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Genealogical Treasures: From the Catholic School Legacy of Pioneers Msgr. William Ketcham and St. Katharine Drexel

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Genealogical Treasures

from the Catholic School legacy of pioneers

Msgr. William Ketcham and St. Katharine Drexel

By Mark G. Thiel

Founded in 1874, the U.S. Bishops charged the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions to protect the interests of Catholic Indians and its Catholic mission and schools that served them. This was an era of heavy-handed government administration of Indian education and hostile relations with the Church, which continued when Monsignor William Ketcham became the Bureau director in 1900. The government had just ceased to provide school contracts to the many church groups who served Indian children, and under the rationale that Indians were non-citizens and government wards, the Indian Office denied the parents the right to decide which schools their children should attend.

Rather than give up the Catholic schools, Monsignor Ketcham attempted to raise the needed \$140,000 per year to sustain them. He first turned to the tribes' government-administered trust fund accounts, which accrued from the sale of lands and resources. But critics argued against it with the presumption of church-state collaboration, to which Father Ketcham replied that Indian people should have the right to spend their money their way. But the Indian Office rejected his idea.

In 1901, Father Ketcham established the Society for the Preservation of the Faith among Indian Children and *The Indian Sentinel* magazine (available online: <http://cdm16280.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15072coll2>) to raise funds and inform the public about these needs. During its first two years, the Society fell far short, raising only \$21,000 and \$26,000, respectively. But Saint Katharine Drexel filled the gap by donating over \$100,000 per year, which saved many schools from closing. He also appealed to the Indian Office to stop mandating school assignments, which it did in 1902.

Two years later, under the new President Theodore Roosevelt, Father Ketcham renewed his call to permit trust fund use for schools, which President Roosevelt found acceptable coupled with annual approval by parents in writing. Then through the Bureau, the Indian Office began by issuing trust-fund contracts to just eight Catholic schools, to which the critics and their Congressional allies responded by drafting bills to prohibit them. In their defense, Father Ketcham testified at a 1905 Senate subcommittee hearing and asked, "Shall an Indian parent have the right to use his own money in the education of his own children in the school of his choice?" His question won the battle, but the Indian Rights Association continued



Monsignor William Henry Ketcham (1868-1921), Director, with his adopted son Tom (Choctaw), in his office at the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Washington, D.C., undated; Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records, Marquette University

the war by bringing suit to stop the contracts. Three years later the U.S. Supreme Court had the final word and ruled unanimously in *Quick Bear v. Leupp* that tribal trust funds were private, and not public, and that tribes could use them as they saw fit.

As with previous government school contracts, the mechanics of the trust fund contracts required participating schools to submit quarterly attendance reports certified by the school's principal. But the reports now became a lot more complicated, since more pupils were ineligible. Pupils were required to be enrolled members of a tribe with a trust fund account and a parent or guardian had to annually consent in writing to have their child's tuition paid from that fund, which government officials scrutinized closely. Schools occasionally listed non-Indians, non-enrolled Indians, or enrolled Indians from tribes without accounts, and given the rural nature and lack of infrastructure on many reservations, schools had extreme difficulties in securing the signatures of some parents. After subtracting disallowed pupils and prorating eligible ones with poor attendance, the government then calculated the tuition payments. One Catholic school administrator, who as a child had been a contract school pupil at that school, estimated that approximately 90% of their pupils had been qualifying pupils listed in these contract attendance records.

Catholic school administrators created the reports in triplicate. They kept one and submitted two copies to the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, which also kept one and submitted the final one to the Indian Office. Soon, over 100 Catholic schools ⇨

received trust fund payments, all of which were on or near reservations in these 14 states: Arizona, California, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. But eventually, the fund transfers depleted most accounts, the payments stopped, and a number of schools, but not all, had to close. In California, all payments ceased by the 1930s; in New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Wyoming by the 1960s; and in all remaining states, they ceased by the 1970s.

Today, the school attendance reports provide a treasure-trove of personal information for genealogists descended from these pupils. This has enabled individuals and extended families to gain and protect their tribal and U.S. citizenship with associated benefits. Researchers will find the copies from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions within its archival records at Marquette University and the copies from the Indian Office copies dispersed among the respective Indian Agency records at the branch repositories of the U.S. National Archives. Also included among the Bureau records are some school attendance records from the previous mission school contract era. Since Marquette University is an educational institution, and the National Archives is not, the pupil records at Marquette are restricted by FERPA, the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act that governs student records at educational institutions receiving federal funds, whereas those at

the National Archives are totally open to the public.

Nonetheless, the archives staff at Marquette is committed to providing public access without compromising confidentiality. This is accomplished by archives staff conducting searches for patrons who are family members. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. In addition, Marquette is constructing an online master list of the surnames within the Catholic school attendance records within the records of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records. This surname list is now available online, <http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/documents/BCIM-series2-1-index.pdf>. However the surnames of most pupils from schools in Montana and New Mexico have not yet been entered, which is targeted for later in 2014. Furthermore, through an online guide to repositories, Marquette strives to provide current contact information and brief record descriptions on all Catholic and non-Catholic institutions that hold Catholic records about Native Americans in the United States, including the National Archives branches that hold other copies of the Catholic school attendance records.

For More Information

Introduction to Native collections: <http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/indians.shtml>; under FAQ, includes a note on records of genealogical value and links to the surname index and Marquette's guide to Catholic records about Indians not at Marquette (includes the National Archives).

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