THE McCURDY MISSION SCHOOL STORY

ROBERT H. TERRY

Long neglected has been the historical drama of this remarkable school where many people have given much to improve the lives of others with little or no regard to personal gain or recognition. Yet outside of New Mexico the larger church body of The United Methodist Church has never really heard the full story of the McCurdy Mission.

For many decades, education was much neglected in northern New Mexico. Responding to the needs for educational opportunity, Miss Mellie Perkins opened the first small mission school in Velarde in 1912. From the opening day of that boarding school, McCurdy Mission served as a home away from home for literally hundreds of students. From the first graduating class of six students in 1926, the school has grown to a 44-acre campus with an enrollment of over 500 students in grades one through twelve.

Farming programs, athletics, community recreation programs, new church congregations, elementary schools, a community hospital and a nursing program have been extensions of this Christian mission. Indeed the deep faith and Christian commitment of the dedicated faculty and staff through the years have served to make this a truly special school.

Pioneers, Preachers, and Missionaries

(1906 - 1926)

In order to appreciate more fully the historical drama of The McCurdy Mission School one must realize that the Homestead Act of 1862 opened thousands of miles of unoccupied lands in the southwest to settlers. By the turn of the century Oklahoma and Texas were filling up and thus only Arizona and New Mexico were left. Railroads ran excursions at low rates, and thousands came to investigate the new land. One such pioneer was a Congregational minister named Wannamaker who traveled west for his health.¹

Wannamaker started a village in eastern New Mexico called Amistad in 1906. By placing ads for immigrants in religious periodicals he soon attracted a variety of religious settlers including Methodists, Presbyterians and United Brethren. Soon after, a young United Brethren minister from Kansas who came to visit his parents was invited to Amistad and opened

a mission field in the area. This young man was Clarence Schlotterbeck. He is probably one of the most unsung heroes of the mission work in the southwest. Schlotterbeck traveled extensively throughout eastern New Mexico and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma. His efforts resulted in the formation of at least eight congregations and the establishment of what became the North Texas Conference of the United Brethren Church.

During the spring and early summer of 1910 Schlotterbeck traveled some 600 miles over the Santa Fe Trail and through the upper Rio Grande Valley. He was deeply concerned to find some Anglo people located there who were without religious services available and many Spanish people in need of the Gospel.

By late summer Schlotterbeck was back at Amistad. Calling friends and neighbors together he reported with enthusiasm his trip and his dream to evangelize the area. From this meeting came the initial gift of $1,000 from Mr. and Mrs. Richard Hauser to establish work at Velarde and the offer of Miss Mellie Perkins to go to the Rio Grande Valley mission field.

During the school year 1911-1912 Miss Perkins temporarily left her work in the North Texas Conference in order to attend Campbell College in Holton, Kansas. There she studied the Spanish language and otherwise prepared herself for the new mission work in New Mexico. It was at this time that she became friendly with a young teacher named Edith McCurdy. It was the untimely death of this beautiful young woman from an affluent family in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, and the subsequent family gift in her memory that caused the first new mission building at Santa Cruz to be named The Edith M. McCurdy Mission.

Prior to the construction of the new building, Miss Perkins had started a school at Velarde in October, 1912, with four pupils. The original building was an abandoned Baptist mission and was in poor condition. Miss Perkins described her first experience as follows:

I must confess as I walked that mile to the mission and saw nothing but dark-faced Mexicans [Hispanic-Americans] staring at me, I felt that I was in a country far from home and kindred and that my desires were fast vanishing, but I called on One who gives strength and courage when needed most and my spirits soon rose. The mission property had been unused for four years, and you can draw some conclusion of its dilapidated appearance. We found the house had leaked and water-soaked up through the floors and these were heaved, and the walls were crumbling and it had a most sickening musty odor all through it. Our goods not having arrived we found lodging with a Spanish family for the night. Early the next morning we began cleaning and shoveling out the dirt and mud and when the goods came we proceeded to make three rooms habitable by means of store boxes and improvised furniture.

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2Brandstetter, p. 3.
Miss Perkins' only real companion that first year was Susanita Martinez, a young girl who had come to Velarde with her from Wagon Mound. During the months to come Perkins reported that she cleaned up weeds, fixed broken fences, cleared fallen buildings, and repaired the house in addition to teaching school.

Helpers like Bessie Haffner (1913) and Mary Brawner (1915) soon arrived at the New Mexico mission. Like many of the early missionaries, Lillian Kendick from Franklin County, Pennsylvania, vividly remembered her first impressions of the area:

I'll never forget the narrow gauge D. & R. G. (Denver and Rio Grande) railroad that took us through the most wonderful lofty mountains nor the Indians on the platform of the station trying to sell pottery nor the two horse wagon that took us over the narrow sandy road through the Santa Cruz plaza to the mission building.5

Many were the hardships of those early mission school teachers. The poverty and general isolation were bad enough, but the constant opposition of the local Roman Catholic priests against a new religion in their area made life almost intolerable. It was no small task to win a convert in the beginning of mission work in New Mexico. Many who were attracted

to the Protestant schools were hindered by the fear of physical violence, the effect of social pressure, or of being abandoned by their families. As one publication put it:

The church at large has never known the story of the persecution and sacrifice endured by the missionaries in these areas. There were hardships and privations not surpassed on any foreign field.6

Mary Brawner reported that “There was considerable opposition during the first years at Velarde as there was throughout the valley—during one severe wave of opposition Bibles and religious Protestant literature—along with school books were burned publicly in several plazas throughout the valley”7 It seems that Santa Cruz fared even worse:

The priest required all the people to bring their Bibles and other books including those distributed by our missionaries for examination. These were piled in the churchyard and burned. One of the boys from our school snatched from the burning embers a copy of “Children’s Stories of the New Testament” in Spanish. For years it appeared that this book was in the library of the Home Mission Society as a symbol that the Bible was a forbidden book and needed to be opened to the people.8

Ironically, one of the young men who assisted the priests in the Bible burning at Velarde was converted some years later:

Fidel Gutierrez—became evidence to the mission workers and church people that the Lord continues to bless even after persecution. . . . While sending fruits and chile up country he was converted while staying in the home of one of his customers. He wrote to the mission teachers saying he was bringing his family to join the church the following Sunday. Long in the memories of those joyous teachers were the Christian smiles and testimony of this man who had come to know the Lord.9

The beginning of the mission work at Alcalde, located midway between Santa Cruz and Velarde, is a special story. As related through the words of an early issue of the Women’s Evangel, it appears that Miss Perkins was passing through the town when she was approached by a gentleman named Clark, one of the leading citizens, who urged her to open a school at Alcalde. The citizens had made an offer of free land, free adobe, and help with hauling and construction. When asked by Miss Perkins why they were so anxious to have such a school, Mr. Clark replied that the work at Velarde and Santa Cruz missions had shown to them the importance of enlightenment and education.10

8In the Valley of the Rio Grande, p. 6. Efforts to locate this book at Dayton, Ohio, and Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, failed. Dr. John H. Ness of the World Methodist Historical Society and former E.U.B. Historian was also unable to help locate this valuable book of a bygone era.
9Letter from Lena Blake to Virginia Frank, unpublished papers, McCurdy Mission. Mission school officials estimate that at least ten children and five grandchildren of Mr. Gutierrez have since graduated from McCurdy High School.
According to the story, when the local boys went to work for the mines and railroads in Colorado, the mission school boys received ten to fifty percent higher wages because "... they are more faithful and do their work better, and can understand English." The economic side of an education was becoming obvious and local parents were determined to have a school for their children.

During 1918 life was rather hectic since many changes were taking place as the work of the mission took hold in the area. One of the most pleasant experiences was that of the first mission wedding of Lottie Newman, a mission helper, to Charles Peterson, a very staunch supporter of the work. The wedding took place on July 18, 1918, in the new chapel officiated by Rev. Callie King. Records indicate that the first funeral service was that of John Womelsduff on October 19, 1918, and was conducted by the principal and pastor Miss Kendig. Apparently Womelsduff's daughter was one of the early students.

The work was growing, changes were occurring, and preachers obviously did more than preach.

Rev. Dye had much to do as the maintenance manager. His wife was the boys' matron and many changes were made. The new Elco electric system was installed. Away with kerosene and gas lamps. What rejoicing when the electricity was turned on and the whole institution was electrified. What had God wrought. We were just his servants. But this wasn't all of our needs. The next year the Overmillers came and he installed water plumbing. Now good-bye water buckets, outside toilets and all those inconveniences and sanitation was possible.

Life was obviously very difficult in those days, and medical help was not always available. The Petersons' new baby became ill the next year (1919) and died shortly after being baptized by Miss Kendig. She reports:

There were no undertakers in the area. Mr. Peterson bought a casket at the general store and we prepared the body the best we could. We had a pastor then, Rev. W. E. Dye; and he conducted the funeral, and little Carl was buried in the mission lot. Later the church bought ground for a cemetery in Alcalde and he was moved there.

Of a much more joyous occasion was the first infant baptism of a Spanish-American baby in the fall of 1919.

The financial picture and attendance figures give proof of the growing mission work of these days. Income had increased from $218.24 in 1915 to $559.65 in 1916, and by 1919 totaled $3,664.46. Sunday School
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attendance had risen from 11 in 1915 to 24 in 1916 and by 1918 stood at 59. Church membership of 10 in 1915 had moved upward to 14 while church attendance averaged 44. Total enrollment for the entire eight grades at the three schools was about 75. Tuition was fifty dollars a year for boarding students and many students worked for twenty cents an hour during school and part of the summer to pay their expenses. Stories are still told of loads of potatoes and other produce that were used by parents to pay part of the tuition.

Life was not easy for a young student at McCurdy in the early days. Jose Manuel Martinez, one of the boarding students at McCurdy in 1919, related that they often had problems with the Roman Catholic boys at Santa Cruz Plaza:

We had fights all the time. . . . Mondays, after wash day [school was held on Saturday but not on Monday], in the afternoons we were allowed to go to town but we had to go in groups because the Plaza boys were always looking for us—they didn't want the Protestants there. I got beat up several times.16

It was difficult for students having stones thrown at them and being assaulted, but that was relatively mild compared to the fate of those early Hispanics who converted to the Protestant faith.

The letters which the teachers occasionally received from students made the effort worthwhile. One such letter was reprinted in the November, 1917 issue of the Woman's Evangel. It was addressed to the Edith McCurdy Mission, Santa Cruz, New Mexico, and dated August 10, 1917. Excerpts are as follows:

It would have been impossible for me to learn anything if it hadn't been for the mission. My mother died when I was eight years old, so I have no one to teach me but the mission teachers. . . . When I went to the mission school, I couldn't talk but a little English . . . I learn[ed] to read my Bible and pray to God every day. . . . I learn[ed] to love each other and many more things in the Home [Mission School]. When I finish my education, I will give God back the very best I have to give, and even now I am ready to do what he wants me to do. I am so glad to know all this things. I surely love my teachers and I know they are good to me. . . .

I want to be a teacher after I have finished my education. We live very far from the people. Oh, how I wish that we could have a church here!18

Manuelita Martinez was fifteen at the time she wrote that letter. She had been one of the first boarding students and soon graduated from the eighth grade.

18Manuelita Martinez, "Thankful for the Mission School," Woman's Evangel (November, 1917), p. 342. Manuelita's father, Albino Martinez, was converted as a young man at an
The religious part of the mission work certainly was not slighted. Records indicate that the chapel was full almost every Sunday. On Easter Sunday, 1920, twenty new members were received and on Pentecost eleven more entered the fold. On Easter Sunday in 1921 thirteen new members were received. Additionally, there were three baptisms by sprinkling and twelve were baptized by immersion. Miss Kendig wrote, "I'll always remember times when students accepted the call to come to the altar and become Christians."  

Getting to New Mexico apparently was half the experience in those early days. There are many tales of lone train rides, lost baggage, and unusual experiences by the early teachers. The Rev. and Mrs. John Overmiller were no exception. After holding an auction of all their household furnishings, except the essentials, which were shipped to Espanola by freight, the Overmiller family left Colorado. As Overmiller has written:

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19 Campbell, p. 20.
I had made provisions for camping out along the way. We made one bed from a canvas stretched across the backs of the seats, and another which would rest one end on the running board outside and be covered by a make shift tent. I had a small cupboard-like container attached to one running board. Some gallon tin cans, with holes in the sides, and sand in the bottom passed for a cook stove with gasoline soaked in the sand for fuel. 21

Roads in 1921 were sometimes difficult:

The trip over the Cimmaron Pass to Taos was a slow one because of a heavy rain which about drowned out the road. We spent a cold overnight stop in a clearing along the way. I still remember how we shivered around our small camp fire while we cooked and ate breakfast. 22

During the early years fire was always a threat at the school, especially because there was no fire department in the valley. All the larger buildings were heated by coal burning furnaces, and all the walls were wooden and adobe construction. Loading the furnaces was the job of the older boys, who frequently overloaded the coal. The results were overheated furnaces which could have burned down any building at any time. On more than one occasion Superintendent Overmiller was called upon to use the fire extinguishers which were kept in every building. On one occasion a fire occurred in the furnace room of the girls’ dormitory and what could have been a great disaster was quickly extinguished by the Superintendent. On another day the furnace in the chapel overheated. As Overmiller related it, “The furnace was so overheated that the walls around it were starting to burn and the wood around the registers at the end of the hot air pipes was burning.” 23 This time it took longer to bring things under control for the white hot furnace had to be cooled down. However, once again the pastor-turned-fireman saved the day. Some say that if they ever build a statue of Overmiller at the school it will be with a fire extinguisher in one hand. 24

The heart of the mission school was its academic program. Both Overmiller and Kendig sought constantly to improve the school’s standards. By 1921 it was realized that while one eighth grade student was to graduate that year, a large seventh grade class followed. So it was decided to begin a high school by adding one grade each year. The tuition was raised at this time to sixty dollars per year for grade school and seventy-five dollars for high school students. 25

The outreach of the mission school was extending farther and farther into the mountains and valley. On many occasions Overmiller traveled

21Overmiller papers, part of an unpublished manuscript entitled, “From Here to There,” McCurdy School files, believed to be written in 1977, p. 11.
22Overmiller papers, p. 11.
23Letter from J. R. Overmiller to Miss Virginia Frank, undated, p. 3.
24Frank, p. 27.
to outlying villages such as Ojo Caliente and Abiquiu for services. As he told it:

I had bought a saxophone and learned to play some church music with it. I had one “Anglo” boy who was quite good with a coronet. We made no announcement of our coming—there were no phones or newspapers in any of those villages at that time. We pulled up to the corner of the village square—set up our musical instruments and began to play. . . . At the sound of our music heads popped out of windows, doors opened, and soon we had a crowd of some fifty people as we sang our message of religious songs. Then I gave a short message from the scriptures, using an interpreter, for most of the listeners knew no English. 26

On another occasion Overmiller traveled into one of the remote villages. Finding that the only church was locked and had never had a service in it, because no priest would come that far, Overmiller proceeded to hold a short service outside the front door. A number of the students at McCurdy shared in these evangelistic trips of Overmiller. Serving frequently as assistants and interpreters were Jose Martinez, Candido Medina, and Victoria Cruz. 27

Transportation was a problem for the school from the beginning. During the first year at Santa Cruz everyone walked. The second year Miss Perkins bought a car, but this went with her when she left in the summer of 1918. The school purchased a horse and buggy. When Dye arrived with a car, the horse named “Nell” was sent to Velarde. Overmiller had an old Ford which he insisted that Miss Kendig learn to drive. Later Overmiller purchased a new Overland and Miss Kendig, with the aid of the other teachers, bought a Model-T Ford. This car was promptly nicknamed “Henry” and was the source of many trips and stories. As Miss Kendig reports, Overmiller “was overturned, stuck in water, stranded in sand, and stuck out on the prairies, but it was all helping to do the will of the Lord.” 28

Overmiller as Superintendent of the New Mexico Conference as well as Superintendent of the Mission School was required to visit each church and hold a quarterly conference. To service the churches out on the plains meant traveling over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains with dirt roads all the way. This was a round trip of about 200 miles and took at least two days in travel time. Some of these trips were more than just routine experiences. Overmiller wrote that:

One night a terrible rain storm came up, and we had to dole people out to stay with others who lived closest to the church. The pastor and I were left to sleep in the church. I chose a church bench. The pastor slept on the floor with a rug pulled over him for warmth. He was a big, heavy fellow and was quite a sight. 29
Superintendent Overmiller was once caught in a real blizzard and along with the local pastor went to spend the night with a church family. It seems that their room was on the cold north side, facing the wind and snow. "The pastor slept in his clothes, but I could hardly afford to wear wrinkled clothes for the rest of my trip, so I undressed and shivered throughout the night."\textsuperscript{30}

Once on a survey trip of the Protestant work being done by the United Brethren, Overmiller had a car full of Methodist and Presbyterian officials when they got stuck in the middle of one especially deep stream. Apparently the high water had shorted out the current to the spark plugs. What was one to do? Never at a loss for effort, Overmiller reported that he did not want to have all those city folks get wet, so he climbed out on the running board over the fender to the top of the radiator, reached down, and turned the crank. "Sure enough, with the help of prayers, which I am sure they were saying, the motor started and we were on our way."\textsuperscript{31}

Numerous improvements occurred during the Overmiller tenure. Among these were the construction of a new home and office for the superintendent, the dedication of the new girls' dormitory, an addition to the boys' dormitory, erection of a power plant for electric lights, remodeling of the chapel at Velarde, construction of a two-room school at Velarde (1927), and establishment of a new church in Espanola (Valley View). Perhaps the greatest improvement brought about by Overmiller was that of an improved water and sewage system. As the superintendent tells it:

Everything in those early days was very primitive. Our water supply at the boarding school in Santa Cruz, except for drinking water, came from ditches, and was stored in cisterns. We drilled another well and installed two pumps which gave us good service.\textsuperscript{32}

Some might say that the most noticeable addition to the mission in these years was the addition of a church bell. Pastor Richard Campbell relates in his history of the Santa Cruz Church that, "The congregation wanted so badly a 'Protestant' church bell, so money was pledged by the congregation and solicited in the community."\textsuperscript{33} The bell arrived in the valley by train, but was difficult to hear.\textsuperscript{34} As usual, Overmiller was resourceful and with the carpentry skill of Jake Johnson they raised the bell tower so that all could hear the bell's sound. And ring it did—for years.

The year 1926 is very special in the history of the school, for it marks the first graduation class of high school seniors. The six members of that

\textsuperscript{30}Overmiller papers, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{31}Overmiller papers, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{32}Overmiller papers, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{33}Campbell, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{34}Campbell, p. 22.
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Jass included Guillerma (Willie) Chavez, Elzadie Leese, Adelina Martinez, Jose Manuel Martinez, Candido Medina, and Robert Vialpando. Five of the six went to York College, Nebraska and one attended Indiana Central College. Chavez, J. M. Martinez, and Medina all returned to teach at McCurdy while Vialpando went on to become an ordained minister.

The McCracken Era

(1927 - 1965)

In 1927 Glen F. McCracken was chosen to fill the staff vacancy for high school principal. For the next forty years this man was destined to mold and shape the entire mission. McCracken, a native Texan, had been teaching in the Espanola public school and was well known to the mission both for his coaching ability and his interest in a young teacher who soon became his wife. Within one year, due to the departure of Overmiller for a new position in Albuquerque, McCracken was appointed chief of the mission.

In an article to the faithful readers of The Evangel, the United Brethren magazine for women, McCracken fondly reviewed his first year as superintendent. He wrote of the difficulties of opening days, of memorizing new names, and of language problems. But he also reported good attendance and a good atmosphere. Students were being turned away due to the lack of room, especially boys—but still they came. As McCracken states:

One old man came and wanted to put his grandson in school. He said the lad had been in a public school for five years and hadn't learned a thing—"Nada Palabra! Nada Palabra!" he repeated many times. The boy was too bright looking to turn away, so room was made for him.35

By this time it seems that a number of young people were carrying the work of the mission into remote regions of northern New Mexico. A 1928 news story recounts the experiences of one of the first graduates as follows:

She is in the hills about forty miles west of us. We are very proud of her. She has thirty-seven pupils and only nine single seats; the rest must sit on a few benches. None of these pupils are above the fifth grade for none can speak English and teaching from English textbooks is a slow process. She has no equipment. We gave her some storybooks and games we had left from Christmas. She has no church privileges and nothing that is elevating or helpful. Drunkenness runs riot and sometimes she is afraid to venture outside her door. . . .36

By 1930 the Great Depression was upon the entire country. Life certainly was not easy on the mission field, and yet that summer a new

outreach was started at Vallecitos. For some time several students from that little mountain community, whose name in English means "Little Valleys," had been urging the establishment of a grade school. Prominent among those doing the urging were Candido Medina, a member of the first high school graduating class and later a high school principal at McCurdy, and Albert Amador.

In 1931 Lula Clippinger came to Vallecitos after eleven years of service as a social worker at Velarde. Miss Lula, as she was known, was born in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and had been a missionary to Africa prior to coming to New Mexico. She became a real "workhorse" for the mission, building fires for both school and church, cooking for the mission, preparing the kerosene lamps, and, after a hard day of work, calling on future members. For sixteen years Miss Clippinger set a pace that was hard for fellow workers to match. Many homes in the most remote regions surrounding Vallecitos received a visit from Miss Lula on horseback.

That same year a church congregation of forty-four members was organized, and after a few years of hard dedicated work it was deemed necessary to build a church. Heavy rains more than once threatened to ruin the adobe construction, but by April 11, 1936, enough of the church was completed for a dedication service. About three hundred people attended this special service, including Bishop Arthur B. Statton, who became the first Protestant bishop ever to visit Vallecitos.

The Vallecitos structure was unusual in several ways. It had the first stained glass windows ever seen in the community. They were provided by one of Miss Lula's Pennsylvania congregations. The building also had fine pews in an age when many New Mexican churches had none. Additionally, it had a beautiful oil painting done by Mr. Arthur Williams of the Avondale Church in Columbus, Ohio. The painting was of Christ the Good Shepherd (El Buen Pastor). Miss Lula believed that the artist had been divinely guided, for the trees resembled local trees, the sheep were appropriate, and the canyon in the background looked familiar. This painting remains a cherished part of the Vallecitos heritage today. Many parts of this remote church were furnished by donations of various Pennsylvania churches, including the pastor's study which came from the women of the Hershey charge.

One of the duties workers frequently performed at remote stations, especially Alcalde was burials. Miss Avis Williams recalls that soon after she arrived at Alcalde in 1945 a knock came on the door and a little girl said, "Our baby died. Do you have any boards or any paper or pretty cloth?" Williams went on to say, "We had the funeral the same day as

38Interview with Miss Avis Williams, Espanola, New Mexico, May 11, 1981.
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the fingernails and lips were turning purple. There weren't any morticians around. The closest funeral home was in Santa Fe so they were buried in the little box."39

There was no embalming of any kind being used in New Mexico in those days and if services were held in the school house, as they frequently were, it was quite hot. Teachers who served Alcalde said that on more than one occasion as the minister preached the funeral service they could see his nose start to curl up due to the odor of the deceased.

Throughout the years of the Great Depression the mission school at Santa Cruz continued to grow with McCracken reporting a fall enrollment in 1930 of one hundred eighty. The year of 1931 turned out to be one of the most dramatic in the history of the school due to the great fire that destroyed the much-needed new gymnasium. According to local folklore the one positive result was that the fire served to bring about the creation of the Espanola Fire Department.

Rebuilt and dedicated in May, 1940 as "McCracken Gymnasium" it was the only gym from Santa Fe to Taos. Area residents were both surprised and pleased by McCracken's generous ecumenical offer to share the new gym with both the Espanola public school and the Santa Cruz Catholic school.

Today it is generally believed that this gymnasium was responsible for breaking down much of that which had separated the mission and the community. However, since a building can only do so much good, it must be said that the real deciding factor in the new era of goodwill was the personality of Glen McCracken. This remarkable man also found time from his many duties to become an ordained United Brethren minister in 1938, and the following year completed his Master's Degree in Education at the University of New Mexico. Some years later he was awarded an honorary doctorate from York College in Nebraska.

The depression years were very hard at the Mission and had it not been for a virtually self-sufficient farm operation the school may have been forced to close. With salaries at $50.00 per month teachers learned anew the meaning of "The Lord will provide." At the height of the depression McCracken once faced a $200.00 debt and no money with which to pay it. It is reported that he prayed over the matter for some time. A short while later with the morning mail arrived a check for the exact amount of money.

World War II set a number of events into motion that were to change forever the slow-moving out-of-the-way region of northern New Mexico. Up on the Pajarito Plateau, almost within sight of the McCurdy Mission, a new city was beginning. When J. Robert Oppenheimer was asked to help select an isolated spot for the country's first atomic laboratory, he

39Interview, Williams.
remembered an early back-packing trip to the Jemez Mountains and his visit to the Los Alamos Ranch School.40 By 1942 the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratories were established and at work developing the atomic bombs which were to help end the war. The opportunities for local residents to help build and maintain this massive operation have economically changed the entire region.

New money began to flow into the valley, and a ripple effect was soon seen in the construction of new homes, shops, and roads. Some local people maintain that the creation of Los Alamos changed the region more than any other single event in local history. Before Los Alamos, local wages for manual labor were about $1.00 per day, but with the construction at Los Alamos wages increased drastically. One McCurdy student made more money during his two-week Christmas vacation, even with paying union dues, than mission teachers made in two months.41

The realities of the war came home to the mission in many ways. Lula Clippinger reported from remote Vallecitos:

We have some interesting children with keen ears. The other day five girlies came to the house. They were much excited. They likely had learned by papers and radio of the trial “Black Out” in Santa Fe. It took a good many words to quiet them that no bomb would drop here.42

In 1942, with help from the Women’s Missionary Association and the Otterbein Guild a medical clinic was started on campus. Through the generosity of the Arthur Packs of Ghost Ranch fame, a local gift of land, and the arrival (following the war) of Dr. Samuel Zeigler the small clinic at McCurdy became in fact a hospital. Zeigler, son of the General Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the United Brethren Church arrived in the Espanola Valley via Youngstown, Ohio, and the occupation Army in Japan. On May 8, 1948, the new thirty-two bed hospital was dedicated and opened its doors with a professional staff of fifteen missionary doctors and nurses. Dr. Zeigler called them “. . . a wonderful collection of people from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan.”43

It is interesting to note that by the time that the vote was taken at Johnstown, Pennsylvania (November, 1946), to unite the entire Evangelical and the United Brethren Churches, the work at Santa Cruz had been in existence for thirty-one years with no separate house of worship for the community. Some eighty-one church members met on Sundays with the students in the McCurdy Chapel, the second-oldest building on campus, which by now was entirely too small and inadequate.

41Interview with Rev. Brandstetter, Los Alamos, New Mexico, May 14, 1981.
43Interview with Dr. Samuel Zeigler, Espanola, New Mexico, July 8, 1982.
After years of praying and planning, and eight months of actual construction a new church building became a reality. Former Santa Cruz pastor Richard Campbell estimates that $15,000 worth of free labor was donated by the pastor and local congregation. Since its construction the Santa Cruz church has served as the hub of much of the religious activity at the mission school. School chapel services are regularly held in the sanctuary. Youth Fellowship, Boy Scouts, Red Cross, and Bible School have all been held within the church and parsonage. At least two local men have entered the ministry from the Santa Cruz church.

Historically there comes a time when every era must end, and so it was that in 1965 the McCrackens retired from the leadership of the McCurdy Schools. For almost forty years Glen McCracken’s strong hand had expertly guided the work of the mission. Growth in the number of buildings, the size of the student body, the quality of instruction, and a number of programs highlighted this era. As Superintendent of McCurdy, Sunday School teacher, community worker, and a loyal soldier for the Lord, Glen McCracken epitomized the purpose of the mission school. Indeed on one occasion a man was overheard addressing Dr. McCracken as “Dr. McCurdy”—so closely had he allied his life with his work.

**Accolades And The Future**

Many are those who have labored long years with so little thought of themselves that an adequate list of the outstanding mission workers becomes an almost impossible task. However, no honor role would be complete without the names of Irene Bachman, Lena Blake, Lula Clippinger, the Herrick sisters (Delia, Vera, and Zella), Georgene McDonald, “Chic” Martinez, C. E. Medina, and many others.

Recent years have seen the retirement of Dale and Margaret Robinson and Dolph and Gwen Pringle. Both couples have been special to the mission. Robinson served as school superintendent from 1965 to 1983. He was responsible for doubling the size of the student body, increasing the staff, many of whom came from Dale’s alma mater, Indiana Central, creating a Licensed Practical Nursing program, raising staff salaries, expanding the mission property and helping to create a model community recreation program.

The Pringles have served on the New Mexico mission field since 1947 as pastor, teachers, sponsors, foster parents, and friends to hundreds of McCurdy students. Rev. Pringle’s 1984 retirement as Elementary Principal left a significant void. Indeed through the years the love and dedication of the Pringles, the Robinsons, and others have served as high standards of measure at McCurdy.

David S. Burgett, son of missionary parents, and new superintendent expresses well the present day role of McCurdy in his first message to mission supporters:
McCurdy continues as an educational institution in Christian mission, dedicated to the development of young people in the name and image of Jesus Christ. Our Christian community is the mode by which we achieve this purpose. We could not fulfill our mission except in this context. It is only by God's grace that we as students and staff live and work in this setting. It is not by our own words and deeds but by God's direction that we continue the long tradition that is McCurdy.44

Much has been accomplished in the past and much still needs to be done. The struggle has never been easy. The region served by the mission is remote and vast, and some villages are isolated. The population, though growing, is still small and widely scattered. The land is arid, and irrigation is still a way of life. Economically the region has improved, but the lack of an industrial base and the acreage owned by the various government agencies still result in a low tax base. High unemployment in many of the outlying communities is still a reality. The local public schools have improved over the years but still face many problems. Local politicians determine the policy and in many cases do the actual hiring and firing of school employees. McCurdy, as well as the public schools, is faced with students who struggle with family break-ups, increased use and misuse of alcohol and drugs, lack of an authority figure in the home, lack of self-discipline, parental rejection, and a feeling of little self-worth.

In this modern age the McCurdy Mission School still provides a high-quality educational program in a Christian environment. As in the past, McCurdy School encourages each student to understand and accept himself or herself as well as to appreciate those from various backgrounds. McCurdy continues to be an instrument for change in the region. Like a bright and powerful beacon, the mission still sends out God's light throughout the Espanola Valley.45