

EARLY VOYAGER PRIESTS

Pre-Colonial Catholic History

by Alexander M. Stewart



VOYAGE I

The publication in the 1934 OFFICIAL DIOCESEAN REVIEW AND ANNUAL CALENDAR of "Early Catholic History in the Rochester Diocese" by Alexander M. Stewart aroused interest not only locally but in Milan, Paris, Rome, Montreal and Quebec. Thus the CATHOLIC COMMISSION feels it a duty to present further illustrations in the same number of an article on "Early Voyager Priests, a Pre-Colonial Catholic History." Mr. Stewart

herein relates various interesting incidents in the lives of the missionaries who spread Christianity throughout the wilds of the Great Lakes and Eastern Seaboard regions. Authenticated with a bibliography, the article offers new knowledge on the Catholic aspects of history in the entire region which now comprises the Catholic Diocese of Rochester. Mr. Stewart has collected data to re-map definite early Indian villages in the diocese.

A Smashed Canoe

Lake St. Louis is a wide placid stretch of the St. Lawrence River above Montreal. As the voyagers entered this lake one of the canoes ran on a sharp submerged rock or the jagged end of a broken, sunken tree. There was yet more than two hundred miles of paddling, but one canoe was a wreck. There were neither Indian villages nor modern service stations along this part of the way, nor was there space in the other canoes for the load of the wrecked canoe.

There is a saying among old campers, that the more you carry in your head the less you need to carry in your pack. In this expedition were two kinds of knowledge; some heads were carrying a load of Greek and Latin roots, and some were learned in spruce roots. Upon going ashore, the college men stood aside and let the men who were truly learned in that environment go up forward.

These were the Indians of the expedition, who went into the forest and within two hours came back with long strips split from cedar logs, to be shaped into ribs for a new canoe. Others who were gone longer, brought back sheets of white birch bark, like immense sheets of thick, strong paper — beautiful, fragrant, water-proof and rot-proof.

Some Indians had gone where they had seen tall spruce trees and brought from them spruce roots, long, pliable and stringlike. They also obtained pine and spruce gum for caulking. Then a model frame was quickly built, thwarts, gunwales and ribs were hewn from cedar and bent over the frame. No nails were used. Fastenings were made by drilling holes and tying with spruce roots. Some Indians used bowstring drills with flint while young sophisticated, modern Indians, used iron drills and knives furnished by the French.

When the frame was ready the bark was bent and stretched on, cut to fit, sewn together at seams with spruce roots and then all joints covered with pine or spruce pitch. It was all done in one day. That day was a day of triumph for the men who knew spruce roots, but there was enough humility in the minds of the men who knew Latin roots to recognize the fine human mentality required to understand spruce roots, and if anyone with an open mind would examine into "the power and secret of the Jesuits" over the Indian tribes of North America, he would find that that power and secret lay in a mutual understanding of the value of the different kind of knowledge which the other man had. There is no room for high-hat or a conceit of knowledge among real men.

Birthday

On June 23rd, 1856, a child was born to the wife of one of the Onondaga guides, and after Mass was celebrated the child was baptized. It rained all day and all night. Nevertheless, the mother with the child journeyed along with the rest of the party, there being nothing but wolves and starvation for her if she should remain behind. Jes. Rel. XLIII, page 142.

On June 26th, about nine o'clock in the evening, a human voice was heard in the forest, uttering a ghostly and forsaken wail. When guns were fired to show that the party was French, a captive escaped from the Mohawks came out of the forest. He was a Huron named Joachim Ondakont. Seventeen days of traveling through the forest had reduced him to a ghostly skeleton of skin and bone. Care was given him; he was supplied with a small canoe and food and sent down river toward Montreal and Quebec.

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If the above words are read with a beating heart, the voice of Him Who spoke on Calvary's cross will be heard saying: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

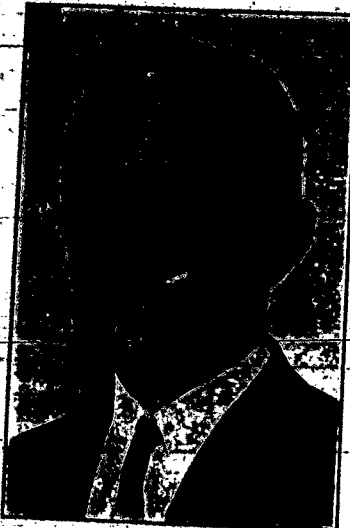
"God Works . . ."

The result of the conference in Quebec was a decision to found a colony at Onondaga. A record of that time says: "We started from Quebec on the 17th of May, 1656. The party consisted of the Rev. Francois de Mercier, Superior of Jorvit and Indes missions for Canada, Frs. Fremin, Dablon, Menard, seven Frenchmen and some Onondaga Indians who had come to act as guides, and some Seneca from the present area of the diocese of Rochester and some Hurons. They embarked in two large shallops, or one-masted sailing vessels, and several canoes.

At Point Ste. Croix, thirty miles above Quebec, the shallops anchored for the night. The priests had asked that the boats remain at anchor in the morning, to give the party time to go ashore for morning Mass.

But in the morning the boatmen forgot the request of the Fathers and pulled up their moorings and went on. Now it happened that the Mohawks, whose territory lay at the eastern end of the Iroquois League, which would found a colony at the center of their league and take from them the advantage which they had of dealing at first hand with the

Pioneer



ALEXANDER M. STEWART is a pioneer in the study of the work of the Jesuit Missions in Western and Central New York State. Through his research and investigations, Mr. Stewart has collected an authentic and detailed history of the early Church settlement of Western New York State, and has also prepared lectures, slides and maps to supplement the study. Mr. Stewart is an authority on the subject and was one of the guest speakers at the recent dedication of the mission table on the present site of Our Lady of Mercy High School. We feel that it should be of interest to our people to know more of the colorful historical background of their region. (D & C Photo)

French on the St. Lawrence and the Dutch on the Hudson.

Where the Fathers had intended to go ashore for Mass, three hundred Mohawks with hatchets in hand, had lain in wait. These were enough men to take captive and put to death the entire French party. The forgetfulness of the sailors had saved the lives of all. The poet Cowper at one time fell into such gloom that he called a cabinman intending to go to a bridge where he would end his life. A London fog made the cabinman lose his way and Cowper wrote the hymn, "God Works in Mysterious Ways His Wonders to Perform."

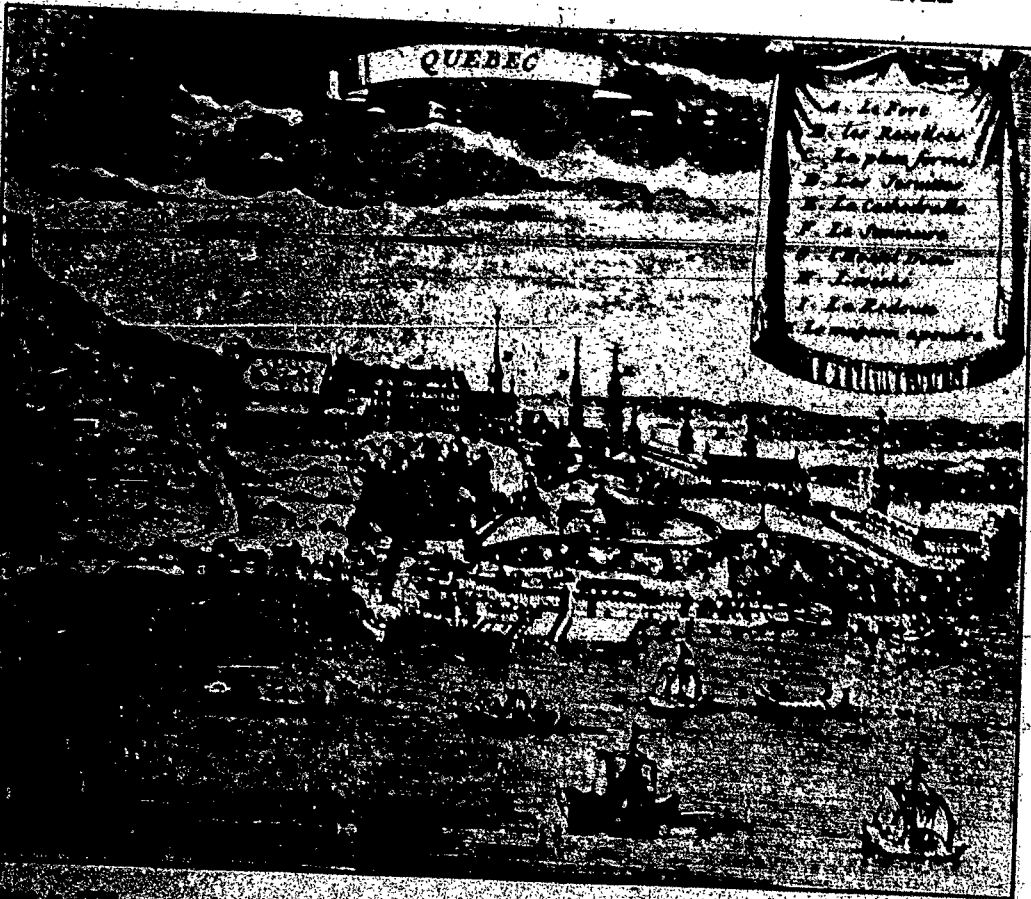
Taffeta Flag

The expedition arrived at Three Rivers on May 20th, and left May 29th, 1656. The ninety miles to Montreal were covered in three days. An express canoe was sent from Montreal to tell the people at Onondaga that the colony was coming.

At Montreal the St. Lawrence River ceases to be a long ocean inlet and comes descending through many rapids from the higher lands above. The sailing boats were left behind, and more canoes were taken.

Above Montreal some Iroquois mistaking the flotilla of colonists for enemies, fled into the forest, but when they saw a flag flying on which was the name Jesus, painted on fine white taffeta silk, they were no longer afraid and approached the expedition.

EARLY PRINT OF QUEBEC IN THE YEAR 1722



The early print of Quebec in the year 1722 shows the city and harbor. The banner above the city reads "QUEBEC". The print is a detailed illustration of the city's layout, including the harbor, the city walls, and the surrounding landscape.

centuries transplanted to the wilderness. To Quebec's was all the glory and power of primitive man. Uncultured, yet educated to the backbone, the Indian taught the white man through the missionaries, the means of overcoming the rigors of traveling and living in New France. Reproduction from Thwaites' edition of JESUIT RELATIONS. Photographs and prints with this article by courtesy of the author.