

Coming to Montana: Immigrants from Around the World



Amazing Montanans—Biography

Father Pierre Jean de Smet

I was born in Termonde, Belgium on January 30, 1801 and I emigrated to the United States in 1821 through a great desire to become a missionary and help Native Americans. I originally came to Whitemarsh, Maryland, but soon found myself in St. Louis, Missouri, because that's where they needed missionaries.

I loved working with Native Americans and they loved me too. I just had a way of talking with them that put them at ease – probably because I respected them so much. I wanted to help, not hurt them. I started my long career in 1838 when I founded St. Joseph's Mission near present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa for the Pottawatomies, a local Indian tribe. From there I truly began my life's work, as I was asked to travel through the Rocky Mountains to be a missionary, or "black robe" as the Native Americans called us. I did come to Montana, establishing St. Mary's Mission on the Bitterroot River with Father Nicholas Point, in 1841. But when I realized how much work there was to be done in the United States, I went to Europe in 1842 to ask for money and people to help us in our missionary cause. In 1845 I returned, and created 6 new missions in the West.

I wanted to do the most good that I could, so decided to try and work with the Blackfeet Indians. This tribe at the time, was very harsh to other tribes and I wanted to try and influence them. I was so happy to learn that they wanted me to come and that they listened to me. They came to peace with neighboring Indian tribes. This was a great accomplishment, and I loved working with the Blackfeet – they were a wonderful and strong people. But again, I had to go back to St. Louis because my religious superiors needed me.



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Father Pierre Jean DeSmet.

Because I worked so well with the Blackfeet, my superiors and the U.S. government asked that I become a peacemaker between the new white settlers and Native American tribes. This I truly enjoyed, because I was able to help the people I loved - the Native American tribes in the West.

I kept many journals and accounts of my travels, because I wanted Americans to better understand these tribes that were as varied as the people from different European countries with different languages, customs, and food. I ended up traveling over 18,000 miles and crossed the ocean to Europe 19 times for my life's work, but every mile was worth it. I loved my job and felt very lucky that this was my calling.