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Exploring the Subtleties of Shifting Identities in Historic Western Montana Missions

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Abstract

In the early and mid-19th century, the cultural and physical landscapes of western Montana were altered by the arrival of Jesuit missionaries. While this was probably not the first instance of Euroamericans coming into contact with the peoples now known as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation, the presence of the missionaries was less transient than that of earlier fur trappers and traders. Among the new missions established throughout the state were St. Mary's, established in 1841, and St. Ignatius, established in 1854.

For most of the 20th century, Native voices were largely silenced in the visual and written records of life at St. Mary's and St. Ignatius. While Jesuit literature and archival photographs from the late 19th and early 20th century paint a conflict-free picture of life at these missions, new literature from contemporary scholars suggests otherwise.

This poster seeks to follow in these scholars' footsteps by carefully examining the subtleties of historic literature and photography focused on St. Mary's and St. Ignatius in the mid- to late 20th century. By considering elements such as word choice in daily accounts written by Jesuit missionaries, death records and spatial organization of cemeteries, and body language and clothing in photographs alongside contemporary literature, I hope to reveal some of the complexity of changing social identities and relations experienced by the residents of these two missions. While it is not the Native perspective that absolutely must be heard and acknowledged, this cursory research effort to read between the lines will aid in constructing a more complete, accurate record of western Montana's history.

Key words: Montana, history, Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, Christianity, identity theory