

#12 More on Father William A. Gilbert, 1941-45

Digging through archives, a story of Father Gilbert's retirement in Ventura, California at age 65, came to light. Before coming to Nativity, William A. "Hap" Gilbert had quite a career: Shakespearean actor in 1929 at the Boston Shakespearean Repertory Theatre, played on stage from Toronto to London to Montreal. In the 1930's he went to Hollywood, a venture that lasted only two months: "I took in the situation...I can take wine, women and song but I couldn't take Hollywood." So he entered Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto to study theology and did missionary work in the lumber camps during this time. ¹

In 1933 he was a track star and Canadian fashion model. Then he went on to become a "bush" preacher north of the 53rd parallel in Manitoba. "It was "Hap" Gilbert's first stage in a new career; he played it for nearly four years and had about 2,000 whites, mostly prospectors and trappers and many Indians as his "audience."² After being offered a chaplaincy on the RMS Franconia, he spent five months sailing around the world—he spent his 33rd birthday in Peking, China.

From China, Gilbert was accepted to the post of canon in Charge of Christian Education at the Cathedral of St. John, Spokane. From Spokane, he came to Nativity. He served at Nativity until 1945 then on to Walla Walla where he "came face-to-face with what was to become his life-long concern, ministry to the incarcerated and penal reform—a ministry that absorbed him for 19 years. He retired at 65 after 36 years in full time ministry. The newspaper, Ventura County Star-Free Press, reported the following on his retirement: "Besides, the stereotyped characteristics of a retiree just wouldn't fit Bill Gilbert: one-time stage and motion picture actor, world traveler, outstanding collegiate athlete and class leader, budding journalist, ranch hand, lumberman, the city fashion model—and priest."³

A man of many talents, relationships evidently came easy, maybe THAT was why he graced our wild-west town of Lewiston so easily—Father Gilbert, we salute you!

Then there was Rev. Frederick Belton from 1946 to 1951. We discussed his building program earlier. Recall, he oversaw building expansion for basement areas useful for education and hospitality. It was under his direction that a new rectory was built. Do all of you parishioners know about all the many rooms in our church? Downstairs, library, kitchen, food pantry distribution, rummage and "history" room?

I haven't run across any "stories" like "Hap" Gilbert's in the archives about Fr. Belton, and I HAVE asked several parishioners for stories--know that history is from the bottom up, not just from the top down.

Stories tell us about relationship we have with each other and with parish leadership. This summer, with our Forum leaders, Tyler Richards and Liz Embler, we have been telling our stories, building relationships with those in our parish, and improving our prayer life. My request (dare I say prayer?) for historical stories was answered by Mary Lou Gregory. She wrote down several stories of former priests. Here is her first story about answers to prayer. (She has more.)

Mary Lou's story concerns Rev. Charles May, our "Centennial priest." (Today's history is indebted to the Centennial Committee for much of our history.) Father May relayed a story about answers to prayers. "He said he wasn't much of a cat lover, but he had neighbor children who were very fond of their pet kitten. One day they knocked on his door and asked him if he'd seen their kitten. They asked him to pray that they would find it. Fr. May recounted that he prayed for the children's faith not to be harmed, because he knew sometimes a missing pet episode can end sadly...Later that day there was another knock on the door. "Fr. May", the children exclaimed excitedly, "we found our kitten in YOUR TREE." More coming from Mary Lou's treasure trove.

There must be more of YOUR stories about our parish life? We have lists of our "historical" rectors: Rev. Dean served from 1951 through 1956 when he was transferred to Ritzville. Mr. H.E. Caudell, *locum tenens*, served from 1956-59 with Rev. William Greenfield, 1956-59—who, history tells us, found the church in financial trouble in 1956—to be rescued by an unnamed commercial firm.⁴ Then there was Fr. Stretch, R. Scott Dills 1968-70, and Charles W. May, 1970—the Centennial priest!

Be sure to come hear Lewiston's acclaimed historian, Steven Branting, on Tuesday September 29, 2015 at 7:00 for our second history lecture celebrating Nativity's 150 years in Lewiston. He will tell stories about early Lewiston and relate that to the early churches in Lewiston—highlighting history through Rev. Dr. Sommerville's tenure. I guess we will call it: "Celebrating Early Lewiston—Early Nativity". Steve's new book about Lewiston may be here from the publishers for the presentation. His books are collectables.

To quote Tyler Richards: "Idaho is a place that is more than potatoes."

Below: Father William A. "Hap" Gilbert

Summer Forum with

Mary Lou Gregory's family

Tyler Richards and Liz Embler



End Notes:

1 The Ventura County Star-Free Press Sunday, September 21, 1969.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 Jennings, John Richard *The History of the Episcopal Church of the Nativity* p 9 undated.

5 Richards, Tyler and Embler, Liz "Parish Profile" Nativity archives 2015.

Works cited:

Jennings, John Richard *The History of the Episcopal Church of the Nativity* p 9 undated.

Richards, Tyler and Embler, Liz "Parish Profile" church archives 2015.

The Ventura County Star-Free Press Sunday, September 21, 1969.

--Deloris Jungert Davisson and Margaret Cole 2015