FATHER ANTHONY RAVALLI, S.J. (1812-1884)
"A ZEALOUS MISSIONARY AND CHARITABLE PHYSICIAN"

The Montana legislature created Ravalli County to encompass the Bitterroot Valley in 1893. These lush agricultural lands took the name of Father Anthony Ravalli, S.J.--long a spiritual stalwart at St. Mary's Mission in Stevensville.

Born in Ferrara, Italy, in 1812, Ravalli entered the Society of Jesus at the age of fifteen. He prepared for his missionary work by studying medicine and surgery, as well as painting, sculpture, mathematics, mechanics, theology, and the full array of liberal arts. Father Pierre Jean DeSmet recruited him for missionary work among the Rocky Mountains Indians in 1844, and the young man took his final vows at that time.

Father Ravalli arrived at St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley in mid-summer 1845. Here he developed the church's agricultural program and built Montana's first grist mill and first sawmill. The priest also became proficient in the Salish language so he could minister to the local natives. He enthusiastically embraced the missionary life with all of its hardships and deprivations.

Father Ravalli soon created a regional reputation based on his skill and resourcefulness as a craftsman, a physician, and a pharmacist. His ability to fashion instruments and tools from scrap material became legendary. His artistic and mechanical expertise repeatedly proved valuable on the frontier.

When St. Mary's Mission closed in 1850, Father Ravalli accepted a series of posts in Idaho, Washington, California, and then back in Montana. He returned to St. Mary's with its reestablishment in 1866 and remained there for the rest of his life.

Father Ravalli was tall, portly, with a commanding presence. He carried a cheerful demeanor and was quick of wit--an engaging storyteller. His compassion for natives and white settlers alike made him welcome wherever he traveled in Montana Territory. Ravalli's extant statuary creations in Northwest churches attest to his skill as an artisan and a craftsman.

The priest never refused a call for medical or spiritual help, regardless of how far from the mission it originated. Father Ravalli became a fabled figure, riding his Indian pony through the countryside to assist the sick, the wounded, the injured, and the dying.

Anthony Ravalli died in 1884--after four years of illness that slowed his pace but never dampened his zeal. His remains were placed in the St. Mary's cemetery, among the Indians with whom he had worked for forty years. His selfless dedication to service speaks volumes about this healer of souls and bodies.

Father Ravalli became a beloved Montana icon through a lifetime of devotion and humanitarianism: "He loved with a warm heart."