

History of Early Experiences in Montana

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(Dictated by Rev. R. De Ryckere 1905 ---- Written by Sister M. Syra)

REMARK: In this paper no attempt has been made to write a history. Only disconnected incidents, recalled from memory, of the first ten years missionary experiences in Deer Lodge, are given. Time does not permit a more lengthy sketch at present.

In June, 1866, Fr. Rem. De Ryckere received his letters of mission from Rt. Rev. A.M.A. Blanchet, Bishop of Nesqually, to go and visit the eastern part of the diocese which extended east and west from the summit of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and north and south was comprised between parallels 49' and 46' North Latitude as far as the bend of the Columbia River, and from where the 46' strikes the Columbia River, then the Columbia River was the boundary to the Coast.

He laid over in Walla Walla, a great outfitting point at that time, for parties going out to Montana, for two or three weeks, awaiting the chance of company to make a trip of over four hundred miles through an unsettled and wild country. Finally under the guidance of some returning miners and in company of some Jesuit Fathers, he left Walla Walla for the furthestmost eastern portion of the diocese, and after a journey on horseback of three weeks of continuous riding by day, and by night sleeping a la belle étoile, he arrived in Deer Lodge on the 27th of July, 1866. On his way to this place he passed and stopped for a day at the Couer d' Alene Mission, where among other Jesuit Fathers he met good Father Giorda, S.J., who had already traveled thru this country, and advised him to make Deer Lodge his objective point. Deer Lodge, at that time, also called Cottonwood, was a small village of a dozen or more cabins, in Deer Lodge Valley on the Deer Lodge River and the county seat of Deer Lodge County. He found it rather centrally located for the part of the diocese over which he had to travel, and although the number of Catholics residing there was small, he concluded to settle at that point and from there to examine the country around and visit the people in the different placer mining camps of the county, at least that part of it which lay west of the eastern boundary of the diocese. His position was anything but inviting: he met with all kinds of inconveniences and fought his way through as best he could. He found no chance of getting a room at the hotel, but was finally given a lodging by Mr. John Grant until the latter sold out a few weeks later; then he was taken in by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Coleman who had moved in to spend the winter at that place.

In October of the same year he undertook the building of a little chapel with the rear fixed up for his own lodging place. He said the first Mass in this chapel on December 8th, hence the title of the Immaculate Conception Church. On the eve of Christmas he moved into his room. The building was small---- 42 by 18 feet; the rooms were partitioned off so as to leave 30 by 18 for the chapel. From the time of his arrival the Father started to visit the different placer mining camps of which there were quite a number: Blackfoot City on Ophir Gulch, Washington Gulch, McClellan Gulch, Lincoln, Pioneer, and Philipsburg, where a quartz mill was built, the first in the county in 1866-7; Cable City, German Gulch, Silverbow, Rockertown, and Butte were small mining districts. He had a good deal to contend with: poor quarters, little assistance and the winter of '66 was dreadfully cold.

It was on December 27, '66 that the Rev. Father, while chopping wood, accidentally mashed the first finger of his right hand, and was laid up for a number of weeks and prevented from celebrating Mass. No one will ever tell what an amount of suffering and privation the Father put up with during these cold winter weeks. But if the days were lonesome and dreary, what of the

dreaded nights, several of them without sleep, whilst at times the pain and soreness of the wound would bring on fainting spells. In his distress he wrote to Rev. Father Kuppens, praying him to come and see him, which he did, but because the poor sufferer had not the elements at his command, and did not prevent a blizzard from springing up and raging at the time of the Rev. Father's trip over to Deer Lodge from Helena, he has never heard the end of it. Even Father Palladino found proper to perpetuate the incident in his book "Indian and White".

In 1867, the Father wrote to his Bishop giving his views concerning his difficult position here: a young inexperienced clergyman cast out by himself, among people of all nationalities and creeds, good, bad, and indifferent---- and yet there was all over the district a fair number of Catholics, even forming the majority of the inhabitants in some of the camps. He thought proper and begged that another and more experienced clergyman might be sent to take charge of the district, declaring his willingness to remain with him as his assistant. An answer came: "Have no one to spare. Do the best you can. God will help you."

In a letter which he received from His Lordship sometime in 1867, he was told to go around with the Sisters from Vancouver, Washington, on a collecting tour for the orphans. He went all over the district with them, saying Mass on Sundays in whatever camp he happened to be for the day. After a canvass of nearly two months he accompanied the Sisters as far as Walla Walla, and then returned to Deer Lodge, this time favored with the company of several Jesuit Fathers, one of whom was Rev. L.B. Palladino: they treated him most kindly all the way up, back to his mountain home.

In the year 1868 he began to build a little church in Rocker, but the camp was almost totally abandoned before the church was finished; the building later on was torn down and hauled to Deer Lodge for a stable. This experience of Rockertown made him give up the idea of building churches in mere placer camps because of their uncertainty, and made him possibly mistrustful of all the camps.

Up to this time hardly any other country village had been started in the district. New Chicago had made a beginning and is at it yet. Others sprung into existence later on, but none grew to be of any size or importance until long after.

This year, 1868, another visit was made by the Providence Sisters of Vancouver, Washington, to collect for the orphans; and he again piloted the Sisters all over the district with as good success as the year before.

Some time in 1868 Western Montana and Northern Idaho were cut off from the diocese of Nesqually, and with Southern Idaho were made into a Vicariate Apostolic, with the Rt. Rev. L. Lootens as its first Vicar Apostolic. The Father never had the pleasure of meeting the Rt. Rev. gentleman. His Lordship never visited this part of his Vicariate of which he had a poor idea, supposing, as he wrote in one of his letters, that this was nothing but part and parcel of the Great American Desert.

During the month of March, 1869, the Father received orders to leave and go to Silver City, Idaho; he objected to leaving without settling his accounts, which he was unable to do, not having any ready money. His Lordship seemed to have concluded, from a letter of his, that the Father wished for a change; this, however, was not the case. An explanation followed; the Father wrote to the Bishop, and his letter was forwarded from Idaho City to Bishop Lootens, who in the meantime had left for Europe and gone to Rome; it was from Rome the answer came telling him to remain until further orders; -- this letter was not written until March 1870. The Father continued making his home in Deer Lodge and continued more or less regularly to visit the placer camps, some of which by this time began to show signs of being worked out; whilst

others seemed to do better for a longer time, and then followed the procession of 'playing out' gradually in their turn. This unsettled and restless state of the mining camps was continued until about 1874 and even to '76. All was excitement and bustle in those early days. None came to stay or build permanent homes. All came to get some money and then return to the East. Reports of newly discovered gold fields were followed by stampedes to the supposed bonanzas which in many cases proved worthless. Even the inclemency of the severe winter weather did not deter adventurous men from leaving their little cabins at a moment's notice to seek fortunes elsewhere, sustaining even loss of life and limb in the attempt.

Whilst Deer Lodge never offered to grow very large, it became a respectable little town about this time, and had a population of over one thousand inhabitants; although there were never more than twenty-five or thirty Catholic families among them. A few Catholic families lived about ten miles above on the Dempsey and Race Track Creeks.

During the years 1871 and '2 everything looked as if in a state of transition -----all was feverish excitement; the resources of the country were uncertain; the placer mines were giving out; agricultural pursuits were not promising; cattle raising was not extensive. The more incredulous thought Montana would again become a hunting ground for the Indians, and that there were not sufficient resources to justify any investment here. However, a few more hopeful and more persevering in the face of all difficulties continued prospecting and trying to develop quartz mines. Some good discoveries were made toward the end of '72 and things took on a more favorable aspect.

In 1873, negotiations were started and application made to the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth to come to Deer Lodge, build a hospital, and take charge of it. Four of them, Sisters Gertrude, Placida, Mary Bridget and Mary Louis, arrived in the Fall of that year. Having rented Dr. Mitchell's hospital, they were given charge of the County poor and sick, while money was being collected for the building of St. Joseph's Hospital. A block 300 by 400 feet on the eastern limit of the Deer Lodge town site was kindly donated to the Sisters by Messrs. Claggett and Dixon, at that time prominent lawyers in this city. Here a new frame hospital was erected and in March 1874 was ready for occupancy. The first building has since been replaced by a more commodious and substantial brick structure, better adapted to the needs and calls of the present time.

In 1874 a site was obtained close to the hospital on which to build a little church. The building was put up, a stone structure 60 by 28 feet, at a cost of some \$7000----the full amount of which was not paid up until long after. This church was plastered during the winter of '74 and '75, and was blessed by Rev. F.J. Kelleher, a priest of the diocese of Omaha, who for a number of years had charge of the counties of Madison and Beaverhead in Eastern Montana over which the Bishop of Omaha had jurisdiction.

Butte, Rucker City, and Silverbow were already three placer mining camps along Silverbow Creek in 1866. They continued for some time to yield their quota of the yellow metal but gradually sank into almost total insignificance until finally the attempt at silver quartz mining met with some success and developments took a firmer shape. Success in that line being met with by some, quartz mills and other reduction works began to be built. More extensive prospecting and development of old claims were carried on and pushed with more and more energy and success. It was from 1874, one might say, but more strikingly from 1876 on, that Butte and its immediate neighborhood have shown that there is an immense network of rich silver and copper mines underlying the town of Butte and its neighborhood. Now, think that while for some time previously to 1870 there had been a few Catholics around Butte, in the early 70's there were no more than eight or ten in a population of a few hundred inhabitants, and to the best of the Father's recollection there was but one Catholic family.

Father Poulin, 1876, was sent as assistant priest to Deer Lodge by Rt. Rev. F.N. Blanchet of Portland, Oregon, under whose jurisdiction the Vicariate Apostolic of Idaho had been placed, after the resignation of its first Rt. Rev. Vicar Apostolic. Father Poulin remained only fifteen months, and on account of poor health went to Montreal.