

***How do we pass on stories of faith?
The story of Father Baptiste P. Lambert***

By Lawrence H Bradner

How do we pass on stories of faith? While I value the work of New Testament scholars, trying for several centuries to answer that question, I wonder why some seem automatically to doubt the authenticity of stories just because they were written years after the event.

I wonder how often the story has been told and re-told, without published documentation, of the Rev. Baptiste P. Lambert at Okreek, South Dakota, during the 1918 flu epidemic. During the early 1970's, I had the privilege of knowing all three of Father Lambert's daughters – Ann Yuken, Evelyn Bergin, and Ellen Quick Bear. But it was not from them I first heard the story.

The future South Dakota suffragan bishop, Harold S. Jones, was my nearest priestly colleague in North Dakota while he served in Wahpeton and I was at Oakes. He and his wife Blossom were kind neighbors to my wife and me, and he was a very good mentor and confessor to a young priest. He told the story in their living room sometime in 1967. It was one of the reasons I was glad to move to the Rosebud Mission in South Dakota when the possibility came up in 1971. I loved listening to stories – and sometimes telling them, too.

Mrs. Quick Bear, when we met in Rosebud in 1971, was, in her old age, an active participant in the Church of Jesus, an Episcopal congregation in Rosebud, and in the Mni Wiconi congregation in Spring Creek. Sitting in her rocker in the building next to the Church of Jesus, where she managed the clothing program, she retold in more detail what I had heard in Wahpeton from Father Jones. Later, at a Spring Creek Lenten service I planned around the story, she agreed to tell it for the Mni Wiconi congregation, still sitting in a rocker.

In 1918, while millions around the world were dying from the flu, Father Baptiste Lambert was serving at Calvary chapel, Okreek. Many in the community were sick and dying. Father Lambert, with the help of his family, was nurse, doctor, undertaker, and priest. When the rest of the Lamberts became ill, he and his daughter Ellen carried on alone.

Then, a little boy died. Ellen told me her father was determined that in some way the whole community should be able to participate in the boy's funeral spiritually even though they could not and should not leave their homes. He went around to every home and told the people that when they heard the church bell ring, they would know he was at that moment celebrating the Holy Communion at the altar.

At the church, there were just Father Lambert and his daughter Ellen, with the body of the young boy in the casket. Ellen stood in the doorway under the tower. When she saw her father at the altar, starting the service, Ellen rang the bell.

Route 18 now runs between the lower land where the church stands and the cemetery high on the hill to the south. After the liturgy at the church, Ellen and her father took the casket up the hill for the burial. It was now late afternoon. After setting the casket in the grave, Father Lambert

said the committal prayers and closed his Prayer Book. With his hands and arms raised high on either side, the priest, in his own words, addressed an impassioned, almost angry plea to God:

“There have been too many deaths! Let there be no more! Let this be the last one!”

As I remember both from Father Jones’ version of the story and from Mrs. Quick Bear’s version, the little boy’s death was in fact the last death at Okreek due to the 1918 flu.

Some readers of this story might conclude that at the time of the burial, “the natural epidemiological course of the disease in the community was running out and just happened to coincide with Lambert’s prayer. He was a good man, that’s all. In fact, even, a very good man!” But I suspect that to the people of the community of Okreek, there was no separation of Baptiste Lambert’s priestly diligence over the years from Baptiste Lambert’s risk-taking vigor in caring for the community during the flu crisis or from Baptiste Lambert’s vigorous, adventurous outpouring of a faith far beyond the dignity of established liturgy. I suspect that for this community, there was no separation of all they knew about Father Lambert and their discovery that the epidemic was ending.

Most likely there were, before 1918 and since, events which on the surface bore some similarity to that described here. I once used my VW Squareback as the hearse to carry a large casket from a wake in a private home, up the steep, difficult trail to the hilltop cemetery of Epiphany Chapel, He Dog, on the Rosebud Reservation. On a cold morning in another Rosebud Mission cemetery, I joined with a few family members after a very small child died. Any of us could have lifted the casket alone; all of us joined in the digging of the grave and its covering. But none of these events had the same power that the Okreek story has.

It must be the power of the 1918 events at Okreek and the power of that story that have propelled its retelling across almost 90 years without, so far as I was able to see, any published retelling of it. I punched in all the Google possibilities I could think of and found nothing!

The story had a very strong effect on me regarding my eagerness to serve on the Rosebud Mission. But every now and then since my 1975 return to my home diocese of Rhode Island, I have told the story to grateful listeners.

As I came to the close of this narrative, thanks to the wonders of e-mail, I received the Rev. Frederick Jessett’s recently written, more extensive narrative of the 1918 Okreek events derived from his conversations with scholar Ella Deloria in the 1950’s and conversations with Mrs. Quick Bear. I decided not to use any of Father Jessett’s version to alter mine, but just finish mine as originally planned.

Fred Jessett became acquainted with Mrs. Quick Bear a few years before I did. For several years near the end of his tenure on the Rosebud, he and I served together and shared acquaintance with Mrs. Quick Bear simultaneously. But she gave her narrative to each of us separately, at different times.

In the Episcopal congregations of the Niobrara Deanery of South Dakota, women and men of the congregations were continually telling and retelling stories with great wit and sometimes tragic depth at suppers, all-night wakes, and church business meetings. In the churches of the Rosebud Mission, such storytelling is commonplace and is one of the strengths that has held the Church in South Dakota together during extremely challenging circumstances over about 150 years. In this respect and others, these South Dakota congregations are very much like those of the first century of the Christian era.

In the Okreek story, I know firsthand several versions: that of Harold Jones, the briefest form; that of Frederick Jessett, Ella Deloria, and Ellen Quick Bear, the longest; and my own telling, of middling length. There are some “factual” differences, but in all three versions the narrative of the core events is the same.

Not with any sense that my version is more accurate than that of Father Jessett, I record my final impression of Father Lambert in the cemetery as I remember his daughter Ellen telling it to me: “The sun was setting to the west of us; with Father’s arms and hands outstretched and his jacket hanging from his arms on either side, the setting sun cast a shadow on the ground that looked like an eagle’s wings.”

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