celebrations. Mother baked large angel food cakes with white frosting and candles. I was fortunate to have my birthday during the hot summer. When it fell on a weekend, Daddy made his delicious hand-churned ice cream and I got to help.

Ever since I moved into the Heritage Living Center, my birthday celebrations have become a community event, a day for the Cheyenne elders and surrounding reservation communities to celebrate not only my birthday, but also to offer thanks to God, to our donors and to our dedicated staff for the beautiful home we live in and the superb care we receive.

Back in 2003, my birthday party was a picnic with games, hot dogs, hamburgers, cake and ice cream. Each year since then the celebration has grown with more and more people attending. This year hundreds came to enjoy a pow wow with many Indian dancers participating in men and women's traditional style dancing, fancy dance style and gourd dances. Four drum groups sang traditional Indian songs. Each group had six to eight drummers and a special attraction was the young boy's drum group from Lame Deer called Clay Hill.

The group called ahead to ask if they could attend. While competing with the older drum groups, the Clay Hill boys delighted the audience with an Indian song about Sponge Bob Square Pants, a popular TV cartoon character!

This was unexpected and everyone burst out laughing.

In the evening, we all sat down to a dinner of roast beef, mashed potatoes, corn, beans, birthday cake and ice cream served first to the resident elders, then visiting elders and then to all the guests. The Cheyenne tradition is to honor the elders by feeding them first.

This ancient custom shows respect and may have been necessary in the old days when years of famine left older people hungry and weak. This is but one of the many Cheyenne family customs that continues to the present day.

Dancers participating in the pow wow during Fr. Emmett's birthday celebration.
Pictures tell the tale of a sunny July afternoon at the Heritage Living Center celebrating Father Emmett’s 85th birthday. The annual party is a good excuse for a community pow wow and gathering of so many whose lives Fr. Emmett has enriched.

In this newsletter you will find Mike’s column from “Big Sky Country,” which is what we call our magnificent state. He will tell you more about my birthday, which was a lot of fun for everyone, even Fergie, who was in her element with all the attention.

I also want to thank you all for the cards and birthday wishes I received this year, as well as the gifts for the care of the elders at the Heritage Living Center. May God bless you and your families and keep you safe during this sweltering hot summer weather.

Your beggar friend,

Father Emmett Hoffmann

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Summer Celebration!

Ten years after groundbreaking at the Heritage Living Center, residents and community members have come to know that every July there is a birthday party on the summer calendar celebrating the man who started it all. But the celebration is more than a birthday party for Father Emmett – it’s a reunion of family and friends gathered to dance and sing and share stories. Many of those stories are of gratitude for Fr. Emmett and the lives he has touched and changed during the past six decades. During the afternoon Cheyenne Chiefs spoke and prayed in their native language. Tots played and teenagers giggled.

Drum groups pounded away, and sang in high-pitched voices. At sound dancers bobbed in rhythmic motion. Dancers spun and gyrated in costumes of extraordinary color and textures made of cloth, leather and feathers. Conversation, smiles and laughter filled the air. A wonderful meal for everyone capped off Father’s 85th birthday celebration on this perfectly sun-splashed afternoon!
Believe it or not, Father Emmett worries that he hasn't done enough for the Cheyenne people! For those of us who are amazed by his achievements, it's hard to imagine how humble he is about his life's work. If you ask him about it, he will tell you that without faithful friends and donors the Lord's work could not have been accomplished.

One thing about Father is undeniable - he stays the course, no matter what. Most priests are assigned to other posts after a few years and they move on. Not Father Emmett.

From the beginning, Father Emmett has relied on donors' suggestions and advice throughout the years, including advice about his personal health. The Guild Arts & Crafts Factory was a successful endeavor. Tribal members flocked to the factory for jobs. They learned how to fill out job applications and what to expect in a job interview. Those who never had the opportunity to work, learned to come to work on time and use their money wisely.

The Guild Arts & Crafts Factory employed over 200 Cheyenne employees and supplies bus transportation for tribal members. It was during his tenure that the Cheyenne learned to make money and decide what they would do with it. When the factory closed after nearly 20 years due to the Oil Embargo, the Cheyenne used their skills to find other jobs. But the closing devastated Father. He felt like the rug had been pulled out from under him. Eventually, students began to tear down the abandoned factory to make way for basketball courts.

Every so often, Father drove slowly past the old factory, watching as the boys tore down the basketball court and sauna and built Assisted Living and Resident Attendants are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Heritage Living Center has more beds, the Heritage Living Center provides transportation provided and is given the name "Soaring Eagle."
Everyone deserves to be safe! A profound moment comes when a Cheyenne elder moves into the Heritage Living Center, carrying the burden of a lifetime of fear and worry. Suddenly, she gets to see the light in her life. It doesn’t matter how old she is, she can still reach her potential as a human being. That’s what I want for every elder at the Center and I believe it’s a moral and spiritual purpose.

As many of you know, the Northern Cheyenne experienced injustices over many decades. I don’t want to see the elders suffer anymore. Every evening, I ask myself, ‘Did I do enough to make their lives better today?’ I wish everyone could get to know the resident elders, the most welcoming, genuine and friendly people you’d ever want to meet. Recently, I spent time with Herb Bear Chloe, who everyone calls “Happy Herb.” However, this year has been anything but happy for him. First he lost his beloved wife, Marie, and then he experienced serious health problems. In our last of the Cheyenne women who knows the ancient way to cut buffalo and deer meat to prepare traditional Indian meals. She is a direct descendant of the Fort Robinson Massacre and preserves the precious oral history of her tribe.

When a young Cheyenne boy came up to Father’s table carrying a large plate overflowing with mashed potatoes and roast beef, enough food for two people, I realized that he may not have eaten in some time. He could barely manage the plate when he asked Father if he could sit down next to him. “Father Emmett is the best thing that ever happened to Ashland!” he said and pitched into his food with a vigor.

It has been an honor and a learning experience working alongside Father Emmett for nearly a year. He had me hit the ground running and I catch my breath whenever I can. Father Emmett is a warm and caring man. We have laughed and learned from each other and have spent long hours thinking and planning for the future.

The sheer force of Father Emmett’s determination to care for the Cheyenne elders was enough to get the job done at the Heritage Living Center. But imagine my trepidation as I followed his path into the future. In this newsletter you will read about some of his humanitarian accomplishments. I don’t know if I can, or should even try, to match his amazing record for good, but I am determined to live up to his goals. One thing is for sure, as we go forward, I, too, will need your help and advice.

So long from Big Sky Country.

Mike Skaggs
Soaring Eagle CEO

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Peter John Wilson (wearing hat) describes the purpose of a sweat lodge to Eleanor and Les Bell of Portsmouth, VA while touring the Heritage Living Center with Fr. Emmett and Mike Skaggs.

Herb, Edna and Fr. Emmett show off their new emergency alert buttons described inside this issue.