

August 9, 1961

ST. MARY'S PARISH

"THE TREE PLANTED IN 1732 IS STILL GROWING". -J. P. Bertrand-

This is the historic development of St. Mary's Catholic Parish, not the commercial evolution of the town of Fort Frances. Other historians have already written the episodes of the "COUREURS DES BOIS", "THE HIGHWAY OF DESTINY", or the "RAINY LAKE DISTRICT".

From the inception of Canadian explorations, missionaries have accompanied the voyageurs and fur-traders, "compassing their birchbark canoes, ever and ever westward toward the setting sun". The adventurers sought expansion of territory and profitable business; the missionaries, true to the Divine Mandate, endeavoured to fulfil their aim, "Go and teach--baptize and sanctify".

Perusing documents and archives, we learn that religious services were held continuously in the Rainy Lake District as early as 1728. Father DeGonnor, S.J., is mentioned as saying Mass on the site of Fort St. Pierre. The first resident missionary at the Port was Father Messaigner in 1732. He was replaced in 1736 by Father P. C. Aunault, s.j. Thus we see that at the very beginning "religion was taught" by "Pioneer Missionaries".

From 1738 we have also, through documentation (Bertrand) (Nute) etc... the names of other Jesuits acting as chaplains with the expeditions of LaVerendrye, the explorer. Missionaries came from Rat Portage or from Lac La Croix to Fort St. Pierre: Father A. Charlevoix 1778; Father Jean Pierre Chone 1782; Father Chs. Dugas 1794; and Father Dominic DuRanquette 1805. There is also mention of two secular priests, Father P. Dugas and E. Mayrand until 1831.

Thus the "Knights of the Cross" labored side by side with the "Knights of the Forest". The missionaries catered to everyone, white and Indian population.

In 1732 , Missionaries came from the Lakehead; from 1795 they established their headquarters at Rat-Portage, now Kenora, and radiated in the Rainy Lake District until 1832, when a permanent mission was established for Chipwa Indians on Couchiching Reserve. Thus for exactly one century Mass was celebrated at Rainy Lake. At that time, 1832, Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface, Manitoba, delegated the famous Father G. A. Belcourt; he organized a permanent post at White Dog and catered to all the district including Fort St. Pierre, the present site of Fort Frances. Due to misunderstandings with the French authorities in Montreal, the Fort had been abandoned by the fur-traders but some voyageurs and Indians remained in the area.

We find from 1832 to 1895, according to the records, Fathers A. Tache, O.M.I. and G. Lafleche, secular priest, who became Bishops; then Fathers M. Demers; F. N. Blanchet; A. Lacombe, O.M.I.; C. Lestang, O.M.I. and others who ministered to the population at regular intervals.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the Oblate Fathers arrived in the District in 1848, with Father A. Tache, O.M.I.; and from that period to the present time the Oblate Fathers remained in charge of the Parish and the Indian School, including 17 missions, 5 stations and 2 posts. The official (canonical) parish of St. Mary was singled-out and established in 1905 by Bishop A. Langevin, O.M.I. of St. Boniface, who granted the decree of foundation. St. Mary's had been a distinct group since 1893 with Father J. B. Dorais, O.M.I. and A. Vales, O.M.I. as permanent quasi-pastors.

While St. Mary's was still without a church, masses were celebrated in private homes, especially in the house of Mr. Louis Hamel, and Mr. Louis Christie, one of which stood on the site of

the present High School. The Oblate records show the statistics of the Catholic population at that time, 1894: 22 white adults in Fort Frances; 57 in the vicinity; 114 on the Indian Reservation; total Catholic population 193 persons.

On June the first 1895 a house was acquired on Sinclair Street. This building was destined to become the first chapel. Services were inaugurated the same year on July 28th, and catechism classes were given in the same house.

In 1905 a church was built; it was on November 25, 1906 that Bishop A. Langevin, O.M.I. blessed the building.

The Catholic population realizing the necessity of religious education opened a separate school. In 1904 the Benedictine Sisters were in charge; they stayed until 1908 when they were called back to their mother-house. From that time until 1914, lay teachers ^{on} carried the work in the school. The same year the Sisters of the Mission, who had been requested by Reverend Father..... as far back as 1901 came to assume the direction of the school.

Miss Marguerite Christie, one of the first parishioners of St. Mary's, writes:

"In the spring of 189~~8~~⁵, the parish was organized. There were three adults and three children. These were Louis Hamel, Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mrs. Louis Christie, my mother, who is the ^{of} oldest parishioner. Two children were my sister Katie and myself; Wilfred Christie, my brother, was the first catholic child born and baptized in the newly founded parish."

Louis Hamel had a very small store at Nine Centre St. Francis to replenish supplies

"At first, Holy Mass was celebrated in Louis Hamel's and Louis Christie's homes, but, very shortly, the priests' home and chapel was built. The chapel was on the second floor and had an outside stairway. I am certain it was Father J. B. Beaudin, O.M.I. who was the first resident pastor."

"In 1898 the parish rectory, the former priests' home and chapel, was moved from Sinclair Street to Victoria Avenue. Quite a few families came soon after the parish was organized: Mrs. James Paul and daughter Rita (Mrs. Emile Cousineau) in 1896; Bill Law and sister Ann; the Gagne and Jalbert families followed soon after; the Stones and Garringtons from International Falls came for services until 1905, when a church was built at International Falls, Minnesota."

Each year the enrollment in the school steadily increased with the result that in June 1925 a new eight-room addition and an auditorium was begun, to accommodate the three hundred and twenty-five (325) pupils. This is the present St. Mary's School which today has three hundred and fifty (350) pupils. By 1955 it became necessary to build a new school in the west end of the town. At present three Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions teach in this new St. Francis' School, which has an enrollment of one hundred eighty-five (185) pupils. Children from the Indian Reserve attend both schools according to the intergration plan sponsored by the Department of Indian Affairs. At the present time the teaching personnel of St. Mary's and St. Francis' schools consist of 16 teachers: 7 Sisters of the Missions, and 9 lay teachers."

"THE LAVERENDRYE HOSPITAL" also on the campus. (Quote from the Grey Nuns)

On June 3, 1941, two small privately-owned hospitals: O'Donnell's and McKenzie's were closing their doors, while a newly erected fifty-five bed General Hospital was opened at 110 Victoria Avenue, Fort Frances."

"The new hospital received its name, "LaVerendrye" in memory of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de LaVerendrye, the French founder of Fort St. Pierre, now Fort Frances. The "Sieur de LaVerendrye" was an uncle to Blessed Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Order of the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) who own and operate LaVerendrye Hospital. The "Grey Nuns" of the LaVerendrye Hospital came to Fort Frances at the request of the Fort Frances Trades and Labour Council, supported by the Town of Fort Frances, who declared "being willing to work with other bodies to secure the hospital." An addition erected in 1952, LaVerendrye Hospital is now an up-to-date 126 bed Hospital. Its Medical Staff is composed of local doctors and out-of-town consultants."

In conclusion, I may add that the members of St. Mary's Parish, young and old, living and dead, are rightly proud of its material development. We must at this time turn our minds and thoughts of thanksgiving to (the good) God (Lord) for having bestowed in the past, as well as today, his special blessings.

We pray that the things of God will daily increase in our hearts and souls, so that as our fore-runners (fore-fathers) have handed down to us the torch of life, we will also relay to future generations the "living water" that will "spring up unto life everlasting".