

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 24: FRAGMENT OF THE WHIDBEY ISLAND CROSS

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One of the most unusual objects in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle is a shapeless block of wood, worn and worm-eaten. It is easily overlooked—but rich in history.

When F. N. Blanchet and Modeste Demers arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 1838, they found very few Catholics, and those few were spread over a vast area. Ministering to this scattered congregation was an enormous task, but they approached it methodically. After just a few weeks in the region, they split up: Blanchet left Demers in charge of the few Catholics they had found at Fort Vancouver, while he headed north to the Cowlitz

Valley, where there were rumored to be four Catholic families. There he met Simon Plamondon, the famous French-Canadian pioneer. (Many years later, Blanchet's own niece would become Plamondon's third wife!)

Blanchet's first visit to Cowlitz was brief, but he returned in March of 1839, again staying at Plamondon's house. He began to preach a mission, with long sermons and catechism lessons, prayers, and plenty of singing. Blanchet was astonished when the mission he had intended for a handful of French-Catholic families began to grow, as delegations from many tribes came to hear the "robes noires," the Blackrobes, speak about God. One of these delegations had come more than 150 miles, from Whidbey Island, with their Chief, Tsla-lakum. They were exhausted and hungry, and their feet were bleeding after the long journey, but they were eager to listen to Blanchet's words. Blanchet wanted to seize the opportunity but was at a loss how to communicate with no common language except the Chinook jargon. He came up with a brilliant solution: the first Catholic Ladder (featured in the first essay in this series). The "Ladder" provided a simple, visual, and memorable way to preach the basic truths of the faith without complex language. He sent the ladder home with Tsla-lakum so the chief could himself share the Catholic faith with his people.

A year later, Blanchet visited Whidbey to see how Tsla-lakum and his people were getting on. He wrote in his diary: "I began the instruction by making the sign of the cross in Chinook jargon, and, to my great astonishment, all the assembly, men, women, and children, made the same, pronouncing the words exactly as practical and fervent Christians. I began to sing the first verse of a hymn in the Chinook jargon, and to my great wonder, all continued to sing



The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle still treasures a fragment of the cross Father Francois Norbert Blanchet raised on Whidbey Island in the 1840s. F. N. Blanchet later became the first Archbishop of Portland and was the brother of our first Bishop, A. M. A. Blanchet.

it to the end, with exact precision. I admired the success Tsla-lakum had had in teaching the people; I blessed the Lord... and my joy was so great that I shed tears of gratitude."

The next day, May 31, 1840, he offered Mass at an outdoor altar, and other tribes joined in the celebration. After Mass, there was a great feast, and the sharing of the peace pipe. Then the native peoples raised a huge wooden cross—24 feet high—which was duly blessed by Father Blanchet. The people prayed and sang, and 122 children received what Blanchet called "the 'medicine' of Baptism."

For a time, Whidbey Island was known as "Cross Island" because of Blanchet's cross. When the missionaries made their occasional visits to the island, their reports would always include reference to the fact that the cross was still in its place. When Father Jean-Baptiste Bolduc visited in 1843, the people were so grateful for his presence that they built him a large house—a clear signal that they wished him to stay in their midst.

But that was not to be—in fact, Whidbey would not have a resident priest until 1933. The faith which had taken hold so strongly in the early days faded away, and when Father J. E. O'Brien arrived in 1933, he found only a handful of Catholics, and he learned about Blanchet's cross not from his Catholic parishioners, but from Ida Sill, a descendant of one of Whidbey's first white settlers. Mrs. Sill dreamed of raising a new cross at Whidbey, and preserving the original, which was fast deteriorating.

In August of 1939, her dream became a reality. Bishop Shaughnessy granted special permission for an outdoor Mass, and Father O'Brien offered Mass on almost the same spot where Blanchet had said the first Mass a century before. Tribes from all over the region came to witness the ceremony and to be part of the raising of the second cross as they had raised the first one. Sadly, the native peoples had to travel long distances—no descendants of the original tribes were living on the island by that time. A fragment of the original cross now survives in the Archives, a reminder of the first mission at Whidbey Island.

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