

The Apache Mission

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Of all the grand ventures begun by the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod in the area of world missions we must never forget or stop appreciating the lessons Christ has taught us in the Apacheland of Arizona. Over and over Christ reminds us that our tools are his Word and Sacraments. These alone will bring about the changes God desires in any human regardless of culture or language. It is my goal in this paper to remind us all of some of the past events of our synod's Apache mission effort, not to repeat the volumes that have been written in great detail by so many others, but to bring to mind some of the facts of the past and to add to what has been written by now recording some of the history of our mission during my time of service there.

It seems best to me to provide a list of important dates and events at this point. This list was drawn from the writings of Professor Edward Fredich and Pastor A.A. Guenther. This list is in no way complete.

- **1893** Adascheck and Plocher arrive in Peridot. Mayerhoff arrives to make his camp on the East Fork of the White River.
- **1896** Adascheck returns to Iron Ridge, Wisconsin
- **1899** Plocher moves to St. Peter, Minnesota, because his wife was in failing health. During his time he started the Peridot School which at that time had twenty students.
- **1900** Carl Guenther arrives fresh from the seminary to replace Plocher at Peridot.
- **1905** Gustav Harders serves Peridot from Globe
- **1911** The Cibecue mission begins when Schoenberg arrived in lower Cibecue, 50 miles west of East Fork. E. E. Guenther arrives in the East Fork area with directions to start a school.
- **1912** Carl Guenther moves to Bisbee, Arizona. Because his wife was in failing health he remained there until her death in 1916 .
- **1914-19** A. Zuberbier succeeds Schoenberg at Cibecue. Harders was joined at Globe by A. Uppligger and H. Rosin. The three new men were fresh out of the seminary. The latter two men would later serve in Peridot. **1918** M. Wehausen arrives from

Seminary to assist E.E Guenther at East Fork. A year later Guenther moved 5 miles away to Whiteriver to establish a congregation there.

- **1920** F. Upplegger arrives at San Carlos. He built the tuffa-stone church and parsonage dedicated himself to the children and to learning the Apache language. E. Sitz arrives to serve Cedar Creek until 1943.
- **1921** A.C. Krueger arrives in Cibecue and serves until **1939**.
- **1922** G. Schlegel arrives at Bylas to build a church and open a school.
- **1928** Paul Schliesser arrives to serve a new station at upper Cibecue, Carrizo and Forest Dale. He traveled a circuit of about 45 miles mostly on horseback through very mountainous areas.
- **1929** First high school was started by E.E. Guenther inside a room at the Whiteriver Church.
- **Teachers of note** Arthur Meier, 1944-1975 East Fork. Willis Hadler 1956-1998 Bylas. Nelson Zimmerman, 17 years at East Fork and 5 years at Cibecue. Reginald Reisop 1972-today East Fork.
- **1930** E. Sprengeler arrives to serve at Bylas.
- **1947** A.A Guenther arrives from Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, to serve at Whiteriver and Fort Apache for 50 years. A church is built at Cedar Creek by Adalbert Schultz.
- **1952-55** David Worgull arrives fresh from the Seminary to serve Cibecue.
- **1955-59** William Bein arrives at Cibecue from Seminary. He begins the tradition of an Easter Sunrise service on a mesa in Lower Cibecue.
- **1958** H. E. Hartzell arrives from Globe to serve for 25 years at East Fork and Canyon Day.
- **1982** Eric Hartzell arrives from Africa to pastor the East Fork and Canyon Day Churches.
- **1983-91** In 83 Larry Pontel arrives at Peridot from seminary. 84 Glenn Seefeldt was assigned to San Carlos. 85 Paul Schulz arrives from seminary as the new pastor at Bylas. 86 Kirby Spevecek came from Milwaukee to serve Cibecue and Cedar Creek.

Apacheland is a place of deep canyons, cold rivers, snow clad mountains, deserts, cacti and rushing waterfalls. It is also home to the White Mountain and San Carlos Apache tribes, each with their own reservation and government. The two reservations together are about 2 million acres of wilderness. On this land Christ has blessed the mission effort of the WELS since 1893 allowing us to build eight churches, four grade schools, one high school and one nursery. All this happened in a land where the people were considered war like when pastors Adascheck and Plocher arrived. There have been many faithful pastors and teachers as well as lay people who have given part or all their lives to serving Christ in Apacheland by loving His Apache people. This also is a place where a few missionaries became famous while others became infamous. Yet through us and at times in spite of us Christ has come into the lives of thousands of Apache people. We the synod took the responsibility of being Christ's tool to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to people who had not known Him ever before.

The 1990's in Apacheland were years in which there were many changes. These were the years in which well known missionaries would leave. Who would have ever believed that names like Guenther and Hartzell would disappear from the scene in the same year? These were the years in which the East Fork nursery was closed. Also, the operation of the Cibecue mission school was suspended. In these years the Missionary Pastor staff completely turned over. Yet these also were years in which the Gospel was proclaimed regularly to the joy of God's holy people in Apacheland. These were also the years in which many little children and babies were brought into the realm of their Heavenly Father through Holy Baptism. These, too, were years in which many God fearing Apaches would depart this world completely at peace in Christ. By God's amazing grace the ministry of the Word of God among the Apaches continued in the 1990's, the Great Commission was carried out to the glory of God.

I arrived in Cibecue in August of 1991 with my wife Debbie who was pregnant with our first child. I had been called to serve the churches at Cibecue and Cedar Creek which are 29 miles apart. I was wide eyed and in awe of all that I was taking in. Everything was so

very different from all I had previously known, clearly I was not in Chicago anymore. Everything was so natural and beautiful and at the same time had the ugliness of a run down central city neighborhood. Cibecue, I was told, is the wild west or as some one else put it "they are still fighting the war out there ". At times I found this to be true. For the most part, I found people who just wanted to be loved and needed to be taught how to love one another.

I was ordained, installed, and commissioned on a muggy Sunday in August of 1991 the next day I found out that I would have my first funeral. I began thinking to myself, what would a funeral here entail? What are the people use to having happen during a funeral service? So, quickly I learned to call Pastor Arthur Guenther for help. On the day of the funeral, the body of Sam Endfield was not brought to the church at the arranged time. Then an elderly woman appeared on my door step to tell me that the family had talked it over and decided that old Sam never liked going to church much when he was alive, so they could not see the point in carrying him into church dead. The funeral was held outside near Sam's house in lower Cibecue. What a sight that place was for the new guy! When Pastor Guenther and I arrived at the house there were about 200 people there waiting around sitting by small campfires. Little children sucking on lemons and eating cookies abounded ,and a cow which had been slaughtered was hung between two trees while several men cut it into parts for the women to cook. When things finally got started Guenther stood up and introduced me to the people in English and Apache saying "This is pastor Bodjanac. He is here to be your friend and your pastor. He will speak the Word of God to you. " In some ways this was like being installed all over again. This introduction I feel really began my work in Cibecue as it gave me instant credibility with the people. I also learned that this funeral was the norm in Cibecue. It was almost a year before I finally had a funeral in church.

I also learned that it is normal for Apaches to put food in the casket with the body of their loved one as a way giving them one last treat for the road. They also like to reopen the casket at the end of the funeral service and wail like heathen. After a few funerals like this, I began making an announcement before the reopening of the casket, that we have hope in

Jesus and understand that this Christian person is with Jesus in heaven through faith in Him. Therefore, please do not wail like unbelievers who don't know Christ. This cut out about 97 percent of the wailing, but there was always one or two Pentecostals in the crowd who would wail anyway and then give me a defiant glance as they left.

At the grave side I soon learned it was normal for Apaches to destroy the earthly belongings of the person who died and drop them into the grave on top of the casket.

Once the casket was lowered into the grave, the pastor would speak and cast one handful of soil into the grave, then the people would each dump one shovel of soil into the grave.

However, there were enough times in which no one remembered to dig a grave at all. This made for a long day at the grave and many grumpy relatives.

The Apaches like to each sprinkle ashes around the edge of the grave to keep the spirit of the dead person from haunting them. Not all our Lutheran Apaches do this anymore and many who do this do not know why they are doing it. At one funeral for a small boy, I remember, that the father of the boy refused to allow the elderly people including his own aged parents to use ashes at the grave or to cast anything into it. This caused an ugly situation, but about 60 Lutherans and other Christians stood with that father and mother as they stood up for their faith in Christ that day. The heathen family members shouted curses and wanted to fight, but in the end they went home unhappy only to return that night to cast their ashes. The father and mother of the boy who died were excluded from family functions after that day.

As long as I am writing about funerals here I just wanted to mention a little about my second funeral as well. It was in late November and it was also the due date for Debbie to have our first baby. That morning we woke up to 18 inches of snow, but Debbie was not having any pains and told me to go have a short funeral. So after packing up my Bible in plastic, I put on my skis, after all how often does one get to ski past cacti, and left for the funeral. The Apaches did not think that I would really show up, after all many of their own relatives had left. They were surprised to see me but very happy too. I had a nice little funeral with them that day. Our son Isaac was born in Show Low a week later. Truly God provides in all occasions.

The 1990's on the reservations became a time of political correctness. Hollywood was praising Native American religion in the movies and in television shows too. There were also a number of movie stars and sports figures who embraced native religion and attended some of the Sunrise Dances on our reservations. This spilled over into daily life on the reservation as a deeper resentment toward Christianity grew. There was also a big increase in the number of Sunrise Dances being held. The Sunrise Dance is a heathen coming of age ceremony for girls. It is worship of the god who lives beyond the sun and teaches that the girl being honored is a goddess for a day. It is also very expensive costing about \$3-5000 dollars these days. It involves serving a large feast and much beer. Beliefs regarding the Sunrise Dance vary depending on who you ask. It has changed vastly from what it was one hundred years ago which was a very private ceremony.

It was not politically correct to attend church regularly or to stand up for your faith in Christ. It was very difficult for a number of our Apache Lutherans in the 1990's to live on the reservation. Yet some who were expected to help with and attend Sunrise Dances for their friends and relatives did not and attended church instead. I remember one Sunday when about half of the Cibecue congregation could have skipped church and attended a Sunrise Dance being given by the local council woman who was their boss. However the majority of the people who were under that pressure came to church and sang out with all their hearts. Our little church was full with a crowd that numbered about 125.

On another occasion a number of church members who live in Cibecue and were working as teacher aids at the local school reported that they were given an in-service day to attend a blessing ceremony being held in the school library. It was not optional for them, they were told be there or loose your job. The ceremony involved a so called medicine man dancing, singing, and pushing smoke from incense into the faces of people with an eagle feather. A person was not considered blessed unless he allowed the smoke to be pushed into his face. Our Lutherans attended but did not participate. They told the medicine man that they were Christians and that he should respect their faith. As a result they were not

blessed by the medicine man and fell out of favor with the local tribal council woman. Yet not one of them lost their job over the matter. Thanks be to God!

Suicide on the reservations, unfortunately in the 1990's, was an all too common occurrence. It was popular among older Apache women who were angry at their husbands or boyfriends to pour gasoline on themselves and set themselves on fire. For about a year, the Fort Apache Reservation, where the White Mountain Tribe lives, held the national record for suicide attempts. Suicide that year seemed to be everywhere. Children were doing it, shooting themselves and cutting their wrists. There was a boy out in the Canyon Day area, a sixth grader, who was angry with his parents for not allowing him to go to Phoenix to see the local high school play basketball in a tournament. He climbed a tree tied a rope around his neck and threatened to jump. He accidentally fell and hung himself in front of his parents. There was also the suicidal young person pastor Guenther went out into the woods near Whiteriver to find as part of a search party. Pastor Guenther found him, but he was too late, he had hung himself. I also had been called to many homes in Cibecue to deal with suicidal people and at times to help take away the knife from a person who was still working on cutting themselves. I remember one Christmas morning about 4:00 a.m., I had been called out to help a young woman with her 14 year old drunk sister who was literally bouncing off the walls. We finally got her to calm down and to go to sleep. Afterward I found out when I was finished there that the lady across the street, who was also a church member, needed to be comforted because her husband had gone into the bathroom, locked the door and cut his wrists. This made for a long and tearful Christmas Day. This suicide trend even made the Phoenix newspapers. It was a trend we were all glad to have pass.

The East Fork Nursery was closed in the 1990's because it was no longer serving it's original purpose of carrying for abandoned babies. It was serving many children which the Tribal Police would bring there out of abusive and neglectful homes, however, the Tribe was no longer supplying their part of the funding needed to keep this very expensive

operation going. When the East Fork Nursery closed, the best and safest child care facility on the reservation was gone.

Among the many blessings Christ gave the Apaches through the WELS are schools. The school in Cibecue opened its doors first in lower Cibecue in 1912. The entire mission complex was moved to upper Cibecue in the 1970's. Some of the older Apaches talk about how the teachers and pastors, especially Arthur Krueger, made shoes for the children from old tires. They did this because the children were always late to school on cold mornings and many would cut their feet regularly. The Cibecue Lutheran School was the first school of any kind in the Cibecue valley. The school educated hundreds of children over the years. From 1991-1996 the school operated with a staff of one regularly called teacher Mr. Nelson Zimmerman and the sacrificial love of his wife Phyllis. Phyllis volunteered to teach the lower grades and Nelson taught grades 5-8. The school grew during those years from an enrollment of about 28 the first year to 54 during the 1995-96 school year.

In July of 1996 Mr. Zimmerman accepted a call to Sanborn, Minnesota. This was a true blessing for the Zimmermans, as five years of doing everything for the school in Cibecue had worn them out. The departure of the Zimmermans signaled a big change at Cibecue. The mission there would operate without a school, and thus began the two loneliest years my wife and I had ever known. After a search for an Emergency Teacher to fill in during the fall of 1996 failed, operation of the school was suspended. The last day that the Cibecue School operated there was an enrollment of about 52 children. There was a great amount of bitterness among the Apaches over the suspending of the school operations. At that time the Administrative Committee for Native American Missions chose to call a staff-minister to help with youth work on both reservations. The man they called was Mr. Rick Lowen from Minnesota. He came and lived at East Fork and did his best to serve the eight churches that are spread out over 2 million acres of mountainous land. The benefit to Cibecue was that he served there about 4-6 hours a week. While other churches such as Cedar Creek, he never had the time to serve at all. There were also some of our missionaries and teachers who were not real comfortable with the idea of a staff-minister

and were not very willing to work with the man. This came largely from a misunderstanding of what the staff-minister was called to do.

One of the biggest changes on the reservation in the 1990's was the departure of Pastor Eric Hartzell. Pastor Hartzell had accepted a call to serve in Georgetown, Texas. He had served about 15 years as pastor at East Fork and Canyon Day churches.

However, Apacheland was his childhood home as well. He grew up at East Fork. He had a great love for the people and the land. Saying good-bye for him was very difficult. Saying Good-bye was also difficult for the Apache people too. As many of them felt a deep bond with him. However, as in every change in the Apache Mission the Lord is in control. The Lord today is carrying the ministry at East Fork and Canyon Day forward through the work of pastor Martin Hahm.

The biggest change of all in the 1990's came about with the retirement of Pastor Arthur Alchasay Guenther. He had grown up in Whiteriver as a boy. Little did he realize at the time how well the Lord was preparing him to serve the Whiteriver church, as he watched his father work. He was God's choice to serve God's people for fifty years. Pastor Guenther had a deep love for the people. He was their friend and their neighbor. Yet, he loved them enough to tell them when they were on the path to hell and needed to repent. He was there for them in good times and in bad. Pastor Guenther's passion was children. Through the many activities and Bible lessons he taught them, he surely has led hundreds of little children to the Savior Jesus Christ. Today he lives with his wife Gloria in their home in Pinetop, Arizona. The Lord has again provided for the ministry of the Word to His people at Whiteriver through the work of Pastor Kirby Spevacek.

The changes for the Apache Mission in the 1990's continued on the San Carlos reservation with the departure of all three pastors. Pastor Paul Schulz accepted a call to serve in Safford, Arizona, while Pastor Glenn Seefeldt accepted a call in the summer of 1998 which moved him to Ringel, Wisconsin. Pastor Larry Pontel now is serving the Lord in the African Mission. These men served their Lord well in Apacheland the many years

they were there. At this writing San Carlos, Peridot, and Bylas are all in need of their own pastor.

After my departure in the spring of 1998 to serve Resurrection congregation in Phoenix, Pastor David Rosenau was called and now serves the churches at Cibecue and Cedar Creek.

Throughout more than a century of our Synod's mission effort, Christ has provided opportunities for missionary pastors and teachers to lift up the cross. He has provided opportunities from preaching in the camps to teaching Apaches in schools. He has provided opportunities from preaching in churches, at rodeos, and wherever invited to teaching the Word in Apache homes. Christ has given us opportunity and has given His Word success. We have planted the seed and have watered the plant very well. This was and must remain our mission. The success of this mission came only from faithfulness to the Word. All of this success came completely by God's grace and mercy. There were many pastors, teachers and lay people who served in the Apache Mission over the last century plus. No one person can say it was all their own doing. God built the Apache Mission, God cared for the mission and God blessed the mission. God will give this mission the future He has determined it should have. Truly our help is in the name of the LORD alone.

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