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There are elements of "Robinson Crusoe" in this story . . .

But there are no ocean waves washing the shores of Heart Butte, Mont., where the Rev. Egon E. Mallman, S.J., spent 42 years of his life as a missionary among 1,500 Blackfeet Indians.

There is no tropical growth . . . only dirt that blows among the cottonwoods and poplars.

There is no humid heat . . . only heat of the scorching kind and cold that reaches 50 degrees below zero.

There is no raft or oar . . . only a vintage truck with a faded blue cab.

Yet, this could be the story of a Robinson Crusoe in a Northwest setting.

Crusoe had no choice . . . he was shipwrecked.

Mallman was in Heart Butte by choice . . . he had volunteered for the Indian missions.

And, of course, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe was fiction. Whereas this is the story of a place only a few miles from Glacier National Park — and of a 160-pound, five-foot eight Jesuit priest whose accomplishments are considerable.

In December of 1976 Father Mallman was assigned to Mt. St. Michael's which sprawls along the sloping bluff northeast of Hillyard near Spokane.

He deeply regretted leaving his cherished Blackfeet, but the move to Spokane was medically imperative. He suffered from cataracts and perforated retinas which rendered him 90 per cent blind. He was diabetic and suffered from emphysema in an advanced stage.

In spite of his handicaps, the priest offers daily mass with the aid of special lights and books with large print. And, with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass, he reads the scholarly journals which intrigued him during the long evenings at Heart Butte.

Born in Uerdingen, Germany, in 1898, Father Mallman was an American from birth. His parents were American; his father was a consulting engineer and was accompanied by his wife on assignment for an American firm when the birth occurred.

When Egon reached the age for formal education, the family was living in London. It was at this time that young Mallman met the



As he was 16 years ago . . . Father Mallman is shown all dressed up in his best cassock and biretta for Sunday mass at St. Ann's Mission Church on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Western Montana. Today Father Mallman states: "There are exceptions of course, but I feel the United States has proved to be a poor guardian for the Indian." (Photo by Richard Lewis)

#### 42 YEARS WITH THE INDIANS

## blackrobe with the Blackfeet

Jesuits. When he was 18 he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Roehampton.

World War I was building to a crescendo when the young Jesuit was permitted to accompany his parents when they returned to the United States. He was assigned to a house of formation immediately so his training would not be interrupted.

Mallman's 13 years of training were in accordance with the Jesuit pattern at that time. Two or three

years were set aside for teaching in a Jesuit high school, college or university.

Father Mallman taught two years at Gonzaga University before he was assigned to Woodstock College, Md., for his formal theological studies. He was ordained a priest in the Woodstock chapel in 1929 by Archbishop Michael J. Curley of Baltimore.

The next several years saw the young priest serve in a number of capacities and places.

"I was obedient," he said, "but every two weeks I wrote to the father provincial asking to be assigned to an Indian mission.

"There was lots of work to be done for the Indians, and I wanted to help do that work."

Father Mallman smiled as he recalled the epistolary barrage he laid down on the province headquarters in Portland, Ore.

"Finally, the provincial must have gotten tired of reading Mallman's letters and Mallman was assigned to Heart Butte.

"I surely did not know that would be my address for the next 42 years. But I'd do it again."

As soon as he could free himself, he was off to Heart Butte.

He makes a joke about his impatience in getting to Heart Butte. "I was anxious to see if their feet really were black. Seriously though, I had a brand new priesthood that I wanted to use to help the Indians."

That was 1934. After being ensconced at Heart Butte, the provincial (and several successors as well) received few letters from Father Mallman other than official ones describing the status of the mission. The old priest in recent years had dreaded looking in his mailbox, for fear there would be a letter telling him to leave his Indians and seek medical attention. And finally, that happened.

As he reflects on his long tenure with the Blackfeet, Father Mallman discusses his impressions of the Indians.

"Most of them are good people. It is only a few who cause trouble, but the whole Indian population is tarred by the same brush that the bad few provide.

"If we stop and reflect, the good whites are frequently treated in the same way."

Father Mallman is convinced the federal government does not provide enough teachers, counselors and administrators to adequately prepare Indian youth to live happily and fruitfully in the complex society of today.

"Of course, there are exceptions. But one will find names of too many Indians on the unemployment rolls."

He feels "there is a general apathy, and consequent ignorance, among whites of all ages about reservations and the wards of the government who are supposed to occupy them."

He paused for a moment and said:

"It's ridiculous, I know, but there seems to be a grand plot at work to

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## blackrobe with the Blackfeet

keep knowledge of the Indians and the nature of their culture a profound secret in our schools, both public and private.

"As a result, we have but a comparative handful of Catholic and Protestant missionaries trying to care for the spiritual and educational needs of thousands of Indians."

He shook his head slowly and said: "There are exceptions, of course, but I feel the United States has proved to be a poor guardian for the Indian."

As one dereliction, he cites the ease with which an Indian can get the government's permission to sell his allotment of land provided him by treaty.

"Land can be the main source of an Indian's income, and large tracts of the reservations in this country are rich in natural resources."

But today, the old missionary said, "the reservation has less and less attraction for the Indian lad out of his teens. He heads for the city. If he is fortunate he finds a job, marries and settles down."

But, he said, one does not find many cases like this because "a strong, sustained effort is required of the young Indian couple to integrate themselves into the white culture into which they have moved."

He pointed out that many jobs require a proficiency beyond the Indian's skill. Also, he said, during an economic slump the Indian, like members of other minorities, is among the first to lose his job.

Father Mallman said the Blackfeet tribe numbers 15,000, with about 5,000 on the reservation in Montana. The other two-thirds are scattered.

Of those on the Blackfeet Reservation, 1,500 were the responsibility of the priest. "Because these 1,500 were scattered over 1,500 square miles, I was kept busy," he said.

"My role was primarily that of a priest, as a dispenser of the sacraments and to offer mass. I was there to comfort those in need, to advise them, to answer any questions about religion."

"Beneath the surface, there is a lot of sorrow. Death is always a difficult time for the Indian. I think the grief of an Indian at the death of a relative or close friend is much more profound than ours."

Father Mallman likened the death customs of the Indians to those of the Irish. "There is a wake the night before the funeral and they sit around the coffin talking quietly. Midway in the evening I would go and lead them in the rosary."

The Blackfeet cherished Father Mallman. He established a rapport that encouraged them to confide in him.

"Like any dutiful priest or minister, I had no office hours."



The varied expressions of a dedicated priest bring forth images and vibrations of a life filled with service and love. (Photography by John Keith)



Father Mallman brought to Heart Butte the skill of a first-class carpenter and soon after his arrival wired a building for electricity and installed the plumbing.

He also is a gourmet cook and is knowledgeable about wines. One of his greatest pleasures, when he had good eyesight, was to cook a sophisticated meal for friends who stopped in to see him. Among the utensils he used was a 40-year-old pressure cooker.

He explains his carpentry skills with a smile. "Every priest should be a good carpenter because Christ was a carpenter and is meant to be the prototype of the priest."

When Father Mallman arrived at Heart Butte in 1934, he was given a tour of the premises by the Rev. Robert Kane, S.J. Handing Father Mallman two keys, Kane had said: "This one is for the church and your living quarters in the basement and this one is for the 'biffy' you see over there."

Noting that "biffy" was a rather dignified euphemism for outhouse, Father Mallman said: "'Biffy' has to go. It clashes with the rest of the decor."

Later that day he studied the church and living quarters and noted that many improvements could be made rather cheaply. The "domestication of biffy" had top priority.

The next morning he took the mission truck and drove to Browning, Mont., 12 miles east of Glacier National Park.

He bought lumber and plumbing fixtures. Within two weeks the cultural level of the priest's quarters had risen 50 per cent and one of the problems of the bitterly cold winters was solved.

The mention of "cold winters" conjures up a humorous event involving Mallman in the '40s.

The late Rev. Leo J. Robinson, S.J., was provincial of the Oregon Province at the time and was making his annual visitation of Jesuit installations in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Alaska. He was at Heart Butte enjoying conversation with Mallman as well as the latter's famed "home brew."

Mallman interrupted his gourmet routine and shoved a burlap sack of potatoes into the bed the provincial was going to occupy.

"Robl," as the provincial was called by most of his subjects, exclaimed: "Hey chief! What goes with the spuds? Have you jumped your trolley?"

Mallman kept on bedding the potatoes. "Listen, Robl. It's going to get down to 40 below tonight and I'm not going to eat frozen spuds the rest of the winter. I'll take the vegetables in with me."

There was no use arguing the logic of the missionary's position. The case was closed. That night, the religious superior of five states wrestled with a sack of potatoes for his share of the blankets.

The passing years provided





His days in Spokane are far from dull for Father Mailman — he relishes the scholarly journals which he could read only during some free evenings while at the reservation. Recalling his schedule in those days, Father Mailman says: "Like any dutiful priest or minister, I had no office hours." (Photo by John Keith)

great contentment for Father Mailman. He gave no thought to vacations; he found his satisfaction in visiting his Blackfeet parishioners, building a church with the help of two men and a \$5,000 donation from the Extension Society, a Catholic philanthropic organization.

When he found time, he wired his own quarters for a lighting system and made other improvements. Except for trips to Browning for supplies, mail and legal business, he stayed on the reservation.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1942, Father Mailman immediately sent a letter to Father Robinson, volunteering for a chaplaincy.

The answer was swift. It stated: "Stay put, chief. If I let you go to war, whom can I get for your slot at Heart Butte? Your brother in Christ, Robi."

Father Mailman stayed at Heart Butte for 36 more years. Those

were years rich in apostolic accomplishment — more than 1,000 baptisms and 200 weddings, to mention only two facets of his work.

After lauding Father Mailman for his 42 years of service among the Blackfeet, the provincial told him he was being assigned to Mt. St. Michael's in Spokane where he could receive the proper medical attention.

He spent Christmas Day of 1976 offering three masses for his Blackfeet in three locations.

The following day he helped to load the small, round-topped trunk that was nearly his age.

He quickly opened the right hand door of the car and took his place next to the driver. He did not look back as the vehicle started moving. An old man who had become a legend in northwestern Montana was leaving home and dear friends.

(The end.)