ON May 31, 1851, two Jesuits rode for the first time into St. Mary’s Mission on the Kaw river. They had come to St. Louis some two years before from the southern slopes of the Alps. Jean-Baptiste Miège¹ was a Savoyard peasant of towering height; his companion, Paul Ponziglione, slight in build, was the son of a Piedmontese count, grandson of a marquis.

Father Ponziglione,² more usually known as Father Paul, was soon to establish himself among the Osages, and their mission, now St. Paul, was to be the focus of his humble and untiring endeavors for almost 40 years, all the rest of his active life, first among the Indians, later among white pioneers.

Father Miège had on March 25 been consecrated bishop in partibus of Messenia and vicar apostolic “for the territory lying to the east of the Rocky Mountains and not included within the limits of the states of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota,” a new vicariate. To the end, fellow churchmen referred to him familiarly as the “Bishop East of the Rockies.” After 1855 he was more usually known as the bishop of Leavenworth, when his see was established in that city, but here we are concerned with that period in his life.


⁽²⁾ On Father Paul see particularly the works of W. W. Greven of St. Paul; also Sr. Mary Paul Fitzgerald, op. cit., and “A Jesuit Circuit-Rider,” Mid-America, n. s. v. 7 (July, 1936), pp. 162-186; further, S. W. Brewster, “Reverend Father Paul M. Ponziglione,” Kansas Historical Collections, v. 9 (1905-1906), pp. 19-32.
before the opening of Kansas in 1854 when his vicariate was strictly an area for mission work among the Indians.

Throughout his life Bishop Miège wrote letters home; in this article passages are given which reflect his opinions of the Pottawatomie and Osage Indians. His official reports are analyzed by Father Gilbert J. Garraghan in his *Jesuits of the Middle United States*.

The mission at St. Mary’s of the Pottawatomie had been established three years before when the tribe was moved from its reservation on the Marais des Cygnes to the Kaw. With Osage Mission 3 on the Neosho, it was the only Catholic establishment in the new vicariate, and Bishop Miège had chosen St. Mary’s as his see.

On that May day in 1851 when the episcopal peasant and the aristocrat subordinate rode into St. Mary’s, a formal welcome had been prepared, but the travelers came from a direction and at an hour totally unexpected, 4 so that the celebration for the great Black Robe had to be put off until the next day.

The Jesuit missionaries, “Black Robes,” at St. Mary’s were Belgians—the starting point of the present small settlement of their countrymen at that place. In 1851 their mission and the Pottawatomies were prosperous.

Bishop Miège found the barbarous splendor of the celebration in honor of his coming most amusing. The chief’s costume mimicked that of a marshall of France, but on much more majestic and solemn dimensions. The outfitting of the lesser militia was not quite so knightly, though it offered rich matter for contemplation. The military band, made up of a violinist and a drummer, was headed by a drum major whose shako was nothing less than a piece of buffalo hide, rather well shaped into a European drum major’s shako for ceremonial occasions. Next came the infantry, all armed with carbines and equipped with all the pomp of the Indians. So were coats of all ages, of all styles and all colors with shoes to match, motley shirts, halves of trousers rich with ribbons as well as years, finally a sort of turban partly covering those long strands of black hair which give quite a wild look to the deep eyes and coppery countenances of my good diocesans. Add to that a prodigious lot of red and yellow ribbons and handkerchiefs fastened or sewn haphazard at all points, and you will have some small idea of the interesting reality.

Then there was the procession. The people lined up from cathedral to episcopal palace (both shacks that were far from water proof).

3. On the two missions during prereligious times see particularly Garraghan, Fitzgerald, and Beekman, cited above.

4. Miège is explicit on this point. Ponziglione in his memoirs written years later said the "... Indians were expecting us and had posted their scouts."—Garraghan, op. cit., v. 2, pp. 644, 645.
When the poor man for whom all this pomp was displayed appeared, songs and rifle shots were heard. Throughout the march to the cathedral, there was a continuous roll of songs, like a regimental band, cries from little children, repeated commands, horseback evolutions of all sorts, until the bishop and clergy entered the metropolitan church. Everything went off with a gravity and devoutness on the part of these good savages which struck straight to the newcomers’ hearts, and I must confess that I should have shed a few tears if that blessed commander-in-chief and his drum major had not time and again by their presence compromised for me rather badly the seriousness which the occasion required. The church which might hold some 15 or 16 hundred persons was full; guns had been left at the door, and horses tied to the fences; and all these good people listened to mass with a piety and devotion I have not seen elsewhere. The reason is that here they believe very practically that only the Great Spirit can give good hunting, and deliver you from those wicked neighbors ever ready to come ask or steal your scalp from you. After mass, another parade and procession, more band music and gun firing till the order to withdraw was given. It was around a 600 pound beef, and large outlay of flour, sugar, and coffee provided by the Mission’s Superior, that these good people went to rest from the morning’s exertions. The tribe has what they call their cooks for days of public rejoicing. It is their duty to prepare the viands and distribute them to the guests. Everything took place in most perfect order and within the limits of the frankest and most cordial joy.

Of some 3,500 Pottawatomies 1,500 were Catholic. Most of these were at St. Mary’s where, until pestilence struck the next winter, life was idyllic. The bishop wrote:

It is really touching to see, on fine summer evenings, good people gather in great numbers in the center of the village to say their rosary together, and then sing in their own language hymns in honor of the Blessed Virgin. I think I have never in my life experienced more delightful emotions than those that made my heart beat as I listened for the first time in our wilderness to those dear savages singing so loudly and with such heartfelt devotion the praises of our Mother.

In two other villages and in a settlement of half-breeds on Soldier creek things were not so well-ordered. He qualifies the half-breeds as “immoral, drunkards, liars all, deaf to all instruction.” Among these people Bishop Miège lived a missionary’s life himself. He described journeying on the prairie in terms which, though here better chosen, are familiar to all those who have read accounts of pioneers. He speaks of hard riding, of camp making, of mosquitoes, and of rattlesnakes,

5. Garin, op. cit., pp. 62-64. Garraghan, op. cit., v. 2, p. 647, quotes from an official report a description evidently of this same scene. In the report the bishop speaks of the affair as the Corpus Christi celebration; so it was, for June 1, 1851, the day after Miège’s arrival, was Corpus Christi Sunday.
6. Garin, op. cit., p. 65. This quotation is from a copy of an official report sent by Bishop Miège to his family. Father Garraghan printed the report practically in toto in v. 2, pp. 645, 646, but these sentences do not appear in his version. The bishop probably added it to the family version.
7. Ibid., p. 67.
8. Beckman, op. cit., pp. 18, 19, quoted at length from Bishop Miège’s letters (Garin pp. 69-71) on these hardships.
the most impudent creatures of their kind, so impudent that I remember once there were three of us on horseback around one of handsome size; it stopped and rose up against us sounding every rattle. . . . We left it master of the field. . . . The night after that day, a biting ant or an insect that lit on my head seemed so many rattlesnakes.9

The chance Canadian, Creole, or half-breed you find in a cabin is somewhat better:

The missionary finds there water, wood and fire. You talk a little with your new friend, for any thinking being that can understand you is your friend in the wilderness. You must hear the owner’s whole story, you catechize him a bit, give him some medals, and hear his confession if you can get it. You put on a good countenance before the piece of squash that he has fried for you in return for the bread, coffee and tobacco with which you provide him.10

In the summer of 1852, the bishop made a trip to Osage mission, harried by fever, high water, flies, mosquitoes, and heat, but, “real days in the land Cockayne. I had a good carriage, two excellent horses, a prudent driver . . . a real Californian’s outfit.”11 Though he considered himself no great shot, the bishop on such occasions went off with his guns when camp was made, and soon returned with small birds a plenty for a meal. “There is a great abundance of this kind of game because an Indian never stoops to kill such small stuff; he has to have a buffalo, an antelope, at the very least a turkey, duck, or pheasant.” The bishop always did his part in the camp work; his traveling companions enjoyed him.

After this trip he wrote home general information and judgments concerning the Osages as well as an account of his visit to them. A translation of this portion of the letter follows without omissions:

The Osages were not long ago possessors of all the land now comprised within the two states of Missouri and Arkansas and of the territory extending indefinitely toward New Mexico. The government has succeeded in buying their finest lands for practically nothing, and they are now relegated to the banks of the Neosho and Verdigris, which they leave three times a year to go out into the plains to hunt buffalo or procure a few enemy scalps. Their return is celebrated by feasts and dances that last as long as their provisions. This year I visited them in their villages, and I should have very much liked for you to have been a witness to the curious scenes which took place then. As for me, I am getting so that I remain cold as stone in the presence of what interested me to the very highest degree in my first days here.

The villages are all built on heights within comfortable reach of wood and water. At a distance you would take them for small cities. And they do have something like streets and public squares—everything perfectly clean. They are guarded by seven or eight hundred ravenous dogs which make approach

10. Ibid., p. 73.
11. Ibid., p. 75.
difficult in the day time and dangerous at night. Their tents, usually 30 to 35 feet long and 9 or 10 high, are covered with matting and buffalo hides which protect them perfectly from the rigors of the winter, and easily admit the breeze in the summertime.

Among the Osages, as among all non-Catholic savages, the women do all the work, carry burdens, manufacture the tents, go after wood and water, etc. The men smoke, gamble, and dance; they held two big dances for me during my visit to them. The first took place at the village called Big Hill, the chief of which is called Great Man. He is in fact a specimen about six feet six inches tall, who hides nothing nature gave him. It was at his place that we stopped, a necessary precaution if you want nothing stolen. Our reception was warm and cordial; all the authorities and notabilities were convened; the scene really lacked neither diversity nor pleasing features. After the customary ceremonies, that is, going all around the Lodge shaking hands with every reasonable being, we came back and sat down on a buffalo robe, placed for this purpose opposite Great Man and his court. After distributing tobacco and marbles, I explained to my audience the purpose of my visit: "to baptize the little children and send the bigger ones to school to teach them to speak with their hands and eyes (read and write)."

The chief replied that I had said some good things, and that his people were certainly of the same mind; then after an interminable eulogy of himself and his subjects he asked me if I knew many chiefs as skillful and as devoted to their people as he was. I answered by adding a few more plugs of tobacco to those I had already given out on my arrival. That was the best sign of approval and satisfaction that I could give him. Our conference, almost like one between diplomats, was followed by a banquet to which we contributed a most fortunate element—the keenest of appetites. So we did great honor to a broad wooden dish which was served to us filled with buffalo meat boiled in water. Fingers of course must do the office of knife and fork, and anyone wishing to drink broth quite simply picks up the common dish which he conveys to his mouth without spilling the liquid over his clothes if he is clever, or else he may use a big wooden spoon provided for the purpose. This latter method is not exactly handy either. When you have finished the dish or at least finished eating, what is left is put before the master of the house, who eats in his turn and then serves his friends. You cannot imagine what an enormous quantity of buffalo meat a person can eat without suffering a bit. I remember eating four meals one morning an hour apart, and having at each disposed of more meat than I eat in a day at home; after that, I felt admirably disposed to go on to others. But I am getting off my subject.

After our banquet we were invited to a ceremonial dance in our honor. It was certainly as fine a savage dance can be; it would take me four pages to describe it. I will only say that the red, black, blue, green and white paint with which these poor people were bedaubed would have been enough to make rare spectacles out of them any place but at home. And if you add the

12. An Osage village named Big Hill by the whites was located on the site of Independence, Kan., according to Father Ponziolone.—Garaghan, op. cit., v. 2, p. 501. Great Man may have been Graumante or Greetomante though Sister Mary Paul Fitzgerald (p. 85) said he was chief of Nantze-Waspee, 33 miles northeast of Big Hill. Great Man, the English rendering of Bishop Miege's l'Homme Grand, is acoustically similar to Graumante, and this man, recognized as chief by all the Osages would naturally have been the object of Miege's visit.
bear skins, the wolf skins, the antelope skins with which they partially cover their shoulders, their knives and their arrows, the little bells hanging at their knees and neck, their plumes of eagle feathers, their movements, shouts and music, you have a whole which perhaps has a name somewhere in heaven. This scene was followed by the awarding of prizes to the bravest in the village.

The Osages are the handsomest race of men there is perhaps in the Indian country, at least six feet tall, robust and well shaped. But that is all. Their soul seems to be the reservoir of every evil human passion; they are thieving, lazy, drunken, debauched, stinking with pride—add anything you like without fear of slandering them. That’s enough for now, isn’t it? I’ll come back to the attack some other time.13

Other Jesuits were not so forthright in their condemnation of the Osages. They loved them—as did the Bishop for that matter—but found their mission to them difficult.

Bishop Miège saw no more of the Osages after this visit and very little of the Pottawatomies. A trip to Europe in 1853 kept him away until the beginning of 1854. The multitude of activities occasioned by the opening of the territory of Kansas pushed Indian problems into the background. He declared, however, that the law on Indian lands which was passed preliminarily to the opening was “the death sentence of the greater part of my poor diocese.” He was thinking of the fate of his redskins. “We fear that they are preparing some nasty trick. It makes one sick,” he wrote in December, 1854, “to think of the way these poor savages have been treated and will be to the end.”14

14. The winter then beginning was very bad. At its end the bishop’s last comment on the Pottawatomi Indians is one of commiseration for their sufferings, and of regret for their lack of foresight in preparing for disaster.—Ibid., p. 105.