

## Those Intriguing Errata: The Truth about Father Rossi

One of the fascinations about studying history is the frequency with which one encounters contradictory "facts." For example, one source credits Father Luigi Rossi with having built Steilacoom's Immaculate Conception Chapel. Actually the chapel was erected, near the center of Fort Steilacoom, a number of months before Rossi came on the scene. He tells us in his memoirs that it was the existence of the chapel which caused him to initially select the fort as the seat of his missionary activities.

In another source, Rossi is described as the first pastor of Immaculate Conception Chapel. In no strict sense was he the "pastor," actually, Rossi's pastorate (area of responsibility) as spelled out in his letter of appointment, dated November 12, 1857, was "all that part of the Diocese which is to the north of the Saint Francis Xavier Mission at Cowlitz (near what is now the town of Toledo) and west of the Cascade Mountain Range." The Diocese actually extended to what was often referred to as the English border, the 49th parallel.

Two other sources state that Rossi was at the fort for seven years.

However, his memoir is entitled *Six Years on the West Coast of America, 1856-1862*. (Emphasis added.) Actually Rossi arrived at the fort on December 9, 1857. Only a year later he decided to change his base of operations to Port Townsend. He gives two key reasons: (a) In his absence Steilacoom area Catholics could be served by the Oblate Priests located in Olympia. (b) There were some 250 or so Catholics farther down the Sound for whom he was the only priest. For him and them, Port Townsend was much more centrally located.

I found it interesting that promptly after his arrival at Port Townsend he set about building a church, which he named Star of the Sea. Rossi's first contact with Washington Territory had been at the Columbia River bar in the midst of a howling Pacific storm. He describes how he prayed to the Mother of God, using the reverent title often invoked by sailors in distress, the Star of the Sea. In his prayers he promised to build a church and name it after her. His ship, the *Brother Jonathon*, safely arrived at Astoria on December 8; a date which marks the Feast of the Immaculate Conception — an auspicious day for the many Catholics who

hold a special reverence for the Mother of God. So, did Rossi have a third reason for leaving Fort Steilacoom: a need to locate to a place where he could build that church he had promised?

Rossi ended his mission to Washington Territory on December 2, 1859. On that date, with the permission of Colonel Silas Casey, he boarded the *USS Massachusetts* which was transporting troops from San Juan Island to Fort Vancouver. At Fort Vancouver he took leave of the bishop who had recruited him in Belgium, Augustine Magloire Alexander Blanchet. (For perhaps obvious reasons, usually referred to in most references as A.M.A. Blanchet.)

However, he didn't make it back to Europe until almost three years later. While on a stopover in San Francisco, he was talked into ministering to settlers in what is now the Sonoma wine country. A prodigious builder, he erected churches in Healdsburg, Tomales, Santa Rosa, and Bodega before he finally left America on the screw steamer *New York City* on September 13, 1862.

Raymond J. Egan

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# Fort Steilacoom

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## For Her Time and Before Her Time Mother Joseph, the Executive

By Raymond J. Egan

*Father Luigi Rossi played a crucial role in successfully recruiting the redoubtable Mother Joseph to the Northwest. So it seems appropriate to include at least a brief article about this "fabulously successful workaholic career woman."*

The use of florid 1990s language to describe a woman of the 1800s is not merely a careless affectation. The current literature seems replete with articles complaining about the lack of women in America's board rooms and executive suites. Yet Washington State's school books barely mention this nun, who has to rank among the best of the Northwest's foremost executives. At a time when we anxiously look for role and career models for our teenage girls, we are literally ignoring this early practitioner of such "non-traditional" occupations as architecture, construction and contract management.

This woman of traditional French-Canadian upbringing built twenty-nine schools, orphanages, shelters, and hospitals between 1856 and her death in 1902. A little arithmetic tells us that she created a new school, health care, or social service facility about every sixteen months. This heroic feat—and I stand by the



adjective—is even more remarkable when one considers that she enriched the lives of settlers in the far-flung area we now know as Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia. Not bad for a woman who didn't learn English until after she arrived here.

Take a cursory glance at any magazine rack by the check-out stand. In every other issue, self-styled experts are advising women on how to talk, dress, and behave in order to get to where they can penetrate "the glass ceiling." Empower-

ment is the goal du jour. Well, let's take a look at Mother Joseph, the executive. She admitted to impatience. We know she could be short-tempered, and that she was quite intolerant of careless workmanship. She was known to reaccomplish other's work when it failed to meet her standards. Because she considered herself homely, she took an attractive nun with her on begging trips to the mining camps. She felt that the miners would more generously support her hospitals and orphanages when asked by someone young and pretty. She was right, of course, but very much politically incorrect by 1995 standards.

Considering that Mother Joseph arduously criss-crossed the territory by canoe, horseback, stagecoach, and—when lucky —by railroad, she had to have been almost constantly on the go. (Interestingly, a trendy program for executives includes outward bound sorts of activities like canoeing, horseback riding, and trips into the wilderness. Mother Joseph was well ahead of her time!) A large part of what little time she had left over from begging, building, and traveling was used to write lengthy letters which—despite her many successes — often contained private expressions of

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### President's Report

Thanks to your support, your museum has enjoyed a number of successes this past year. Over 550 school children have toured the fort. Almost \$8,000 has been obtained in grants for development of the interpretive center. As discussed elsewhere in the newsletter by Ken Morgan, the Civil War encampment over the Memorial Day weekend was bigger and better than ever. In conjunction with the reenactment, your Board held a tea for board members from five other local museums and treated them to a well received, private evening tour of both the Yankee and Confederate camps.

During the year, a number of groups have held meetings in Quarters 2 and so have become better acquainted with the fort. Our library has been moved to a larger, more accessible space in Quarters 2—and is being expanded as fast as donations will permit. (If you have any books, magazines, newspapers of the period 1840-1870, they would be welcome, valued additions to our reference section.) And a consortium has been formed with the Steilacoom and Steilacoom Tribal museums for the purpose of jointly sponsoring a series of six talks during the coming year. These talks, collectively known as the Inquiring Mind series, will be offered

under the auspices of the Washington Commission for the Humanities. Most of the costs of obtaining the speakers are paid by the Commission. More information will be mailed to you as soon as the detail planning is complete. (By the way, you are going to start hearing from your museum twice as often. Between each quarterly, you are going to receive a newsletter listing the upcoming events at the fort and at other museums in the county.)

As a special treat at our annual meeting on October 1, Claire T. Raam will deliver her well received talk on the 1853 crossing of the Naches Wagon Train of 1853.

Your Board has scheduled a Christmas activity at the fort for Saturday, December 9th. However, we need to hear your ideas about the kind of event which you think would be most likely to become a part of family holiday traditions. For example, some families have been attending *Nutcracker* performances for years. Others have been attending Christmas concerts. What can we offer at the fort that would add to the joy of the holiday season? What would you like to see. Please call Bo Cooper at (206) 582-3301 or Ken Morgan at (206) 866-6640 with your ideas.

We want you to attend the monthly meetings of your Board. We want your input, and we want you to know what your museum is planning and doing. Please join us on the fourth Monday of each month in Quarters 2 at 7 p.m.

**Mother Joseph** (continued from p. 1) her painful insecurities and self doubts.

Even more of a departure from our modern image of the woman executive is Mother Joseph's deep, intense spirituality. Yet, it is this very spirituality which drove her to build facilities for the homeless, the parentless, the elderly, the mentally ill—facilities that our early settlers,

struggling just to survive, were unable to provide on their own. Indirectly, it was a tribute to her spirituality when, for her accomplishments, she was designated by the American Institute of Architects in 1959 as "First Architect of the Northwest" as statues of her likeness were placed in Statuary Hall in Washington, DC, and in the capitol in Olympia.

It is especially regrettable that our textbooks don't give Mother Joseph the attention that she has earned. In our relentless drive to separate church from state, we seem to have overreacted. In order to avoid endorsing any religion, textbook writers exclude practitioners of religion regardless of their accomplishments. Guidelines for the teaching of Washington State history do acknowledge that missionaries played a role in the development of Washington State. (Can you imagine a history book that didn't mention the Whitmans?) But in practice, our textbooks fail to provide any significant information on this brave, indefeatable missionary/executive who epitomized the term "Christian Charity."

Readers interested in learning more about Mother Joseph may want to check with their local libraries for her biography entitled *The Bell and the River* by Sister Mary of the Blessed Sacrament McCrosson, Pacific Books, Palo Alto, California, 1957.

### 1995 Award of Excellence

The Washington Museum Association presented its 1995 *Award of Publication Excellence* to Historic Fort Steilacoom Association, acknowledging the quarterly newsletter "as an exemplary model of a publication produced by a small, local, grassroots organization by diverse contributors and talented editing, layout, and production volunteers who's dedication and final product greatly contribute toward museum professionalism."

## 1995 Civil War Reenactment

More than 360 Civil War reenactors gathered under sunny skies at Fort Steilacoom Park on Memorial Day weekend to participate in the second Encampment and Battle at Fort Steilacoom. The event was jointly hosted by the Washington Civil War Association and the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association. Also participating were members of the Northwest Civil War Council.

All participants agreed that the event was especially exciting due to the number of soldiers present, the intensity of the battles, and the camaraderie and fellowship shared by the reenactors. The presence of a large cavalry force consisting of the 1st U.S. Cavalry and the 43rd Virginia (Mosby's Rangers) added significantly to the realism.

Size and terrain features of the battle area allowed Federal and Confederate forces, commanded by Ken Morgan and John Daugherty, to conduct more fluid battles than are normally seen at Northwest events. Flank attacks, behind the lines movements, battleline adjustments, battalion-sized movements, and withdrawals were all attempted with varying amounts of success. One engagement became so fluid that the lines became completely reversed, which allowed the Federal troops to capture the Confederate artillery. The artillerymen, realizing their predicament, quickly became "galvanized," and fought gallantly for the Union.

For the first time in Washington, actual battles were reenacted: the first day at Gettysburg, with the Federal cavalry defending McPherson's Ridge against superior numbers of Confederate infantry; and the second day, with the 20th Maine defending Little Round Top against the onslaught of the 15th Alabama and other Rebel troops, finally driving them off at bayonet point.

In-camp activities were highlighted by celebrating marriage rededication vows by Confederate Legion Commander and Mrs. Daugherty and Federal Chaplain and Mrs. Moore. All present wished them continued happiness in their lives and were pleased to share those special moments with them.

Special tours of the Historic Fort Steilacoom quarters were conducted by Shea Munroe and the docent staff. Children's activities were highlighted.



The Fort Steilacoom board hosted an evening tea and tour of the Federal and Confederate camps for members of the several Tacoma area museums and historic associations. All agreed that joint activities are worthwhile and should be done more often.

Confederate and Union soldiers', as well as all American Armed Forces members' sacrifices and dedicated service were remembered in a short but moving memorial service. Flowers were placed on symbolic last resting places, a volley was fired, and *Taps* was sounded.

Without the talents of many people, the event would not have been the success it was. Special thanks are due to Laurie Sterling and Bob Demorest for their efforts in publicizing the event, the Board of Directors of Historic Fort Steilacoom for handling the gate, and the commanders and reenactors of the WCWA and NCWC who made the whole thing possible.

Kenneth A. Morgan