Sketch of the Alaskan Missions

With an account of the death of the late

Most Rev. Charles J. Seghers,

Archbishop-Bishop of Vancouver Island, B. C.

JA 436
10/466

SKETCH OF THE ALASKA MISSION.

WRITTEN AUGUST, 1887.

Archbishop Seghers had asked several times Missionaries for Alaska from various religious Orders, but could not obtain any. Finally the Reverend Father Superior of the Rocky Mountain Mission, S. J., having received some young religious of his Order from Europe, answered the Archbishop's earnest and repeated request, by sending him two Fathers of the said Society, who should go with him to explore that country before opening there a Mission. These were Fathers Tosi and Robaut, to whom were given, as companion, a certain Mr. Fuller, who had offered himself for this purpose. This Fuller had been known to the Fathers for several years, having for some time acted as helper at Industrial Schools, but he was neither a Brother nor a postulant to become such.

The place where the first Mission was to have been founded was in that part of Alaska where the Stuart river flows into the Yucon, about 250 miles from its source, in the eastern part of Alaska, and about 2,500 miles from its mouth in the west. The Yucon river has a length of 2,800 miles, and seems to be larger and deeper than the Columbia; it flows through the heart of Alaska, and is the largest river as yet known of that country, many tributaries emptying into it. In winter there is no other way of exploring that country than by traveling over the frozen surface of rivers and lakes. In summer the Yucon is navigable, and people travel up and down it in boats or on rafts. The Indians are mostly found on the banks of the rivers or on the sea coast.

The Archbishop first intended to leave San Francisco in the spring of 1886, by one of the steamers that go to the western part of Alaska; these steamers enter the Yucon and pursue their course eastward, very far into the interior. According to this plan the Missionaries would have reached the place of their intended explorations without any trouble or difficulty. But something happened that obliged them to change their plans. The Archbishop had to wait till he should receive the Pallium from the Archbishop of Oregon, and it was not till summer that this solemnity could take place. It being too late then to take one of the steamers that go up the Yucon,

Archbishop Seghers and his companions had either to wait till the following spring, or to change their plans, that is, to travel from east to west instead of traveling from west to east, as was at first intended; and after reaching the headwaters of the Yucon follow the river to the intended place. This plan they finally adopted. This road did not present any extraordinary difficulties till they reached a spot about 35 miles from the Yucon, where swamps and lakes abound. As soon as they reached this part of the country they were obliged to travel on foot across streams, rocks and glaciers. For help they had Indians, who carried the baggage on their backs. With these Indians one must have great patience and pay them well for their services. They are experienced packers and good guides, knowing the country well, as they are employed for that by the miners that go to that country. Having reached the headwaters of the Yucon the Indians left the Missionaries and returned to their homes. There our travelers put themselves to the building of a very solid raft, because when any party comes to this spot and are unable to secure a raft from others returning they are obliged to build their own, if they want to continue their journey. On such rafts explorers row over lakes, shallow places and rapids, till they reach, on the Yucon, the terminus of their journey. It is needless to say that such a way of traveling is full of hardships, fatigues, want and unforeseen accidents; yet there is no danger for the lives of the travelers, otherwise the Archbishop would not have risked those of his companions. The greatest difficulty, says F. Tosi, is to make a good raft to go down the river. In this way, on a raft, the Archbishop and his companions penetrated into the interior of Alaska, and reached the mouth of the Stuart river after many accidents, which are described in two letters, one written by the Archbishop, and the other by F. Robaut. When the Missionaries had reached the junction of the Stuart river it would seem that they had come to the end of their journey for that year, and that they should make there their winter quarters, as there is no communication in winter, except between places that are very near to one another. But the zeal of the Archbishop was pushing him on further. He thought that three Missionaries in one and the same place were too many, seeing the want of the whole country; besides, he feared that the numerous bands of Indians near the banks of the Yucon would be lost to the Church by any delay. For these reasons the Archbishop resolved to leave the two Fathers and travel 900 miles further down, notwithstanding the earnest entreaties of F. Tosi to the contrary. Thus the Archbishop left on the 8th day of September, 1886, with Mr. Fuller as companion. F. Robaut says in his letter: "This separation was very hard for him and for us, but it was necessary, he said, and so, after a tender and repeated good bye,

he departed from us." When the Archbishop was about leaving they all agreed that the two Fathers would go down the river as soon as it would be open for travel, and meet him at his new station, which would probably take place towards the end of May or the beginning of June. Then they would consult together what was to be done, and one of the Fathers would remain in Alaska, and the other would return with the Archbishop to San Francisco; the Superior of the Mission, on being informed as to what could be done there would then refer matters to the Very Reverened Father General of the Society of Jesus, for the establishment of the Alaska Mission. In accordance with this agreement the Fathers went down the river some time in May, in the expectation of meeting the Archbishop full of life and crowned with success. It is difficult to imagine what was their disappointment, sorrow and consternation at the news of the awful tragedy of the Archbishop's death. At first they could not believe the terrible news, but they had to submit themselves to the disposition of Divine Providence, when they came to the evidence of the facts. They were told that the Archbishop had been shot dead by Fuller, and that his body was at St. Michael's in a Russian Church.

THE DETAILS OF THE MURDER

And of the murder's mind are as follows: During the voyage from Portland to the southwestern coast of Alaska, Fuller's conduct was often so extravagant that F. Tosi twice counseled the Archbishop to send him (Fuller) back with the same steamer, which would return from Alaska to Portland, for it seemed dangerous to F. Tosi to continue traveling such a long distance with a man of this kind. But the Archbishop, judging his services necessary, both during the voyage and during the winter in that most difficult country, took him along, in hopes that the extravagances of Fuller, which arose from a fear that the whites wanted to take his life, would subside as soon as he would be far away from them, and though Fuller's extravagances continued, yet the Archbishop, in his zeal, separated himself from the Fathers, and traveled down the river alone in company with Fuller. F. F. Tosi and Robaut, when near St. Michael's learned the following facts: "Nearly a month had passed since the Archbishop had reached the end of his trip of 900 miles, when he took the resolution to make a third and shorter journey to visit some other tribe of Indians. He took with him Fuller and two Indians as companions. The Archbishop traveled with them for several days until he reached a place about one day's distance from a camp of the Indians he intended to visit. It being late in the afternoon and Fuller tired, he proposed to the Archbishop to camp there for the night and not to go any further that day. The Archbishop having asked the advice of the

Indians thought better to go on, which they did, and reached an empty Indian house in the evening. According to the Indians who accompanied the Archbishop, Fuller was very much displeased that his advice had not been followed, and he complained bitterly, because, he said, the advice of Indians had been preferred to that of a white man. They say, also, that Fuller was very much excited during the night, and seemed not to have slept. At daybreak they saw him get up and go about as if he would start the fire, but did not do it. All at once he called the Archbishop, telling him to get up. The Archbishop arose to a sitting posture, and on seeing Fuller with his gun levelled, folded his arms on his breast and inclined his head, when the man shot him. The bullet passed through his forehead near his left eye and came out from the upper part of the neck. The Archbishop died instantly. The Indians witnessing the tragedy got frightened, and fearing that Fuller would kill them also, disarmed him, but Fuller assured them, saying coolly and calmly that he had made up his mind to kill only the Archbishop. Then he and the Indians arranged the body of the dead Prelate, taking away only the pastoral cross and ring, which objects, he said, he would give to the ecclesiastical authorities in Victoria, B. C. From this it would seem that we can safely conclude that Fuller's mental faculties had been upset, partly in consequence of a previous disposition for monomania and partly, also, in consequence of the sufferings he had undergone during the voyage; further, we may suppose that he killed the Archbishop in a fit of madness. This conclusion is corroborated by the following fact: He is reported to have said that when they will hang him he wants the consolation of confessing to a Catholic Priest—not to accuse himself of the murder of the Archbishop, for which he feels no remorse—but of his past sins. The only consolation left to us who have known this beloved Archbishop is the thought that Almighty God, who, in his inscrutable wisdom and providence over his creatures, governs and directs all to his greater glory, will know how to use the tragic death of this holy Prelate as an efficacious means of propagating the saving light of the Gospel. We are aware that the crown of sacrifices which the Divine Goodness imposed on the holy man for the salvation of the Indians in asking from him the renunciation of the Archbishopric of Oregon, in order to undertake such an arduous mission, full of hardships, received its most brilliant gem in the bloody sacrifice of his precious life. We cannot suppose that God, on beholding a sacrifice so precious, will not be moved to grant in some future time, perhaps not far distant, the conversion of the poor creatures, for whose salvation the sacrifice was made.

Neither F. Tosi nor F. Robaut knew anything about this sad event until last June, when they went down the Yucon to meet the Arch-

bishop. F. Tosi left the body of the Archbishop as it was, in a zinc casket surrounded with ice to preserve it. It is in the Russian Chapel at St. Michael's which is situated about 500 miles from the mouth of the Yucon, and when possible it will be taken by steamer to Victoria, B. C. Father Robaut went then to the Indians in whose Territory the Archbishop was killed, and Father Tosi left on the steamer bound for San Francisco, to acquaint Superiors of all that had happened. In this last trip he had good opportunity to visit the western sea coast of Alaska, both above and below the mouth of the Yucon. He arrived from San Francisco to Portland on the 23d of July, and gave us all the details of the facts just related, besides much important information about the country and its inhabitants, which we shall now relate.

The climate of Alaska is not very changeable, it being very cold in winter, and but moderately warm in summer, and this uniformity of climate makes it very healthy. F. Tosi, whose chest was always more or less weak, and who suffered from rheumatism, like most of our Missionaries in the mountains, says that his health has very much improved during his stay in Alaska, and the writer, who saw him after his return from there can testify to the fact that he appeared to be much stronger. It seems that along the Yucon river the snow is not very deep, last winter it was not deeper than two feet, whilst in the Rocky Mountains it was very deep. In summer it rains but seldom, hence on the Alaska mountains there must be a great deal of snow, to feed, when melting, a river like the Yucon, one of the largest rivers in the world. During the winter the thermometer marked on an average 15 deg. below zero (F), though sometimes it went down to 60 deg., and even 70 deg. below zero (F.). During extreme cold a wonderful phenomenon takes place—the respiration is accompanied by a perceptible voice that can be heard at some distance. This strange phenomenon must be ascribed, it would seem, to the condensation of the volume of warm air, which on leaving the mouth is instantly condensed by the very cold air without. The dwellings of the natives are built partly under and partly above ground, and covered with a thick layer of clay as a protection against the severe cold. Dense forests of different kinds of wood can furnish fuel necessary for any purpose. A great quantity of wood being necessary it is evident that to procure and transport it is accompanied with many and great difficulties; but should the winter supply of wood give out it is possible to get more, even in winter, only a person has to take the precaution of clothing warmly and lighting a large fire on the spot where he cuts his wood. To form an idea of the intensity of the cold in those regions it is sufficient to mention that to procure the necessary water, they have to go to the middle of the river with

a pick-axe and make a hole in the ice, which is about six feet thick, and that they have to cover it with branches before leaving, if they don't want to have to go through the same process again next day. To get water near the shore is impossible, or at least very difficult, because there the water either freezes from the surface to the bottom, or the ice is much thicker there than in the middle of the river, where the current is swifter. In summer one can travel in a boat down without any difficulty, and even up the river, but not without some exertion. In winter there is no country in the world that has roads more level than Alaska, that is to say, the frozen surfaces of its rivers, lakes and swamps. The ice is so thick that there is no danger of breaking through, how heavy soever the load may be. The only vehicle in use in winter is a sled drawn by dogs; these animals are very large and tame, and accustomed to hard work. They are placed before the sled in files of two or three and are driven without the aid of a bridle, sometimes, however, one of the party on snowshoes precedes the dogs, making the road and leading the way. The dogs carry in this manner considerable weights, and sometimes even the driver, who jumps on the sled from behind while it is moving. It happens not seldom that the sled is upset in going over a heap of drifted snow or some other obstacle, and if the driver is not very quick in jumping off he is thrown into the snow, because the dogs cannot be stopped all at once, on account of their having no bridle. A person ought not to loose courage if the dogs, from time to time, are difficult to manage, since much patience is needed in traveling with dog-sleds in Alaska. There are no horses in the country, but F. Tosi thinks that it would not be very difficult to keep them, even in winter, if only warm stables were built that would protect them from the cold. Hay grows in all the swamps, which might be mowed in summer and stored away for winter. Still with all this it is to be doubted if horses would be of any utility in Alaska, otherwise they would have been imported long ago. One of the difficulties, and by no means the least, would be the impossibility to carry along on a horse the amount of hay required for a trip of any extent. The same difficulty does not encumber one who travels with dogs, because these, besides being able to endure hunger for a longer time, may be fed with dry fish of which a sufficient quantity can be taken along on the sled, and which can be procured, if needed, wherever the Indians live. Although there can be found in Alaska large tracts of good land, still on account of the severe and protracted cold it would not do to cultivate them, and therefore they will always lie waste. Nevertheless F. Tosi thinks that during the short period of summer one could raise without much difficulty such vegetables as need only a short time to come to ma-

turity, as potatoes, cabbages, etc., for the sun remaining on the horizon for nearly four months (May, June, July and August), its heat must produce a good effect on vegetation. This being as yet only an opinion, experience must show whether it be right or wrong. But as in other countries, so in Alaska—a person who has money can procure from San Erancisco dried pear, beans, etc., etc., also fresh vegetables of every description preserved in air tight tin cans. There are three steamers that run between San Francisco and the interior of Alaska, going up the Yucon river. One of them leaves San Francisco about the middle of March, another in the beginning of April and the third at the end of May. These three steamers having completed their voyage up and down the Yucon and along the coast of Alaska, return to San Francisco, and if we mistake not the first of these steamers returns before the third leaves. The company that owns these vessels has been very kind to the Missionaries. For F. Tosi's last trip from Alaska to San Francisco the company refused to take any money. The charges for freight are very moderate. By these steamers the Fathers of Alaska would have a means of direct communication with San Francisco, where there is a college of the Society of Jesus. One of the Fathers residing in California might might act as Procurator, supplying all the things necessary for the Missions in Alaska. By this communication with San Francisco the Alaska Missions are in a much better condition than the Rocky Mountain Missions were in years past. The Missionaries were then entirely separated from all civilization, and were obliged to provide themselves with the necessaries of life by undertaking long journeys of several hundred miles over rough and difficult roads, transporting everything by means of pack-horses. Missionaries of Alaska, by simply writing a letter to their Procurator in San Francisco, may obtain every year a full supply of everything they need for the next year, and keep up a comparatively easy correspondence with their superiors.

The country furnishes abundance of food, as fish and game of different kinds. Thousands and thousands of Indians with their dogs live almost exclusively on fish. Every stream and river abounds with them. There being no falls of any height that might prevent the fish from going up the Yucon, those from the sea find no difficulty in ascending the river, and therefore it is full of them. There is a certain kind of white fish there, about a foot and a half long, which is of exquisite taste. The Indians fish with strong nets, very ingeniously made of sinews. In winter time they make first a hole in the ice, and then throw in their nets, so in Alaska one may secure at any time a quantity of fresh fish. Game, however, is not as abundant as fish, yet we ought not to wonder at this since warmblooded animals cannot

live in such a cold climate. Nevertheless they are great numbers of deer, moose and bears, the meat of which is very good to eat. In hunting these animals a person has to be very cautious if he values his life. Hunters there use a kind of bullet which explodes in the body of the animal and kills it instantly. Let this suffice with regard to the country and climate.

We will now proceed to give some particulars of a more important nature—about the Indians or natives. We do not intend to say any thing about the whites that are spread here and there over the interior of the country, as they are very few. On the south coast, however, which is very healthy on account of its mild climate, and on which several mines have been discovered, the Indians have been overwhelmed by the whites and infected with corruption, so that it is very probable that they are lost to religion. It seems, too, that there is very little hope of converting those Indians who live on the west coast of Alaska, south of the mouth of the Yucon, but the same can not be said of those Indians who dwell on the west coast of Alaska north of the mouth of the Yucon, as also of those who live in the interior of the country, along the shores of the same river and its tributaries. These latter Indians are very numerous and are all heathens. F. Tosi says that he met about 10,000 of them who, in their eager desire to be instructed in the truths of religion, have asked for Missionaries. He also saw about 5,000 who belong either to the Protestant or Russian Churches. Unfortunately F. Tosi lacked the opportunity of visiting the more northern regions of Alaska where, according to the most authoritative accounts the Indians are the most numerous, and have as yet never seen a Missionary of any denomination. The zeal of the English Protestant Ministers is very great. Last year five of these Missionaries went up the Yucon to open a school for the Indians. We may state here that for many years there lives on the shores of one of the tributaries of the Yucon an old minister. F. Tosi has met this gentleman, and says that he is for the Protestant Missions of Alaska what F. Joset is for the Catholic Missions of the Rocky Mountains. His zeal for the conversion of these Indians is so great that without ever relenting he undergoes the greatest hardships and difficulties. F. Robaut has taken up his abode amongst the Indians who were to be visited last fall by the Archbishop, and he is all alone. Let us pray to the Almighty that he may take this good Father under his protection, who very probably will have to remain in his present solitary position until next spring; however, all possible measures have been taken that F. Tosi and his companions—F. Ragaru and B. Giordano, S. J., may reach him before winter sets in. They left Victoria on August 9th, 1887. In consequence of the dangers that would follow from delay, F. Tosi

thinks that serious steps ought to be taken to open those Missions at once, and he is also of the opinion that at each station there should be at least two Fathers and one Brother. In the region where these first stations should be established there are more than 15,000 Indians anxious to put themselves under the care of Catholic Priests. But if the number of Missionaries necessary could not be supplied at present, then there should be—for the moment—one Father with a Brother at each station. Even during winter communication might be had between these several stations. The two which are the farthest apart are about 300 miles from each other. The trip could be made with facility, there being all along the way, at a distance of from fifteen to thirty miles, Indian villages. But the distance between all the other stations would be only from 100 to 200 miles. Of those stations, all accessible either by the river or by the sea, four would be in the interior, on the banks of the Yucon, and three would be near the seacoast. These Indians speak only two languages that are entirely different from each other; one of these is spoken by those living in the interior, the other by those living near the seacoast. Besides these, there are several dialects, more or less different from the mother language. The coast Indians are Esquimaux, and all these, to the number of several thousands, gather together in summer time for the purpose of fishing, which circumstance would offer to the Fathers a good opportunity to work for their conversion. In general, these Indians may be said to be of a very pacific disposition, like the Indians of the Rocky Mountains—there being no danger at all to go and live among them. They are very intelligent and well disposed to be instructed in religion, which assertion can be proved by the conversion to Protestantism of many thousands of them. Those of the Indians who had the happiness of making the acquaintance of Archbishop Seghers respected, honored and loved him very much, and whenever any of them happened to meet him they would say that they preferred the Catholic Bishop to any other teacher.

From this we may infer of how great importance it is that the place left by our lamented Archbishop be as soon as possible filled by another, in order that the Indians may know that if they have lost a good friend and father in the Archbishop, they have found another with a spirit like his and who like him desires nothing more than to make them know God and the religion that leads to him. One of the principal motives of the hope we cherish of their easy and speedy conversion is the absence of that detestable plague—polygamy—which is and always has been the greatest obstacle to the conversion of the Indians of the Rocky mountains. It seems that the fact of this exceptional continency among those Indians must be ascribed to a peculiar custom generally observed among them. When their children have

come to the use of reason, that is about the age of 7 or 8 years, their parents make an agreement by which they are betrothed to each other. From the time of this—their betrothal—the children are obliged to help each other as if married already, although they continue to live each in his or her respective family. For instance, whenever the boy goes a fishing he has to give part of his fish to his future wife, and so in like manner in all other things. On the other hand, the girl is obliged to mend the boy's clothes, to dry them when they are wet, and to prepare his meals whenever necessary. In this way they grow up loving each other from their tenderest years. Further, when they have come to a riper age, they go and live together, continuing all the while to love each other so exclusively that the same affection for other persons never arises to interfere. This custom, says F. Tosi, not only keeps far away any polygamy, but even renders any breach of conjugal faith very difficult, and what is more wonderful is that without any religious teaching their morals are in general very good. But we must not think that the missionaries will have no difficulties to surmount. One very great obstacle will be the superstitions or practice of Indian medicine—probably even of magic arts. It is evident that these Indians will not give up so easily such practices, which are of so high repute among them that anyone who is versed therein is considered by the tribe a wise and powerful man. Let us hope that the all-powerful grace of the Almighty will overcome all these obstacles. Let us pray that He, the Lord of the harvest, may send laborers into this uncultivated part of his vineyard. A grand opportunity is now open to secure to holy church the charge of these numerous tribes. To do this, however, requires immediate action, or the enemy will creep in and sow the cockle in this virgin soil, as he has already done on the southwest coast of Alaska, and if so, the cockle will take such firm root as to require years of endeavor to eradicate it—if possible even then. The many Indians visited by the now martyred Archbishop and his companions appealed to him in the most urgent and piteous manner to have the Fathers stay with them, and teach them the way to heaven. Shall their appeal be in vain? Shall the labors of the apostle of Alaska be now lost after having shed his blood to water that promising soil? This is the question now to be considered by all Catholics who have the welfare of souls at heart and desire to raise a monument to the memory of one of the greatest Apostles of Holy Church.

Let students of all Seminaries and Catholic Universities both of Europe and America offer themselves to go and toil there, mingling their sweat with the blood of this new Martyr of the Northwest. Let Superiors of religious houses and dioceses, who cannot go themselves to that field of labor, exercise their merciful zeal towards those

abandoned souls by encouraging their young Levites to imitate Archbishop Seghers.

We, who hear the cries of these poor Indians for help, wish we had a voice of thunder like the Angels trumpet, which would carry to the four corners of the globe these words of Eternal truth: Date et dabitur vobis, date Missionaries to Alaska and dabitur vobis centuplum, dabitur to your souls, dabitur to your parishes, dabitur to your religious communities, dabitur to all your flocks.

To the Laity, also, are addressed these same words: Date et dabitur vobis, give and it shall be given unto you, because they can help the Missionaries with their means, and to them a hundredfold shall be given here, and life everlasting hereafter.

The children of the Church all over the world, whom God has blessed with temporal goods should remember in their comforts, that whilst they are enjoying themselves and at the same time believe that they are pleasing God, many souls in Alaska are allured into the bottomless pit by the enemy of their Divine Benefactor. Let them consider that by giving up some of their superfluities in favor of the Alaska Indians, those abandoned souls will be enlightened in the ways of the Lord—will enjoy an everlasting happiness and will pray for their benefactors here upon earth and in heaven.

For further information apply to the

REVEREND FATHERS OF GONZAGA COLLEGE,
Spokane Falls, W. T.,
U. S. of A.

Or to Very Reverend Father J. J. Jonckan,
Administrator of the Diocese of Vancouver Island,
Victoria, B. C.

INTERNATIONAL BOOKFINDERS
You name it - We find it
Beverly Hills, California, U.S.A.

HR
BV 2803 A4
S637 1887