

# A Short History of Goodland

In the lush forests of Southeastern Oklahoma, there is an area the Choctaws named "*Yakni Achukma*" or "*Good Land*" because of its numerous springs, abundant timber and fertile soil. In this place called "*Good Land*," the oldest agency in the state still stands today. As early as 1835, Cyrus Kingsbury, known as the "*apostle to the Choctaws*," made regular visits to the area to preach and minister to the Choctaws.

In 1848, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Presbyterian and congregational organization, recognized the need for a permanent missionary to Good Land and sent Mr. and Mrs. John Lathrop to this mission station. John Lathrop built the first structure, a two-room log manse, for his wife and him. After one year of service, Mr. and Mrs. Lathrop requested reassignment.

In fall of 1850, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Porter Stark were appointed by the same mission board to continue the mission work. Prior to accepting the appointment to Good Land Mission, Mr. Stark served as superintendent of Old Spencer Academy for Indians. Mr. and Mrs. Stark made their home in the manse built by John Lathrop. Mrs. Stark wasted no time in beginning to teach the Native American children in the area how to read and write. The first "school" met in a side room of their manse.

In 1852, Oliver Porter Stark, with the help from Henry L. Gooding and other Choctaw neighbors, built the structure that served the community as both church and school for 42 years. Although moved several feet from the original location in 1894, the same church, renovated many times and enlarged, stands on the Goodland campus today. The original church bell given by The Reverend John P. Turnbull is a constant reminder of the work accomplished by these early pioneers — with meager resources. Oliver Porter Stark also dug the first well, which was still being used in 1932 when it was sealed and covered by the present concrete steps of the old Goodland High School.

In an early report written in 1860 to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, The Reverend Oliver Porter Stark wrote the name "Good Land" as one word. Since that time, the church and home have retained the one word spelling of "Goodland."

Goodland School originated as a primary day school; and, because children were often needed to help in the fields, average attendance for the first few years was about twenty. From the beginning, the Native American families in the area were interested in the school. Many families moved close by in order that their children might attend and that the old and young might worship there. The local church members opened their doors to orphan children in order for them to attend the school. The church and school grew together.

During the Civil War, two Choctaw regiments pitched their tents on the campus around the well that The Reverend O. P. Stark dug. Oliver Porter Stark wrote the mission board to report about the bands of robbers and lawlessness that existed in the area at the time. He requested reassignment and was transferred to Paris, Texas in 1866, where he helped to establish a girl's boarding school and the First Presbyterian Church. This left the Goodland Mission Church without an assigned pastor, but the seeds the former missionaries had planted was strong enough to endure the period of turmoil.

After the Civil War, the Presbyterian Church was divided and disorganized and left the mission without a pastor, teacher or mission board to guide and encourage its work. Apparently, each "*side*," North and South, assumed that the other would pick up the Mission. During this period Native American families and their white friends in the area continued the work begun by the missionaries. The Reverend John P. Turnbull, an ordained Native American Presbyterian Minister, operated the church and school until 1890 when Joseph P. Gibbons was assigned to the Goodland Mission. Finally, in 1894, the Goodland Mission became a special responsibility of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., and the General Assembly's Executive Committee of Home Missions.

In 1894, the church was repaired and the first dormitory was built for what eventually became the Goodland Indian Orphanage. During preceding years, Christian families of the Goodland community had begun to take orphans into their homes in order that they might attend the Goodland School. The dormitory was built from hand-hewn logs to house sixteen Native American boys on Goodland Mission property. It was a crude building — one large room with a sleeping loft overhead and a kitchen/dining room added on one side. A large front porch provided extra living space. Supplies for the orphans were donated from Indian families who lived nearby.

This was the humble beginning of the Goodland Indian Orphanage. In those days, Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians were predominant in the region.

In 1901, the first superintendent assigned to the school and home was a Choctaw man by the name of Silas L. Bacon, who himself had been orphaned as a child and taken in by a family near the mission school. For twenty years The Reverend Bacon served as Superintendent of the School, and during his administration four dormitories and a bathhouse were built. Several Native American families deeded land to the institution during those years, and by 1920 the school owned a total of 75 acres. Even more important, was the impression left on the school by The Reverend Bacon himself, a humble and deeply religious man.

Financial problems were acute — both to build needed structures and to feed the children. Silas Bacon had to plead with the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee and with Christian friends of the Home for funds. In a speech at the school, The Reverend Bacon admitted that, while he could never beg for himself, he did not mind humbling himself to beg on behalf of the children in his care. Concluding his speech he said, *"My heart makes me know that God is in this work. We got to do all we can. And I notice no child has starved. None has frozen in our school, even if times have been so hard most of the time."* The Reverend Silas Bacon made a lasting impression on the community with his selfless love for children.

In 1913, oversight of the school passed from the Executive Committee of Home Missions to the Indian Presbytery. In July 1923, control was transferred to the Synod of Oklahoma (later to become the Synod of Arkansas and Oklahoma, and now the Synod of the Sun).

In 1921, The Reverend Silas L. Bacon succumbed to tuberculosis, and soon died. He is buried in the Goodland Cemetery near another early pioneer of Southeastern Oklahoma, the first Governor of the Choctaw Nation, Basil Leflore.

## **Goodland Indian Orphanage**

After the death of The Reverend Bacon, Samuel Bailey Spring was made Superintendent of Goodland Indian Orphanage — a position he held until his death nine years later, April 17, 1930. He was one-fourth Choctaw and he was highly educated. In spite of his advantages, he cared very deeply for young people. When given the choice of Principle Chief of the Choctaws or Superintendent of Goodland Indian Orphanage, he chose the latter. One of his former students once wrote of him: *"We always felt free to talk over any question with him. Not once did he turn a child away, saying, 'I'm too busy to see you now.' And always we left those meetings with our problems solved, with something to work on, some word of encouragement, and some praise."* The 1929 financial crash of the Great Depression had serious repercussions in Oklahoma. In Goodland's favor was the fact that it was the only home for Native American orphans maintained by the Presbyterian Church U.S., but it had a crushing debt of over \$30,000. The Synod, although in a financial pinch of its own, voted in faith, to continue the Home. The Church called The Reverend E. D. Miller to supervise the Home during this time of crisis. Through prayer and the help of many friends, he paid the outstanding debt within six years. He repaired and painted the older buildings, fireproofed the roofs, seeded the campus with grass, planted gardens and orchards, and built poultry flock and a dairy herd. He laid out gravel drives and concrete walks and added a tennis court and football field. Miller jokingly referred to his method of administration as a *"Divine-Human Partnership."*

Another milestone occurred in 1930, when the Goodland public school consolidated with the Home's own school on campus. The gym and auditorium, constructed by Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers, became a community center for the neighborhood. From that point on, the Goodland Mission was indeed a boarding home with schooling on campus.

Over the years, gifts were especially important to the Goodland Home. In 1934, Daniel Wade, a colorful Choctaw, gave funds to construct an infirmary. The result, the home acquired a stately stone structure, Wade Hall.

By 1940, the Home owned 763 acres of land, 390 of which comprise the campus. Normal wear and tear took their toll on the old dormitories, so smaller and safer cottages were built in the 1960's. During the same time period, the original church was restored and dedicated to The Reverend Oliver Porter Stark, leader of the original Mission through the 1850's.

### **Goodland Presbyterian Children's Home, Inc.**

In the 1960's, Civil Rights legislation and legislation within the Church mandated that children of all races, creeds and colors be welcomed to the Home. The High School was closed by the state in 1962 and students then attended local high schools and vocational schools in the surrounding communities. The elementary school (first through eighth grade) continued to be operated by the state for all children in the district. At that point in time, Goodland ceased to function as a boarding school and could no longer exist solely for Native American young people. Children of all ages, from broken homes, in need of adult supervision, or with other serious problems were welcomed to Goodland by its staff.

In 1981, the Board of Trustees began evaluating the program and services offered by the home in light of societal changes. The Board's realization that the Home had to move toward a more economically feasible program led to its decision to serve only boys at Goodland. It was a hard decision to make. National statistics indicated 94% of children-at-risk were males. In June of 1981, the final decision of the board was to establish a program directed at the needs of boys from dysfunctional families. The mission was to provide a structured learning environment that nurtured and motivated boys to excel by improving their self-image and providing a structured guidance program.

### **Goodland Academy**

Today, Goodland provides a home for boys, ranging in age from 6-13 upon enrollment, who are unable to live at home for many different reasons. Most of our children come from single parent families and are classified as disadvantaged and/or neglected – most of which are ADD, ADHD, ODD or Bipolar young boys. Eight young men live in each of three cottages, under the nurture and guidance of Christian couples. The couples live in comfortable quarters within the cottage and act as mother and father for all eight boys. All residential students participate in work programs on campus, designed to teach them good work ethics; and, to prepare them for employment in today's competitive society.

The most current change at Goodland happened in 2006 when the board decided to expand our services to children by adding an individualized educational program component. This resulted from the epidemic proportion of students with special needs and the fact the rural community could not adequately and effectively address those needs. The decision by the board returned us to our roots and our original mission, which was to provide the best education to those with the greatest need. Goodland again became a holistic program with control of the entire educational process of each child. The results have been phenomenal – children who were once failing every subject are today making As and Bs in every subject. Since our educational program is self-paced, there is less pressure from peers and instructors, which allows them to learn much more rapidly. This expansion of the ministry was heralded by a return to an old familiar name – we began doing business as Goodland Academy. The moral and self-image of the boys improved dramatically as a result of these changes.

Goodland Academy is a member of the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Schools, the National Coalition for Residential Education and accredited by the National Association of Private Schools. Goodland continues to improve services to children, always seeking better ways to meet the needs of children. As a unique and diverse Presbyterian ministry, we are transformational, inclusive and ecumenical and as one head of a national organization noted, a prototype for other organizations that will soon follow in our path.

Professionally trained staff and volunteers provide spiritual guidance through daily devotional, weekly Bible study, regular church attendance and youth-related activities. Some boys come to Goodland for a predetermined period of time, but most will remain until they graduate from high school. Goodland becomes their substitute family. Our program is designed to promote a family atmosphere; a loving couple acting as parents; pets, family activities and outings; daily chores, family-style dining and normal social interaction with a parental figure. Each member of the staff plays an important role in this family-oriented environment and staff members are carefully selected to provide the best possible role model. Goodland sponsors and participates in other youth service activities in an effort to serve the needs of all children. The home has chartered the only Scouting program in Choctaw County, which presently has a total membership of 30 boys. Boys from the Home participate in youth council, synod workshop, and church youth-related activities. Goodland also welcomes adult and youth workgroups from churches and civic organizations. These workgroups not only keep our operating costs down by providing maintenance on our buildings, but they also connect our students to a larger support group.

### **The Future of Goodland**

As we look with a vision to the future for more facilities to serve more children, we do this entirely by faith in God. In truth, it is this practical faith that has marked the history of Goodland from the very beginning. Goodland exists today because God has nurtured and sustained it. Through the Civil War, the Depression and World Wars, Goodland has been here serving the needs of children. As we move forward into the future with plans for an expanded campus for over 128 residential students, we do it with vision, hope and above all faith in God's leadership and guidance.

Goodland is the last remaining mission begun by the early missionaries that came with the Choctaws to Indian Territory over 160 years ago. It has ministered to literally thousands of children over the years, which have in turn carried on the teachings to another generation. Today, former students are teaching in schools and universities, they hold responsible positions in large corporations, and occupy positions of authority in the Native American tribes. Goodland has been an influential ministry in the lives of children since the beginning in a two-room log manse. Still, Goodland's primary concern remains the same — to minister to the needs of today's children — just as the New Testament teaches in James 1:27 . . . . *"the greatest expression of our faith and devotion to God is to provide for the needs of destitute children and widows."*