THE SOCIETY OF JESUS - an organization of Catholic men commonly known as Jesuits - ordered Father Peter De Smet to go west in 1840 to evaluate the Oregon Country as a possible new missionary field. Three times during the 1830s the Missouri vice-province of the society had received appeals for missionaries from Rocky Mountain tribes, most notably the Flat-heads, but the Jesuits were slow to react. In the report following his first journey to the Pacific Northwest, De Smet urged his superiors to make up for lost time and immediately establish a mission in the Oregon Country lest Methodists like Jason and Daniel Lee convert all the Indians. Accordingly, in 1841 De Smet, assisted by five other Jesuits, returned to the Oregon Country where he established St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley not far from present-day Missoula, Montana. Back in St. Louis again in October 1842, De Smet presented a bold plan to his superiors. He must go to Europe, and there, in a suitable Catholic environment, he would raise money and recruit men for the Rocky Mountain mission.

The outpouring of interest in the Indian missions that De Smet received on the Continent during 1843 quite amazed him. Not only did he raise 145,000 francs (approximately $26,500) in cash and supplies, a princely sum for those days, he also received an audience with Pope Gregory XVI, enlisted eight Jesuit volunteers to the missions, and persuaded six Sisters of Notre Dame du Namur to establish a convent and school in the Oregon Country.

Inasmuch as his authority now extended over numerous persons and several tons of supplies, De Smet decided it would be more economical to charter a ship directly to Fort Vancouver than to cross the Atlantic Ocean and then make an exhausting overland voyage from New York to the Three Forks of the Missouri River. The captain of the brig Infatigable agreed to make the two-ocean voyage to the Columbia River for 18,000 francs ($3,300) as long as he could take along additional paying passengers and supplies; De Smet agreed.

The Infatigable surged into the billowing, stormy North Sea on January 9, 1844, wrote De Smet, "like a spirited steed released after long being held in check." The ship shuddered, pitched and rolled so continuously that before long De Smet's entire cadre lay incapacitated with seasickness. De Smet likened one of his priests to a green parrot, "clawing at benches, chairs, and the shoulders of passengers" as he made his way to the upper deck where he could, with relief, pay his tribute to King Neptune. The Atlantic
Ocean, like the North Sea, remained tempestuous all the way to Cape Horn, the most southerly tip of South America, much to the regret of De Smet and his associates.

Foul weather continued even when the ship had passed into the currents of the Pacific Ocean. For days on end gale-force winds pushed against the vessel with mast-bending force, severely testing the skill of the captain, the courage of the passengers, and the obedience of the crew. "The waves rose in pyramids around us, and masses of water torn off by the fury of the wind were hurled upon us in floods and filled the deck with foam," De Smet recorded in his journal; "The peril was great." As an afterthought he commented, "A tempest is truly a sublime spectacle: the description is infinitely more agreeable than the reality. If there had been less of the frightful about it, probably I should have enjoyed it more." Happily, the danger diminished as the ship proceeded up the coast of South America, and during the first weeks of April the captain even permitted landings in Chile and Peru. After Lima, however, the captain set a course directly for the Columbia River, a destination he reached on July 28.

Sighting the Oregon Coast after seven long months at sea greatly cheered the passengers. Within a short time, however, all joy on board the lnfatigable turned to despair. In order to enter the estuary of the Columbia River the ship would have to pass over the churning tides of the Columbia River bar, "the seven-fanged horror of the Pacific," as some mariners called it, and the captain of the lnfatigable now confessed that he had been unable to obtain a chart of the Columbia River before his' departure from Antwerp. He therefore knew nothing specific about the entrance to the river. The sailors on board knew by heart the names of the ships that had wrecked on the treacherous bar at the mouth of the river, not the least being the Peacock, Captain Charles Wilkes's flagship for the United States Exploring Expedition. After the Peacock ran aground in July 1841, Wilkes surveyed the entire length of the bar in another ship, reporting depths as shallow as 25 feet on one end and as deep as 78 feet on the other. Without a chart, the captain of the lnfatigable did not know which end of the bar to skirt, north or south, in order to reach the estuary.

AFTER STUDYING THE ROCKY shoreline from a distance, the captain steered his vessel out to the open sea to spend the night. That evening De Smet paced the deck alone praying the rosary. Several times he stopped and peered across the open water to Cape Disappointment, wondering about the wisps of smoke he saw arising from campfires on shore. "This sight filled my soul with indescribable emotions," he mused in a moment of deep introspection.

It would be necessary to be placed in the same position, to understand fully what were then our feelings. Our hearts palpitated with joy as we gazed on those boundless regions, over which were scattered so many abandoned souls, the young, the aged, dying in the shades of infidelity, for want of missionaries; an evil we were about to alleviate, if not for all, at least for a great number.

ABOUT TEN O’CLOCK the next morning the captain decided to approach the bar. Enormous breakers made him rethink the idea. About that time several passengers on the middle deck observed a demonstration of the distant northern shore; it appeared to be several men firing rifles. This alarmed the crew, and the captain, too, so he tacked about and spent the night in the less threatening open sea. On the morning of the third day the captain brought the lnfatigable around again, this time hoping to estimate the depth of the water across the bar by calculating the velocity of the breakers. The captain himself took station at the topmast, but regrettably he could see nothing upon which a sound judgment could be made.

"But just then, when everything seemed desperate," De Smet recalled, "a ship was espied in the distance, in Baker's Bay, making towards Cape Disappointment, and hope sprang up again at once in all hearts. 'Let us see how they come out, then we can go in by the same way,' was the unanimous expression." For an hour the possibility seemed real, as the captain followed the ketch with his spyglass. Then the vessel suddenly dropped out of sight. Next the captain sent the ship’s second officer and four volunteers to reconnoiter the
mouth of the river in a small boat. The bobbing craft disappeared as it approached the bar and did not return to the ship that night.

July 31, Saint Ignatius's feast day in the calendar of the Society of Jesus, dawned bright and clear on a calm ocean. Twenty-one years earlier De Smet, then a mere scholastic, had celebrated the feast day of his society's founder by ceremoniously scooping a spade full of dirt from the foundation of Saint Stanislaus novitiate in Florissant, Missouri; this day he and his fellow priests prayed five Masses, asking their patron to grant them safe passage across the Columbia River bar. After Mass most everyone scanned the waves looking for the dory carrying the second officer. When it finally appeared in the distance, "Our hearts beat hard; all were divided between hope and fear," De Smet confided, "All awaited uneasily the word which was about to decide our fate." The mate reported that close to midnight he found the passage; it seemed to have at least five fathoms of water and no other obstacles. The captain only needed a moment to digest the news before deciding to make a run at crossing the bar. He knew that sometimes ships sat off the Columbia River for a month waiting for a suitable opportunity to cross and this might be his best chance.

Taking command of the tiller, the captain unfurled all the sails and piloted the Infatigable directly toward the vortex of crashing waves. A serious attitude gripped the crew and passengers on the swaying ship, most of whom stationed themselves at the rail of the forward deck; the sisters, however retired below to pray. As the Infatigable lurched toward the point of no return, the waves crashing on the reef parted to reveal two clear channels in the brownish green water, one veering to the north toward Cape Disappointment, and the other easing toward the opposite shoreline in the direction of Clatsop Spit. The captain instructed his navigator to set a course for the southern shore.

De Smet remembered the next few moments in intimate detail for the rest of his life. A sailor tied himself to the outside of the vessel and began to measure the water's depth by casting a lead weight at the end of a line. The sounders had several times reported seven fathoms. Soon six fathoms was heard, after that five then four and one half, presently four, and so it went, always growing less. Each cry was a shock that oppressed our hearts, and at the repeated cry of three fathoms all countenances were visibly discomposed, for that was the vessel's minimum draft; several of us thought that it was all over, that the ship was about to strike. Soon the cry of four fathoms caused something of a revival of joy. But of the five miles of the bar we had as yet made only three. Suddenly a cry of 'three fathoms' plunged us again into consternation at the cry of two and one-half fathoms I felt, as it were, annihilated. I expected to see the anchor let go, and then a mild scramble for the boats.

But neither the anchor nor the lifeboats let go from the Infatigable, and the captain held his course. The next cast of the lead showed four fathoms, then five, and from that moment on the depth of the water beneath the Infatigable increased at every plunge until the cry of "no bottom" allayed all fears on board. Steadily the ship made its way into the wide, protected estuary of the Columbia River and set its anchor in Youngs Bay.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, while the passengers and crew celebrated their triumph, a canoe carrying a dozen Clatsop Indians and a white man pulled alongside the Infatigable and requested permission to come aboard. Using sign language, the Indians told the ship's officers that no previous ship had crossed the bar using the uncharted southern channel. James Birnie, superintendent of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Astoria, clarified the matter. When the Indians alerted him to the presence of a ship offshore, he said, he crossed the estuary to Cape Disappointment and attempted to illuminate the proper side by using fires, flags and guns; but apparently the Infatigable chose to ignore his advice. To the contrary, De Smet hastened to explain, "We had indeed observed all these signals, but sea-faring makes people suspicious; it was feared that it was some ambush of the Indians, desirous of capturing the vessel," and therefore the captain favored the
southern side. While the captain believed that luck carried his ship across the untested side of the Columbia River bar, De Smet was sure that Saint Ignatius had guided the ship to the estuary with divine power.

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