

THE POTAWATOMI MISSION AND ITS TRAIL OF TEARS

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On May 28, 1830, at the urging of President Andrew Jackson and after heated debate, congress passed the Indian Removal Act. This act gave the president the authority to buy lands presently owned by Indians east of the Mississippi River, including the Potawatomi Indians in northwest Indiana, transfer the Indians to federal lands west of the Mississippi, and support them financially for one year until they could get settled and be able to support themselves. Five hundred thousand dollars were appropriated for this.¹

The Potawatomis had first received the faith in the mid and late 1600's through the work of Jesuit missionaries Jacques Marquette, Louis Hennepin, and Claude Allouez, and their successors, but the "Black Robes" had departed in the 1760's when the British took over the territory after their victory in the French and Indian War, and with the suppression of the Jesuits by the French king in 1764.² But the Potawatomis retained their faith as best they could and one of their chiefs, Leopold Pokegon, travelled to Detroit in 1830 to ask that a priest be sent among them again.³

It happened that Father Stephen Badin, the first priest ever ordained in the United States, was visiting his brother in Detroit at that time and he was asked to accept this mission. He had been a seminarian in France when the French Revolution broke out in 1789, had fled France for the United States, completed his seminary studies in Baltimore, and was ordained by Bishop John Carroll in 1793, Carroll's first priestly ordination. Badin served among the French and English-speaking Catholics in the Ohio Valley in the early nineteenth century, and then accepted the mission to the Potawatomis in 1830.⁴

Within weeks of his arrival, he described his work:⁵

I am consecrating the little strength left to me to spread the seeds of the Faith among the good Potawatomi savages. I have the names of twenty-four of them who came to be instructed and baptized. . . . I am too old to learn their language and I am obliged to use

an interpreter. . . . Consequently there is need of patience and the grace of the Holy Spirit above all. Ask it for me in your fervent prayers.

Badin set out immediately to establish a school, and also an orphanage, he tried unsuccessfully to attract some Kentucky sisters to staff them, and both eventually failed. In 1832 he purchased 524 acres of land from the government, land which he later gave to the bishop on condition that a school and an orphanage be built there, land the bishop later gave to Father Edward Sorin on which he founded the University of Notre Dame and his manual labor school. Badin constructed a log cabin on it to serve both as a chapel and his residence. He encouraged the Potawatomi in the cultivation of wheat and corn and, since in Potawatomi culture chiefly women tilled the soil while men did the hunting, Badin cultivated his own garden to give an example that farming was for men also.⁶ Badin travelled widely, usually on horseback, from Fort Wayne to Chicago to Kentucky, and once mentioned that he had spent \$1000 of his own money on his Indian ministry.⁷ There was certainly a crusty, curmudgeon side to Badin, and there seemed to be few bishops he could get along with, but he could also be tender toward his Indians:⁸

If one could know the good savages that I have the happiness of instructing, one would be able to defend and love them. . . . You know the charm of their piety, so naive, so true, their modesty, and their silence in the church, their attention at the catechism and at the exhortation of the priests proclaiming their sentiments of respect for the Master of Life. . . .

In 1836, Badin was sixty-nine years old and, worn out from his missionary travels, decided to leave his Indian mission, but only because he had a worthy successor.⁹ Father Louis Deseille, a thirty-eight year old Flemish priest, ordained twelve years, had emigrated to Detroit in 1832 to work among the Indians, and was immediately sent to assist the tiring Badin. He seems to have made his home at Pokegon's Village just north of the Michigan border, but he travelled frequently to Badin's mission at the two lakes and to the Potawatomi settlements along

the Yellow River about twenty-five miles to the south.¹⁰ At each location the ministry was the same, days filled with religious instructions, baptisms, Mass, marriages, care of the sick, and burials, and he shared Badin's interests in chapels, schools, and agriculture.¹¹

Gentle person though he was, Father Deseille was soon brought into conflict with the public authorities. Government officials in Washington, including Secretary of War Lewis Cass and Commissary General of Subsistence George Gibson, had assured the Potawatomi, and Deseille, that under the Removal Act of 1830 the natives did not need to move if they decided not to sell their present land to the government, but the Indian agents on the scene continued to urge them to sign such land sale treaties to free them from the encroaching white settlers and hostile state laws.¹² Some of the subsequent treaties were signed willingly, others only under threat, and others only when the chiefs had been made drunk on the white man's whiskey.

There were four Indian settlements along the Yellow River to the south of South Bend at this time, and three of the four Potawatomi chiefs may have signed a land sale treaty. The fourth, Chief Menominee, earlier baptized by Father Deseille, had not, and he thus insisted that his settlement did not have to move:¹³

The President does not know the truth. He, like me, has been deceived. He does not know that your treaty is a lie and that I have never signed it. He does not know that you made my chiefs drunk, got their consent, and pretended to get mine. He does not know that I have refused to sell my lands and still refuse. He would not by force drive me from my home, the graves of my tribe and children, who have gone to the Great Spirit. . . . I have not signed any treaty, and I shall not sign any. I am not going to leave my land. I do not want to hear anything more about it.

Father Deseille supported him in this, and also continued to favor chapels, schools, and agricultural pursuits, all suggesting Indian permanence and stability. His patience exhausted, the local Indian agent, Colonel Abel Pepper, in May, 1837, ordered Father Deseille to leave the public property or be arrested for disturbing the peace and attempting to alienate the Indians

from the government.¹⁴ Deseille, acknowledging that he was not an American citizen, obediently left the reserve, returned to Pokegon's Village for a brief period, then, seriously ill, came to Father Badin's mission by the lake. There was no other priest in the vicinity, although Indian runners set off to Chicago, Logansport, and New Albany to find one. Father Deseille asked his Indians to help him into the chapel, gave himself Viaticum, and died there in the arms of his Indians, a scene commemorated in the mural in the Log Chapel on the campus today.¹⁵

With Father Deseille now gone and a crisis developing over removal, the bishop of the newly established diocese of Vincennes in southern Indiana ordained young Benjamin Petit and sent him north to replace Father Deseille.¹⁶ His first visit was to the Indians along the Yellow River, the spot from which Father Deseille had been evicted:¹⁷

I have stayed twenty-one days among them. This is the life we led during that time: At sunrise the first bell rang, and you would have seen the savages come along the forest paths and the shores of the lakes. . . . While waiting for the laggards to assemble, the catechist gave in an animated manner the substance of the previous day's sermon. Then they recited a chapter of the catechism and the morning prayer. I said Mass between hymns, after which I preached, my sermon being translated by a respectable French demoiselle of seventy-two years who has consecrated herself in the capacity of an interpreter to the work of the missions. Then they concluded with a Pater and an Ave, sang:

In thy protection do we trust,
O Virgin, meet and mild,

and left the chapel.

Then it was time for me to hear confessions until evening, sometimes even after supper. At sunset they came together again for catechism, followed by an exhortation, evening prayer, the hymn to the Virgin, and I gave them my blessing -- poor Benjamin's blessing!

He wrote his bishop the next month:¹⁸

Now to tell you of my Christmas: Pokegon's savages arrived at Bertrand for the festival Friday morning, to the number of sixty or seventy. I went there myself and heard confessions until sunset Saturday. They brought me back by sleigh to South Bend, where on Sunday morning after High Mass I had the happiness of baptizing Mme. Clark. I left for Bertrand immediately, and in the afternoon performed seven baptisms three of which were of Indian adults; then confessions until eleven o'clock, midnight Mass, sermons in French and English and about fifty communions: the next morning at the lake

confessions until High Mass, English and French sermons, and ten or fifteen communions. I shall confess after these two High Masses, six sermons, and confessions during these days, I felt very tired and in the afternoon I fell asleep in an armchair by the fireplace.

A few days later he wrote of his Indians to his family back in France.¹⁹

Ah, I love them tenderly! If you saw, when I enter a cabin, the little children who surround me and climb on my knees, the father and mother and elder children who gather together, piously make the sign of the cross, and then with a trusting smile come to press my hand -- you could not help loving them as I do. . . . I am beginning to speak their language a little -- to appreciate something of what they say to me. . . . I am truly happy. Do not wish anything better for me but that God protects us! This mission is menaced by approaching destruction -- the government wants to transport the Indians to the other side of the Mississippi. I live between fear and hope, but I entrust my hope and fear to the hands of the Lord!

Despite those fears, he retained hope that the removal orders could be reversed.

Although still only twenty-six years old, Petit had graduated both college and law school in France, had practiced as an attorney for three years before entering the seminary, and he assisted the Indians in drafting an appeal to Washington, but it was eventually rejected.²⁰ The government insisted that the land sale treaties had been validly signed. During the delay, white settlers began to move into the disputed territory and the military was called in to preserve order.²¹ On September 4, 1838, the long removal march began, under the watchful eye of the military. A few days later, the bishop gave Petit permission to accompany them, on condition that he return as soon as the march reached its destination. He gathered his few belongings, caught up with the march at Danville, Illinois, and described this “Trail of Tears” in his journal.²²

I leave to get my baggage --

Before leaving South Bend Mlle. Campau is dying --

I am unable to overtake the party until Danville --

I sleep in General Morgan’s tent --

a few baptisms --

six miles from Danville --

Holy Mass twice, 6 deaths, 2 baptisms, 3 private baptism --

at camp 10 miles from Sandusky, 3 deaths --

camp Sidney 2 deaths --

my appointment as interpreter --

one death --

on the 23rd two deaths --

I remain with the sick at the camp called Sagamon crossing --

3 burials --

I rejoin the emigration 16 miles further on with the sick, one woman dead on the way --

I am attacked by fever. A Frenchman wants to take me into his house. I fear difficulties
in catching up --

extreme unction for an Irishman --

I buy various things -- boots, blankets, hose, wine, raisins, goggles, books, &c. --

departure from Quincy, the health of the camp improves --

Catholics come to see me at camp --

I am attacked by fever --

we lose our way in a heavy all-day rain in the prairies --

I fell sick at Joseph Bourassa's, for 19 days I have a fever there --

I return to camp --

no flour --

still ailing, no bread --

the fever again --

the fever leaves me, I feel better --

I receive only this day my order to return --

I prepare myself to depart within a few days in order to gather strength against the cold
and the rigor of the road at this advanced season --

The march had lasted exactly two months, from September 4 to November 4, it had covered 660 miles from central Indiana through Illinois and Missouri to eastern Kansas, and Petit wrote a lengthy summary to his bishop at its end, concluding:²³

Thus, Monseigneur, your aim and mine have been achieved. This young Christendom, in the midst of the anguish of exile and ravages of epidemic, has received all the aid of religion. The sick have been anointed, the soil which covers the ashes of the dead is consecrated, faith and the practice of religious duties have been maintained, even in their temporal sorrows he whom these people call their father has had the consolation of often being able to render assistance. . . . You wished, Monseigneur, only for the glory of God and the salvation of these Christians. I looked for nothing else. Let us hope your wishes will be fulfilled.

More than forty Indians had died on the march, and Father Petit's fever was serious. He somehow struggled back across the state of Missouri to Saint Louis, but he could go no further. The Jesuits there received him generously, gave him what medical attention they could, but nothing could be done. He died there peacefully on February 10, 1839.²⁴

It seems appropriate that the bodies of these three missionaries -- Stephen Badin, Louis Deseille, and Benjamin Petit -- lie buried in the Log Chapel here on the Notre Dame campus, a replica of the one Father Badin himself had constructed a hundred and seventy years ago as the center of the Church's Potawatomi ministry.

Notes

- 1 – The Removal Act is reprinted in Anthony F. C. Wallace, The Long Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians (New York, 1993), pp. 125-128. Excerpts from Jackson's speech to congress on December 8, 1829, are on pp. 121-124. See also Ronald N. Satz, American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era (Lincoln, NE, 1975); Robert Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832, Vol. II (New York, 1981), pp. 259-264; and Matthew Warshauer, Andrew Jackson in Context (New York, 2009), pp. 119-122.
- 2 – For the Potawatomis, see R. David Edmunds, The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire (Norman, OK, 1978); George Pare, "The St. Joseph Mission," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. XVII (June, 1930, to March, 1931), pp. 24-54; Everett Clasby, The Potawatomi Indians of Southwestern Michigan (Dowagiac, MI, 1966), pp. 3-14; Rev. William McNamara, C.S.C., The Catholic Church on the Northern Indiana Frontier, 1789-1844 (Washington, DC, 1931), pp. 4-11; and Rev. Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C., The History of the Catholic Church in the South Bend Area (South Bend, IN, 1953), pp. 1-7.
- 3 – Cecilia Bain Buechner, "The Pokegons," Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Indianapolis, IN, 1933), pp. 298-299, and McNamara, pp. 18-19.
- 4 – The best biographical study of Badin is J. Herman Schauinger, Stephen T. Badin: Priest in the Wilderness (Milwaukee, WI, 1956). See also McNamara, pp. 21-48; McAvoy, The Catholic Church in Indiana, 1789-1834 (New York, 1940), pp. 174-198; and McAvoy, "Father Badin Comes to Notre Dame," Indiana Magazine of History, Vol. XXIX (1933), pp. 7-16.
- 5 – Badin to M., September 30, 1830, Annales de l'Association de la Propagation de la Foi, Vol. IV (Lyon, 1830), p. 547, the English translation from McNamara, p. 25.
- 6 – Catholic Telegraph (Cincinnati), July 14, 1832, cited in McAvoy, "Father Badin," p. 10.
- 7 – Schauinger, pp. 215-263.
- 8 – Badin to Mon Cher Ami, December 12, 1831, Annales, Vol. VI (Lyon, 1834), pp. 168-169, the English translation from Schauinger, p. 225.
- 9 – Schauinger, pp. 243-263.
- 10 – Deseille to The Commissary General of Subsistence (Gibson), December 28, 1835, in "Correspondence on Indian Removal, Indiana, 1835-1838," Mid-America, Vol. XV (1932-1933), p. 179.
- 11 – McNamara, pp. 42-68; Schauinger, pp. 243-246; "Missionaries of Indiana -- First Rev. C. De Seille (sic)," Ave Maria, Vol. I (1865), pp. 474-475; and Shirley Willard and Susan

- Campbell, Potawatomi Trail of Death (Fulton County Historical Society, 2003), pp. 15-25.
- 12 – Letters of Lewis Cass to Abel Pepper (January 25, 1836) and to the Potawatomi chiefs (February 9, 1836), cited in Edmunds, p. 265, and Deseille to The Commissary General of Subsistence (December 28, 1835) and to A. C. Pepper (March 21, 1836), both in “Correspondence on Indian Removal,” pp. 180 and 182.
 - 13 – Benjamin F. Stuart, “The Deportation of Menominee and his Tribe of the Pottawattomie (sic) Indians,” Indiana Magazine of History, Vol. XVIII (1922), pp. 257-258.
 - 14 – Pepper to Deseille, May 16, 1837, “Documents,” pp. 185-186.
 - 15 – McNamara, pp. 68-69.
 - 16 – McNamara, pp. 69-76, and Willard and Campbell, pp. 26-28.
 - 17 – Petit to his mother, October 15, 1837, Annales, Vol. XI (Lyon, 1839), pp. 385-386, English in Willard and Campbell, pp. 33-34.
 - 18 – Petit to Bishop Brute, December 16, 1837, quoted in Willard and Campbell, pp. 48-49.
 - 19 – Petit to his family, January of 1838, Annales, Vol. XI (Lyon, 1839), p. 387, English in Willard and Campbell, p. 52.
 - 20 – Petit to Bishop Brute, June 20 and 23, 1838, quoted in Willard and Campbell, pp. 77-81.
 - 21 – Willard and Campbell, note 21 on pp. 87-88, and General John Tipton to Petit, September 2, 1838, in Willard and Campbell, pp. 201-202.
 - 22 – Petit’s hurried journal entries are reprinted in Willard and Campbell, pp. 129-131.
 - 23 – Petit to Bishop Brute, November 13, 1838, Annales, Vol. XI (Lyon, 1839), p. 408, English in Willard and Campbell, p. 105.
 - 24 – Willard and Campbell, pp. 114-116.