

## FATHER DE SMET AND THE POTTAWATTAMIE INDIAN MISSION

One of the earliest attempts to found a mission among the Indians of Iowa was that made among the Pottawattamies by the Jesuits<sup>1</sup> under the direction of the renowned missionary, Father Pierre Jean De Smet. This mission was founded in 1838 on the site of the present city of Council Bluffs. Although the mission was of comparatively short duration it is notable as an example of the heroic attempts to bring the Indians under the influence of Christian civilization. Moreover, it served as a training school where Father De Smet learned to know the Indian character — a knowledge that fitted him well for that greater work which he was later to accomplish in the far west. He left many records of his experiences at the mission; and with these as a basis it is possible to reconstruct an account of the daily life of the missionaries themselves as well as the manners, customs, legends, traditions, and mode of living of the people among whom they labored.

The Pottawattamie Indians were of Algonquin stock. The name "Pottawattamie" meant "makers of fire" and was used to designate them as an independent people who built their fires apart from other tribes.<sup>2</sup> Their first

<sup>1</sup> In 1833 the bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States, assembled at the Second Provincial Council of Baltimore, appealed to Rome to have the Indian missions of the United States entrusted to the Jesuits. Members of that order had had much experience in dealing with the Indians. Their mission work had gone hand in hand with French and Spanish discovery, exploration, and settlement. In fact, they often became explorers and discoverers themselves.— *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, p. 240; Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Fulton's *The Red Men of Iowa*, p. 163.

recorded habitat was in the region of the Great Lakes. They were at one time members of Pontiac's Confederacy, and in 1812 belonged to Tecumseh's Confederacy. After that date they were found in scattered groups in northern Indiana, northern Illinois, and southern Wisconsin. In a series of treaties, extending from 1829 to 1837,<sup>3</sup> they ceded to the United States all their lands in these regions in exchange for five million acres in what is now southwestern Iowa, which had been ceded to the United States in 1829<sup>4</sup> by the Sioux, Sacs and Foxes, Ioways, Otoes, and Missouris. Through errors on the part of the government agents, the Pottawattamies who were removed westward in 1835, 1836, and the early part of 1837 were first carried into the territory now comprising the northwestern part of the State of Missouri, not far from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. These Indians, however, were removed to their own lands in Iowa in 1837, and the Council Bluffs sub-agency was established at a point about one mile above the mouth of the Platte River on the east (left) bank of the Missouri River.<sup>5</sup>

Although a few Pottawattamie Indians may have arrived at the site of Council Bluffs sometime in 1835 or 1836, the first arrival of which an official record appears occurred in 1837. On July 28th of that year, the steamer *Kansas* arrived at a point on the left bank of the Missouri River about fifteen or eighteen miles above the mouth of the Platte River. On board the *Kansas* were about one hundred Pottawattamie women and children, with some men who were unable to walk, all in charge of Brigadier General Henry Atkinson and Dr. Edwin James. Dr. James had just been appointed sub-agent for the Pottawattamie Indians. Other members of the tribe were escorted over-

<sup>3</sup> *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Pt. II, pp. 750-766.

<sup>4</sup> Pickard's *Iowa Indians in The Iowa Historical Lectures*, 1892, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, p. 10.

land to their new home, but the number of Pottawattamies who finally located in southwestern Iowa probably never exceeded three thousand.<sup>6</sup>

During the next year — 1838 — a Catholic mission was founded in their midst by two Jesuit missionaries, Fathers Pierre De Smet and Felix Verreydt. Father Verreydt, while stationed at the Kickapoo Mission in Kansas, had visited the Pottawattamies before they had removed to Iowa with the intention of establishing a mission among them but his object was not accomplished at that time. After the Pottawattamies had settled at Council Bluffs a delegation visited the Kickapoo Mission to ask that a "blackrobe" be sent to their tribe. They were doubtless assured that their request would be granted, for on January 26, 1838, Father De Smet wrote to friends in Belgium, "New priests are to be added to the Potawatomi Mission, and my Superior, Father Verhaegen, gives me hope that I will be sent." A few weeks later his hope was realized and he was appointed to establish a mission among the Pottawattamies.<sup>7</sup>

The story of De Smet's early life and how he became interested in the Indians is briefly as follows. Pierre Jean De Smet was born in the village of Termonde, in Belgium, in the year 1801. After completing his elementary education in the neighborhood of his home, he went to the seminary at Malines at the age of twenty. Here, as in the elementary school, he distinguished himself for his tact and his good common sense. He was also noted for his physical strength and for his skill in sports — talents that served him well in the exacting life of a missionary among the Indians of the western country. Of a fervent and sentimental character, he turned naturally to a religious career.

<sup>6</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 26, 27, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, pp. 79, 80.

One day there came to the seminary a missionary from America, Rev. Charles Nerinckx, who had been laboring for some years in Kentucky and had returned to Belgium in search of funds and recruits. The tales of his thrilling experiences impressed several of the young students, and six of them volunteered for the mission fields. In the group were Pierre De Smet, John B. Smedts, Joost Van Assche, John A. Elet, Felix Verreydt, and Pierre Verhaegen. Parental objection was the first difficulty that the group had to meet, but they did not allow this to deter them. De Smet had to pawn his personal belongings for the expenses of the trip. The young missionaries sailed for America in the summer of 1821, and after a journey of forty days arrived at Philadelphia. After visiting Baltimore and Washington, they entered the Jesuit novitiate at Whitemarsh, Maryland. A call soon came from the Bishop of New Orleans for more missionaries to work among the Indians from St. Louis as a center, and De Smet was among those who answered the call, for it was his ambition to work among the western Indians.

The little crowd left Whitemarsh on April 11, 1823, for Missouri. The trip was made mostly on foot until they reached the Ohio River, and there a sort of barge was procured for the slow trip down the river. On May 31st they arrived at St. Louis and almost immediately set out to establish a new novitiate at Florissant, Missouri, about fifteen miles from St. Louis. After his regular course of studies at Florissant De Smet was ordained to the priesthood on September 23, 1827. While he was still a student, he had an opportunity of learning something about the Indians, for from 1824 to 1830 he taught the children in the Indian school which the Jesuits had established near their novitiate at Florissant. The new Jesuit college, which has since become St. Louis University, was started in 1828, and

in 1830 Father De Smet became a member of its faculty. Ill health caused him to give up his work for awhile, and in 1833 he made a trip to Europe to secure more recruits for the Jesuits and funds, instruments, books, and the like for the new college. He visited his old home in Belgium for several months and travelled somewhat in the interests of his work. He started for America in 1834 with three volunteers and many supplies for the college, but he became sick in crossing the North Sea and was forced to return to Belgium. When his health permitted, he worked constantly in trying to stir up an interest in missionary work, and when he set out for America in 1837, he brought with him three more candidates for the Jesuits.<sup>8</sup>

While Father De Smet was in Europe delegations had come to St. Louis from the Indian tribes of the far west to ask that a "blackrobe" might be sent to labor among them. These petitioners had come in 1831, in 1835, and again in 1837. On each occasion they were told that there were no missionaries available but that one would be sent soon.<sup>9</sup>

In 1836, Father Charles F. Van Quickenborne, together with Father Christian Hoecken and three lay brothers, had visited the Kickapoo Indians in northern Kansas and established a mission there. But they were rather discouraged at the lack of response on the part of the Kickapoos, and were glad when a band of Pottawattamie Indians came to ask for a "blackrobe" for their tribe. This request offered an opportunity to Father De Smet, which he gladly accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it came about that on May 31, 1838, Fathers De

<sup>8</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, pp. 5-76; Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 9-18.

<sup>9</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 19-30.

<sup>10</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, pp. 78, 79.

Smet and Verreydt, accompanied by Brother Andrew Mazelli, landed at the site now occupied by Council Bluffs, Iowa, to begin their work among the Pottawattamies. They expected an enthusiastic reception, but the savages who, decked out in gala attire, lined up along the river bank to meet the boat seemed to take no more notice of them than they took of any other strangers. In order to pay their respects to the Pottawattamie chief, "Billy" Caldwell, Father Verreydt and Brother Mazelli set out on a trip of four miles to his camp. While they were gone Father De Smet discovered that the Indians could not even "make the sign of the cross nor say a pater or an ave."

The chief received the missionaries in a very cordial manner, and they established themselves in a log fort or blockhouse which Colonel Stephen W. Kearny had turned over for their use.<sup>11</sup> This fort or blockhouse, some twenty-four feet square, had been erected in 1837 to protect the immigrating Pottawattamies from their belligerent enemies to the north. It had been occupied for a short time by Captain D. B. Moore with Company C of the United States Dragoons who returned to Fort Leavenworth when the danger seemed no longer to threaten.<sup>12</sup> On this structure Father De Smet placed a cross, and immediately Father Verreydt remarked that he "beheld the devil clap his tail between his legs and take flight over the big hills." Chief Caldwell gave them the use of three cabins to which they later added a fourth — each about fourteen feet square with roofs of wooden rafters, which let in the rain, hail, and snow.<sup>13</sup> Close by the chapel the missionaries laid out a

<sup>11</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 157-159; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, pp. 265, 267.

<sup>12</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 51-54.

<sup>13</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-*

cemetery.<sup>14</sup> Within a few weeks they were able to open a school which was of great help to them in their work though it could accommodate only thirty children.<sup>15</sup> The new church was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, and was named St. Joseph's Mission although it was also often referred to as St. Mary's.

One especially notable event at the mission was the first celebration of high mass. This took place on August 15, 1838, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Father De Smet, who probably sang the mass, gave the following description of the event: "The church where the divine service was celebrated was perhaps the poorest in the world; but twelve young neophytes, who three months before had no idea of the law of God, sang Mass in a manner truly edifying. Reverend F. Verreydt preached on devotion to the Mother of God; afterwards I gave an instruction upon the ceremonies and upon the necessity of baptism, and conferred that sacrament upon a score of adults. . . . After the Mass I blessed four marriages."<sup>16</sup>

There were at this time about two thousand Pottawattamie Indians in the vicinity, including some thirty families of French half-breeds. They lived in groups, situated from five to twenty-five miles apart. These villages were made up of several huts and tents constructed of upright poles covered with the bark of trees, buffalo hides, canvas, straw, and grass, and pitched helter-skelter

*Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 158; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, pp. 268, 269.

<sup>14</sup> Kempker's *The Catholic Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 164; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, p. 269.

with no regard for order or symmetry. Their lack of arrangement and their crude construction gave the villages a rather ugly appearance.<sup>17</sup> Except his hut, almost all that an Indian possessed was a horse and a few weapons. The clothing of the men usually consisted of a colored shirt, a woolen blanket, a pair of colored leggins or gaiters, adorned with silk ribbons of various colors, and moccasins of deer-skin, decorated with beads and silk ribbons. For ornaments they often wore a bead necklace or a silver crescent, or both together. Ear-rings were worn by both sexes. Each man carried a big knife in a sheath attached to a belt. On their heads they occasionally wore a leather band in which feathers were inserted to keep their hair in place. The hair was worn very long in two braids, one falling behind, the other in front, and each braid was highly adorned with trinkets and gaudy ribbons or feathers. Their faces were painted in various colors. A young man who was capable of supporting himself as a hunter carried a calumet and a tobacco bag which contained tobacco, a small piece of steel, a firestone, and a scrap of punk.

The dress of the women was, perhaps, a bit more elaborate than that of the men. Father De Smet thus described it:

Mademoiselle "Pack-Up-and-Get," (that is her name) eldest daughter of the Prince Big Axe, wore a coiffure, when she made her appearance in the great council lodge, the principal feather of the right wing of a female goose and a *bandeau* of blue beads interlaced with small cords. Her shirt of crimson curtain cloth was fastened at the neck with a deer's foot and pizzle, and adorned with seven silver spangles, which might be worth in Belgium a franc apiece. The draperies of this garment descended gracefully to the loins, covering her blue petticoat, which hung to her knees. Her leggins or gaiters were decorated with figures, worked in

<sup>17</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 15, 157, 158; Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 83.



porcupine quills and embroidered with sky-blue silk. A blue bed-blanket was thrown negligently over the princess' shoulders.

Her Royal Grandeur's moccasins were adorned with little beads of assorted colors, ingeniously worked in the form of toads. She had employed a great profusion of vermilion to add to the natural pink of her complexion, while Spanish brown and Venetian red had been mingled to paint her hair where it was parted in front. This long growth, the princess' natural ornament, did not cover her shoulders, but was plaited and tied together on the back of her head, as if to display a real and positive phrenological bump.

The princess had been prodigal in her toilet of that perfume so much admired by the Indians, the essence of the skunk, the odor of which is insupportable to civilized noses, and which announced her approach to the assembly, even before her form appeared.<sup>18</sup>

The women did most of the manual labor: they washed, mended, cooked, built the cabin, cut the wood, tilled and sowed the field. They appeared old at thirty.<sup>19</sup> The men preferred to pass their time in smoking or playing cards. Their only labor was hunting, and when necessary, war. Each fall the men banded together for the buffalo hunt. Usually they were successful in obtaining enough buffalo to supply themselves with meat and hides for some months. They hated work, and they were happy when idle. In general they had no ambition. If one aspired to better his lot or to increase his fortune by work, he became the object of general hatred and jealousy, and his possessions were quickly confiscated. Even the chief possessed no unusual rank or dignity.

On the other hand, the Pottawattamies were naturally gentle and obedient; disputes were rare, and often years passed without a quarrel, except when they got drunk, when their whole being seemed to be transformed. They

<sup>18</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. III, pp. 999, 1000.

<sup>19</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. III, p. 1093.

were sober more out of necessity than from virtue. They were fond of jesting, and could take a joke. They had no expression for blaspheming the name of God and their worst epithet to hurl at another was "dog".

They held many of the religious beliefs that were so commonly found among the Indians of America — belief in a Great Spirit, in some cases two Great Spirits, one good and one evil, in a Providence, in an evil spirit, in the necessity of adoration and worship, in the creation of man, in a universal deluge, in a mediator between the Great Spirit and man, and in the immortality of the soul. The ministers of their religion were medicine men, and their ceremonies consisted chiefly of songs and dances.<sup>20</sup>

The missionaries saw at once that there was a tremendous amount of work ahead of them, but it was work which offered the very opportunities that they had been seeking. The Indians were not only ignorant of the truths of Christianity, but were prejudiced and superstitious, and addicted to superstitious practices. A fortnight had passed after the arrival of the missionaries among the Pottawattamies before they came across a single Catholic Indian. Of the French half-breeds only a few had been baptized, and their knowledge of religion was negligible. Polygamy was common. "They change wives as often as the gentlemen of St. Louis change their coats", wrote De Smet. Then there was the fact that they were so fond of idleness and were of such a wandering disposition that they could not be contented in any settled abode. The difficulties of the Indian language, unwritten, consisting of many dialects, not easily pronounced, and with few interpreters, made the work doubly hard.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. III, pp. 1062-1099.

<sup>21</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 157, 163.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle that the missionaries had to meet was the prevalence of the liquor habit—a habit which afflicted not only the men, but also the women and children, and from time to time transformed a most peaceful community into a raging mob. The effect of this traffic is often referred to by Father De Smet. In his diary for the year 1839, the following notes occur:

May 25. Two Potawatomes killed on the Chage river in a drunken frolic.

May 27. Three Potawatomes drowned in the Missouri, supposed to be drunk.

May 28. A Potawatome poisoned on the Mosquito while drunk. Frequently the case.

May 30. Arrival of Steamer *Wilmington* with provisions. A war of extermination appears preparing around the poor Potawatomes. Fifty large cannons have been landed, ready charged with the most murderous grape shot, each containing thirty gallons of whiskey, brandy, rum, or alcohol. The boat was not yet out of sight when the skirmishes commenced. After the fourth, fifth and sixth discharges, the confusion became great and appalling. In all directions, men, women and children were seen tottering and falling; the war-whoop, the merry Indian's song, cries, savage roarings, formed a chorus. Quarrel succeeded quarrel. Blows followed blows. The club, tomahawk, spears, butcher knives, brandished together in the air . . . . .

I shuddered at the deed. A squaw offered her little boy, four years old, to the crew of the boat for a few bottles of whiskey. . . .

No agent here seems to have the power to put the laws into execution.

May 31. Drinking all day. Drunkards by the dozen. Indians are selling horses, blankets, guns, their all, to have a lick at the cannon. Four dollars a bottle! . . . . .

June 19. A monster in human shape . . . . . a savage returning home from a night's debauch, wrested his infant son from the breast of his mother and crushed him against the post of his lodge . . . . .

Aug. 19. Annuities \$90,000. Divided to the Indians. Great gala. Wonderful scrapings of traders to obtain their Indian credits.

Aug. 20. Since the day of payment, drunkards are seen and heard in all places. Liquor is rolled out to the Indians by whole barrels; sold even by the white men in the presence of the agent. Wagon loads of the abominable stuff arrive daily from the settlements, and along with it the very dregs of our white neighbors and voyagers of the mountains, drunkards, gamblers, etc. etc.<sup>22</sup>

These extracts describe vividly not only the horrors of the traffic, but also its duration. There is scarcely a page of this diary throughout the whole summer in which there is not some mention of the traffic. "With a drunken Indian about", wrote Father De Smet, "no one is safe, and many times my own life has been in danger."<sup>23</sup>

The missionaries were constantly trying to convince the Indians of the horrors of the traffic and were doing all in their power to stop it. Father De Smet wrote to the government on the subject in terms that could not be misunderstood, but no action was taken. The Indians themselves in a council begged the agent to prevent the poison being brought among them. Father De Smet could not find words to express his feelings in regard to the abuses connected with the liquor traffic and it was always a cause for deep regret that he was not more successful in curbing an abuse which was gradually destroying a nation among whom the most perfect harmony prevailed when they were sober.<sup>24</sup>

These difficulties, however, instead of deterring the missionaries tended to increase their zeal. Their days and their weeks and their years were devoted to the task of attempting to convert these children of the plains to Christianity, instructing them in the truths of religion,

<sup>22</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 172-174.

<sup>23</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 17, 158, 175, 184, Vol. III, p. 1088.

preparing them to receive the sacraments of life, deterring them from the cruel, fiendish excesses to which they were led by their savage nature and by unscrupulous white men, obtaining for them peace with their neighbors, educating their children, blessing their marriages, healing their sick, and burying their dead.

Their daily routine was severely monotonous. It began each morning with the offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass in their little chapel. At times they were denied even this source of consolation. Father De Smet tells how on one occasion the mission had been without supplies from Easter (March 31) until the 20th of April. On this day, news was brought that the steamer from St. Louis, containing long-needed supplies, was approaching. On their way to meet it, the missionaries were dismayed to see the vessel rapidly sinking, having struck some obstacle in the river. "Of our effects, four articles were saved: a plough, a saw, a pair of boots and some wine . . . . And the wine permits us to offer to God every day the most holy sacrifice of the mass, a privilege that had been denied us during a long time."<sup>25</sup>

The most of the day was spent in the work for which they had established the mission. First of all came instruction. This was carried on both at the mission itself and in the Indian camps which were scattered about, anywhere from five to twenty-five miles apart. "We try to visit them once a week, to instruct the children and preach to the elders", appears an entry in the diary. Those who were preparing for baptism and who could attend the mission school were instructed twice a day.<sup>26</sup> In an official report on the mission

<sup>25</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 183, 184; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, p. 269.

<sup>26</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 158-166.

submitted in the fall of 1840, Sub-agent Stephen Cooper wrote: "Schools, there are none here under the authority of the government. There are two Roman Catholic priests residing within my agency, of good moral character, who set a good example to the Indians and the half-breeds. They have a chapel, and school, and teacher, and have several young Indians in the school who are coming on pretty well."<sup>27</sup> During the first two and one-half months they baptized 105 persons, among them the wife of the head chief, and a boy, Logan Fontenelle, who later became chief of the Omahas and died fighting against the Sioux.<sup>28</sup>

Father De Smet believed that the Indians appreciated the spiritual favors that had been brought to them, for in the evening of the day of their baptism all assembled at the home of one family "to return thanks to God for the signal benefits with which he had overwhelmed them". On another occasion he wrote: "These honest people are now overrunning the country in every direction to win their near relations and acquaintances, to bring them to be instructed and enjoy the same happiness with themselves. Several Indian women . . . have dragged themselves, sick as they were, for a distance of two or three leagues, to come and ask us for baptism before they died."<sup>29</sup>

The number of those admitted to instruction and to baptism continued to grow. By the fall of 1839 the missionaries were able to report a congregation of about three hundred converts, including several chiefs and their families. Forty had been admitted to receive Holy Com-

<sup>27</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, p. 36; *Executive Documents*, 26th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. I, pp. 321, 322.

<sup>28</sup> Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, No. 5, p. 270; Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 164.

munion, and it appeared to be a great happiness to them to assist at daily Mass. At this time, too, the missionaries had already blessed the marriage of twenty-three couples "who have so far", remarked Father De Smet, "remained very steady".<sup>30</sup>

Much of the time of the missionaries was taken up in visiting the homes of the Indians. "I visit the Indians in their wigwams", Father De Smet wrote, "either as a missionary, if they are disposed to listen to me, or as a physician to see their sick."<sup>31</sup> Apparently these visits were welcome, for John Bidwell, a western pioneer, who knew Father De Smet well, said of him: "He was a man of great kindness and great affability under all circumstances; he was of a genial and buoyant temper, fond of jest and merriment, and humorously disposed." Father De Smet once said of himself, "I am naturally inclined to laughter". He was a favorite among the Indians. In fact it was said of him: "He had but to show himself to win their hearts. There was that in his benevolent manner that commanded their trust in an instant. They delighted to honor him. He was borne in triumph or escorted with imposing ceremony; given their best lodge; feasted until endurance could receive no more." Some of his visits, however, had rather unpleasant features connected with them. He often referred to the feasts to which he was subjected — the disgusting cooking and the repulsive food — and he marvelled that human beings could live in that way. "The stomach of the Indian has always been a riddle to me", he said.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 164, 177, 184; Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 185.

<sup>32</sup> Bidwell's *First Emigrant Train to California in The Century*, Vol. XLI, p. 114; Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 108, 115, 117.

Sickness and plagues were very common among the Pottawattamies. Their careless and filthy habits of life were a favorable soil for many diseases. Often there were hundreds sick at one time, and missionaries were often called upon to act as physicians. Each day during an epidemic Father De Smet visited a new village, carrying remedies and words of encouragement to the victims. On one occasion, the chief of one of the neighboring tribes brought his boy who was at the point of death to Father De Smet for medical aid.<sup>33</sup>

In the evenings, or whenever else he was free to do so, Father De Smet used to sit down in the midst of a group of attentive Indians and entertain them with stories. The young, and often the old, savages would listen in wide-eyed wonder as the friendly Jesuit regaled them with tales from Holy Writ—the story of creation, of the deluge, of Noah's ark, the Maccabees, Samson, Joseph and his brethren, and countless other stories from the Bible. He also told them of the heroes and the great events of American and European history, of Washington and of Napoleon, of the great cities of Europe and the vast throngs of people who lived in them.<sup>34</sup>

Another work Father De Smet undertook at the mission was that of keeping a faithful record of everything worthy of note which took place there. The official records of the mission, such as records of baptisms and marriages, were kept, of course, in books especially for that purpose. In addition, he kept recorded in a journal with fidelity and accuracy many of the events that occurred during his

<sup>33</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 185; Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 116; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs in The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, p. 268.



residence at the mission.<sup>35</sup> But the most notable collection of records dealing with events at St. Joseph's Mission are the frequent letters which Father De Smet wrote. In this collection are letters to his superiors, describing in detail the life at the mission and setting out its drawbacks and its prospects; letters to his friends and relatives in his native country, describing his charges, his joys, and his sorrows; letters to the United States government officials, complaining of the liquor traffic among the Indians; letters to his friends asking perhaps for some favor; and letters to scientists, giving a description of geological specimens or of plant life thereabouts.

The monotony of the life at the mission was relieved from time to time by visitors of all sorts — passengers who came on the river steamers, a delegation of Indians from some neighboring tribe, or perhaps the government agents to make a new treaty. The arrival of a boat always caused great excitement in the village and hundreds of Indians would line up on the shore to meet it. The steamers plied up and down the Missouri all during the summer months carrying north provisions, mail, and passengers, and taking back in exchange for the provisions hides or furs or whatever else the Indians had to offer. It was the chief means of contact between the dwellers on the prairies and the centers of civilization and commerce. The passengers often landed to converse with those on shore or to offer some article for sale or to buy some little trinkets that the Indians might have to offer. The chance to get off the boat, even for a few minutes, relieved the monotony of the long river journey.

On one occasion during his sojourn at the Pottawattamie Mission Father De Smet made a journey north to the Sioux

<sup>35</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 171-179.

country by steamer and by good fortune met on board Jean Nicollet, the celebrated French scientist and explorer, Charles Geyer, a German, and Lieutenant John C. Fremont of the American army, who were making a scientific excursion for the Federal government. Father De Smet had known Nicollet for some time and their delight in this meeting was mutual. As the missionary was also a scientist of considerable ability he was able to render aid to the members of the expedition.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently he made several observations and gathered many specimens of plants and minerals which he sent to Nicollet, who praised the accuracy of De Smet's work, and used it freely in the reports which he later published for the United States government.<sup>37</sup>

At the beginning of each winter when the hunters had been successful, relates Father De Smet, there was a season of rejoicing in the villages of the Pottawattamies. The music, consisting of flutes and loud drums, accompanied by the monotonous songs of the Indians, continued throughout the day and night. Each family gave a feast and was very careful not to slight anyone by failing to send an invitation. Such a breach of etiquette would never be forgotten and would be quickly revenged. The food was spread lavishly and the whole village took part in the celebration.<sup>38</sup>

Another work that fell to the lot of the missionary, and at which Father De Smet was singularly successful, was that of peacemaker. He described one instance of work of this kind which he undertook on behalf of the Pottawattamies. This was a trip to the Sioux Indians in dread of

<sup>36</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 179-182.

<sup>37</sup> Garraghan's *Father De Smet: History Maker in the Illinois Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. VI, p. 172.

<sup>38</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. III, pp. 1094, 1095.

whom the Pottawattamies had lived for two years. The Sioux received him cordially and gave a great feast in his honor. After having feasted with them, he disclosed to them the object of his visit — a lasting peace between themselves and the neighboring Pottawattamies. He discussed the points of the proposed treaty with them, refuted the false reports that had hitherto divided the two nations, and persuaded the Sioux to offer presents and smoke the calumet with the Pottawattamies.<sup>39</sup> Later Father De Smet became well known as a peace emissary of the United States government to the Indians, and in 1852 Thomas H. Benton declared that Father De Smet could do "more for their welfare and keeping them in peace and friendship with the United States than an army with banners."<sup>40</sup>

Sometimes delegations from other tribes came to visit the Pottawattamies. While Father De Smet was at St. Joseph's Mission some of the Sioux chiefs, with several of their warriors, came to the Pottawattamie village to smoke the calumet. The Sioux visitors displayed every mark of friendship, and gave a serenade before every wigwam and cabin in the village. At another time two Omaha chiefs, with several warriors, came to dance the calumet, or their dance of friendship. This dance, remarked the missionary, was noted more for its confusion than for its grace. The savages yelled and struck their mouths and leaped in the air, keeping time with the drums, turning and twisting in every conceivable fashion. The missionaries showed the visitors their chapel and they seemed to take a great interest in the explanation of the Crucifix, the altar, and the images showing the stations of the Cross. The chiefs invited the missionaries to visit them, and baptize their

<sup>39</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 189, 190.

<sup>40</sup> Garraghan's *Father De Smet: History Maker in the Illinois Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. VI, p. 177.

children. The missionaries gave the Indian visitors some rosaries for their children and some crosses for themselves, which they hung about their necks.

On another occasion three of the Pawnee Loup chiefs from the Platte River came to visit. They were lodged in one of the cabins of the mission, and their curiosity was excited at seeing the priests making the sign of the cross before and after meals. They invited the missionaries to visit them, and when they returned home, taught their whole village to make the sign of the cross. One of the most notable characteristics of the Pawnees was the fact that they forbade the use of liquor in their tribe, claiming that they were crazy enough without drink.<sup>41</sup>

There were many things, however, to discourage the missionaries in their work. Enthusiastic as Father De Smet was, he could not help noting the obstacles to the success of their labors. The revolting uncleanness, the idleness, the love of whisky and debauchery, the inability to grasp the abstract notions about religion, all tended to make the prospect anything but encouraging. The weakness of the Indian in the presence of temptation and the greed of the white man in presenting temptation were everywhere in evidence. The conversion of the Indians, Father De Smet concluded, was altogether a work of God.<sup>42</sup>

Added to the disappointments of their ministry were the countless privations which the missionaries had to undergo. "This portion of the divine Master's vineyard", wrote Father De Smet, "requires from those who tend it, a life of crosses, privations and patience." The distance from St. Louis and the difficulties of communication were so great as to make it very hard to obtain supplies, and as a result they

<sup>41</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 165-178.

<sup>42</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 18, Vol. III, p. 1076.

were sometimes without even the necessities of life. At one time their distress was extreme and they were forced to live on acorns and wild roots for more than a month.<sup>43</sup>

And their comforts of life were few. "The other night, during a downpour", one of De Smet's letters ran, "I was obliged to open my umbrella to protect my face from the rain that fell on it and awakened me. My furniture consists of a cross, a small table, a bench, and a pile of books. A piece of meat, or some herbs and wild roots, washed down by a glass of fresh spring water, is about my only food." The priests spent their spare moments about the mission in chopping wood, cooking meals, and mending clothes.<sup>44</sup>

The loneliness, too, made the missionary's lot a much harder one. "We who are at the end of the world", De Smet wrote to a brother priest, "far from friends and fellow-priests, in the midst of strangers and infidels, suffering privations, and daily witnessing revolting scenes, look forward to letters as a real treat. If you only knew the joy they bring, I am sure every one of you would give us this consolation and support, for after reading our letters we are filled with renewed zeal."<sup>45</sup>

The wild nature of the country added to their discomforts. Wolves often came to their doors and carried off their chickens. There were snakes in abundance, and field, forest, and cabin swarmed with mice "which gnaw and devour the few fruits that we possess. . . . We live also in the midst of horse-flies and mosquitoes; they come upon us by thousands and give us no rest day nor night." During the winter months with the extreme cold and snow, and with the frozen river cutting off the chief means of

<sup>43</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 163, 183.

<sup>44</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, pp. 87, 88.

communication with other settlements, their discomfort increased.<sup>46</sup>

There were, however, some encouraging events. On the 18th of September, 1839, two Iroquois Indians stopped at the mission. They were from the Flathead and Pierced Nose Indians, about two thousand miles to the west, and were on their way to St. Louis to ask for missionaries for their tribes. Father De Smet was much impressed with them. "By their instructions and examples", he wrote, "they have given all that nation a great desire to have themselves baptized. All that tribe strictly observe Sunday and assemble several times a week to pray and sing canticles. The sole object of these good Iroquois was to obtain a priest to come and finish what they had so happily commenced. We gave them letters of recommendation for our Reverend Father Superior at St. Louis." Father De Smet also said: "With tears in their eyes they begged me to return with them. . . . Should God deem me worthy of the honor I would willingly give my life to help these Indians."<sup>47</sup> Their appeal had not been in vain. Father De Smet was shortly to follow them westward — away from St. Joseph's Mission, but to a greater and more successful field of labor.

In 1840 famine threatened the mission, and on February 13th Father De Smet started for St. Louis to obtain relief. The journey was a most difficult one, over a trackless land covered with snow. He took sick on the way, but finally reached St. Louis, where he was forced to remain in bed for some time. When he had recovered and had made all preparations to return to St. Joseph's, he was told that he had been selected for a new mission far to the west among

<sup>46</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 29, 30.

the Flatheads. Father Hoecken was to take his place among the Pottawattamies.<sup>48</sup>

Late in 1840 when Father De Smet was returning from this mission to the west he stopped at Fort Vermillion, where he learned that the Sioux had violated their treaty and had attacked the Pottawattamies. He reproached the Sioux for this and again made them promise to bury the hatchet. Then he moved on to his next stop—the old mission at St. Joseph's. "It would be in vain for me to attempt to tell what I felt at finding myself once more amidst our brothers", he wrote. "I had, however, the grief of observing the ravages which unprincipled men, liquor-sellers, had caused in this budding mission; drunkenness, with the invasion of the Sioux on the other hand, had finally dispersed my poor savages. While awaiting a more favorable turn of events, the good Fathers Verreydt and Hoecken busy themselves, with the care of their holy ministry among some fifty families that have the courage to resist these two enemies. I discharged my commission to them from the Sioux, and I venture to hope that in future they will be quiet in that quarter."<sup>49</sup>

By 1841 Father Hoecken had baptized at least four hundred Indians but the mission was beginning to decline, and in September, 1841, the little band of missionaries left Council Bluffs for St. Mary's Mission, which had been established two years before at Sugar Creek for the Pottawattamies of Kansas. The last entry in the baptismal register of the Council Bluffs mission bears the date of July 17, 1841.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, pp. 93-95, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, pp. 256-258.

<sup>50</sup> Kempker's *The Catholic Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa*, p. 6; Laveille's *The Life of Father De Smet, S. J.*, p. 95; Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, p. 57.

After the abandonment of the mission in Council Bluffs in 1841 until the arrival of the Mormons in 1846 there was no church organization represented among the Pottawattamies of this region, and the Indians were without teachers or religious instructors, except for the annual visits that Father Hoecken made to the old mission, until 1847 when the Pottawattamies were finally removed to Kansas.<sup>51</sup>

The Pottawattamie occupancy of territory in Iowa, which had continued from 1837 to 1847, was ended by a treaty drafted at Washington in 1846, and signed by the Iowa bands on June 5th of that year. By its terms the Indians relinquished their lands in Iowa for a money consideration and a tract of land, thirty miles square, in Kansas. They were to move within two years after its ratification, July 22, 1846. The removal was begun in September, 1847, and was completed by the fall of 1848.<sup>52</sup>

Father De Smet made no mention of the Council Bluffs mission when he passed the place in 1842. With the exception of the old blockhouse and a few graves, no vestige of his brave endeavor to Christianize the Pottawattamies remained.<sup>53</sup> The old blockhouse, surmounted by the cross placed there by Father De Smet, was still standing in 1855. It was called the "Old Fort", or the "Old Mission" and for many years was the sole place of Catholic worship<sup>54</sup> in

<sup>51</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 19, 20; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, No. 5, pp. 271, 274.

<sup>52</sup> Thwaites's *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, Vol. XXVII, p. 153; Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 39, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Brigham's *Iowa: Its History and Foremost Citizens*, Vol. I, p. 64; Chittenden and Richardson's *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Vol. I, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 43, 45; Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, No. 5, pp. 268, 274.

The mission buildings and the attached graveyard were situated mainly in



Council Bluffs. It was finally torn down to make way for a dwelling.<sup>55</sup>

Thus passed away the visible remains of one of Iowa's earliest Indian missions. But the short duration of the mission itself does not indicate that it was altogether a failure; it was one of those brave efforts which the pioneer missionary was willing to make in the face of difficulties. While the mission lasted, much good was done for the Indians spiritually, physically, and socially; but perhaps its greatest work was that it served as the training school for one of America's renowned missionaries, Pierre Jean De Smet.

FRANK ANTHONY MULLIN

COLUMBIA COLLEGE  
DUBUQUE IOWA

the two blocks now bounded by Broadway on the north, Voorhis Street on the south, Union Street on the east, and by Franklin Avenue and State Street on the west. The Clausen residence stands approximately on the site of the old mission church.—Cassilly's *The Old Jesuit Mission in Council Bluffs* in *The Creighton Chronicle*, February 20, 1917, Vol. VIII, No. 5, p. 265.

<sup>55</sup> Babbitt's *Early Days at Council Bluffs*, pp. 43, 46.