IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SAINT JOSEPH'S MISSION

Number 847 1986

Jesuit missions to Idaho's Nez Perce Indians commenced as an extension of church ministry to Catholic residents of Lewiston. Father Joseph M. Cataldo arrived there in 1868. His interest extended to providing educational as well as religious services to local Nez Perce bands, whose reservation school (for which Henry Harmon Spalding has been responsible until 1865) was closed. Cataldo encouraged Nez Perce people to attend his Lewiston church, and in February 1868 he got a small chapel for Saint Joseph's Mission built a mile above Lapwai Creek. Presbyterian opposition to expansion of his Nez Perce ministry delayed further action there, and he was assigned for about two years to Coeur d'Alene mission responsibilities. When he returned to Lewiston in May 1872, a considerable Nez Perce mission opportunity was presented to him. Several hundred joined Spalding's Presbyterian Church at that time, and Cataldo was able to baptize over a hundred new adherents that year, augmenting his earlier group of less than forty. He had to overcome considerable opposition of Nez Perce agency officials who objected to construction of a permanent Nez Perce church building, but he managed to erect another temporary chapel at Sweetwater in October of 1872. By that time, he had about 100 Nez Perce Indians attending his services in Lewiston. Finally he got Interior Department Secretary Columbus Delano to allow his building project to proceed. With $600 contributed in Lewiston and another $400 contributed by North Idaho miners--some of them Chinese--his effort succeeded. Josiah Slickpoo provided a Mission Creek site somewhat isolated from Presbyterian missionary activities, and construction was completed by September 8, 1874.

With their permanent church building occupying a reasonably secluded site, Cataldo's mission associates added some cabins and a productive orchard and garden to their mission complex. A vineyard also was planted, and annual wine shipments went to Bishop Alphonsus Glorieux at Boise. Each shipment went sour prior to arrival. As Erwin Thompson noted in his historic structure report for Saint Joseph's Mission, "Rather than embarrass . . . (Brother Benvento Priotto, manager of Saint Joseph's winery), the bishop would always set this wine aside as his 'reserved case.'" Cataldo also got a school started before 1877, when he assumed responsibility for administering all Jesuit Rocky Mountain missions for sixteen years. Just after Cataldo left, General O. O. Howard's Nez Perce War with nontreaty bands created a lot of resentment among nonparticipating Indians as well. This conflict disturbed missionary activity for some time.

Before Cataldo returned, a priest's residence was added in 1889, and Alice Fletcher allocated a 160-acre allotment for mission purposes. He arranged to obtain twelve eastern novices to train there to improve a new school built in 1902. Expansion of his mission building followed in 1904. Until 1915, Cataldo often had to leave for temporary assignments elsewhere, but in that year he settled there permanently. He was disappointed when his school and convent burned on August 27, 1916, but continued active until 1928 when a big Lewiston reception was held in his honor, February 20.

Mission activities gradually declined over thirty years following Cataldo's death later in 1928. School operation continued for a decade after Saint Joseph's Mission closed on August 7, 1958. Preservation of mission buildings continued, although fire destroyed Cataldo's house, November 24, 1963. Finally, after school closure in 1968, Saint Joseph's Mission entered a new phase as a site interpreted as part of Nez Perce National Historical Park.