

Finding Father Emmett



Above, exuberant donors squeeze in tight for a photo with Fr. Emmett. Below, a reporter interviews Father Emmett while others wait to visit.



Some seemed bewildered, others simply beamed with joy at seeing Father Emmett Hoffmann at the 125th Anniversary of St. Labre Indian School this past June. They finally got the chance, after so many years, to reunite with the man most had never seen in person but had always considered a close, personal friend.

For 40 years, Father touched their hearts through his compassionate letters describing the harsh conditions on the remote Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana. Since 1954, they had responded with contributions to help their “beggar friend” change a small, dilapidated mission school into one of the finest Indian Schools in the country.

“He’s right over there!” was the buzz in the school’s Soaring Eagle Gymnasium and multi-purpose center, named after Father Emmett in the mid-90s. Soaring Eagle is Father’s Indian name bestowed upon him by the Northern Cheyenne.

“I want to meet Father Emmett, where is he?” continued to be heard throughout the complex. The fact is, although Father has not been officially affiliated with St. Labre since 1994, he has been “just up the road” all along. As readers of this newsletter, you know that in 2002, with the help of wonderful benefactors, Father built the magnificent Heritage Living Center, an Assisted Living Center for Northern Cheyenne elders they call, “the miracle on the hill” above Ashland. Today, the Center bustles with activity, a place 40 tribal elders call “home.”

At the mission celebration, visitors and donors hovered around Father, chatting, having pictures taken with him and asking him to sign his biography, *Renegade Priest of the Northern Cheyenne*. On more than one occasion, Father Emmett was moved to tears between the smiles, laughter and hugs.

Many of the celebration visitors got their start as St. Labre donors during Father Emmett’s lifetime journey with the Cheyenne. And one of the highlights of their trip – a wonderful memory to take home – was seeing the man in person who inspired them for so many years, their good friend, the beggar priest, Father Emmett.

- john warner

A Note from Father Emmett

Early autumn in Montana is the most beautiful time of the year, with the clear, usually cloudless skies and bright, starry nights. Some days we had above normal temperatures with only a few colder, rainy days. This year, the many unusual summer evening thunder and rain storms were blessings in disguise, reducing the number of forest fires. Since mid-August, the cooler summer days have given us the taste of an early fall and the fear of an early winter.

Heritage Living Center residents and staff, joined by many of my friends on the reservation, put on a wonderful celebration for my birthday in

July. Two drum groups with singers provided the music. There were gourd dancers and regular Indian dancing, which inspired 87 year-old Sylvia Elk Shoulder, one of our residents. She stood up from her wheel chair and danced with the gourd dancers, to the delight of everyone present.

Afterwards, visitors and staff joined the residents for a delicious barbeque dinner. We had originally planned to eat outdoors but the cold, rainy weather moved the meal indoors. Residents celebrating birthdays can choose the entrée for their party. Since I am of German descent from Wisconsin, I asked that we serve real German brats (German sausages) along with hamburgers and hot dogs. Most of the Cheyenne residents had never heard of "brats."

Over the 4th of July, special friends from Dallas came for a visit. We had a delightful time and a lot to share since it had been almost 20 years since I last saw them. Through the years they raised a family while running a private Montessori School and training Montessori teachers.

A four day visit with my sister Phyllis in late August was definitely the highlight of my summer. Sister Phyllis Hoffmann and Sister Marion Etzel, both Salvatorian Sisters, had come from Wisconsin for a short vacation. Sister Phyllis has visited

me many times over the years but we both enjoyed showing Sister Marion around the reservation, telling her about the changes that have taken place over the past 55 years; paved roads, houses instead of tents and old log shacks, a new school and even a Community College.

Seeing the reservation today, they had many questions about the history of the Cheyenne and how they survived not only the military battles but later having to eke out a living after the reservation was formed. Their questions brought back many memories of the past as I relived my early days among the

Cheyenne. I could feel the emotions that led me to dedicate my life to the Cheyenne people rather than seeking an easier apostolate.

Summer came to an official end over the Labor Day weekend with the Ashland Community Pow-wow. Indian tribes from New Mexico, Oklahoma and other western states joined in the celebrations and took part in honoring departed family members. Among the various contest dances a special Chicken Dance Memorial was performed in

honor of Joe Fox Sr., one of our resident elders who passed away 2 years ago.

My memories of the summer would not be complete without saying "Thank You" to you our friends and benefactors for your sacrifices, which help us to care for the elders at the Heritage Living Center during these difficult times. I am most grateful because without your help it would be impossible to provide for their needs. Each day, we thank God and ask Him to bless you for your generosity.

Your grateful beggar friend,



Father Emmett Hoffmann



My sister Phyllis visited this summer from Wisconsin.

“No White Man Ever Touched Me”

Cheyenne Women in the Escape from Ft. Robinson 1878-1879

By Renee Sansom Flood

In the annals of the American West, the names and deeds of Indian women have washed away in the streams and rivers of time. Historians discount Indian oral history, which was, with few exceptions, the only way native women could describe their memories of pre-preservation days. To disregard their stories silences them as effectively as bullets did in the late 1870s, when Northern Cheyenne women changed the course of war and peace in Indian country.

Of all the plains tribes, Cheyenne women were best known for their purity. Strict customs meant that young girls were watched at all times. In good families, many marriages were arranged. When a Cheyenne woman married, she and her new husband slept apart for ten days to talk and get to know each other before consummating their marriage. During that time, the bride and groom decided whether or not the match was a good one.

Over time, it became harder to keep the old customs when battles with the military disrupted Cheyenne life. After Custer's defeat in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, the victorious tribes were hunted down. Within two years most of the Indian leaders had surrendered including the Cheyenne Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf. Descendants



Magpie, a Cheyenne bride in 1867

remember their tribe was “driven like cattle” for 72 days to an agency in Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma.

It was hell from the start. Accustomed to the cool mountain air in Montana, the Cheyenne suffered from extreme heat in the south. They recall “having to sleep out in the open with no tents, no tipis.” Nearly 60 people died the first year from malaria, malnutrition and dehydration brought on by diarrhea and medical neglect.

Warriors in Little Wolf's band depended on the medicine woman, “Notamehee,” North Woman, for her advice. They asked her if they should escape. North Woman told them to wait 2 days until she could talk to the chiefs before giving them her opinion. Finally, she approved saying, “Get everything organized and packed – all your gear. We are going to travel at night – not during the day. We don't want the soldiers to see us.” The Cheyenne later remembered, “The warriors were lucky. She had powers to protect them.”

On the night of September 9, 1878, Dull Knife and Little Wolf's people slipped away from the Oklahoma agency. They were pursued for weeks in running battles with thousands of troops and civilians chasing 353 Cheyenne. With winter coming on, Little Wolf and his friend Dull Knife decided to split up. Little Wolf with the majority of seasoned warriors would go north over the mountains and Dull Knife and his

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band would try to reach Red Cloud Agency. North Woman was afraid for Dull Knife's people, telling them, "Do not leave us. The soldiers will outnumber you and wipe you out!"

Chief Dull Knife led 46 males, aged 11 to 80, of which only about 30 were fit to fight. The rest, approximately 100 people, were women and children. Dull Knife was beloved by his people because of his kindness and concern for little children. He knew he could not go north with Little Wolf because sick elders, pregnant women and small, weak children could not survive the long journey over high mountains and across rivers without warm clothing and plenty of food. As it was, the women had to bandage the mouths of their little ones who breathed through their nostrils when soldiers were near.

Little Wolf hoped to serve as a decoy to confuse the soldiers and make certain that at least one of the two bands would survive.

North Woman joined Little Wolf on the long trek over the mountains and they finally made it home to Montana. North Woman lived to old age, a respected medicine woman of her tribe. But as she had feared, after Chief Dull Knife and his people split up from Little Wolf's band, they were captured by soldiers in a heavy snowstorm and brought into Camp Robinson, Nebraska Territory on October 26, 1878. Nearly all of his 150 "ragged" Cheyenne were suffering from hunger, chills and fever.

In mid-December, the man in charge at Camp Robinson was known to the Cheyenne as "the Commander." Capt. Henry W. Wessells Jr. was 33 years old, the married son of a Civil War General. Fort interpreter, James Rowland, half Cheyenne, was only 19 years old, a young

man with a good heart but no match for the short, hot-tempered Wessells.

It was no secret that Wessells was smitten with one of Chief Dull Knife's daughters, a pretty girl the soldiers called "The Princess." Her real name was "Ameohtsestse," or Traveling Woman. Capt. Wessells met with Dull Knife and bluntly asked for his daughter but the chief told him, "I did not raise my daughter to be given away like a dog."

Wessells scoffed and his smirk angered the chief's sons. One of them snapped, "We do not do those things with our

"I did not raise my daughter to be given away like a dog."

Chief Dull Knife - December 1878

women!" In the Cheyenne way it was the brother who consented to his sister's marriage and it was clear to the sons that Wessells just wanted their sister for his own pleasure. After the son's remark, the Commander immediately threatened the young man, shouting, "I am the boss here! I will hang you!"

Trying another tactic, Wessells separated the women and children from the men. He told Traveling Woman, through the interpreter, "If you take me as a husband, I will let your people go free. I will build a fine house for your father and give him cattle, horses and supplies." Rowland interpreted but Traveling Woman stood her ground. "No!" she told Rowland, "He might take it out on me. He will beat me and treat me rough." Descendants

recall, "The boy (Rowland) told the Commander what the woman had said. He got mad right away!" Wessells must have pulled out his pistol or made a move toward the girl because Rowland and Traveling Woman "got spooked" and ran out of the room. Later that night in the barracks Dull Knife's son overheard his parents discussing the Commander's proposal. He "got mad at his dad," and in anger asked him, "Are you talking about using my sister as bait?" His remark ended the discussion.

Following War Department orders, Wessells gave Dull Knife no choice – he must return to Oklahoma. Dull Knife refused, "No," he said. "I am here on my own ground and I will never go back." Capt. Wessells then had the barracks locked with an iron bar and the windows nailed shut with planks. He gave orders for all food and fuel to be cut off from the prisoners. Four days later, he cut off the water. Wessells offered to let the women and children come out to be fed but the warriors did not trust Capt. Wessells, afraid he would use them as

hostages. Still, the people endured without food, water, or heat for approximately a week with night temperatures of 25 degrees below zero. Thirsty little children scraped the frost from the window panes. The suffering of the elderly and the pregnant women was unimaginable.

On January 9, 1879, the Elk Society warrior Little Shield told his people, "We will not die here . . . We will die fighting!" The prisoners had hidden about 7 old rifles and a few pistols but not much ammunition. They dressed in their best clothing and went about kissing each other goodbye, knowing that many of their relatives would die that night. They waited for the moment of escape from the torture of starvation, thirst and the ago-

nizing horror of watching their innocent children die. When the temperature dropped to 30 degrees below zero, one of the prisoners couldn't stand to see her baby suffer and tried to kill her.

About 10 p.m., Little Shield led the Ft. Robinson Breakout. At the first shot, Wessells ran outside shouting orders to his men. The women, old men and children ran ahead while their men tried to cover them with gunfire. A warrior, Black Bird, saw Captain Wessells gun down his pregnant wife. "He killed Mrs. Black Bird. The Commander took his revenge out on her. It was not right! It made our people mad!" Many of the fighting men died within minutes and Wessells led his soldiers, dressed in buffalo coats, on a long chase that resulted in the deaths of women whose bodies were scalped, mutilated and indecently exposed. (The military blamed civilians for the barbarism.) Desperate people hid in holes, caves and crevices. In one instance, soldiers yelled for young children to be handed out of a hole and their lives would be spared. When the terrified children climbed up holding infant siblings, soldiers shot them down and then stood over the hole firing until the screaming stopped.

Dull Knife's daughter, Traveling Woman, was shot while trying to save her 4 year old sister. Weakened by loss of blood, she told the little girl to keep running, "Follow the others. You know which way to go." When the proud Cheyenne woman could go no further, she sat down, leaned against a tree and died. Chief Dull Knife and a few relatives nearly starved in a cave for 10 days. Then it took 18 more days to walk to safety. Within the previous year and during the outbreak, Chief Dull Knife had lost a wife, 3 sons and 2 daughters. Grieving and weakened by the ordeal, he never regained his health. The beloved chief was allowed to return to Montana where he died on his ancestral homelands in 1883.

Over a half dozen companies under Capt. Henry Walton Wessells Jr., mounted and well-armed with rifles and artillery field pieces, were victorious over 150

starved Northern Cheyenne on foot in mid winter. In less than a week, public outrage over the tragedy prompted an investigation. Wessells and his men were exonerated of all wrong doing in a subsequent military court of inquiry, which attached "no blame to anyone in the Military Service," and recommended "no action be taken." Commander Wessells died in 1929, a Brigadier General, like his father before him and was buried with his wife Eliza Lane in Arlington National Cemetery.

The moral and spiritual courage of Cheyenne women before and during the Ft. Robinson Outbreak will never be forgotten. Dull Knife's daughter refused to be used as a pawn and taken against her will. Perhaps if Traveling Woman had lived, she would have felt the same way a proud, elder Lakota on her deathbed, whose dying words were, "No white man ever touched me."



Inspired by the singing and drumming, Heritage Living Center resident Sylvia Elk Shoulder, 87, rose from her wheelchair to dance for a moment with Ernie Robinson during Fr. Emmett's birthday celebration.

Sources:

Interview with Chief Dull Knife's descendant, the late Northern Cheyenne Chief Burton H Seminole – 1997.

Interview with Rubie Sooktis, Dull Knife descendant, author, filmographer and Cheyenne historian – 1997.

Heritage Living Center Oral History Project: interviews with Wesley White-man, Grover Wolf Voice, Dan Seminole, James Medicine Bird, Ted Rising Sun, Alex Black Horse, John Woodenlegs, Red Fox and Charles Sitting Man Jr.

Testimony of survivors, soldiers and local citizens in the "Proceedings of a Board of Officers, convened by virtue of the following special order: Headquarters Department of the Platte, Fort Omaha, Nebraska, January 21, 1879," Special Orders, No. 8, Records of the U.S. Army Commands, Record Group 98, National Archives.

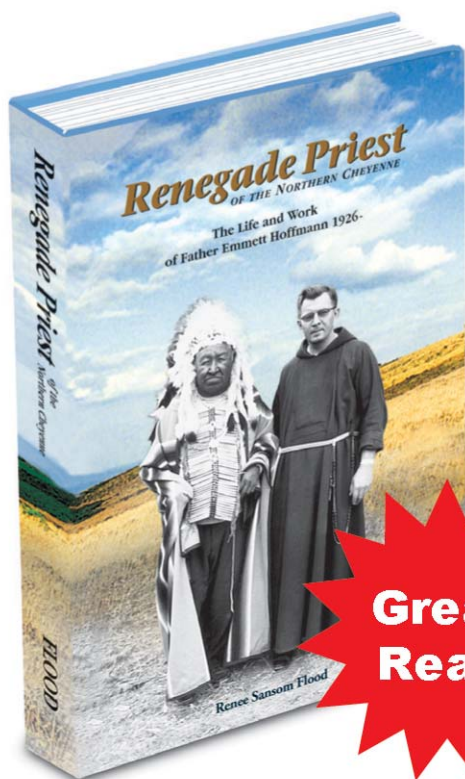
Sweet Medicine by Peter J. Peter Powell

The Fighting Cheyennes by George Bird Grinnell.

Ft. Robinson and the American West, 1874-1899 by Thomas R. Buecker

Holding Stone Hands by Alan Boye

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Marnee is an active widow who loves animals. She sponsors a program that fosters wounded wild animals and has been a long time volunteer at the local zoo. She lives with her dog Sadie, a toy Pomeranian, that she taught (This is a true story) to put away all of her 10 toys every night. Each toy has a name and when Marnee calls out the name, Sadie brings that particular toy and drops it into a basket.

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A barber pole grasshopper pays an autumn visit to the Heritage Living Center.



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