

Iti Fabussa

Father William Henry Ketcham *Part One*

With students settling back in to classrooms for the school year across the nation, it is a perfect time to reflect upon education.

The next few Iti Fabussa articles will focus on lesser known missionaries from various denominations that influenced education in the Choctaw Nation, working to respect Choctaw children and their families in the face of change.

With the systematic assimilation policies in government and mission boarding schools that existed across the United States, we will never know the true cost of abuse, cultural loss, and historical trauma to Choctaw people.

How do we acknowledge the positive opportunities of an education, connections to life-long friends, and those individuals that worked to respect Choctaw people within the atrocities of a nightmare? Delicately.

Perhaps, focusing on stories of light, like legacies of missionaries who dedicated their lives to working within the Choctaw Nation, might offer some solace.

The first missionary whom we will focus on is Father William Henry Ketcham, who was born to Protestant parents on June 1, 1868 in Sumner, Iowa (Abing 1994).

Ketcham converted to Catholicism and later pursued a theological education by enrolling in an institution located in Indian Territory, Sacred Heart Monastery.

Sacred Heart Monastery had been a part of ministry to Native Americans since 1876 (Abing 1994). This work among Native American students so deeply pressed upon Ketcham that he sought permission from the highest Catholic authority in the region to conduct missionary work in Indian Territory exclusively.

His second mission assignment led him to Antlers to serve tribal members of the Choctaw Nation (Abing 1994). With only \$25 to start a mission, Ketcham slept in the railroad house and conducted mass to his growing congregation in the court house, all while studying the Choctaw language to better communicate with residents in the community that spoke little to no English (Abing 1994:3).

Ketcham secured donations to build a residence, a chapel, and St. Agnes Mission school to serve both day and resident students.

Over time Ketcham mastered the Choctaw language, so much so, that Choctaw Chief Victor Locke later noted, "according to our traditions, with the sole exception of the late missionary to Louisiana Choctaws, the Abbe Rouquette, who died in New Orleans in 1887, Father Ketcham was the only priest who has acquired our language" (Nieberding 1955:189).

According to "The Indian Sentinel" (Locke 1920:423), Father Ketcham worked with a board of translators comprised of first language speakers, including Peter J. Hudson of Tuskahoma and Ben Henderson of Antlers, to develop materials from a Choctaw point of view, in the Choctaw language.

In 1899, these included a prayer book and catechism materials in dual English and Choctaw formats to better serve students including a Choctaw adapted Catholic Ladder (Nieberding

1955). Catholic Ladders, looked much like ladders on print with “thematic sequences of symbols or pictures for instructing candidates on how to achieve heaven” (Thiel 2009:49).

He purchased Choctaw education materials for students including spelling, arithmetic, and books of the Bible. In 1916, Ketcham published his *Katiskisma*, a detailed catechism he translated into the Choctaw language, to ensure future Choctaw students and their families could continue to connect with the Gospel in their own language (Nieberding 1955, Locke 1920:423-424).

The St. Agnes Mission served the community for 48 years and the school remained a prominent option for local children until April 12, 1945 (Abing 1994, Nieberding 1955). It was on this day an F5 tornado struck the town of Antlers, leaving nearly half the town homeless, 69 killed, and over 350 injured (Holmes 2015).

The tornado lifted the St. Agnes Mission rectory up into the air where it exploded into thousands of pieces (Nieberding 1955).

The Mission was leveled except for the hallway of the school building.

Here, huddled under collapsed walls were 60 young students with their teachers, miraculously saved from the storm (Nieberding 1955).

The community of Antlers worked together to rebuild the town within a short time, but St. Agnes Mission remained closed.

Part Two of Father William Henry Ketcham’s story will be in an upcoming issue of the Biskinik.



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Father William Ketcham, students and nuns outside the St. Agnes Mission School in Antlers, Indian Territory. The photo was taken before statehood in 1907. The school, along with the chapel and a residence was built with donations Ketcham secured. The St. Agnes Mission School was an option for local children until an F5 tornado struck Antlers on April 12, 1945. The Mission was destroyed except for the hallway of the school building. Huddled under the collapsed walls were 60 children and their teachers. While Antlers was rebuilt, the Mission remained closed.