

**St. Mary's Mission**  
**Statement of Significance 1841-1954**  
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**Significant dates: 1841, 1850, 1866, 1879, 1891, 1921, 1941, 1954**

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

For its cultural associations, its architectural features, its archaeological potential, the influence of Father Anthony Ravalli, and the far-reaching impact of the Jesuits in the Northwest, St. Mary's Mission District is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A, B, C and D.

The divergence of cultures, the physical and cultural impacts of western migration on native people, and the growth of settlements are rarely evident all in the same built environment. St. Mary's Mission, a microcosmic community that interprets these facets of Montana's heritage, is a rare exception. Jesuit priests and lay brothers founded the mission—the first in the Northwest—near the present mission site in 1841. St. Mary's Village evolved into the town of Stevensville. Throughout the settlement of the region, the Jesuits played key roles helping the Salish transition from their traditional hunting lifeway to an agrarian economy imposed with the demise of the buffalo. St. Mary's churches—both old and new—clearly illustrate that the historic complex has always been, and continues to be, a place of celebration and worship for both the Indian and white communities.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, St. Mary's served as a model community. The Jesuit "Black Robes" founded Montana's first permanent settlement, bringing Catholicism to the Salish people and to the Northwest. The Jesuits at St. Mary's practiced Montana's first agriculture and animal husbandry, operated the first school, and provided the first regional medical and pharmaceutical services. The mission was active until it closed in 1850, but the seeds, both physical and spiritual, that the Jesuits planted in the 1840s remained viable until the priests returned to reestablish the mission at the present site in 1866. During the next unsettled decades, the Jesuits provided financial support, medical services, and spiritual guidance to both the Salish and white settlers as the town of Stevensville grew. The Jesuits also advocated and interpreted for the Salish who wished to stay in their ancestral homeland.

The first wave of Salish followed Arlee to the Jocko Reservation in 1872, dividing the people into two groups and creating a bitter rift. In 1891, however, the US government forced the two hundred remaining Bitterroot Salish to abandon their farms and the graves of their ancestors and move to the Flathead Reservation in the Jocko Valley. The mission then closed.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stevensville's Catholic community continued to grow and St. Mary's Parish, created in 1910, saw the mission church again in frequent use. In 1911, the Salish observed twenty years on the reservation, and returned as a group to St. Mary's for the first time since 1891. The Salish have continued to return to the mission annually to share their stories, keeping their memories alive for new generations of school children. The new St. Mary's, designed and built in 1954, is integral to the district because it represents the continuation of Catholic services to the Stevensville community. But more important, it recalls the global community whose support directly assured old St. Mary's preservation. Those who built the new church did so to save the historic chapel, to protect it from deterioration through constant use.

The vernacular log architecture of the St. Mary's Mission complex illustrates early log building techniques and artistic adaptations to conditions on the remote western frontier. Complementing the 1866 church are the pharmacy where Father Anthony Ravalli dispensed remedies; the log home of the Salish chief Victor; the adjacent Salish and community cemeteries; and one gnarled crabapple tree, living evidence of the agriculture practiced at the mission. These elements tell the 19<sup>th</sup> century portion of the mission's history. The modern priest-designed church continues the vernacular tradition. Like the Jesuit fathers before him, Father James Dowdall drew the plans and supervised the construction. The new church is thus a continuation of the old, and an essential chapter that tells the rest of St. Mary's story.

Father Anthony Ravalli, architect of Idaho's famed Cataldo Mission, played a key role in the immediate community and larger region. He was not only the architect of the historic mission church and pharmacy, but he also was a valued provider of medical and spiritual aid to whites and Indians. He is buried in the adjacent St. Mary's Cemetery. Ravalli County bears his name and Montana celebrates his life in the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Montana State Capitol.

## **Christianity Comes to the Northwest**

A decade after Lewis and Clark trekked across Montana and back in 1804-1805, Big Ignace La Mousse led a group of Iroquois trappers to the pristine Bitterroot Valley in present-day southwestern Montana. They settled among the Salish people whose homeland lay there. The Iroquois were Christian, having been educated by Jesuits at the Canadian Caughnawaga Mission.<sup>1</sup> They told the Salish of the "powerful medicine" of the Catholic faith. From the Iroquois the Salish and their neighbors, the Nez Perce, learned of the Black Robes. Years before, a Salish leader named Shining Shirt had a vision. He foresaw black-gowned men who would come to teach them about "the good spirit who sits on top." The Salish connected the two events and longed for Black Robes to teach them.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Ignatius Loyola founded this religious order of the Roman Catholic Church in 1540. The purpose of the order was to propagate and strengthen Catholicism throughout the pagan and Christian world.

Although Protestant missionaries were active in the 1830s in the Northwest (Oregon), the Salish and Nez Perce specifically wanted Catholic Jesuits. Elements of the Salish religion and Christianity were surprisingly complementary. Generosity, community, obedience, and respect for family were important to both Christians and Salish. In addition, the power of chant, prayer, and devotional hymns; a sacred calendar associated with sacred colors; the veneration of sacramental objects and sacred sites, water used for purification; and other rites associated with Catholicism were similar to Salish beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

In 1831 and 1835, Salish and Nez Perce delegates undertook the long and dangerous journey to St. Louis through enemy Sioux territory seeking Black Robes for their people. Big Ignace La Mousse led the second delegation. Although Bishop Joseph Rosati at St. Louis promised both times to send a missionary when funds were available, no Black Robes came. Big Ignace undertook a third journey in 1837 taking three Salish and a Nez Perce with him. Enemy Sioux struck the party and all were killed. A fourth delegation in 1839 finally brought results. Bishop Rosati sent Father Pierre Jean DeSmet to answer their pleas.

Father DeSmet was born in Belgium in 1801. He joined the Society of Jesus as a novice, without his parents' consent. He left his home and eventually arrived in St. Louis in 1821. DeSmet learned English and completed his studies, became a U.S. citizen in 1833, and took his first missionary post among the Potawatami Indians at Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1837. There by chance he met the fourth Salish delegation headed to St. Louis in 1839. DeSmet traveled with them to help convince Bishop Rosati to send Black Robes to the Bitterroot Valley.

### **Montana's First Permanent Settlement**

On September 24, 1841, Father DeSmet and Fathers Gregory Mengarini, a linguist, physician, and musician; Nicholas Point, artist, architect, and educator; and Jesuit Brothers Joseph Specht, William Claessens, and Charles Huett arrived in the Bitterroot Valley. A few months previous, a young Salish girl had had a vision of the Virgin Mary just before her death. She counseled her people to listen to the Black Robes who would soon come to the valley. Indicating where the church should be built, the child died. Taking this as a prophecy, the company of Jesuits and Salish planted the cross on that site and built St. Mary's there, thus founding the first Christian mission in the Northwest, in what would later become Montana.

The mission church, living quarters, and other outbuildings soon spread along the east bank of the Bitterroot River. Montana's first industries at St. Mary's Mission included irrigation and agriculture, water-powered flour and saw mills, and animal husbandry. At first, the mission prospered. Father DeSmet traveled to the Hudson's Bay post at Colville, Washington for seeds to plant potatoes, wheat, and oats. The first summer

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Peterson, *Sacred Encounter: Father DeSmet and the Indians of the Rocky Mountain West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) 23-24.

produced bountiful crops. Father DeSmet also brought the first cattle and livestock to the mission from Fort Colville and practiced the first cattle branding in Montana. St. Mary's "cross on a hill" was the first brand used in Montana.<sup>3</sup>

There were, however, fundamental religious and cultural differences between the Salish and the Jesuits. The Salish did not embrace the Catholic beliefs of hell and sin nor did they all wish to practice agriculture. The concept of land ownership was, to all native people, contradictory to the notion that the land belonged to God who loaned its use to all equally. The Salish wished to adopt some of the Christian beliefs, but they did not wish to abandon their own traditions.<sup>4</sup> Further, more serious difficulties arose when the Jesuits, whose mission was to bring Christianity to all people, began to discuss teaching Catholicism to the Blackfeet. The Blackfeet and Salish were traditional enemies, and the Salish saw this as betrayal. The Salish had no desire to make peace with their enemies, nor did they wish to change to an agrarian lifestyle.<sup>5</sup>

The settlement around the mission, known as St. Mary's Village, grew. Father Point had laid out the settlement as a quadrangle. The houses were fifty feet apart, each with a lawn of sixty square feet. He based the plan on the European model without regard to the domestic practices and traditions of the Salish. The open plan and the location of the village left the site vulnerable and indefensible against the enemy Blackfeet. The layout showed a lack of understanding of Salish customs and concerns.<sup>6</sup>

By 1846, the farm produced seven thousand bushels of wheat and four or five thousand bushels of potatoes and other vegetables. There were forty head of cattle and other livestock, a dozen houses, and a larger church under construction at St. Mary's Village. But a serious rift arose when the Salish returned from a buffalo hunt sullen and uncommunicative. During the hunt they had allied with the Blackfeet to defeat the Crows. Fathers DeSmet and Mengarini had been present at the victory and offered the Blackfeet tobacco which they had promised the Salish.<sup>7</sup>

Father Ravalli later wrote that Father DeSmet lavishly promised the Salish animals, plows, and a permanent village. These promises proved impossible to keep and so the Jesuits anticipated trouble.<sup>8</sup> They were correct. Marauding Blackfeet began to harass the settlement, and the Jesuits lived in constant fear of attack.

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<sup>3</sup>Stevensville Historical Society, *Montana Genesis* (Stevensville Historical Society Press: Missoula, MT., 1971) 264.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, 24.

<sup>5</sup> K. Ross Toole lecture, "Apostasy" (University of Montana: Missoula, MT., 1962), housed at the MHS Research Center video library.

<sup>6</sup> Peterson, 114.

<sup>7</sup> *First Roots*, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Garraghan, S.J., *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, Vol. 2 (New York: The America Press, 1938) 377.

After they founded St. Mary's in the Bitterroot Valley, the Jesuits ventured farther, establishing missions to the Coeur d'Alene, Pend Oreille, Colville, and Kootenai people. Father Ravalli designed the famed Cataldo (Sacred Heart) Mission near Coeur d'Alene, Idaho built between 1848 and 1853.<sup>9</sup> The Cataldo is a National Historic Landmark. The Jesuits also founded a mission among the Blackfeet at Colville, Washington, and tried to end the conflicts between them and the Salish. However, after 1846 Chief Victor—friend to the Jesuits and leader of the Bitterroot Salish—could not convince his people to defend the mission or protect the Black Robes from Blackfeet raids.<sup>10</sup> Despite these difficulties, during the decade of the 1840s, St. Mary's Mission was the keystone among the other missions to the native tribes of the Northwest.<sup>11</sup>

### **Closure of St. Mary's/Founding of Fort Owen**

St. Mary's closed in 1850 because cultural conflicts put the mission in constant danger. Jesuits in residence during this transaction were Fathers Ravalli and Gregory Mengarini and Brothers Claessens, Bellomo, and Savio. Father Joseph Joset arrived from the Sacred Heart Mission in Idaho to arrange disposition of the property. In Montana's first written conveyance of property, Major John Owen purchased the mission mill and buildings from the Jesuits, and the fields as far as the Jesuits had right to sell them, for \$250. Title to the land itself, however, by immemorial occupancy, belonged to the Flathead (Salish) Nation.<sup>12</sup> Owen, whose title of "Major" was self-styled, was a former sutler—or licensed trader carrying goods and supplies—for the army. He had come west in 1849 with the army which was to establish posts along the Oregon Trail to protect travelers. Owen, along with his Shoshone wife Nancy and his brother, happened upon the scene when the Jesuits put the property up for sale.

Included in Owen's purchase of the mission buildings were the chapel and another church under construction. The Jesuits left instructions that Owen was to burn them according to custom if the priests did not return within two years. This Owen did in 1852. He established Fort Owen (listed in the National Register in 1970, NR#70000363) as a trading post. The government appointed Owen the first Indian Agent to the Flathead (Salish) in 1856.

Congress created Washington Territory in 1853. The vast expanse of land included the northwestern United States from the Pacific across the Continental Divide to the western portion of present-day Montana. Isaac I. Stevens, en route to Olympia, Washington to assume his post as governor of the new territory, scouted a transcontinental railroad route across what would later become Montana. Lt. John Mullan, one of the survey party accompanying the governor, became interested in

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.anglerguide.com/articles/18b.html>, accessed 9/6/2009

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Bigart, et. Al., *Life and Death at St. Mary's Mission*, Pablo, MT: Salish Kootenai College Press, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, 118.

building a road between Walla Walla, Washington and Fort Benton. At Stevens' urging, Congress appropriated funding and road construction began in 1859. Road crews reached Fort Benton in 1860, completing the route. Although intended for military use, instead it became a supply route to the mining camps. The road bypassed Fort Owen, but it indirectly brought traffic and business allowing John Owen's trading post and the area to prosper. In 1863, John Winslett and J.K. Houk opened the first store at St. Mary's Village. Congress created Montana Territory in 1864 and St. Mary's Village was formally platted, becoming Stevensville, named for Isaac Stevens.<sup>13</sup>

The years following the Jesuits' departure were unsettling. In 1854, the Jesuits returned to the region to establish St. Ignatius Mission twenty-six miles south of Flathead Lake. In July 1855, Governor Stevens organized a major council with the Pend'Oreilles, Kutenais, and Salish near present-day Missoula to establish a reservation. The location was contentious. Chief Victor and the Salish wanted it located in the Bitterroot Valley. All three groups finally agreed that the huge, million-acre plus Jocko Reservation would be in the area south of Flathead Lake. However Article 11, inserted into the treaty, allowed the Salish to remain temporarily in the Bitterroot Valley pending a survey to be ordered by the president. The outcome of the survey would ultimately decide if the Salish were to receive their own reservation in the Bitterroot Valley or move to the Jocko. This would eventually cause the Salish great heartache and sorrow. The treaty essentially forced the tribes to cede all their lands in western Montana except for the Jocko reservation.<sup>14</sup>

Father Joseph Menetrey of St. Ignatius Mission visited the Salish in the Bitterroot Valley twice in 1857. He reported to Father DeSmet that gambling and libertinism were rife among them, but the chiefs—Victor, Moiese, Ambrose, and Adolph—deserved praise and had not “deviated from the path of honor and virtue.” Three hundred Salish confessed their sins to Father Menetrey and he set aright twenty marriages. In the eyes of the Jesuit priests, Father Menetrey left the Salish in much better spiritual condition than he had found them.

The Jesuits, however, worried that the new generation of Salish seemed to have little regard for the honesty which had always so impressed them. The Jesuit fathers suspected John Owen of inducing them to gamble. Owen did not encourage agriculture among the Salish, and did not allow the Indians to cultivate crops on the former mission lands. White settlers began encroaching into the Bitterroot Valley, establishing farms and homesteads. Despite the promise of the survey that the Salish still believed would restore their land to them, Owen encouraged white settlers to improve their properties in the Bitterroot Valley. Owen did not, however, encourage

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<sup>13</sup>*First Roots*, 36. President Abraham Lincoln decreed that the town be named Stevensville in memory of Major General Isaac Stevens who died in the Civil War at the Battle of Chantilly in 1862.

<sup>14</sup>Roeder and Malone, 116-117; Robert Bigart and Clarence Woodcock, *In the Name of the Salish & Kootenai Nation: the 1855 Hell Gate Treaty and the Origins of the Flathead Indian Reservation*, 1.

the Salish in their Christian pursuits, and in fact had disagreements with the Jesuits and occasionally worked against the priests.<sup>15</sup>

During his six-year tenure as Indian Agent, Owen fought the policies that proved counterproductive to the Salish people placed under his charge. In the end, he resigned in disgust over the government's failure to provide for them.<sup>16</sup> Owen fielded numerous complaints that whites were supplying alcohol to the Indians. This and other difficulties resulted in Owen's resignation on July 17, 1862. Owen built a house close to Fort Owen for the elderly and infirm Chief Victor, noting in his journal that Christianizing, civilizing, and educating Indians is "a farce long since exploded." On December 13, 1862, Owen noted,

Had a visit from the old Chief Victor. I am building him a house close to the fort. This is the first time Since I have known him which has been 12 Years that he has not gone with his Camp to Buff[.] I dissuaded him from it last fall. He is quite old & infirm. I told him if he would remain with Me that he should have a good Comfortable house to live in & a field to Sow & plant for himself.<sup>17</sup>

By 1865, the behavior of the younger generation of Salish, carousing and gambling, unfortunately led responsible citizens to distrust the Salish as a group. John Owen wrote that the old chiefs could do nothing with the younger men. They refused to listen to their elders' counsel. Meanwhile, the land survey mentioned in the treaty a decade before was not forthcoming. Owen rightly predicted that the Salish would never leave the Bitterroot Valley of their own free will.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Jesuits return to St. Mary's**

Father Joseph Giorda, S. J., Superior of the Rocky Mountain region, called for the Jesuits' return to the Bitterroot Valley in 1866. The Black Robes re-established the mission a mile south of Fort Owen, locating it, perhaps out of respect for Victor who was still chief, near the old man's homestead. Victor's cabin, predating the mission buildings by several years, still stands. Fathers Giorda and Ravalli, along with Brother Claessens, staffed the mission. Father Giorda left his position as superior and came to St. Mary's permanently. Father Ravalli and Brother Claessens were among the original staff at the first St. Mary's Mission. Brother Claessens, as previously, directed the building of the fourth St. Mary's. The present St. Mary's Church was

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<sup>15</sup>Gilbert Garraghan, S. J., *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, Vol. II (New York: America Press, 1938) 390.

<sup>16</sup>*Roots*, 35-36; for a brief history of John Owen and his fort, see Ellen Baumler, "The Deportation of Major John Owen," *More from the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch Volume III* (Helena: Helena Independent Record, 1998) 24-28.

<sup>17</sup>Dunbar, Seymour and Paul C. Phillips, *The Journals and Letters of Major John Owen, Pioneer of the Northwest 1850-1871*, Vol. 1 (Southworth Press: Portland, ME, 1927) 262; Evans, 261-262, discusses ownership of this house. A 1973 photograph in Evans, p. 233, shows Mary Ann Combs in front of the house at the mission.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, 146-149.

built for the Salish and “others who desire to hear divine service.”<sup>19</sup> The chapel dedication took place on October 28, 1866, and the first wedding on December 27<sup>th</sup>. Soon after, living quarters consisting of two rooms were added to the rear of the chapel. These two rooms remain today. Behind the living quarters were a blacksmith’s shop and several farm buildings that no longer exist.

For two years after the reopening of the mission, Father Ravalli kept his residence at St. Michael’s at Hell Gate, ministering to the physical and spiritual health of white settlers there and at Frenchtown. While Brother Claessens directed Indian laborers who did the building, Father Ravalli planned, designed, and decorated the interior of the current St. Mary’s church.<sup>20</sup> In 1868, he moved to the house built for him at St. Mary’s Mission and from there dispensed his medicines from his pharmacy. This house is an integral part of the St. Mary’s Historic District.

When his store of European pharmaceuticals was depleted, Father Ravalli experimented and manufactured his own, learning from the Indians about the properties of local plants. He also planted an Italian herb garden and an apple orchard. One gnarled tree remains as testament to this industry. The layout of his pharmacy included a hospital room. There were ample shelves for his concoctions, and his own bed, modified after he suffered a stroke. These and other interior details speak to the medical aspects of Father Ravalli’s talents.

Brother Claessens left St. Mary’s on reassignment in 1877 but returned in 1879 to enlarge the mission church. The addition doubled the length to a total of 46 feet. Like the original chapel, the addition was constructed of hewn logs chinked with mortar, but the new front was covered in clapboard. A six-foot enclosure around the centered front door rose to a tower twenty-five feet high. The bell in the domed belfry, shipped from Cincinnati, could be heard from a far distance. Dick Barry served as carpenter, finishing the interior and blending the old portion with the new. Indians and whites could now attend services under the same roof. Chairs with buckskin seats in the nave accommodated the Indians while the settlers sat in wooden pews in the gallery.<sup>21</sup>

Father Ravalli designed and painted the elaborate altar. He carved a near life-sized effigy of St. Ignatius clad in a black cassock made of canvas stiffened with paint and a statue of the Blessed Mary. Father Ravalli’s works of art reveal him to be a master of many talents. The revered priest made the tools necessary to do the work he wanted done, and he even fashioned his own paint brushes from the tail hair of his favorite cat.<sup>22</sup>

### **Salish in the Bitterroot from 1840-1891**

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<sup>19</sup> Evans 149.

<sup>20</sup> Add note

<sup>21</sup> Evans, 182.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 186.

Indian tribes of the Northern Rockies and eastern Plateau saw huge changes during the second half of the nineteenth century. These changes ended a centuries-old lifeway. Lands ceded to the US government under duress, the creation of reservations, demise of the buffalo, and policies bent upon destroying traditions and culture were catastrophic. Indian people suffered the banning of their religious ceremonies and the suppression of their native languages in mission boarding schools. The General Allotment Act opened reservations—lands native people believed were protected by treaty—to white settlement.<sup>23</sup> The situation for the Salish was perhaps worse than it was for other Montana tribes because for several decades, they held out hope that the Bitterroot Valley would remain their home. St. Mary's Mission played an important role in the transition from native lifeway to later life on the reservation, acting as intermediary between the Salish and the government.

Salish leaders played key roles in assisting the Jesuits in the founding and maintaining of St. Mary's during the nineteenth century. First among them was Tjolzhitsay, Chief Big Face, named by Father DeSmet for his elongated features. This dignified chief met the party of Jesuits at Pierre's Hole in present-day Wyoming, en route to the Bitterroot Valley in 1840. He was ninety years old when he became the first of the Salish to be baptized by the Jesuit fathers. The venerated chief died in 1841 or 1842 and was among the first Salish to be buried in the Indian cemetery at St. Mary's. Archaeologists thus far have not determined the exact location of this early cemetery or the site of the first St. Mary's Mission. Erosion and shifting of the Bitterroot River has likely obliterated traces of the earliest settlement.

Chief Victor (Slem-cry-cre or "Little Bear Claw") succeeded Big Face. Victor's father was Three Eagles, the leader who met Lewis and Clark at Ross' Hole in September of 1805. One of the first of the Salish to accept Christianity, Victor was always a loyal friend to the Jesuits and a devout Catholic. Victor was present at the Council of 1855, and long held out hope that the Salish would remain in the Bitterroot Valley. He was even willing to open his homeland to other tribes. He refused to consider moving his people north to the Flathead Reservation in the Jocko Valley. Victor proposed a compromise: allow his people to remain in the ancestral homeland pending government survey. Victor finally put his signature on the treaty with the insertion of Article 11, but there were misunderstandings on both sides.

Victor in his old age served as a bridge to his people between the old ways and the new. He was a devout Catholic and later in his life, lived in his house like his white counterparts as an example to his people.<sup>24</sup> The struggle to remain in the Bitterroot Valley divided Victor's people. Some were hostile to the Catholic missionaries. Some realized that game was becoming scarce and that adopting new ways would eventually be a necessity, so some Salish took up farming. But white settlement began to encroach in the Bitterroot Valley. While Victor lived in a house to set an

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<sup>23</sup> Peterson, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Victor's life closely parallels that of Plenty Coups, last chief of the Crow. Plenty Coups' home near Pryor, Montana, is a National Historic Landmark. See the National Register nomination for Chief Plenty Coups Homestead, State historic Preservation Office, Helena.

example, he did not completely give up the old ways. He died while on the buffalo hunt of 1870. His wife Agnes continued to live in the house until her death in 1884. Victor's son Charlo became chief and inherited the house. Years later his contemporaries visiting the mission referred to it as "Charlo's house."

In 1872, General James A. Garfield arrived in the Bitterroot with an executive order from President Ulysses S. Grant to remove the Salish to the Flathead Reservation. Charlo refused to sign the agreement and government officials recognized Arlee, a subchief whose mother was Nez Perce, as chief so that they could secure a signature. This created a serious rift Charlo never forgave. Arlee signed the agreement. Ultimately, Charlo's signature was added onto the document without his consent. The forgery rightly fueled Charlo's distrust of the US government. Father Ravalli, present at the signing, formally corroborated the forgery.

Arlee and his followers moved to the Flathead Reservation in the Jocko valley with Arlee as the government-sanctioned chief. Charlo refused to lead his people away from their homeland, and never forgave Arlee or spoke to him again. The Salish population at this time was about five or six hundred. For the three hundred Salish remaining in the Bitterroot Valley, life was not easy. Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn in 1876 and the flight of the Nez Perce in 1877, coupled with a virulent campaign in *The Weekly Missoulian* to establish a US Army post at Missoula furthered the unsettled plight of the Bitterroot Salish.

After the last buffalo hunt in 1883, the Bitterroot Salish depended upon their farms for subsistence, but further encroachment of white settlers and a lack of implements and seed prohibited agricultural expansion. In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, or the General Allotment Act, which gave Indians of the different tribes individual ownership of their 160-acre plots on reservation lands. Not only was land ownership a white man's concept, but also the government held the allotted lands in trust. These lands could not be sold for twenty-five years. The allotment system set in motion at this time would eventually destroy tribal economies of not only the Salish people, but of all land-owning Indians.

In 1889, Chief Arlee died at his ranch on the Flathead Reservation. Arlee's death left an opening; Charlo could now perhaps reconsider moving his people to the Jocko without having to speak to Arlee or recognize him as chief. Arlee's death in August came on the heels of an unprecedented drought that same year. The terrible conditions caused widespread devastation among both Indian and white farmers in the Bitterroot. Salish farmers could not make a living and suffering became their "journey to survival."<sup>25</sup> The government again pressured Charlo to reconsider moving the three hundred remaining Salish to the Flathead Reservation.

Throughout these difficult times, the Jesuits at St. Mary's Mission advocated for their Indian parishioners, writing letters to the government on behalf of the Salish leaders. The Jesuits objected to the removal of the Salish to the Jocko and pled with the

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<sup>25</sup> Peterson, 135.

government to hear Salish grievances. The Jesuits were also instrumental in mediating crises between white and Indian neighbors during volatile times. St. Mary's Mission was also the site of negotiations in 1869, 1872, 1883, 1884 and 1889 between Salish leaders and US government officials trying to convince the Salish to move to the Jocko.

The priests at St. Mary's provided economic aid, first by teaching agriculture to the Indians. During lean years of near starvation, the Jesuits hired Salish as seasonal workers to plant and harvest. They purchased items from the Salish such as horses, other livestock and fish, and even loaned and sometimes gifted them money.<sup>26</sup>

Father Ravalli's skills as a doctor and pharmacist made St. Mary's Mission a regional medical center for both Indian and white, Catholic and Protestant. His pharmaceuticals included European and traditional Salish medicines. His home at the mission was the dispensary and hospital. Between 1866 and his death in 1884, Father Ravalli's skills were renowned far and wide.

The main function of St. Mary's, however, was as a place of worship and community celebration. The Jesuits recorded details of three Episcopal visits—Bishop Charles Seghers in 1879 and 1882 and Bishop John Brondel in 1887—that underscore the important place of St. Mary's in the context of the Catholic history of the Northwest. Feast days and celebrations brought the Salish—scattered across the valley—together to share news, share resources, and make decisions. Salish leaders gathered at the mission to hear the Jesuits' advice, but always made their own decisions.<sup>27</sup>

St. Mary's Mission thus served religious, social, and economic purposes. Each of its functions was of equal importance. Finally, however, the Bitterroot Valley could simply not support the impoverished Salish.

### **The Salish Leave their Ancestral Homeland**

The Bitterroot Salish, destitute and starving, had no hope. Chief Charlo finally agreed to take his people to the Flathead (Jocko) Reservation. Among the conditions Charlo insisted upon was the preservation of the two-acre cemetery where so many of his people were buried.<sup>28</sup> In October of 1891, Charlo and his people, under the escort of General H. B. Carrington, left their farms and the graves of their ancestors. Sitting tall on his pony, Chief Charlo did not look back.

The chief later commented: "We were happy when the white man first came. We first thought he came from the light: but he comes like the dusk of evening now, not like

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<sup>26</sup> Bigart, ....

<sup>27</sup> Bigart, ....

<sup>28</sup> Evans, 205.

the dawn of morning. He comes like a day that has passed, and night enters our future with him.”<sup>29</sup>

Salish elder Louis Adams retells the trek to the Jocko as Mary Ann Combs, the last living member of the Bitterroot Salish who moved from the valley with Charlo, described it to him. Mary Ann was born near Darby in 1881 and lived with her family up Kootenai Creek and attended services and feast days with her family at St. Mary’s Mission. Mary Ann Combs frequently visited St. Mary’s and recalled her mother picking apples off Father Ravalli’s apple tree, she also remembered her own garden with melons, squash and onions and white neighbors who were nice to her family. It was the government who made them move out, not their neighbors. One clear beautiful morning when she was 12, the army sent word that everyone was to gather round. The soldiers told the several hundred Salish that the move was to take place immediately. According to Mary Ann, the soldiers who accompanied her people held them at gunpoint throughout the several days’ journey. They had no respect for her people. The soldiers told the Salish that they were not to leave the trail for any reason, even when the women and children needed to relieve themselves. It was degrading and humiliating and everyone was crying as they dragged their tipi poles behind their horses, passed the fences that now divided off the land that had once been their homeland.<sup>30</sup>

Louis Adams is a direct descendent of the Bitterroot Salish. He recalls that when he was a little boy and his relatives gathered, the adults whispered together when the children were out of earshot. As soon as Adams entered the room, conversation would stop. When he was in his teens, he finally discovered why. His aunt explained to him that the family was very angry when the government forced them leave their beloved Bitterroot Valley. However, the elders in his family who participated in the departure did not want their children to carry on their broken hearts. “This is your home, now,” his aunt told him. “And you need to feel good about it.” The elder family members kept their grief to themselves.<sup>31</sup>

The Salish departure to the Jocko Reservation and the closing of St. Mary’s as an Indian mission ironically marked the fiftieth anniversary of St. Mary’s founding. Yet its presence impacted the establishment of nine Indian missions and the conversion of 7,000 Indians who were practicing the Catholic faith in 1890. Jesuits continued to minister to Stevensville’s white Catholic community, making monthly visits to St. Mary’s.

Charlo lived out his life like a great leader in exile and died at the Flathead agency on January 10, 1910, never having returned to St. Mary’s Mission or to the Bitterroot

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<sup>29</sup>James Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 255.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, 231—232; Mary Ann Combs died in 1978 at 98; see [http://fwp.mt.gov/news/article\\_2964.aspx](http://fwp.mt.gov/news/article_2964.aspx), accessed 9/6/2009.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Adams to Sentinel High School students at the Jocko Agency Church, May 15, 2008. Author was present.

Valley he so loved. He is buried in the cemetery at the agency on the reservation, disconnected from the graves of his ancestors.

From 1866 to 1891, Salish were buried in the cemetery adjacent to the mission grounds. The cemetery ceased to be active when Salish families moved to the Flathead Reservation in 1891. From 1866 continuously to the present time, Catholics from Stevensville and St. Mary's Parish have buried their loved ones in the cemetery. The two burial grounds, one with tombstone-marked graves, and the other with no markers at all, sit separate, but side by side.

### **St. Mary's in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Return of the Salish**

The Jesuits allowed settlers to rent Father Ravalli's house, Victor's house, and some of the rooms attached to the chapel. They were not effective landlords and the renters were not good tenants. The property began to decay. By 1904, Jesuits had neglected the mission buildings to such an extent that they could not charge rent for them. In 1908, Bishop John Carroll established St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Hamilton and St. Mary's thereby fell under the jurisdiction of the parish priest at Hamilton.<sup>32</sup>

In September of 1911, the community of Stevensville sent an emissary to the Flathead agency. The purpose was to formally invite the Bitterroot Salish to return to their former home in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of their departure. While individuals and small family groups periodically returned to the mission, this was the first time in two decades that the Salish returned as a group. They travelled over the same trail for the first time since Charlo led them away from their ancestral home. Salish and whites who had known each other as neighbors were reunited. The community of Stevensville embraced their Salish guests and for three days, there was feasting, dancing, and storytelling.<sup>33</sup>

Preparations for this event prompted recognition and appreciation—for the first time—of the historical and contextual significance of St. Mary's Mission. The *Daily Missoulian* noted, "The old church stands in a good state of preservation but the grave of Father Ravalli has been somewhat neglected. However, steps have been taken by the Stevensville people to look after the grave and funds are being raised for the work. The Church and the Ravalli monument are indeed historic marks in the Bitter Root and in the life of the tribes."<sup>34</sup>

Stevensville's white Catholic community grew from a handful of members in 1891 to enough in 1921 for St. Mary's to become its own parish. Father James P. O'Shea was its first diocesan pastor. Father O'Shea undertook the job of renovating the small historic chapel so that it could house frequent services. He gathered the church furnishings that had been scattered over the years and returned them to their original places. On August 19, 1926, a ceremony honored Fathers De Smet and Ravalli with

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, 215-217.

<sup>33</sup> *Missoulian*, September 10, 1911.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; *Missoulian*, September 14 and December 17.

the unveiling of a bronze plaque, donated by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. Among those attending were Bitterroot Salish who had been baptized in the old mission.<sup>35</sup>

### **Later History of St. Mary's Parish**

The small mission chapel continued to serve St. Mary's parish. In 1941, more than 8,000 people traveled to St. Mary's Mission to attend the centennial celebration of Catholicism in the Northwest. Archbishop Amleto G. Cicognani, the apostolic delegate from the Vatican, and thirty bishops from across the United States, celebrated pontifical high mass. Although no one was alive to remember Father DeSmet, several oldtimers did recall Father Ravalli. One of them, born in a log cabin fifteen miles from the mission, was a non-Catholic who said, "He was a great man, one of the greatest to ever ride this valley. He shook my hand and blessed me as a boy. I'd be proud to have him do the same today."<sup>36</sup>

Continuous use took a toll on the small historic church and parishioners dreamed of the day when they could build a new St. Mary's, retire the old church and preserve it. The Most Reverend Joseph M. Gilmore began a program to build a new St. Mary's that attracted widespread notice not only among Montanans, but also among Catholics and others across the country.

In 1952, the Most Reverend George L. Leech of Harrisburg, PA, visited St. Mary's with the Bishop Gilmore. Bishop Leech recognized that a new church was essential for the preservation of the old mission church. He undertook a special fundraising program in his diocese and substantially contributed to the new St. Mary's. Montanans also generously contributed funding, materials, and labor. Bishop Gilmore appointed Reverend James P. Dowdall St. Mary's parish priest. Father Dowdall was a native of Anaconda, and his previous assignment was the construction of the Catholic church at Three Forks. Thus experienced, Bishop Gilmore entrusted Father Dowdall with the building of the new St. Mary's. Father Dowdall drew the building plans, siting the new building next to the old. He planned a glass backdrop behind the altar, with a perfect view of snow-capped St. Mary's peak, so-named by Father DeSmet when he founded the first mission in 1841. Clad in jeans, the priest worked right alongside the laborers at every phase of the construction.<sup>37</sup>

Workers broke ground in April 1953. The Northern Pacific Railroad donated the stone quarried from a pit near Clinton and shipped it to Stevensville. Seminarians from the Diocese of Helena helped pour the foundation; Anaconda pipefitters and welders worked weekends to install the heating plant; Missoula volunteers did all the planning and installation of the electrical work; various construction and engineering firms donated equipment, personnel, and labor; the Butte Knights of Columbus laid

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<sup>35</sup> Evans, 223.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Missoulian*, August 28, 1941.

<sup>37</sup> *Great Falls Tribune*, December 27, 1953.

all the shingles and did the landscaping. The Diocese of Great Falls made substantial donations as did the Catholic Extension Society of America. The new church cost \$40,000. Bishop Gilmore presided at its dedication in September 1954.<sup>38</sup>

The new, one-story church today stands in marked contrast to the old log St. Mary's, but it is fitting that it be so. The striking differences in appearance beautifully illustrate the growth of a community whose roots are widespread. The building of the modern church was a deep expression of the keen appreciation Catholics, non-Catholics, Montanans and non-Montanans have for the labors of the Jesuits and for the preservation of a cornerstone in the settlement of the Northwest. The annual return of the Salish to the Bitterroot Valley serves as an educational tool, with St. Mary's as its campus, interpreting for modern-day students and visitors the human cost of settling the West. The new St. Mary's is an integral, essential piece of the mission's story. It is no less a product of Catholic faith and global community than is the old St. Mary's representative of these same forces. The old and the new side by side visually demonstrate the continuation of the physical and spiritual seeds the Jesuit fathers planted long ago.

### **Anthony Ravalli, S.J.**

Father Anthony Ravalli, S.J., a man of many talents, arrived at the mission in 1845. Father Ravalli was an extraordinary man who mastered many disciplines. He was a priest, sculptor, carpenter, physician, surgeon, pharmacist, artist, architect, and mechanic. He traveled a 200-mile radius ministering to those in need of medical services or spiritual aid. Born to a wealthy family in Ferrara, Italy in 1812, he joined the Society of Jesus at fifteen, and later attended medical school at the Jesuit Roman College. He was ordained in 1843 and recruited by Father DeSmet to serve in the Rocky Mountain missions. He arrived at Vancouver, Washington in 1844 bringing medical supplies and pharmaceuticals, surgical instruments, carpenter's tools, and two buhr (mill) stones.<sup>39</sup>

Father Ravalli soon proved himself to the Indians at Colville, Washington. A young Indian woman had tried to hang herself and stopped breathing. Ravalli gave her artificial resuscitation and soon she sat up to the astonishment of those present. Thereafter, Father Ravalli's reputation preceded him wherever he went.<sup>40</sup>

Once at St Mary's, Father Ravalli's first task was to inoculate the Salish against smallpox, thereby practicing the first western medicine in Montana. Ravalli used vaccine brought from Europe and later, made from oxen infected with cowpox.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The Stevensville *Northwest Tribune*, September 9, 1954.

<sup>39</sup> The burh stones are on permanent display, along with several other items related to St. Mary's Mission, in the Homeland Exhibit at the Montana Historical Society in Helena, Montana.

<sup>40</sup> Jeanne O'Neill, *Men of the Mission; In the Shadow of Old St. Mary's* (Stevensville, MT: Stoneydale Press Publishing, 2007) 37.

<sup>41</sup> Evans 92.; *First Roots*, 27. An epidemic gravely impacted Montana's previously unexposed tribes—especially the Blackfeet and Assiniboine people—in 1837.

Later epidemics, especially one in 1869, left the Bitterroot Salish mostly unaffected because of Father Ravalli's intervention. The gentle priest was also Montana's first pharmacist and dispensed pharmaceuticals to Indians and white trappers, traders, and Catholic colleagues from his dispensary at St. Mary's Mission. When his supply of European medicines was depleted, he learned alternative remedies from the Indians. Father Ravalli distilled the first medicinal alcohol in Montana from the camas root.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout his life in remote Montana, Father Ravalli traveled many miles on his Indian pony in the worst weather to visit the sick. He amputated frozen limbs, helped women in childbirth, nursed Indians and whites through countless illnesses, and gave last rites to the dying. In 1879, Father Ravalli suffered a paralytic stroke, but still he visited the sick, lying on a cot in a wagon. When he died on October 2, 1884, the legislature named the new county in the Bitterroot Valley in his honor. He is buried in the small cemetery at St. Mary's. His friends and parishioners took up collections and erected the monument on his grave. In 2005, Father Ravalli was inducted into the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans.<sup>43</sup>

Father Ravalli's talents are evident in many ways at St. Mary's Mission. His architectural legacy is the beautiful mission chapel he carefully designed and expanded. The colorful statuary, altar carvings, and paintings in the log mission church are his creative handiwork. His home and pharmacy also bear his indelible architectural and artistic stamps. Interior woodcarvings, shelving, finely made furniture, and artifacts from his professional life give a startling glimpse into the religious devotion, medical practices, and personal life of this renowned, beloved, and multi-faceted priest.

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<sup>42</sup> O'Neill, 41.

<sup>43</sup> O'Neill, 40-41.