Fr. Adrien Croquet (1818-1902)

Father Adrien-Joseph Croquet (pronounced “Crockett” locally) arrived in Oregon in 1859 from Belgium. Throughout his time in Oregon, he maintained an eclectic missionary lifestyle, traveling each year throughout the Willamette Valley, to Indian reservations, and along the Oregon coast.

Croquet grew up in Braine l'Alleud, Belgium, and was ordained into the Catholic priesthood as an abbot in 1844. He attended the American College of the University of Louvain for a short time in 1859 before voyaging to New York. The American College was initiated and financed by several American archdioceses, including Oregon City, to prepare American and European students for work as missionaries to America.

While initially stationed at the Oregon City Archdiocese, Croquet traveled to St. Paul, Oregon, to Vancouver, Washington Territory, and to The Dalles to visit white settlers. In 1860, he became the principal Catholic missionary on the Grand Ronde Reservation, joining Methodist missionary J.L. Parrish and the nondenominational Rev. J. Chamberlain.

Croquet became known throughout western Oregon and spent time in the Yamhill Valley (1863), the Tillamook area (1861-1898), and Coos Bay. He was accepted by the reservation Indians and it helped that he learned to speak Chinuk Wawa, the lingua franca of the old Pacific Northwest. He spoke the mass in Chinuk Wawa, as well as in English and his native French. He lived an austere lifestyle, cooking for himself and living in the same manner as his Indian neighbors.

After the Sisters of the Holy Name were assigned to the reservation in 1874, Croquet lived more comfortably as the sisters performed many household duties for him. In about 1879, he lost a good portion of his annual salary and went into debt on behalf of the native community. Croquet’s extended family in Belgium aided him throughout his time in Oregon with funds for travel and repayment of his debts.

At the Grand Ronde Reservation, Croquet directed the building of the original St. Michael’s church (1861), employing Indian laborers as well as Fort Yamhill garrison troops. He also administered the reservation boarding school, managing successive orders of Catholic nuns as teachers at the school. The present St. Michael's church stands in the same location, now the corner of Highway 22 and Grand Ronde Road.

For over forty years, Croquet recorded tribal births, deaths, and confirmations at the Grand Ronde Reservation. His work, which constitutes the most complete genealogical record of the period (1860-1898), is now part of the Pacific Northwest Catholic Church Records for Grand Ronde. Croquet was succeeded at the Grand Ronde Reservation by Father Felix Bucher.

For a time, from about 1860 to 1879, the United States government divided Indian reservations between the Protestants and Catholics. The Methodists were given sole rights to minister to Siletz reservation, and Croquet was not allowed to minister to the Catholic Indians there. Croquet’s return to Siletz was granted in 1879 after appeals by several Methodist and prominent Catholic ministers in the Pacific Northwest.

Ministering to the native peoples and the surrounding white population was time-consuming work. By 1876, a nephew, Francis Mercier, came to Oregon when Croquet requested help from his family in Belgium. Francis served as Croquet’s principal aid while on the reservation and traveling to other locations throughout western Oregon. Francis married Marie Petite, a member of the Grand Ronde tribe, and the Mercier surname continues today on the reservation.

Croquet gained international fame through a series of letters he wrote to his family and colleagues in Belgium. The local newspapers in Belgium printed his letters, calling him the “Saint of Oregon.”

In 1894, Croquet was named prelate of the Papal House. Aided with funds from another nephew, the future Cardinal Desire Mercier, Croquet returned to Belgium in 1898 to retire. He spent his remaining years living with his family and died in 1902.

Written by David Lewis

Further Reading:

Bosse, Jean. *Memoirs of the Great Brainois: Monsenior Adrien Croquet, "The Saint of Oregon."*

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