

# Father Putman: Missionary in South Seas

By Larry Martin

Picture a group of seven tropical islands, or more specifically, coral atolls, each approximately the size of the town of Milton, with populations of less than 200 Polynesian tribesmen each.

On the islands, there is no electricity, no citrus fruit, little lumber, few tools, not even topsoil.

If you were asked to introduce the "white" person's way of life to these islanders, having to somehow visit all seven islands without a boat of your own, and meeting problems at every advance, you would be in the position taken by Father Ostaaf Putman, a member of the Fathers of Sacred Hearts. He visited Milton last week to see his sister, Mrs. W. J. Norrington of R. R. 6, Milton.

Father Putman lived with the Tahitians as a missionary of the Roman Catholic faith before beginning similar work in Hawaii five years ago.

Along with his duties of spreading the Christian teachings, he attempted to manufacture topsoil for the barren coral atolls by creating compost from coconut leaves and packing it into drainage ditches. The islanders' disinterest in this venture, however, led to its failure.

Mr. Putman could visit each of his seven islands only once every 18 months, and often the Polynesians would slide in the direction of their former methods of living.

"I once read in an American magazine feature that on certain islands, the sorcerer (witch doc-

tor) would again assume control as soon as the missionary left," he reported. "By the description of the island and the sorcerer, I knew it was my islands."

Living conditions as Father Putman found them on the atolls were less than sanitary. Families not fortunate enough to have grass huts simply squatted under a tree.

Because the atolls are only four or five feet above sea level, the natives acquired their drinking water by scooping into the ground with their hands until they struck water, then ladled it out with their hands.

"They are a very gay people," said Father Putman. "If a child, even five or six years old is hungry, he is pointed in the direction of the ocean and told to get his own. The child will then spear a fish and eat it immediately, unscaled, uncleaned and uncooked."

The adults adopt somewhat the same tactics in their cuisine.

Because of the infertile land, there is no citrus fruit to be found on the islands. One family in ten supports a pig! However, it is considered more of a pet than a potential meal. There is also the occasional dog to be found.

Any change from the coconuts and fish diet is provided by European ships.

When the historic raft "Kon-Tiki" broke up on one of the reefs near the island, jubilant islanders were still finding K-rations three years later.

Father Putman was amused at the large supply of food the "Kon-Tiki" crew was carrying.

Other food situations, however, are not so humorous.

On one occasion when the missionary requested food from the galley of a visiting ship, he was presented with a total of about 30 ounces.

"Two cans of sweet peas," he recalled, smiling, "to last six months."

Mail and delivery service is pathetically slow in the south seas. Waiting periods of six months are common, even for badly needed drugs. A newspaper may appear three years after publication.

When Father Putman first left his native Belgium for missionary work in the islands, his friends scoffed when they saw the hammer and saw he was planning to take along.

He was told he would easily acquire such articles when he got there, so he left the tools behind and packed a few extra books. Because of this, he attempted building projects for nearly three years without the rudimentary equipment.

When supplies did arrive, the small boat was swamped while shooting the reef and the tools, along with a number of kitchen utensils and books, ended up on the bottom of the sea.

The following day, native divers recovered most of them, but a careful fresh water bath was necessary to prevent rust from the salty water.

Natural disasters are always imminent in the islands, too, since they are in the region of referred to his seven atoll circling typhoons.

One serious storm struck on

April 1, observed there, as in Canada, as "April Fool's Day."

When the French governor and his staff were told of the mishap, they assumed it was a joke, and not until a delegation of natives visited the governor in person did he realize the seriousness of the event and sent some help to the stricken island.

Diseases are numerous and common in the islands. Among the more serious are lung diseases, pneumonia, pleurisy, leprosy and elephantitis.

Although Father Putman often treated 40 or 50 patients in one morning, he never contracted one of the germs. Drugs are hard to come by and commercial aspirin is a popular commodity.

Trading between the islanders and visiting ships is frequent, but the unsuspecting natives are often fleeced.

Among the prices Mr. Putman quoted was the astronomical cost of one dollar for a single American tailor-made cigarette.

A fountain pen sells for \$40. Sailors' dishonesty enough to do it can make their fortunes selling a concoction consisting of one-half inch of whisky and the rest of a pop bottle of sea water. This "luxury" costs \$30 per bottle.

In view of these inflated price tags, one would assume a product such as aqua-lung tanks would be out of reach of the islanders, but they apparently aren't. The Polynesians, traditionally divers for pearls, have updated their methods and profits by using this mechanical apparatus.

With or without the tanks, the divers are accustomed to diving 42 fathoms (over 250 feet) regularly. Bends and ear pressure diseases are thus added to the islands' grim toll of discomforts.

Father Putman, upon arrival at the islands, found the natives using coconut leaves for clothing. He introduced cloth and with it, instruction in dress-making.

Throughout his conversation with a Champion reporter, he cut as the "forgotten islands."

The reason for this is the disinterest shown by the French government in the district.

When France ignited her atom bomb recently, one of the tiny islands was commandeered for the army officers attending the blast. Electricity was installed, solid buildings erected and these were left standing when the army moved on.

This is still rather a minute range for a regime lasting over 100 years, however.

The islanders find amusement in a number of traditional ways, including music, dice and a game resembling checkers.

When a small piano was presented to Father Putman for use on the islands, the natives were able to play it with ease after getting accustomed to the note positioning. Attempts by white men to introduce note-reading were met with disinterest.

Father Putman reports the island music is very low-pitched and "smooth".

The island missionary is not always met with kindness by the Polynesians. Investigating the disappearance of a worker in the islands, police are usually told that he "was killed by sharks." The priest himself was nearly attacked by three angry tribesmen one night, but managed to avoid injury.

Cannibalism was present up to the late 19th century and one island population decreased from 6,000 to 100 people in 150 years. The cause of this rapid population decline is still debated, but two strong suspects are a cannibalistic war and tuberculosis.

Islanders married at 14 or 15 years of age before the arrival of the missionary, but their new respect for the Roman Catholic church gave Father Putman the control to persuade them to wait at least a year or two more.

Although changes have come about, due largely to the busy priest's patient work, the lack of support for these missionaries, the ignorance or disinterest in their late by the mother government and unbelievable primitivity of the people, will make the islands remain as they are for a long time yet.

Father Putman also lamented that since the introduction of television and other Americanizations to Hawaii, many of the younger islanders, the ones who

could foster improvement and help with the hard work, are leaving their atolls for the glamorous "white man's life".

Their parents and island bound friends, however, will long be a people who refer to trans-oceanic liners as "fire-ships"; spit chewed-up food into their babies' mouths; pay \$30 for a few ounces of unrecognizable "liquor"; and find their amusement in hand-made dice and April-fooling the French governor.

The Milton visitor was born in Flemish Belgium and has mastered seven languages including Flemish, French, English, Tahitian, German and Congolese.

He did missionary work in the Congo just prior to Lumumba's decree that white people should be fed to the alligators. Five years ago, he visited his sister and brother-in-law here on his way to Hawaii, and this visit is included in a three month vacation from his Hawaiian work.

Rev. Putman planned to spend a couple of days touring Montreal following his departure

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from the Milton area and will then travel to his native Belgium.

He states that his work in the 50th state is much easier than the island work because of as-

sistance from electricity and comparatively nearby cities, as well as an automobile.

Father Putman also has a twin brother doing mission work in the south seas.

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VISITING HIS SISTER, Mrs. W. J. Norrington, of R.R. 6, Milton, Father Ostaaf Putman, missionary to Hawaii, is shown holding a model boat made from the bark of a coconut tree and studded with a collection of native gems

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