



The Story

Of

St. Mary's Mission

By Rev. Martin Florian

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Prologue

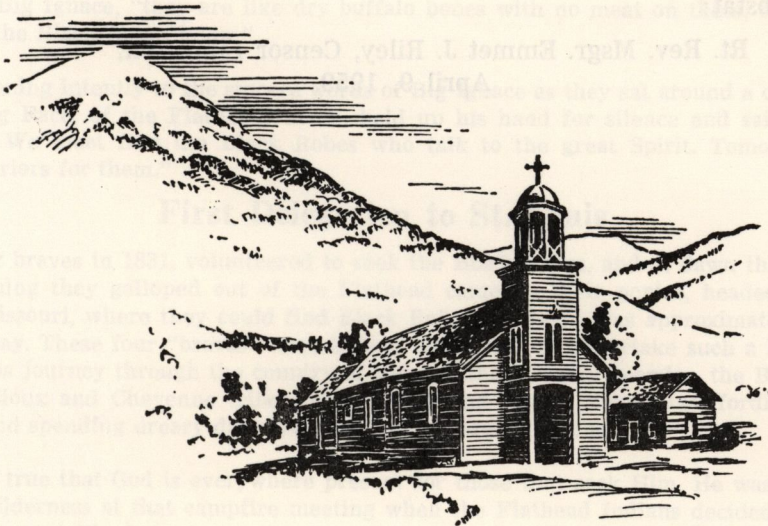
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Indians' Efforts and Sacrifices to Secure Black Robes

Stevensville, Montana

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Prologue

There are many versions connected with the efforts of the Flathead Indians to get Black Robes into their midst, but the main purpose of this brochure is to give the average tourist some idea of the depth of their sincerity to learn about the God-given truths of our Faith; and, of the heroism and sacrifices of this tribe to come to a possession of the Faith; also some idea of the hardships of Fathers De Smet and Ravalli in coming to teach and minister to these good souls redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

Indians' Efforts and Sacrifices to Secure Black Robes

The Iroquois Indians in the Northeastern part of what is now the New England states and the maritime provinces of Canada were converted to Christianity by the early French missionaries, among whom were the eight Jesuit Martyrs: Isaac Jogues, John Brebeuf, Rene Goupil, John Lallande, Anthony Daniel, Gabriel Lallemont, Charles Ganier, and Noel Chabanel, who gave their lives in martyrdom between the years 1642 and 1649.

Big Ignace and twenty-four companions, descendants of the Iroquois Indians, migrated westward in about 1820, and were received into the Flathead Tribe situated in the Western part of what is now the State of Montana.

These Iroquois converts inspired the Flatheads with a desire to become Christians. Although the Flatheads and Nez Percés had previously heard from trappers of the Black Robes and their "big prayer" (a name the Indians gave the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass), it was Big Ignace who became the Apostle and taught them the Lord's Prayer and how to make the sign of the cross. "The words I speak are nothing," exclaimed Big Ignace, "they are like dry buffalo bones with no meat on them, compared to what the Black Robes know."

Listening intently to the sincere words of Big Ignace as they sat around a campfire, Chief Big Face, of the Flatheads arose, held up his hand for silence and said: "It is decided. We must find the Black Robes who talk to the great Spirit. Tomorrow we send warriors for them."

First Delegation to St. Louis

Four braves in 1831, volunteered to seek the Black Robes, and at dawn the following morning they galloped out of the Flathead camp on their ponies, headed for St. Louis, Missouri, where they could find Black Robes. St. Louis was approximately 1,600 miles away. These four "braves" were indeed very brave to undertake such a long and dangerous journey through the country of some of their deadly enemies, the Blackfoot, Crows, Sioux and Cheyenne tribes; besides crossing rugged mountains, fording swift rivers, and spending dreary days crossing the sunparched plains.

It is true that God is everywhere present for those that seek Him. He was present in the wilderness at that campfire meeting when the Flathead Indians decided to seek Him. But uncivilized as they were, they knew that they must seek Him through the instructions and ministrations of the Black Robes, because the Black Robes are the dispensers of the mysteries of God, and because the Black Robes are to teach us to observe all things whatsoever God has commanded. The missionaries of other denominations offered their services but the Flatheads would have none but the Black Robes.

Motivation makes all the difference in the world. Without motivation those four braves would not even have rounded up their ponies. With motivation they did not hesitate to undertake the long and dangerous journey from what is now Western Montana, to St. Louis, Missouri. Even though the White man considered them savages, they "loved God with their whole heart, their whole soul, their whole mind and all their strength." The four braves who volunteered to go in quest of Black Robes for their tribe, set out on the long journey in the early spring of 1831. It was the first part of October when they reached St. Louis. Two of them Paul and Narcisse, probably because of the hardships of the trip, fell ill and died. There is a burial record of Narcisse in St. Louis, stating he was buried October 31, 1831; and of Paul that he was buried November 17, 1831, in the Catholic Cemetery. Both were baptized and received the last sacraments.

The other two braves left St. Louis the following spring but were never heard from again. Some misfortune must have overtaken them on their return journey. But the Flatheads, undaunted, would not give up hope; so strong was their eagerness to have the Black Robes among them to tell them about the great Spirit. Accordingly Big Ignace decided to undertake the second expedition in quest of the Black Robes. He took with him his two sons, Charles and Frances, ages 12 and 14. They left late in the summer of 1835, and arrived in St. Louis three months later. They were promised a Black Robe as soon as one would be available. Eighteen months passed and still no Black Robe.

Finally in the summer of 1837 Big Ignace decided to undertake a third journey to St. Louis. On this journey he was accompanied by three Flathead and one Nez Perce Indians. One early morning as they were breaking camp at Ash Hollow on the South Platte River, a band of Sioux Indians attacked them and tomahawked Big Ignace as well as his four companions. Thus the third attempt of the Flathead Indians to secure Black Robes for their tribe, ended in failure.

Fourth Delegation Meets With Success

Only four of the twenty-four Iroquois who migrated to the Bitter Root Valley were now alive. Two of these, Peter Gaucher and young Ignace, son of Big Ignace, volunteered to make the fourth attempt to secure Black Robes. These two set out in the summer of 1839. Instead of the Overland Route, through Wyoming and Nebraska, they decided to travel by canoe down the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. When they reached what is now Council Bluffs, Iowa, they met Father Peter De Smet, who at that time was working among the Pottawatamie Indians. This was the Father De Smet who was to be sent to them as their Black Robe.

Father De Smet advised them to continue on to St. Louis, and to see Bishop Joseph Rosati, who received them cordially and promised them a priest soon. Peter Gaucher started out alone on the return trip to take the message to his tribe. Young Ignace remained as a guide for the Black Robe. The following spring, March 27, 1840, Father De Smet and young Ignace set out on the journey that would bring the first Black Robe to the Bitter Root Valley. Peter Gaucher arrived at the Eight Mile Creek Camp of the Flatheads about the time Father De Smet and young Ignace left St. Louis.

On learning the good news from Peter Gaucher "the Black Robe is coming," Chief Big Face appointed ten warriors to go ahead to greet the Black Robe, for whom they had waited almost a decade. The rest of the tribe would follow. The warriors met Father De Smet and young Ignace near the present site of Green River, Wyoming. After offering a Mass of Thanksgiving at a place later called the "Prairie of the Mass," the

delegation, together with their Black Robe, began the return trip to the headwaters of the Snake River, where they found the main body of the Flathead Indians waiting at Pierre's Hole Valley, near the Idaho-Wyoming line.

What joy and happiness must have filled the wilderness on that day when the Flathead Tribe met their longed-for Black Robe! Their braves, of whom seven had lost

their lives, had traveled a total of 14,000 miles in the four trips made to St. Louis to secure Black Robes; and now here was one in their midst!

What gratitude must have sprung up in their hearts to have one of the Great Spirit's ambassadors to teach and sanctify them, and to make them children of God and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven! They composed a hymn in praise and thanksgiving to the Great Spirit and Mass was celebrated the next morning before they started the long trek, 300 miles, back to the Bitter Root Valley.

Father De Smet's Arrival in Montana

Father De Smet crossed the mountains from Henry's Lake and came into what is now the state of Montana on July 22, 1840. The following day, July 23, 1840, he offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass not far from the shores of Red Rock Lake, the first Mass offered in Montana.

Father Laveille, S.J., in his biography of Father De Smet writes: "On July 22, 1840 the caravan reached the ridge which separates the watershed of the Missouri from the Columbia River." This ridge is now called Red Rock Pass between Henry's Lake and the Centennial Valley. Then he quotes from Father De Smet's diary: "I said a Mass of Thanksgiving at the foot of this mountain surrounded by my Indians who chanted canticles of praise to God."

After spending a month with them, and appraising their fervor and need, he began his return journey to St. Louis on August 27, 1840. To comfort them at his departure he told them he would return to build them a church in which they could worship the Great Spirit and assist at the "great prayer" (The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass).

Speaking for his people, Chief Big Face assured the Black Robe they would keep him in their prayers for his safe return. It was December 31, 1840, when Father De Smet returned to St. Louis. During the winter months he talked matters over with his superiors and arranged to take 12 other men. Among them were Father Nicholas Point, 42, a native of Rocroy, France, who for four years had acted as the first president of St. Charles College, Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Later he was to become known for his facile descriptions of Western life, and for its graphic portrayal in pen and ink sketches. Father Gregory Mengarini, 29, who had answered the call for missionaries to the Rockies; an Italian, he was accomplished in medicine and music. Three lay brothers who accompanied the priests were William Claessens, 29, Belgian, the blacksmith; Charles Huet, 35, Belgian also, the carpenter; and Joseph Specht, 32, German, the tinner and handyman.

After a four and a half months difficult and wearisome journey they reached the Bitter Root Valley on September 24, 1841, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy. They named the mountain, directly west of the Mission site, St. Mary's Peak. The Mission also was named St. Mary's, in honor of the Mother of Christ.

St. Mary's Mission

As soon as they had rested from their long journey, the Black Robes and their helpers began to build a temporary church of cottonwood logs which were bound together with wooden pegs and chinked with clay. It measured 25 x 33 feet. The roof was made of lodge poles, interlaced with branches and plastered with clay. A year or two later this structure was enlarged to 30 x 60 feet. A high fence of lodge poles was built around the church and smaller structures, as a protection against enemies, whether human or animal.

In the original temporary church, galleries were built on each side. There were no seats. The Indians squatted on the floor which was made of roughly hewed logs. The window panes were of deer skin, scraped thin to allow some light to come through. Brother Claessens, who came with Father De Smet, and who was foreman of the job, gives us all these details in a note-book which he left.

Looking at the old Mission Structure it will be noticed that it was built in three sections. The middle is the original part built in 1841. The front and rear sections were added later as the need for more space arose, and as the missionaries had more time to enlarge the original structure. The glass windows, cedar shingles, belfry and bell were also later additions.

There is no record of a church building on any other site than the present one. The early settlers familiar with the history of the mission, who knew the pioneer priests who built the church, had never heard the missionaries mention any other church or any other location than the present one.

A treasured story is told of the church built by Father De Smet in 1841. After it had just been completed, Chief Big Face exclaimed: "It is the place where little Mary said the House of Prayer would be built!" Several years before the arrival of the Black Robes, a girl about thirteen years of age, named Mary, became seriously ill, and at her own request was baptized by one of the Iroquois Indian converts who inspired the Flatheads to seek the Black Robes. While thanking God for the grace of Baptism, she suddenly cried out, "I see the Heavens open up and God's Mother calls me." Then addressing those around her, she added; "Listen to the Black Robes when they come, they have the true prayer; do all they tell you. They are coming and will build the House of Prayer where I am dying." This incident made such an impression on the missionaries that they reproduced it on canvas. A copy of this oil painting is still preserved on the right hand side of the Communion rail in the old mission church.

In the spring of 1842, only six months after the arrival of the Black Robes, the Indians were put to work, splitting rails and fencing a plot of ground for a crop to be planted. The Black Robes taught them to plow and sow. This was the first agriculture in Montana. It was also in 1842 that the missionaries brought the first cattle into the territory from Fort Colville, not far from the present site of Spokane, Washington.

Arrival of Father Ravalli

Leaving Fathers Nicholas Point and Gregory Mengarini in charge of St. Mary's Mission, Father De Smet went to Europe to raise funds and to recruit more missionaries for the Indians of the Rocky Mountain area. Among the missionaries he brought back with him was Father Anthony Ravalli, from Ferrara, Italy, who was 33 years of age when he came to St. Mary's Mission in 1845.

Father Ravalli brought two small burstones with him from Antwerp, Belgium, and made the first Flour mill in Montana. The burstones were 15 inches in diameter and were operated by water power. Now the missionaries could have real flour made from wheat they raised in their own field.

Not long after its first flour mill was in operation, Montana got its first sawmill, designed and built by Fathers Ravalli and Mengarini. The saw was made of wagon tires flattened out into a blade, and teeth chiseled into it and then filed sharp. The missionaries had to devise many practical means to improve their living standards. For other supplies which could not be grown or manufactured at the Mission, they had to journey 800 miles to Fort Vancouver, Washington, not far from the mouth of the Columbia River. In those days the difficult things were done immediately; the impossible took a little longer.

Mission Temporarily Closed

Half breeds and squatters, for selfish motives, sought to poison the minds of the Flathead Indians, against their Black Robes, and accordingly the missionaries closed St. Mary's Mission in 1850, and departed for other mission fields where priests were urgently needed. The mission property was leased to Major John Owen, who later built Fort Owen, a landmark to the north of the Mission site. Major Owen restored the property to the missionaries on their return in 1866. Some of the property had deteriorated, but part of the old church was left and around this a new larger structure was built by Father Ravalli. Several other buildings were also erected, including the old pharmacy to the north of St. Mary's Mission church, the first pharmacy built in Montana; and it still stands as a monument to Father Ravalli's skill as a physician of the body as well as of the soul. Many of the things he made and used are still preserved in both the mission church and in the pharmacy. In the pharmacy is a stretcher on which he had himself carried to the sick, because of a paralysis he suffered four years before his death on October 2, 1844, at the age of 72. He was buried in the St. Mary's cemetery behind the Mission church, where a marble shaft marks his resting place. So great is the respect and honor shown to Father Ravalli, that this county bears his name. Also a town west of Missoula has been named after the great missionary. Another town west of Missoula bears the name of De Smet.

On August 27, 1872 a treaty was drawn up during President Garfield's term by the Federal Government for all the Indians to move to the Flathead reservation on the Jocko river. But it was not until 1891 that Chief Charlot and about 200 Indians finally left the Bitter Root Valley to settle in the above mentioned reservation. With the departure of this last group of Indians, St. Mary's was no longer an Indian Mission. But the log chapel built by Fathers De Smet and Ravalli served as a place of worship for the White people in the Valley until 1954, when the new St. Mary's Church was built by Father James Dowdall. The Old St. Mary's still stands and we hope will be preserved as a reminder of the Catholic Church's obedience to her Divine Founder: "Go forth into the whole world and teach all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Her missionaries, known by the Indians as "Black Robes," came here into the wilderness in 1841 and carried on the same spiritual work and ministrations as the Apostles did in obedience to Christ, their Divine Master and Redeemer.

Centennial of Mission

In 1941, at the site of this first mission in the Pacific Northwest, thousands of people, including many members of the Catholic Hierarchy and civic leaders in the

United States, gathered here in Stevensville to observe the centenary of Father De Smet's arrival to minister to the spiritual needs of the Flathead Indians. At an outdoor altar, a replica of the one on which Father De Smet offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the primitive wilderness of the Bitter Root Valley, the Most Reverend Amleto G. Cicognani, Apostolic Delegate to the United States and now a Cardinal, celebrated Solemn Pontifical Mass. The celebration was sponsored by the Most Reverend Joseph Michael Gilmore, Bishop of Helena.

The Indians still have a great reverence and love for the spot where their ancestors first received the gift of Faith. On September 21, 1958, which was the Sunday nearest the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, September 24, they made a pilgrimage from the Jocko Reservation to Old St. Mary's Mission to commemorate the arrival of Father De Smet on September 24, 1841. This pilgrimage was made with the permission and blessing of the Most Reverend Joseph Michael Gilmore, Bishop of Helena. High Mass was offered in the Old St. Mary's at 4:00 p.m., September 21, 1958, by the Rev. Cornelius Byrne, S.J., who arranged and led the pilgrimage to this hallowed spot. The High Mass was sung by the Jocko choir. Prayer and hymns were sung in the Indian language and a sermon was delivered in Indian by the Rev. Louis Taelman, S.J. The Indians of the Jocko reservation would like to make this pilgrimage an annual event. St. Mary's Mission is still a sacred spot, loved and revered by the descendants of the Flathead Indians, whose forefathers made such heroic efforts to bring the Black Robes and the faith of Christ into their hearts and souls. God bless them, and all the tourists who come here to visit this cradle of Christianity in the Northwest!

Martin Florian
April 15, 1959

