Father Desmet And the Flathead Indians

George Bousliman
Carroll College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.carroll.edu/history_theses

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Bousliman, George, "Father Desmet And the Flathead Indians" (1962). History Undergraduate Theses. 83.
https://scholars.carroll.edu/history_theses/83

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Carroll Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of Carroll Scholars. For more information, please contact tkratz@carroll.edu.
FATHER DESMET AND THE FLATHEAD INDIANS

GEORGE L. BOUSLIMAN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT
OF CARROLL COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR HONORS AND THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE

CARROLL COLLEGE
HELENA, MONTANA
JUNE, 1962
THIS THESIS HAS BEEN APPROVED
FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF
HISTORY

by Thomas A. Clines

Date June 12, 1962
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this thesis I am especially thankful for the valuable time and advice given me by Mr. Thomas A. Clinch, chairman of the History Department at Carroll College.

I am also indebted to Father White and the staff at the Carroll College library for their help.

Finally I wish to thank Miss Joan Hagestad for typing this final draft.

George L. Bousliman
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ................................................................. iii

**Chapter**

I. The Indians Search for a Priest ........................................... 1

II. Desmet's First Trip to the Mountains ................................. 8

III. The Establishment of St. Mary's Mission ............................ 14

IV. The Decline of St. Mary's and Its Abandonment .................. 25

V. Father Desmet and Other Indian Tribes .............................. 27

VI. Conclusion ............................................................................. 29

**Bibliography** .......................................................................... 30
Chapter I

The Indians Search for a Priest

Father Peter J. DeSmet, S. J. has oftentimes been called the "Apostle of the Rocky Mountains." Perhaps an even more appropriate title would be "Montana's Apostle," for in all the huge Rocky Mountain region, Father DeSmet was more at home in Montana and, to be even more specific, with the Flathead Indian tribe of western Montana than with any other tribe.

In this thesis an attempt will be made to present the missionary work of Father DeSmet with his beloved Indians. But in order to do this it first must be shown how the Indians became interested in Catholicism and how they attempted to obtain the services of a Catholic priest. Such will be the purpose of the first part of this thesis.

Sometime between the years 1812 and 1820, a group of Iroquois Indians from the mission near Sault, St. Louis along the St. Lawrence journeyed to the Rocky Mountains.¹ What their purpose was in this seemingly reckless wandering is not known. What is important is the fact that these Indians had been in contact with Jesuit priests. The leader of the band was Ignatius or Ignace La Mousse, better known as Big Ignace or Old Ignace to distinguish him from another Iroquois, Young Ignace. Old Ignace, as I will call him, was a baptized Catholic and was married by Jesuit priests.²

Once having arrived in the Flathead country, the small group of Iroquois was so cordially received that they decided to stop their

¹Lawrence B. Palladino, S. J., Indian and White in the Northwest. (Baltimore, 1891), 9.
wandering and live with the Flatheads. Before long they became members of
the Flathead, sometimes called Selish, tribe and intermarried. Soon Old
Ignace was teaching the Flatheads Catholic prayers and explaining the faith
to the attentive Indians. The Indians were taught the Lord's prayer, the
Sign of the Cross and other rudiments of the Catholic faith. The Indians
kept Sunday holy, baptized the nearly dead and erected a cross over the
graves of the dead. The Flatheads were keenly interested in the Catholic
religion and desired a Blackrobe to teach them how to get to heaven. 3

The Pend d' Oreilles and Nez Perce, friendly neighboring tribes, also
desired Catholic priests. At the time the nearest Catholic priests were
in Quebec and Montreal, more than four thousand miles away. Sometime before
1831, however, it was learned that Catholic priests were in Missouri. Thus
Old Ignace assembled the Indians for a tribal council, where it was decided
that a group would go to St. Louis in hopes of obtaining a missionary.
Four volunteers left the main band in 1831 for a three thousand mile trip
across mountains, deserts, rivers, and even more dangerous, Sioux and Crow
country, both tribes being deadly enemies of the Flathead and Nez Perce.
It is not known definitely whether these four were of the Nez Perce or
Flathead tribe. 4

In any event the four Indians probably travelled to St. Louis with
a caravan of fur traders. Once in St. Louis, around the first of October,
the Indians went at once to a Catholic Church, but the tragedy lies in the

3Palladino, op. cit., 10.
4Laveille, op. cit., 99.
fact that no one could understand their language. While in St. Louis the Indians visited General Clark who noticed their flat-heads. The tribe from the Bitter Root Valley, while called Flatheads were subject to a misnomer because they did not practice flattening the head. Evidence indicates that the first group was from the Nez Perce tribe because they did flatten heads to some extent. Nonetheless in a strange surrounding and tired from their journey two of the Indians died within a few days and the other two left to return home. The two who died were buried in the old Catholic cathedral in St. Louis.5

The failure of the first Indian mission to obtain a Catholic priest is significant because it prompted the advent of Protestant missionaries in the Oregon country. In a letter commonly known as the Disoway letter, written by G. P. Disoway and published in the Christian Advocate of New York in February of 1833, a fervent appeal was made to the Protestant religious world to send missionaries to the savages of the Oregon country. The first attempt was made by the Methodists, headed by Jason and Daniel Lee, along with three laymen. However, the Protestant stay was short-lived, as the Flatheads showed no desire to make use of their services. The Indians wanted a missionary with a long black robe, crucifix, one who did not marry and said the Great Prayer (the Mass). The Protestants were the very antithesis of this description, and so they moved on to establish a mission in Oregon along the Willamette River.

5Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, Father DeSmet's Life and Travels Among the North American Indians. (New York, 1905), 1, 21-23.
For the sake of the Flatheads it was probably a blessing that the Protestants were not wanted by them because the subsequent reasons given by Lee and Frost in Ten Years in Oregon, page 127, would probably have been detrimental to any existing spirit of Christianity in the hearts of the Indians.

Subsequent inquiries had furnished reasons to the missionaries that could not justify any attempt to commence the mission among them. First, the means of subsistence in a region so remote and of access were, to say the least, very difficult. Second, the smallness of their number. Third, the vicinity to the Blackfeet, as well as the white man's enemies as theirs, and who would fall upon the abettors of their foes with signal revenge. Fourth, a larger field of usefulness was contemplated as the object of the mission than the benefiting of a single tribe, etc.

The Protestants were not to give up so easily. In the following year, 1835, Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman, were sent to Oregon to investigate the possibility of establishing a mission. Upon learning that missionaries were coming, Insula, the Little Chief and Great Warrior, along with other members of the Flathead tribe went to the Green River rendezvous area, and there they were met with disappointment, as the missionaries were not Black Robes, but Parker and Whitman. Learning that the men were not Catholic priests the Flatheads would have nothing to do with the men.

In 1836 Dr. Whitman returned, with a number of assistants, still determined to establish a mission among the Flatheads. The Nez Perce met the party, but the Flatheads remained conspicuously absent. Convinced that their attempts at setting up a mission in Flathead country would be abortive, this group of Protestant missionaries moved on to the upper Columbia River.

---

A final attempt to make Protestant Christians out of the Indians was made by Mr. W. H. Gray of the Presbyterian Church. His journey was also purposeless, as a group of Flatheads were, at the same time, heading for St. Louis to obtain the services of a Catholic priest. 7

In 1835 the Flatheads had good cause to be disappointed after having had contact with the Protestants. But the religious fervor of the Indians grew even stronger as they decided to send another expedition to secure a Catholic missionary. This time Old Ignace and his two sons Francis and Charles made the journey to St. Louis and after having been promised missionaries as soon as possible by Bishop Rosati, Ignace returned home with his sons. 8

Time passed slowly for the anxious Indians, until 1837 when a third group was sent out. Old Ignace headed the delegation, which also consisted of three Flatheads and one Nez Perce. Upon reaching Fort Laramie, they were joined by a number of white men, one of whom was W. H. Gray, the Protestant missionary, who was returning from a fruitless missionary attempt to Christianize the Indians. At Ash Hollow they encountered a band of hostile Sioux. With no intention of harming the white men, the Sioux ordered them aside. Being dressed in white man's clothing, Old Ignace, the seed of Catholicism for the Flathead tribe, could have joined the whites in safety, but instead

7Ibid., 15-18.

he chose to remain with his tribe and as a result was massacred alongside his fellow Indians.\textsuperscript{9}

This massacre at Ash Hollow is somewhat indicative of the fighting ability of the Flatheads. In the skirmish the five brave warriors withstood the attack long enough to kill some fifteen of their enemy before they themselves perished.\textsuperscript{10}

Undaunted by three unsuccessful expeditions and with the loss of a number of lives, the Flatheads in the summer of 1839, made their fourth and final trip in search of a Catholic priest. In a tribal council Young Ignace and Pierre Gaucher volunteered to travel alone. Passing by Council Bluffs at the Pottowatamie mission of St. Joseph's they met Father DeSmet who by a strange coincidence was destined to be the realization of their long-lived desires for a Catholic priest.\textsuperscript{11}

Once in St. Louis, the two young Flatheads were promised by Bishop Rosati that this time their trip would not be in vain. The two, who spoke French, went to confession and communion and were confirmed by Bishop Rosati.\textsuperscript{12}

On October 20, 1839, the two left St. Louis, assured that a priest would be sent to the Rocky Mountains the following spring. Pierre Gaucher journeyed home alone to bring the good news to the tribe while Young Ignace waited at Westport to return with the promised priest.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 247-248.
\textsuperscript{10}Palladino, \textit{op. cit.}, 20.
\textsuperscript{11}Laveille, \textit{op. cit.}, 102.
\textsuperscript{12}Palladino, \textit{op. cit.}, 22.
\textsuperscript{13}Garraghan, \textit{op. cit.}, II, 248.
The stage was now set for Father DeSmet's historic trip to the Rockies and to his beloved people to be, the Flathead Indians.
Chapter II

DeSmet's First Trip to the Mountains

Father DeSmet was born in Termonde, a small town in Belgium on January 31, 1801, one of twenty two children of Joost DeSmet, a wealthy shipbuilder. As a youth he entered the Society of Jesus and left for Europe to work in America. In 1835 the Bishops of the United States entrusted the Indians to the Jesuits. The following year Father DeSmet was sent to Kansas to start a mission among the Pottowatamie Indians.

Father DeSmet had often dreamed of a mission which could be completely isolated from civilization and all of its vices. With knowledge of the Rocky Mountains and the seemingly impregnable home of the Flatheads, combined with their obvious religious fervor Father DeSmet was convinced that he should be the one to fulfill the desire of the Flathead Indians for a Catholic priest.

His superiors at first were reluctant to send Father DeSmet on his way because of ill health, but they finally consented. DeSmet's first journey was solely for the purpose of investigating the Flathead area in order to learn whether or not a mission would be justified. What's more Father DeSmet had no grandiose ideas and realized the trip would be a dangerous undertaking. Writing to his brother he said, "But God, in whom I put my trust, will, I hope, guide me, for it is for His greater glory that I undertake it. The salvation of the whole nation is at stake."  


16 Laveille, op. cit., 103.
On March 27, 1840, with Young Ignace serving as a guide, Father DeSmet set out alone, as his superiors were financially unable to supply him with an assistant. The two travelled alone until they reached Westport, Missouri, where they were able to join a caravan of the American Fur Company heading west on April 30, of the same year. Soon DeSmet took ill and was forced to be carried in a cart for sometime. The group crossed desert and plains until they finally reached Green River, a rendezvous area for trappers and Indians. Here DeSmet was met by a group of Flathead warriors, sent ahead of the main band by their chief.\footnote{Ibid., 103-105.}

Here, at the Green River rendezvous area, Father DeSmet said Mass on Sunday, July 5, 1840. This was the first Mass said in the Rocky Mountains.\footnote{Ibid., 107.} The congregation was composed of Indians, whites, trappers, hunters, and fur traders. One of this motley crew was a Fleming, John Baptiste de Velder, who would remain with Father DeSmet for the remainder of his trip. After Mass, the spot was called "The Prairie of the Mass" by the Indians.\footnote{Palladino, op. cit., 25.}

The following day Father DeSmet left his companions and with the Flatheads began the trek toward the main body of Indians which took them eight days. When they arrived at Pierre's Hole they were met by some sixteen hundred Indians, of the Flathead, Nez Perce, Pend d'Oreilles and Kalispell tribes, all of whom had travelled some eight hundred miles to greet the priest. Immediately DeSmet met the chief, The Big Face. The
Flathead chief was willing to cede his authority to Father DeSmet, probably thinking of him as a great warrior who would lead his people to victories over their enemies, but DeSmet refused because his purpose was the salvation of souls. Anxious to begin his missionary work Father DeSmet led some two thousand Indians in prayers that night.  

On July 23, 1840, the entire group moved on to Henry's Lake via Henry's Fork of the Snake River. Here DeSmet climbed a mountain and on a stone engraved the following inscription, "Sanctus Ignatius Patronus Montium, die 23 Julie, 1840." The group travelled on until they reached Red Rock Lake, in the present day state of Montana.

Sometime around the end of July DeSmet and his companions found themselves at the Three Forks of the Missouri River. Since their rendezvous Father DeSmet had been leading the Indians in prayer and instructing them, but it was on Jefferson Island, on the banks of the Beaverhead-Jefferson River near the Three Forks of the Missouri River where Christianity was first preached in Montana. Now, after having been with the Indians for two months, preparing several hundred for baptism and instructing another thousand Father DeSmet decided to begin his journey home.

Convinced that a permanent mission was justified, Father DeSmet now made plans for his return to his superiors, even though he had not actually visited the traditional homelands of the Flatheads which was across the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\text{Ibid.}, 25-26.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{Ibid.}, 26.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{22}}\text{Laveille, op. cit., lll.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}}\text{Palladino, op. cit., 26- 27.}\]
continental divide in the Bitter Root Valley.24

Father DeSmet left the Gallatin Valley on August 27, 1840.25 As a companion he had with him John Baptiste de Velder, who had joined him at the Green River rendezvous area. When he decided to leave, the Flatheads presented him with seventeen of their best warriors to escort him safely through Blackfeet and Crow country, the two tribes most feared and plagued by the Flatheads. The party travelled through Crow country, as far as Fort Alexander, and before they entered the land of the dreaded Blackfoot DeSmet sent his escort of Flatheads home for fear they would be massacred.26

While travelling through Blackfoot territory Father DeSmet and his companions were stopped by a band of that infamous tribe. At first the warriors were suspicious until one of DeSmet's friends told them that he, DeSmet, was a Black Robe, "The man who speaks to the Great Spirit." As soon as these words were spoken the temperament of the Blackfeet changed immediately and the priest was invited to join the Indians in a meal. After the meal was finished, DeSmet was asked to sit on a buffalo robe and so he did. Immediately twelve Indians then picked him up and carted him off to the village as if he were a triumphant warrior returning home from a gallant victory. All the short while he was with the Blackfeet DeSmet was treated like royalty.27

This event is significant because it greatly aroused the interest of Father DeSmet who thereafter sought to convert the Blackfoot tribe. Later,

24 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit., I, 28.
26 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit., I, 34-35.
27 Palladino, op. cit., 28.
when he joined the Flatheads once again, he announced his plans, but they were not appreciated by the Flatheads, who were bitter foes of the plains tribe. This incident and DeSmet's attempt at first converting the Blackfeet and then restoring peace between the two tribes is probably one factor which eventually led to the distrust of the Catholic priests on the part of the Flathead Indians.

While with the same tribe of Indians called the Sioux-Blackfeet by J. L. Considine, author of "Cross in the Rockies," which appeared in the August issue of the Extension, DeSmet was the central figure in another noteworthy incident. One night asleep in the camp of this hostile tribe the priest was awakened by the chief who came into his tent with a torch and knife. The Indian asked the priest if he was afraid. Taking the hand of the chief Father DeSmet placed it on his breast and replied, "See if my heart beats more rapidly than usual, why should I be afraid? I am as safe in your tent as I would be in my father's house." Realizing that the missionary was no coward the Indian left and permitted Father DeSmet to instruct his son.

Now travelling alone, DeSmet and De Velder finally reached Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone. There Father DeSmet baptized a number of half-breed children and on September 23, 1840 they set out once again.

The men journeyed to the camp of the Mandan Indians, to Forts Clarke, Pierre and Vermillion. From there the priest took a canoe along the Missouri to Council Bluffs and finally arrived in St. Louis on New Years Eve. Once in St. Louis after having told his companions of the religious


character of the Flathead and other Indian tribes, all of his fellow Jesuit priests were anxious to accompany him the following year to reap the harvest of Christianity which had been seeded by the pioneer priest, Father DeSmet.  

30 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit., I, 115-118.
Chapter III
The Establishment of St. Mary's Mission

Father DeSmet was now prepared to embark on his evangelical labors; but one thing stood in his way and that was a lack of money. His superiors could not even furnish half the needed amount which the expedition would require. The only alternative for the worldly Jesuit was to raise the money, and he did just that. Travelling to New Orleans and Philadelphia, among other places in the East, Father DeSmet was able to collect the needed sum of money for the expedition.

Making the trip with Father DeSmet were two other priests, Father Gregory Mengarini, a Roman, and Father Nicholas Point, a Vendean, along with three Lay Brothers, Joseph Specht, from Alsace, and Charles Huet and William Claessens, both Belgians like the Superior of the group, DeSmet. In this respect Palladino makes an interesting remark that, "they were all members of the Society of Jesus and by their diverse nationalities seem to have foreshadowed the cosmopolitan character of the population of the State of Montana." All of the missionaries were skilled in one field or another. Father Mengarini was adept in languages and had a knowledge of medicine. William Claessens was a blacksmith; Charles Huet, a carpenter; Joseph Specht, a tinner and factotum and lastly Father Point, who because of his outstanding missionary zeal, was a tremendous boost to any labor in the name of God.

---

31 Laveille, op. cit., 118.
32 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 256-257.
33 Palladino, op. cit., 29.
34 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 259.
Besides the religious, Father DeSmet also employed three laborers to do the hard labor which would be involved in the construction of the mission.  

The group began their trip on April 24, 1841, from St. Louis and travelled to Westport, Missouri, where on May 10, they joined a caravan of adventurers, many of whom were headed for the gold fields of California.  

The leader of the caravan was Thomas Fitzpatrick, famous scout, "mountain man" and one of the former owners of the then defunct Rocky Mountain Fur Company. At the Kaw River, John Bidwell's party of fifty joined the group, so that the caravan consisted of some seventy people.  

At Fort Hall Father DeSmet and the others met an advance escort of Flatheads who were sent ahead to greet the missionaries. Among those who were sent ahead were Gabriel Prudhomme, a half-breed, Charles and Francis, the two sons of Old Ignace, Young Ignace, young Pelchimo and Simon, the oldest man of the tribe. Simply as an indication of the great desire of the Flatheads to obtain a priest, Young Ignace travelled alone without food or water for four days and nights in order to meet Father De-Smet.  

The missionaries left Fort Hall on August 19, 1841, and went up the Snake River. When they moved into the present state of Montana, they brought with them a wagon drawn by a team of oxen. This was the first  

35 Laveille, op. cit., 121.  
36 Ibid., 120-121.  
37 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 259-260.  
38 Ibid., 262.  
wagon to enter the Treasure state. 40 No longer with the rest of the caravan, the missionaries and Indians crossed the continental divide and moved toward the headwaters of the Beaverhead River where they met the main body of the Flathead tribe on August 30, 1841. 41

Resting for a few days the missionaries then proceeded toward the Bitter Root valley, accompanied by a few lodges of the tribe, as the rest of the nomadic peoples would join them in the fall after their annual hunt. By the Deer Lodge Pass the travelers recrossed the continental divide into the Deer Lodge valley of western Montana and reached the present site of Garrison, at the mouth of the Little Blackfoot River. Father DeSmet then christened the stream St. Ignatius River, which today is sometimes called Hell's Gate. 42

Following this stream, the party passed the present day city of Missoula and finally ended their long journey by travelling twenty eight miles up the Bitter Root valley to a spot midway between the present town of Stevensville and old Fort Owen. This spot was reached on September 24, 1841, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy and was the site of St. Mary's mission among the Flathead Indians, the first Catholic mission in Montana. 43

According to Garraghan's The Jesuits of the Middle United States, St. Mary's was the first Catholic mission for Indians in the entire Pacific northwest. 44

41 Palladino, op. cit., 31.
42 Ibid., 31-32.
43 Ibid., 32.
44 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 264.
The state of Montana in its 1962 highway department map states that St. Mary’s mission was the first permanent white settlement in Montana.\textsuperscript{45}

There were a number of reasons for deciding on this particular place as the seat of the mission. The soil was very rich, the surrounding countryside unparalleled for its beauty, and the home of the Flatheads was a good spot for the mission because of its proximity to many other Indian tribes.\textsuperscript{46}

The mission was certainly situated in a practical location. It was also in a spot chosen beforehand by Divine Providence. After the chapel had been built one of the Indians exclaimed, "Why! this is the very spot on which little Mary said the house of prayer would be built." Years before, while the Indians were camped on the site of the mission Little Mary, an Indian girl about thirteen years old, became ill and died. After she was baptized by one of the Iroquois and before she died she said:

\begin{quote}
Listen to the Black Robes when they come; they have the true prayer; do all they tell you. They will come and on this very spot, where I die, will build the house of prayer.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

Not only was the mission named St. Mary’s, but the entire surrounding countryside, including the river, mountain range and valley were also given the namesake of our Blessed Mother. \textsuperscript{48} St. Mary’s mission was formally inaugurated on Sunday, October 3, 1841, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.\textsuperscript{49}

Once established the Jesuit priests immediately began to Christianize

\textsuperscript{45}State of Montana, 1962 Highway department map.

\textsuperscript{46}Laveille, op. cit., 125.

\textsuperscript{47}Palladino, op. cit., 34-35.

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 32-33.

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., 34.
the Indians. This was their primary purpose as missionaries. In this respect Father DeSmet hoped they could use as a model the eighteenth century Spanish Jesuit mission of Paraguay. In writing to a friend, Father Verhaegen, Father DeSmet listed the following advantages these Jesuits had over most other missionaries:

We have greater resources for obtaining such results than had the Spanish Fathers. Remoteness from corrupt influences; the Indians aversion to other sects; his horror of idolatry; his liking for the white man, and for the Black Robe in particular, whose name for him is synonymous with goodness, learning and piety; the central position of the mission, sufficient land for several settlements, fertile soil, the protection of high mountains; no meddlesome and petty authority conflicting with that of God and those who represent Him upon earth; no tribute to pay but our prayers; such are the advantages our mission enjoys. Furthermore the Indians are convinced that without religion there is no happiness either in this life or in the world to come.50

Letters written by Lieutenant Mullan, builder of the Mullan road, and Issac Stevens, Governor of the Washington Territory, indicate the religious zeal and moral fiber of the Flatheads. Mullan said of the Indians:

Am I among people whom all the world calls savages? I could scarcely believe by eyes. The thought that these men were penetrated with religious sentiments, so profound and beautiful, overwhelmed me with amazement.

I could never say enough of those noble and generous hearts among whom I found myself. They were pious and firm, men of confidence full of probity and penetrated at the same time with a lively and religious faith, to which they remain constant. They never partake of a repast without imploring the blessing of heaven. In the morning when rising and at night, when retiring, they offer their prayers to Almighty God. The tribe of the Flatheads among Indians is the subject of their highest esteem; and all that I witnessed justifies this advantageous opinion.

Governor Stevens also had words of praise for the Flatheads in writing to an Indian agent:

50 Laveille, op. cit., 126-127.
You are already aware of the character of the Flatheads. They are the best Indians of the mountains and the plains — honest, brave, and docile, they only need encouragement to become good citizens — they are Christians, and we are assured that they live up to the Christian code.  

Such was the nature of the men and women Father DeSmet and the other missionaries worked and lived with. Nonetheless not all of their laboring was without difficulty. Especially frustrating was the problem of convincing the men that neither divorce nor polygamy was permissible in a Catholic civilization.

The second purpose for which the Jesuits had established St. Mary's among the Flatheads was to teach them to work as industrious Christians and become self sufficient. The first task was to build a chapel and shelter for the winter. Father Point, the architect of the group, drew plans for the mission and soon after they had arrived work began. In the center of the mission a chapel was to be built and plans were drawn up for the priests house and school, dwellings for the Indians, workshops and stores. Soon all the Flatheads became laborers. Thousands of stakes were cut in the forest and their property was fenced in. That fall the priests' house and farm house were built and after five weeks a temporary church with "pediment, colonnade, balustrade, choir seats, etc.," were erected. Indeed the missionaries were successful with their secondary purpose of making laboring Christians of the Flathead Indians.

---

51 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit., IV, 1264-1265.
52 Chittenden and Richardson, op. cit., I, 40-41.
53 Laveille, op. cit., 128.
Just as they had promised Father DeSmet and the rest of the priests, the Indians were back from their hunt before the fall season of 1841 ended. On December 3, one third of the entire tribe was baptized. The Jesuit priests were now kept busy with the evangelical duties of their mission. The first Christmas celebrated by the Catholic priests and the Indians was a solemn occasion. On that holy day one hundred and fifteen Flatheads, thirteen Nez Perces and a Blackfoot chief with his entire family were baptized. Some six to seven hundred newly baptized Catholics came to the little church of St. Mary's on that Christmas day. 54

Soon the news spread that the Black Robes were with the Flatheads. The result was an influx of members of neighboring tribes, all desirous of obtaining the services and blessings of the Catholic priests. Father DeSmet in writing to his Provincial on December 30, 1841, had this to say of St. Mary's mission at the close of the first year:

The whole Flathead nation has been converted, and baptism administered to many Kalispels, Nez Perces, Coeur d'Alenes, Snakes and Kootenais; other tribes are asking for us, and a vast country only awaits the arrival of the missionary to range itself under the banner of Jesus Christ." 55

So great was the influx of surrounding tribes that on one October day the missionaries instructed representatives from twenty four different Indian tribes. 56

When spring came the missionaries would plant seed in order to further the economic development of the mission. No seed was to be had, however, so

54 Palladino, op. cit., 35.
56 Palladino, op. cit., 35.
Father DeSmet, with an escort of ten warriors, left for Fort Colville in Washington territory on October 28, 1841 to purchase the needed seed and other supplies. En route he visited the Kalispels, Pend d' Oreilles and Coeur d' Alene tribes, all of whom had been in contact with the Jesuits.57

While with these tribes Father DeSmet baptized one hundred and ninety persons and taught them prayers through an interpreter. The Sign of the Cross, Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostle's Creed, Ten Commandments, and Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity, and Contrition were all translated into various Indian dialects. In order to teach these prayers to the Indians Father DeSmet had the youths stand in a circle, then each was given a part of a prayer or a commandment to memorize so that after each recited their part the whole tribe learned the prayers without the presence of the busy priest.58

Father DeSmet returned from Fort Colville on December 8, 1841, with a few bushels of oats, potatoes and wheat. When the missionaries planted the seed the following spring the Indians laughed and thought it was a terrible waste to bury the food only to see it rot in the ground. But when the green blades began to sprout the Indians who would sit and watch for hours could not have been more pleased to watch new life appear. This was the first attempt at agriculture in the state of Montana, and a successful attempt it was. Planting seeds was also useful in explaining the resurrection of the dead to the simple but deeply faithful Indians.59

When Father DeSmet returned from Fort Colville in 1841, the seed and

57 Ibid., 36-37.
58 Ibid., 37.
59 Ibid., 37-38.
supplies he brought back with him were of a small quantity, and the mission was badly in need of additional supplies. This prompted another trip for the priest. This time, in the spring of 1842, Father DeSmet left for Fort Vancouver to obtain additional provisions for the mission and also to discuss future plans for missionary work in the Oregon country with Father Blanchet, vicar general of the Bishop of Quebec and with John McLoughlin of the Hudson Bay Company, a friend of the Jesuit missionaries.

After visiting at Fort Vancouver, Father DeSmet returned to St. Mary's with the additional supplies. But his stay was brief, as he left the mission once again on July 29, 1842, to go to St. Louis for more manpower and provisions for the mission among the Flatheads.

In St. Louis Father DeSmet learned that his superiors would not be able to supply him with his needs so he set out for Europe in 1843 on a fund-raising campaign. While in Rome the Jesuit had the honor of a private audience with His Holiness, Pope Gregory XVI. The Europeans proved most generous and Father DeSmet was able to return to the United States in 1844, with the needed money for St. Mary's mission. The priest now believed he was entitled to spend his remaining days with the Flathead Indians.

On October 3, 1844, Father DeSmet left St. Paul Oregon, with the intention of reaching St. Mary's and spending the winter with the Flatheads. He arrived in the camp of the Kalispel tribe on November 6, 1844, to see that a mission had been established not long before by Father Hoecken. Because of bad weather

---

60 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 269.
61 Palladino, op. cit., 41.
62 Ibid., 41-44.
he was forced to terminate his journey and spend the winter with the Kalispels and Father Hoecken. Early the following spring he was able to arrive at St. Mary's overjoyed to see that the religious spirit of the Flathead Indians had not changed. 63

During his brief stay with the Flatheads at St. Mary's mission Father DeSmet drew up plans for the St. Ignatius mission which would be established by the Jesuit Fathers in 1854. Much to his dismay Father DeSmet was forced once again to part company with the Flatheads and St. Mary's mission. This time his destination was Fort Vancouver. Little did he know that this was to be one of his last visits at the place where he had hoped to spend the rest of his life. 64

Father DeSmet wrote a letter dated September 6, 1846, at the Flathead camp on the Yellowstone River. In this letter he gave a summary of the accomplishments of the first five years of missionary work among the Flatheads. Returning to the "nursery of our apostolic labors in the Rocky Mountains," DeSmet was delighted to report that a new church was nearly completed, a sawmill, flourmill, crops of wheat, potatoes and oats, forty head of cattle, a herd of hogs, a number of domestic fowl and twelve frame houses were also added to the mission. 65

Among the firsts for the laboring Jesuits were: the first wagons and oxen in Montana, the first farming in Montana, the first cattle in Montana, and probably the first sawmill (made by Father Ravalli) in Montana. No

63 Ibid., ilii.
64 Laveille, op. cit., 170.
65 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 270.
doubt the mission, which was the first "ordered civilized life" in Montana, offered many temporal and spiritual advantages for the Flathead Indian tribe. 66

66Ibid., 270.
Chapter IV
The Decline of St. Mary's and Its Abandonment

In 1845, even though blessed with many material advantages, the Flathead Indians at St. Mary's mission seemed to take a sudden change for the worse, and their religious spirit appeared to be seriously damaged. In his work, *Montana: An Uncommon Land*, the author, K. Ross Toole, expresses what could only be termed a series of opinions when he listed the following as reasons for the downfall of the mission.  

To begin with, Toole states that the Indians were not really pious, but rather clung to the Cross only because it was to them a symbol of physical power which would help them defeat their enemies. This statement was not substantiated by the author and does not sound plausible. Other reasons and more likely ones given by Toole, were that Father DeSmet talked to the Flatheads about the conversion of the Blackfoot tribe. This could very easily have caused a strain between the priest and the Indians because the two tribes were bitter enemies. Another possibility was that Angus McDonald, a Hudson Bay Company trader, was undermining the work of the Jesuit priests. Finally there is evidence that Father Mengarini became involved in tribal politics, and that this eventually led to the distrust of the Catholic priests on the part of Little Faro and others who were influential members of the tribe. It was probably a combination of unfortunate factors which caused the disbandment of St. Mary's mission. In any event it was sold to Major John Owen in 1850 and was not to be re-established until 1866.  

---

St. Mary's mission was re-established by the Jesuit Fathers and lasted until 1895 when the last of the Flathead Indians left their traditional homelands in the Bitter Root valley to move to the Jocko reservation in western Montana.  

---

69 Garraghan, op. cit., II, 390-391.
Chapter V
Father DeSmet and other Indian Tribes

As the scope of this thesis is limited in extension an attempt has been made to relate Father DeSmet only with the Flathead tribe. It would be a mistake not to mention in passing that he was also justly famous in his dealings with other Indian tribes of Montana and the West.

To indicate somewhat his high regard among political circles it will only be necessary to mention his vital part in concluding peace with the Sioux Indian nation. Because the Indians would trust no other white man, Father DeSmet was the only one the Indians would allow in their camp for peace talks. As a result the United States government obtained his services and the result in turn was the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868. The preparations for the treaty were first made by Sitting Bull and Father DeSmet in Sitting Bull's camp. The treaty was then concluded at Fort Rice by delegates of the legendary Sioux chieftain and the U. S. government.

An interesting story in connection with Father DeSmet and the Blackfoot tribe is of significance. Once while visiting the Blackfeet the priest came upon a chief who spoke English quite fluently. DeSmet learned that the chief was an Irishman, who in order to curb the vice of drunkenness, joined the Blackfoot tribe and married a squaw. Desirous of a Catholic baptism for his five children, the Irish Blackfoot was able to get Father DeSmet to handle the baptismal duties. In addition he baptized many others of the famed plains tribe while making the visit.


While these two seemingly remote incidents in no way begin to describe Father DeSmet's relations with Indian tribes of the West other than the Flatheads they do, I believe, indicate the broad nature of his work with the Indian tribes. The Treaty of Fort Laramie with Sitting Bull and the Sioux nation is indicative of his work as a mediator between the government and the Indians. In this respect it is a tragedy that the policy of the United States government toward the Indians did not follow the pattern set by the charitable and yet just Jesuit priest.

Finally, concerning the incident with the Irish Blackfoot, we can see Father DeSmet's missionary work with other Indian tribes. In this capacity he baptized and instructed the Indians and served as a genuine model for the ideal Christian life. He was also instrumental in many other missionary fields, at least at the planning stage. Besides St. Mary's he had no small part in the preparation of a number of other Indian missions and in so doing prepared the way for further missionary work.

Father DeSmet died on May 23, 1871, after having spent his last years in St. Louis. When the steamer DeSmet, which was named after him, travelled up the Missouri with the news of his death the Indians knew that they had just lost their best friend. An English clergyman and contemporary of Father DeSmet's wrote:

At Fort Peck the head chief turned his back and while his stalwart frame shook with emotion, tears coursed down his tawny cheeks. No other man ever had such a hold on the affections of the Indians as Father DeSmet and they look upon his departure from earth as a terrible calamity.72

72 Garraghan, op. cit., III, 106.
Father DeSmet justly deserves the title of "Montana's Apostle," for it was he who carried the torch of Christianity to most of the Indian tribes of Montana. Not only did he lay the groundwork, but he also returned occasionally to the Indian tribes and missions on both sides of the mountains to inject a spark of religious spirit in the hearts of the Indians he loved so dearly.

Father DeSmet was also of tremendous significance to the West in general, for it was he who oftentimes served as a delicate balance between Indian and white and resolved differences between the two races in the best interests of both.73

In conclusion, Father DeSmet, while in the service of God, did much for the welfare of the Indians, especially the Flathead tribe, and also contributed greatly to the development of the West in general.

73 Gilbert J. Garraghan, S. J., Chapters in Frontier History. (Milwaukee, 1934), 174.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


O'Connor, John J., "Apostle of the Northwest," Catholic Digest, (September, 1940)

Vestal, Stanley, "Irish Flathead," Catholic Digest, (April, 1945)