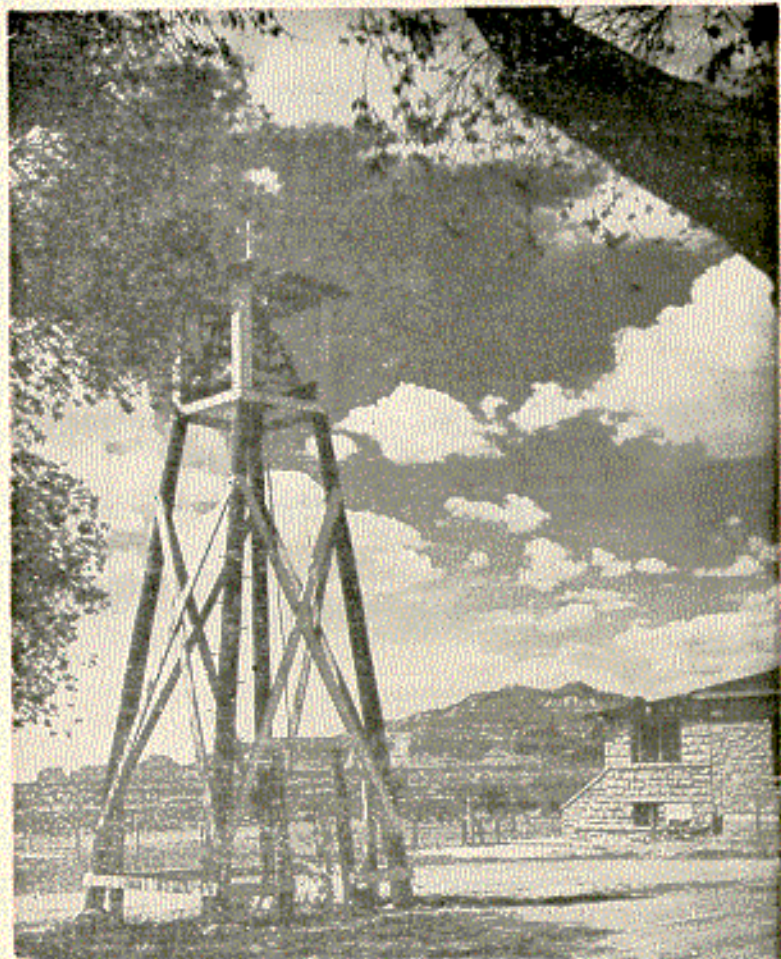


A
Brief History
of
St. Isabel Mission
Lukachukai, Arizona

Fr. Emanuel Trockur, O. F. M.



At the Foot of Lukachukai Mts.

St. Isabel Mission – Lukachukai

In an article written in 1915, Fr. Anselm Weber refers to a visit which he and Fr. Leopold had made to Tschili fifteen years before as the "first beginning" of a mission at Lukachukai. The two padres had gone there for a meeting with Indians at the home of Charley Mitchell. Purpose of the meeting was to persuade some of the Navajos of that region to send their children to St. Catherine Indian School in Santa Fe which was conducted by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Mother Katharine Drexel, foundress of this community of Sisters, was planning at the time to build a school for Navajo children near the reservation at St. Michaels and, by having a number of pupils from that tribe attend her school in Santa Fe, she hoped to acquaint the Indians with her educational program and to arouse their interest in schooling.

At this meeting, Fr. Anselm relates, he learned for the first time of Lukachukai. Here he met Tsiishbizhi (Braided Hair), an influential headman and leader from that district, who listened with rapt attention as Fr. Anselm spoke. Like Old Silver-smith, Braided Hair had up till now violently opposed education, particularly protesting against having children taken off to schools far away from their homes, but the friar's words were so straightforward and convincing that he then and there offered to send one of his sons and a nephew to St. Catherine school.

A few days later Braided Hair and Charley Mitchell were on their way to Santa Fe, accompanying Fr. Anselm who was taking five boys to the sisters' school. The brief visit during which they had the good fortune to meet Mother Katharine personally, made a strong impression upon the Indian leaders, who now became zealous defenders of education. As a result many of the first pupils who attended St. Michael school which opened in the fall of 1902, came from their districts, and, due to their influence and interest, the school in later years had little difficulty in obtaining pupils to its capacity.

Father Anselm began in 1903 to make occasional visits to Lukachukai usually saying Mass at Braided Hair's home. On each trip he became more and more convinced that here was a favorable locality for a mission. As was his common observation throughout Navajo land, this was not a village, he preferred to call it a "vicinity" in which he found a goodly number of Navajos living in scattered homes that dotted the valley at the foot of the Lukachukai mountains. They were thrifty and progressive in their own primitive way and irrigated small fields of corn,



Where Fr. Anselm said Mass

alfalfa, wheat, beans and melons by means of ditches that diverted the waters from two streams originating in the mountains.

Preoccupied with the thought of adopting the very successful methods of his illustrious confrere, Friar Junipero Serra, in California less than 150 years before, Fr. Anselm envisioned, though not on so pretentious a scale, a happy and thriving colony of Navajo farmers at Lukachukai. Furthermore, by this time many children from this area had completed the courses offered by

St. Michael school; they had been baptized, made their first Holy Communion and had been instructed in the Catholic Faith. Now they were living back home, 75 to 100 miles from St. Michaels with little opportunity to practice their religion. The need of follow-up work was obvious, for, unless a priest could keep in contact with these former pupils and make it possible for them to attend Mass and receive the sacraments, the results of their Catholic education would come to naught.

The Indians too, wished to have a padre living among them and they frequently begged for a church and a missionary. Lack of funds and personnel prevented compliance with their wishes and although he could not even surmise whence he might obtain the necessary financial means, Fr. Anselm promised to establish a mission here at some future time.

On October 9, 1909 Fr. Anselm came to Lukachukai for the last night of a Yeibichai dance, which was attended by Indians from all points on the reservation. Next morning after conclusion of the dance he met with the local Navajos to announce to them that he was at last prepared to erect a chapel for them, with a room for the visiting padre, provided they would give him a piece of land on which to build.

Having given their unanimous consent to do this, they led him to a point where they indicated a plot that they wished to offer him. He promptly secured a description of the tract, which he included in a petition, directed to the Secretary of the Interior, requesting that it be set aside for missionary purposes. Thirty-three heads of families affixed their signatures (thumb prints) and the request was delivered to the agent at Fort Defiance, who forwarded it to Washington.

On this tract was a spring which had always been held sacred and which is known in the Navajo legends as *Habo'ol'eesi*, which means: *it is tramped out*. According to the story a segment of the tribe, the Buffalo People, had left the San Francisco Peaks country in the West and were journeying eastward toward the sacred mountain in New Mexico. When they arrived at the foot of the Lukachukai mountains they searched in vain for water and soon they were suffering from thirst. Stomping

the ground, it gradually became moist and after a while there was enough water for all to drink. To this day this spring yields an abundant supply of sparkling, clear water.

Approval of the grant followed on December 18, 1909, but construction of the chapel was not begun until July 18, 1910, after work on Annunciation Chapel at Chinle was well under way. Mr. W. E. Hildebrand, who supervised the erection of the



First Chapel at Lukachukai

Chinle chapel, also contracted for the Lukachukai building; using the same plans, he added two small 8 x 8-foot rooms in the rear to be fitted out as sacristy and living room.

Funds for the chapel were obtained chiefly from three benefactors, among whom was Mr. James J. Condon of Jersey City, N. J., who contributed over \$500.00 in memory of his deceased wife, Mrs. Isabel Condon. At his request the mission was dedi-

cated to St. Isabel of Portugal in ceremonies conducted by Fr. Anselm on June 22, 1912.

With the total cost of building alone amounting to \$2,240.82 and a still unpaid debt of 300.00, plastering, interior painting and decorating and procuring of all but essential furnishings had to be postponed. Fr. Marcellus Troester, assistant to Fr. Leopold at Chinle, now began to attend to this mission, making regular visits for a few days each month except in the winter time when most of the Indians moved away with their flocks. A bell, donated by a daughter of Mr. Condon, announced the arrival of the missionary and the time for Mass and religious instructions.



At Blessing of the Bell

In 1914 the government began to build a day school only a short distance from the mission and now the Indians urged stronger than ever for a resident priest. Their pleas were presented to the Provincial Board in Cincinnati and their wishes finally came true in August, 1915 when Fr. Berard Haile, who had been at St. Michaels since the year 1900, was appointed the first pastor of St. Isabel Mission. Brother Gervase Thuemmel was transferred from Chinle and assigned as his companion and helper.

They took up residence shortly thereafter, rather, they moved into the one building which comprised the mission at that time, but which had not been planned as a permanent residence. The

two small rooms at the rear of the chapel were converted into kitchen, dining room and sitting room and the chapel itself which, unfinished and undecorated, presented "an atmosphere of extreme poverty," had to serve as dormitory and store room.

More spacious living quarters were absolutely needed and the friars promptly took upon themselves the task of providing them. First plans to build of logs were quickly abandoned and they decided to use stone which was available less than a mile away. The site was staked off and ground broken on August 24.



St. Isabel Mission

All thought of engaging masons or carpenters or plumbers had to be dismissed. Payment of wages for imported laborers to this isolated region would have rapidly depleted the mission "treasury" which, as was then the case and still is to this day, showed a meager balance. Fortunately Brother Gervase, by his experience gained during his years at Chinle, had developed into an expert stone worker and he was only too glad to undertake the job of architect and builder. Within a very short time he and a group

of Indians had quarried a total of 200 loads of rock. These, together with 30 loads of sand, were hauled to the site in the space of three days. Adobe, which was used as mortar, was right at hand.

Construction began immediately and, with the help of a Navajo stone mason and two other Indians who mixed the mortar and carried the hod, the walls were completed before Christmas with an outlay of a little more than \$600.

The remaining construction work, such as carpentry, plumbing, etc., was done for the most part by the two friars themselves. Lumber was purchased from the government sawmill, 40 miles away and other materials had to be hauled all the way from Gallup, a distance of more than 90 miles, at an average freighting cost of one cent per mile per hundred weight. Total cost of the new residence, which was completed in 1916, was slightly in excess of \$2,000.

The government school at Lukachukai was opened in the fall of 1916 with an enrollment of 21 pupils. From the very beginning Navajo parents objected to having their children walk a long distance to school and in order to placate them Superintendent Peter Paquette set a two-mile limit within which he expected all children of school age to attend; at the same time he promised to make every effort to have the government arrange for the establishment of a boarding school.

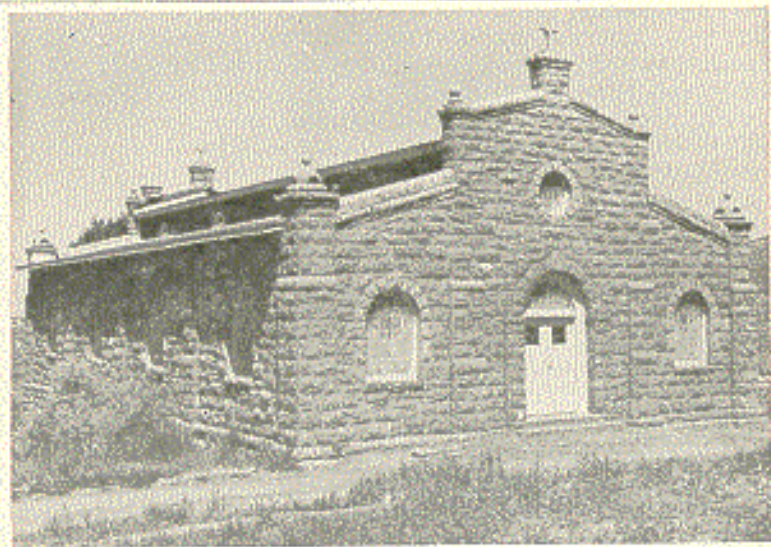
Average attendance for the first year was about 16 pupils daily; toward the end of the school term and in the early fall it frequently dwindled to two or three pupils who managed to arrive just in time for the noonday meal -- a clear indication that the day school idea was not being favorably accepted.

The school continued to "operate" for several years but despite repeated urgings and warnings, the attitude of the Navajos remained unchanged. It was therefore closed and left in charge of a caretaker.

Also attended to from St. Isabel were two mission stations: Tselthichidahaskani, (Red Rock), on the east side of the mountain where Fr. Anselm had rented a stone building from an Indian and which was visited monthly when road conditions permitted; and

Tsehili, about 15 miles to the south, where religious services were held in the home of Charley Mitchell.

A few years after its completion the original church building at Lukachukai was seriously damaged by what was at first believed to have been an earthquake; most likely though, the damage was caused by a settling of the foundation. By this time there had risen the need of a house for an interpreter and his



At St. Isabel Mission—Lukachukai

family and, after the old structure was repaired and remodeled to serve that purpose, the friars, in 1922, began the construction of a new church.

Dispensing, as in the previous project, with architects and detailed blue prints, they contented themselves with rough pencil sketches for the general plans of an artistic church in Spanish-Romanesque style. The old quarry from which the material for

the residence had been taken supplied the grayish-white sandstone for the main walls. Father Berard freighted most of the other needed materials by truck from Gallup. Dedication of the church was delayed and finally took place October 14, 1928, Fr. Emanuel Trockur, O. F. M. conducting the ceremonies.

On November 9, 1928, Mother Katharine Drexel, by arrangement with the Indian Service, took over the government school buildings nearby for operation of a mission school and medical dispensary. Miss Rose Jaegle, of Cincinnati, Ohio, held the position of matron, Miss Anne Gray, of Middletown, Connecticut, was the teacher and Mrs. Cordelia Kell, of Fulton, Missouri had charge of the dispensary. After two years Miss Gray and Miss Jaegle were succeeded by a Navajo couple, Mr. and Mrs. John Watchman; Mrs. Kell remained five more years after which the project was discontinued.

A combination community house - chapel, erected under the direction of Fr. Clementin Wottle, O. F. M., was dedicated at Tsehili on June 8, 1943 by His Excellency, Bishop Espelage, of Gallup. More than 700 Indians attended the religious ceremony which was followed by a barbeque dinner prepared by the Indians themselves. An afternoon program consisted of speeches by government and tribal officials, including Chee Dodge, and closed with talks by the Bishop and by Fr. Anselm Sippel, superior of the Navajo missions.

The building is constructed of adobe and has a seating capacity of about 300; it has been so arranged that the altar may be closed off from the main assembly section, which can then be used for social and business meetings. Holy Mass is said here every Thursday from May to November, weather and road conditions permitting.

Still another mission station was established at Round Rock, 13 miles west of Lukachukai, where Mass was said for the first time in an Indian home on May 6, 1944. A small chapel was completed in the fall of 1953 and divine services are held here regularly each Sunday at 9 o'clock. The Red Rock station, across the mountain, has for many years been in the care of missionaries residing at Shiprock.

Sixty miles from government headquarters, Lukachukai is frequently inaccessible, during the winter for months at a time because of heavy snows and in the rainy season, following the hard rains which make the roads impassable. Through all these years the inhabitants of this vast region had been without a doctor or hospital. The friars, therefore, were constantly called upon to provide relief in the form of cough medicines, aspirins, salves, liniments, etc. for the unfortunate sick and injured.



Dispensary Visitors, Lukachukai Mission

Only at long intervals did government field nurses and doctors visit the district but even then the seriously afflicted had to be transported to a distant hospital, either at Chinle or Fort Defiance. Pleas of the Indians for a permanent medical establishment went unheeded by the Indian Service.

Fr. Blase Brickweg, O. F. M., who heads St. Isabel Mission today, came to Lukachukai on February 1, 1951. His predecessors

had made several attempts at having sisters take over medical and social work here, but it was only after the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, Springfield, Illinois, had come to Gallup in the fall of 1949 that hopes for such a project began to brighten.

These sisters were especially fitted for this type of work and



Forty Hours' Devotion at Lukachukai

when Father Thomas Blomstrom, who preceded Fr. Blase, told them of the plight of his Indians, they became interested. They were invited to visit Lukachukai and a hurried observation of conditions sufficed to convince Sister Mary Jean and her compan-

ion, Sr. M^{ary} Josephine that here was a field in which they could do much valuable mission work.

After Sister Mary Magdalen, Vice-Provincial, visited Lukachukai on May 22, 1952, it was tentatively agreed that their community would accept this new project, subject to the approval of their Mother General in Germany. There was much rejoicing among the Navajos when the report was spread that the Bishop and the friars had prevailed upon the sisters to come here to conduct a medical dispensary.

Now for the second time the original church was scheduled for remodeling. The month of August found a crew of men excavating a cellar for furnace room and laundry; carpenters were busy erecting partitions to divide the building into nine small rooms comprising chapel, sacristy, kitchen, dining and reception rooms, and four tiny cells with only enough space for a bed, a chair and wash stand.

Official approval by the Mother General came less than a year later and the welcome news was relayed to Fr. Blase on April 5, 1953. On June 17 Sister M. Damascene, who had thirteen years of missionary experience in China, and Sister M. Carola arrived at Lukachukai to make a beginning of their work among the Indians at St. Isabel; at first they spent only two days each week treating patients who came to the dispensary which was located in a small room of the rectory. The very first day was given to arranging the dispensary and on the following day they gave medical treatment to 21 patients, including a medicine man who had contracted a sore throat performing an all-night cure ceremony.

This plan meant a weekly trip of almost 200 miles by the shorter route and one of nearly 300 miles by a longer, over rough roads which on occasions were barely passable owing to the summer rains. After some time the plan was changed and the sisters spent an entire week here. Later on they returned to Gallup only once a month for their Day of Recollection on First Fridays.

Meanwhile their residence was slowly but surely being completed, and the first Mass was celebrated on a temporary altar

in their private chapel on November 19, 1953. Following the installation of a beautiful altar, pews and tabernacle — a Christmas gift from St. Paschal's Mission Circle of Cleveland, Ohio — the little chapel and Convent were blessed by Fr. Blase on January 20, 1954 and titled The Immaculate Heart of Mary.

At this writing (September, 1956), an addition is being annexed to the convent on the north and before the snow flies a well-equipped dispensary will be in operation, replacing the cramped quarters heretofore serving that purpose in the friars' residence.

Four sisters reside at Lukachukai and besides their regular duties in the convent and medical dispensary they visit Indians throughout the district, conducting medical clinics and giving religious instructions; they also assist the padres with their catechism classes which are held one hour each week for the 200 pupils enrolled in the government boarding school nearby.

Assisting Fr. Blase are Fr. Martan Rademaker and Brother Francis X. Evans. Since the opening of this mission 41 years ago, 1,734 Navajos have been baptized.



The name, *Lukachukai*, is an anglicized version of the Navajo words which describe the locality: *luk'a*, reeds and *ch'ogai*, white spruce, and hence would indicate the place of the reeds where the mountain slope is white with, or covered with white, spruce trees.

In the broad *Lukachukai* valley, which extends westward from the mountains that tower to an elevation of more than 9,000 feet above sea level, there is a rank growth of sage brush. The soil is particularly fertile and the sage plant often attains a height of five and seven feet; two live streams, the *To Tso* and the *Lukachukai* Creeks, which wind through the valley, provide a considerable amount of water for domestic and agricultural needs. The high altitude makes for a short growing season, so that certain crops will not mature.