

The St. Boniface Indian/Industrial School

We have had numerous inquiries at the library about the St. Boniface Indian/Industrial School which was located on West Gilman Street in Banning, just west of 8th Street. A visible reminder today of St. Boniface is the line of olive trees extending north from Gilman Street. The trees at one time bordered the drive to the campus grounds. Indian School Lane use to lead directly into the campus and was originally a traditional trail leading from the Morongo Reservation (then called the Potrero Reservation) west through the Gilman Ranch and beyond.

In 1888, Los Angeles Bishop Frances Mora authorized construction of St. Boniface with Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) funding, through the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. Mora chose the Banning site because of its proximity to several reservations. The Morongo, Soboba, San Manuel, Twentynine Palms, Cabazon, Pala, and Pechanga Reservations were all located within a 70 mile radius of the proposed St. Boniface site in Banning.

Much of the impetus for creating the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions may have been a response to the guilt incurred for taking away the land and homes of local Native Americans. Father Benedict Florian Hahn, the third and most revered superintendent in the history of St. Boniface, wrote in the "Mission Indian" about the Indians being the only "true Americans," and the tragedy of having their land taken from them. In Father Hahn's mind, St. Boniface was an attempt to reverse some of the damage done to the local Cahuilla, Serrano, and Chemehuevi people. Indian boarding schools were a logical extension of the earlier California Mission system, although there was an educational component added to the manual labor trades which were taught and often exploited. Father Hahn believed the Spanish civilization had damaged the Native people of Southern California and only through intensive education and spiritual guidance would they be able to survive as "useful members of society."

The original purchase of land and materials was made possible in part by Mother Katharine Drexel, a Catholic philanthropist who donated her inheritance for the purpose of educating African-American and Native peoples. Eighty acres of property were purchased from Dr. Wellwood Murray in 1889, for \$12,000, and St. Boniface was built in 1890. Bricks were made by Chinese laborers at Capt. T. E. Fraser's brickyard on Westward Street in Banning, but the actual construction of the buildings was done by Indian students. When St. Boniface opened on September 1, 1890, there were 125 students enrolled.

The school would ultimately educate some 8,000 students in its 88 year history. The sisters of St. Joseph taught at St. Boniface for the entire time the school was open. Approximately 21 children died while attending St. Boniface, most of them having contracted tuberculosis.

There is great debate over the Catholic Indian Mission schools. Some view them as exploitive in their treatment of the students and the pressure of constant proselytizing. Some of the

motivations behind the schools may have been well intended but the lack of awareness of the needs of the Native culture created constant conflicts. Some of the best sources for research on St. Boniface come from the students themselves. I was unable to locate any former students of St. Boniface but through researching the library's files I was able to find newspaper articles that contained interviews with some of the former students who spoke of their memories of the school.

Reactions by former students of St. Boniface are mixed. Several years ago I was a part of a video team that interviewed Gloria Wright, a Luiseno elder who attended St. Boniface. She had mostly fond memories of being a student there. Although she felt burdened by the school's workload, she credited the foundations of her spiritual life and sense of morality to the priests at St. Boniface.

Other former students had less positive memories of their experiences at St. Boniface. They remember extensive workloads and harsh punishments. Several men who were former students of St. Boniface have visited the Banning Public Library looking for photographs of the school. Most of the men remembered trying to "escape" St. Boniface when they were boys, which usually resulted in a short-lived attempt to get over Mt. San Jacinto before being captured and brought back to the confines of the school.

Former St Boniface students Mrs. Ann Vallarte and Jane Penn spoke of life at St. Boniface in a 1974 Record Gazette article. In the article they remembered, "Both boy and girl students separated into different dorms, made their own beds and did all their own house cleaning. The boys would milk the cows and bring the milk to the kitchen and the girls would separate the cream and churn butter. Boys made the bread in large ovens for the whole school." The former students remembered long walks into the hills and canyons near St. Boniface, accompanied by the Sisters.

The students went to school for half of the day and then worked in the gardens and kitchens, learning to sew, make lace and other trades. Mrs. Vallarte remembered, "We grew our own vegetables and fruits. We sulphured dried fruits and vegetables in the summer for use in the winter. We learned to make candles, crushed grapes for wine, and the boys pressed olive oil. These items were sold to help support the school." Father Hahn also built a print shop and he and the students published a bi-monthly school newspaper, "The Mission Indian."

Many of the students were from close-by reservations but there were also orphans and "half-orphans" from the flu epidemic of WWI. In 1921 the school was opened to out-of-state and non-Indian students. By 1950, most of the boarding students were orphans, or children needing foster homes. Agriculture still flourished at the campus and St. Boniface began to acquire a reputation for high quality olive oil.

Former student, Mary Standfield Anderson attended St. Boniface from 1943 to 1949 and shared the campus with White, Native American, Hispanic and Black students, many who were from broken homes. She said all the students shared their school without prejudice. "We really didn't know there was a difference of skin. We didn't have the racial things that maybe the community around us did because we were just one big family at the time," she said.

After the Franciscan priests left Southern California in 1952 the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions left the St. Boniface campus property to the San Diego Diocese who lent the property to the Boys Town of the Desert. The Boys Town of the Desert moved to Beaumont in 1969, leaving the St. Boniface property vacant. The San Diego Diocese sold the St. Boniface campus to developers in 1973. Considered to be an imminent danger to the public, the campus was demolished by the City of Banning in August of 1974, leaving behind the rubble of the buildings and the small cemetery against the foothills.

The Banning Public Library recently received a donation from Alicia Smith of Yucaipa. She kindly donated an extremely rare publication from St. Boniface, "The Mission Indian." The newsletter is the first one published and is dated October 15, 1895. The newsletter has been scanned and is available to view by appointment at the library. An excerpt from the newsletter beautifully describes St. Boniface and was written by Father Hahn. It reads:

"In the valley of San Gorgonio, just north of the town of Banning and nestling snugly 'neath the hills, with San Jacinto Mountain in full view, stands St. Boniface's industrial training school for Indians. A lovelier location could scarcely be found, for this valley is indeed a land of enchantment and ever here in Banning the gentle breezes blow."

There are few remnants left of the St. Boniface School. Although there have been numerous efforts in the past to restore the cemetery to a respectful condition it is still in need of protection. There are many rock walls intact and jagged concrete structures, including the original rock grotto, minus the saint statue. The grounds are littered with broken vacuum cleaners, electric typewriters, stained carpets, broken-down couches, paint cans, plastic trash and useless tires. Portions of the bulldozed buildings and foundations are still visible among the weeds and growth. The property has been bought and sold by numerous developers in the past few decades but it currently sits in silence, mostly destroyed but still "nestled snugly 'neath the hills," frozen in time.

Thanks to Tanya Rathbun Sorrell for contributions to this article. Ms. Sorrell contributed a chapter about St. Boniface in the book, "Boarding School Blues," by Clifford Trafzer. The book is highly recommended reading for anyone interested in this subject. Banning Record Gazette, September 9, 2011, by Bill Bell)

Photograph Captions for Article:

Photograph #1 - "St. Boniface Band, circa 1940."

Photograph #2 - "St. Boniface grounds, circa 1950."

Photograph #3 - "School boy at St. Boniface, 1925."