

BEGINNINGS

Rain pounded on the roof of the old pickup truck as it slid along the muddy trail. Its headlights shone on the sagebrush lining the dirt road. Lee Begay glanced at his wife on the seat beside him and asked in the Navajo language, "How much longer?" "Now!" she said. "I need help now; the baby is coming!" "But it's 75 miles to the Shiprock hospital. We just can't go that far," Lee said. "Let's go to the mission; Elsie Benson will help us."

Minutes later, Lee Begay burst into the evening worship service at House of Prayer Lutheran Church calling for nurse Elsie Benson. Elsie hurried from the church and ran through the rain to the pickup truck. "Help me get your wife into the clinic and we'll phone for the Chinle ambulance's she told Lee. But Elsie soon discovered there was no time to call for help; the birth would not wait. Elsie helped the mother onto a bed and ran for her "stork kit." The baby's head emerged with the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around his neck. Praying aloud for guidance, Elsie was able to slip the cord free. With a lusty cry, the newest member of the Navajo Nation, *Tábaqahí* Clan, came into the world.

Without Elsie Benson's help, Lee and Lucy Begay's baby boy would not have survived. The Begays and many other Navajos have been helped by Lutheran ministries at Rock Point and Many Farms, Arizona and Navajo, New Mexico. In turn the Navajos have given much to those who came to live among them.

1950

JOHN CARLSEN'S VISION

Lutheran ministry among Navajo people began late in the history of the United States. John Carlson, director of an organization called the Gospel Hour from the Heart of America had a concern for ministry among Native Americans. Mr Carlson had been a missionary in Bolivia. When he returned to this country, he traveled extensively and spoke in congregations, encouraging contributions and recruiting workers to serve in ministries in remote areas of South America. In 1950, he traveled by train with several friends from Los Angeles to Gallup, New Mexico. On the trip they discussed possible missionary work among native tribes of Central and South America. As the train passed near the red rocks of the Navajo reservation one of the men wondered aloud why they had not considered working among the Navajos.

Soon after this, John Carlsen went to Washington D.C. At the Department of the Interior where he was a frequent visitor to obtain visas for missionaries to Bolivia someone asked him; "Why all this interest in South American Indians? Why not do something for those in our own country?" Those experiences were the beginning of John Carlsen's concern for the Navajos.

In 1951, Carlsen traveled to Window Rock Arizona headquarters of the Navajo tribe, and talked with tribal chairman, Sam Ahkeah. Ahkeah took him to Rock Point, one of the remotest areas of the reservations and told him that the people there needed help. Carlsen talked with a doctor at the Presbyterian mission hospital at Ganado, Arizona who told of the need for medical work at Rock Point as well.

1952

NAVAJOS ASK FOR A MISSION

In the spring of 1952, Knute Jore, a field representative for John Carlsen's organization, was producing Christian radio broadcasts out of Gallup, New Mexico. In these daily fifteen minute broadcasts, Navajos told Bible stories in their own language. At Rock Point, Billy B Begay listened occasionally to these broadcasts on his battery-operated radio. He was touched by what he heard. Billy's neighbors, Eugene and Martha Natatches, also heard the Christian broadcasts. They joined Billy B in prayer that a mission would be established at Rock Point. Eugene and Martha had both grown up near Rock Point. After they married they lived in Flagstaff where they first heard of the Christian faith. It was there they became Christians. They returned later to live at Rock Point.

John Carlsen returned to the reservation in 1952. He traveled to Rock Point and met Billy B Begay and Eugene Natatches. They told him they had been praying that a mission would come to their area. There had been only a limited Christian witness in that part of the reservation. In the 1940's Navajo evangelist John Peter Yazzie came to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school at Rock Point each weekend from Sweetwater. He taught religion classes at the boarding school on Sundays. Baptist missionary Arthur Norris had lived for a few months at Rock Point and Claude Fondau had stayed with Navajo families at Rock Point for a few weeks but there had been no continuous ministry.

ROCK POINT IN 1952

Arville and Loraine Witt operated the Rock Point trading post. They had come in 1948 and continued as the traders until Arville's death in 1970. They were known affectionately as Pappy and Mammy Witt. In Navajo, Pappy Witt was called *Akalii Sáni* or Old Cowboy.

The Witts' apartment at the back of the trading post consisted of a living room kitchen and bedroom. Arville hauled water from the nearby government windmill and built an outhouse behind the trading post. A fireplace was used for cooking and for heating the house. Mrs Witt describes their arrival in 1948, "The first time I came to Rock Point it took us nine hours to drive from Farmington New Mexico (100 miles) because with the spring thaw the roads were so bad. The store was badly run down but the valley we came to was just beautiful - big red rocks and pinnacles of rocks; I'd never seen anything like it." The Witts installed a small diesel generator to furnish limited amounts of electricity for their home and the trading post.

Rock Point is nestled in a valley carved out by the Chinle wash, a dry riverbed most of the year but a fast-moving river during rainy seasons. The valley is surrounded by red sandstone mesas. The community is named for a huge mesa that looms in the west. In Navajo, the mesa is called *Tsé Nitsaa Deez Áhí*. Translated, the name means Large Rock with Multiple Projections Sticking Upward. In English the name was simplified to Rock Point. In 1950, the community consisted of a trading post with the trader's home attached, a chapter house where local Navajo meetings were held, and a BIA boarding school for children in grades one and two. The only ones who owned automobiles at Rock Point were the trader and the BIA teacher. Navajos traveled by horseback or horse-drawn wagons.

In the early 1950's, Navajo country was a remote area, largely untouched by the dominant culture. There were few paved roads throughout the 25,000 square mile reservation. Navajos spoke their own language; English was a foreign language in Navajo country. The people lived as their ancestors had for centuries; most never traveled away from the reservation. Their homes were one room, eight-sided log structures called hogans, without electricity or running water. Each autumn, government workers traveled through the reservation, gathering up children and taking them to boarding schools in remote places like Brigham City, Utah, Fort Sill, Oklahoma and Riverside, California. The children were not allowed to return to their families until the following spring. Navajos were not eager for that kind of schooling many children stayed at home, herding sheep and learning weaving or silversmithing from their parents.

The BIA boarding school at Rock Point was located a quarter of a mile east of the trading post. Built in the 1930's, the sandstone block building housed a classroom, boys' and girls' dormitories, a kitchen and dining room. In 1949, Albert Kukulsky came as principal-teacher. His responsibilities included supervising the dormitory and dining room, doing maintenance work and teaching. Sixty students were enrolled in grades one and two.

There were no medical facilities at Rock Point before 1953. Navajos went for treatment to a singer, or medicine man. For modern medical attention the trader or the school teacher drove Navajos over the dirt road to the clinic at Chinle, 50 miles to the south. If the patient needed hospitalization, another 30 miles was added to the trip. Once a year a Public Health physician visited the students at the Rock Point BIA school. A Public Health nurse came occasionally to give students immunizations or medication.

1953

GLOBAL GOSPEL FELLOWSHIP

In 1953, John Carlsen's Gospel Hour from the Heart of America organization expanded its ministry and took the name Global Gospel Fellowship (GGF) with headquarters in Minneapolis. John Carlsen said, "The inspiration for this name came to me while I stood at the bedside of the late Elias Gabrielson of Lucerne, Minnesota, listening to him pray for our work. He prayed that our radio work would circle the globe. My heart was deeply moved as this servant of God prayed." GGF was introduced as "a fellowship of Christian believers organized for the purpose of encouraging the spiritual gifts of believers, strengthening, encouraging, assisting, inspiring and challenging already established Gospel work and promoting new work wherever and whenever doors are open as God supplies workers and funds." Carlsen negotiated with tribal and federal officials and secured a lease for five acres of land for a mission at Rock Point. *Táchii'nii Nééz*, tribal councilman from Rock Point, gave the five acres from his grazing land. On May 19 Sam Ahkeah, chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, and John Carlson signed the lease for the mission. The lease stated that the Rock Point Mission program would include hogan visitation, general Gospel ministry, medical work a mechanic shop, a radio station and a Christian boarding school. The mission was to be operated by Global Gospel Fellowship...

(Excerpts from the first three pages of *Amazing Grace – Fifty Years of Lutheran Ministry among Navajo People*, compiled by Fern D. Cole, and published by the Navajo Evangelical Lutheran Mission at Rock Point, AZ. Contact the mission at www.nelm.org to obtain a full copy).