

A Short History of Goodland Presbyterian Children's Home

In the lush forest of Southeastern Oklahoma, there is an area the Choctaws named "Yakni Achukma" or "Good Land" because of its numerous springs, abundant timber and fertile soil. In this place called "good land", the oldest mission agency in the state continues to serve the needs of children and youth. As early as 1835, Cyrus Kingsbury, known as the "apostle to the Choctaws," made regular visits to the area then known as the "Good Land Mission Station" to assist the Choctaw people in their spiritual and societal development.

William Fields, a local Choctaw resident, along with Cyrus Kingsbury, recognized the growing need for a more permanent person to lead the growing community in their development. They both petitioned the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Presbyterian and Congregational organization, to send a permanent missionary to Good Land. In 1848, they answered the call and sent Mr. and Mrs. John Lathrop to the Good Land mission station to prepare the way. John Lathrop began his work by building the first structure, a two-room log manse, where he and his wife to resided as they began the development stages. After completing their initial work, Mr. and Mrs. Lathrop were reassigned in order to make ready for the permanent minister that was to be assigned to the area.

In the spring of 1850, Rev. and Mrs. Oliver Porter Stark were appointed by the same mission board to continue the work begun by Mr. and Mrs. Lathrop. Prior to accepting the appointment to Good Land Mission, Rev. O. P. Stark served as superintendent of Old Spencer Academy for Indians – about 9 miles north of Good Land. Once on the Good Land campus, Rev. Stark's wife, Margaret, wasted no time in starting to teach the Indian children in the area how to read and write. The first "school" met in a side room of the manse with only 4 boys.

By 1852, the number attending her small school grew to over 40 boys and girls. This was the same year that Rev. Stark—with the help from William Fields and other Choctaw neighbors—built the structure that served the community as both church and school for 42 years. Although moved several feet from the original location in 1894, the same church, renovated many times and enlarged, stands on the Goodland campus today. For over 100 years, the original church bell given by Rev. John P. Turnbull, a Choctaw Presbyterian minister, still remains perched high atop the church where has called generations of children to a better education and a stronger relationship with God. The church and bell remains a constant reminder of the work accomplished by these early pioneers with meager resources and an unwavering faith. They are examples of how faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains.

Rev. O. P. Stark not only built the first church, but he also dug the first well, which is still being used today. In an early report written in 1860 to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Rev. Stark began writing the name "Good Land" as one word. Since that time, the church and home have retained the one word spelling of "Goodland."

Goodland School – known in those days as "Goodland Academy" – originated primarily as a boarding and day school with an average attendance of 40 boys and girls. From the very beginning, the Indian people made sacrifices to ensuring their children received a higher education. They saw their best means of survival as a people were through education. The community of Goodland grew as families moved closer to the school in order for their children to receive a better education. Those families that could not relocate placed their children under the care of local church members in order for them to attend the school. The church was a vital part of the school and the school was a vital part of the ministry of the church.

During the Civil War, two Choctaw regiments pitched their tents on the campus around the second well Rev. O. P. Stark had dug near the church. Although no battles were fought near the school, the ravages of war left deep wounds. Weary and worn, Rev. O. P. Stark wrote the mission board to report about the bands of robbers and lawlessness that existed in the area at the time, he requested reassignment and was transferred to Paris, Texas in 1866. It was there in Paris, Texas that he established a girl's boarding school and the helped build to start the First Presbyterian Church. This left Goodland Mission without an assigned pastor, but the seeds the former missionaries had planted were strong enough to endure the period of turmoil.

After the Civil War, the division within the Presbyterian Church was disorganized and continued to leave the mission without a pastor, teacher or mission board to guide or encourage the work. Apparently, each "side" – North and South – assumed that the other would pick up the mission work. During these dark days when the country was recovering from a bitter war, the faith and sacrifice of a few sustained the work. Indian families and a few white friends in the area continued the work begun by the missionaries. Carrie LeFlore Gooding – daughter of Gov. Basil LeFlore – along with older children taught in the school by the early missionaries, taught in the school for more than twenty years. Rev. John P. Turnbull pastored the church until his death in May of 1894. Rev. Turnbull knew his condition and had requested help from the newly organized Presbyterian Church, U.S. In 1894, the Goodland Mission became a special responsibility of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. under the auspices of the General Assembly's Executive Committee of Home Missions. Rev. Joseph P. Gibbons answered the called as a missionary to the Choctaws to serve as minister of the Goodland Church and administrator of the Goodland Academy. He and his wife, Bella M. Gibbons, sacrificed everything to serve the needs of children and families.

This same year, the church underwent its first major renovation and the first dormitory was built for what was to eventually become the campus of the Goodland Indian Orphanage. Prior to the building of the first dormitory, families in the Goodland community took orphans into their homes that they might attend the Goodland Academy. The first dormitory was built from hand-hewn logs to house sixteen Indian boys only a few feet away from the Goodland Church. It was a crude building—one large room with a sleeping loft overhead and a kitchen/dining room added on one side. A large front porch provided extra living space.

Supplies for the orphans were donated from Indian families who lived nearby. Each week one of the church members took a wagon from house to house receiving liberal contributions of meat, lard, meal, flour, potatoes, sugar, molasses, and coal oil for the boys to use. Mrs. Gibbons spent much of her time writing and sharing the story of Goodland. It was through her tireless efforts that donations came in from the east coast to the west coast. Mrs. Gibbons taught, recorded the history of Goodland, and wrote the newspaper and numerous appeal letters. She worked tirelessly until her death in 1935. Rev. Joseph P. Gibbons preceded her in death in 1918. Both were laid to rest in the Goodland Cemetery.

This was the humble beginning of the Goodland Indian Orphanage. In those days, Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians were predominant in the region and all took part in helping the school and boarding home to grow.

In 1901, the first superintendent assigned to the school and home was a Choctaw named Silas L. Bacon, who himself had been taught at the Goodland Academy by Mrs. Carrie LeFlore Gooding. Silas was orphaned as a child and raised by his grandmother near the school. During his administration, four dormitories, a school building and a bathhouse were built. Several Indian families deeded land to the institution during those years including himself and his wife.

By 1920, the Goodland Church and Academy owned a total of 75 acres. Silas and his wife – Eliza – believed in the importance of the work that God called them to so much, they sacrificed their life and possessions. More importantly, Silas and Eliza left an indelible the impression on the children for generations to come. They both were humble and deeply spiritual, whose faith was always evident by their works.

In 1913, the school passed from the Executive Committee of Home Missions to the Indian Presbytery.

Financial problems were acute. Both to build needed structures and to feed the children, Silas Bacon traveled extensively pleading with the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee and with Christian friends of the Home for funds. In a speech at the school, Bacon admitted that, while he could never beg for himself, he did not mind humbling himself to beg on behalf of the children in his care. Concluding his speech he said, “My heart makes me know that God is in this work. I know we must to do all that we can. And I notice no child has starved. None have frozen in our school, even if times have been so hard most of the time.” Silas Bacon made a lasting impression on the community with his selfless love for children and his faith in God to supply all the needs. He once said, "It is faith that sustains us." Silas and Eliza died still doing the work God had called them to do.

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

In 1921, Rev. Silas L. Bacon succumbed to the disease tuberculosis and died. He is buried in the Goodland Cemetery near another early pioneer of Southeastern Oklahoma—the first Governor of the Choctaw Nation, Basil LeFlore. Eliza continued the work, which God had called her to until her death the following year.

In July 1923, control was transferred to the Synod of Oklahoma (later to become the Synod of Arkansas and Oklahoma and now the Synod of the Sun).

Goodland Indian Orphanage

After the death of Rev. Silas and Eliza Bacon, Samuel Bailey Spring was made superintendent of Goodland Indian Orphanage. His family owned most of the land that formed present day Hugo and they were actively involved its formation and development in 1901. Bailey and Silas Bacon had been good friends for years and had worked together in 1902 to establish the First Presbyterian Church of Hugo. He was one-fourth Choctaw and was highly educated. He was Presbyterian that many said could get and keep your attention. In spite of his advantages, he cared very deeply for young people. When given the choice of Principle Chief of the Choctaws or Superintendent of Goodland Indian Orphanage, he chose the later. His wife told him that Goodland was a burden that would lead to his death, but he chose the way God lead him. Bailey was willing to sacrifice all to provide children a better education and a better life. He exemplified the words of Jesus, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." [Mark 10; 14] One of his former students once wrote of him: “We always felt free to talk over any question with him. Not once did he turn a child away, saying, ‘I’m too busy to see you now.’ And always we left those meetings with our problems solved, with something to work on, some word of encouragement and some praise.” Bailey Spring came from a wealthy family, but spent all of his wealth to buy food and clothing for the

children. He knew that the greatest expression of his faith and devotion to God was in ministering to the needs of children. Bailey Spring ministered at Goodland for nine years until his death, April 17, 1930.

The 1929 financial crash had serious repercussions in Oklahoma. In Goodland's favor was the fact that it was the only home for Indian orphans maintained by the Presbyterian Church U.S., however it had a crushing debt of over \$30,000. The Synod, although in a financial pinch of its own, voted in faith to continue the home and school. The church issued a call to Rev. E. D. Miller to supervise the Home during this time of crisis. At the same time Rev. Miller was called upon to oversee Goodland, he also received was called upon to teach at Dallas Theological Seminary. His daughter recalls packing up all their possession to move and asking, "Where are we going to move, daddy?" He answered, "God will show us the way." It was not until they came to the split in the road that God lead them to Goodland. Rev. Miller was a man of great faith and God-given wisdom. When faced with the overwhelming debt in 1930, the last days of Goodland looked inevitable. During those days, Helen Marshall recalls Rev. Miller calling all of the students together in one large room at Bacon hall. He asked all the children to pray for God's provision. He said, "Unless God intervenes, this will be the last day of school here at Goodland." Helen says, "as they were praying around noon that day, the phone rang and a man from California gave enough funds to pay off the debt." From that point on, God cause the home to prosper under Rev. Miller's leadership. He served the home and school for over 15 years. During this time, he repaired and painted the older buildings, fireproofed the roofs, sod the campus with grass, planted gardens and orchards, and built poultry flock and dairy herd. He laid out gravel drives and concrete walks and added a tennis court and football field. Miller jokingly referred to his method of administration as a "Divine-Human partnership."

Another milestone occurred in 1930, when the Goodland public school with 30 students consolidated with the Goodland's own school with 200 students, which still resides on the campus. The gym and auditorium, constructed by Works Project Administration (WPA), were built in 1936 and still stand today. From the early 1900s to 1950s, Goodland was boarding over 200 children of all ages during the school year and home for over 50 homeless children.

Gifts have always been especially important to Goodland. In 1934, Daniel Wade, a colorful Choctaw, gave funds to construct an infirmary. The gift resulted in the Home acquiring a stately stone structure that is today called Wade Cottage.

By 1940, the Home owned 763 acres of land, 390 of which comprise the campus. From Normal wear and tear took their toll of the old dormitories, so smaller and safer cottages were built in the 1960's. During the same time period, the original church was restored and dedicated to Rev. Oliver Porter Stark, leader of the Mission through the 1850's.

Goodland Presbyterian Children's Home, Inc.

After a little more than 100 years, God continues to bless the ministry at Goodland. In the early 1960s, God brought faithful servants to oversee the home and school. From James and Vera Gable, who dedicated their lives to serving children to the Shepherd sisters, who gave of their wealth to build the present day campus.

In the 1960's, Civil Rights legislation and legislation within the church declared that children of all races, creeds, and colors be welcomed to Goodland. The High School was closed by the state in 1962 and students started attending high schools and vocational schools in the surrounding communities. The elementary school (first through eighth grade) continues to be operated by the state for all children in the district. At that point in time, Goodland ceased to

function as a boarding school and could no longer exist solely for Indian youngsters. Children of all ages from broken homes, in need of supervision, or with other problems were welcomed.

In 1981, the board of trustees began evaluating the program and services offered by the home in light of societal changes. The board realized that the need for a more economical program would ultimately lead to one that served the needs of one sex. National statistics indicated 94% of children at risk were males. In June of 1981, the final decision of the board was to establish a program directed at the needs of boys from dysfunctional families. The mission was to provide a structured learning environment that nurtured and motivated boys to excel by improving their self-image and providing a structured guidance program.

In 1988, the board of trustees saw the need for revitalization and spiritual renewal in Goodland's overall mission. A new director was hired, David L Dearing, to lead the home through this period in Goodland's long history. Today, Goodland provides a home for boys ages 6 through 18 who are unable to live at home for a number of reasons. Eight boys live in each of three cottages, under the nurture and guidance of Christian couples. The couples live in comfortable quarters within the cottage and act as mother and father for all eight boys. All boys participate in work programs on campus, designed to teach them good work ethics and to prepare them for employment in today's competitive society.

Goodland has a strong emphasis on education and encourage all students to obtain a college degree. Boys attend public schools and participate in any school-related activity they choose. Education is stressed with on-campus study hall, tutoring, vocational opportunities and personal guidance counseling. An individualized self-paced educational program is offered any boy or community child needing a specialized form of learning. Spiritual guidance is provided by professionally trained staff and volunteers through daily devotionals, weekly Bible study, regular church attendance and youth-related activities.

Some boys come to Goodland for a predetermined period of time, but most will remain until they graduate for high school. The program is designed to promote a family atmosphere; a loving couple acting as parents, pets, family activities, and outings, daily chores, family style dining and normal social interaction with a parental figure. Each member of the staff plays an important role in this family-oriented environment and staff members are carefully selected to provide the best possible role model.

Goodland sponsors and participated in other youth service activities in an effort to serve the needs of all children. The home has chartered the only two scouting programs in Choctaw County, which presently have a total membership of 75 boys. During the summer and throughout the year, Goodland hosts more than 27 youth mission groups on campus serving over 350 youth. Boys from the Goodland participate in youth council, synod workshops and church youth-related activities. A private self-paced school is provided for community children for kindergarten to seniors in high school. Presently, this school operates at capacity with 30 children from the community and surrounding area.

Goodland is the last remaining mission begun by the early missionaries that came with the Choctaws to Indian Territory over 150 years ago. It has ministered to literally thousands of children over the years, which have in turn carried on the teachings to other generations. Today, former students are teaching in schools and universities, they hold responsible positions in large corporations, and occupy positions of authority in the Indian Council. Goodland has been an influential ministry in the lives of children since the beginning in a two-room manse. Our greatest expression of our faith and devotion to God is to minister to the needs of children.

(James 1:27)