



EAGER FACES wait the next handful of candies, then the kids scramble in the snow

for the wrapped pieces. Most carried plastic bread wrappers for sacks to carry their loot.

Guard Brings Christmas to St. Mary's

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to the late arrival through the mails, the following Christmas story by Betzi Woodman was delayed a week.)

By BETZI WOODMAN

ST. MARY'S—There were ushers this year to escort us to our seats in the cavernous metal building which is gymnasium and auditorium at St. Mary's.

Topping the program handed to each of us was a sketch of a C-123 airplane and the words, WELCOME AIR NATIONAL GUARD. At the bottom we read "Operation Santa Claus: 1970."

This was a long step from the informal activities which first greeted the Air Guard here some dozen or more years ago. Operation Santa Claus had its debut then when an Air Guard pilot delivered moose meat from an accidental kill to the mission school then an isolated orphanage.

The meat was dropped on the snowy hillside and the pilot could not forget the people's scrambling for the meat. Next time oranges and Christmas candy were added as a treat.

But air-dropping such perishables has its perils—and one load of oranges burst open, scattering along the frozen river. It is reported that the children below retrieved every one.

"Adoption proceedings" began after that, with the Guard making personal contact with the remote school.

Deliveries are made to other villages and schools also, but

St. Mary's with its children from many communities claimed a special place in the Air Guard's heart and the unique relationship has grown deeper each year.

The school has added a high school and become accredited in those years. Airplane crews from the planes, which landed on the frozen river in front of the school prior to building of the air strip a few miles away, regularly lost a basketball game to the St. Mary's team on these visits.

Entertainment grew in scope and participants. But the basic friendship between the Air Guard and St. Mary's has never wavered.

The program-makers this year, wise to weather delays in Alaska's bush, did not date the schedule of events, for we

might not have gotten there on the planned December 18.

As it was, we were more than an hour later than the announced 1 p.m. when we

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Christmas Activities at Village of St. Mary's on the Andreafsky



ONE OF THE MOST delightful parts of the school program was the rhythm band performance by members of the primary grades under the able baton of Joe Afcan, 8. There was not one goof in the precision playing of the various "instruments"—triangles, bells, tambourines, shakers, sticks, cymbals and drums—as the youngsters followed Joe's direction for "Skip to My Lou," "Swanee River," and "Skater's Waltz" playing in the background by recording. The unerring rhythm of the whole group and Joe's amazing conducting won huge applause.



SISTER SCHOLASTICA, who has cooked for St. Mary's for 37 years—including former days when the mission was at old Aklurak in the Yukon Delta, is overjoyed to hear of a special gift to the school from BP Alaska, Inc.—a new stove. Although it had not arrived in Anchorage in time for this trip, it is hoped to deliver the new electric stove in time for Sister to cook Christmas dinner on it. The present stove is temperamental, and when the burners work, they are on full blast—no simmer or gentle cooking possible, Sister says. Even so, she sees to feeding some 270 kids a day with the old equipment. Life will be a little easier for Sister now.



ST. MARY'S SCHOOL and dormitories from the air in early morning on most recent flight. Frozen Andreafsky River in foreground.

Christmas at St. Mary's...

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settled to enjoy the special program.

As always, the performances delighted. Junior high students sang, including "O Come All Ye Faithful" in English, Latin and Eskimo.

"The Bounders," Upward Bound students of the University of Alaska, presented Indian dances and songs in a modernized style of those from the Minto and Stevens Village area.

It was interesting to note that only one of the performers was Indian—the others all Eskimo!

A group of Chevak students—four girls and four boys—gave two unusual Eskimo dances with old favorites Jimmie Paukan and Billy Beans of St. Mary's city on the drums.

The Senior High Choir, well balanced between male and female voices, sang selections from a play "It's the Lord's Thing" including "Doin' the Christmas Thing" and "There is No Peace."

But it was the rhythm band of the primary classes which stole the show. They took their places on the risers as though they performed for audiences every day.

With the poise of a Bernstein, the conductor, eight-year-old Joe Afcan, entered, carrying his music stand, baton and musical score.

To recorded music, Joe guided his instrumentalists through "Skip to My Lou," "Swanee River," and "Skater's Waltz" with never an extra tambourine shake or triangle tingle. Every band member displayed a remarkable sense of rhythm.

Kindergartners, pink-cheeked from being outside, sang motion songs. They faltered only slightly when photographers converged on them.

Programs such as this—many undoubtedly more elaborate—have been taking place all over Alaska this season. Yet none—no matter how superbly performed—can top what happens at St. Mary's.

Here, some 400 miles west of Anchorage, during this time especially, meaning comes through for words such as "welcome," "friendly," "joy"—and "love." There are no complications—it is a direct, immediate and completely genuine experience.

Actually, Operation Santa Claus begins while yet gold brightens the birch in Septem-

ber and it involves countless known and unknown people throughout the Anchorage area. The Air National Guard, which shepherds the operation, begins then to ask the community to share Christmas with the some 270 kids at St. Mary's.

And the gifts pour in. Clothing, toys and games, equipment, candy, foodstuffs—this time a bunch of bicycles, some for spare parts for the ones already there.

Guardsmen at Kulis Air Guard Base decided early in the program they would rather contribute to St. Mary's than to exchange gifts and cards among themselves.

These "small change" funds bought candy heretofore, but this year J.C. Penney Co. contributed a "Jeep load" of sweets so the men bought oranges, apples and—for the high schoolers—a collection of nearly all the top one hundred pop records.

This year, too, marked some very special large gifts for the school. BP Alaska Inc. heard the St. Mary's appeal on the Anchorage radio and inquired what was needed.

The Rev. James Laudwin, new head of the school (and experiencing his first Guard visit) reported that Sister Scholastica, who has cooked for the school for the past 37 years, was having much trouble with the old stove.

Temperamental, it sometimes wouldn't heat well at all, then again it would be too hot.

So, BP sought the right stove—electric—and had it airlifted to Anchorage for special Guard delivery to the school in time for cooking Christmas dinner.

Atlantic Richfield Co. donated a fine slide projector to aid in both education and entertainment programs at the school. And Alyeska Pipeline System Co. contributed a new IBM electric typewriter.

A \$500 cash donation was used for two stereo record players—one for the nuns' quarters and one for the layworkers' section.

The two third grades at Chester Valley School in Anchorage took collections and sent the cash to the school. One envelope contained \$13.20 and the other, \$18.00.

When we departed Anchorage, members of the press, seated along the sides of the Guard's C-123-J airplane, barely had

room for toes because the donations were stacked high and wide in the plane. The constant splendor of Alaska's landscape below made up for discomfort of noise and crowdedness as we flew west.

Some three hours later, we crossed the extravagant loops of the Yukon River and then caught sight of the modest mission on the banks of the Andreafsky River.

St. Mary's airstrip has no control tower—but the skillful Air Guard pilot brought us in for as smooth a landing as any commercial jetliner at Anchorage International.

Fellows from the Senior Class greeted us—including David Friday, Chevak, student body president. Then, after shaking hands with Santa Claus (S/Sgt. David Martinez suddenly grown plump and silver haired), they unloaded the two Guard planes.

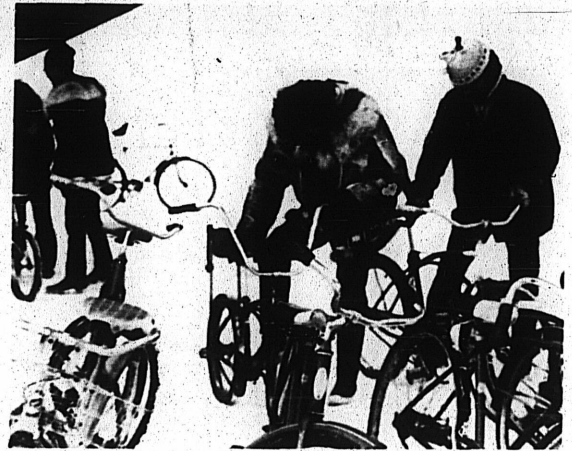
We rode in the open body of a pickup truck across the rolling country to the little city and the school. And there, on the slope above the road, were some 300 students, nuns and lay workers, waving and shouting welcome.

Everyone wore smiles and you knew you were REALLY welcome. They even cheered the departing Guard plane as it roared unhearing off into the mists.

Santa, in a following truck, tossed wrapped candies to the younger kids who scrambled eagerly in the snow for the prizes. Then we were surrounded and moved along to the program.

In the hall the crowd shouted another welcome and as each special gift was announced, they broke into loud and spontaneous cheering.

Clusters of students gathered around various ones of us, talking, telling, sharing information.



THE FELLOWS unload the bikes from the maw of the Guard's C-123 aircraft. Some are for riding and some in less good condition are for repair those already at the school.

—Photos by BETZI WOODMAN

We had been there a scant two hours, yet we knew we were among friends.

It didn't matter what gifts we had brought—there was no questioning of motive. We were trusted.

We felt, too, the glorious release from city pressures which comes in the Northern bush. How beautiful to be here among friends, to feel this love and to sense the joy.

Then I wondered: was I alone in my feelings? Was it because I had been here many times before and was remembered by many? I watched and listened to those making their first trip

here. They too seemed wholly at one with the people and place, marveling at the willingness to be helpful, at the 18 layworkers who come to give a year of service without compensation, at the mountain of gifts being carted inside for sorting and distribution here and up and down the river.

I was right. Something does happen here during this special season. Ordinary people from many places meet briefly and simply in the spirit of love and sharing.

And we have a precious bit of Christmas joy.