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FATHER JOHN MARY MEVEL MAN OF THE HOUR AND PASTOR OF THE RAILROAD

By Father John Dwyer, printed April 8, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

On July 10, 1865, Archbishop Alemany wrote a letter to Bishop O'Connell of Marysville to inform him that on that date the "student Mevel" had arrived by ship, that he had finished his course of studies and that he had all the necessary documents. What did Bishop O'Connell want done? Meanwhile, the archbishop had sent the young man to the seminary at Mission Dolores. On July 21, the archbishop examined young Jean Marie and deemed him ready for ordination, a decision he also communicated to Bishop O'Connell by letter. Accordingly, the archbishop gave young Mevel the tonsure on July 22 and the Minor Orders on the following day. Bishop O'Connell's letters came and the archbishop ordained the young man a sub-deacon on July 30, a deacon on August 6, 1865. Four days later John Mary Mevel, as he came to be known, was ordained a priest of the Vicariate of Marysville.

Shortly after he arrived in Marysville, Bishop O'Connell sent Father Mevel to Gold Hill, Nevada as an assistant to Father Patrick O'Reilly. But where had he come from? From All Hallows, as Bishop O'Connell had written to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Paris in May and told them that in September he expected several young priests from All Hallows, one of whom was a Frenchman. But having no family in Ireland to visit, young Mevel sailed for America as soon as classes ended. He was already an experienced hand by the time his classmates arrived in the fall.

Late in 1866 when Father Thomas Crinion of Oroville became seriously ill, the bishop transferred Father Mevel to Oroville to assist him and finally to take his place when Crinion died on January 20, 1867. But by the end of the year, Father Mevel had been replaced in Oroville by Father Patrick O'Kane and a new and certainly unique assignment was given to him because he was the "man of the hour."

Father Mevel was transferred at the end of 1867 to Forest Hill to assume the pastorate of a new and different kind of parish—"The Railroad Line Parish." Construction of the Central Pacific portion of the new transcontinental railroad had reached Bishop O'Connell's diocese by June 1865 when track laying proceeding east from Auburn came into his area of jurisdiction. The number of accidents almost daily which required the summoning of a priest often from great distances touched the heart of the bishop. He resolved to solve the problem by creating the "Railroad line parish" and giving it its own special priest, in this case, Father Mevel. Forest Hill was a good place to reside as the construction work continued up the west side of the Sierras by the time Father Mevel took over, the track laying reached Cisco and was rapidly approaching the summit.

During the first part of 1868 the track laying wound its way down the steep eastern slope of the Sierras and the new town of Truckee came into being. With its start Father Mevel eventually moved his headquarters to Truckee, thus becoming its founding pastor in late 1868.

Bishop O'Connell, a man slow to praise, had this to say about Father Mevel in a letter to All Hallows: "Father Mevel is pastor of the line of railroad along which so many accidents happen almost daily and so many lives are lost. Father Mevel's forte and specialty is to assist the sick and dying at all costs and all hazards. He is presently collecting subscriptions for a church in honor of St Louis."

Might this not have been the first church in Truckee? Unfortunately both Truckee and Reno lost their churches and records in disastrous fires, and so the very early days of both parishes are not so clearly outlined. However, the National Catholic Directory of 1870 informs us that Truckee was a parish. It states: "Truckee and the line of Railroad to Toano: J.M. Mevel, Pastor."

By the winter of 1868 the line had pushed itself half way across the Nevada desert towards the meeting point with the Union Pacific near Ogden. Thus the spring of 1869 found Father Mevel working in the Reno area and eventually establishing another new parish. He definitely was saying Mass in Reno by January 1871.

Eventually he established himself in Reno, for by mid-July 1877 he wrote to Bishop O'Connell from Reno telling him that he had met three Dominican Sisters who were in Reno because of the illness of one of them and he wanted them to remain and open a school. Thus it was through Father Mevel's efforts that the first Dominican Sisters came to Reno, opening their school at Fifth and Lake on September 3, 1877. Shortly afterwards fire consumed Father Mevel's church which seems to have terminated his stay in Reno.

There is evidence that he went to Haiti to offer his services there. Thus twelve years of outstanding priesthood in the Grass Valley Diocese were terminated. History owes it to this priest the credit for founding both the Truckee and the Reno parishes and for giving outstanding service in a unique apostolate.

THE RAILROAD

Few factors caused such revolutionary change to a small western community as the coming of the railroad. Citizens watched the laying of tacks with as much excitement as if it were a circus. The railway station became the focus of civic life, with several trains a day in each direction and a telegraph office from which messages of grave import could circulate throughout the town. Social life usually centered on the railway hotel, usually built across the street from the station by the Union Pacific Company.



From the Diocesan Archives

Workmen Building the Transcontinental Railroad