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FATHER FLORIAN SCHWENNIGER, OSB A BENEDICTINE ON THE GOLD DUST TRAILS The Padre of Paradise Flat

By Father John B McGloin, SJ, printed January 29, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

Snuggled down in a remote valley which is reached over one of the spectacular mountain ranges which mark rugged Siskiyou County is a hamlet named Sawyer's Bar. A short distance downstream from the settlement, which is located on the north fork of the Salmon River, lies an elevated portion of land which earlier miners called "Paradise Flat" –a term of affection for the venerated Padre who labored there and who, in 1857, completed a still standing church which is served, weather permitting, as a mission of the Fort Jones parish. The Padre we write of here was an Austrian Benedictine monk named Florian Schwenninger (1809 – 1868) a priest of diminutive stature who looms very large indeed among those who served souls along the Gold Dust Trails of Northern California.



Benediktinerabtei St. Georgenberg-Fiecht

1138—1988

Saint George Benedictine Monastery, Fiecht, Austria

Martin Francis Schwenninger was born in Innsbruck, Austria on January 30, 1809. Feeling a call to both the priestly and monastic life, he entered the Benedictine Order at the monastery of Fiecht, located about 25 miles from Innsbruck. There he was known as Brother Florian. He was ordained a priest on July 29, 1832 and offered his first Mass in the Jesuit church of Innsbruck. He quickly developed a yearning for the foreign missionary apostolate (one not at all alien to the Benedictine call) and Father Florian was sent to the United States in 1844 with his abbot's blessing.

Several years were spent serving the German population in various cities of northern New York but the future Padre of Paradise Flat really came into his own when, in 1852, he received a letter from Bishop Joseph Alemany, OP who, after two years of service as Bishop of Monterey in California desired the services of a priest to work among the Germans of his flock who were in San Francisco and dispersed through northern California. Soon the young Benedictine monk was on his way to California, arriving in San Francisco in August, 1852. The next spring he was sent by the now Archbishop Alemany to the mountains in the northern part of this diocese where a priest was needed. And so it came to pass that the hardy little Benedictine monk from far off Innsbruck entered into 15 years of devoted priestly service which were to merit for him a special place in the gallery of Catholic leaders who mark the American phase of the Catholic history of California.

Father Florian built a small chapel in the mining town of Shasta but it was not long before he branched out into the many towns which had sprung into being with the discovery of gold in the northern mountain area of California. Weaverville was his center for several years and he built the first church there. Most of all, though, Father Florian seems to have been an apostolic wanderer in the truest sense as he made his way by foot along perilous mountain trails to minister to the scattered sheep of his flock. He must surely have marked the similarity between the beautiful mountains he traversed (some of them now known as the Trinity Alps) and those of his native Austria. By 1859, Father Florian was able to send his Abbot a long report of his activities and with it went a revealing newspaper clipping preserved in the monastic records of Fiecht in Austria. It reads in part as follows:

“Father Florian is building a Catholic Church on Salmon River, working with his own hands. He is a remarkable man, a German Benedictine monk, most thoroughly instructed in ancient and modern languages and in music. Above all he is a good, kind hearted faithful man of God who is content to live in waste places for the advancement of his church. His life is one long sacrifice for the religion he professes. Every timber shaped by his hands in the solitude of his mountains is a work as worthy of consecration as a corner stone in the church of St Peter.”



The Church in Paradise Flat, built by Father Florian between 1855 and 1857.

Photo from the Diocesan Archives

It was between 1855 and 1857 that the now historic church was erected to St Joseph by Father Florian. There it stands today, a proud possession of all of the townfolk, only a few of whom are Catholic, but who are all united in their determination to thwart occasional attempts of mining interests to invade the Flat and thus imperil or perhaps destroy the pioneer church. It appears that their efforts will continue to be successful. A visit to this area and church is highly recommended.

I first saw this church in mid-August, 1952 and returned some years later on June 10, 1961 to offer Mass there using the historic vestments of Florian himself. While serving as summer pastor of the Fort Jones parish in August 1967, I offered Mass there to a fairly numerous congregation since there had been some previous publicity. Again in 1974, while serving the Fort Jones parish I motored over the mountains to offer two Sunday afternoon Masses in August and early September. Well remembered is the great heat of the second of these Masses of that day offered in three different places. I had a memorable swim in the Salmon River.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

St Joseph Church, Sawyer's Bar
Built by Fr Florian Schwenniger, OSB in 1857

The Florian vestments were acquired by my first seeing them on display at Sutter's Fort, Sacramento, where they had been loaned by a Marysville family which had obtained possession after Father Florian's death there in 1868 – he lies buried in the old Catholic cemetery in Marysville, far from his native Austria and monastery. Eventually I was able to obtain title of these vestments for the University of San Francisco and they are an honored possession there now. I have felt it a special privilege to wear them at my several Masses in Padre Florian's church on Paradise Flat. There appears to be no extant picture of the Padre and this would include my checking in the monastic records in Fiecht which I visited in 1957.

It would seem that some of the purest gold mined in the mountains of northern California was of the spiritual kind; that is why it is fitting in this present series to honor the memory of a brave Benedictine – Florian Schwenniger, OSB, The Padre of Paradise Flat.

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Photo from Diocesan Archives

Abbot Anselm Zeller, OSB

**Abbot of Saint George Abbey, Fiecht, Austria
Made a Visit to Saint Joseph Church, Sawyers' Bar,
And Celebrated Mass Using Father Florian's Vestments**



Photo by John E Boll 2014

**Tombstone of Father Florian Schweningen
St Joseph Cemetery, Marysville**