

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 35: HOST IRON FROM ST. GEORGE INDIAN SCHOOL

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A common task for religious sisters well into the twentieth century was the making of hosts. Using wheat and water only, the Sisters prepared a dough which was rolled very thin and pressed flat in a host iron. The iron was then placed in a hot oven until the hosts were cooked. Various designs, from the simple to the elaborate, could be pressed into the hosts, particularly the large host which was used by the priest celebrant. The host iron featured here dates to the late nineteenth century and was used by the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Philadelphia at St. George Indian School just outside Tacoma.

St. George Indian School owed its beginnings to Father Peter Hylebos, the pioneer priest of Tacoma and, by all accounts, a very decisive personality. When he became the first resident pastor of St. Leo's Church, Tacoma's first parish, many of his parishioners were members of the Puyallup and other tribes. They had been baptized years before by missionaries like Archbishop F. N. Blanchet and Father Chirouse. Now, these native peoples were vanishing before his eyes: decimated by disease, marginalized by the new dominant culture, and forced ever further from their native lands by the influx of white settlers.

In lamenting their fate, Father Hylebos quoted the words of the Puyallup Chief Stanup: "There are three times as many Puyallups down under the ground in our graveyard as there are standing here.... Two years ago you could see a house here and there between the trees, now you can only see a tree here and there between the houses."

Not long after his arrival in Tacoma, Father Hylebos traveled east, to Washington DC and then to Rome, in search of support for the Indian tribes of Puget Sound. In Rome, "Divine Providence almost directly guided him to Miss Katharine Drexel," he later wrote (describing his own journey in the third person). Drexel would not long afterwards establish a religious community especially dedicated to the service of African American and Native American people. She provided Father Hylebos with generous financial support—more than \$4,000 annually for many years—and also recommended a lay teacher, Esther Stevenson, who would devote her life to the school. With additional help from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in Washington DC, grants from the government, and the support of a group of Franciscan Sisters from Philadelphia, "St. George's Industrial School for Indians" soon became a reality.

The Sisters arrived in October of 1888: "a feeling of loneliness stole over the hearts of the missionaries as day after day the rain poured down and the clouds obscured the blue heavens." The school was ready for occupants on October 16, and the first class was held on October 26.

At that time, assimilation was the government's policy in dealing with native tribes. The goal was not the preservation of the history and culture of these tribes, or their survival as a people, but rather their



Above: A detail of the host iron used at St. George's Indian School, from 1888 to 1936. **Below:** An early photo of the main school building. *Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.*

total assimilation into the dominant culture. St. George Indian School was characteristic of this philosophy. It was a boarding school, so children were separated from their families and tribes and completely immersed in a new way of life. They came from many different tribes—Puyallup, Yakima, Tulalip, Muckleshoot, among others—and spoke many languages. At St. George, only English was spoken and the use of native languages was forbidden in the classroom. The school was also a working farm, and children learned trades: the Sisters taught the girls to cook, sew, and raise chickens, while the chaplain, Father De Decker, helped the boys learn to handle horses and cows, clear land, build fences, and plant and harvest crops.

Faith was at the heart of all that happened at St. George's. The records of the school give witness to many baptisms and First Communions. The visits of Bishop Junger for Confirmation were a special treat. The boys of the school built a small bridge and a new road on purpose to make the Bishop's visits to them easier (the road was appropriately named the "bishop's road"). In 1895, the children helped build a stone grotto on the grounds, in which was placed a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, a gift from Mother Katharine Drexel. Father

Hylebos described the procession: "The boys headed the festal march, holding aloft a banner of St. Joseph. The girls followed, two by two, carrying a banner of the Blessed Virgin. Next came four large girls, dressed in white, carrying on their shoulders the statue.... Sisters from St. George's School followed, singing the litany alternately with four priests of nearby towns. Last came several young Indian girls, dressed like little angels, and strewing flowers where the Blessed Sacrament was to pass.... the occasion... made a lasting impression on the minds of all present."

St. George's School continued to thrive into the 1920s, and was a prominent Catholic presence in Tacoma, even sponsoring a booth at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition in 1909—the handiwork of the boys and girls was, according to Father Hylebos, much admired. But with the Great Depression, funding dried up and Bishop Shaughnessy, dealing with massive debt, closed the school in 1936.

In 1944, in a letter to the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Shaughnessy wrote that financial concerns were not the only reason for closing St. George's. The whole policy of assimilation—which, under John Collier, Roosevelt's Director of Indian Affairs, was being dismantled—was a failure. "The school was located nowhere near any tribe of Indians," Shaughnessy wrote. "Hence the little children were deprived of family life and unnecessarily so while the actual schooling that they received was too often ill fitted toward attaining the purpose to which it should have been directed."

The school buildings endured for many years and served various purposes until 1971, when the property was razed for the construction of Gethsemane Cemetery.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*