

[Page 64 - From a Wonderful New Biography Called Father Jimmy: Father Jimmy Thompkins in Reserve Mines](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 73](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1998/6/1

side the parish came to read and borrow books. The collection numbered around 2,000 volumes, with about a tenth of them in circulation each week. Father Jimmy suggested that people read Marx • and his own particular favourite, J.P. Warbasse's Cooperative Democracy. He also recommended Up from Slavery by Booker T. Washington, the Black American educator, to inspire the oppressed miners....

Father Jimmy had an eclectic view of the sort of literature people needed to make sense of the world: "You can get books on any imaginable topic... Books create a centre of interest, study and discussion. The people can't do this job of self-help unless they are stimulated. They've got to have the information, too, and the motives. They've got to want to be something." He also recognized that people needed a guide in the vast world of books he was acquiring: "A library is not only books. A library is books plus a trained librarian." WITH INCREASED DEMANDS on the library in Reserve Mines, Father Jimmy cast around for a librarian to run it. The Sisters of Charity... sent Sister Francis Dolores, who had just taken a degree in Librarianship. "Much against my will and total dismay in fact, I was told I was lent out to a man named Dr. Jimmy Tompkins who lived in Reserve • wherever that was." Sister Francis Dolores thought the town would be "the extreme of desolation." She arrived in Reserve in September, 1940. "I [had] thought I was going to be a professor [at Mount Saint Vincent University] and here I was being shoved off to the backwoods, wherever the backwoods was. And I got down there and within a year I'm saying to myself, 'This is what I was looking for all my life.' Stimulation. Exciting opportunity for growth, a oneness with a friend, people who are there waiting to be drawn out, young people. And the year went by and went into ten • and the ten years went. I can't believe I spent a decade there.... I wasn't there a month and it was like chemistry. Dr. Jimmy and I were just merging into each other's philosophy and I was clicking. I knew I was in a place where I was going to live and grow.... "And we had marvelous little discussion groups that he would sit in on...and it was during the war years and we had a lot of talk about [that] and we had all the war books...when they came out from those war correspondents. And the boys were reading them and discussing them. And he'd come in and listen and he was putting his foot on the chair, you know, listening. He was tremendously impressed with it.... "So very often we'd have some celebrity...the Deputy Minister of the Department of Agriculture in Washington would come up with his team. The Lorimers • they were Russian experts. People like that would come and he'd ask them to stay overnight. And they'd get those young people over talking and people would be just entranced listening to those young people talking about books they had read. And even the kids, he'd get the kids to say, 'What book did you read this week?'... The library had spoken books on records and children would sit around the phonograph listening to Dickens and Browning. Father Jimmy wanted beautiful, illustrated books for children to excite them and hook them on reading. Sister Francis Dolores: "And then he'd get them to

talk about it afterwards. We put in an awful lot of garden books...and everybody began to read gardens." He encouraged a group of miners to acquire some land and start farming it. Mary Laben remembered: "The mines were only working two days a week and he wanted people to be able to feed themselves. He got affiliated with the Agricultural College in Tmro. He got an ag.? representa? tive sent in here, in fact he got two of them. One was Lynton Martin and the other was Fred Proudfoot. They went around to meetings. Everybody started from scratch. They started plough- ' ing the land. They rented a tractor first and eventually they bought it." This gardens project prospered. Nearly seventy-five fami? lies participated, encouraged by Father Leo Sears who came as You look back at it and wonder who did it! "It was friendly. People visited and talked of their troubles. i If you could help you were doing it, you know." . The miners and their wives could do little about the major forces in the company-dominated community. But they could start taking actions to better their lives, urged on by their priests.... ' FATHER JIMMY KEPT UP THE PRESSURE to initiate a sys- = tem of regional libraries. He spoke to school trustees: "A library is not an invention to kill time, but is a place to get information on subjects in which we are interested.... There are clever and vital people in every community and it is ex- l tremely important that such people be intellectually fed, because it means everything to the community...." And again: "I want regional libraries because I want the people to be able to know a fool when they see one...." Tompkins pushed all the time, everywhere. Even at confes? sion. It is said that he would skirt the sins and ask his parishion- = ers what was the last book they had read. He had once said: ; "The man who has not read a book in the past year is not fit to walk the streets of a democracy." l Out of it all, Mary Laben said that ordinary people began to study and understand their world.... The credit union in Reserve flourished. Under Father Jim-] my's prodding a group of miners opened their own cooperative j store in 1937. Word of the priest's achievements spread across North America. Reserve Mines became an important stop on tours organized by American social activists and reformers. j Already at the Top of Nova Scotia's BESTSELLER LIST! This book is an excellent biography with copious quotes and inter? views with those who knew and worked with Father Jimmy." • Jim Mor? row in the Victoria Standard "A valuable addition to the growing body of literature on the Antigon? ish Movement. People might even become convinced, again, that they could do a better job than governments." • Senator Dr. Peggy Butts in the Catholic New Times AUTHORS of Fattier Jimmy Jim Lotz is a respected community development writer and animator; Michael R. Welton is the Dr- 1 rector of Adult ! Education at Mount Saint Vincent Univer- 'H'iK "] sity in Halifax, Father Jimmy j'B'S n Nova Scotia. 176 pages • 25 photos \$14.95 SUBSCRIBE TO CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE • a Cape Breton Tradition! 4-ISSUE SUBSCRIPTION in Canada l outside Canada \$19.00 l \$24.00 Jiv'sa'Tcr; INTO Our 26th YEAR! Subscribe, Renew, & Subscribe FOR Friends Cape Breton's MAGAZINE WRECK COVE - NOVA SCOTIA A Future for the Past 64