

Swiss Sisters of Standing Rock

Think Julie Andrews. Think "The Hills are Alive." It's unlikely the Sisters ever cavorted so sweetly amid the hills, but who knows? They loved their native Switzerland's shimmering mountain lakes and perfectly stunning peaks, so who knows what kind of dance they did when alone amid that mountaintop majesty.

Just think of Julie Andrews, but put her in a huge black robe, a stem-to-stern nun's habit, and bedeck her with brimmed bonnet to cover every last wisp of hair. Think of Julie Andrews, but as a nun in that famous opening scene from *The Sound of Music*, and set all that dancing in North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, circa 1880. I know--it's a stretch.

What on earth must it have been like for four Swiss sisters, who'd learned a smidgen of English but nothing in Lakota to follow their revered Bishop Marty's call to Canonball, North Dakota, of all places, to teach school on an Indian Reservation, kids who were bamboozled by black robes and ominous habits?

Culturally, their mission was madness, and it started woefully. When the steamboat went to anchor, the locals sent out a couple of mules for the sisters to ride to get to shore. Sister Adela went first--Sister Adela of rather stout frame. The poor mule wasn't taken by the load and dispensed of Sister Adela post-haste. Down she went into the muddy Missouri.

But there was no giggling. Sister Adela's baptism was mortifying to the European black robes, and no one on shore giggled either. After all, who among the Lakota hadn't been tossed by a mule? All in a day's work.

When they came ashore finally, some of the Native folks stood there with their hands open, smiling. The sisters, sworn to poverty, hadn't, Lewis-and-

Clark-like, brought along a bucket of trinkets or medals, so one of them took a crucifix from around her neck and gave it to a man who looked at it strangely and hung it from his ear.

Their first medical operation was an amputation accomplished with a kitchen knife and a saucepan. Their medicine cabinet held little more than quinine water and cod liver oil.

When one of the young Lakota women they were training suddenly died, the entire community wept, but the sisters were aghast when the Lakota men and women went off to a nearby hill to wail and scream, and then returned with bloody slashes all over their arms, their long hair cut hideously.

The Benedictines never expected the reluctance the Lakota people had toward educating their children. They had to be cajoled, had to be bribed by fresh bread and the promise of more anytime they'd come to visit.

Runaways were incessant, and it took quite some time for the nuns to determine that their headcount losses were clearly related to maternal visits. What they learned is that Lakota mothers' blankets were so big that it was impossible for the nuns to determine when there were four feet beneath those blankets and not just two. Some kids just walked away.

What those mission-driven Swiss Sisters understood, however, was that they were changing lives. What they didn't is that that process would leave many of the people they'd come to serve without purpose, robbed of an identity they'd always had.

Could they have guessed? I don't know.

Once upon a time, two little girls were taken in. As was the practice, those two were bathed scrupulously, their clothing tossed out on a pile to be

burned, their hair cut in a visibly nice, white girl style. Then they were dressed in the kind of dresses little girls were supposed to be wearing.

A few nights later, those little girls determined to leave; but before they did they went to piles of rubbish and retrieved the worn and dirty clothes they'd been wearing when they'd come to the mission school. The next morning, the sisters couldn't believe those children would leave perfectly adorable dresses on the pile of rags to be burned.

Think of Julie Andrews in a habit, a half-dozen of them, from Switzerland, on the reservation, fumbling with language, teachers with so very much to learn.