



# chez nous

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*La société canadienne-française*

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## FATHER GOIFFON LOSES HIS LEG

(Editors Note)

This is the fourth in a series of memories of Father Joseph Goiffon, pioneer priest in the Diocese of St. Paul.

Father Goiffon had a certain amount of notoriety because for almost 50 years of his priesthood he was an amputee. In this excerpt he talks about how he came to lose his leg in St. Boniface, Manitoba on November of 1860.

A hint before reading: Those who lived through the Halloween blizzard of 1991, will identify immediately with Father Goiffon.

A note on geography. Father Goiffon talks about the Salt River of Dakota as where his misadventure occurred. On a map of present day North Dakota find the Salt (now named the Forest) River where it flows into the Red River north of Grand Forks.

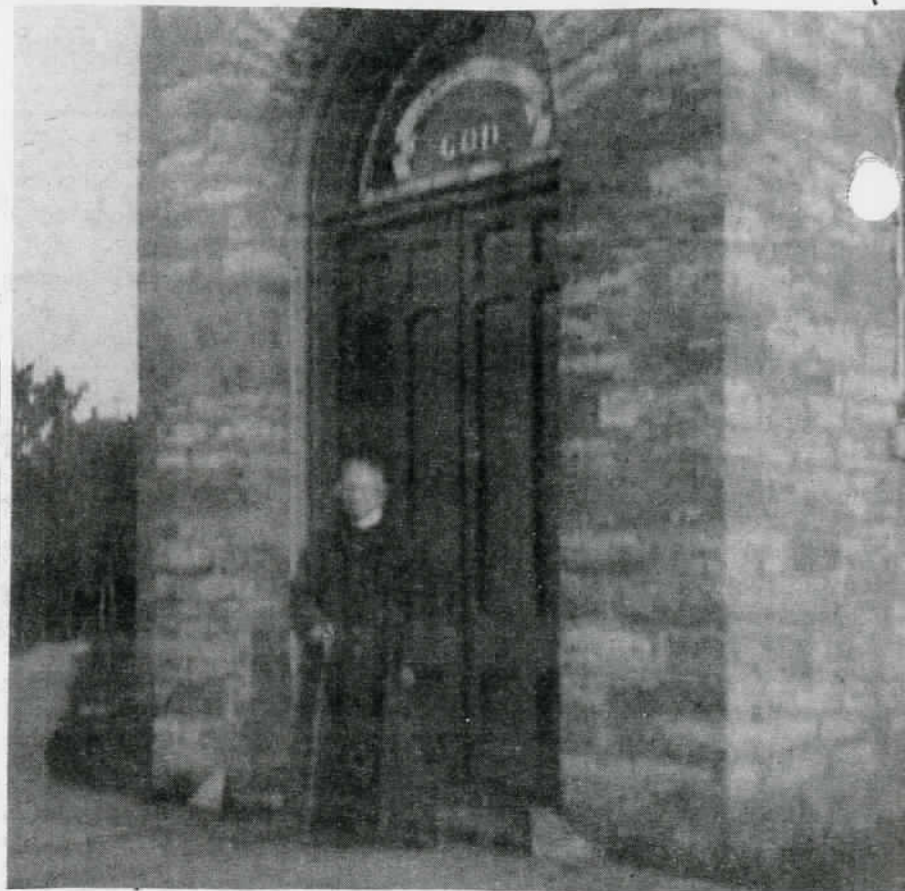
You are now oriented.

Enjoy.

I wanted to get to St. Joseph with my wagons to have them unloaded, so I consented to go ahead; this was on a Tuesday. I figured to make the trip in four days. I started on my best horse, a beautiful animal, American stock, four years old. The first three days everything went fine. The first evening I arrived at a point in the big woods where I perceived a flickering light, like the one of a candle; I went towards it and it was a small fire to drive away the mosquitoes, made by one of my Metis who was lying there in the leaves. I spent the night with him. The next day, again towards evening, I reached the grand forks which then was only a large prairie. There on the shore of the river, beside a table made of boards, I met a Metis, Francois Demarais. We spent the night as usual, lying side by side on the ground beside our table. The next day was the feast of All Saints, it was beautiful weather, almost too warm to travel, but I arrived at last about 9 o'clock at night to the camp of the Metis of Red River, who had left us at St. Paul, carrying our tent. It was their fault that I froze later on. I passed the night with them.

The next morning, November 2, 1860 after a light breakfast, quickly disposed of, as all of us were very low on provisions, and we had very little to eat. It was about 7 o'clock in the morning and each one began to hitch up. As I had but a horse, I was alone first. It was at Little Salt River that I felt the fall of a little warm rain. I asked how much farther we had to go to reach Pimbina; they told me about 40 miles. About ten miles from here, they told me, you will find a small river known as the Big Salt River, and then a prairie for 30 miles. Well I said, as it has started to rain, if the weather turns bad, I will wait for you in the little point of the woods. The rain continued and I stopped at the little river, as agreed, and I waited the whole day





Fr. Goiffon at St. Peter's Church, Mendota MN  
The photo, from the Minneapolis-St. Paul Archdiocese archives, is undated. Fr. Goiffon died in 1910

but nobody came. Towards night, there came from another direction, a young Englishman, who was coming to meet his uncle, whose oxen were tired. The young man had two oxen. He asked me for news of his uncle and I replied that when I left him, that morning, his uncle's oxen did not show signs of being exhausted and I was expecting them all that very evening. I urged him to spend the night with me, as he would have to travel 10 miles more to arrive where I had left them, and that in traveling at night, he would lose himself in the prairie. He thanked me saying that he was too worried about his uncle, asked me about the road, which I explained as well as I could and he left. I wanted to avoid trouble for him, and possibly save his life, as it was this same young man whom God had chosen eight days later to pull me out of the snow where I would otherwise have perished.

The light rain of November 2, changed to snow and in the morning there was an inch of snow on the ground, blown by violent wind from the northwest. I made a little shelter in the woods where I would remain until the storm passed, but God did not so will it. It was Saturday and I wanted to be in Pimbina, to say the Mass on Sunday. Besides, my horse, who the day before, had eaten nothing but a little dried hay that I had cut with my pocketknife, in little spots where the prairie fires had not reached, would have starved. As for myself, I saw no way to procure wood for a fire, as I had no axe and my provisions were exhausted. All these considerations urged me, in spite of my better judgement, to brave the bad weather and try to finish my journey.

I climbed the hill and reached the edge of the prairie, my horse refused to face the tempest, so I came back down towards the river. However, some incomprehensible impulse urged me to try again to cross the prairie. I made a new attempt and this time succeeded in entering the prairie. I had not made two miles when I perceived that I would have great difficulties in facing this bad weather. This prairie of 30 or 40 miles, where I had never passed before, where all wagon tracks had been obliterated by the snow, was like a vast desert. I could not hope to find feed for my horse, who



had so little to eat the day before, as the fire that had passed just before the snow had burned all. So, I thought of turning back, but the same impulse which urged me to start, coaxed me to keep on and I obeyed it. //

So I traveled just until evening, not suffering much with the cold, sometimes riding sometimes walking. At night-fall I dismounted to walk, as usual, by my horse, holding him by the bridle, but he would not follow me. "Well I said, you are tired and I myself am tired, we will sleep here." I knew I was on the summer road by some blades of grass which pierced the snow, and being in line, indicated there were clumps of grass that have been saved from the fire by the wagon tracks. I also knew that traveling all night I could lose my direction without the hope of finding it again.

God must certainly have robbed me of reason, I covered my horse the night before but the idea never occurred to me to cover him on the prairie. I merely contented myself to attach a rope to his neck, leaving him loose, and set myself to burrowing in the snow where I could pass the night. I found water under the snow, but it did not occur to me that we were in the swamp. I thought that as it had rained all the day before, it was natural that there was water all over. I placed my saddle on the snow, to serve as a seat and a bed and for four days and four nights, my only cover was a buffalo robe. Exhausted from my trip, I soon fell asleep and was covered with snow.

It was late the next morning when I awoke. My first care was to dig myself out of the snow which had accumulated on my robe and to look for my poor horse. There he was standing on the same spot where I had left him the night before. He had merely turned his back to the storm. I looked for my whip and my large French hat which I had beside me when I retired; useless trouble, they had disappeared under the snow and I tried to dig them out with my hands. I only succeeded in hurting my knuckles, the marks of which I still bear.

The storm had not ceased, and being wet with sweat, caused by the snow that covered me, I thought it best to wait for better weather to continue my journey. It was cold, and I had no mittens, I crouched again, like a porcupine, under my robe and was soon covered with snow same as the day before, and slept, not waking as I recall, until the next day, or late that night. I looked and the poor beast was lying on the ground frozen. Having nothing more to do than to take care of myself and because the storm was still raging, I crawled under my buffalo robe and slept again. Not waking until afternoon, I perceived, in removing the snow that was covering me, that the storm had passed and the weather was fine. It was about two hours before sunset,

I made a bundle of what I thought I could carry, figuring that before night I could reach a clump of woods, that I imagined I could discover in the distance. But, when I tried to get up, I found that my legs could no longer carry me. I was frozen. But God, who is always good to His missionaries, did not permit me to suspect that I was frozen, as if I had such a thought, I would have begun to rub my feet with snow to thaw them out, and I would have died, unable under such circumstances to endure the pain that I would have suffered thawing them out. Unable to walk without suffering, I waited until Providence sent someone to help me, and I remained quietly under my robe.

Awaking the next morning, Tuesday, I succeeded in disengaging my buffalo robe from under the snow. The weather had turned so cold that my robe, wet with perspiration from my body, froze all at once, stiff as the bark on a tree, leaving openings all around which permitted the snow and cold to enter. I had thought myself safe so far, but seeing that there was no longer shelter for me, I decided that the end had come, and recalling that while in St. Paul, I was given money for 24 Masses, I searched my pocket for a pencil to make a note in my breviary to the effect that when I was found, those Masses would be said as marked in my book. Nevertheless, unable to find a pencil, I could not mark anything and had to leave the care of these Masses in the hands of God. Remembering the devotion of my Metis, who in their hard circumstances promised Masses for the souls in purgatory, I promised 32 Masses for the souls in purgatory if I was ever able to say them, and went to sleep.

The next morning shaking the burden of snow and seeing the day, I was surprised



to wake up again in this world. Then remembering a person who was devoted to me, had told me that another person of prominence, had mentioned that I would die without the sacraments, I said to the good God, imploring Him that I did not wish to die here because I had tried to defend the laws of the church and do His work and that if I died here the error would prevail over right, so I did double the number of the promised Masses for the souls of purgatory, engaging myself to say 68 Masses, 60 low Masses and 8 high Masses, if I could only arrive at my mission and say them. I then sent my guardian angel to find me someone for tomorrow, for I told him I did not wish to remain here any longer. I believe I fell asleep again. In the afternoon of Wednesday, I dragged myself with my buffalo robe towards my horse frozen in the snow. My intention was to open my horse, take several of his ribs and plant them in the snow and in some way to help hold up the buffalo robe, thus making a little shelter where I could breathe a little good air, because that which tired me the most when I was not sleeping was to be without a hat. It meant that I had to have that buffalo robe constantly against my face and I had no chance to breathe. Having but a small pocket knife, I saw at once that it was impossible to open my horse. I tried to dig in along side of him that his body might protect me from the northwest wind. Useless trouble again! The snow had become hard as ice; unable to protect myself against the wind. I thought of eating; I made an opening in the horse, in the part most exposed to the cold. The meat was frozen, it was flat and without taste. I made another opening in another place where the meat was not frozen, taken from under the skin, a fine large piece of lean meat, and holding it in my left hand, and seizing it, after the manner of the savages, on the other end with my teeth, I cut it with the aid of my small knife in long strips like you would do with frogs, and was able to swallow some pieces with great pleasure. I cannot recall of having ever eaten better meat, so I did it justice and left but a small piece, which I ate the next morning when I awoke.

After eating a good supper, and no longer having my saddle, I sat myself on the snow close to my horse, covering myself with my robe; I was slow to get to sleep. When I awoke in the morning, I ate under my robe the small piece of meat left from the day before. I was afraid to raise my buffalo robe to see if my guardian angel had accomplished the task that I had asked of him. He had been faithful. I saw about a mile from me, a man or a youth, with his two oxen. I started calling, but the more I cried, the farther he went with his oxen. Then I thought I was closer to Pimbina than I had imagined and, as this was the first snow of the season, that it was probably a young Metis who had come to look for his animals and bring them home, and that my cries had frightened him and made him run away. With this thought, I mixed words with my cries, asking for help, saying that I was frozen and demanding that he go for Joe Rolette to tell him that I was frozen, begging him to send a dog train to bring me to Pimbina. It was useless. My young man seemed to be going farther and farther away from me. I was wrong however, it was my sight that was failing me as I could see but one man where there were two and I saw but two animals when there were four. I could distinguish no carts, yet there were two; it was on the level prairie and there was nothing to obstruct my view.

Tired from calling and thinking that my efforts had been useless, I crawled back under my robe to rest and to wait for a better chance to get home.

While I was calling, the two men were holding a conversation that I could not hear, though I had seen only one man. They were the uncle and his nephew, both English. (This nephew was the same young man who had arrived with his two oxen at my camp six days before, going to meet his uncle, and whom I wanted to spend the night with me fearing that he might get lost. A kind act is never without reward. It was this same young Englishman whom, my guardian angel had led to camp close enough to me and to hear my cries in the night. He and his uncle took me the next day to Pimbina.) "Who can be calling," said the uncle, "oh, it is a wolf," answered the nephew. "No it cannot be a wolf he replied, the wolves do not howl so late at night." "Oh yes, uncle, it is a wolf, I have heard them cry throughout the night." (The nephew, having frosted his hands could not sleep that night.) "No replied the uncle, the wolves do not cry so late, I must go see what it is," and he arrived just as I was beginning to get warm.

Poor man, said he, on seeing me, so here you are frozen. Oh no I am not frozen I answered. "You have had nothing to eat." "Oh yes I have eaten a good piece of my horse and it was very good." And as he added that they themselves had nothing to eat,



and had to content themselves with a cup of coffee, which they had heated by burning 13  
one of their merchandise cases, I invited them to help themselves to one of the legs  
of my horse. The good Englishman thinking that I had lost my reason, went to get me  
a cup of coffee the last he had left. He then tore off my shoes and cut off my cassock  
at the waist, as it was frozen to me, then loaded me into his cart. He then sent his  
nephew to Pimbina to Joe Rolette's that he might come and get me, that I might get there  
quicker, as his oxen were too feeble, having had nothing to eat for four or five days.

Hearing the news, Mr. Rolette came to meet us and took me to his home where we  
arrived at dusk. Up until that time, I had not felt frozen, and had no pain in my legs  
all the time I had remained on the snow, and concluded that I had not suffered much harm.  
After reaching the house, they put my two legs in a basin of snow and two men began to  
rub them. Some time had passed before I felt any pain. When supper time arrived, the  
men placed me on a bed. I had not thawed out yet. They brought me some supper and not  
feeling any pain, I ate like a man who had been traveling in the woods. During the night,  
I began to thaw out, not in the snow water, but with the aid of a good fire they had  
made in the room. It was now Friday and they brought me breakfast, a beautiful fried  
fish. I had to be content by looking at it, as the pains became so great that it was  
impossible for me to think of food. Mr. Rolette became my nurse and gave me all the  
care that a good mother could give her child.

In spite of all his efforts for seventeen days, my feet were beginning to rot, when  
the Reverend Father Lestand, administrator of the diocese of St. Boniface, hearing of  
what had happened to me, and knowing that there was no doctor at Pimbina, had the  
kindness to send me M. Iside Goulet to take me to the bishop at St. Boniface. He had  
a dog train and the roads having become bad by the thawing of the snow, which had not  
frozen again, it was hard traveling.

I had a high fever when he arrived. In spite of that, the following morning, finding  
me better, we started and arrived that evening at the river Gratiot. We took lodging  
at the only house that was there, at a man named Claign. He wanted to care for me all  
through the night but at midnight, I told him to go to bed, because everytime they opened  
the door it made a draft and kept me coughing continually. The next day we traveled  
to the "Pointe Coupee", at the home of a very fine man whose name I have forgotten.  
There I passed the night without coughing so much, but my feet were getting more and  
more decomposed; it infected the whole house. The third day we reached the bishopric  
of St. Boniface, where after resting three or four days, they told me, that in order  
to save my life, they would have to amputate my legs. As it was necessary, I could not  
resist. So, on the third day of December, 1860, the old doctor Thom, of the English  
colony, and a young doctor of the company of English soldiers, removed my right leg,  
just below the knee. They delayed the amputation of the left leg until sometime later,  
thinking that I was not strong enough for a second operation at that time. The operation  
seemed to be a success, and after the first few days of suffering, I regained considerable  
strength and the doctors thought they would soon be able to remove my left foot, when  
suddenly, the ninth day after the first operation, a large vein burst letting escape  
a large amount of my blood and I was so close to death, that the good Sister Gouselin,  
who was in charge of the church said to her servants who worked in the kitchen, (it  
was the 12th of December), "We are close to Christmas and Father Goiffon is going to  
die. Let us make some candles which will serve for the feast and for the funeral so  
that all will be ready when Father Goiffon dies." Prudence is a virtue, but it is  
necessary to follow it up. The girls put 60 pounds of beef suet in a large kettle and  
heated it too hot. The grease begun to boil over the sides of the kettle and the girls  
threw cold water into the grease which made it run all the more over the red hot stove.  
The grease spreading more and more set fire to some boards which had been placed behind  
the stove to dry. The floor caught fire, and in a minute, the flames mounting the steps,  
went from the kitchen to the bishopric and all was aflame.

At nine o'clock, Sister Gouselin, as I have already said, having charge of the  
kitchen and the linen of the sacristy, goes to her superior, Sister Halada, for  
permission to go to the bishopric. "What for said the Superior", "to awaken Father  
Lemestre, who told me to call him at nine o'clock". "Oh, said the Superior, this good  
priest has taken care of Father Goiffon, and is tired, let him sleep another hour." Some  
minutes after 10 o'clock, Father Lemestre was hardly out of his bed that I heard him



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cry "fire", save Father Goiffon". I raised the sheet that covered my head, and saw in the dining room, a thick smoke, black like that which comes from the stack of a steam boat. "Oh, I said, I am a lost man, try to save something from the room of Monsignor." Father Lemestre and Father Dumoulin who happened to be there, I know not how, paying no attention to my suggestion seized the mattress on which I was lying and carried me outside onto the porch. The fire which came from the kitchen, spread so fast, that as soon as they placed me on the porch, Father Dumoulin, who wanted to re-enter to get his hat which he had left on the table in the dining room, found it impossible to do so, as the fire was coming out the windows and the doors. In a few minutes the fire spread to the sacristy, and from there to the cathedral, and in one hour the three beautiful bells, which were the pride of that section fell in pieces from the two towers and one could see nothing but ruin and desolation.

From the porch of the bishopric, I was carried to the hospital of the Grey Sisters. It was about four hundred feet from the bishopric. They have said that I just missed freezing again while on that porch, but this is not so as I do not remember suffering from any pain after leaving the bishopric and arriving at the home of the Sisters, where I have always been well treated. During the first seven days at the hospital, I was very feeble, from my blood escaping from time to time from my broken vein. The eighth day, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, feeling something wet in the bed, I passed my hand down to learn the cause and I withdrew it full of clotted blood, I threw it in the room, calling a sister, who had a class in the room near by. Very soon old Dr. Thom arrives and binds up my thigh, but he had so little faith in his bandage that he said to the nurses that in three hours I would not be alive. My director, Father Lestant, gave me Holy Communion and sent a man on horse at great speed to St. Norberts ten miles away, which was the nearest parish to St. Boniface to secure the Holy Oils with which to give me Extreme Unction. Mgr. Tache of the cathedral, having lost everything because of me, it was only just that I leave him my possessions. The disposition of my will was not to take long. I gave to Mr. Tache and the cathedral at St. Boniface, my library that I have at St. Paul, and all that I possess in my mission. I dictated my last wishes to the Rev. Father Lestant, while his secretary l'abbé Oran, was writing it down. I hurried him as I feared I would not have time to sign the document. It seemed that I was passing into another world, like a phantasmagoric image which disappears when one withdraws the curtain.

I had become so feeble that it was with difficulty I could swallow a drop of water. The messenger who had been sent to St. Norberts for the Holy Oils, was obliged to cross the big Red River four times, and consequently he should have taken quite a long time for that trip. He did not expect to find me still living when he got back. He came back in the evening and they gave me Extreme Unction making the remark that God was very good to me, giving me time to receive all the sacraments. I was prepared for death and all expected me to draw my last breath, but God had willed otherwise. So far I had done so little for Him. Either the sacraments had effected a corporal cure or the clotted blood which had escaped from the broken vein had cauterized it, for, from that moment, I did not lose another drop of blood. I became quiet, suffered no more and regained little by little my strength. Such was the progress that I who had had so much trouble to swallow a drop of water, began, at midnight to take several spoonfuls of broth and the following morning I swallowed with great pleasure a good soup. Thus, I continued to gain strength day by day, so that in two weeks, the doctors thought me strong enough to undergo the amputation of my left foot. This they did January 6, 1861. The operation was successful and I continued to gain strength so rapidly that, in a very short time, to occupy myself, I took charge of the catechism of the children of St. Boniface while still in bed. I recall that among these children, I had a little lad of twelve years named Marion, uncle of the wife of Mr. Kittson. This little fellow had the thumb of one hand made like the claw of a large crawfish and he used it as a crawfish would.

On Ash Wednesday I had them carry me, in a chair, into the chapel of the Gray Sisters, which, since burning of the Cathedral had become the parish church, and I was charged to make the sermon. It was not without fear that I accepted this duty as it was the first time that I had to preach without preparing my sermon. (All the books had been burned in the fire which destroyed the Cathedral and the bishopric.) The good Lord helped me, as I did pretty well, and I was charged to preach the sermon every Sunday



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in Lent. In the spring we had a flood and waters were so high that they were able to bring a barge to the door of the home of the sisters. They took me by water to the college. It was the first time I had been out since November. The water having withdrawn, and the earth becoming firm, I procured for myself, a wooden leg and two crutches beginning thus to take a few steps indoors and later on, outside. I received then my dispensations from Rome; I succeeded in standing erect without my crutches and I managed to reach the altar to say the 68 Masses I had promised to the souls of Purgatory. The seventh of June, they brought me a wagon and I returned to my missions at St. Joseph and Pimbina which I had left nine months before. The day after I arrived, was the day for my parishioners to leave for the prairie for the summer buffalo hunt. It was a beautiful day.



# Nouvelles Villes Jumelles

Newsletter of La Société Canadienne Française Du Minnesota

## SUPPORT LSCF

### DEADLINE

Next deadline for Chez Nous and Nouvelles Villes Jumelles is November 5. Mail to Dick Bernard, 7632 157th St. W. #310, Apple Valley, MN 55124.

La Société needs your financial and personal support. Dues for 1993 will soon be due. Rates: Family \$15.00; Senior over 62 \$8.00; Single \$10.00; minor under 18 \$1.00. Checks to La Societe C-F. Send to George LaBrosse, 4895 Brent Ave., Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076.

### ACTEUR D'UN JOUR

At the Foshay Tower gathering, Georgette Lobbe-Pfannkuch told of her forthcoming French "Readers Theater" group, which runs from October 12 through November 30, every Monday 7-9 PM. This is a class for intermediate and advanced speakers, and will include correction of pronunciation, psychology of the character, and reading of your part on stage on the last day. This is an opportunity to improve your French and increase your vocabulary in 8 weeks of fun. Georgette has credentials in acting, music, narration, and college teaching and French Theater direction. She is, as you probably know, programmer for Bonjour Minnesota every Tuesday morning 10-11 on KFAI 90.3FM. (Editor would urge your to listen.) Regarding her class, if you wish, call Georgette at 645-3784 or Catherine at 874-0939.

### FÊTE DE NOËL

The LSCF Christmas party will take place at St. Louis Church in St. Paul on December 4. This is a pot luck. If you aren't bringing food, please contribute \$3.00 each (only \$1.00 for children over 6). We begin to eat at 6:30.

There will be a talent show with prizes in which anyone may (can?) participate. "Les Errants" will perform for us.

### ÉVÉNEMENTS PASSÉS

President Leo Gouette extends thanks to all who participated in the Little Canada Days Parade - on-lookers too!

Bill Horn hopes the twenty-five members and guests who came to the open house in Mr. Foshay's office in the Foshay Tower enjoyed themselves. He did.