

STRATTON

In 1960, Most Rev. Bishop D. Feeney appointed me assistant to Father Jos. Allard in Oquossoc, Me., near the border of New Hampshire in the Rangeley District, a region famous for its majestic mountains and its beautiful lakes. The rectory at Oquossoc is not the biggest I know. Father Allard lived there with his housekeeper and her brother, who was sexton. There was only one room left for me.

The good father offered me a little house that had been given to the parish at Stratton, 25 miles east of Oquossoc. Sugarloaf, just seven miles south of Stratton, was beginning to be popular for its excellent ski trails, so I accepted. The house was just 16 x 20 feet small with a lean-to in the back and a glassed-in piazza on two sides. Half of the lean-to was converted into a chapel and the other half into a woodworking shop. There was a garden and beautiful pine trees on the property. It was on Route 27, going from Farmington to the Canadian border, 25 miles away. The little local church was not much more than five minutes' walk from the house. The few Catholic families around there (about 20) did their best to help me. The Morins, the Nadeau, the Pepins, the Poulins, Eddy Ethier, Dieudonne Berube, Roland Pare and Jules Bedard. I owe much to John Tague and Kaye, his beautiful wife. A cousin living in Rangeley, Barney Marquis, adopted me in his beautiful family and was very, very helpful. Within 10 miles from my place I could see three beautiful mountains over 4,000 feet high. Bigelow, Crocker, and Sugarloaf. A little further there were two more, Abraham and Saddleback. There are only nine mountains over 4,000 feet high in Maine and I had four of them in my neighborhood. Flagstaff Lake is very close to town and a few miles north near the Canadian border, we had the chain of lakes at the headwaters of the north branch of the Dead River.

I was about 50 miles from the city of Megantic, P.Q., in the northeast and about 100 miles from Sherbrooke, P.Q., in the northwest. I was 50 miles north of Farmington with its beautiful college, about 75 miles from Waterville, Me., and 65 miles from Rumford to the southwest. I was about 300 miles from Fort Kent, my home town.

The first priest to come in that district as pastor was Father Julius H. Boucher. I met him later on when he was pastor in Chisholm, Me. He told me some of his souvenirs. As he was coming to his new parish on the train, the conductor asked him if he was going hunting. When he told him that he was the new pastor of Oquossoc, the conductor told him with a smile that two weeks before another priest had made the trip with the same idea but went back a few days after. Dear Father Boucher soon learned why. There was no rectory and very few parishioners stayed around after

Labor Day. They were tourists who would come back next Spring. But there were many lumbering camps in the district and the good father asked the Bishop how he could manage to live with so few people. The Bishop told him to visit the lumber camps; They would take care of him until the tourists came back. They sure did; he never forgot their generosity and also the humorous adventures of his life in the woods.

One stormy winter day the clerk looked out and saw a little man coming across Rangeley Lake on snowshoes and a pack on his back. When he asked who was crazy enough to be out on a day like that, the boss looked out and said, "It could only be the pastor of Oquossoc." Somewhere on the slopes of Bigelow Mountain there was a lumber camp that Father Boucher decided to visit. It was winter and there was no tote road but only a snowshoe trail some five miles in. It so happened that at that camp they had found the recipe to make their own drink. Father knew about that so he played a little joke on them. When they saw a stranger walking into camp there were a bit nervous, especially when he told them that he was a government inspector, but before they decided to haul the evidence to the dump by the back door, he threw his coat on the table and told them that he was their priest and that he would appreciate something stronger than coffee to warm his very cold bones. They willingly let him sample their homemade cold medicine.

He also got acquainted with the owner of a tourist camp on Little Black Lake about 20 miles northeast of Stratton. With his customers this gentleman was generous enough to allow Father Boucher to build a chapel in Stratton. I was using this chapel on weekends but on weekdays I said my Mass in my little private chapel. I had electricity and running water. I cooked with gas and burned wood to keep the place warm. On Saturday evening I started the gas furnace at the church and the next morning it was comfortable. But one cold Sunday morning in January, the church was as cold as a barn. I called the man who brought the propane gas and he said that he could do nothing. I mentioned the fact to Dieudonne Berube, an old lumberman, and he told me to pour hot water on the connections of the pipes going from the tanks to the furnace. He said that the trouble was caused by frost gathering in the pipes. I did as he said and we had the furnace going. Father J. Allard stayed in Oquossoc just a year after I came there. His successor was Father Gilbert Patenaude, a strong young priest, officer in the army reserve, wise, zealous and good manager. He stayed seven years in Oquossoc and did much good. He was on the committee who built the chapel at Sugarloaf. In the beginning, Sunday Mass was celebrated in the basement of the Lodge, then in the basement of the future chapel. The members of the committee were a bit too idealistic.

The name of the benefactors of the chapel was kept secret. "DO not let the left hand know what the right hand is giving." On the advice Father Patenaude changed their methods and found the money needed to finish the project. Secret alms-giving is excellent but less than excellent is still very good. The help that business is giving to religion is still very good advertising. In those days there were an average of 2,000 skiers on the slopes and a couple of broken legs every weekend. A group of people bought the north slope of Bigelow Mountain with the intention of developing it for sports. But the project was blocked by the environmentalists. The State bought the land back but I do not think that much has been done to develop it.

I don't know if that is wise. The State does not pay taxes and by taking over, it cuts its revenue. Moreover, wilderness is not for the elderly nor the children except perhaps the Boy Scouts. It is my opinion that the children and the old folks have a right to the peace and cleanliness of nature, of God's country. Those who are happy only when they have it all to themselves seem to suffer a touch of egotism. They miss the pleasure of sharing. It took time but the public has learned how to prevent forest fires. It can learn how to keep God's country clean and peaceful. With all the noise and pollution of our rat race we need a place where it is clean and peaceful; it is essential to our health. The healing woods express a reality. For two or three years when I was at Rockwood I had a camp on the south shore of Brassua Lake. Those who work in paper mills know that some jobs are very noisy and enervating. Well, some of the workers at Scott's Paper Mill in Waterville would come to Brassua Lake for a couple of weeks in the summer. There was much less traffic on Brassua than on Moosehead Lake. It was more quiet and peaceful and that is what they were looking for; that is what they needed.

