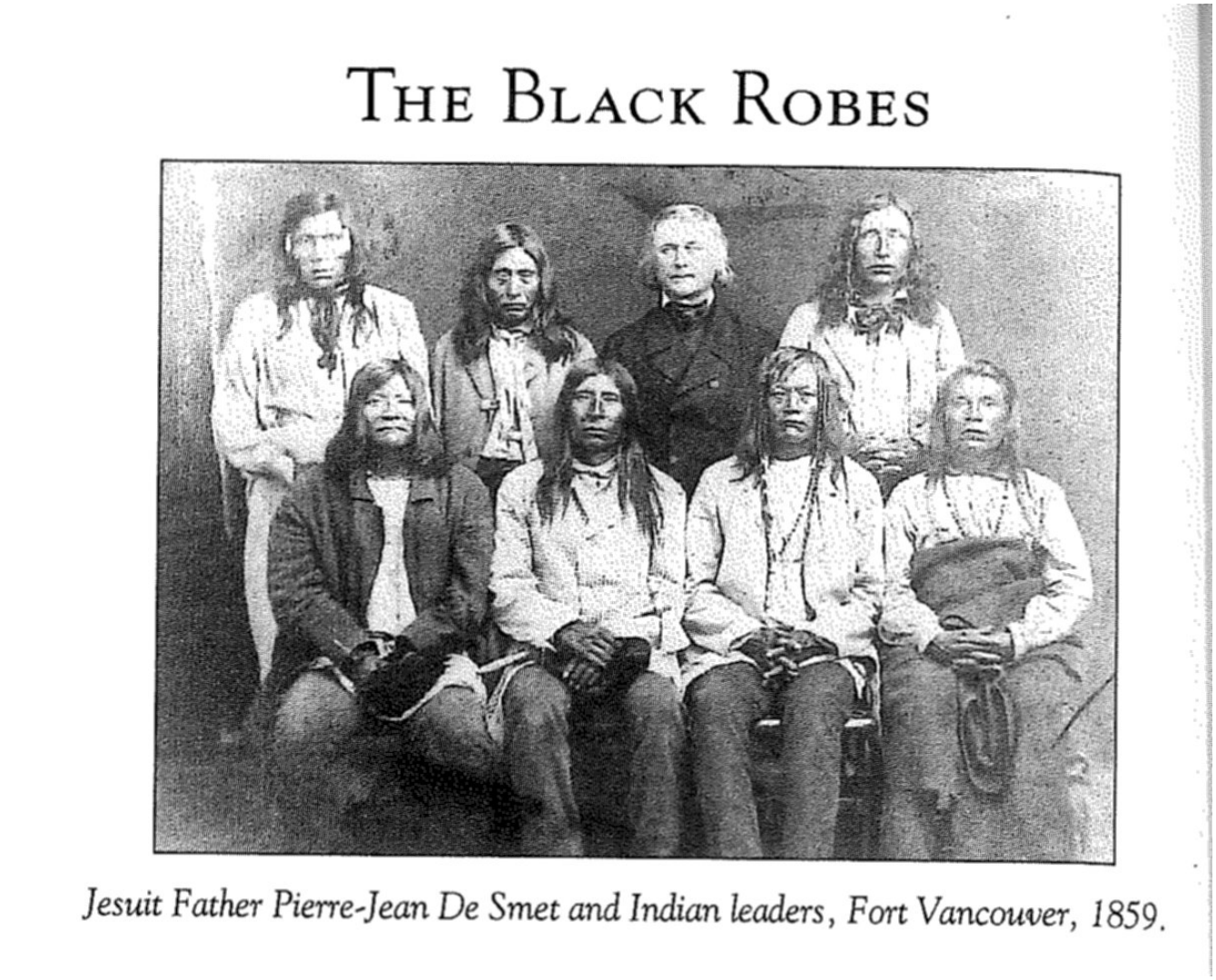
# Early Priests in the area—

By Gretchen A Luoma Cohan

Long before any government agency offered guidance about vaccines or facilitated vaccine supply chains, indeed before Washington became a State, a priest in Kettle Falls administered them using a knife blade--likely saving hundreds of lives.

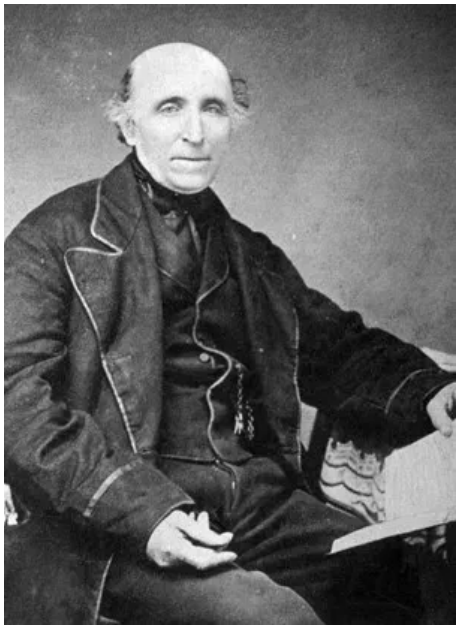



*Jesuit Father Pierre-Jean De Smet and Indian leaders, Fort Vancouver, 1859.*

The practice of transferring a small amount of a disease through a skin puncture to build immunity in a healthy person had been known and practiced in China, India and Africa for centuries. Techniques improved and precision increased over the years and in England, Edward Jenner famously promoted vaccine effectiveness in the late 1700's. New understanding of contagious disease gave rise to widespread use and even mandates for mass vaccination.

In the Inland Northwest, however waves of smallpox swept the region many times devastating Indigenous people and causing the deaths or dispersal of whole communities. Lewis and Clark's journals include hearing of widespread death, seeing empty villages as well as encountering native adults with scars that were likely from the first western waves of the epidemic in the 1780's.

“There was no doctor in the country and no vaccine to be had” Father Joseph Joset S.J. wrote later in his papers about the epidemic of 1852. He goes on, describing his experience in third person: “[Since the sick] man was in very good constitution, the Father took the matter from his and first inoculated first his wife and children...and everyone escaped the infection. The Father had never done such a thing before but a missioner, in such circumstances must improvise himself a doctor.”



*Fr Ravalli*

Father Joset proved himself to be among the most adaptable of the priests who served in this area during the time of the Hudson Bay Company’s activity. Well known as a diplomat and peacemaker he “made every effort to prevent the Indians from clashing with the Whites .” Born in Switzerland, he arrived in the far west at age 34 and took active part in peace talks between tribal leaders and government officials, including attempts to avert white violence in Rosalia, Washington, as well as his duties in parish and pastoral ministry. He served at St. Paul’s mission, in the settlements around the Hudson Bay Company’s Fort Colvile and surrounding areas from 1851-80’s.

Priests were welcomed by the Hudson Bay Company officials partly because many employees, French, French-Canadian, Iroquois or culturally mixed were Catholic and partly because they held found it important to “have a chaplain in this country and...to allow missions to be established at proper places for the conversion of the Indians.” Priests furthermore were regular customers of the trading company and frequent paying companions on the trade routes.



*Fr De Smet*

Fathers Frances Norbert Blanchet and Father Modeste Demers were the first priests to enter this area after a three-thousand-mile mission site planning journey from Montreal to Fort Vancouver in 1838. Father Pierre Jean de Smet followed and embellished these plans including selecting locations and names for mission stations, St. Paul (Kettle Falls) and St. Frances Regis (originally near Chewelah then relocated to Ward, between Kettle Falls and Colville currently a bed and breakfast). De Smet fulfilled the demand by four Indian delegations in succession dispatched from the Rocky Mountains to St. Louis to beg for "black-robes". He paved the way for European-born priests such as Father John Nobili S.J., Father Anthony Ravalli, Father Louis Vercruysse and Father Peter De Vos. These men began and continued building projects most notably the St Paul’s mission church (still standing following its refurbishment in the twentieth century and transfer to National Park Service in 1974.) Ravalli also inoculated the tribes he served against smallpox, and his

efforts shielded the Bitterroot Salish against epidemics that devastated other tribes. In 1893 Ravalli County, Montana was named after him.

For their part, the Catholic leadership laid out the priests' work: to facilitate conversion to Christianity, to extend help to all who need it, and to "not lose a single opportunity to inculcate principles of Gospel teachings either in their private conversation or their public discourses." Seventeen additional points delineated mostly sacramental and teaching ministry.

In general, the priests focused on baptizing infants and adults, blessing marriages and promoting moral and theological instruction. They shared with the Protestant missionaries in the region a belief that shifting from nomadic to farming lifestyle would allow the best chance for Indigenous people to survive and also would create stability for the White traders and settlers.

Father Joset's adaptability was especially important during his ministry in Kettle Falls in the turbulent 1850's. No records survive about Native perspectives on his vaccine project, but a handful of stories illustrate the cultural clash between spiritualities. In his writings he tells of a native man asking for tobacco. Father Joset refused he said, because he had none. Frustrated the man took credit for the priest's subsequent near-fatal illness and boasted about his powers in "killing the blackgown."

In 1852 newly appointed governor Isaac Stevens proposed the initial reservation plan for the area's native people igniting more tensions and straining existing trade, farming and even family and religious partnerships. In 1855 gold was discovered in and the following months and years grew chaotic as desperate men turned from their California dreams to exploit new lands. The US-Canada border was proclaimed and U.S. military quickly built Fort Colville (with a change in the spelling) and more settlers and tradespeople hurried to this valley to service the new post. As the population center shifted and plans were laid for a new Catholic church in Pinkney City, nearer the new fort, St. Paul's Mission closed.

Father Joset summarized his views about the Catholic missions: their "primary function was to help the Indians and to let the Whites look out for their own destinies." What this meant, day to day, and in individual lives belongs to speculative history, but it is clear that his and the other priests' ability and willingness to improvise and adapt in these dynamic years, had lasting effect.

Black Robes and Indians on the Last Frontier by Sister Ilma Maria Raufer O.P.
Colville Collection Book 5; Catholic in the Colville Community compiled by Patrick Graham
National Park Service St. Paul's Mission written and online materials