

Getting to Know the Igorots – Fighting Back

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It was in the latter part of the 19th century that the American missionaries found ways to make friends with the Igorots in the mountains, a friendship that was born from mutual respect and admiration. And it was around that time too when they discovered what colonial powers all over the world discovered, that there is no respect for the indigenous people. It was no different in the Philippines. The lowlanders had conveniently forgotten that they too were head hunters at one time. So the Igorots were accused of being

head hunters, savages, that they had tails, that they were ignorant and so forth.

What could be done? The missionaries in Sagada, Mountain Province, decided to set up a school. St. Mary's School, Sagada, was founded by American missionary Rev. Fr. John Staunton in 1904, which was then referred to as a mission school. By 1907, there were 17 pupils. The first school building of the Mission of St. Mary the Virgin in Sagada was completed in 1912. It was a two-and-a-half story building 36 x 90 ft with siding and roof of pine shingles. The school was intended to educate kids from late grade school (grade seven) to the end of high school. The school at the time of its founding also had dormitories to house kids who came from outside Sagada.



This was a time of prosperity for Sagada and St Mary's. Many highly educated Americans had flocked to the region to learn the local customs and mythologies. St Mary's had no shortage of amazing educational talent to draw from. Additionally, the new teachers were well connected so they were able to have books, publications and materials sent to them regularly from the States. Often St Mary's was better equipped than the schools in the lowlands. St Mary's

would operate as a church school so it didn't just teach the three "R"s, it also taught Christian principles and practices. And in founding the school the primary mission was to be to show the rest of the country that Igorots were actually at least as smart as kids anywhere else in the nation.



The only major issue was that the missionaries could not afford to administer the school by themselves, they needed funding so it was set up as a private school complete with tuition.



At the time tuition was very expensive, typically about seven thousand pesos a year at a time when most of the population hadn't yet begun to understand money. But, interestingly, this didn't pose a serious problem. At the time selling a full grown pig in the market got you seven thousand pesos so each family simply raised a pig each year for each child.

The mission was an amazing success. Within a very short time St Mary's Scholars were in the top ten scholars in the nation. A little later too, St Mary's itself became among the top ten

schools in the nation. Today those who have become really effective leaders in their fields have inevitably been St Mary's graduates. To the shock of the entire Philippines those "savages" were actually performing better academically than their own kids and over time they were getting the better jobs too. It was a valuable lesson for the lowlanders and a point of pride among the Igorots and the school.

Unfortunately after many decades of operations by the mid nineties the church wanted to get out of the school business and so it gradually pulled away from St Mary's. That change caused the school to fall on hard times. To make matters worse the



Alumni

Philippine government was finally funding grade schools and high schools so it was no longer necessary to scrimp and save to send your kids to St Mary's even though that was still the better school. Before long the school was in serious difficulty financially.

This led to some very turbulent years in which it was no longer certain that it would survive. But the alumni are very strong and the school was able to attract many Friends of St Mary's too. This led to the school finally

becoming independent of the church and incorporating as an independent entity.

Today the school is slowly returning to its former glory. It has a web site <http://smssagada.org/> and encourages people all over the world to become Friends of St Mary's. It also has a publication (the Postboy) which can be found at <http://sagada.org/postboy/>. Go check it out. If you think its mission is good perhaps become a friend of the school.

