

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 2: BISHOP BLANCHET'S OREGON TRAIL DIARY

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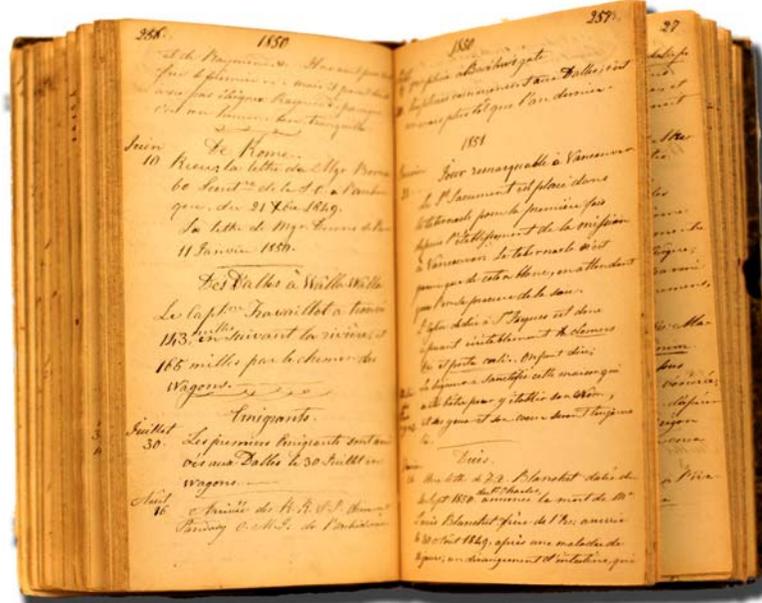
When we think of the Oregon Trail, we probably think of hardy farmers bound for the rich soil of the Willamette Valley. But not everyone on the Oregon Trail was headed to Oregon, and not all of them were farmers. There were bankers and entrepreneurs, trappers and guides, teachers and adventurers, even a Catholic bishop, and they settled in virtually every state west of Missouri, including what is now Washington State.

The Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle treasures a small leatherbound book with hundreds of pages covered in small, neat script. Written entirely in French, this is the journal of our first Bishop, Augustin Magloire Alexandre Blanchet, who was named Bishop of Walla Walla in 1846 and journeyed to his new diocese by the Oregon Trail in 1847.

A. M. A. Blanchet was no longer a young man when he set off for his new diocese; he would celebrate his 50th birthday on the Trail. The journey began on March 23, 1847, the day after Palm Sunday. He did not journey alone. With him was Father Jean-Baptiste Brouillet, who had already been named Vicar General of the new diocese (in his diary Blanchet almost invariably refers to him with great formality as “the Rev. Brouillet, Vicar-General”). Two of Blanchet’s nieces came as well, along with two seminarians, and two laymen, carpenters, who would assist in the new mission. After celebrating solemn Vespers in the Cathedral, Blanchet bade farewell to his friends and went to bed: “the night is long,” he wrote, “because each one is thinking of a multitude of things which prevents sleep.”

The journey got off to a scary start. “Nothing occurred to disturb the pure joy which was in our hearts, until suddenly the coach is overturned on its right side and everything is upside down.” They were still in the suburbs of Montreal! The carriage was righted without any significant damage except for bruises to the Bishop’s shoulder.

From Montreal it took several weeks to reach Independence, Missouri, where Blanchet’s party would join their wagon train. The diary records his culture shock. “I have found the Americans polished and engaging,” he wrote on April 13, “but I cannot approve of their manner of raising their legs as high as their heads when they are sitting down and they always find something on which they can prop their feet. It is an



Bishop Blanchet’s diary is one of many treasures of Pacific Northwest Catholic history housed in the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.

epidemic malady. You can always recognize an American this way.” The Church was different here, too, the Bishop found. In Pittsburgh, he observed, “one can see that they are not accustomed to have ceremonies such as those in Canada.”

For Blanchet, it was difficult to adjust to life on the road, where nothing followed a pattern. He had to celebrate Mass when he could, and sometimes it was not possible to have Mass, even on Sunday. On May 9, he writes with good humor: “being unable to find a way to say Holy Mass, I eat and please my stomach which has

been asking for mercy for quite some time.”

Sickness was a constant on the Trail. When the wagon train passed through the great prairies, the pioneers were able to eat fresh meat for the first time in many weeks, which resulted in rampant indigestion. At Chimney Rock, Bishop Blanchet sadly wrote, “everyone has diarrhea, but no one has it worse than I.” The animals were often sick, too, which caused delays. And there were constant dangers of other kinds as well: even going down a hill could result in injuries to animals and humans and damage to the wagons.

Thousands of people died on the Oregon Trail. On June 16, Father Brouillet was summoned to a six-year old girl who was dying. By the time he reached her, the child was dead. The girl had never been baptized, and Bishop Blanchet sadly told her father he could do nothing for her—the Church did not allow priests to provide burial to those who died without baptism, even children, until the Second Vatican Council. He recorded in his diary that the girl’s own father “buried her on the right side of the road near the campsite with a headboard on which was carved her name *Sara*.” After that devastating experience, Father Brouillet went to all the families in the wagon train urging them to have their children baptized. He and Bishop Blanchet baptized eight people on the Trail.

The party arrived at their destination, Fort Walla Walla, on September 5, 1847, more than five months after leaving Montreal. There would be little time to rest. Walla Walla, they would soon discover, was a tinderbox, where tensions between the whites and the Native peoples would very soon explode into violence.

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy