

VIEWPOINTS

EXPLORING SOUTH DAKOTA



By Katie Hunhoff
Editor at South Dakota Magazine

A South Dakota Christmas Story

BY KATIE HUNHOFF

In the 1930s, down-on-their-luck families sometimes lodged in county poor farms. Herschel and Hilda McKnight ran the Charles Mix County Home for the Poor in those years. It was housed in a four-story building that was once the Ward Academy in Academy, S.D., south of Mitchell. Before her death, Hilda told of her experiences to Marian Cramer, a Bryant farmwife and teacher who has written several articles for South Dakota Magazine.

Several times through the years, we've related Hilda's story of a 14-year-old girl's Christmas at the Home for the Poor. Here's an abbreviated version.

Hilda said she always remembered the day that Carol arrived with her mother. "It was never easy to welcome people to a poor house. Herschel moved quickly to the door and opened it. He had a special way of putting people at ease."

The McKnights strived to provide clothing so the kids wouldn't look out-of-place at school. The mothers and two WPA seamstresses sewed and repaired donated clothing. Carol befriended the McKnights and offered to help in the laundry and sewing room as well. But one day in the fall she told Hilda, "I know how hard you and Mr. Mac worked to get us nice clothes. It really doesn't matter, I guess. I have this lovely skirt and they still call us 'poor house kids' at school."

Hilda gave Carol a hug, and to hide her tears she fussed with a missionary barrel that had just been delivered from a church in the East. "Let's see what treasures we can find," she said. Together, they laughed as they pulled out wool pants with the seat worn thin, a pair of long underwear with holes in the knees and elbows, and other useless things. But way at the bottom, Carol pulled out a chiffon scarf. Though threadbare, it seemed lovely to her eyes.

"Would you like to keep it?" asked Hilda. Carol's answer was to hold it closely and nod. The scarf was her doorway to dreams. She would sit on her bed and finger the soft chiffon. She was not in the Charles Mix County Home for the Poor. She was far away. She always neatly folded her scarf and put it away.

The holidays came in 1933 despite the dust. Hilda and the women baked cookies and decorated the poor house with paper chains. The county allowed one clothing gift for each resident, so the McKnights shopped carefully to make it worthwhile.

A few days before Christmas, Carol tapped on the McKnights' door. "You have been so busy for all of us, but you won't have any Christmas presents, any Christmas," she said.

Hilda assured the girl that they would celebrate Christmas together as one big family. "You are all our family, Carol. We are happy."

On Christmas morning, Carol hesitantly returned to the McKnights' room. First, she approached Herschel. "I don't have a present for you," she said. "Just a hug." Herschel was a big man, and he enfolded the slim girl in his arms.

Then Carol said, "Mrs. Mac, I have something for you." She handed Hilda a box wrapped in paper, and watched like a hawk as she untied the string. Beneath the crackling paper was the girl's chiffon scarf.

Hilda fought back tears as she fingered its softness. "It's all I have, Mrs. Mac," Carol said.

Hilda told our writer that she treasured it forever: "The frayed chiffon scarf is forever my symbol of Christmas and a true gift of love."

Katie Hunhoff is the editor of South Dakota Magazine, published in Yankton. For more history, travel and culture visit www.southdakotamagazine.com.



FROM THE PULPIT

Special 'Gifts' Given and Received...

BY REV. RICK PITTENGER
First United Methodist Church

The following Scripture is written on the Wall in the Wesley House:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

MICAH 6:8

Another often-quoted scripture for this season of Giving is:

"You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. 35 In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"

ACTS 20:34

The Message puts it this way. In everything I've done, I have demonstrated to you how necessary it is to work on behalf of the weak and not exploit them. You'll not likely go wrong here if you keep remembering that our Master said, "You're far happier giving than getting."

Special "Gifts" Given and Received...

It is that time of year where the talk of gifts is once again on our lips.

One of the highlights of my week is serving at the Welcome Table meal hosted at our church every Monday night from 5:30-7 p.m. It is a special time and the more times I serve the more blessed I become for it is more than a meal served to persons who are food insecure. It has become like a big Thanksgiving Dinner with your family and/or friends.

First of all, you're greeted at the door with a smile; you're invited to take a table much like you do at even the fanciest restaurants. If there isn't room in the dining hall you're invited to take a seat in our waiting room. Once there is room to seat your family or your group of friends you're invited to have a seat where you will be asked what we can get you to drink; we serve iced tea, coffee, milk

or water. The Coffee is hot, the rest of the beverages are iced cold. There is nothing worse than a warm glass of milk or cold coffee.

I started to write down that I have 3, then 4, then 5 and then my mind was flooded with the memories of a crowd of persons who've touched my life week in and week out. To describe for you what a "Special 'Gift'" ALL the people are; I will be telling you about just a few, ok, several. They know who they are; but I'd like you to know the type of person that comes to the Welcome Table. Since I haven't asked any of their permission to write about them... they'll be nameless for this article. Still there are characteristics that if you've ever served or been to the Welcome Table you'll no doubt know who I'm talking about.

There is a man who comes at about 3 o'clock each week to set the tables complete with glassware, silverware, napkins and condiments for your coffee, with spoons in the middle of each and every table. He does so methodically, almost reverently, and using his one good hand as the other has been stricken by some struggle of life. Perhaps you see where this is going. He's not a "handicapped" person as we used to say. He's not a "Special Needs" as is the PC term of the day. He is yet another "Gift" and each week I see many "gifted" people... who give without expecting recognition or status... some people just know how to share God's love which is also a gift.

Each Monday, I/we get a phone call from another "regular"... her call comes in about 3:30 or 4 p.m.. She calls to ask what the Menu is for the evening. I always say: "Is this _____?" She laughs and says, "It sure is..." Whoever answers the phone tells her what the menu is for the evening.

We have the 93-year-old man who still drives his own car; and when I have the worship at the Care Center, he's in the crowd there as well. Always willing to "swagger" over to the piano

and play for my service. He's always good for one cup of coffee and sits in the middle table just inside the door. He's always smiling, always has a good demeanor in spite of the aches and pains that come with aging.

There is another guest we have; she comes with her boyfriend. They sit together, ride the bus from SEDAC together. And if I ever miss either Welcome Table or Church (yes they attend church here on Sunday mornings) she'll say, "Where were you, I missed you?!" Just as an aside, during our Praise band and throughout the service she helps "lead" the singing from her pew.

There is the Vietnam War veteran who wears his Lincoln High School Sweatshirt almost every week. Now, you might think he must be a graduate of Sioux Falls Lincoln, or maybe he just picked the sweatshirt up at a thrift store. If you thought that, as I did until I spoke to him, you'd be sorely mistaken. He received that as a gift from Lincoln High School during one of their Show Choir Performances at a concert at Lincoln High School. "Yep, they invited me up on stage and gave it to me because I was one of their best boosters." (He rarely misses a concert.) In fact, he spends most days at either the USD or Vermillion Public Library watching You Tube videos of Show Choirs and Drill Teams from all across the nation and he "ranks" them.

I have one young man who beckons me over to his table each and every week. "Pastor, Pastor"... he is excited to have me come and listen to his accomplishments for the week. You see, he's an avid presence at the USD gym. He's been trying to coax me into coming by and showing me the ropes of how to dead lift hundreds of pounds as he is able to do.

More than once he'll say to me: "Pastor, Pastor..." what are you doing the rest of the week?"

And when I tell him that I pretty much do "THIS" the rest of the week; I visit people, I work on sermons, I read, I study people, I take photographs... He'll add: "No, I mean, what do you do for WORK!"

When I tell him I'm a Pastor he'll say, "I mean, what do you do for a job?" And when he gets ready to leave he'll fist pump me and say, "Hey Pastor, good to see you man, and have a good week, OK?!"

I get hugs from the youth from our youth group who come to the Welcome Table. And a week ago I was taking some pictures... at our Welcome Table Thanksgiving...

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted her... she smiled and gave me one of those "I see you and I know what you're doing faces!" She pointed two fingers, index and middle from her eyes out to mine. I returned the gesture... from my eyes to hers... she doesn't talk much... she has no need, for she speaks with the eyes of grace and acceptance... so I accommodated her; she wanted HER picture taken. People were rushing by her to leave and she would allow them to pass, first graciously, then not so graciously. After all, she was getting her picture taken. She posed like a model, one hand on the chair the other on her hip, as if descending the stairs in the 1950's classic Sunset BLVD. Gloria Swanson played a crazed attention-driven actress named "Norma Desmond"... "All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up"

With that, I took a picture of the most beautiful woman in the room that night... complete with stocking cap pulled down ready for the cold of winter which almost covered her eyes hidden by her thick glasses. I clicked away. With a smile she was off into the night.

Yes, I learn a lot at the Welcome Table; even the name at times. I feel we should replace our name as the First United Methodist Church. We're the Welcome Table Church and that is truly a Special Gift... given and received.

Have a blessed Christmas (See you at the Welcome Table Church;) giving and receiving everyone, all the time,
Rick.

Looking Back At Surgery During The Civil War

BY RICHARD P. HOLM, MD

About 150 years ago, one in four fighting in the Civil War died, amounting to some 620,000 deaths. Two-thirds were due to disease, not injury, and a full half of non-traumatic deaths were from diarrheal illness, unknowingly due to contaminated water. The remaining non-traumatic deaths were from respiratory illness, particularly lethal because 90% of the soldiers were weakened by chronic diarrhea and malnutrition.

That said, 1/3 of the deaths that came from injury would have

been worse, had it not been for the surgeons that became experienced during the Civil War. There had been radical improvements in weaponry at the time with new rapid-fire rifled muskets, which caused cone-shaped bullets to spiral, giving impressive accuracy at a 300-500-yard range. In the face of such deadly weapons, smart soldiers hid behind trees, rocks, earth-works, but too often had exposed legs or arms. It's no surprise limb injuries accounted for 70% of all wounds. These bullets tore enormous easily infected wounds with shattered

bones, pieces of clothing, and non-sterile skin pulled into the wounds.

Most trauma surgery had to be performed during the first 24 hours after injury in open air field tents. The value of sterility was not yet realized, and there was no understanding of clean instruments, clean wounds, or even clean hands. The world would have to wait ten more years before Joseph Lister popularized sterile surgical technique, and before the value of clean water was understood.

One war reporter wrote: "They would work for days without washing. As he waited for the next man to be placed on the table, the

surgeon would stand back... holding his knife in his boot or even in his teeth." Another description: "The surgeons and their assistants, stripped to the waist and bespattered with blood... cut and sawed away with frightful rapidity, throwing the mangled limbs on a pile nearby as soon as removed." Without sterile technique to repair a wound, amputation actually provided a better chance of survival.

Although there was no sterility, anesthesia was available during the Civil War. Ether had been discovered in the 1840s, and by 1861 chloroform became popular by field surgeons because it was less

flammable, less nauseating, and more portable. Records indicate that during the entire war, general anesthesia was given 80,000 times with only 43 recorded anesthesia deaths. Screams coming from surgical tents were not from anesthetized patients, but from wounded soldiers about to have surgery.

Then, as the war ended, some 15,000 experienced surgeons returned to their home communities all over the US. Who would have thought that from the horrors of war, lifesaving knowledge of anesthesia and surgery would spread throughout this country?



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