



Father Pierre Jean De Smet

Dakota Images

A missionary for almost fifty years, Pierre Jean De Smet devoted his life to the welfare of the Indian tribes in the West. He was born in Termonde, Belgium on 30 January 1801, came to America in 1821, and was ordained a priest of the Society of Jesus in 1827. It was not until 1838 that he began his missionary work among the Indians.

Father De Smet's first mission was at Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he ministered to the Potawatomies. These bands were suffering from attacks by the Sioux under Wamdesapa, and De Smet met with the old chief at Fort Vermillion and tried to make an agreement with him to stop these raids. This was De Smet's first venture into South Dakota.

When gold was discovered in California, the federal government asked De Smet to help negotiate with the Indians at Fort Laramie for a right-of-way through their country. Confident of the sincerity of the government, Father De Smet used his influence to assure peace. On another occasion Father De Smet learned that there was gold in the Black Hills. Yet, for many years he kept this secret because he knew that the white man would demand the Indians' land. One of the richest mines in the Black Hills was named after him. Again in 1868, convinced that resistance would only lead to extermination, he joined the Peace Commission and convinced over fifteen thousand Indians to lay down their weapons. He went alone to Sitting Bull's camp and persuaded him to end the Red Cloud War and to sign a peace treaty at Fort Rice.

Perhaps no other individual ever had so much influence with the Sioux tribes. Until his death in Saint Louis on 23 May 1873, he devoted himself to their fortunes and was the chief mediator between them and the federal government.

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