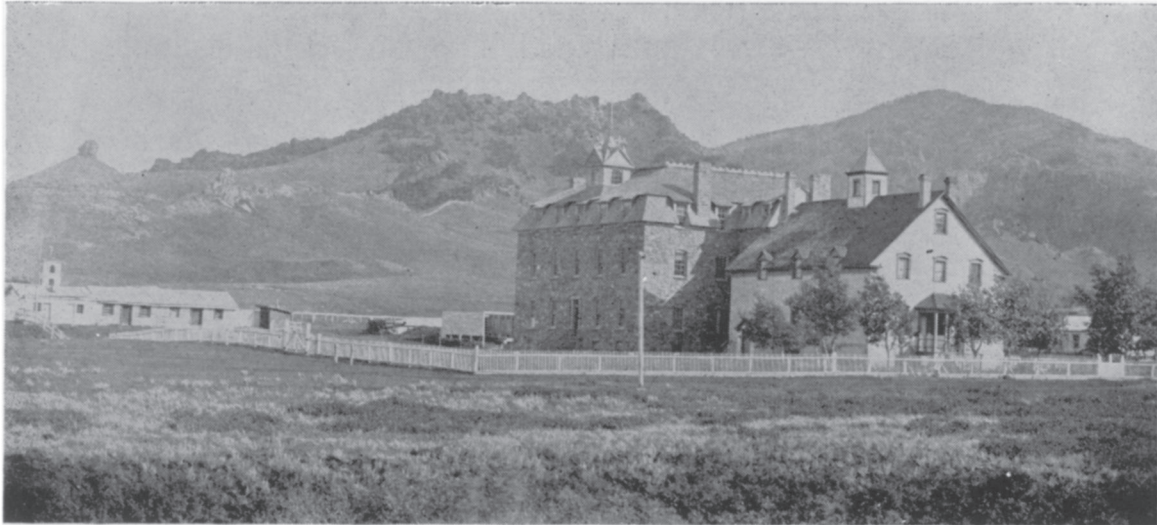


# Historic St. Peter's Mission: Landmark of the Jesuits and the Ursulines Among the Blackfeet



by **Wilfred P. Schoenberg, S. J.**

**A** PPROXIMATELY 15 miles from Cascade, Montana, which is half-way between Great Falls and Helena on U. S. Highway No. 91, lies historic old St. Peter's Mission. Once a thriving hub from which Jesuit missionaries worked out, like spokes into a wide Montana wheel, the mission now appears to be abandoned, a mere relic of the past, a sobering reminder of a long struggle which was finally lost. An original hewn log church still stands in contrast with the crumbling ruins of more pretentious stone buildings which decay around it; and, if the ruins suggest the irony and fickleness of history, they also glorify what remains.

They say that on warm sunny days there are rattlesnakes in the grass spreading over the ruins. No doubt they are right. It is what you would expect. The snakes have come to claim the stones quarried from the bluffs and mountains surrounding the mission. The Indians and nuns and priests of the mission have long since departed, allowing the grass to spread where once busy feet trod and the snakes to multiply where once multi-storied buildings filled the little valley. Only the path to the church is still open. Worn down with pious regularity by a few Catholic families who worship there, it pre-

sents interesting evidence of living man in a melancholy scene of ruin and decrepitude.

St. Peter's has enjoyed a violent past as well as a thriving one. With its roots in ground jealously guarded by the Blackfeet, "of all tribes the most numerous and most fierce,"<sup>1</sup> with its struggle against poverty, starvation and fires, and its final destruction by the indifference of a government policy, it must not be imagined that its past could be anything except violent. Perhaps if the Indians had not wanted it that way the missionaries would have. There is nothing more glorious for missions

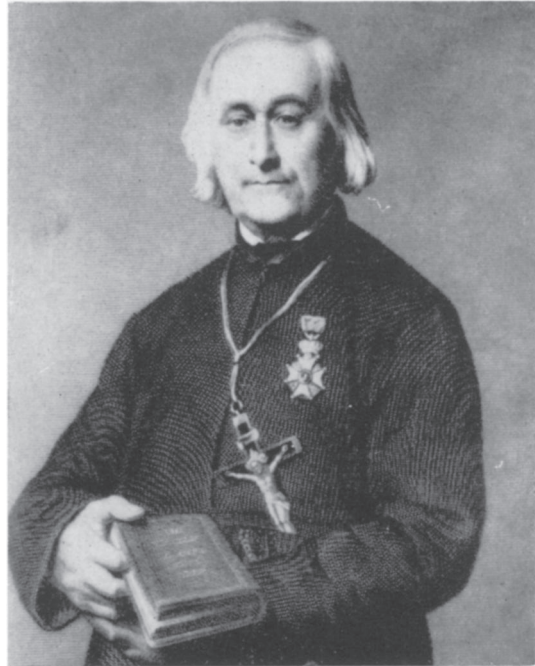
## DECADE BONUS SPECIAL . . .

With this first issue of Volume XI, 1961, *MON-TANA the Magazine of Western History* departs from its regular format to bring you a special second decade section beginning on these pages with the scholarly account of historic St. Peter's Mission. On page 86 may be found another utterly new feature for this magazine

. . . a short old West vignette, in this case the story of the famous Justin boot. Via this added section each issue, we will share with our readers some of the many succinct, offbeat and epic facets of Western history which have come to our files complimenting the long-established bill of fare.

and missionaries, in retrospect at least, as opposition. From the historians' point of view the mission's violent history is even more acceptable because it casts over the remains the morbid pall of tragedy, a quality which assures his account of a reading.

The mission's founders could foresee the violence. They came to live among the Blackfeet but a brief time after the tribe had been decimated by smallpox. This fact was not lost on the Jesuits. When the first Jesuit to live among them arrived in the autumn of 1846, he estimated the number of the tribe at "about 1,000 lodges or 10,000 souls. This is not half what they were before the smallpox was introduced among them." And of the whole number, "the women constitute more than two-thirds if not even three-fourths."<sup>2</sup> At this time the Blackfeet nation comprised three large divisions, having different names but speaking the same



FR. PIERRE JEAN DeSMET, great Jesuit missionary, was painted wearing the decoration of the Knight of the Order of Leopold, presented by King Leopold of Belgium. At the insistence of his family, DeSmet allowed his portrait to be made wearing the distinguished decoration. After that time, nothing more was heard of it, and the indomitable missionary continued his labors in the frontier West. (Historical Society of Montana photo.)

Wilfred P. Schoenberg, S. J., archivist at the Crosby Library, Gonzaga University in Spokane, has made full use of his access to a wealth of original, unpublished documents relating to the religious and secular history of the Northwest and Alaska to become one of the region's busiest historians and writers. Now at work on a chronicle of Catholic history in the Northwest, Father Schoenberg's most notable works are on the Jesuit Mission Presses, and the Jesuits in Oregon and Montana. His books and articles are invariably readable and appeal to the lay reader as well as to the academician.

Son of the late Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Schoenberg, formerly of St. Aloysius Parish in Spokane, Father Schoenberg graduated from Gonzaga High School in 1933 and six years later entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Sheridan, Ore. He taught at his high school alma mater between 1946 and 1948, before he began the study of theology at Alma College in Alma, Calif. He entered the priesthood on June 15, 1951, at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco.

Father Schoenberg received archival training at the National Archives in 1946 and received the jubilee award from the Northwest Catholic Library Association for cultural contributions to the Pacific Northwest.

language: the "Siksikana" or North Pie-gans who were the Blackfeet proper, the "Pikuni" called South Pie-gans by whites, and the "Kaenna," also called the Bloods. The Siksikana inhabited the high plains along the eastern slope of the Rockies on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. When the border line dispute was finally settled, they withdrew to the northern side. Catholic

<sup>1</sup> Father DeSmet, S.J., in manuscript notes regarding the Blackfoot Mission, to Fathers Roothan, S.J., General of the Society of Jesus in Rome. It may be observed that DeSmet's comment was not intended to be complimentary, probably because of Blackfeet hostility toward the Flat-heads, his favorites. Later his attitude changed and in his writings subsequent to the Blackfoot-Flathead alliance of 1846 he reserved such sharp remarks for other tribes.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Palladino, L.B., S.J., *Indians and White in the Northwest*, First edition. Baltimore, 1894, p. 172.

missionaries who worked among them were members of the Congregation of Oblates of Mary Immaculate of whom the most renowned was Father A. Lacombe, O.M.I. The South Piegans dwelled exclusively in Montana, a territory which was also occupied by two other tribes, the Gros Ventres and the Assiniboines who were a distant branch of the Dakota or Sioux.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes observers on the early frontier spoke erroneously of these two latter tribes as members of the Blackfeet nation. Actually they were inveterate enemies of the Blackfeet and when missionaries first attempted to Christianize either tribe they were caught in tribal wars.

The first Jesuit to meet a Blackfoot was Father DeSmet who had the great pleasure of speaking with several on his first trip to the west in 1840. So far as records can produce evidence, he was also the first to baptize a member of the tribe. In a letter to a comrade-in-arms this very energetic, globe-trotting Black Robe described the long ceremony which cost him, among other things, his Christmas dinner. "There was an old chief of the Blackfeet nation, in the camp, with his son and his little family, five in all, who had been hitherto very assiduous in their attendance at prayers and catechism. The day succeeding my arrival I commenced giving three instructions daily, besides the catechism, which was taught by the other Fathers. They profited so well that, with the grace of God, 115 Flatheads, with three chiefs at their head, thirty Nez Percés with their chief, and the Blackfoot chief and his family, presented themselves at the baptismal font on Christmas day. I began my masses at seven o'clock in the morning; at five o'clock P. M. I still found myself in the chapel."<sup>4</sup>

The baptism was a tangible beginning if an unpredictable one. DeSmet, his zeal for more Christians now greatly aroused, conceived a bold plan for preventing Blackfeet raids on the property and maidens of his cherished Christian

Flatheads. He would convert the Blackfeet (it was as simple as that) and foster an alliance between the two tribes.

In the autumn of 1845 he undertook one of his most adventurous journeys hoping to find the Blackfeet in their high altitude haunts. Though he travelled as far east as Madison Forks on the Missouri, he failed in his purpose and was forced to return to St. Mary's, his head already buzzing with plans for another search. A chance presented itself in autumn of the following year. Compelled to return to St. Louis to arrange for mission supplies, DeSmet boldly chose a course through Blackfeet country which was ordinarily avoided if possible. Father Nicholas Point, S. J., who had accompanied him to the Rocky Mountains in 1841 and who was now somewhat disillusioned in his first enthusiasm, left St. Mary's with DeSmet on August 16th.<sup>5</sup> They headed directly into Blackfoot territory. After an Indian battle or two and a little more excitement, which one might consider appropriate in view of his objective, DeSmet had the satisfaction of bringing together the chiefs of the two tribes at Fort Lewis on the Missouri river, which was about three miles above and on the opposite bank of its successor fort, called Benton.<sup>6</sup> He spent four

<sup>3</sup> "The Sioux of the Mountains," says Father Palladino, "*Assini*, in their tongue, standing for mountains or rocks, and *Boines* for Sioux." *Ibid.* p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> This letter is included in Chittenden, Hiram Martin and Alfred Talbot Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, S.J.*, New York, 1903. Vol. I. p. 338. Ewers states that the first Protestant missionary among the Blackfeet was "the Reverend R. T. Rundle, a Methodist, who worked among the Assiniboine and North Blackfeet for eight years following 1840." cf. Ewers, John C., *The Story of the Blackfeet*, Lawrence Hashell Institute, 1944, p. 42. The first Protestant missionary among the Piegans was the Reverend E. D. Machev, who was sent to Fort Benton in the summer of 1856 by the Presbyterian Church. The Reverend Machev returned East after one month because of the illness of his wife who accompanied him. Also cf. Ewers, John C., *The Blackfeet*, Norman, 1958, p. 194 sq.

<sup>5</sup> Father Point, in a letter to the Jesuit General in Rome, dated April 14, 1845, requested to be transferred to a new mission in Eastern Canada. The General, answering on February 18, 1846, gave Point the permission he requested, but Point did not receive this letter until spring of the following year. For further details cf. Garraghan, Gilbert J., S.J., *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, New York, 1938. Vol. II. p. 450 sq.

<sup>6</sup> Established in May, 1847, Fort Benton was first called Fort Clay. Its name was changed to Benton in 1850 to honor the man who had often rescued the American Fur Company from disaster. cf. Chittenden, Hiram Martin, *Fur Trade of the Far West*, New York, 1903, Vol. III, p. 963, and Father Garraghan's corrections of Chittenden's account, "Nicholas Point, Jesuit Missionary in Montana of the Forties," in Willard and Goodykoontz (eds.), *Trans. Mississippi West*, Boulder (University of Colorado), 1930, p. 51 sq., and *The Jesuits in the Middle United States*, Vol. II, p. 446 sq.



OLD ST. PETER'S CHURCH, with the log cabin nuns' quarters to the right, are shown in this early picture from the Historical Society of Montana archives. Surpliced altar boys are pictured, along with a Jesuit priest in the background. This old log building, reverently preserved and boasting a new bell tower, is all that remains of the mission. More impressive stone buildings once at the site are in ruin.

days at this American Fur Company post and after his departure on September 28th, both tribes smoked and danced far into the night to celebrate their newly-made peace.

DeSmet left more than peace smoke behind him. Father Point, quite reluctant to leave the mountains after all, remained at Fort Lewis to take advantage of the Blackfeet's more favorable dispositions toward Christianity. His winter was not wasted. Having won over the Blackfeet with the magic of his paintings, he was able to baptize 667 of them before his own departure in the following May. Though all but 26 of them involved children, the mission was firmly established in the hearts of the Indians, at least, if not in buildings and debts.<sup>7</sup>

The buildings did not appear for ten troubled years. Jesuits in the interim occasionally visited the Blackfeet at Fort Benton or in their summer camps, and more often families or bands of Blackfeet crossed the Rockies to visit the Jesuits at St. Mary's and St. Ignatius. Father Adrian Hoecken, S. J., founder of the latter, described the arrival of Chief Little Dog in a letter to DeSmet: "Last spring, and during the summer following, we had several

Black-Feet here. They behaved extremely well. Among others, the Little Dog, chief of the Piegans, with some members of his family. They entered our camp with martial music and an innumerable quantity of little bells. The very horses pranced in accordance with the measure, and assumed a stately deportment at the harmony of the national hymn."<sup>8</sup>

Just one month after this letter was written, (May, 1857) an Indian agent, Major Alfred Vaughan, proposed to Father DeSmet that a Catholic mission for the Blackfeet be established on the Judith river. Since Vaughan was not a Catholic, his recommendation carried more than ordinary weight with the Jesuits and DeSmet lost no time in forwarding it to Rome. Two months later Colonel Alexander Cummings, head of

<sup>7</sup> Jesuit literature of the period abounds with references to the Blackfeet and their conversion. Various reasons are given for their desire for Christian baptism, for example Point's influence over them and the good example of whites at Fort Lewis. The principal reason given by both DeSmet and Point was that the Blackfeet, by nature very superstitious, wanted Christian Baptism as a medicine more powerful than their enemies'. Thus, though many Blackfeet adults pleaded with Point for Baptism, he reluctantly consented to baptize them only after solid assurances their motives were purged of superstition.

<sup>8</sup> DeSmet, Rev. P. J., S.J., *Western Missions and Missionaries*, New York, 1859, p. 316. Unfortunately this delightful chief Little Dog was killed in June 1866 by younger members of the tribe, according to Deputy Indian Agent Hiram D. Upham, because he was too friendly to the whites. Little Dog and Big Lake, of all Blackfeet chiefs the most friendly to the whites, were both greatly influenced by the Jesuit missionaries. There is no doubt that this influence protected the lives of countless whites during the restless sixties.

St Stanislaus Seminary  
Abrissant Mo. May 6 1914

Rev. L. B. Palladino S. J.  
Rev. & Dear Father P. C.

About a quarter of  
a century ago, I remember you  
kindly requested me to furnish you  
with some items about the beginnings  
of Helena, for your book "Indian and  
White in the North West". Presuming  
that similar information about  
the pioneer days, will be equally  
acceptable to you, I now on my own  
initiative, write to your Reverence  
concerning St. Peter's Mission among  
the Blackfoot Indians.  
An error in your book was possibly  
brought to my notice, a few weeks ago.

A facsimile of the first page of Father Francis Xavier Kuppens' history of St. Peter's Mission, the original of which is preserved in the Oregon Province Archives of the Society of Jesus, is reproduced here. Written in 1914, Father Kuppens' history was dedicated principally to correct certain errors made in the first edition of Father Palladino's "Indian and White in the Northwest."

the Western Superintendency of Indian Affairs, one time companion of Isaac Stevens in his treaty-making and more lately Governor of Colorado territory, made a similar proposal to Father DeSmet, adding waggishly that Jesuits were his favorite missionaries. If he had baited a hook, DeSmet swallowed it. Writing to the Jesuit General in Rome he repeated the Colonel's remarks and urged compliance. Rome, reputedly slow to move, took action immediately. By the spring of 1859 Father Nicholas Congiato, S. J., Superior of the Rocky Mountain missions, dispatched Father Hoecken with orders to select a mission site.

After he arrived among the Blackfeet in April, Father Hoecken spent the summer months travelling extensively with the tribe, always alert to the advantages of a mission on any site visited. He finally selected a spot on the Teton river, "just close to where the town of Choteau is to-day [sic] and the Butte, but a short distance off,

received as a landmark of the Mission site, the name of Priest's Butte, which still retains to the present day."<sup>9</sup> Upon this first site Father Hoecken and his Jesuit companion, Brother Vincent Magri, built three small log houses. Having finished this heavy chore, they simply settled down to a winter of hard labor learning the Blackfoot language—a task almost as distasteful to them as being scalped. In October, Father John B. Imoda, S. J., arrived to share it.<sup>10</sup>

The long winter revealed more than Blackfoot prefixes and verbs. The site, though delightful in other respects as all present residents of Choteau will happily agree, was found to be unsuitable for a mission. So, on March 13, 1860, the three missionaries gathered their frugal possessions and moved to a new location on the banks of the Sun

<sup>9</sup> Palladino, *op cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Father John Baptist Imoda, S. J., born in Turin, Italy, on November 29, 1829, entered the Society of Jesus on April 22, 1854. He came to the U. S. in 1858 and arrived at the Blackfoot mission in 1859. He died in Helena on June 18, 1886.

FR. JOSEPH GIORDA, S. J., second founder of Jesuit Missions in Montana, was born in Italy in 1823 and renounced his considerable inheritance to become a Jesuit in 1845. He arrived in the United States in 1858 and with Father Imoda and Brother de Koch chose the site for St. Peter's in 1862. He died at Sacred Heart Mission in the Coeur d'Alenes in 1882.

river, a short distance from the future site of Fort Shaw.<sup>11</sup> Here they built two more cabins of logs like the first. Lacking the necessary farm implements and seed, they were unable to make a garden—a matter of grave concern. They understood well what it meant to live “on the county,” as the Indians lived: on fish, buffalo, roots, moss and berries. They had existed this way in the old mission for five months.

In August, while rumors of Blackfoot depredations filled the little valley, Father Congiato, S. J., the Superior, appeared at the new mission. He promptly ordered the project abandoned; probably, because the Indians did not like the site. He dispersed the small community's occupants, sending Father Hoecken to St. Louis and Father Imoda and Brother Magri to St. Ignatius, “294 miles by the great road.” Thus the second mission came to naught and the Jesuits were as far as ever from their objective.

The roaring sixties which followed were hard years in Montana Territory whether one lived at Fort Benton or somewhere else. The discovery of gold immediately attracted swarms of whites, not all of them graduates of a finishing school. Hot-bloods among the Indians (especially the northern Pie-gans who swooped down from Canada) greatly itched to annihilate the alarming influx as they would any pestilence. Inter-tribal wars also flourished. (Whatever the distractions there was always time to steal an enemy's scalp.) Most Blackfeet, Father Kuppens was informed by a wag from their winter camp, considered Black Robes as whites and therefore subject to liquidation, if need be, like all other whites. Other tribes conveyed the same general idea to the Jesuits, so the latter had no mis-



givings about their fate should they fall into hostile hands.

It was under these circumstances that three Jesuits, eager to establish a mission once and for all, returned in the autumn of 1861.<sup>12</sup> Fathers Joseph Giorda and Imoda and Brother de Koch arrived at Fort Benton on October 25th with the following instructions:

1. Proceed to Fort Benton, pass the winter studying the language of the Indians and attend to the spiritual wants of all the people in the vicinity.
2. Select a suitable site for the permanent location of the mission.
3. Once located, the new mission was to be called after St. Peter the Apostle.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Father Francis Xavier Kuppens, S.J., corrects the account in Palladino's first edition of *Indian and White in the Northwest* in a manuscript entitled, “Notes on St. Peter's Mission.” This is in the Oregon Province Archives of the Society of Jesus. Written principally for the benefit of Father Palladino, the manuscript effectively produced corrections in the second edition of *Indian and White in the Northwest*.

<sup>12</sup> Father Joseph Giorda, S.J., was born near Turin, Italy, on March 19, 1823. The son of a wealthy noble family, he renounced his inheritance to enter the Jesuit Order on March 29, 1845. He came to the U.S. in 1858. Full of virtues, if not also in years, he died at Sacred Heart Mission among the Coeur d'Alenes on August 4, 1882. Brother Francis de Koch, S.J., was born on November 11, 1827. He entered the Jesuit Order on July 3, 1855 and died after sixty years on May 17, 1917.

<sup>13</sup> Kuppens manuscript, p. 11. This is the first authenticated reference to the name of the Blackfeet mission and it certainly indicates that the previously established missions did not bear this name. Palladino states that the dedication to St. Peter was intended to honor the Jesuit General in Rome, Father Peter Beckx, S.J., a Belgian who was elected General on July 2, 1855; he died on March 4, 1887 at the ripe old age of ninety-three.

Father Giorda followed his instructions to the letter. Throughout the long winter, with Imoda and two brothers accompanying him, he scoured the country, finally deciding in favor of a location on the banks of the Marias river.<sup>14</sup> This, too, seemed to have a voodoo cast upon it, for the tribal chiefs strongly objected to the Jesuits' occupying it.

“. . . but several of the chiefs strongly objected to having the Mission located there, and insisted with Father Giorda that it be established elsewhere. As the Father discovered before long, the Indians were quite diplomatic and reasonable about the matter. The Marias region teemed with buffalo which, the Indians feared, would be exterminated by the whites who were sure to follow in the wake of the mission. Hence they did not want it located in that section.

“Lest they should become alienated, Father Giorda thought it advisable to yield to their wishes. Accordingly, he and Father Menetrey, who a few months before had been called to work in this new field, started out again in search of a suitable Mission site.”<sup>15</sup>

Father Giorda, with his pious entourage, again took up the search. This time he chose a site “on the left bank of the Missouri River, about 6 miles overland above the mouth of the Sun River, and the Indians true to their promise, followed and camped all around the mission.”<sup>16</sup>

Father Kuppens composed a description of the exact place:

“When the location of the mission had been determined upon, in a general way; The Father preempted a small peninsula formed by a prolonged bend in the river. It contained about 175 or 200 acres of land. The neck was not more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile wide; A short fence at this place would enclose the whole property. On the east a wide fringe of heavy cotton wood trees occupied about 40 acres. The remaining, about 150 acres were level, good loam, sufficiently

high to be safe from the spring floods and were good for farming or pasture. And it seems to me that opposite the extreme Southern end of the peninsula a small creek flowed into the river. At the north just outside of our fence the ground rose, gently at first, then steeper and steeper until at a height of about 100 feet it terminated in a heavy layer of rock. This was the edge of a high plateau. To the west perhaps  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile beyond our preempted claim, a dry ravine with a gently ascent offered an excellent wagon road to the top of the plates. This we used to go to Fort Benton or to Helena.”<sup>17</sup>

The Jesuits took possession of this site on February 12, 1862. Two cabins were erected immediately, then a third for a chapel, and finally the three were joined together into an “L” shape by the simple expedient of building two more cabins in between.

“All the buildings were well matched,” says Father Kuppens, “all of the same material, green cottonwood logs, of the same degree of finish, they were not squared, and the bark had not been removed. The walls were  $7\frac{1}{2}$  feet high, the interstices and chinking were plastered with clay. The roof was made of rails laid close together, with a heavy layer of clay. There was no ceiling in any of the rooms: and as for floor we had, when the buildings were new, a most delightful velvet carpet of a very dense sod. When the carpet was worn out as the very best will do in time, we walked on a clay floor. There was a porch, about five feet wide along the whole length of this incipient rectangle. In after life I have often wondered that there could be so much interior peace and consolation in poor surroundings. These were all the accommodations of St. Peter's in Dec. 1864.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Brother Lucian D'Agostino, S.J., joined the group after their arrival.

<sup>15</sup> Palladino, L. B., S.J., *Indian and White in the Northwest*, 2nd edition, Lancaster, Pa., 1922, 1. 193. This corrected version follows Kuppens' manuscript account.

<sup>16</sup> Kuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23 sq. Page 24 was left blank by mistake.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27, sq.



CHIEF WHITE CALF (third from left) and members of his Piegan Blackfoot band are pictured at the Badger Creek Agency in 1888, six years after White Calf and others had been baptized by the zealous Father Prando in his little log hut mission on Birch Creek. Abandoning surplus wives, the Indians received the sacrament from the Jesuit who was carrying on a personal war with Indian Agent John W. Young at the time.

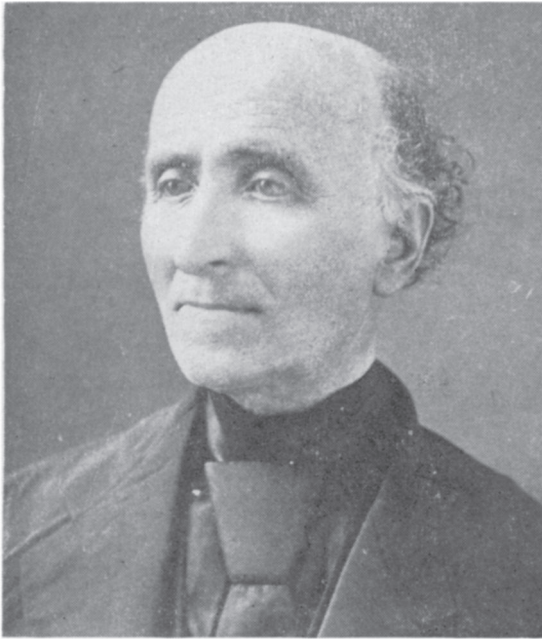
A curious detail of this palatial frontier establishment was a corral for horses directly outside the guest room. "Horses were borrowed sometimes during the night," says Father Kuppens almost apologetically, "to the great annoyance of ourselves and of our guests. By this arrangement each guest could keep his eye on his pony." This is doubtless one feature of St. Peter's that was little understood in Rome.

The Missouri was still frozen over when the mission was being built. This circumstance led to a grave mishap and a solemn vow which assured the Blackfoot nation of at least one friend among the Black Robes. One evening, so the accounts say, Father Giorda rather foolishly attempted to cross the ice on foot. It is not surprising that he fell through, since it was late February. When the ice gave way he had the presence of mind to extend his arms, and there he was, dangling in icy waters up to his arm pits, his feet carried by the current to the under-surface of the ice. His shouts for help were slower to attract the mission brothers than they did an Indian who lived near the mis-

sion (despite his un-Christian weakness for keeping a spare wife in his lodge). Bigamy fortunately did not prevent this redskin Casanova from casting a quick lariat to the precariously situated Black Robe. Saved from the Missouri's treacherous grasp, Giorda was convinced he owed his life to this Indian—which certainly cannot be denied. He solemnly made a vow to spend the rest of his life for the Blackfeet, at least insofar as Superiors allowed it. For his part the Indian, too, was thankful. Henceforth he took great care that every guest at the mission should be acquainted with all details of the rescue and should never forget them.

As if this were not enough adventure for one fortnight, Giorda fell into another equally dangerous and less dignified one, but not without an element of humor. Father Palladino, as usual, relates the details with a moral lurking somewhere:

"Father Giorda," he wrote, "set out with his interpreter to visit the Gros Ventres, and fell in with a war party belonging to the camp of Bull Lodge, one of the chiefs of the tribe. Both he



FR. ANTHONY RAVALLI, S. J., skilled physician, architect and missionary was one of the Jesuit stalwarts in the West. A monument to his architectural skill is the Coeur d'Alene Mission of the Sacred Heart at Cataldo, Idaho. He was at St. Peter's in 1864 and used his physician's skill to extract a Blackfeet arrow from the leg of Father Francis Kuppens. (Historical Society photo.)

and his companion were made prisoners, but the latter managed somehow, to escape. The marauders took from the missionary his mount and packhorse, provisions and all; and not content with this, they stripped him of the clothes on his back, to his very undergarments. Having relieved him of the cassock, the red flannel shirt he wore caught their fancy, and this, too, he had to surrender to his captors. No sooner had one of the band gotten [sic] it, than he put it on himself; but he was considerate enough to offer his own habiliment, a vermin - infested something without name, in exchange. It is stated that the thermometer at the Fort marked at this time forty degrees below zero; and how, under such conditions, Father Giorda did not perish with cold is truly remarkable.

"He managed, however, to make his way into the presence of Bull Lodge, who handed him a buffalo skin for a covering. The chief could hardly believe that he who stood naked before him and half frozen was a Black Robe. Not long after, horses, saddle, and some personal effects, namely, breviary, cassock and a pair of blankets, were returned to the missionary, but he was not permitted to remain in the camp."<sup>19</sup>

With these startling diversions, St. Peter's-on-the-Missouri got under way. Though raids and war parties continued to bedevil the frontier during the early years, the Jesuits achieved a nervous kind of stability which the chronicler called "progress." Father DeSmet, with his characteristic optimism, reported on this "progress" after a visit to St. Peter's in the late summer of 1862.

"On reaching the base of the Rocky Mountains, I met two of our Italian Fathers (Giorda and Imoda), and two coadjutor Brothers, who have settled among the Blackfoot tribes. This nation numbers about 10,000 souls. The meeting was unexpected on the part of my dear brothers in Christ, and the joy was all the greater. I found them in a rather bad way, lacking, in fact, almost everything, even necessaries, and I had expected as much. Thanks to a remnant of the funds obtained in Belgium (in 1860-61), I was enabled to bring them assistance. I had the great consolation to find them safe and sound, and to procure for them, in good order, a fine assortment of church ornaments and sacred vessels, victuals for nearly a year, garments and bed coverings, which they sadly needed, agricultural and carpenters' tools, several plows, some picks and shovels, an ambulance and a wagon—all of which were absolutely necessary, in a new establishment among 10,000 nomadic savages, whom it is desired to christianize and civilize.

"These worthy brothers are laboring among the Blackfeet with tireless zeal and courage. At the time of my visit they had been barely six months in that country, and the number of baptisms inscribed on the register came to upwards of 700 children and adults. The Mission is dedicated to the Apostle

<sup>19</sup> Palladino, *op. cit.*, 2nd edition, p. 195.

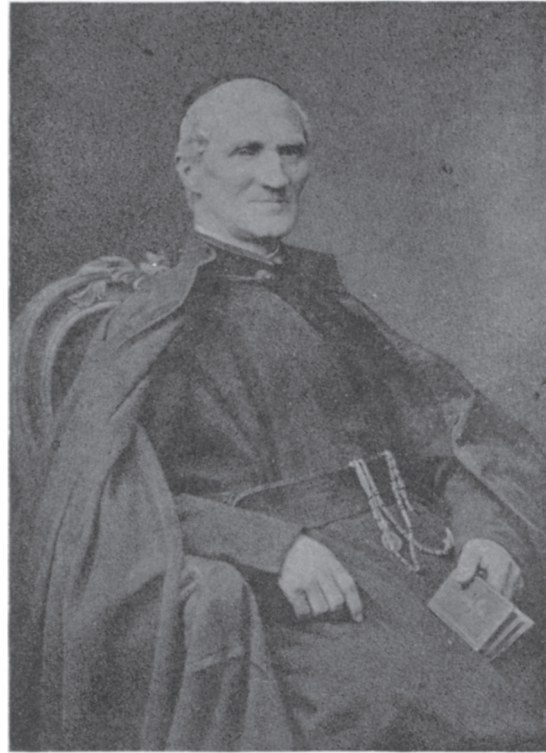
FR. PETER BECKX, S. J., the Belgian Jesuit who became the twenty-second general of the Jesuit Order in 1855, was the man for whom St. Peter's Mission was named, according to Fr. Palladino. Father Beckx died on March 4, 1887 when he was in his ninety-third year.

Peter. The number of Christians has grown considerably since my visit. The sight of this interesting little Christian community, growing so admirably in that far off desert, after centuries of abandonment, was to me a most consoling spectacle, showing the power of the Lord's grace over hearts so barbarous and but now so guilty—for the Blackfeet are considered the most barbarous and cruel of all the tribes of the plains."<sup>20</sup>

In August, 1864, the distinguished architect-doctor-Jesuit, Father Ravalli, arrived. Since many Jesuit communities have at least one genius among them, it should not be surprising that one so challenging as St. Peter's should now have two, Ravalli and Giorda, one of the greatest Indian language scholars in the history of Montana.<sup>21</sup> Augmenting the mission's good fortune, yet another addition to the staff arrived three months after Ravalli: Father Francis Kuppens, S. J., no great genius but a far-above-average Jesuit. This brought the number of the community to six—four priests and two brothers.

"I recollect well the evening of my arrival," Father Kuppens wrote at his Florissant, Missouri desk, exactly 50 years later; "and the first days I spent at the mission, the reception which the Indians gave me, the view of the Belt mountains, and of the Rockies: the immense plain, the majestic Missouri River which nearly encircled our place, remain vividly depicted in my mind; and in the evening I recollect, my attention was called to the roar of the waters of the Missouri at the Great Falls."<sup>22</sup>

If Father Kuppens had expected adventure when he left St. Louis, he surely was not disappointed in Montana. Soon after his arrival, while returning from a missionary excursion,



a young buck tried to steal his mount. "Upon this," says Father Palladino loyally, "Father Kuppens gave the fellow a good wack across the face with his whip, and off he galloped as fast as the horse could take him. In the twinkling of an eye, the Indian had recovered from his surprise and with bow and arrow shot at the Father, hitting him in the calf of the right leg, where the missile stuck, till it was extracted by Father Ravalli at the Mission."<sup>23</sup>

The little diptych described by Palladino presents a true-to-life portrait of the two Jesuit newcomers to St. Peter's: Father Kuppens, only twenty-six in years, fiery and energetic, and

<sup>20</sup> DeSmet's letter to Father Boone, in Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, S.J.*, Vol. II, p. 786 sq.

<sup>21</sup> Father Anthony Ravalli, S.J., was born at Ferrara, Italy, on May 16, 1812. He entered the Jesuit Order on November 12, 1827. He came to America with DeSmet in 1844, bringing with him the trained skills of physician and architect as well as missionary. One monument to his architectural skill is the old Coeur d'Alene Mission of the Sacred Heart at Cataldo, Idaho. Ravalli died on October 2, 1884. Giorda's part in the composition of the Kalispel Dictionary is well-known. Cf. Schoenberg, Wilfred P., S.J., *Jesuit Mission Presses*, Portland, 1957, p. 18 sq. Giorda, as shown by this bibliography, had a major role in the composition of four other important imprints from the St. Ignatius Mission Press.

<sup>22</sup> Kuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 22. He wrote this May 6, 1914, at the age of 75.

<sup>23</sup> Palladino, *op. cit.*, 2nd edition, p. 202.



the gentle Father Ravalli, a mellow fifty-two, pulling an arrow out of the priest-warrior's leg. Looking closely at the portrait you can see the younger man's impatience with the time required to extract so persistent a leech as an Indian arrow, and the older man's concern for the salvation of the rogue who attached it. Ravalli had already lived among the Indians for a ten full years.

A year later both had much medicine to practice. It seems that during the winter of 1865, a gold stampede into the Sun river area coincided with a particularly dreadful blizzard and cold spell. Many a miner had his ears, nose, hands or feet frozen. A number found their way to St. Peter's mission, where the scant accommodations were thrown open to them by the Fathers. Ravalli's skill saved many Irishmen that winter, and gold or no gold from the stampede, many another perished because the Ravalli's were scarcer than heavy nuggets.

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FR. PHILIP RAPPAGLIOSI, S. J., son of a wealthy Italian family, became an assistant at St. Peter's in the winter of 1876 and during the next winter of starvation his health broke under the strain of trying to help his Blackfeet charges. His death, attended by some suspicion of murder, caused a great stir in Rome. A copy of a rare biography on his life is in the Oregon Province Archives in Spokane.

The Sun river gold rush was a prelude to disaster. Added to it was the severe winter and three excessively dry summers (1862-1865) which created other hardships; but another, a more-to-be-regretted factor, entered into the final chapter of St. Peter's on the Missouri.

Had the government's promises to the Blackfeet and the mission been redeemed, it is quite probable that St. Peter's might be on the Missouri today—another St. Ignatius Mission famed for its contribution to Montana history. But it is a sad fact, on record, that the government did little or nothing to keep promises solemnly made in councils and treaties. The Blackfeet had agreed to take up farming if the Jesuits located their mission on the Missouri. When St. Peter's was established, many of them moved their lodges into the general area where they awaited the ploughs, cattle, harness, seed, and so forth, promised in their treaties. None of it ever arrived.<sup>24</sup>

The Jesuits, too, lacked these bare essentials for an agricultural economy. Though they had occupied fertile land, they could not put it to use. Their only garden was a one-half acre plot, spaded by hand and planted with seed provided by Father DeSmet. Gradually, as Father Kuppens observed, the Indians, disillusioned in pale faces' treaty-making, drifted away into the north country where they could jerk buffalo meat without great inconvenience. Actually, since they needed food to survive, they had no other choice.

If this was discouraging "progress," worse was to come. In the spring of

<sup>24</sup> Agricultural goods were promised the Blackfeet in Articles IX and X of the Blackfoot Treaty of 1855. Kuppens emphatically states that nothing arrived. "The mission itself was destitute of all those things. An abundance had been promised again and again, but nothing had been received." *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

BOYS SCHOOL and Jesuit residence buildings at St. Peter's Mission are pictured in about 1896. Fire, the recurring plague of the struggling mission, wiped out both buildings in January, 1908.

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1866, what peace the mission enjoyed was shattered by the arrival of a squaw man, John B. Morgan, who earnestly begged the Fathers to give him refuge, saying that the Blackfeet were determined to kill him. Foreseeing the consequences, the Jesuits bravely accepted him. Then they speedily witnessed reprisals. First their ten head of cattle were shot, one by one, within sight of the mission. Finally the mission herder, John Fitzgerald, was murdered scarcely a quarter of a mile away. The Jesuits buried him at the foot of the bluff described by Kuppens. The same day, April 26th, Father Giorda arrived from Virginia City, whence he had been summoned. A conference was held "on the west side of the river," probably to avoid disturbances, during which Giorda inquired about developments on a previously selected new mission site. He was visibly relieved, says Father Kuppens who was present, when informed that new buildings were almost ready. With tears in his eyes, Giorda then announced that St. Peter's on the Missouri would have to be abandoned, "since prudence demanded it."

That evening, after a frugal and sad supper, Giorda gave the Jesuit community "a short but impressive exhortation" in the mission chapel. In the morning they bade farewell to their much-loved mission. Father Giorda, delayed by a final prayer at the place of his rescue, was the last to leave.

A new St. Peter's, prepared in anticipation of a possible grand climax on the Missouri, was about a day's journey southwest, half-way between the Dearborn and Sun rivers. This was the location of the famous Bird Tail Rock on the Mullan Road. Here the bone-like ruins of St. Peter's lie today.



During the previous autumn, Giorda had sent Father Imoda with a brother and a few workmen to prepare logs, stone and other necessary materials for a well-developed mission which was to include a school. Lumber was hauled from Helena for the project. The first visitor to the construction camp was General Thomas Francis Meagher "who had strayed from the Mullan Road in a blizzard, and landed in our camp, attracted by the barking of dogs." Other visitors during construction were a number of chiefs who not only expressed approval of the location but promised to send their sons to the school when it was ready.

Giorda and his Jesuits took possession of this almost completed establishment with heavy hearts. Because of past experience they knew full well how delicate was the thread on which its fate hung. Perhaps by the morrow it would have to be abandoned, like three other missions, to rot beneath Montana's bright sky.

On the 28th, the day after their arrival, four priests said Mass in the new mission, after which they took their breakfast with the two brothers. Then all in melancholy silence examined their buildings—for a first and last time. The decision had just been made to abandon this mission also, until the bloody wars between whites and Indians had spent themselves.

This decision was made by the Jesuit Superior, not so much to save his Jesuit scalps, which was a praiseworthy objective (though most, for the sake of martyrdom, would liked to have lost

them) but principally because Jesuit manpower was altogether too scarce to waste in a fruitless mission. Little results, not to mention "progress" again, could be hoped for before the frontier regained its peace. Hence Giorda ordered his men, "across the mountains to St. Ignatius" where there was work enough for three times their number. Giorda himself returned to Helena from which he continued to visit Blackfoot camps in fulfillment of his vow.

For eight years St. Peter's had "a lingering existence of rather a prolonged agony." Jesuits were careful to visit the place periodically to comply with all requirements of the law to establish legal title. Meanwhile their two previously occupied sites were preempted by the government for the use of soldiers, the one on the Sun river in the summer of 1866 to control developments during a gold stampede there, and the other on the Missouri shortly after the Jesuits closed it.<sup>25</sup>

The strain of frontier tensions and of Giorda's responsibilities as Jesuit superior seriously affected his health. On September 11, 1866, he was relieved of his duties and Father Urban Grassi, S. J., was assigned to his position.<sup>26</sup> This arrangement was explicitly stated to be "temporary," that is, Father Giorda was to be relieved only long enough to recover his strength.

Father Grassi, an absolutely fearless and rugged missionary, aged thirty-six with eight years of mission experience at St. Ignatius, was apparently not well-disposed toward the foundation at Bird Tail Rock. About one year after assuming office of Vice-Superior he dispatched Father Joseph Menetrey, S. J., to the mission with orders to close the place.<sup>27</sup> Menetrey lived at the mission during the winter of 1867-1868, but before he had disposed of all the movables, he was suddenly recalled to Helena. Entrusting the mission to the care of Thomas Moran, he returned to headquarters in the summer of 1868. Several months later Father Gregory

Gazzoli, S. J., was ordered to examine the situation and to make a report on the expediency of re-opening the mission. He also spent a winter there, looking into all aspects of the case. He returned to Helena in the following summer with an unfavorable report.

Two other circumstances now conspired to complicate matters. First, on December 5, 1870, President Grant in his message to Congress announced his famous "Peace Policy," assigning the spiritual care of specific reservations to certain religious groups and restricting the activities of all others on those reservations. By this new policy Grant turned over the Blackfeet Reservation to the Methodists. Catholic missionaries were informed they no longer would be allowed to establish missions on the reservation. Since Bird Tail Rock was proximate to, but not on the reservation, Jesuit interest in the site picked up. Meanwhile Father Giorda had again assumed his office of superior on September 12, 1869. Thus the early 1870's were years of re-examining and wishful planning for the opening of St. Peter's. Finally in the early spring of 1874 Giorda considered the time ripe. He dispatched Father Imoda, his old comrade among the Blackfeet and the two veteran brothers of the mission to Bird Tail Rock with all-out plans for a boys' school for whites and a boys' "industrial" school for Indians.

<sup>25</sup> Palladino wrote: "Scarcely three days after reaching St. Ignatius last of April 1866, a special messenger arrived, sent by General Francis Meagher, and brought the General's request that Giorda, or in his stead, Father Kuppens with power of attorney, should come over without delay, in order to convey to the United States Military, the old St. Peter's Mission on the Sun River." Says Father Kuppens indignantly: "This is a mistake. The mission on the Missouri was the mission in question. I travelled with General Meagher from Helena to the mouth of the Judith River, was present at the conference of General Meagher with Colonel Raver, the commanding officer. General Meagher pleaded our cause very warmly, and I can positively affirm, that not a word was spoken about the mission on the Sun River. Our whole conference related to the site on the Missouri, where the houses could be used for storing their goods, and the peninsula was a most safe and desirable corral, for all the stock of the entire command. The offer was favorably considered, and a small band of soldiers occupied the place for two or three months." *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Father Urban Grassi, S.J., was born in Girola, Italy, on November 25, 1830. He entered the Society of Jesus on December 5, 1850 and came to the United States in 1853. His death brought on by overwork and pneumonia occurred at Umatilla, Oregon, March 21, 1890.

<sup>27</sup> Father Joseph Menetrey, S.J., was born in Friburg, Switzerland, November 28, 1812. He entered the Society of Jesus at the age of twenty-three, came to the United States ten years later and spent thirty years in mission and parish work in Montana. He died at St. Ignatius Mission on April 27, 1891.

FR. PETER PRANDO, S. J., energetic Jesuit who arrived at St. Peter's in the spring of 1880 and learned the Indian language thoroughly, baptized hundreds of Blackfeet and eventually incurred the wrath of Indian Agent Young by continuing to baptize Blackfeet at his log headquarters at the edge of the reservation. This photograph was taken by O. S. Goff of Fort Custer, Mont.



The three eager friends of the Blackfeet had scarcely taken up residence at St. Peter's when they received word that Congress had passed a law on April 15th establishing the new boundaries of the Blackfeet reservation north of the Birch Creek-Marias River line. This placed the southern border of the reservation about 60 miles from St. Peter's.

Determined to remain after so much effort and prayer in making their decision, the Jesuits sadly set about the grim business of survival. No longer were the villains in their lives Northern Piegans who unexpectedly swooped down from Canada, but the much less personal evil of government policy; though it must be admitted, personalities in the form of traders or agents entered the scene and quite literally stole the show.

The first victim of the new era was Father Philip Rappagliosi, S. J., who arrived at St. Peter's as an assistant in the winter of 1876.<sup>28</sup> Buffaloes were plentiful that winter and the Indians feasted on their choicest tidbits without restraint. During the following winter, however, famine stalked treacherously among the tepees on the reservation as well as elsewhere; and terrible hardships, in which the Jesuits shared, became a daily ordeal. Indians went in search of buffalo carcasses left to rot the year before. "These they brought home with them, rejoicing, and they devoured them with an appetite which only a starving man possesses."<sup>29</sup> Father Rappagliosi, accustomed to the refinements and bounty of his native Italy, broke under the strain. He died on February 7, 1878, with the suspicion of his having been murdered clinging to his remains.

When the news of this well-known Jesuit's death reached Rome, three priests volunteered to take his place. All three, Fathers Philip Canestrelli, S. J., Joseph Damiani, S. J., and Peter Prando, S. J., spent many years in the missions of Montana. All became noted Indian language scholars and all presented manuscripts to the St. Ignatius Mission Press which printed them. There the resemblance ended.

Prando was not the first to arrive but he was the most energetic; and though he did not long survive the bitterness of the government agent's opposition, he left the most lasting mark upon the Blackfeet. Arriving at St. Peter's in the spring of 1880, he was first assigned the unpleasant task of learning the Indian language, a duty he undertook with so much vigor that he soon came to excel his companions

<sup>28</sup> Father Philip Rappagliosi, S.J., mostly distinguished himself with the holiness of his life. Born of a wealthy and noble family in Rome, September 14, 1841, at precisely the time Father DeSmet and his Jesuit confreres were founding the first mission in Montana, he entered the Jesuit Order at the precocious age of fifteen. He completed his studies in divers countries of Europe and came to the United States in 1873. Worn out by hunger, cold, fatigue and grief, he died February 7, 1878. His death, as has been noted, created a great stir in Rome and a biography, now a great rarity, was produced within a year: *Memorie Del P. Filippo Rappagliosi*, Rome, 1879. A copy of this book can be found in the Oregon Province Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Manuscript by an unidentified author, "The Apostle of the Blackfeet," in the Oregon Province Archives of the Society of Jesus. This contains details on Rappagliosi's life and work among the Blackfeet.

in the art of speaking and writing it. He also studied the English language and in periodic excursions to Fort Shaw and Sun River he had opportunities to practice both of these adopted tongues. In May, 1881, with his notes on the Blackfeet language in his saddlebag and with the thrill of a great challenge surging through his body, he picked his way north along the Lewis Range of mountains to the reservation. Going directly to the Agency at Badger Creek, twelve miles beyond Birch Creek, he requested an interview with the agent, Major John W. Young.<sup>30</sup> Young, a staunch Methodist, was seemingly very cordial. He approved Prando's remarks about the establishment of a school at St. Peter's for Indian boys and in conclusion he assured Prando that "I love the Catholic Priest. In fact my mother died a Catholic."<sup>31</sup>

From May until November when he was recalled to St. Peter's, Prando visited Indian camps all over the reservation, baptizing many of the children and promising to return to instruct and baptize the adults. Before leaving he built a log hut "36 foot square" on the south side of Birch Creek.

In the following May he returned. Many adults including the head chief of the Blackfeet, White Calf, having disposed themselves for baptism by abandoning extra husbands or wives, received the sacrament in Prando's little hut. Perhaps for this reason, as Prando claimed, perhaps not, Young turned against Prando. Thus began a personal war between the Catholic Black Robe and the Methodist agent. Young in a rage ordered Prando off the reservation at the end of May. Prando, with a saucy retort, obeyed the order and many sympathetic Indians followed him, establishing their camp on the opposite side of the creek from Prando's mission. From his fragile fortress Prando sallied forth as he wished, a Moses defying Pharaoh. He openly made forays into Young's domain, protesting that he knew his rights "as a

white man, knowing, too, that the Constitution of the United States grants religious liberty to all." On these defiant excursions, and in his little hut, he baptized 686 Blackfoot Indians, "as it were by contraband."

At this point another development favoring Prando's position took place. It is unlikely that Young knew of it, though it was, in effect, a loaded Jesuit cannon trained on his agency at Badger Creek. Father Joseph Cataldo, S. J., the contemporary Superior of the Rocky Mountain Mission, already a veteran of another Black Robe-Indian Agent battle on the Nez Perce reservation, canonically established the Birch Creek mission as an official Jesuit residence and assigned another Jesuit to assist Prando.<sup>32</sup> He also ordered the Fathers at St. Peter's to increase the capacity of the boys' school by erecting permanent stone buildings. This was in open defiance of Young who, it was said, very much disapproved of the Blackfeet sending their children off the reservation.

If this were not rebellion enough, poor Young had to bear more. Louis Riel, the Metis rebel against the government Indian policy in Canada, now joined the Jesuit "rebels" at St. Peter's. Banished from Canada with a price on his head, Riel took a position as teacher at St. Peter's, in 1883. "The work was monotonous and elementary but he seemed to enjoy it, and satisfied his employers except when he talked politics which made them impatient, or when he discussed religion as he did occasionally which gave them alarm. He pleased the parents of the pupils and carried with him until he died various letters of appreciation which he received while he was a teacher."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> One lone voice has been raised in the defense of Major John W. Young for his part in the years that followed. Without doubt it is an able one and long awaited. Mrs. Helen B. West published her defense of Young in *Montana*, Vol. IX, (January, 1959), p. 2 sq.: "Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet." Most Jesuit writers were rather harsh on Young, who unquestionably had something in his favor in the dispute.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Prando in a letter to Father Joseph Cataldo, S.J., which was published in *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. XII (1883), p. 305 sq.

<sup>32</sup> This was Father Joseph Damiani, S.J.

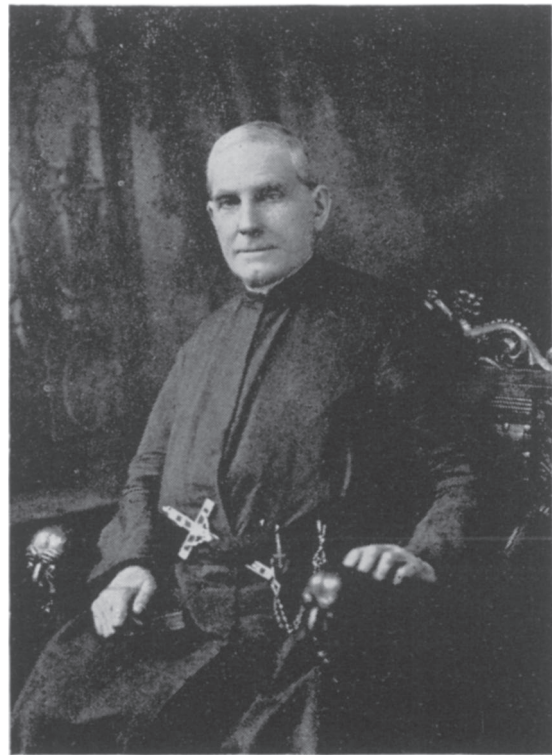
<sup>33</sup> Davidson, William McCartney, *Louis Riel 1844-1885*, Calgary, n.d., p. 129.

FR. JOSEPH CATALDO, S. J., Superior of the Jesuit Missions in the Rocky Mountain region from 1877 to 1893, was a veteran of more than one battle between the Black Robes and government Indian agents. He openly defied Agent John W. Young when he ordered permanent stone buildings erected at St. Peter's to expand the school for boys.

In mid-June, 1884, Riel left St. Peter's to answer a new summons of his people for leadership. He died the following year, on a government scaffold, and with him ended the anxieties of the Jesuits about his religious messianic complex.

Meanwhile, in 1884, Prando was moved to St. Ignatius Mission, probably because of the pressure brought to bear from Washington. Young, too, was relieved of his charge. So the two war horses retired from the field; the agent in silent moroseness, Prando as irrepresible and witty as ever. The work of both, as sometimes happens, went on as before. Prando's little mission subsequently developed into Holy Family Mission which eventually replaced St. Peter's.

At St. Peter's the boys' school flourished, in numbers if not in a material way, and the new superior, Father Joseph Damiani, S. J., began to agitate with higher-ups for the establishment of a girls' school under the Ursulines.<sup>34</sup> Protesting that "a mission school without nuns is no mission school at all," he finally had his way. On October 30, 1884, the distinguished Ursuline pioneer, Mother Amadeus Dunne, arrived by stagecoach from Helena with two other Ursulines. A fourth was summoned from Miles City. In short order Mother Amadeus had her school in operation with thirty little Indian maidens in residence. While a permanent stone convent and school were being erected, with funds partly supplied by Miss Katherine Drexel of Philadelphia, the nuns and their Indian girls lived in log cabins. These, you may be sure, were as spotless as convents everywhere, but the poverty they enclosed exceeded even that of the Jesuits. For seven years the Ursulines suffered it; then,



at the end of 1891, they transferred their few belongings to the new three-story Mount Angela which but proved to be a more sturdy shell for the same grim poverty. On January 1, 1892, Bishop Brondel of Helena said the first Mass in the new chapel, using an old piano for an altar.<sup>35</sup>

With this "new look" Mount Angela assumed new functions. On the occasion of its dedication it was designated as the Motherhouse for the Ursulines of the West. A new academy for white girls became an added feature which unexpectedly developed into two permanent Montana schools.<sup>36</sup> By this time the Indian girls' department had become a "contract school" with the U. S. Indian Department paying \$9.00 per month for each of a specified number of children, a number which never

<sup>34</sup> Father Joseph Damiani, S.J., was born in Tivoli, Italy, on October 6, 1842. Having entered the Jesuit Order on September 28, 1859, he arrived in the United States in 1878. He died at Port Townsend, Washington, on June 24, 1922.

<sup>35</sup> Many details concerning the Ursulines at St. Peter's can be found in Mother Clotilde, O.S.U., *Ursulines of the West*, n.p., 1936.

<sup>36</sup> The present Ursuline Academy in Great Falls, established on this site in 1912, is a continuation of the original academy at St. Peter's. A second school, the College of Great Falls, had its beginnings in 1932 at the Ursuline Academy when Bishop O'Hara undertook its foundation with the aid of the Great Falls Ursulines.

equalled the total at the mission. For example in 1893 "of the one hundred and three children at St. Peter's the government paid for ninety."<sup>37</sup> Though meager, the subsidy put the struggling mission on its feet. At the beginning of 1895, its future appeared as serene and as secure as a Helena gold-plated bank.

But even banks go bankrupt and the blow that made St. Peter's insolvent was not long in coming. In the Secretary of the Interior's Annual Report for 1894 a policy of substituting government schools for contract schools was already under discussion and a 20% reduction in the amount allowed contract schools was suggested. Accepting this policy, the Senate Committee on Appropriations recommended that Congress in its Appropriations Act for the fiscal year 1896 limit aid to the contract schools and establish the principle that "the government shall as early as practicable make provisions for the education of Indian children in Government schools." This policy, which appeared to be very reasonable on the surface, was approved by Congress in 1895. As in the case of the establishment of the reservation boundary, there was no appeal. In the end it practically destroyed mission schools of all faiths; it cost the government countless millions of dollars over the years; it secularized a significant part of Indian leadership; and it produced a type of school that largely failed in its purpose for at least two generations.

Although this was not the first blow to strike St. Peter's, nor the last, it was surely the most unreasonable, since it denied the basic right of parents to choose their own school for their children. Almost immediately funds for St. Peter's were cut off and the Jesuits were forced to close their school. Father James Rebmann, S. J., the mission's superior, dispatched the last two Jesuit teachers to another mission in June,

1896. Then he, too, left to assume direction of Gonzaga College in Spokane Falls, Washington. St. Peter's was no longer a major mission.

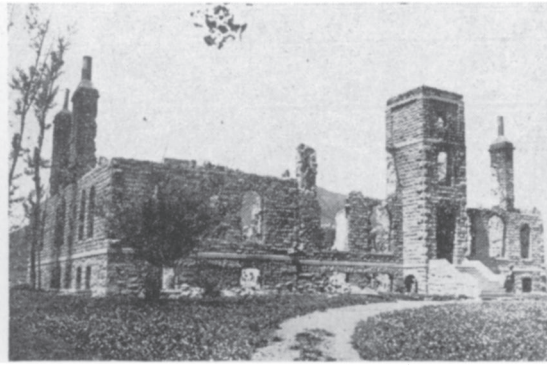
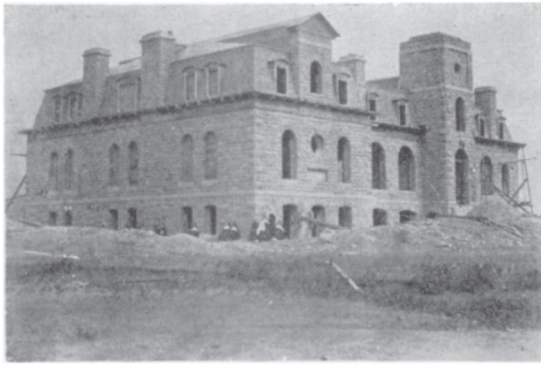
The Ursulines, committed to a broader program, could not so easily solve their dilemma. Fortunately their academy for white girls was flourishing. They received some, though not considerable, help from eastern friends and they drifted along, uncertain about the future and gravely concerned over their hand-to-mouth existence.

Two years passed in anxiety and indecision. Then the Jesuits, sick at heart and disturbed about their whole mission system, announced that they would abandon St. Peter's at the end of May, 1898. Henceforth they would concentrate on Holy Family Mission for the Blackfeet. They felt there was no other choice. At this time they operated four other mission schools in Montana besides Holy Family and seven other mission schools in the Pacific Northwest. As if this were not woe enough, they had recently been assigned to cover the entire Alaska Mission which had to be financed with something besides sunshine and fresh air.

The departure of the Jesuits left the Ursulines in a quandary. With so much at stake, their motherhouse and academy as well as the Indian girls' school, they could not bring themselves to abandon St. Peter's. Hard-pressed on all sides, they continued to struggle.

Meanwhile a pathetic little crisis arose when an Indian boy, brother to two girls at St. Peter's, was refused admission at the government school unless his sisters attended the government school also. The two girls begged the nuns to keep them and their brother also so the harassed nuns held a council and decided to open a boys' school in the buildings abandoned by the Jesuits. To staff it they had to employ male assistance which, of course, involved more begging and frugality.

<sup>37</sup> Mother Clotilde, O.S.U., *op. cit.*, p. 41.



MT. ANGELA SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, established at St. Peter's Mission by the Ursulines, is shown at the left in about 1891 shortly before its completion. At the right are seen the ruins of the building after a fire destroyed it in November, 1918.

In 1900 reorganization of the Ursuline Order provided for the establishment of a new Northern Province of the Order with its motherhouse in New York. This called for rearranging the situation at St. Peter's as well as a re-consideration of their school's future. While the nuns pondered this problem the old Jesuit buildings were destroyed by fire in January, 1908. Unable to rebuild, the nuns dropped this part of their program. Three years later another answer appeared in the form of a gift of land in Great Falls from John D. Ryan. The site, an excellent one for an academy, became the center of hopes and plans. Under the supervision of Mother Perpetua Egan, O.S.U., a splendid new building was erected and occupied in September, 1912. Thus another function of St. Peter's disappeared. Now only the Indian girls' school remained; and its existence was so tenuous that the appearance of a church mouse might have severed it.

On November 16, 1918, a more-than-mouse appeared. Another fire, devourer of missions, destroyed Mount Angela during the night. Nuns with their forty-two Indian maidens, most of them in bare feet and night clothes, hurried into the snow to save their own scalps. Nothing else was saved; everything gathered by the nuns with agonizing effort for thirty-three years disappeared in the roaring flames of a few bewildering moments. The Ursulines' loss was estimated at seventy-five thousand dollars.

The flames that destroyed the physical facilities also settled the question of their remaining in the valley of the Bird Tail Rock. There was no reason to rebuild. Those of the children who were not sent home were taken to Great Falls or were placed in other Ursuline schools of Montana. The Ursulines themselves were transferred to other houses of their Order where they took up new work while they probably philosophized about the fickleness of mission life and the advantages of being nuns.

Thus St. Peter's, as a mission, came to an inglorious end. Yet its original church, weathered and battered by continual use, standing like an anachronism of logs in a ferro-concrete century, still serves as a mission station of the Cascade parish of the Sacred Heart. A new bell-tower has been added at the front entrance to take the place of the original one which stood, precariously, for many years, at the center of what was formerly an L-shaped building. Its gleaming whiteness reveals the care which the Diocese of Great Falls has taken to preserve the old church. Hovering above it and all around it is a mystical kind of history, like the history of ancient castles where medieval battles were waged. This, too, cherished by those who have lived in the shadow of the church as well as by those who have gathered its relics, is profoundly worthy of preservation.