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FATHER FLORIAN SCHWENNINGER, OSB The Padre of Paradise Flat

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Born near Innsbruck, Austria in 1809, Martin Francis Schwenninger entered the Benedictine Order at a young age. He received the religious habit of his Order in 1828 and was later ordained a priest. Taking the religious name of Florian, Father Florian could have easily been a famed professor at a European university since he had honored degrees in Scripture and oriental languages from Tyrol University in Austria. Father Florian's adventurous soul led him from the secure monastic life in Austria in 1844 to the vast expanses of America's Wild West.

Father Florian served as a missionary in New York State for his first few years in America. However, he felt called to the West and became the first missionary of any faith to enter the Northern California gold fields in the early 1850s.

In August 1852 he found himself aboard the steamer *Golden Gate* on his way to the port of San Francisco. While most passengers on the ship suffered from cholera, the pale padre maintained his health.

Father Florian, as he liked to be called, first worked among the German people of the City. But in July 1853, he boarded a paddlewheel boat up the Sacramento River and headed towards the Trinity-Klamath gold mines. Archbishop Joseph Alemany of San Francisco had appointed him to that mountainous district in 1853, urging him to visit as many mining camps as possible.

After a brief tour of California's Capital City, Father Florian continued on to Marysville, a commercial city at the head of the Yuba River and the northern terminus of his boat ride. There he met Father Peter Magagnotto who came to California in 1849. From him, Father Florian received timely advice on how to deal with the rugged men of the northern Mother Lode.

And rugged they were. By 1850, over ninety percent of the white population in California was male, with clergymen, lawmen, and decent women few and far between. Although God-fearing gentlemen did inhabit the Trinity-Klamath gold region, most were ruthless and reckless. Instead of observing the Sabbath, they gambled in the saloons on Sunday and spent the evening in the brothels. Other miners were so immoral they murdered any who stood in their way, especially the natives. And, in many places along the Trinity, Salmon, and Klamath rivers, the white men wantonly murdered Indians.

Although Father Florian knew that danger lay in the Trinity-Klamath gold mines, he bravely boarded the six-horse stage bound for Shasta Town, near present-day Redding. He and other Catholic clergymen hoped that the moral teachings of the church might calm the miners' spirits and change their greedy ways. Perhaps with a proper priest and a church nearby, communities with families would form.

Father Florian slowly moved north over narrow country roads and through such rough mining camps such as Lousy Level and Whiskey Flat towards his destination. Finally, the stage rolled into Shasta Town as well as into a maze of traffic. Great lumbering freight wagons and pack mules by the score could be counted, for the bustling community was the transfer point of passengers and supplies going into the high mountains of the Klamath and Trinity mines. A crowd of miners, stage drivers, and muleteers kept the town alive day and night.

When Father Florian stepped off the stage onto Main Street, those who stood watching him on the saloon-and brothel-lined thoroughfare probably stared in wonder, for he wore the heavy robe of a Benedictine monk. Never before had a Catholic priest ventured too far north into the California mining district.

Although Father Florian's first Masses in Shasta Town were held in the town hall, he soon had a large congregation of followers—both Catholic and Protestant—ready and willing to build a church for him. That was a great honor, since a fire had devastated Shasta in June 1853, hitting many citizens hard financially.

Anxious to broaden his missionary work, within weeks Father Florian was off to Weaverville, thirty-five miles to the northwest. There lay the head of the Trinity River where over 4,000 men worked their mining claims with many Chinese men among them. Although a fire had swept that camp too in March 1853, the townsfolk promised the good-natured priest a church. He continued his journey to the diggings along the Trinity where thousands of men scoured the ravines, gulches and riverbeds for gold.

HE NEXT TOOK a coach as far as Trinity Center, an important mining and trading community on the Oregon-Shasta Stage Line. From there, he walked the rest of the way, for he scorned to ride a mule, the only other mode of travel through the hazardous mountains.

Even Father Florian found the trails along the Trinity and Salmon rivers difficult. But instead of turning back he became only more inspired and determined. At every home he visited, at every camp he came to, he left a holy picture or a crucifix to help the people feel more content with their isolated life in the wilderness.

Up the narrow, rocky gorge he trudged, following the river as it twisted and zig-zagged into the clouds, over the glacier-carved Trinity Alps, clear up to Carville and the Trinity Divide. After crossing the divide by Ferry, Father Florian ambled down the steep, almost invisible path towards Coffee Creek Trail and level land.

The last place he visited that fall was Sawyer's Bar, a boisterous community between the Trinity Alps and the mist-veiled Klamath Mountains. Pausing at a bend on Coffee Creek Trail, he glanced down and saw the makeshift town's tents and shacks from at least a half-mile above. Below him lay the turbulent Salmon River, whose noisy blue waters swiftly tumbled from high mountain springs, carrying tree trunks and other debris into its whirling eddies. On the river's bank, he could see thousands of men working their mining claims.

Miners' mouths gaped as they watched the stooped, frail figure of Father Florian plod across the two hewn logs and entered Sawyer's Bar. Most may well have wondered why a man of God would dare enter such a hell-raising town where shooting and killing were common. He did not even dress like them. They wore dirty shirts and overalls tucked in tall muddy boots, and all were unkempt, unshaven, and unshorn, while he still wore his Benedictine habit.

As Father Florian slowly plodded down the single street of the crowded camp, greeting each miner in his kindly manner, more and more men paused to stare at him. New arrivals at the four-year-old camp were no novelty, but never had those men dreamed of meeting a Benedictine monk. He held Mass and a flurry of excitement followed. People walked down from the Klamath, forty-five miles away, to see him preach. When the townsfolk learned he wanted a Catholic church built in Sawyer's Bar, they were amazed but eager to build it.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Sawyer's Bar Old Town Hall

Father Florian fell in love with Sawyer's Bar, it so reminded him of his native Austria, but he could not stay long. He had to get back to Shasta Town before winter set in. Many a miner told tales of those who perished when the blizzards blew—and they blew often in these mountains, making the wet, rocky earth slippery and dangerous.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

An Old House in Sawyer's Bar

On his return trip, he found that Shasta Town, Weaverville, and other mining camps had built new churches in his honor. Kind-hearted Father Florian, the sole priest of Shasta and Trinity counties, had one busy but happy Christmas. He continually traveled day and night, making trips to say Mass and hear confession as far south as Red Bluff in Tehama County, over to Weaverville and the camps along the bed of the Trinity River, and north above Redding.

When spring of 1854 came, he was anxious to resume his journeys over the mountains, visiting every camp. This time, he went over Scott Mountain to Callahan in Siskiyou County, took Coffee Creek Trail over the ridges to Cecilville, and then journeyed down to the Salmon River mines and to Sawyer's Bar.

In early 1855, Father Raphael Rinaldi took over residence at Shasta Town, Shasta County, while Father Florian moved to Weaverville in Trinity County. That July, Archbishop Alemany appointed Father James Cassin and his assistant, Father Thomas Cody, to Siskiyou County where Sawyer's Bar is located. Father Florian visited his beloved camp one last time before that exchange occurred. At once the town's folk resolved to build a church for him in order to encourage him to

visit them often. They constructed Saint Joseph Church in 1855, the oldest and best preserved church in northern California above San Francisco.

Although Father Florian had been appointed priest only to Trinity County, he often journeyed up Coffee Creek Trail to the Salmon River's north fork. By 1856, his attention had turned towards the missions along the Salmon River, for he wanted to mend the miners' unlawful and wicked ways. In early spring of 1856, he was able to visit Sawyer's Bar and saw Saint Joseph's church under construction for the first time. It lay on Paradise Flat, where the miners believed the gold had been played out.

A makeshift community had once rested on this flat, but when the miners had discovered that the gravel beneath them was rich in gold, the town moved downriver to where Dan Sawyer had set up a sawmill. They called the camp Sawyer's Bar. Since lumber could not be transported into those remote mountains, the miners whipsawed it right in Sawyer's Bar and then hauled it upriver to the flat.

It so pleased Father Florian to see the miners hard at work on the little wooden church beneath the pines that he became inspired. To the east and rear of the church lay ample space; there he created a cemetery. The only headboards found in this cemetery in those early days were made by Father Florian himself. He carved them freely from whipsawed boards and graced them with his wonderful penmanship.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Saint Joseph Church, Sawyer's Bar

Father Florian became the sole priest of Siskiyou County in the spring of 1857. On April 10, he took over the parish of Yreka and in the first week of May was off to Sawyer's Bar. Noticing that his church was almost completed, he took off, visiting as many mining camps in Siskiyou County as possible. He walked up the Salmon River to the confluence of the Klamath at Somes Bar and, from there, to Happy Camp and even over the ridge to the mines of the Smith River.

Later that year, Father Florian visited Sawyer's Bar again, knowing that the church would be finished. This time, he carried a mysterious bundle under one arm. Finally reaching Paradise Flat, he set his luggage in the single room lean-to at the back and examined the church. It was forty-six feet long and twenty-feet wide. A simple cross lay under the gable. Four picture windows, with crosses painted in the center of each pane, let in an abundance of light. A carpet covered the floor, but the walls had no interior lining. A silver coin bearing the date of the building was placed on a corner post.

Before Mass, Father Florian set the secret bundle on the altar of the newly built church for all to see. A large group gathered for the first Mass at Saint Joseph Church. When the congregation looked at the altar, they were astonished. There lay an oil painting of the crucifixion, the work of some famous Austrian artist, given to the padre before he left for America.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Wood Headstones Carved by Father Florian

IN 1858, FATHER FLORIAN became resident priest at Sawyer's Bar. He lived there with his cats and chickens in the lean-to at the rear of the church. Crowds of people attended his Masses. They overflowed the church and stood on the surrounding flats to hear his sermons. The town had no school, so Father Florian taught the children of his congregation how to read and write, and he gave lessons in art, music, and penmanship. When the first public school opened in Sawyer's Bar, he served as the school teacher's aide. He also kept busy conducting last rites and fashioning markers for graves, for death in that remote region was frequent and often violent.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Oil Painting of the Crucifixion Brought to Sawyer's Bar from Austria by Fr Florian

This painting hung in the Church at Sawyer's Bar for 100 years but was rescued from the harsh conditions there by Fr John Sullivan who had it restored by a professional artist. For safety and protection from the elements, it now hangs in Sacred Heart Church, Fort Jones

Father Florian's Small one Room Living Quarters



Father Florian remained in Sawyer's Bar until 1866 when Bishop O'Connell of the Vicariate of Marysville visited him. Father Florian was in such poor health that the bishop hospitalized him and recalled him to Marysville. By then, most of the miners had left the Trinity-Klamath gold mines for better paying regions.

At first, Father Florian had a difficult time living in Marysville. Although he stayed active celebrating Mass and hearing confessions, he often day-dreamed of life along the Salmon River, of the pine-scented forests and the noisy streams. He wished he could once again visit the rough-clad, big-hearted miners. But, most of all, he prayed that his congregation at Paradise Flat would never forget him and his teachings.

On July 28, 1868, after fifteen years of labor in the rugged Northern California mountains, Father Florian quietly commended his spirit to the Lord in death.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Interior of Saint Joseph Church, Sawyer's Bar

Sawyer's Bar has not had a resident priest since 1866, for it is too remote and the roads over the mountains are too difficult, but Saint Joseph Church still stands, having escaped heavy hydraulic mining operations in the late 1890s and early 1900s, as well as two fires which blazed the town in the 1950s. In 1978, it was entered into the National Registry of Historic Places.

The headstones are still in relatively good condition but are now preserved inside Saint Joseph Church, while the crucifix and the original key to the door are kept at Sacred Heart Church in Fort Jones. When Father Roy Doner was pastor of Fort Jones, he celebrated Mass in the church at Sawyer's Bar every third week during the warmer months when weather permits. Today in 2015, Mass is celebrated once a year in Saint Joseph Church, Sawyer's Bar during the summer.

Archivist's Final Thoughts

I am moved by the heroic life of Father Florian Schwenninger, OSB, who left the comfort of his Benedictine monastic community in Austria for a missionary life in the new world of America in the mid-1800s. Small in physical stature, Father Florian was a giant in missionary zeal for the miners living in the recesses of the Trinity Alps of Siskiyou and Shasta Counties. If anyone deserves the title of saint, it is Father Florian for his heroic missionary life in Northern California.

Saint Joseph Church in Sawyer's Bar is an historic building, the first Catholic church in the northern most region of California in 1855. It is in serious need of repair if it is to be saved for future generations to see. This church is testimony to the heroic life and ministry of Father Florian Schwenninger, OSB, the apostle of Jesus the Christ sent to the early miners of Northern California. May his memory live on for generations to come!

DATES IN THE HISTORY OF SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH, SAWYER'S BAR

- 1850** White men first enter the Salmon River led by Captain Best. Gold discovered along the river by Fred Coffin.
- 1851** Town of Bestville erected just west of the present town of Sawyer's Bar.
- 1855** Construction of the church started under the direction of Father Florian.
- 1857** Father Florian officially assigned to the Yreka parish. The first Mass is celebrated in the almost completed Sawyer's Bar church.
- 1858** Father Florian took up year-round residence at Sawyer's Bar and completed the interior of the church.
- 1868** Father Florian died in Marysville at the Sisters' Hospital. Thereafter, the Sawyer's Bar church became a mission first of the Yreka parish and later the Fort Jones Parish.

1930 The front porch and stairs were replaced but the entire church was in a poor state of repair.

1953-

1957 Major restoration of the church was done. A concrete foundation replaced the original wood foundation. The roof, windows, sashes, front siding and wall cloth were all replaced.

*This information was taken from a plaque located at
the entrance of the church*

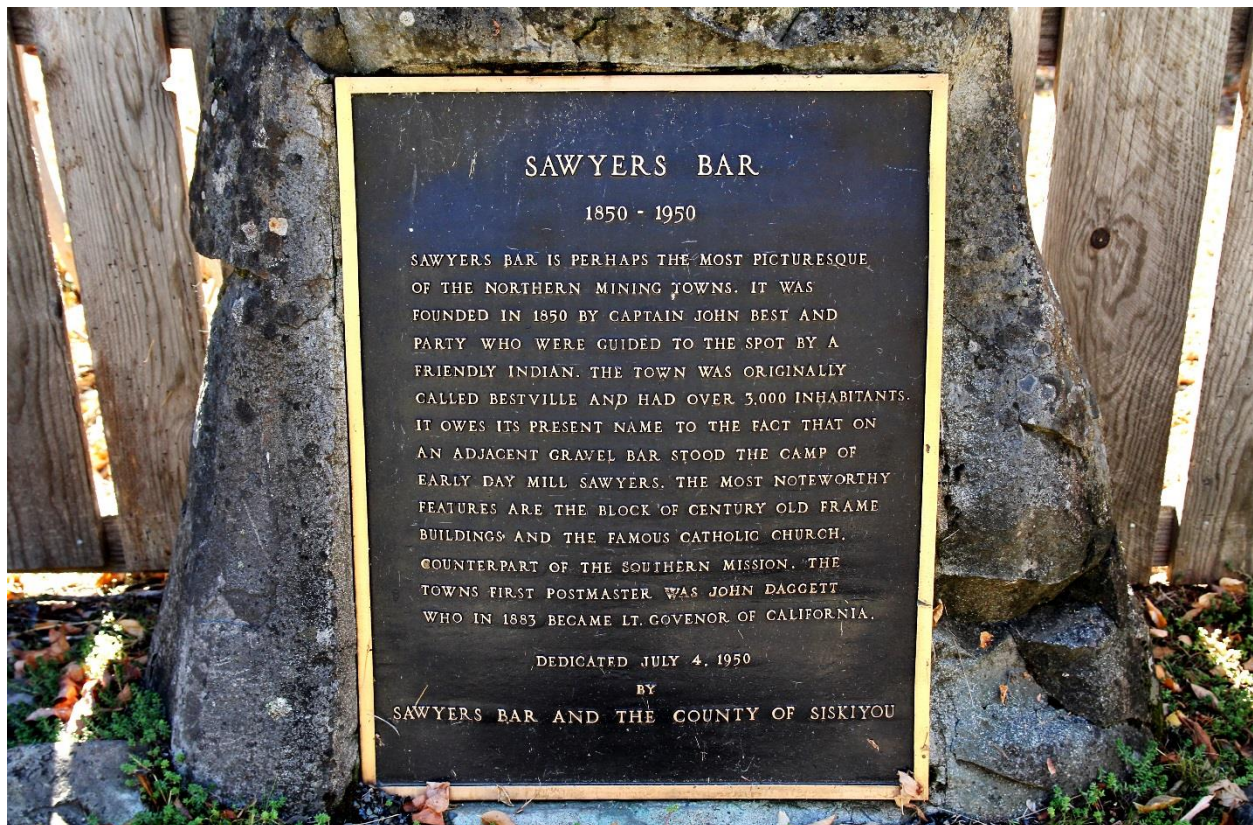




Photo by John E Boll 2015

The Sawyer's Bar Church Cemetery Established by Father Florian



Father Florian's Headstone, St Joseph Cemetery, Marysville