In 1836 Mother Duchesne wrote to Mother Barat: “I feel that I am a worn-out instrument, a useless walking stick that is fit only to be hidden in a dark corner....I have never at any time attracted people’s confidence, and the same thing is true here.”

Perhaps it is time to re-consider that self-evaluation in the light of an experience I had on the “Trail of Death” in 1998 with descendants of the tribe which Philippine Duchesne had come to serve.

As a child I had played with my cousins in caves below the bluffs on which the Potawatomi once held their council meetings. In shivery expectation, we half-hoped we would meet their ghosts. Something far more wonderful was to happen later in my life: I was to meet their descendants.

My unexpected adventure began as the result of an invitation in the spring of 1998 to the Midwestern Jesuit Archives in St. Louis, Missouri. The guest speaker was Mrs. Shirley Willard, president of The Fulton County Historical Society in Rochester, Indiana. More than twenty years ago, when Mrs. Willard was teaching grammar school history classes, she noted a single passage in the history text that the children used: “And so the Potawatomi went from Indiana to Kansas.” No mention of the horrors of the journey; no allusion to the cruel injustice of the event that became known as “The Trail of Death.” The teacher turned to research, seeking out the sites at which the tribe had stopped, planning to erect a bronze marker at each one, planning to educate children and adults about a sad part of earlier American history.

In 1838, she learned, 659 Potawatomi left Indiana at gunpoint, by order of the U.S. government, to be re-located in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma – a forced march of more than 600
miles. With them was a young French priest, newly ordained, and a new arrival from France. He pleaded with his bishop to allow him to accompany the tribe, to act as a buffer between the rough soldiers and the weary Indians – men, women, children. In his notes, he recorded the suffering, and his efforts to effect some relief; he reported the burials of some forty children. Adults died, too, subject to typhoid, malaria, dysentery. Once out of their native terrain, they did not always know which fruits, berries, barks were safe to eat or use for medicinal purposes, and where pure water was. Fr. Petit, sharing their misery, also became ill, and was dying when they arrived in Kansas. Though he was not a Jesuit, “the Blackrobes” took him on horseback to the Jesuit infirmary in St. Louis, and cared for him until his death at twenty-seven years of age.

Mrs. Willard and the Potawatomi had organized every five years a commemorative caravan, not only to set up markers of the Trail of Death, but as an educational mission. The afternoon in the Jesuit archives served that purpose. In native Potawatomi dress, Mrs. Willard told how she and the caravan members tried to urge audiences to love and reverence all persons, and were eager to create an understanding of the culture of the Native American. As she finished her presentation, she remarked, “And a few years after their arrival, the Potawatomi met a woman named Philippine, who helped them. I wish I knew more about her.”

After the blessing of the plaque in the patio of the Archives, I promised to send Mrs. Willard Mother Callan’s scholarly study of the life of Philippine Duchesne. In return she sent me an invitation to join the 1998 Trail of Death in September. In preparation, I prayed that I would meet some descendants on the trail whose ancestors had known St. Philippine Duchesne. By way of material preparation, I rented a small tent with the rustic name of “The Bull Frog,” tried to find Sugar Creek on AAA maps (it wasn’t there), and decided to meet the group at Stilwell, Kansas for the installation of a new marker.
What I was looking for was an obscure field, and in the end, it was not the map that guided me, but sound – the sound of muffled drums, beating slowly, slowly, for about twenty minutes. Played by native American university students, they were intended to set the mood, to suggest the slow, heavy, dragging feet of the sick and exhausted Potawatomi walking through these fields. In a circle around the new monument, stood native Americans, school children, nearby farmers and their children, members of the caravan, bus drivers who had brought the children, and our hosts, a young couple who owned the land. They had donated it and had promised to landscape it and care for it, set as it was in the corner of the field below their home.

After Mrs. Willard’s presentation, the wife of a member of the tribe, but not a Potawatomi herself, evoked for us the sights and sounds we would have heard and seen, had we been in the field in 1838: the cry of babies being born, of women weeping, soldiers shouting, horses neighing, carts groaning as they were dragged through the prairie grasses. In 1998, native Indians dancers performed a ritual dance for us, and the children sang, “We’re Standing on Holy Ground.”

Our hosts had provided a lunch for us in the pavilion on their grounds, refusing any remuneration because they wanted to contribute something to the travelers. While we waited for the children to be served first, Mrs. Willard introduced me to Sr. Virginia Pearl OSF as an RSCJ: “You are a Religious of the Sacred Heart? Your are a miracle. God sent you. My great great grandmother, who was a child on the Trail of Death, was taught by Mother Duchesne (“Mother Rose” to the Indians) to sew and to cook. All our lives we have heard from our mothers and grandmothers, the story of the ‘Madames of the Sacred Heart,’ and of Mother Duchesne, and we have always hoped that some would come back would join us on these pilgrimages, but no one
has ever come.” My heart was deeply touched. So this was the reason for the inner voice I had heard when I received the invitation to join the caravan: “You are meant to go on this trek.”

What I learned, little by little, from members of the Pearl family (six brothers and sisters) was that this particular Potawatomi family has never forgotten Philippine Duchesne and her early companions. They told me the story they had not read first in Mother Callan’s book – that the native Americans had called her “the women who always prays,” and that children had dropped leaves on the hem of her habit to see how long she stayed motionless. They knew it first from the mothers of each new generation, who passed on the words and the experience of Teresa Living.

Teresa had been a tiny survivor of the Trail of Death, orphaned en route to Missouri. Perhaps someone carried her when carts broke down, horses died, but she arrive, alive, at Sugar Creek. When Philippine and her first little band arrived in 1841, they took Teresa to live with them and taught her, though they had not yet a boarding school. The tribe had added a new name to Teresa, “Teresa Living,” because she had survived. She learned prayers from Philippine. It is usually said that Mother Duchesne could not learn the language of the tribe, but Fr. Hoecken, SJ had mastered it, and he wrote down simple prayers for her in Potawatomi. Philippine memorized them and taught Teresa in her own language (“Our Father, Hail Mary,” etc.). It is a fact of which all the Pearls are very proud – that they learned prayer in their own language. When she married an Irish trader, Mr. Slevin (or Slavin), Theresa taught her children these prayers. She had eight children, and each passed on the teaching of Teresa, and her gratitude for “Blackrobes,” “Madames of the Sacred Heart,” and “Mother Rose.” When we eventually moved on to St. Mary’s, Kansas, in a long caravan of cars, vans, trucks, recreational vehicles equipped with CB radios (no “smoke signals” for today’s Potawatomi), yet another series of adventures awaited me.
The entire town was celebrating the 150th anniversary of the coming of the Blackrobes and the Religious of the Sacred Heart. A holiday had been proclaimed by the Mayor of St. Mary’s. In the afternoon, there was a parade of about twenty-six floats. I was fortunate enough to be invited to the home of Mrs. Marge Guerich, the eldest of the Pearl family, and a dynamic organizer. When I arrived, her rooms were full of children who were coloring posters and borders and signs; Mrs. Guerich was making mountains of peanut-butter sandwiches to feed the energies of the artists. Suddenly, one of the bedroom doors burst open, and two miniature RSCJ walked out, very sedately, dressed in a home-made replica of the habit, including frilled cap, veil, and side-beads. With them with two small “students,” dressed in nineteenth century crinoline skirts and shawls, and one little boy in short pants and jacket, cap, reminiscent of Oliver Twist and David Copperfield. Several of them belonged to the Pearl family, others were neighbors (also learning about “Mother Rose”). Mrs. Guerich, the grand-mother, had been the vehicle for the “race memory.” A second door flew open, and out walked a solemn, perfectly attired four-foot Jesuit, cassock swinging, biretta fashioned from black construction paper neatly stapled. One of the relatives and his little daughter had built a teepee for the float on which children, caravan guests, friends were to ride through the city.

We hurried down the street to find the number of our float – a long, long flat car from the farm, filled with bales of hay for seats, and featuring a teepee in the middle. The little nuns and their students and the Jesuit sat or stood on bales at one end. The Potawatomi on pilgrimage in bright shirts and head bands, lined the decorated float and waved to the townspeople gathered on the street. Judges meticulously made notes on large pads to determine the prizes. The float was attached to a huge John Deere tractor, competently driven by an eighteen-year-old Pearl girl whose father was a local farmer. School bands accompanied us, small children waited hopefully
for pieces of wrapped candy to be flung in their direction; dogs jumped and barked, and we all called out in Potawatomi, “How-ni-kan!” (‘Hello, friend”). Middle-western America was “on parade,” and the joy was infectious.

Later in the afternoon, we were invited to the Museum, where members of the Historical Society of St. Mary’s served as knowledgeable guides about artifacts, charts and pictures that gave insight in 150 years of history. The lower floor of the Museum had been prepared for a Mass, the altar placed directly under the enormous head of a stuffed bison, glaring balefully at us. The double doors of the museum opened, and Benedictines, Jesuits, secular priests, entered. The curators had thoughtfully prepared treasures from the past for their use: a chalice used by Fr. de Smedt, SJ (not the pioneer Fr. de Smet), a catechism written in Potawatomi by the brilliant linguist, Fr. Hoecken, SJ, and the first prayer book he had written, with the prayers that Teresa Living would have learned from Mother Duchesne; a crucifix, burned almost to the melting point, but still recognizable, on white satin in an archivist’s display box; and most touching, a three-foot white statue of Our Lady. Her eyes are cast down, and the sculptor had made no attempt to simulate eye-balls, so the Potawatomi called her “the Blind Madonna.” They prayed to her “because she could not see their sins.” Once more we sang, “We’re Standing on Holy Ground.” The vice-provincial of the Jesuits spoke of the legacy of the early pioneers, both religious and secular. It was not too difficult to imagine them standing near us in these moments of communion around the altar.

As we left the museum, Sr. Virginia Pearl and her brother Bob took me aside and whispered, “We have something we want to show you.” They drove me high above the city to an isolated and ancient graveyard, above the buildings originally occupied by the Jesuit college there, and for a time, by the Religious of the Sacred Heart after they left Sugar Creek. My guides
stopped before the grave of Teresa Living Slevin, surrounded by plaques bearing the names of her eight children. Here, I asked them to teach me to pray, native American fashion: to the East, the symbol of new beginnings; to the West, symbol of harmony and peaceful endings; to the South, place of warmth and maturation; to the North, where we prayed for “the wisdom of our ancestors.” Afterward, we sprinkled the grave with tobacco leaves cut into small pieces (the peace pipe once had been outlawed by the government in its effort to destroy Indian culture; tobacco was then substituted for ritual use).

Quietly, they said to me, “And now, we will take you to your people.” We walked to the other side of the small cemetery, and there, high on the hill, was the monument marking the graves of the seven RSCJ from pioneer days: Mother Mathevon and some of Philippine’s colleagues in the New World. I felt a deep gratitude to these women for their courageous lives. If I had quite unknowingly brought two Potawatomi back to them, they had prepared my re-discovery of the Potawatomi people in the twentieth century. Again, we prayed, silently, in the four directions, and sprinkled tobacco around the monument. “How-ni-kan, dear sisters.”

The evening entertainment was once more the work of Mrs. Guerich, who had organized the Knights of Columbus and their wives to prepare a splendid commemorative dinner for us. A folder at each place indicated that the celebration was for the “coming of the Black Robes and the RSCJ” 150 years ago – and it featured a copy of a painting of Mother Duchesne. On a center table was the astonishing work of a baker: a recreation in chocolate of the first little church built by the Jesuits: logs made of rolled chocolate, spire crafted from stiff white frosting. Beside the pastry lay an old photograph of the original. The two-foot replica beside it was perfect. A Jesuit read from Fr. Petit’s journal for the “Grace before Meals,” and ended the evening after dinner with another selection from the journal of this valiant young priest.
There were memorable experiences at Sugar Creek as well. Sugar Creek is basically two farmers’ fields; it has few amenities – just the “felt presence” of those who lived there in the 1800’s. Imagine a moonlit night. A local parish group had supplied dinner (transporting all that was necessary to cook; there are no kitchen facilities there, no electricity). Present: members of the caravan, a local confirmation class, and their teachers. Location: the tiny “trading post” built by Fr. Poole in recent years. On its veranda sat the confirmation class. On the grass, in lawn chairs or on cushions sat the other guests. Mrs. Willard made her thoughtful presentation, then asked members of the caravan who were direct descendants to tell a little of their experience as Potawatomi, and as travelers on the caravan. Sr. Virginia Pearl rose to say that there was a Religious of the Sacred Heart present, and she would tell a story of Mother Duchesne at Sugar Creek, and would they please mime it as she spoke? “Do what her words suggest to you.” The most familiar and simple story was of the Potawatomi admiration of the woman who prays always, so I launched into a description of the way that the children tested her. Sr. Pearl quietly, in Indian dress, knelt before me and held her hands folded in prayer. Slowly, one by one, children jumped down from the porch, searched for leaves and pebbles, and as I spoke, put them on the hem of Sister’s Indian skirt. This vision, under a full moon, in the silence of the country, with a genuine Potawatomi before me acting the part of Philippine, and children imitating their earlier counterparts, was almost too much to bear in its simple beauty – in that place, at that time. I grew cold. Sr. Virginia brought me an Indian shawl and put it round me, saying: “We are taking you into the tribe.”

There is a custom observed on the caravan. On the final night, all gather round a great bonfire and discuss what they have experienced on the caravan, make suggestions for improvements for another year, express thanks to the organizers of each event. But on our last
night, a heavy rain fell. So one of the Pearl brothers invited us to his home, and in a large parlor, lighted only by a triangular candle, Mrs. Willard initiated the discussion. What had the pilgrimage meant to us? I awaited the moment to thank them for a memorable experience. I had felt so at home with them (they had taken me into their homes each night – I never saw the inside of The Bull Frog). I felt protected and safe, noting that they never deserted anybody with car trouble, illness, or some momentary problem. The caravan waited patiently until the problem was settled. No one was “abandoned.” And I was grateful to them for what they had shared of the joys and sorrows of their lives, of their tribe. Bob Pearl spoke from the shadows across the room: “All my life I have wanted to meet a Religious of the Sacred Heart, because our Mother spoke of them so much, but our paths never crossed. And now you have come to us and we are grateful that you joined us. You have been a spiritual presence among us.” I felt very small and wondered if we had ever done enough for these people who had kept our memory alive for decades without actual contact with us. Yes, there was the canonization – but those chosen to represent the tribe had no direct knowledge of Philippine, had not lived at Sugar Creek. There were no Pearls there.

I tried to make up for this by responding at once when they made a request for tickets to the Papal Mass. With help, I was able to find enough to invite seven Potawatomi and to invite them to live in our guest cottage at Villa Duchesne. On another moonlit night: we waited at 2:30 a.m. in the parking lot of a nearby college for great yellow school buses – another colorful caravan – which took hundreds down to the doors of the TWA dome.

“May we wear our native dress?” I answered that the Pope was their Chief, and they were honoring him. So at the moment of his appearance on the floor of the arena in his Pope mobile, I looked down the row. They had taken off their coats, and there were the bright shirts, shawls, head-bands of these people who have been faithful to the Church for 150 years. I wish John Paul
II could have met them. They have educated their children well, in many professions, and as good parents. They have loved the land and cared for it, though times are hard for the farmer. They have close family life, and they treasure their traditions and their memories. They have kept the Faith.

In 1999, when a large group of RSCJ celebrated a Golden Jubilee, I among them, I invited them all to Sugar Creek and St. Mary’s. The story has been told elsewhere, but the one (mental) photograph I have is this: On the morning that our van left St. Mary’s for Sugar Creek, Mrs. Guerich and Sr. Virginia Pearl asked the driver to stop briefly at the 150 year old Church near her home. She and Virginia are Eucharistic ministers, and there, they gave us Holy Communion before we left on this last part of our pilgrimage. We made our Thanksgiving en route to Sugar Creek.

I recalled Philippine’s descriptions of the Potawatomi sent to Mother Barat: “they remind me of the first Christians.” And today they are the same.

No, Mother Duchesne was not a “worn-out instrument, a useless walking stick that is fit only to be hidden in a dark corner…..” She was a shining light in the life of an orphan who “remembered” her and passed her memories on to later generations of her family. She could not learn Potawatomi language but they learned hers: the language of hard work, love, kindness, generosity, fidelity. She did win hearts. She “attracted the confidence” of the Potawatomi. Her spiritual descendants of Sugar Creek days will take her lessons to the four directions of the world, having “drawn wisdom from the ancestors.”

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