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Catholic Hospital History Project

Documenting the legacy and contribution of the  
Congregations of Religious Women in Canada,  
their mission in health care, and the founding and operation of Catholic hospitals.

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Projet de la *Grande* Histoire  
des hôpitaux catholiques au Canada

Retracer l'héritage et la contribution des  
congrégations de religieuses au Canada,  
leur mission en matière de soins de santé ainsi que la fondation et l'exploitation des hôpitaux catholiques.

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# A Leap of Faith

The Grey Nuns Ministries in Western and  
Northern Canada  
Volume II  
The Grey Nuns in Northern Saskatchewan,  
Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese  
and Zaire

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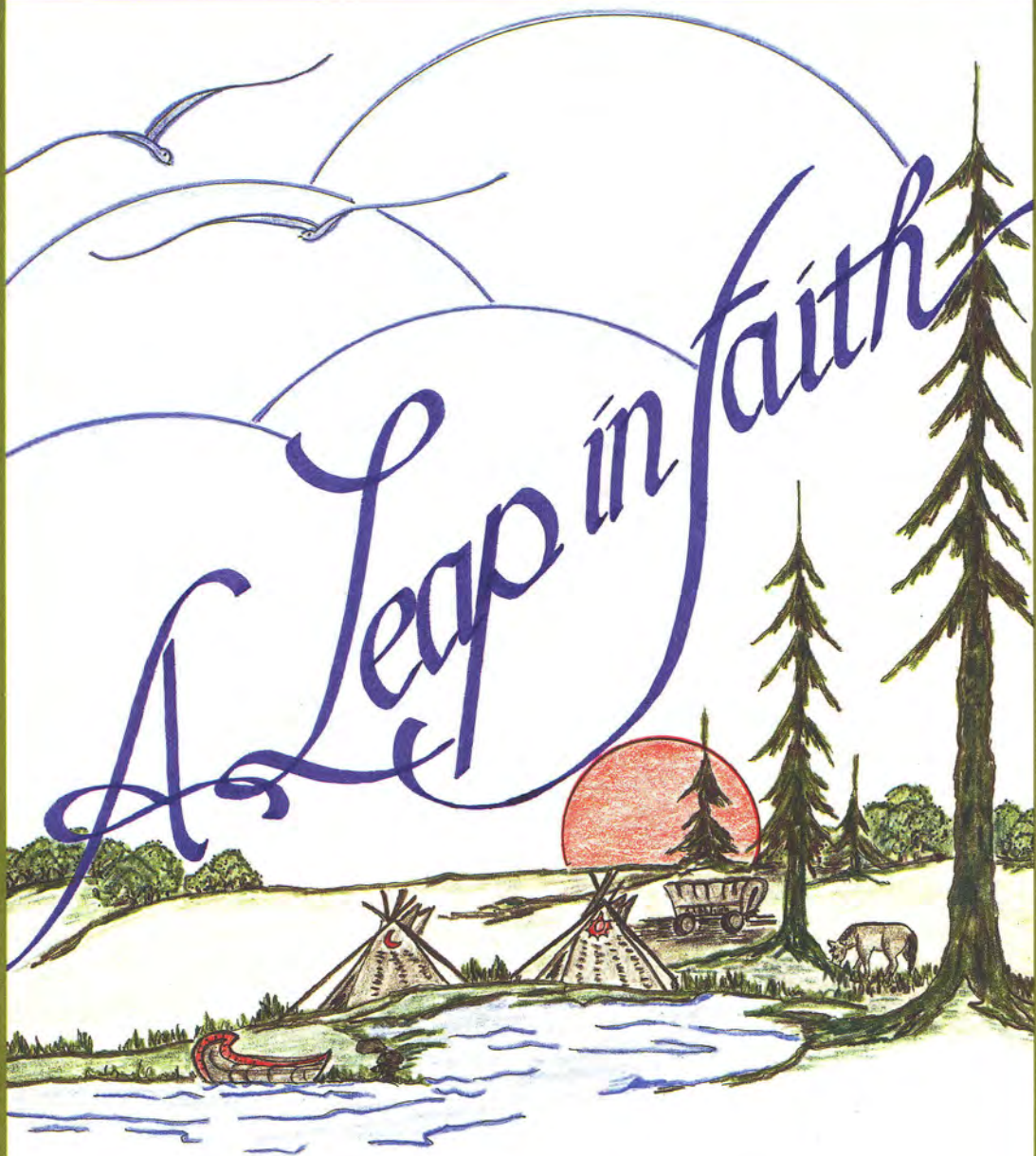
Thérèse Castonguay, s.g.m.

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*The Grey Nuns Ministries  
in Western and Northern Canada*

VOLUME II

**Thérèse Castonguay, s.g.m.**



*A Leap In Faith*

*The Grey Nuns Ministries in Western and Northern Canada*

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Northern Saskatchewan,  
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## Volume II

The Grey Nuns in Northern Saskatchewan,  
Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese and Zaïre

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## *Dedication*



To: ***Saint Marguerite d'Youville***  
without whom the  
Grey Nuns would not have existed and this  
*Leap In Faith* would not have occurred.  
(Painting by Flore Barrette, s.g.m., 1957)

# Abbreviations



## Archives

APA	Alberta Provincial Archives
EA	Edmonton Archives
GNRC Arch.	Grey Nuns Regional Centre, Edmonton, Archives
MMY Arch.	Maison de Mère d'Youville, Montréal, Archives
Nic Arch.	Maison Provinciale Nicolet, Archives
St.B. Arch.	Maison Provinciale Saint Boniface, Archives

## Religious and priests

c.s.j.	Sisters of Saint Joseph
c.r.i.c.	Regular Canon of the Immaculate Conception
CSSF	Felician Sisters
C.Ss.R.	Redemptorists
f.i.c.	Christian Instruction Brothers
E.J.	Daughters of Jesus
G.N.S.H.	Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, Philadelphia
G.S.I.C.	Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, Pembroke
MOMI	Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
Msgr	Monsignor

n.d.s.	Sisters of Notre-Dame de Sion
O.M.I.	Oblates of Mary Immaculate
O.S.A.	Order of Saint Augustine (Augustinians)
o.s.c.	Clarisses (Order of Saint Clare)
O.S.E.	Sisters of Saint Elizabeth of Humboldt
PM	Sisters of the Presentation of Mary
p.s.s.	Sulpicians
s.a.s.v.	Sisters of the Assumption of Mary
s.c.e.	Sisters of Charity of Evron
s.c.j.	Sisters of the Child Jesus
s.c.o.	Sisters of Charity of Ottawa
s.c.q.	Sisters of Charity of Québec
s.g.m.	Grey Nuns of Montréal
s.g.n.	Grey Nuns of Nicolet
s.g.s.h.	Sisters of Charity of Saint-Hyacinthe
S.J.	Society of Jesus (Jesuits)
s.n.d.	Sisters of Notre-Dame d'Auvergne
s.n.j.m.	Sisters of the Holy Names
SP	Sisters of Providence
S.S.A.	Sisters of Saint Ann
u.j.	Ursulines of Jesus



# Acknowledgments

*A*t the end of a project of this magnitude, it is never possible to thank all those who have made it happen. The list could go on and on. With trepidation of missing anyone, I begin a litany, which soon becomes my prayer of gratitude, for all those whose help contributed to the production of *A Leap in Faith*.

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It pleases me to extend my thanks for the most enjoyable and inspiring hours I spent interviewing former missionaries and recording reminiscences of their lives of dedication in isolated and primitive missions. Their ministry of love and charity continues in their golden years. The assistance of Grey Nun historian, Sister Agnes Sutherland, provided helpful information and advice for which I am most grateful.

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*Thérèse Castonguay, s.g.m.*

January 15, 2001

## Preface

*A Leap in Faith - The Grey Nun Ministries in Western and Northern Canada Volume II* builds upon the heroic stories of the Grey Nuns who ministered in Northern Saskatchewan, the Far North and Zaïre. It brings out the courage and dauntlessness displayed as remote settlements are reached by the Grey Nuns and Oblate Fathers and Brothers.

Dating from 1860 onward the reader will be fascinated by the rugged courage, deep faith, profound creativity and bravery witnessed by these dedicated women and men. The story reveals the challenges of transportation, housing in cramped quarters, food shortages, and basic primitive survival. Greater than the physical challenges, one quickly identifies with the spiritual stamina sustaining these pioneers. Loneliness for family and one's culture, isolation with long hours of darkness and/or long unending light, unfamiliar customs and language all become grist for character building and strength. Trust in Divine Providence sustained the sisters as they made the *sacrifice of our life, of our health, and of our strengths*. (*Ile-à-la-Crosse Chroniques*, p. 30)

Once unmet needs were identified, nothing could hold back their whole-hearted response. Neither fire nor poverty, floods nor fatigue, epidemics nor unrest, hardships nor inadequacies would block their determination to make a positive difference in people's lives. Page after page acquaints one with the history, the challenges and reality of the growing Canadian culture as it interfaced with native peoples and early settlers. The reader will be moved many times by the valiant courage and faith of these women and men. Inspired by Marguerite d'Youville's deep faith and love of those most in need, the Grey Nuns seek to discover

the face of Jesus in the poor.

The risk-taking of our pioneer sisters is matched over the years by the depth of letting go as missions were closed due to lack of sisters or greater needs in other areas. Today, at the dawn of the 21st century we are called to be risk-takers, venturing into an unknown future, letting go of the familiar to continue our mission of being compassionate signs of hope and revealers of God's love to those we meet each day.

Sister Thérèse Castonguay, author of the fascinating book: *A Leap in Faith: The Grey Nuns Ministries in Western and Northern Canada - Volume II*, thoroughly researched the Grey Nun archives in Montréal, Nicolet, Saint Boniface, and Edmonton as well as many other sources in order to capture the essence of the primitive settlements, their gradual development, the challenges and hardships encountered and the noble dispositions of the missionaries.

It is with much pride that our Grey Nun history is shared with you, the reader. May the lives of these valiant women and men be of inspiration as, *Together, we are summoned to be vibrant and compassionate signs of hope in our broken world* (Grey Nun Vision Statement, General Chapter 1996).

*Marcia Wiley, s.g.m.*

Provincial Leader



# Introduction

**A** Father of the Church, back in the Second Century, defined the name of God in a creative association of meanings which likely resulted in the later expression of leaps in faith. While apologizing for the exclusive language of this quotation, I chose to share this excerpt with the readers:

*He is called God because he has built everything on its own foundations, and because he makes a leap:<sup>1</sup> leaping means giving life to the world... He is almighty, he contains everything: the heights of heaven, the depth of the abyss, the bounds of the earth are in his hands.<sup>2</sup>*

Is it not true that the Grey Nuns pioneers and many of their followers have repeatedly experienced these moments of creation, these leaps in faith, *giving life to the world*, sharing the gift of their lives with people in foreign lands, sharing the gift of their faith with those who still ignored their God and Savior.

One of the glories of the Grey Nuns Congregation is the heroic lives of their pioneers who went to primeval areas of western and northern Canada, under the most trying conditions, with the unique goal of extending God's message of love to the people living in remote parts of this country. And when Grey Nuns left the comfort of modern Canadian life and risked a jaunt to Dungeness, Zaïre, to help in the promotion of the people living in huts, devoid of health care, and unable to break the poverty-despair cycle, these Grey Nuns were adding a resplendent page to the Congregation's leaps in faith in order to advance the Kingdom of God.

In glancing through **A Leap in Faith**, one can identify a number of instances of faith in action, actions of faith that always

astonished witnesses. Leaps in faith that carried a ripple effect a century later. A 90-year young former missionary still treasures a letter received from a colleague in ministry,

*A few of the elders here were either at residential schools or working in hospitals with the sisters. I am glad to say they have only fond memories of the sisters they knew and talk about the sisters with love and respect and gratitude. In my experience in the north, the work and presence of the sisters among the Natives has been the greatest blessing they have received from God. It still shows to this day in the lives of the sincere people I meet.<sup>3</sup>*

The content of this history is organized geographically and chronologically. Some thematic descriptions are identified with sub-headings. Geographically, we follow the civil provinces comprised in the Grey Nuns' canonical Province of Saint Albert. Volume I published in 1999 covered the Grey Nuns missions located in Alberta where the sisters arrived in 1859. In this Second Volume, we begin the Grey Nuns' second missionary field in Northern Saskatchewan in 1860, followed by the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese in the Northwest Territories (NWT) in 1867, and finally in Africa in 1973.

Several missions located within the civil boundaries of Alberta and Saskatchewan were under the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, and administered by the Grey Nuns Provinces Divine Providence and, later, Saint Albert. These missions are also presented in this Volume II. The Zaire mission is covered in Part III of this Volume.

Again, as for Volume I, the *24-hour clock* is used to indicate the time of day; the *metric system for weight and measurement*, legalized in Canada in 1971; and the *Canadian Catholic Church-approved inclusive language*. Also, attention is paid to exclude antiquated terminology which was common in previous centuries until the contemporary era gave it a pejorative meaning not intended at that time.

The Grey Nuns worked closely with 27 Bishops in Northern Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories and Africa, as listed in

Appendix IX. Grey Nuns shared missionary fields with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.) in nearly all their missions in western and northern Canada. They worked alongside several other religious communities in their common ministries. Except for the Oblates and the Grey Nuns, all religious are identified in the text by both the name of their religious community and its initials; diocesan priests are referred to by the title of Father. The Index gives complete names and initials of the community for all listed.

*The faces of the past are like leaves that settle to the ground.  
They make the earth rich and thick so that new fruit will  
come forth every summer.<sup>4</sup>*

So did our heroic pioneers. They have passed on the earth, they have made it richer so that new missionaries may come forth 'every summer'.

#### NOTES: Introduction

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- 1 The word theos (God) is here derived from the verbs theirai (to found) and theein (to leap) - beyond every limit!
- 2 Theophilus of Antioch, quoted in Clément Olivier, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New City Press, First Printing, 1993.
- 3 Brault, André, OMI, **Letter** to Sister Anna Brodeur, March 4, 1994.
- 4 George, Chief Dan.





# Prelude:

## THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE GREY NUNS

The brief history of Marguerite d'Youville's life and spirituality in Volume I was important to explore where the Grey Nuns came from, to identify their spiritual mother - their Foundress - and to show how she was motivated in her life of *universal charity*.

In this Prelude to Volume II, a further attempt is made to capture God's action in Marguerite's life and ministry and to demonstrate how God's Providence is always at work in Marguerite's spiritual daughters through charitable endeavors.

This journey takes us back to writings from the French School of Spirituality, which Marguerite espoused with the help of Father Louis Normant, a spiritual son of Jean-Jacques Olier, one of the founders in the French School of Spirituality. This School influenced the French Church in the 17th and 18th centuries and consequently, the Youvillian Spirituality. Other writings included posthumous publications from authentic manuscripts left by both Marguerite's first biographer, her own son, Abbé Charles Dufrost, and one who interviewed Marguerite's contemporaries, Antoine Sattin, p.s.s.. Later, in 1852, the astute theologian, Michel Faillon, p.s.s., scrutinized Marguerite's faith in God as it impacted her life in the first written theological analysis of her spirituality. In 1945, the renowned historian, Albertine Ferland-Angers's writings eloquently captured the omnipresence of God as Divine Providence in Marguerite, the faithful witness of charity and love without boundaries. And, in our time, an author and spiritual daughter of Marguerite, Sister Estelle Mitchell gave us a 20th century interpretation of Marguerite's spiritual portrait.



On October 15, 1701, in Varennes, Québec, Marie-Marguerite Dufrost de Lajemmerais was born of Marie-Renée Gaultier de Varennes and Christophe Dufrost de Lajemmerais. Marguerite was the first of six children in this profoundly Christian family. Varennes, part of the Seigniorship of Boucherville, was a piece of land given to Marie-Renée at the time of her January 1701 marriage by her grandfather Pierre Boucher, lord of Boucherville. When patriarch Pierre Boucher chose his place of residence and gave it his name, Boucherville, he said,

*[it is] to have a place in this country, consecrated to God, where honest people could live in peace, and the inhabitants profess to be of God in a particular fashion.<sup>2</sup>*

Marie-Marguerite Dufrost de Lajemmerais' predisposition to a saintly life was to be expected, not only because of the values she inherited from her great-grandfather, but, especially, because of the Christian upbringing she received in her parents' home. A major contributor to the formation of her solid faith was the grace from her loving God which enabled her to grow through suffering in the crushing trials she endured in her young life. The ever-present action of God was obvious in Marguerite's life.

## *God as a Father and as Providence*

For Marguerite, God was the Eternal Father, Divine Providence, who watches over, and 'provides' for all creatures. In her heart, 'father' was equivalent to 'provider'. Had she not experienced in her childhood, this calm, reassuring security in the presence of her father, Christophe Dufrost de Lajemmerais who, as a captain in the army of King Louis XIV, provided for the livelihood of his spouse and their six children? When her young father died in 1708, she was barely seven years old. While the oldest child in the family, her maturing mind was soon convinced that a father is indeed a provider. One inescapable proof in her case was that her father's absence suddenly left his family destitute. This

was in the Canadian cultural context of the early 1700s and we need to remember that women were not employable outside their home.

Because of her precocious sense of responsibility and her love and concern for her distraught mother, she recognized the presence of Providence when Governor General, Marquis Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil, and Intendant Raudot sent an appeal to the Marine Minister, on November 14, 1708:

*Le sieur de Lajemmerais died this summer. He leaves a spouse and six children destitute. It is a pity to see this grieving family unable to subsist in the future unless you have the kindness to help them.*<sup>3</sup>

While this appeal took six years to bear fruit, Marguerite, 'the little family provider', fully used her little hands and her great heart to give support and assistance to her mother and siblings. Was she not the divinely chosen instrument of Providence for her needy family?

Later, when her revered great-grandfather, Pierre Boucher, lord of Boucherville, took her into his home for awhile, she more fully perceived God as the Eternal Father and Providence in the generosity of the beloved octogenarian, so attentive to her spiritual growth. Was it not Divine Providence, acting through Pierre Boucher and other benevolent family friends, who provided for the adolescent to spend two years receiving an education and celebrating her first communion at the Ursulines convent in Québec? Was not her contact with the Ursulines and the still recent saintly life of their foundress, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, to create a lasting influence in the predestined Marguerite? With Saint Paul, she could exclaim,

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation who consoles us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the same consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God ...*  
(2 Cor 1:4).



When, at the age of 13, Marguerite returned home, from the Ursulines Convent, she dutifully resumed her functions as the hands and heart of Divine Providence, helping her mother to raise her family, contributing some revenue through her embroidery or other crafts, and guiding her younger brothers and sisters in the knowledge and service of God. Early in adulthood, trials shaped the character of Marguerite.

*She [Marguerite] was 18 when a family event took place, changing the serene and happy life that had been hers. After a widowhood of 11 years, her mother remarried. Her choice [of partner] was unfortunate[...] Far from improving her situation, he brought to her and her family a loss of esteem.<sup>4</sup>*

As a result of her mother's remarriage, a serious admirer of Marguerite disappeared from her life, his family refusing to admit him into their ranks. Loyal to her mother,

*Marguerite's reaction to this abandonment was to overcome her sadness, proving her strength of character, and to keep hoping in the future.<sup>5</sup>*

That strength of character, that hope in the future, trademarks of Marguerite throughout her life, were undoubtedly the traits that so endeared her to her mother and siblings. Her biographers often remarked on the loving authority Marguerite earned among her siblings who consulted her, confided in her, and who, often unknowingly imitated her actions.

In 1722, she married François d'Youville, a marriage that brought her poverty, humiliation and unhappiness. Soon she discovered that her live-in mother-in-law was irritable, jealous and avaricious. Rumors brought Marguerite increased information of her husband's illegal liquor trafficking. His rare appearances at home, his drinking habits and rude behavior brought despair and almost total destitution to a family in need of a loving, caring husband and father. In her anguish, Marguerite remembered the word of the Psalmist: *The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit* (Ps 34: 18).

*At first she did not understand how sweet is the resignation of a loving soul, chastened by adversity; but, after five years of married life, overcome by the secret inspirations of grace, and convinced, at last, that God alone is our consolation and support, she determined to renounce the vain maxims of the world, and to embrace a devout life. For this purpose, she placed herself under the direction of M. du Lescoat, a Sulpician, and the parish priest of Montréal, whom Providence had selected to be her guide on the thorny road to perfection, and to point out to her the work to which she was called.<sup>6</sup>*

In 1727, a momentous event, a deep spiritual experience marked Marguerite's life for ever. She more deeply viewed God as a loving Father. She was moved to manifest and reveal this love to all, especially, the most downtrodden. Indeed, the Eternal Father's presence immersed her in love and trust in Divine Providence. Although she would only reveal this event more than 40 years later, she soon became known as the Mother of all those in need. God's grace inspired her to choose love. With Jean-Jacques Olier, she was able to say,

*Eternal Father, I surrender all the trust I have in my own worth and I entrust myself entirely to you.<sup>7</sup>*

With the help of her first spiritual director Marguerite explored the roots of her faith. She viewed her sufferings in a deeper Christian perspective, she still intensified her devotion to her family. The Eternal Father's presence immersed her in love and trust in Divine Providence. It was soon after, in 1730, that François was home dying, possibly of pleurisy. He died within a week with Marguerite, and two surviving young sons at his bedside. François' death was sincerely grieved by his family. Marguerite's sufferings did not disappear, but only changed focus, and her faith was further anchored.

Marguerite perceived God as being the Father of all human beings. In her adult life, she also acknowledged her consequential kinship with all peoples, her brothers and sisters in the universe.



This conviction explains why, in her life of universal charity, she could not see any of her sisters or brothers in want or suffering any pain without immediately offering to heal the wounds, feed the hungry, cover the shivering indigent, visit the prisoner, shelter the orphans, teach the unschooled, love the unloved; in a word, be the hands and heart of Providence. To paraphrase a 20th century theologian, Henri Nouwen, one could say that,

*her participation in the inner life of God led her to a new way of participation in her brothers' and sisters' lives.*<sup>8</sup>

Was it not this kinship with all humanity that much later was to inspire the Grey Nuns, in 1840, to accept the foundation of the Grey Nuns of Saint-Hyacinthe; in 1844, to leave family and country, and to travel amidst unbelievable hardships in response to a call from the Church at the Red River settlement to serve those who needed care and education? Other foundations followed with equal generosity: the Grey Nuns of the Cross, Ottawa, in 1845 and the Grey Nuns of Québec, in 1849. Over and over again the Grey Nuns repeated these leaps in faith in their daring, adventurous responses to calls and missions throughout the centuries.

Marguerite had been especially prepared by God to be a witness of the love of the Eternal Father in the institute she established in 1737. God as Father, for her, was the source of all charity and compassion for human sufferings. Her words were few, but her actions thundered what she believed. She wanted her spiritual daughters to draw from the Father's infinite love, the feelings of compassion, the strength and courage they required in caring for the needy. She commissioned a theologian from France to write the *Aspirations to the Eternal Father* in order to nourish her devotion and that of her sisters.

For more than two centuries, Grey Nuns have prayed daily the *Aspirations to the Eternal Father* and the *Invocations to Divine Providence* which have nourished their faith and sustained them in difficulties. Daily they were given to reflect on these and others verses,

*O Father of the only begotten Son, grant that he may live in us with all his divine virtues.*



*O Father, source of all love, multiply our works of charity and render them fruitful unto eternal life.*

*O Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who are pleased also to be our Father, grant that we may always remain your faithful children.<sup>9</sup>*

*Divine Providence, you are the promoter of all the wonderful works of God.*

*Divine Providence, you are the consolation of the poor.*

*Divine Providence, you are the provider of all things.*

*Divine Providence, you are the mother of the orphan.<sup>10</sup>*

## *Jesus, Mary and Joseph*

According to Faillon, Marguerite's great love of the 'Eternal Father' was a very singular vocation, perhaps first in the history of various spiritualities at that time. It seemed that for the first 1700 years of Christianity, God the Father had systematically favored the devotion of Jesus Christ,

*No doubt a very singular vocation, and may be with no previous example. It is evident that the Eternal Father purposely preferred to be relegated to second rank and offer Jesus Christ as the object of the first religion in the Church.<sup>11</sup>*

Thus, the vocation of Marguerite d'Youville was quite exceptional in the Church and it did not result from sophisticated studies on her part. This vision was rather the fruit of her contemplation and her inescapable certitude of the immense love of God, the Eternal Father, for all human beings. It was a grace straight from God to Marguerite, the source of all her actions. It became her deep conviction, her passion. This was her charism, a charism that she used fully throughout her extraordinary life of service, always inspired by God's Word: *Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gifts each of you has received (1 Pet 4:10).*

Marguerite d'Youville and her spiritual daughters have always found in the prayer of Jesus, the *Our Father*, the expression of their faith in God the Father and God's Providence. Seeing in the first word, *Our*, a special bond with all human beings who have the same Father, and therefore are all brothers and sisters, resulted in universal communion and strength in their prayer and their work. Their ministry to the wounded and the poor, in their extended family, is nurtured by their faith and their experience of Divine Providence in their lives, ministry and mission.

Marguerite's incarnational theology consisted in her certitude that Jesus is her brother, as all human beings are, in him, sons and daughters of the same God the Father. Further, she saw Jesus in the poor, the suffering she was called to serve. ...*I was hungry and you gave me food...I was sick and you took care of me... I was in prison and you visited me...* (Mt 25:34-35). In the poor she served the Lord. It was natural for her to say: *nos seigneurs les pauvres (our lords the poor)*. She taught her sisters to do likewise.

*Upon entering the wards, the sisters will intensify their faith and recognize Jesus Christ in His members, giving them kind attention; they will serve them with joy [...]*<sup>12</sup>

Continuing their contemplation with the prayer of Jesus, the Grey Nuns strive to incarnate a providential role in the call: *give us this day our daily bread*. Knowing that this phrase was coined by Jesus himself, they also deepen their conviction that, while the words *us* and *our* reinforce the universal kinship of all persons, they strongly call for equality, sharing, stewardship and, loving assistance to those in need. Praying for each other, helping to provide for each other, sharing one's possessions, time and talents so that all receive *daily bread* for their body, heart, mind and soul, this is a lifetime agenda for the Grey Nuns. When not on the *giving* end of the spectrum, the Grey Nuns seek to receive with gratitude and humility, remembering that in giving they have received from the poor. In giving, there is always an exchange and while the poor receive, they also give and teach the giver. As the *Our Father* continues to inspire the giver of care, comfort and *daily bread* to the needy, it is also a powerful teacher for acknowl-



edging one's own poverty and neediness. Are we not all in the same spiritual poverty throughout life?

The special charism of Marguerite d'Youville that won her the title of Mother of Universal Charity was described in the 1981 edition of the Grey Nuns Constitutions,

*The grace of participation in the unlimited confidence of Jesus in the Providence of his Father and a call to make known on this earth [God's] compassionate love - such was the charism of Mother d'Youville. Her mission, as she understood it, was to manifest to the needy without discrimination that tremendous charity which has its source in God the Father. She saw Jesus Christ in the poor and served them with humility, gentleness and compassion, considering it an honor and a privilege to be their servant.<sup>13</sup>*

Was it then surprising that her spiritual daughters, the Grey Nuns braved the adventurous call to the far west and north of Canada? They knew they would face hardship, but their love rendered them fearless. In responding to the earlier call to the Red River, the moment of their departure was described by a reporter who was,

*struck with admiration [...] This leave-taking constitutes a noteworthy date in the history of Canada.<sup>14</sup>*

Yes, to go to those who needed help, the sisters had to face tremendous danger, discomfort, isolation and loneliness,

*[...] much time was given for more farewells. They went to every room, paused for prayerful reflection, remembered all meaningful events that happened within these walls and, while wiping their tears, renewed their faith in Divine Providence who, without fail, would wait for them in their future mission. [...] While traveling, the group was constantly at the mercy of weather conditions: rain, cold, wind, scorching heat [...]<sup>15</sup>*

Worshiping the Sacred Heart of Jesus was another way in which Marguerite was close to God. On October 23, 1731, she

became a member of the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart. When she founded her community on December 31, 1737, she ensured the Sacred Heart of Jesus was given a focal point in the lives of her sisters, their prayers and their ministry. As did Jean Eudes, one of the founders of the French School of Spirituality, Marguerite was ever in the presence of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, loving as he loved, living for others as he lived. Hers was the prayer of Eudes,

*O most lovable and all love of the Heart of my Savior, be the Heart of my heart, the soul of my soul, the spirit of my spirit, the life of my life.*<sup>16</sup>

Throughout her life, Marguerite often contemplated the words of Jesus who, after saying to his disciples: *no one knows the Son except the Father* (Mt 11:27), continued, saying: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light* (Mt 11:28-30).

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, played a significant role in the lives of Marguerite d'Youville and her spiritual daughters. Marguerite understood the meaning of a Marian dedication encouraged by the French School of Spirituality, which is essentially Gospel-centered with emphasis on the person of Christ and the Holy Trinity.<sup>17</sup> One of this School's early promoters, Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Priests of Saint-Sulpice (p.s.s.) once elaborated on the power of intercession given to Mary and her love for her children on earth. He wrote,

*I cannot express, and [...] no creature will ever be able to say, what is the love and tenderness of God the Father towards the Blessed Virgin [...]; this is infinite, immense, incomprehensible to any created spirit.*<sup>18</sup>

Most of the important events in the history of her community were planned to be held on special days of the Blessed Mother Mary. Several weeks before the founding of the Grey Nuns Congregation, on November 21, 1737, the feast of the



Presentation of Mary, was chosen by Marguerite and her three companions to welcome their first boarder, a 60-year old, blind woman. Together they knelt before a statue of Our Lady of Providence to confide to her their new ministry, saying,

*Father, we consecrate ourselves to you and we give ourselves to the Holy Virgin Mary, your beloved daughter and our true Mother, to practice through her and with her, the Obedience and Charity which must reign among your children.<sup>19</sup>*

On February 2, 1745, Feast of the Presentation of Mary, Marguerite and her three companions signed their new *Rule of Life*, known today as the *Original Commitments*,

*[...] so that this union may be firm and lasting, unanimously we have agreed and of our own free will we have promised [...] unreservedly to consecrate our time, our days, our work, indeed our lives, to labor, the product thereof to be put in common to provide subsistence for the poor and for ourselves. To receive, feed and shelter as many poor as we can take care of by ourselves or by the alms of the faithful. [...].<sup>20</sup>*

The Feast Days of Mary are always lovingly honored in Grey Nuns' houses since the days of their saint Foundress.

*Formed to the Sulpician spirituality, that is a Marian spirituality, Mother d'Youville lived of the Marian devotion, joyfully observed all her feasts of which, none by tradition was overlooked in the Institute.<sup>21</sup>*

Saint Joseph, the provider for the Holy Family, found a promoter of his special gift in Marguerite d'Youville. She inherited, of the Charon Brothers and the Confraternity of the Holy Family, a particular closeness to Saint Joseph and she,

*developed it in harmony with her special grace. She saw St. Joseph as the earthly father, a human presence like that of the Eternal Father for Jesus and Mary, the providence who sustained them. This man of silence was a contemplative*



*blessed by the visible presence of the Son of God and of his mother. [...] One day the Foundress would express these ideas clearly and creatively. She wanted to have a painted picture depicting St. Joseph at his work bench with his tools while a cross appeared above the figure of the child Jesus.<sup>22</sup>*

Marguerite celebrated the feasts of Saint Joseph and her spiritual daughters followed her example. They frequently called upon his protection when beginning a new construction, facing financial or administrative problems, lacking resources to provide food or medications for the poor, the orphans, the patients. It seems that their heavenly protector and provider always came to their help.

Grey Nuns' ministries dedicated to the rehabilitation and promotion of women emphasize the role of Mary in the Church, in families and the lives of all women. Likewise, all Grey Nuns' ministries in the West and North of Canada and in developing countries, as captured in **A Leap in Faith** are human, and a necessarily limited reproduction of the Eternal Father's love and compassion, of Divine Providence's care for the needy, of Jesus' offering of His life for His brothers and sisters, and of Mary's nurturing of her children on earth. Intentionally, all the ministries of the Grey Nuns have been a discerned response to God's call to follow in the footsteps of their heavenly models, in a way to be most supportive and cooperative with Church and civil authorities at all levels. It is in this way that the Grey Nuns constantly endeavor to emulate the inspired actions of Marguerite.

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PART 1

*The Grey Nuns in Northern  
Saskatchewan*





# CHAPTER ONE

1860 -

## ILE-À-LA-CROSSE: SCHOOL AND HOSPITAL

Ile-à-la-Crosse was hailed as the first Native Mission, the Mother Mission,<sup>1</sup> by Bishop Martin Lajeunesse, Apostolic Vicar of Keewatin in introducing Mission Saint Jean-Baptiste. This mission was also the Mother Mission of the Grey Nuns, their first Mission opened in today's Saskatchewan. The Métis name of this remote settlement, Ile-à-la-Crosse, came from *Sakittawak*, a Cree word meaning: place where waters meet.

On September 10, 1846, after a 62-day journey from Saint Boniface, Father Alexandre Taché and diocesan priest Father Louis-François Lafèche arrived at Ile-à-la-Crosse as founders of Saint Jean-Baptiste Mission. On November 23, 1851, Father Taché was consecrated Bishop of the Northwest Territories, his episcopal seat being at Saint Boniface. Eight years later, Father Vital Grandin, then at Ile-à-la-Crosse, was summoned to Marseilles, France by the founder of the Oblates, Bishop Eugène de Mazenod. This was to put an end to the many objections of the young Oblate who could not agree to his call to the episcopate. His nomination by Rome dated back two years earlier to December 11, 1857, but the young Grandin was finally convinced that his humility should give way to obedience. One wonders whether his frail health was not the main reason for all his hesitations. Later, upon Father Grandin's generous acceptance, the Bishop of Marseilles consecrated him as Bishop Coadjutor to Bishop Taché on November 13, 1859.

In the meantime, Bishop Taché, having discussed with Father Grandin his plan to obtain Grey Nuns for Ile-à-la-Crosse, asked him to explain verbally this urgent need to Mother Julie

Deschamps, Superior General, when he stopped in Montréal. The request brought no surprise to Mother Deschamps as the missionaries of 1859 for Lac Ste-Anne were first destined to Ile-à-la-Crosse, a decision later changed. Mother Deschamps accepted the foundation and promised the future Bishop that, on his return from Europe, he could bring his new recruits with him.

## *The foundresses*

Mother Julie Deschamps chose three of her sisters for the future Grey Nuns' mission of Ile-à-la-Crosse and announced their names on May 22, 1860: Sisters Agnès (Rose Caron), superior, 27 years old; Philomène Boucher, 20 years old, and Marie-Anne Pépin, 28 years old. The date of their departure was imminent: June 4, 1860. The new Bishop Grandin had planned an early departure in order to avoid traveling in the rigor of autumn or winter.

## *The trip*

June 4, 1860, hardly two weeks after their call to mission by Mother Deschamps, Sisters Agnès and Boucher, along with Bishop Grandin and his other recruits from France, were ready to depart. After Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, followed by the Prayers of Itinerary, breakfast was served. Needless to say there was no sign of hunger among the travelers. Resolutely, the dauntless sisters had a last farewell for their community, their families and their country before departing for the train station.<sup>2</sup>

The trip presented no more comfort or safety than for the Lac Ste-Anne missionaries one year earlier. In fact, they were to face more severe hardships. It did however, include again the welcomed comfort of the train from Montréal to Saint Paul, Minnesota. Arriving in that town on June 9, they were received

with kindness by Bishop Grace of Saint Paul Diocese. A few days respite allowed for visiting, resting and organizing of baggage. They arrived at Crowing on June 13 before noon, and waited for transportation to be sent by Bishop Taché. The sisters were delighted, the following day, when the carriages arrived, to see Mother Elizabeth McMullen, Assistant General, who was returning to Montréal. It was a short, but comforting visit, as her departure was confirmed for June 16. The westward caravan's departure however, was delayed by torrential rain, and on June 18, they began the second leg of their trip. The missionaries were then cramped in oxcarts, with boxes and luggage, for the next 800 kilometers to Saint Boniface. The caravan included 13 carts led by as many oxen named: Black, Corbeau, Lady, Brutal, Format, Rouget, Surprenant, Barbouillé, Barriolé, Trois Pouces, Nez Blanc and Dos Blanc. Reading this list, one can suggest that these oxen were bilingual! One of them, however, had no name passed on to history as only 12 names could be traced.<sup>3</sup> Sister Agnès noted later:

*The weather is nice, but the roads are horrible; at some places, there were bridges newly built, but you should see how! They were big trees thrown side by side. You can imagine how we were jerked about in our carriage...The river is very high... many brooks and sloughs to cross...Sister Boucher stepped on a snake... or was it a branch? She got so afraid that she began to run back to the tent and lost one shoe.<sup>4</sup>*

There was not a day without similar experiences, whether hilarious or frightening. One day, they met a large caravan of 36 chariots coming from Saint Boniface. The men informed the missionaries that there were about 100 Sioux on the road rushing to declare war at Crowing in revenge against the Sauteux tribe who had killed eight of their people.<sup>5</sup>

Three days before arriving at Pembina, on July 4, 1860, the travelers saw a carriage, and two men on horses coming towards them. The horses were soon identified by a guide as being the sisters' horses from Saint Boniface. Rejoicing began among Bishop

Grandin's crowd, rejoicing multiplied when a letter from Bishop Taché was delivered, addressed to: 'The Sisters of Charity en route for Red River'. How thoughtful and kind!

The following day, they had to cross a river that was so high, the men had to build a canoe for the baggage. Then, the sisters had to be carried on the men's backs to cross the muddy terrain. To that, Bishop Grandin commented:

*Poor Sisters, before you arrive at Ile-à-la-Crosse, you will have been carried many times!*<sup>6</sup>

July 9, 1860, the caravan arrived at Saint Norbert where two Bishops were awaiting them resulting in Sister Agnès' comment:

*We had two Bishops to see us leave at Saint Paul, we needed two again for our arrival at Saint Norbert.*<sup>7</sup>

The explanation for Saint Norbert was that Bishop Grandin had left the group with Father Jean Séguin early in the morning to arrive before Bishop Taché who was to meet him in that village. The trick worked well. By 1600 hours, Bishop Grandin was in Saint Norbert and Bishop Taché arrived 45 minutes later! The rest of the caravan arrived at 2000 hours. Escorted by their two Bishops, everyone walked to the church in a prayer of gratitude for a safe arrival. The travelers were ready for their last night of sleep before reaching Saint Boniface. But, the night was short. The Grey Nuns were so elated to meet with Sisters Flavie Laurent and Hedwige Dandurand, missioning at Saint Norbert; they talked and talked late into the night.

On July 10, the long-desired day of arrival at Saint Boniface, the travelers participated in Mass, a quick breakfast and soon they could see the carriages sent from Saint Boniface. By 0830 hours, everyone and everything was loaded on the ferry-boat: six carriages and 12 horsemen, a magnificent procession!

*Within 15 minutes of our arrival, we began hearing the church bells announcing the missionaries. As we arrived, a ceremonial welcome was ready; all went to the church [cathedral]...the procession of Bishops and priests, clothed*

*for a ceremony, walked to the altar. The hymn of thanksgiving: Te Deum was sung, followed by the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. It was very moving, I assure you, there was an abundance of tears.<sup>8</sup>*

The missionaries had been traveling for 36 days from Montréal. In Saint Boniface, they met the third Grey Nun, Sister Pépin and a volunteer, Marie-Luce Fortier who were to join them. They now had 20 days for community sharing and rejoicing. The joy however, was mixed with sadness at the thought of the mother house they had left so far behind, and of their departure for Ile-à-la-Crosse set for July 30.

Twenty days had gone by too fast. This last part of the trip was to be an uninterrupted series of accidents, difficulties and miseries of all kinds. For 67 more days, they were to slowly, but surely, increase the distance that separated them from Montréal, through 37 portages, through countless rivers and lakes and rapids, nights under the tent, rain, thunder, cold and scorching heat, and with the unwelcomed company of mosquitoes. The list of dangers the missionaries endured over these weeks covers some 20 pages of the **Chroniques**. It is a spine-chilling account. Thank God they survived! Not only was nature cruel, but the equipment was dangerous. The temporary guides, hired for about 12 days, August 13 to 24, to assist between Grand Rapids and Lac Cumberland, were most hard and ruthless. Providence was really present with the missionaries every minute of this dangerous trip. How did they survive? One comment among many in the **Chroniques** gives a glimpse of their formula:

*...This circumstance, while it left us at the mercy of Providence, gave us an opportunity to admire and bless this divine and maternal hand who watches over her own.<sup>9</sup>*

By September 13, the neophyte travelers thought they had gone through the worst of their trip and began to figure out how many days separated them from Ile-à-la-Crosse. They discovered that they were in for a surprise when, having to change guides once more on September 14, at Trois-Petits-Diables Rapids



(Three Little Devils Rapids), they were left alone until replacements arrived. Furthermore, they had no means of transportation on that site. They clung to the hope that the promised help would arrive soon. Soon, happened to be on September 24. Eleven days of not knowing, sometimes hoping, sometimes despairing; 11 days that included almost a week of rain and snow and freezing, and almost total fasting due to a shortage of food. When nine strong men showed up at the detour of the lake, with the needed barge and much sympathy towards the abandoned missionaries, immediate gratitude flowed from every heart. So grateful to see Bishop Grandin back as their beloved Bishop, the nine 'saviors' fell to their knees, asking his blessings.

The trials were not over. One night, the barge was caught in the rapids, all efforts to move it having failed. In early morning, while the men, tired of a long night of failures, were sitting quietly, trying to eat breakfast, the three sisters and the volunteer walked toward the rapids to examine the situation. Lo and behold, the barge was freeing itself from the eddy and had begun to follow the flow of the river. They called to the men who, as on Resurrection morning, did not believe the women. They continued their breakfast. The first calls were repeated by other more urgent ones and finally the men went to the rescue of their only means of transportation.<sup>10</sup>

After many more hours of portage and six more long days of traveling, beginning at 0200 hours, when the wind was favorable, the undaunted travelers,

*began to see, through our tears, houses and a church with a high steeple supporting the cross, instrument of our redemption. Coming closer, we could distinguish two black robes with crosses sparkling in the sun. They were two Oblates, Fathers Valentin Végréville and Julien Moulin. Brother Louis Dubé was also on the shores with many of the Cree and Métis population. Bishop Vital Grandin gave his first episcopal blessing to his people of Ile-à-la-Crosse, all kneeling down at the shore.<sup>11</sup>*

The missionaries had taken 67 days to travel 1,700 kilometers from Saint Boniface, in the most horrible conditions. They had finally arrived. All were ready for a great celebration. This was mid-afternoon, Thursday, October 4, 1860, the day the Grey Nuns' mission at Ile-à-la-Crosse was founded. Bishop Grandin, who had continued fasting in order to celebrate Mass on his arrival, went directly to the church, put on his purple cassock and other liturgical vestments and began the celebration. The people were transported with joy. They sang with great enthusiasm and the sisters shed abundant tears while, in their prayer, joining in the melodies of the Natives and Métis, they,

*made in their favor, the sacrifice of our life, of our health  
and of our strengths.*<sup>12</sup>

Following Mass, the priests accompanied the new arrivals to their house, now an episcopal residence, and Brother Louis Dubé served them lunch. Then, Bishop Grandin and the priests invited the sisters to visit their own house nearby.

## *Their home*

The description of this building in the **Chroniques** reflects the sisters' satisfaction and surprise. The 10 by seven meters building was identical in size to the episcopal residence. There was one classroom; a lovely kitchen for the volunteer, Marie-Luce Fortier, with a table, a cupboard and a stove; further down the hall, a small room with a table and a bench made the refectory. On the second floor, there were five rooms and a community room with a stove, a table, six chairs and a cupboard.<sup>13</sup>

Beds were considered an unacceptable luxury amidst such poverty. That first night, and many nights thereafter, the sisters rolled themselves into blankets and slept on the floor. Lightheartedly, the sisters noted that this was a vast improvement from nights in the tent or under the stars.

Then came the time to clean up the unfinished house. Limestone was unavailable at Ile-à-la-Crosse; the sisters chose the

next best, clay. The chimneys were made of hay and clay; they had to be clipped to prevent catching fire when approaching with a candle. There was not enough kitchen-stuff, such as cooking grease, or fat to make candles, so they added water. That created another problem: one candle could not last through the night, and the sisters would go without light during the long winter nights.

### *Their ministries*

During his recent visit in France, Bishop Grandin received a small amount of money from a monastery to be used for a house under the patronage of Saint Bruno. On October 6, 1860, the Bishop blessed the sisters' residence and gave it the name *Hôpital Saint-Bruno*, a name which was kept until 1874 when a new building was blessed and named Saint-Joseph Hospital. This was in keeping with a promise made by Bishop Grandin at the fire of 1867.

A sick nine year-old boy, Philippe Bekatla, became their first patient on October 6, 1860. Hence the sisters started a hospital in their unfinished house. Philippe would spend his days in the kitchen to keep warm and sleep beside the community room at night because he was afraid to be alone on the second floor. When he had to use the outhouse at night, a sister had to walk out with him into the dark and cold. In spite of months of loving care and attention, the little boy did not get better and was taken home as he neared death.<sup>14</sup>

Patients came in large numbers that first year; their trust in the sisters' healing power lasted many generations. It likely began with the white settlers who came in 1776 and the Métis nation which began at Ile-à-la-Crosse.

On October 8, 1860, the superior, Sister Agnès took on her function of sacristin, while continuing her responsibility to care for the sick. She took other tasks as well, as she adds in the **Chroniques:**

*I took it as a pleasant duty to set aside some of my time to*



*help Sister Pépin and teach sewing to the children. For them, to mend clothes was a mystery!*<sup>15</sup>

Sister Pépin prepared for classes which were to start on November 26 of that year. That day, *Ecole Sainte Famille* was opened and 15 students arrived as boarders. Classes for the eight boys and seven girls were held in the sisters' residence, using a room of four by seven meters which had four successive names throughout the day depending on use: dormitory, refectory, recreation room and classroom.

Sister Boucher was responsible for laundering and mending for all the clothes of the priests and brothers, for both the residents and those passing through. The volunteer, Marie-Luce Fortier, took responsibility for the kitchen. It did not take long for Brother Louis Dubé to give all his kitchen tools to Marie-Luce, along with the task of feeding all members of the mission which, one month later included: boarders, residents, orphans, priests, brothers and the sisters, more than 25 people in all. On October 15, 1860, the sisters admitted the first two orphans, Gabriel and Marie-Thérèse Lafleur. There were also two elderly women who were living at the mission: Josephte Rougette and Mélanie Sathene.

All these people were accommodated in the kitchen until the building could be completed. After November 26, when children arrived as boarders, the eight boys always slept at the episcopal residence; they would arrive at the sisters' residence at 0530 hours and leave at 2000 hours. It was found that, in order to teach basic education and hygienic practices, all that time was needed for the sisters to fill this mother role. That one building had become, in no time, the sisters' residence, hospital, orphanage, an 'old folks home', and soon, a boarding school.

When Christmas arrived, the sisters prepared a poor, but inspiring little crèche for the chapel. Baby Jesus was a gift from the Grey Nuns of Ottawa, an autonomous branch of Grey Nuns, only 15 years old at that time. In spite of snow and storm, many Natives left their camps and came to the mission for Christmas celebrations. Seeing this representation of a newborn Jesus, they



were so impressed and so delightfully childlike in their reaction that the sisters admitted being deeply moved.<sup>16</sup>

Before closing the year 1860, after three months of ministry, the chronicler wrote a list of services rendered by the sisters to the population. They had bound 161 wounds, given out 171 medicines, and made 27 visits to the camps and tents.<sup>17</sup> A marvelous record of service in such a short time!

Communications with the outside world were rare and yet so ardently desired. Their first mail arrived on February 6, 1861; the first barge arriving from Saint Boniface appeared on July 7, 1861, and their first clock, a gift from Bishop Taché arrived in September, 1861.<sup>18</sup> Prior to receiving that gift, the location of the sun was their faithful reminder of time.

It is very moving to read some extracts of the **Chroniques** referring to the tender care given to the sick by the sisters. One example was a note on six-year old François Beaulieu:

*He was beautiful as an angel, the idol of his father and grandfather, who, on August 5, 1864, had confided him to Bishop Grandin to instruct him. Again, on November 30, 1864, François was brought to the Mission with severe pleurisy which had started several days before. The symptoms became more and more serious. Bishop Grandin was really sad to see this child near death. Everyone joined in prayers, promises and we gave him the most dedicated care, nothing seemed to help... On January 2, 1865, around 0200 hours, little François took his place among the angels in heaven after having represented them on earth.<sup>19</sup>*

## *Difficulties multiply*

Fasting became an everyday happening at the Mission; fish was very scarce and the garden produced poor results. The cross was heavy to bear. It seemed impossible to envisage greater difficulties. Then fires were on the agenda to further divert their energy and resources. In December, 1865, the outside oven started a fire near

the house, which, thanks to the orphan Baptiste Pépin, who spotted the danger, was extinguished in time to avert a disaster. Then, again on April 16, 1866, fire started in the chimney. This time, Bishop Grandin saw the roof of the sisters' convent on fire at 0500 hours. He cried: *Fire at the Grey Nuns!* All were on the spot to avert yet another disaster. For the third year in a row, in 1867, fire again visited this very poor settlement. A new house, built for the sisters, but still occupied by the Bishop, priests and brothers, was totally destroyed by that destructive element in the evening of March 1, 1867. For fear of a general engulfment of the whole Mission, Bishop Grandin, all missionaries, the two elderly women and the nine orphans moved onto a snowbank on the frozen lake to observe, through their tears and prayer of resignation, the destruction of their meagre possessions in the church and the sisters' house. Fortunately, the wind turned before the church and the sisters' house became prey to the destruction. Upon returning to the sisters' residence, Bishop Grandin, pale and shaken by the emotions and the cold, invited the missionaries to the chapel where he began to sing a *Te Deum*, a hymn of gratitude to God as they were stricken and spared at the same time. Then, all found a place on the floor, rolled up in blankets and attempted to sleep. These crowded conditions were their fare for the following week, until the male employees' house could be re-arranged to accommodate the Bishop, priests and brothers. Bishop Grandin was to write on the tragedy that they *had lost everything and did not even have a handkerchief to wipe off their tears*. By October, 1867, another new house was completed for the priests, smaller than the previous one, but ready sooner than anticipated. Again, in April, 1868, Brother Jean Perrard discovered that the floor under the large oven was burned through. Another major fire was prevented, thanks to Divine Providence. September 14, 1868, a similar danger occurred when the barn came very close to catching fire. But with the help of all, and the protection of Divine Providence, the barn was saved.<sup>20</sup> We find many similar situations in the **Chroniques**, where fire was almost victorious against the efforts of the valiant firefighters. It was often concluded that Mother d'Youville had protected them

from a worse inferno. The missionaries' faith in Divine Providence never wavered.

That year, 1866, there were no fish to be found; famine was complete, noted the chronicler:

*...this may appear hard, but for whoever experiences it, this is nothing compared to what the heart - this poor and miserable heart - suffers from loneliness, isolation and remoteness from those we love, the difficulty to correspond with our superiors, the disappointments which have happened so frequently...*<sup>21</sup>

There was a note of sadness in the **Chroniques**, on July 31, 1863, when the departure of one of the foundresses was registered. Sister Philomène Boucher was called to Red River in the hope of recovering her health badly damaged by deprivations and other hardships. It took one year to have a replacement with the arrival of Sister Hedwidge Dandurand in 1864. More help arrived in the following years: Sister Sophronie Blanchet in 1866 and, in 1871, Sister Sara Riel, sister of the soon-to-be-well-known Louis Riel.

## *Miraculous cures*

Two miraculous cures had been entered in the **Chroniques** in previous years. Sister Hedwidge Dandurand on January 20, 1869 and Father Prosper Legeard on July 13, 1871. Who was the heavenly protector? The cures were attributed to Blessed Marguerite-Marie, a sister of Paray-Le-Monial in France and apostle of the Sacred Heart, recently beatified; and she was not finished with the cures needed at Ile-à-la-Crosse. The next 'miracle' was on November 23, 1872 when Sister Sara Riel lay dying of a violent pneumonia. After praying to the future saint Marguerite-Marie, she suddenly experienced full recovery. Sister Sara Riel later obtained permission to change her name to Sister Marguerite-Marie, in honor of her heavenly benefactress.<sup>22</sup> The pious and dedicated Sister Marguerite-Marie was cured. However, she contacted a serious case of tuberculosis 11 years later, on October 16,



1883. She died a saintly death on December 27 of that year.<sup>23</sup>

## *Epidemics*

At least five epidemics occurred at Ile-à-la-Crosse between 1882 and 1903. In September, 1882, whooping cough affected many children at the Mission, as well as those who lived with their families. Two orphan girls at the Mission did not survive the disease. In January, 1884, a violent cold, accompanied by fever, assumed near epidemic proportions and in March of the same year, it was typhoid that threatened the lives of a number of people.<sup>24</sup> Then, in 1887 and 1889, an undetermined 'sickness' affected several persons in the settlement. In April and May, 1903, scarlet fever and smallpox found hosts in many children. Fortunately all recovered, but among adults in the region who were affected, several died.<sup>25</sup>

## *The Northwest Rebellion*

Life in the North bears tragedies of all kinds. Never could the missionaries of Ile-à-la-Crosse have imagined the possibility of one such as the Northwest Rebellion. Having very little contact with the rest of the country, therefore, very little news, it was only on April 21, 1885 that a Métis, Baptiste Charlot, arriving from Lac Vert (Green Lake), informed people at the Mission of the rebellion of the Métis against the Government. Charlot also informed the missionaries that Louis Riel had said he would come himself to Ile-à-la-Crosse to avenge the death of his sister, adding that her death was the result of mistreatment by the priests and sisters.<sup>26</sup> The missionaries were informed that two Oblates had been killed at Lac La Grenouille, Fathers Léo Fafard and Félix Marchand. Several Missions had been rampaged and destroyed. War was declared and seeking safety became a priority for those at the Mission.

Prudence required that everyone leave the Mission until more peaceful days arrived. There were 55 persons to be accommodat-



ed, including orphans, boarders, elderly women, volunteers and sisters. It was possible to return some of the children to their families in order to reduce the size of the group. On April 28, 1885, at 1800 hours, they departed for the 80-kilometer walk across the frozen lake that would bring them to a small deserted island, later called Ile Ste-Croix (Holy Cross Island). They traveled all night, in haste, to escape danger. They made several detours to deceive the warriors. At 0130 hours, a priest had joined them; they stopped, celebrated Mass and traveled again. The 34 exiles arrived at Ile Ste-Croix after eight days, on May 6. On that island, they were to experience poor conditions and crowded space within the hunters and fishers camp; they were at the mercy of the weather. They were, however, often consoled by God's presence among them in the Blessed Sacrament and celebrating Mass almost daily. On May 24, Pentecost Sunday, they planted a cross on the island and inscribed this memorial note in the Chipewyan language:

*It is on this Island that the priests, sisters, brothers and the factor, frightened by the proximity of the Cree rebels and persecutors, came to find refuge in the midst of their faithful Chipewyans. It is as a souvenir of their sojourn among them that this cross was planted in order to thank God.<sup>27</sup>*

The cross, once elevated, was blessed and the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed. That day, abundant rain prevented celebration of the Mass, as this was always done in the open air. Soon, better news started arriving from the Mission. No trouble had arisen at Ile-à-la-Crosse, but they were told that the Grey Nuns of Lac LaBiche had been in a similar situation, having to escape to a deserted island. They were also informed that Louis Riel had been imprisoned. By that time, the ice had melted on the lake and they were able to travel by barge, with a few portages. Leaving the island in early morning, on May 29, they were at Ile-à-la-Crosse the following evening, on Saturday, May 30, 1885, at 2200 hours. They had been absent 32 days. Their first action was to enter the church and thank God and the Blessed Virgin Mary for their love and protection during these days of fear, uncertain-

ty and anxiety. Then they reached their home and could not wait to settle for a much needed night of sleep. Life returned to normal at the Mission, although the fatigue accumulated over that dreadful month required more rest than usual for most of the missionaries.

## *Grey Nuns leave the Mission*

Fires, floods and famine experienced by the missionaries were adding up to the difficulties of living at Ile-à-la-Crosse. In the year 1901, the flood had been especially furious and lasted from early June to the end of October. The land around the houses was still inundated when the water froze at the end of October. On Saturday, July 13, 1901, Mother Vicar Eugénie Letellier arrived to visit the sisters and assess the situation. She had earlier written the Superior General, Mother Praxède Filiatrault, requesting approval to remove the sisters from Ile-à-la-Crosse. Providence guiding the unreliable mail system, no answer had arrived by the time her visit was finished. Therefore, the sisters would not leave the Mission at this time. When the letter finally arrived on December 15, approving the proposal, it was too late for any change that year.<sup>28</sup> The approval was then withdrawn.

Because of the flood, no seeding or harvest was possible, thus adding to the famine crisis. In October, 1901, having no feed for the animals, 13 cows had to be killed rather than subjecting them to death by starvation. In April, 1902, the sisters ceased milking the remaining cows, except two, because they were too emaciated. The health of the sisters was very precarious after suffering so many years. Four had died at a very young age between 1877 and 1897. This was not ignored by the new Superior General, Mother Mathilde Hamel, but the time had not come yet for a final decision to close the Mission. At the General Chapter of 1902, it was agreed that the sisters would remain at the 'Island of Miseries'.<sup>29</sup>

Three years later, in June, 1905, a letter from Mother Hamel informed the sisters of Ile-à-la-Crosse that their recall was decided, and that as soon as the Sisters of Saint Joseph arrived from

France, the Grey Nuns could return to Saint Boniface.<sup>30</sup> Although expected, the news caused sincere grief for the sisters and, as soon as it became known by the people, they came in large numbers to express their sorrow at the thoughts of losing their sisters. Their sadness was obviously shared by the sisters and the Oblates and, while the sisters were comforted with the love of their people, they knew that they could not continue much longer in the present circumstances.

The eight Sisters of Saint Joseph of Lyon, France, arrived on September 7, 1905 and were welcomed warmly by the Grey Nuns. Almost the whole population was at the shore to curiously look at the newcomers. After giving some orientation to their successors, the six Grey Nuns and four volunteers left on September 9 after 45 years of total dedication to their God, their Church and the people of Ile-à-la-Crosse. They were leaving behind, in the cemetery, the remains of four Grey Nuns who had died at Ile-à-la-Crosse since 1860: Sister Hedwige Dandurand, November 8, 1877 at 40 years old; Sister Sara Riel (Marguerite-Marie), December 27, 1883 at 35; Sister Denise Senay, October 23, 1886 at 46 and Sister Ste-Mectilde (Angélique Dicker), March 8, 1897 at 30 years old. They were leaving a Mission engraved in their hearts through the mystery of suffering and loving. They would often return in spirit and in prayer. And one day they would return in person!

### *Returning to their people*

The Grey Nuns returned to Ile-à-la-Crosse! After one year at the Mission, the Sisters of Saint Joseph moved to Lac La Plonge (Beauval), a short distance southeast of Ile-à-la-Crosse. There they stayed one more year, but their acclimatization remained extremely difficult and, in 1907, they requested to be relieved of their commitment. Repeated requests from Bishop Albert Pascal of Prince Albert, the Oblates and the people of the region, prompted a turn of events. One letter from Bishop Pascal on September 30, 1909 is particularly convincing:



*...God seems to tell us that only the Grey Nuns of Montréal, the apostles par excellence of the most difficult missions of western Canada, are able to succeed in these missions... I cannot believe that you cannot see God's will in our serious need...The following reasons might help convincing you: danger of floods at the school is now almost nil; the government will help now because this was the first condition of the Treaty with the Natives; there is now a train reaching Green Lake, making the trip much easier; there are holy missionaries resting in the cemetery who seem to cry for your return; and for me, I would be greatly consoled to have the Grey Nuns back at Ile-à-la- Crosse.<sup>31</sup>*

The Grey Nuns returned on January 28, 1910, first to Lac La Plonge (Beauval) to where the school had been transferred.<sup>32</sup> As for Ile-à-la-Crosse, their return was only in 1917. The main reason was that most missionary activities had moved to Beauval because of disastrous flooding at Ile-à-la-Crosse. After Bishop Ovide Charlebois made his first visit in the area in 1911, a revival occurred at Ile-à-la-Crosse and, coincidentally, or Providentially, fewer floods occurred in the following years.

## *New foundresses*

On September 21, 1917, four Grey Nuns arrived at Ile-à-la-Crosse to begin again their work of education and health care: Sisters St-Nazaire (Philomène Nadeau), superior, Elise Martel, Cécile Nadeau and Séphora Fouquette. Sister St-Nazaire had served at Ile-à-la-Crosse from 1898 to 1905. Her presence was precious to all who knew her.

There was much rejoicing, a gun salute, and visits by the people to assure the sisters that they were welcomed. The people were generous in offering all kinds of help to make the sisters' return and readjustment a heart-warming experience. Hearts were light and happiness reigned in the little residence. On September 30, Father Marius Rossignol blessed the house and placed it under the protection of the Holy Family. Classes started on October 1,



1917 for 30 children; a few of them boarders, a number that kept increasing. The orphanage mission of the sisters' residence was also activated as one handicapped orphan girl was welcomed, Marie-Eugénie Lafleur.<sup>33</sup> Their health care functions, at the convent and in home visiting, also resumed quickly as the onset of the Spanish Flu made many victims.<sup>34</sup>

## *Fires*

Almost five years of unclouded happiness among the sisters and the people of Ile-à-la-Crosse had elapsed, for which everyone was grateful. On Holy Thursday, April 1, 1920, the sisters brought their homage of gratitude in their prayers at the church. Suddenly, Sister Ste-Cécile looked through the window and saw fire at their house. All those assembled in the church for the celebration ran to help, but it was too late to stop the conflagration. The house burned down quickly; only a few items were saved.

On Good Friday, at the veneration of the Cross, the superior, Sister St-Nazaire broke down, sobbing. As if no one had felt free to express their distress until the signal was given, the whole congregation now broke with loud sobbing and abundant tears. This was, for many, a close identification with their dying Savior; it was their way to say to the Father in union with their Savior: *Your Will be done*.<sup>35</sup> Healing and peace returned to the faith-filled community.

This tragedy brought to light, again, the generosity of many individuals and groups. The priests arranged for temporary accommodation of the sisters in their own small residence, using every corridor to make room for one more orphan, one more boarder, one more sister. The day following the fire, sisters from the mother house in Montréal sent boxes of useful clothes and other articles. These boxes arrived on January 21 of the following year, nine months after the fire. Sisters from Saint Boniface, Saint Albert and Beauval were also most generous in their assistance. The people from Ile-à-la-Crosse were no less magnanimous: on Easter Sunday, just three days after the fire, a collection for the sis-

ters was taken in the church which, to everyone's surprise, brought a fantastic total of \$400.00.<sup>36</sup>

By April 12, 1920, classes resumed in the priests' residence for 25 students, and the sisters were back to their various ministries. On September 20, the excavation for a new house was completed, giving reasons for hope.<sup>37</sup> Moving into this new building was possible the following year on October 24, 1921. Immediately, Fathers Marius Rossignol, superior, François-Xavier Ancel and Laurent Legoff came for the blessing of this new dwelling. Classes began on the same day at 1030 hours. No one was more eager to begin a normal life again than the students and teachers. The Oblates were thanked profusely for their generous assistance throughout these difficult 18 months. The following year, on April 4, 1922, the telephone was installed in the residence. A novelty for Ile-à-la-Crosse.

Another tragedy, miraculously averted, was recorded in the hearts of the missionaries of the 1940s. Boxes of clothing stored in the furnace room began smoldering one evening. All were alerted by the smell and the smoke in the convent. After searching through the house and finding the crucial spot, priests and brothers succeeded in extinguishing the smoldering fire. Once security was assured, Father Guy Remy came to the superior, Sister Berthe Gamache with a framed picture of Marguerite d'Youville found above the danger area saying: *She is the one who saved you.*<sup>38</sup>

## Drownings

Three years passed, filled with good days. Mother Octavie Dugas, Superior General, spent Christmas and New Year's Day with the sisters at Ile-à-la-Crosse, and was gratified to note the enthusiasm and happiness in the little Grey Nuns family. Once her last term as superior at Ile-à-la-Crosse was completed, Sister St-Nazaire became superior at nearby Beauval; she was replaced by Sister Clémentine Raymond in December, 1922.

A tragedy loomed on the horizon. On Saturday, September 23, 1923, all children and missionaries were in a motor boat tak-

ing a berry-picking trip to an island. Sister Cécile Nadeau drowned along with three of the seven boys in her canoe which was attached to the motor boat. The canoe capsized when it hit rocks submerged in the water. Sister Nadeau, a promising, ardent missionary, was 29 years of age. Her death and that of the three young boys, Eli Arcand, Jean Bélanger and Charles Notomagan, were deeply grieved by all the people of Ile-à-la-Crosse and surrounding areas. It remained a vivid memory for a long time. Messages of sympathy poured in from Bishop Ovide Charlebois, the mother house, provincial houses and other Grey Nuns houses and the Oblates.<sup>39</sup>

Another tragedy occurred on June 22, 1941. Sister Eugénie Lamoureux, who, out of pure charity, attempted to save a 14-year old girl from drowning, was herself engulfed in the waters. Both were gone in minutes; one, the unsuccessful heroine, was 38 years old, the other, Mary Laliberté, a promising young lady. God's ways are inscrutable!

Close to Ile-à-la-Crosse, a bus driver drowned when his brakes failed and the bus plunged into the water at Buffalo Narrows, on May 13, 1965. This called for an entry of sadness in the **Chroniques** and a kind note of condolence sent to his family by the superior, Sister Pauline Lemieux. Close to the sisters' hearts was the loss by drowning of a 13-year old girl, Linda Aubichon, on June 1, 1968. In spite of all efforts of the priests, sisters, Corporal Pless of the RCMP and his helper, Linda could not be rescued from the merciless element.

## *The School situation*

In 1935, the Oblates Superior General, Father Théodore Labouré, visited Ile-à-la-Crosse as well as other Canadian Missions of his priests and Brothers. A most interesting document resulted from his observations. He specifically noted:

*A most important step to attract the Natives to God is to learn their languages and to study them in depth... what influence can missionaries have on children if they cannot*



*communicate through a common language...<sup>40</sup>*

Providing the children with an opportunity for education has always been a priority in missionary endeavors. At Ile-à-la-Crosse, the Oblates and Grey Nuns were among the first to extend such an opportunity. Until the 1940s, there was no government subsidy for schools at Ile-à-la-Crosse. The missionaries were left with meagre financial resources, but their dedication was relentless. Since 1860, the Oblates and the Grey Nuns were making available free education to the Natives, Métis and White children, free food and lodging, for those who lived too far to commute every day, and free space in the sisters' residence for classes. It is no wonder that there was so much poverty at the Mission, in spite of a few generous benefactors and financial support from the Vicariate of Prince Albert.

Storm clouds gathered over this otherwise peaceful country. The School system of this small settlement of Ile-à-la-Crosse was not spared the years of religious subjugation of the 1940s in the province of Saskatchewan.<sup>41</sup> When the Liberal Party lost the provincial election to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation Party (CCF) in 1944, a new personage appeared on the scene, C.H. Piercy, superintendent of schools in the district of Kenistino which included Ile-à-la-Crosse. A secret report which he had written to the Government, and which was later leaked out to Ile-à-la-Crosse included statements such as:

*The Church took control of the schools...therefore, schools should be owned and controlled by the government...There is too much religion in the schools, symbols are displayed...therefore, out the crosses...out the 'Our Father'...There is too much division between boys and girls...therefore, construction of chalets for about 15 mixed children...<sup>42</sup>*

When, by chance, Bishop Martin Lajeunesse reviewed this infamous report, he was able to get the Premier, T. C. Douglas to visit Ile-à-la-Crosse for a meeting with the local Member of the Legislative Assembly, Marcién Marion and the priests of the sur-



rounding Missions. The evening of July 18, 1945 was a turning point for the religious life of Saskatchewan when this historic 3-hour meeting took place. During these hours, the sisters were in the chapel, praying for the success of the discussion and most of the population of Ile-à-la-Crosse was at the door, waiting to hear the results: a sure proof of commitment to their rights for good education for their children.

To think that the battle was over would be a serious misreading of history. It appears C. H. Piercy was pursuing his plans without proper authorization from the School Board or from his superiors in Regina. He easily earned the suspicion of the local population and his plans were aborted one after the other. On March 16, 1946, another landmark meeting was held at Marcien Marion's home, where C. H. Piercy was left no choice but to do justice to the Holy Family School. Rental of the classroom space at Holy Family, board and room subsidy for each child living at the school, and just salary paid to the sisters were all obtained, not without difficulty. An almost complete victory for Catholic education for children at Ile-à-la-Crosse!

Sister Yvette Lapointe, who had arrived at Ile-à-la-Crosse in 1946, was welcomed by Sisters Anna Bisson, Archange Brady and Léda Belley, also teaching at Ile-à-la-Crosse. Sister Lapointe's presence was precious in the timely need to seek justice for teachers of remote areas in Saskatchewan. She was elected president of the new *Remote Northern Areas Teachers' Association* in September, 1947. That association eventually melded with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in 1948. Sister Lapointe was elected as Northern representative on the Executive, testifying to the credible ascendancy she immediately obtained among her peers. By 1950, an equitable situation had been established for the teachers of Ile-à-la-Crosse and surrounding districts; C. H. Piercy was no longer Administrator of the district and there was encouraging progress at the Holy Family School.<sup>45</sup> This abbreviated presentation of such a complex situation can hardly do justice to the valiant architects of a great victory. However, it can invite avid readers to further consult writings on the subject.

In the midst of such a crucial struggle for the future of education in northern Saskatchewan, Bishop Martin Lajeunesse found time for occasional visits in the classrooms. One day, he asked the students where the sun rose in the morning. They answered with assurance: *in the east*. And in the evening, where is the sun? With no less confidence, the answer came: *in the west*. And, where is the sun at noon? The students became baffled, but one girl risked: *at Ile-à-la-Crosse!*<sup>44</sup>

Now and again, Sisters received loving visits or letters from grateful former students, even as far as 30 to 40 years after they left the school. In March 2000, such a card was received by Sister Imelda Chartier which delighted the retired missionary:

*I always wanted to thank you for being the mother figure when I needed it most. You were a part of my life just when my mother disappeared. You were always so gentle and kind to everyone. These traits I really admired in you. I also appreciate the values, morals, discipline and work ethic that were instilled in me.*<sup>45</sup>

## The hospital

There had been many epidemics and diseases to battle in this settlement where no facility was available to provide observation and care to patients located hundreds of kilometers away from the Mission. The sisters were doing many home visits, treatments, dressings, dispensing of medications with no access to necessary equipment and supplies. The Spanish Influenza of 1918 and the typhoid outbreak of 1920-21 had taken a regrettable toll on the population. Time had come to fill the hope of many for a hospital at Ile-à-la-Crosse.

*Father [Rosignol], before I retire, I hope that I can accomplish something that will remain as the masterpiece of my public life. I want to establish a hospital here for the population of this northern part, who, so far have no medical facilities [said Dr. M. Seymour]... After six years of numer-*



*ous parleys and ironing out of difficulties, the Department of Indian Affairs at Ottawa agreed to build and equip a 22-bed hospital. By a verbal agreement, the Liberal government of the province was to take charge of the maintenance cost of the institution, and the two governments agreed to provide the service of a resident physician. The internal administration was left to the Vicariate of Keewatin, and for practical purposes, in the hands of the Mission of Ile-à-la-Crosse. So, the Grey Nuns, as always, took charge of the service, first under the direction of Father Rossignol, the Superior of the Mission.<sup>46</sup>*

All hurdles being out of the way, construction of Saint Joseph Hospital began in June, 1927. Sister Saint Adolphe (Ida Drapeau), a nurse, arrived in July, 1927 and was available to help with the organization of the hospital while responding to health calls in and around Ile-à-la-Crosse. By March 18, 1928, Dr. G. F. Amyot had his office ready for use within the unfinished hospital. Patients began arriving,

*On March 30, 1928, the first baby was born [to the Daigneault family]. She was a girl named Marguerite Thérèse Daigneault... In August the same year, there was installation of electricity in the hospital...<sup>47</sup>*

The official opening of the 25-bed hospital took place on April 11, 1928. Dr. M. Seymour and Father Marius Rossignol had realized their common dream and the people were delighted.

It would be presumptuous to think that the Mission had immunity against all problems. The following years were to bring failure of the electrical and water systems, heating became inadequate and the governments, provincial and federal, decided to transfer the dilapidated hospital to Bishop Martin Lajeunesse in 1936! The undaunted Bishop, fully trusting in Divine Providence, made the needed repairs and added a fire-proof annex.<sup>48</sup>

In the early 1970s, maintaining ownership and operation of the hospital became too onerous for the Vicariate of Keewatin. At the same time, a new organization was coming to life: the

Saskatchewan Catholic Health Council (SCHC), a creation of the Saskatchewan Bishops, with Ed Marion as president. On June 9, 1978, the Keewatin Vicariate sold the hospital to the new SCHC. A Sister of Saint Elizabeth of Humboldt, Sister Philomene Dobmaier became administrator in September of the same year.

The history of Saint Joseph Hospital would not be complete without mention of two physicians whose names stand out for their long service and dedication at Ile-à-la-Crosse: Dr. P. E. Lavoie who, in 1943 wrote **Les Origines de l'Ile-à-la-Crosse** and Dr. Meinrad Hoffmann. The latter received the highly coveted papal award Bene Merenti on June 4, 1967 in a meaningful ceremony conducted by Bishop Martin Lajeunesse and attended by his people: Natives, Métis and White and the Church community of Ile-à-la-Crosse.

## *Grey Nuns continue*

In 1960, the Grey Nuns celebrated the 100th anniversary of their arrival at Ile-à-la-Crosse. It was also in reality 100 consecutive years of service to the Mission they were celebrating, even if they were absent *physically* for 12 years from 1905 to 1917. During that absence, their hearts and prayers remained with their people of Ile-à-la-Crosse, their hope to return remained alive.

The Grey Nuns Congregation is forever grateful to the people of Ile-à-la-Crosse who so generously gave two of their beloved daughters to serve God in their ranks: Sisters Thérèse Arcand and Joséphine Bouvier. In the 140 years of the Grey Nuns involvement at Ile-à-la-Crosse, seven sisters were buried with the people they had served and loved. The four pioneers in the cemetery died before the Grey Nuns left in 1905; their names were given earlier in this chapter. In 1923, Sister Cécile Nadeau; in 1930, Sister Eugénie Lamoureux, and in 1991, Sister Thérèse Arcand joined them in this permanent resting place.

A former missionary from 1956 to 1971, Sister Germaine Lauzière, died at the Grey Nuns Regional Centre in Edmonton on December 31, 1999. During her last illness,



*...a very special incident happened when Rita Leonard-Guzik and Coryl Schuler were turning Sister Lauzière. As they both held on to her drawsheet to lift her, they felt her to be weightless, about 30 centimeters off the bed. The nurses, as well as Sister Lauzière, were all astonished and when Rita said: Do you know what is happening here? Sister Lauzière simply commented: It must have been the angels holding me up.<sup>49</sup>*

An aura of mystery, respect and astonishment resulted among the staff from this experience which will not soon be forgotten.

The last Grey Nun in the ministry of teaching at Ile-à-la-Crosse was Sister Marguerite Quirion. She left on December 26, 1970, 110 years after the first teacher, Sister Marie-Anne Pépin began in 1860. Two other teachers had left Ile-à-la-Crosse a few months earlier: Sisters Thérèse Chartier, on June 26 and Cléophee Beaudoin, on July 29, 1970.

In the year 2000, two Grey Nuns missionaries continued to visit at the hospital, perpetuating the tradition of service started 140 years ago with, and for, the people of this settlement. To date, a total of 159 Grey Nuns have served at Ile-à-la-Crosse during these years, giving a cumulated total of 910 years of dedication and mutual respect. May the two remaining missionaries, Sisters Lucie Lefebvre and Thérèse Lesage always find God in their labor of love.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 1

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- 1 Germain Lesage, O.M.I., **Capitale d'une Solitude**, Ottawa, Editions des Etudes Oblates, 1946, p. 17.
- 2 Notes of Sister Malvina Colette, in: Ile-à-la-Crosse **Chroniques** 1860-1885, pp. v, vi, GNRC Arch.
- 3 Journal of Sister Agnès, in **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. xix, GNRC Arch.
- 4 **Ibid.**, pp. xxi to xxvii.
- 5 **Ibid.**, p. xxiii.
- 6 **Ibid.**, p. xxix.
- 7 **Ibid.**, p. xxx.
- 8 **Ibid.**, p. xxxi.
- 9 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. 14, GNRC Arch.
- 10 **Ibid.**, pp. 26, 27.
- 11 **Ibid.**, p. 29.
- 12 **Ibid.**, p. 30.
- 13 **Ibid.**, p. 31.
- 14 **Ibid.**, p. 41.
- 15 **Ibid.**, p. 51.
- 16 **Ibid.**, pp. 52-53.
- 17 **Ibid.**, p. 55.
- 18 **Ibid.**, pp. 55, 58.
- 19 **Ibid.**, pp. 72, 76-77.
- 20 **Ibid.**, pp. 80, 81, 88, 96, 97, 100-101.
- 21 **Ibid.**, p. 83.
- 22 **Ibid.**, pp. 103, 116, 150.
- 23 **Ibid.**, pp. 315, 320.
- 24 **Ibid.**, pp. 298, 325.
- 25 **Chroniques**, 1886-1905, pp. 15, 50, 295, GNRC Arch.
- 26 All information about the Rebellion was taken from: **Chroniques**, 1860-1885, pp. 348-459.
- 27 **Ibid.**, p. 355.
- 28 **Chroniques**, 1886-1905, pp. 273-281, GNRC Arch.
- 29 **Ibid.**, p. 287.

- 30 **Historique**, doc. # 43, GNRC Arch.
- 31 **Historique**, doc. # 45.
- 32 This Mission will be presented in Chapter Three of this Volume.
- 33 **Chroniques** 1917-1944, p. 2-4, GNRC Arch.
- 34 **Ibid.**, p. 5.
- 35 **Ibid.**, pp. 10-12.
- 36 **Ibid.**, p. 13.
- 37 **Ibid.**, p. 16.
- 38 Gamache, Sister Berthe, Verbal reminiscences, January, 2000.
- 39 **Ibid.**, pp. 171, 172.
- 40 Labouré, Théodore, O.M.I., **Extraits de l'Acte Général de la visite**, Unpublished, p. 1.
- 41 Remy, Guy, O.M.I., **Mémoires d'un Insulaire - l'École Ste-Famille Ile-à-la-Crosse**, Unpublished Report, 1945. Much of the information of this crisis is taken from this Report.
- 42 These comments were found in the above-noted **Mémoires**, p. 4.
- 43 Levesque, Blandine, s.g.m., **Regardons en arrière**, Unpublished paper, 1950, pp. 1-8.
- 44 Beaudoin, Cléopée, s.g.m., **Reminiscences**, February 2000.
- 45 Caisse, Ruby to Sister Imelda Chartier, March 22, 2000.
- 46 **Island Breezes**, Vol. IX, No. 6, p. 10, 1948, quoting words of Dr. M. Seymour, Deputy Minister of Public Health, Saskatchewan, to Father Marius Rossignol in 1921.
- 47 Wylie, Faye, s.g.m., **Grey Nuns - Ile-à-la-Crosse**, Unpublished material, p. 4., GNRC Arch..
- 48 **Island Breezes**, Op. Cit., p. 10.
- 49 Desmarais, Sister Hélène, in Sister Germaine Lauzière's Eulogy, January 5, 2000.

## CHAPTER TWO

1907 -

### SASKATOON: SAINT PAUL'S HOSPITAL

A serious outbreak of typhoid among workers building a bridge in Saskatoon was a call from God for the Grey Nuns to bring health care to Saskatoon. The growing city in central Saskatchewan numbered some 2,000 persons in 1906 when two Grey Nuns arrived on Saturday, September 29.<sup>1</sup> They were only passing through Saskatoon to attend Sunday Mass while on a fund-raising mission for their orphanage and hospice in Saint Boniface. That brief stop-over was the beginning of a Grey Nuns presence that was to last at least 94 years, from 1906 to the time of writing in 2000 and hopefully, on into the future.

There was no hospital in Saskatoon in 1906, but there was a small house on 11th Street, which had been used as a temporary hospital during the Northwest Rebellion in 1885 and had since been designated as a historic site.<sup>2</sup> Some 20 years later, there was a resurgent need of such facility. The 1906 typhoid epidemic left no doubt in the minds of the people of Saskatoon that a hospital was needed, and immediately. This was sometimes, also, the opinion of Father Léandre Vachon, parish priest and his assistant, Father Joseph Paillé, both Oblates. The latter had the surprise of his life when he saw two Grey Nuns knocking at the door of his make-shift hospital, the small and crowded rectory. In his faith, he was sure they were an answer to his prayer. Pressed to return to their *begging* duties, Sisters Phaneuf (Alma Peltier) and Julie Guay explained their predicament: they were torn between their earlier commitment to their superior in Saint Boniface and the urgent needs of these four patients, lying in every available space in the rectory, with no caregivers in sight. They prayed for God's guidance and decided to stay until they could contact their supe-



rior in Saint Boniface.<sup>3</sup>

On October 2, 1906, Dr. Peter Donald Stewart, who feared for the departure of these wonderful nurses, asked them if they could remain at least until the epidemic was over. Upon their evident hesitation, he enquired about the name of the Mother Vicar and immediately sent her a telegram. The following day, Mother Despins (Georgina Beaudoin) responded affirmatively, to the joy of all. The two sisters were thus allowed to remain two more weeks. In October 1906, Mother Vicar Despins came to Saskatoon, with Sister Alphonsine Archambault, to study the situation and report their findings to Mother Mathilde Hamel, Superior General.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, further pressing requests from Saskatoon obtained extensions to December, then to January 1907. Letter after letter indicated that the mother house was unable to approve the foundation of another hospital at that time. In reverse direction, urgent correspondence continued to expose the immediate needs of the people of Saskatoon, especially during the ongoing epidemic. Meanwhile, Sisters Phaneuf and Guay lived their new, temporary and unofficial mission with untiring devotion, gaining more and more the appreciation and support of the priests, physicians, patients and families. Providence seemed actively at work since, following Mother Vicar Despins' visit, her recommendation to Mother Mathilde Hamel, Superior General, and the visit in Montréal of Father Léandre Vachon with three prominent citizens, the General Council, on January 19, 1907, approved the founding of a hospital in Saskatoon.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout these months of uncertainty, Sisters Phaneuf and Guay were relentless in their service and dedication. As Christmas approached, they took time to make beautiful decorations at the church, the best they ever had in Saskatoon! It is reported that the church was full for Midnight Mass; some people came from as far as 125 kilometers to attend this event at Saint Paul's Parish.<sup>6</sup>

## *The foundresses*

History cannot underestimate the extraordinary role of Sisters Phaneuf and Guay in the founding of Saint Paul's Hospital. Without their stop-over in Saskatoon to attend Sunday Mass, these sisters may have never known, nor responded to, the extreme health care needs of this new city, they would not have been made *prisoners of caring*, and Saint Paul's Hospital would not have come into existence. A letter from Sister Sainte Praxède (Anna Dubé) to Mother Anna Piché, Superior General referring to the Blessing of the newly built Hospital in 1913 noted the unofficial title of these two remarkable sisters,

*Several of our sisters of the surrounding missions, among them, the two foundresses, Sisters Phaneuf and Guay, accepted our invitation.<sup>7</sup>*

Following this long preamble, one is eager to meet the other two sisters who officially received the mission to open a hospital in Saskatoon: Sisters Sainte-Dosithée (Marie-Délina Arsenault) and Julia Blakely. After a few short days of preparation, Sister Blakely together with Mother Elodie Mailloux, Assistant General, left Montréal by train on January 21, 1907 and arrived at Saint Boniface at 1000 hours on January 24. The following day, they took with them the other foundress, then a missionary in Saint Boniface, Sister Sainte-Dosithée, and all three traveled to Saskatoon. The formidable weather conditions, snow storm and excessive cold at that time, delayed their trip from the usual 18 hours to five days and six nights from Saint Boniface to Saskatoon. They arrived on January 31 and immediately began their tasks as foundresses of the hospital.<sup>8</sup>

The 40 year-old Sister Sainte-Dosithée had been a co-foundress of the Edmonton General Hospital in 1895 and a former superior and administrator of Saint Roch Hospital in Saint Boniface. She was well prepared to be chosen as superior-foundress of this new hospital in Saskatoon. Sadly, however, hardly a year after arriving, she was stricken with typhoid and

had to return to Saint Boniface for recovery and later, a new posting. The rest of her missionary life was spent in various northern missions, always serving with total dedication and respectful caring. She lived at the mother house for her last 20 years where she died at the age of 88 on October 12, 1955. When she celebrated her 50th anniversary of religious life in 1945, Bishop Joseph Trocellier of the Mackenzie Vicariate wrote the following words of praise:

*The memory of this valiant religious missionary is still well alive in the McKenzie [sic] and particularly among all those whom she cared for so maternally.<sup>9</sup>*

With Sister Sainte-Dosithée, came Sister Julia Blakely, a nurse who had graduated and worked in the United States. She was called to be co-foundress at Saskatoon at the age of 29. A faithful support to Sister Sainte-Dosithée, but with fragile health, she was unable to cope with the hardships of the beginning hospital and was transferred to the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary within a year. Sister Blakely died in Montréal on November 22, 1932 at the age of 54.

Deeply committed to the success of the hospital in Saskatoon, Sister Phaneuf took advantage of the arrival of the sisters to resume her *begging duties* in February, this time in favor of Saskatoon. She was accompanied by a charitable lady from that city. They went as far as Prince Albert and their efforts were generously rewarded; they collected \$5,000.00 to begin the hospital.<sup>10</sup>

On May 3, 1907, both Sisters Phaneuf and Guay returned to their missions in Saint Boniface and resumed their interrupted *begging duties*. It was said that their stay in Saskatoon from September 1906 to May 1907 had deprived their orphanage and hospice in Saint Boniface of close to \$2,000.00 in revenues. They enjoyed, however, the distinct privilege of ensuring the creation of the first hospital in Saskatoon.<sup>11</sup>

## *Opening of the hospital*

From September 30, 1906 until the opening of the hospital on



March 19, 1907, the sisters continued to care for the sick in the rectory. There were as many as eight patients at a time in very crowded areas, using every centimeter of available space. Very sick people in despair, coming to the door of the rectory, could not be refused. For the caregivers, priests and sisters, selfless dedication was the only rule of conduct and this was no secret to the people of Saskatoon.

It had been agreed to purchase Dr. J. H. C. Willoughby's house to begin the first hospital but the owner was absent from the city during the hard winter months. Upon his return, things moved faster. As an added kindness, Dr. Willoughby donated a horse to the sisters. An Act of Transfer of the doctor's house to the Grey Nuns was signed by Mother Elodie Mailloux on March 22, 1907. Through a verbal agreement, the move of furniture had begun earlier and, on Tuesday, March 19, the two patients still at the rectory were transferred to Dr. Willoughby's house. Two more patients arrived that same day and soon, the 10 available beds were occupied.<sup>12</sup> The house was spacious. When all organized as a hospital by partitioning rooms, it accommodated 17 beds. The sisters decided to name it Saint Paul's Hospital (SPH) in honor of the patron saint of Saint Paul's Parish, the only Catholic parish in Saskatoon at that time.

Soon after the opening of this first permanent hospital in Saskatoon, Saint Paul's Hospital, the General Council decided to place this young institution within the jurisdiction of the Saint Albert Vicariate as was Ile-à-la-Crosse, located further north. Mother Agnes Carroll was Superior Vicar of Saint Albert Vicariate at that time.<sup>13</sup>

## *Difficulties begin*

The hospital started with many health problems among the staff. A competent and well-liked orderly named Campbell, died of typhoid in March 1907. As mentioned earlier, the two foundresses' health failed early in their ministry in Saskatoon; both Sisters Sainte-Dosithée and Julia Blakely had to leave their



young institution in 1908. Fortunately, 10 more sisters arrived during the course of 1907; life became easier for the pioneers of the hospital.

Another painful difficulty besieged the sisters. Early records refer to fanaticism noticed among some people of other religious denominations. One individual, in particular, had his name passed on into history for his acerbic writings against the Roman Catholic faith. Hardly had the sisters begun their work of mercy with typhoid patients than suspicions and defamatory posters found their way into the public purview. One particularly villainous poster was refused publication by the **Saskatoon Star Phoenix** in July 1907, but its author, determined to spread his hateful remarks, had his venom printed in Winnipeg.<sup>14</sup> Providentially, several supporters of the sisters entered the written foray and presented articles of support and praise about the sisters' good ministry during these trying months. Relative peace eventually returned.

By the end of 1907, an accumulation of serious concerns led Mother Praxède Filiatrault, Superior General to consult Bishop Albert Pascal of Prince-Albert.<sup>15</sup> These concerns made a long list which included: no running water; no washroom facilities in a house filled with typhoid patients; two sisters contracted typhoid; financial hardships were serious; the distance from the church made it impossible for some sisters to attend Mass even on Sunday. A contract had been signed by Bishop Albert Pascal and Mother Mathilde Hamel in May 1907, but some of the improvements required were beyond the scope of the contract. There were serious plans to leave the hospital until more acceptable conditions were restored. Prior to the completion of her term of office, Mother Mathilde Hamel had advised the sisters to admit no more patients until the situation improved. The sisters complied, although regretfully. Providentially, during that time, no one presented a need for admission. A few weeks later, a new directive arrived for them to resume their regular service and in no time the house was filled again. By mid-December, there were already 25 patients.

Financial hardships became a 'way of life' at Saint Paul's throughout its history. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, some anxiety is read between the lines in the **Chroniques**, in correspondence and other documents:

*The financial crisis is great and worrisome. In many places, the harvest is poor due to lack of rain or invaded by grasshoppers. Products cannot sell. People are out of work. Families usually financially secure become poor. Misery reigns in many households. A few individuals come to work at the hospital to pay their bills. Others clear their debts contracted sometimes five years previously, with farm products. May God have pity on the needy.<sup>16</sup>*

There are also memories of sisters laboriously knitting in their rare available moments in order to raise funds to pay the employees' salaries, buy food for the patients, medication, supplies and equipment. A few names of these 'busy fingers' live in the recorded memories of those heart-breaking days: Sisters Margaret O'Grady, Ovilia Bédard, Germaine Béliveau and Julia Richard.<sup>17</sup>

Poverty often goes hand in hand with charity, as seen with the widow's mite in the Gospel. The charity of the Grey Nuns in their poverty did not go unnoticed as we read in the Golden Jubilee Report of the hospital:

*The Charity at this hospital in the tragedy that befell total strangers from foreign lands proved itself at the highest. The hospital became a haven for refugee doctors to the limits of its capacity. The majority who escaped racial extermination and reached us were of the Jewish faith and many of them were too frightened to admit their origin. Regulations required a year's hospital residency in Canada to enable them to take the Dominion Council licensing examination.*

*After the war a new crop of homeless doctors arrived. These were now known as D.P.'s (displaced persons) doctors. Again with the same generosity all that could be accommodated*

*were enrolled as interns in the hospital. D.P.'s were of different creeds from many European countries and a good many were of the Roman Catholic faith. The only question asked of the refugee and the D.P. doctors were proof of their qualifications as doctors of medicine.<sup>18</sup>*

## *And consolations...*

There were also consolations of all sorts in the sisters' life. The chronicler noted:

*The physicians are happy about everything. So much the better.*

*We received our eighth patient, a physician. His minister brought him in and he congratulated us on our hospital. Blessed be God! We have crosses to bear, but consolations too.<sup>19</sup>*

A year later, Sister Léa Dandurand, superior, wrote encouraging comments to the mother house:

*God visibly blesses our little hospital; we constantly witness returns to the faith among our patients and true conversions. An atheist, claiming to believe in nothing but money had a change of heart and requested Baptism. A cancer patient with no hope for a cure also requested Baptism. His profession of faith was somewhat singular, but surely acceptable to God: "Do you believe in God?" - "Yes, if the sisters so believe." - "Do you believe in the holy Catholic Church?" - "Yes, as much as the sisters believe in it." We see this as a proof that we preach more by our actions than by our words.<sup>20</sup>*

## *A new building and others*

The city of Saskatoon was growing rapidly and the forward-looking pioneer sisters were placed in a never-ending dilemma to



answer all needs for hospital care with a very limited bed capacity. Clubb's description paints a clear picture of the situation:

*Because of the burgeoning population in the western section of Saskatoon, particularly in the Riversdale, Westmount, Pleasant Hill and King George districts, St. Paul's Hospital in the early boom years found its role as a family-oriented hospital expanding beyond its facilities. The increasing number of rural patients who came to Saskatoon to seek medical consultation and consequent hospital treatment added to the predicament. More women were deciding to seek medical and hospital care when giving birth to their children, and St. Paul's happily recorded the first new-born baby to arrive at this hospital on October 5, 1909. The decision to open and expand St. Paul's School of Nursing meant that additional space would be required for living quarters and classrooms for prospective nurses.*

*To keep pace with the rapid development of Saskatoon, the "Hub City" whose spokes extended 100 miles [150 km] or more in each direction of the compass, the Grey Nuns of St. Paul's Hospital took bold and progressive steps to meet the anticipated demands for hospital service.<sup>21</sup>*

Having built an extension to Dr. Willoughby's house in June 1907, there were now 45 beds available with the possibility of adding another 20 in case of emergency. The first operation was successfully performed by Dr. Andrew Croll<sup>22</sup> and a telephone was installed at the hospital; both events were recorded on April 13, 1907. Other extensions to the building were added in the following years.

This was the largest hospital in the province of Saskatchewan, but already too small for the needs of the growing population. On April 17, 1909, City Council opened the first municipally-owned City Hospital located on Queen Street and Seventh Avenue.

In August 1910, Saskatoon City Council agreed to construct sewer and water lines to serve Saint Paul's Hospital. This essential addition brought the institution to an enviable level of efficiency



and comfort. Shortly after, Sister Euphémie Sanders began night duty. Up to that time, for eight years, all sisters were doing night calls for their own patients, leaving very few restful nights for any of them. And, the shortage of beds continued! By that time, active planning for a new hospital had begun at Saint Paul's. Plans were approved by the General Council, funds were secured through loans and donations and a mini-Sod Turning Ceremony was held on September 2, 1911 while Mother Anna Piché, Superior General was present.

On November 1, 1913, all rejoiced at the blessing of the new hospital by the first Bishop of Regina, Bishop Elzéar Mathieu.<sup>23</sup> The new hospital was supplied with the most modern equipment. An electric elevator was provided as a highly appreciated addition. During the Great war of 1914- 1918 (WWI), as many as 175 patients, including soldiers, were accommodated, using every accessible corner in the building.

This 1913 Saint Paul's Hospital was built on Avenue P between 20th and 21st Streets. It had a capacity of 150 patients and space was provided for 40 nursing students. This was a vast improvement from the 1907 house, or the rectory of 1906. A letter of July 1922 from the Bureau of Public Health, Government of Saskatchewan brings this point to light:

*I have Dr Middleton's report after his inspection of your hospital on the 22nd of June and I am pleased to note that ...the building is kept in splendid condition.*

*I note that you have built a new isolation hospital of 36 beds, cottage style and four units and that you are building a new power house and arranging to convert the stable into a laundry. Also that you have good laboratory facilities with a sister in charge...*

*An especially pleasing feature is the manner in which records are written up by the doctors and nurses and the manner in which the sister in charge of records is tabulating and filing these...<sup>24</sup>*

Congratulatory comments of that kind could hardly be expected in the aftermath of the Spanish influenza in 1918. Some 455 epidemic patients<sup>25</sup> were cared for, taxing staff and facilities beyond their limits. Sadly, one Grey Nun and two nurses succumbed to the influenza while several others contracted the disease. Sister Sainte-Léonce (Amanda Sauvé) died on November 9, 1918 at the age of 31. Because of the danger of contagion, the Health Bureau was reluctant to let sister's body be transported for burial in Saint Albert. The kind Dr. Des Rosiers offered a place in their family plot in Woodland Cemetery. At the end, this kindness was not necessary. There were active negotiations between the Health officials in Regina and Saint Albert with the desired result: Sister Sainte-Léonce's body was transported to Saint Albert for burial among so many other Grey Nuns who had given their lives in the service of humanity.<sup>26</sup>

Several additions to the 1913 building, such as a frame isolation annex in 1922 and a three-storey brick, north wing in 1925, brought the bed capacity to 245. Yet space continued to be at a premium as more out-of-town patients traveled to Saint Paul's Hospital for expert care. The several extensions added to the hospital over the years made it a maze of corridors and stairs which complicated traffic and communications. Other extensions of the building were realistically unthinkable. This was confirmed by expert advice received from architects, and other provincial and federal government inspectors.

In the late 1950s, funding for a new construction became a much debated topic between the hospital and the two levels of government: provincial and federal. Several names are retained in history acknowledging the dedication and perseverance of giant promoters of Saint Paul's Hospital's needs and interests: Justice Emmett Hall, *wisdom incarnate*; Sister Yvonne Prévost, *valiant woman*; Bishop Francis Klein, *faith-filled mediator* and Dr. David M. Balzan, *zealous diplomat*. These *leaders in the struggle* carried a long and exhaustive five-year campaign which resulted in Saint Paul's obtaining a reasonable 70% funding to build a new hospital. This modern hospital was blessed by Bishop Klein on



September 21, 1963. In the process, mutual respect was enhanced between these four leaders of Saint Paul's Hospital with the leaders of the country and the province: John Diefenbaker, Prime Minister of Canada and T. C. Douglas, Premier of Saskatchewan. Both visited the hospital and were most sympathetic to the needs presented.

Among the high-ranking individuals who visited the hospital, Sister Yvonne Prévost, superior and administrator from 1957 to 1964, registered a rather surprising note:

*During the busy 1961-63 construction, someone knocked at the door of my office, saying, "May I come in?" - Yes, please sit down. "Is this the place for complaints?" - I would be pleased to help you if I can. "Well, it is about the soup that is cold and the sandwiches that are not as good as they used to be." - Oh! I will look into that. What floor are you from? "I don't have a room here. I come every day to get my lunch and go to the washroom." - That is a different situation. Tell me more about that. "I pay my medical insurance, so I have a right to get some service in return. That is why I have been here every day for the last 10 years. You can't blame me for that."<sup>28</sup>*

Needless to say that the list of poor people who came daily to claim food was adjusted.

A quarter of a century later, in the '80s, the hospital was to make substantial funding requests which again were successful, but not without persistent efforts. As a result, a \$52.7 million project was largely funded by the government, while equipment and furniture were trustingly placed in the hands of the new SPH Foundation. This new wing added 100 beds and included the most modern equipment and essential space.<sup>29</sup> No one will ever forget the remarkable skills and diplomacy of the Project Director, Brent Skinner during the arduous years of planning! The Official Opening occurred on September 14, 1989, a celebration which began with a Dedication ceremony presided by Bishop James Mahoney. The civic portion of the event was attended by



other invited dignitaries: Sylvia Fedorak, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan; Grant Devine, Premier; George McLeod, Minister of Health; Henry Dayday, Mayor of Saskatoon; Bishop James Mahoney of Saskatoon; Sister Marguerite Létourneau, Superior General, and Sister Faye Wylie, Provincial Superior.

## *Struggle of the '80s*

Struggles of another nature surfaced in the early '80s. A long and crucial political battle developed in which the very survival of Saint Paul's was seriously at stake. It began when Minister of Health Herman Rolfes appointed a team to do a Role Study of the University Hospital. The report, tabled on January 8, 1981, recommended a merger of the three Saskatoon hospitals under a 'super board', a solution totally unacceptable to the Grey Nuns and the hospital. The brave stand taken at that time by the hospital family was mostly in order to ensure the preservation of ethical principles as upheld in a Catholic Health Care facility. Equally opposed were the Medical Staff and individual physicians, hospital personnel, Saskatoon Senate of priests, and residents of Saskatoon and surrounding municipalities who were unanimous in their rejection of such plan. The Board Chair, Sister Germaine Héту issued a press release in which she stated strongly and clearly,

*It is not our intention now, nor in the future, to sell St. Paul's Hospital...religious orders such as the Grey Nuns still have a role to play in the provision of health care... We feel that we are very much part of the community and that the community is very much part of us. Many citizens have indicated to us that the philosophies embraced by the Grey Nuns are still needed and desired in the operation of a health care facility such as St. Paul's.<sup>30</sup>*

Then followed a flood of letters, telephone calls and briefs to the Government and to the Grey Nuns in support of saving Saint Paul's. There was indeed such a wide base of support that no government could have disregarded so much opposition to the proposal made by the Role Study team. A meeting of the hospital

Board and Administration with Health Minister Herman Rolfes and his officials was held on February 11, 1981. All fears subsided among Saint Paul's delegation when,

*the Minister assured the sisters that it was not his intention to force the Grey Nuns to sell the hospital or take part in a management contract unless it was their desire to do so. He said that he and his government appreciated the 'uniqueness' which the Grey Nuns brought to the health care system in Saskatchewan through their ownership of Saint Paul's Hospital and that this 'uniqueness' was worth preserving.<sup>31</sup>*

These comments were reassuring, but soon another page was turned in the controversy. That year, 1981, much opposition was raised when the Department of Health decided to form Health Districts throughout the Province. These Health Districts in turn were responsible for implementing the government health care budget cuts. It became evident that Saint Paul's Hospital was slated for closure, but there again, the citizens of Saskatoon won the battle and Saint Paul's successfully entered into an agreement with the Saskatoon Health District in which the assurance of preserving the Ethics and Mission of Saint Paul's was secured.

## *The Foundation*

There were no Hospital Foundations in the early 1900s, but there were brave fundraising activities at Saint Paul's Hospital. We recall with some admiration the *begging assignment* that brought Sisters Phaneuf and Guay to Saskatoon in September, 1906 and the *begging trip* of Sister Phaneuf to Prince Albert in 1907. These were the years when government assistance for health care was almost non-existent. The same was still true in July, 1917 when Sister Saint-Liguori (Mary Kelly), former superior and administrator displayed her creativity in organizing the raffle of a new car, netting \$4,851.00, and a "Rose Day" that brought in \$1,010.00 for the hospital.

On December 29, 1982, 65 years later, as government funding became more restricted, the Saint Paul's Hospital Foundation was



established in order to initially raise funds to purchase furniture and equipment for the new wing being planned. This Foundation is an independent body responsible for all fundraising activities at the hospital. The first Chair was Keith Thompson and the first Director of Development and Public Relations, Toni Davidson. At the opening of the Third Millennium, the Chair was Howard Cooper and the Executive Director of the Foundation, Cathy Chrones. Since its inception, the Foundation has brought in millions of dollars and unmeasurable public support for Saint Paul's Hospital. In recent years, a substantial amount was directed to support Spiritual Care as one of the special characteristics of Saint Paul's.

There is a multitude of contributors to Saint Paul's Hospital through the Foundation. All are given official recognition at an annual event, as well as permanent recognition with the 'Tree of Life' displayed near the main entrance since 1988. As one other example, on April 14, 1994, Saint Paul's Hospital honored the Knights of Columbus for their long-standing and generous contribution to the life and spirit of the hospital. On that occasion, presentations were made to Bill Reed, Grand Knight and Lorne Mysko, president.

The Saint Paul's Hospital Foundation operates a very active Planned Giving Program and won first place in the 1996 Association for Healthcare Philanthropy of Canada's Showcase Awards for excellence in the area of Planned Giving.<sup>32</sup>

## *Nursing Education*

Saint Paul's Hospital opened its School of Nursing two years after the hospital was officially established. On November 21, 1909 Sister Marie-du-Saint-Sacrament (Héloïse Marchand) the first Director of the School admitted five students, including two Grey Nuns. A comment found in the **Chroniques** entry for that day reveals very clearly the traditional thought behind opening a School of Nursing at the beginning of this century:

*At last, we will have some help! Like our sister-houses, we*



*will have nursing students who, under our direction will follow a course of training and studies during two and a half years. May Mary, in this beautiful day of her Presentation to the Temple, bless our School which we place under her auspices.*<sup>33</sup>

After two years, the first five students successfully completed their nursing program and graduated on September 21, 1911. Sister Séphora Beauvais, one of the graduates that year was the aunt of a future Governor General of Canada, Jules Léger and of the future Cardinal Paul-Emile Léger of Montréal.

During the 1930s, Dr. David M. Baltzan published a book on medicine for nurses which he used in his teaching at the SPH School of Nursing. This was a major contribution to the education of SPH nurses for many years. On November 21, 1931, Bishop Joseph Prud'homme, Bishop of Prince Albert and Saskatoon, presided at the blessing of the new four storey Nurses' Residence. Nursing students moved out of the former Dr. Willoughby's house and enjoyed their own home for the three years of their student life.

In 1957, the Golden Year Nurses Convocation was held at the Capitol Theatre on May 12 with Premier T. C. Douglas as the main speaker. A Glee Club masterly presentation directed by Urban Donlevy preceded Premier Douglas' address. Enraptured by the delightful choir's performance, the Premier exclaimed:

*Toronto has its 'Happy Gang', but Saskatoon has its 'Saint Paul's Glee Club'!*<sup>34</sup>

Throughout its 60 years of operation, Saint Paul's School of Nursing succeeded in maintaining and often surpassing Nursing Education standards. During the fifties, it adopted the Block System<sup>35</sup> in its curriculum; later it streamlined its clinical experience to better coincide with theory, and still later studied the advantages and disadvantages of the Centralized Teaching Program (CTP) begun in Saskatchewan on an experimental basis in 1953 and legally established in 1956. The two large Catholic Schools of Nursing in Saskatchewan, Saint Paul's and Regina

Grey Nuns Hospitals opted to not participate in the CTP in order to ensure that ethical principles continued to be learned by their own nursing students.

Graduates of Saint Paul's were known to be dedicated, committed and highly devoted. As an example, on April 2, 1964, two Saint Paul's graduates, Cécile Poilièvre and Ida Raiche, left their home to become missionaries in South America with a group of equally dedicated members of the diocese of Saskatoon.

Examples of long-standing Directors of the School were Sister Appolina Ste-Croix from 1943 to 1954, Sister Jeanne Quintal from 1954 to 1963 and Sister Fernande Dussault who was appointed in 1963, having recently received a Masters' in Nursing Education from the Catholic University of America. The latter remained in that function until the closure of the School in 1969. These long tenures brought valued stability to the School as drastic changes in Nursing Education were on the horizon.

The Saskatchewan Ad Hoc Committee on Nursing Education completed its study in 1966. It recommended the transfer of Nursing Education from the Department of Public Health to that of Education, thereby prompting major changes in the system. Eliminating the service component from the education of nurses facilitated better coordination of all learning experiences: clinical and theoretical. This plan, responding to years of nursing educators requests was not unique to Saskatchewan, but its implementation was unique in that it was legislated and executed province-wide.

In September 1966, Dr. Jack Leddy was appointed Chair of the Committee on Nursing Education to oversee the transfer of Nursing Education from the Saskatchewan Department of Public Health to that of Education. In this position, he was immediate advisor to Sister Thérèse Castonguay, appointed by the Government of Saskatchewan as Superintendent of Nursing Education for the province.

In Saskatoon, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences (SIAAS) built a new wing replacing the seven nursing schools in the northern half of the province, in preparation for a



large enrolment of nursing students, in September 1967. Saint Paul's School of Nursing, like every other hospital school in northern Saskatchewan, discontinued admitting students after the 1966 class. It was a nostalgic moment for Saint Paul's when, on October 20, 1968, the School of Nursing graduated its last group of students, after almost 60 years of operation. Two thousand and fifty-seven SPH nurses obtained their nursing education at the SPH School of Nursing. They now practice their noble profession in many parts of the world. Their competence is recognized at home and abroad. They perpetuate Saint Paul's spirit wherever they are, proudly living Saint Paul's mission.

### *Mission : Spiritual Care and Ethics*

When the hospital was founded, it was immediately opened to all who needed health care, regardless of their race, color, creed, or their ability to pay. Repeatedly, this principle was applied and publicised. In December 1909, Sister Saint-Liguori (Mary Kelly), wrote a first Annual Report in which she clearly described the sisters' respect of the religious preferences of their patients,

*The religious opinions of every patient are absolutely respected, and clergymen of any denomination are at liberty to visit their patient at any time....[for the School of Nursing, she added], Those wishing to join must apply to the Sister Superior and are accepted irrespective of religion and nationality.<sup>36</sup>*

Such respect and openness to others' faith was remarkable in this period of early 1900s. It has been the basis for the very significant emphasis placed on spirituality in the hospital over the years. Sisters on the Nursing Units always placed Spiritual Care as a top priority in their caring mission. A priest chaplain was available around the clock for sacramental ministry to Roman Catholic patients and, from the earliest days, the doors have been wide open to all clergy. The distribution of communion to patients, by their respective clergy, prayer with patients and reli-



gious services in the chapel are easily available.

In a Synopsis of Activities - 1976-1977, we read:

*Morning and evening prayers recorded by clergymen of different denominations are played over the P.A. [public address] system daily.<sup>37</sup>*

On November 26, 1969, Dr. Morley Smith-Windsor, administrator, formally recognized the services of Pastoral Care as a Department with Father Frank Malone, C.Ss.R. as chaplain. The Redemptorists had ministered at the hospital since their arrival in Saskatoon in 1935. Over the years, SPH Chaplains made a long list of caring spiritual advisors who were available for patients, families and staff. A particularly long tenure of some 20 years, cumulated over several periods, is credited to Fr. Aloysius Rekowski. His ministry was marked by kindness and dedication.

Later, developments brought a new title to the Department: Spiritual Care Services. In the 1980s, a monthly Memorial Service was begun for grieving families of patients who had died at the hospital. This activity continues to be highly valued by family members and staff as a privileged occasion to pray together and support each other in the loss of loved ones.

The services of many resourceful and committed Grey Nuns always maintained the level of Spiritual Care to an enviable status. In addition to Grey Nuns who were Unit supervisors, those responsible for the Department of Spiritual Care, deserve special mention in this chapter. Sisters Yvonne Bézaire, Lise Chaloux, Desanges Gionet, Faye Wylie and Carol Borreson are names deeply engraved in the hearts of the Saint Paul's family.

Sister Lise Chaloux was Director of the Spiritual Care Department before leaving for a mission in Brazil, in 1992; she was replaced by Sister Desanges Gionet. Sister Faye Wylie's tenure of only three years at Saint Paul's, from 1993 to 1996, left deep sadness at her departure to her new post as Provincial Superior of the Saint Boniface Province in Manitoba. History will always credit her with the essential ground work accomplished to prepare the successful transfer of Saint Paul's to the Bishops of Saskatchewan in 1999. During her stay at Saint Paul's, she added

the responsibility for Spiritual Care Services to the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation (SCHC). When she left, Sister Carol Borreson took over the Spiritual Care Services and Mission. In the summer of 2000, Sister Borreson left her position for a new calling to the Grey Nuns missions of Brazil. Her successor was Brian Zimmer, a well-chosen candidate to replace a Grey Nun and ensure that Saint Paul's Mission remain dynamic. While Brian Zimmer coordinated Spiritual Care Services. Saint Paul's Hospital President, Mary Pat Skene replaced Sister Wylie, for her other responsibility, as CEO of SCHC during the crucial time of the transfer of Saint Paul's to the Bishops' Corporation.

In 1991, the Department of Spiritual Care Services began to offer Clinical Pastoral Education programs (CPE) with Reverend Don Misener, a Baptist minister, as Pastoral Educator and CPE Supervisor. This new dimension in the hospital services provided more visibility to the Spiritual Care aspect of the hospital and contributed to the enhancement in the skills in the Department. He retired in 1999, leaving a deep impact from his eight year tenure at Saint Paul's and was replaced by Helen Krueger.

Illustrative of the high recognition of Spiritual Care at SPH are a few comments gleaned from a 1996 article in **The Star Phoenix**:

*Canon Lewis Gill, chaplain of the local Order of St-Luke, thinks there is a health benefit to a life of faith and that the medical profession could put that to good use in their own practice of medicine...Pastor Vern Ratzlaff, a Mennonite Pastor who chairs the Spiritual Care Advisory Committee to the Saskatoon District Health Board, agrees with Gill that more needs to be done to enhance the role of spirituality in health care.*

*Sister Faye Wylie, Chair of Spiritual Care Services at Saint Paul's Hospital, also believes in the value of spiritual care. It was that belief within the hospital that led to the establishment of the First Nations Prayer and Ceremonial Room within the health care facility.<sup>38</sup>*



Closely embedded in the Mission of the Hospital, spiritual care goes hand in hand with carefully organized Ethical consultation services. Father Mark Miller, C.Ss.R., Ph.D. has been employed as ethicist by Saint Paul's since 1994. Widely known and in high demand across Canada, Father Miller's skills have brought Ethics to cafeteria discussions and to the dinner table of many families, as well as at the bedside. In 1999, Father Miller was awarded the highest distinction of the Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC), the 1999 Performance Citation Award, a well-deserved recognition.

## Other Unforgettable People

Names of *Leaders in the Struggle*, side by side with the early pioneers, come naturally to mind when one reviews the amazing history of Saint Paul's Hospital. On the one hand, attempting to list all those who assisted in the growth of the hospital, through financial contributions, encouragement of many kinds, and moral support would be impossible. Many were these altruistic persons and generous supporters who wished to remain anonymous, but a few other names can be identified.

This section will acknowledge significant events and related significant persons as a special homage to those who made Saint Paul's Hospital what it is at the beginning of the Third Millennium.

- 1915 - A Provincial Medical Association was formed with *Saint Paul's physicians* among the founding members.
- 1917 - The Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association (SRNA) was formed with full support of the *nurses of Saint Paul's Hospital*.
- 1924 - November 26, a beautiful bronze statue of the Sacred Heart of Montmartre, measuring 2.5 meters and weighing 450 kilograms, was erected on the roof of the hospital, thanks to the initiative of *Sister Mary Ann Casey*, superior and administrator.
- 1926 - December 1, Saint Paul's received a Hospital



Standardization Certificate from the American College of Physicians and Surgeons, as a result of *Dr. R. H. MacDonald's* leadership. The hospital then became a teaching hospital. In 1931, *Dr. R. H. MacDonald* was appointed the first Chief of Surgery until he became Chief of Staff in 1946.

- 1930 - *Dr. Hugh Edwin Munroe* was appointed Saskatchewan Lieutenant Governor. He was a former member of SPH medical staff.
- 1934 - April 19, Saskatoon became a diocese with *Bishop Gerald Murray, C.Ss.R. as first Bishop*. Much pride and rejoicing was shared by the hospital.
- 1938 - The Grey Nuns celebrated their 200th Anniversary by giving three days of free hospitalization to all their patients, under the leadership of *Sister Margaret O'Grady*, superior and administrator and a fervent apostle for the poor.
- 1941 - April 23, the Lay Advisory Board held its first meeting with *Sister Rose Vincent*, superior and administrator. Members were *The Honorable Justice McLean, Yvan Byers, Emmett Hall, T.H. Kinahan, Dennis Shannon and H. J. Vossberg*. On October 14, a Ladies Auxiliary organization was created with the support of *Sister Rose Vincent*, superior and administrator. Elected president was *Mrs. J. Elhatton*.
- During the 1953-59 polio epidemic, *CFQC radio* loaned the hospital a generator to handle the overload caused by the many iron lungs in operation (Emerson Respirators). A Provincial Clinic was established at SPH, using the Elizabeth Kenney method for the treatment of patients afflicted with poliomyelitis.
- 1947 - January 1, was the first day of the Saskatchewan Hospital Services Plan created by *Premier T.C. Douglas*, a Plan which would become national almost 20 years later. *Sister Loretta Mansfield* was superior and administrator in that memorable year.
- 1955 - On April 15, during the administration of *Sister Annette Lachance*, the **Chroniques** registered the birth of the

25,000th baby in Saint Paul's Hospital. That year, *Dr. Jack Leddy* was appointed Chief of Surgery, a position he held until he was appointed Chief of Staff in 1974. From 1982, he held the title Chief of Staff Emeritus at SPH.

- 1957 - The Golden Jubilee of the hospital was celebrated under the direction of *Sister Marie Laforce*, superior and administrator. The Coat of Arms of the hospital was launched on that occasion, a design executed by *Sister Antoinette Bézaire*.
- 1960 - The first renal dialysis treatment was performed at Saint Paul's Hospital, using a machine flown in from Calgary. *Dr. Mark Baltzan* was responsible for that department while *Sister Yvonne Prévost* was superior and administrator of the hospital, and *Sister Yvonne Viens* was supervisor of the Emergency Room where the treatments were performed. *Sister Aline Bohémier* was involved with *Dr. Mark Baltzan* in building the first renal dialysis machine at Saint Paul's.
- 1961 - *Justice Emmett Hall*, former legal advisor to SPH, was appointed Chair of the Royal Commission on Health Services for the Federal Government with *Dr. David M. Baltzan* as one of the members. The Hall Report was published in 1964, a precursor to the National Health Insurance Plan.
- 1962 - In April, the administration of *Sister Yvonne Prévost* registered the birth of the 100,000th resident of Saskatoon, *Ida Sahli*. She was also the 27,092nd baby born at SPH. On July 1, the Saskatchewan Medicare Crisis began and lasted until July 23. The crisis was staged by physicians to protest the provincial medical plan as proposed by the government in spite their opposition.
- 1963 - June 27, *Dr. Morley Smith-Windsor* became the first lay Assistant Administrator. He replaced *Sister Ann Ell* as Administrator when she completed her term as superior and administrator in 1967. September 21, 1963 was a day of rejoicing for all those who had won the struggle for a new building with *Bishop Francis Klein* of Saskatoon blessing the



new hospital.

- 1967 - April 22, Saskatoon lost its beloved *Bishop Francis Klein* to the Diocese of Calgary. As a rich consolation, on December 13, *Reverend James Mahoney*, born at SPH was consecrated Bishop of Saskatoon.
- 1970 - In February, *Dr. Stephen Worobetz*, former Saint Paul's physician, was installed as Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan.
- 1971 - November 4, former *Mayor Sidney Buckwold* was appointed to the Senate of Canada. He had served a number of years as a member of the SPH Lay Advisory Board.
- 1974 - October 7, *Sister Bernadette Bézaire*, Director of Nursing, was named to the University of Saskatchewan Senate, representing the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association. That year, *Dr. Dan McFadden* became Chief of Surgery. He continued in that capacity until 1992.
- 1977 - September, *Sister Cécile Gauthier* was appointed Assistant Executive Director - Patient Care Services.
- 1980 - SPH was designated as the Provincial Home Care Dialysis Centre with *Dr. Mark Baltzan* as head of the department.
- 1982 - In January, the first Board of Management was appointed, replacing the previous Board composed exclusively of Grey Nuns. *Sister Germaine Héту*, Provincial Superior, was the first Chair with *Walter Podiluk* as Vice-Chair. *Walter* became Chair upon *Sister Héту's* completion of her term as Provincial Superior in June, 1983. One other Grey Nun, *Sister Thérèse Castonguay*, remained on the Board.
- 1983 - The sisters joined *Bishop James Mahoney* and the diocese in the grandiose celebration of the Catholic Diocese Saskatoon's 50th Anniversary. On April 27, *Sister Bernadette Bézaire* received a Life Membership Award from the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association.
- 1984 - In the summer, *Sister Cécile Gauthier* and a Saskatoon nurse, *Rosella Grise* were part of a Canadian delegation of 36



- nurses to the People's Republic of China; a 20-day professional exchange.
- 1995 - March 2, was a day of sadness for the diocese of Saskatoon when their beloved *Bishop James Mahoney* died at the Royal University Hospital. *Sister Faye Wylie*, after completing her terms as Provincial Superior in Edmonton, became Director of Spiritual Care and Mission at Saint Paul's and superior of the sisters' community. She had also completed a special program of the Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) designed to prepare leaders in Catholic Health Care organizations. *Mary Pat Skene* became the new President of the hospital in September, after holding prominent positions in Grey Nuns institutions in Alberta.
  - 1996 - May 3, *Reverend James Weisgerber* was consecrated Bishop of Saskatoon in a grandiose ceremony at Saint Patrick's Church. On June 12, Saint Paul's Hospital opened the *Native Spirituality* room, the first in any health care facility in Saskatchewan.
  - 1997 - November 13, *Dr. Richard Baltzan* was elected president of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC).
  - 1999 - October 12, Saint Paul's Hospital held a very meaningful celebration marking the Transfer of Sponsorship from the Grey Nuns to the Bishops of Saskatchewan through the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation (SCHC) under the leadership of *Mary Pat Skene*. Upon taking that position, *Mary Pat* was replaced as CEO of Saint Paul's by *Sharon Sullivan*, formerly Vice-President of Saint Paul's Hospital.

## *Passing the Flame*

Lamenting on reduced membership in the sisterhood has been more and more frequent these years, especially when looking at the demands for new ministries. Saint Paul's Hospital is no exception to this dilemma. During recent years, planning for the gradual withdrawal of sisters in service institutions has been on

the agenda. Fortunately for Saint Paul's Hospital, the SCHC was ready to accept the transfer of ownership which officially occurred on October 12, 1999. In a moving and meaningful celebration the SCHC became the new owner and operator of Saint Paul's Hospital, thus safeguarding the spiritual and ethical legacy of the Grey Nuns.

Grey Nuns had owned and operated the hospital during its first 92 years, from 1907 to 1999. During that time, a total of 276 sisters had served as members of the Saint Paul's family, cumulating a total of 1,375 years of *care with a difference* which characterized the exceptional history of the hospital.

Grey Nuns are not leaving Saskatoon. Four sisters still remain in the city and continue to offer their ministry at the hospital, within organizations that give a voice to the poor, with the aboriginal people of Saskatoon, within the parish for music or other ministries, and in visits to home bound and sick persons. The caring continues into the Third Millennium.

#### NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 2

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- 1 Clubb, Sally, **Our Story - 75 Years of Caring**, Saint Paul's Hospital, 1982, p. 4. Some other sources give 6,000. However, it is known that Saskatoon was incorporated as a city with 2,000 people in 1906.
- 2 **Ibid.**, p. 3.
- 3 **Chroniques**, p. 5, GNRC Arch.
- 4 **Ibid.**, p. 3.
- 5 **Historique**, doc. # 7 to 9, GNRC Arch.
- 6 Phaneuf, Sr. (Alma Peltier), *Fondation de l'Hôpital de Saskatoon 1906*, in: **Hôpital Saskatoon, Historique 1906**, p. 50. Unpublished, GNRC Arch.
- 7 Sainte-Praxède, Sister, Letter to Mother Anna Piché, Superior General, November 1913, **Historique** #20, GNRC Arch. (surrounding missions meant: St-Boniface, Beauval, Edmonton!)
- 8 **Chroniques**, p. 11.
- 9 **Biographical sketch**, Sister Sainte-Dosithée, GNRC Arch.
- 10 Phaneuf, **Op. Cit.**, p. 51.
- 11 **Chroniques**, p. 23.

- 12 **Ibid.**, p. 20.
- 13 **Historique**, doc. # 12.
- 14 **Ibid.**, doc. # 7A.
- 15 **Ibid.**, doc. # 15A.
- 16 **Chroniques**, Op. Cit., Vol. I, p. 223
- 17 Arseneau, Sr. Marguerite, 'Reminiscences of the 1940s', verbally transmitted.
- 18 Baltzan, Dr. David M., *Educational Activities*, an article written for the hospital's Jubilee, March 1957, **SPH Historique -1906**, p. 115.
- 19 **Chroniques**, p. 21, March 20 and 27, 1907.
- 20 **Historique**, doc. # 18.
- 21 Clubb, **Op. Cit.**, p. 11.
- 22 McFadden, Dr. Dan, *Surgery - A Historical Perspective- 1907-1997*, in **A Tradition of Caring - A Future of Hope**, ed. Sister Bernadette Bézaire and committee, Saint Paul's Hospital, Saskatoon, 1997, p. 99.
- 23 **Historique**, doc. # 19, 20.
- 24 Seymour, Dr. Maurice, Commissioner, Bureau of Public Health, July 4, 1922, **Historique**, doc. # 23.
- 25 **Chroniques**, **Op. Cit.**, p. 80.
- 26 Clubb, **Op. Cit.**, p. 16.
- 27 Titles in italic were assigned to these heroic defenders of Saint Paul's rights by the editors of: **A Tradition of Caring, Op. Cit.**, p. 26.
- 28 Prévost, Sister Yvonne, Story told to this author in the 1960s.
- 29 Skinner, Brent, Planning Department - Redevelopment Project IV, 1979-1988, in **A Tradition of Caring, Op. Cit.**, p. 58.
- 30 Hart, David, CEO of Saint Paul's Hospital, "A Catholic Hospital's Fight for Survival" **CHAC Review**, Sept. Oct., 1981, p. 4.
- 31 **Ibid.**, p. 5.
- 32 **A Tradition of Caring, Op. Cit.**, p. 63.
- 33 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. 39. (The first groups graduated after two years)
- 34 Donlevey, Rod, Reminiscences given verbally.
- 35 A nursing curriculum organized to provide periods of concentration on theory, followed by periods of practical experience, rather than hours of classroom work during days of clinical experience.
- 36 **Chroniques**, p. 39.
- 37 Synopsis of Activities, 1976-77, p. 57.
- 38 Battiste, Virginia, **The Star Phoenix**, September 14, 1996.
- 39 **A Tradition of Caring, Op. Cit.**, p. 28.





## CHAPTER THREE

1910 -

### BEAUVAL - RESERVE AND VILLAGE

There was a school building for the people of Lac La Plonge,<sup>1</sup> but no more sisters to teach and care for the people, and Bishop Albert Pascal of Prince Albert had only one desire: to obtain Grey Nuns as soon as possible. After the departure of the Sisters of Saint Joseph,<sup>2</sup> the Bishop was left with a large population of children and adults to educate and many sick to care for.<sup>3</sup> We recall that there were no Grey Nuns at Ile-à-la-Crosse since 1905, and the Sisters of Saint Joseph had left Lac La Plonge in June 1909. This was a dark hour for the Church in northern Saskatchewan.

The zealous Bishop Pascal was not one to give up or despair. His hope for the return of Grey Nuns remained high and assiduous correspondence resumed with the Grey Nuns' Superior General, Mother Praxède Filiatrault. In his request Bishop Pascal knew that he was supported by Bishop Paul Bruchési of Montréal and Mr. Charles Lecoq, p.s.s., a highly respected spiritual advisor of the Grey Nuns in Montréal. Bishop Pascal wrote:

*In order to obey you, I had agreed to replace your sisters by sisters from France. Alas! They could not survive where your sisters have lived almost 50 years, under less favorable conditions. God seems to say that only the Grey Nuns of Montréal are able to succeed in these meritorious posts. [...] The school is located further from the shores now, no danger of floods. [...]*<sup>4</sup>

As if this plea might lack the eloquence and persuasive effect required, Father Joseph Rapet in his turn wrote:

*Our hearts are very afflicted and we plead for your compas-*

*sion for us and our poor Natives. We cannot believe that you would not see in what is happening today [the departure of the sisters of St-Joseph] the evident will of God. The Government will help us. The Mission reminds us of glorious names: Taché, Lacombe, Grandin. These holy apostles and the sisters who rest in the cemetery seem to grieve for your absence and claim your return.*<sup>5</sup>

One of the final important decisions of the General Council, before the General Chapter of October 1909, was the positive response to the pleas of these missionaries on October 4, 1909. Immediately plans began for the Grey Nuns to return to what became known as *The Little North* to distinguish it from *The Far North* in the Northwest Territories. Lac La Plonge was located 55 kilometers south of Ile-à-la-Crosse where the Grey Nuns had missioned from 1860 to 1905. In 1906, the Ile-à-la-Crosse school building was moved to Lac La Plonge. It was used for three years by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Lyon, then by a Mrs. Deschambault, a former student of Qu'Appelle Residential School, for a short period until the arrival of the Grey Nuns.

## *The foundresses*

Mother Praxède Filiatrault, Superior General, had to search long and far to find enough sisters for the new mission of Lac La Plonge they had just accepted. Having only 765 sisters located in 60 various houses from Montréal to the McKenzie in Canada and from the eastern United States to Toledo, Ohio did not leave much flexibility to open a new mission. Nevertheless, six generous sisters were named for Lac La Plonge: Sisters Saint Nazaire (Philomène Nadeau), superior, and Saint Elisée (Alzire Diquière), from Saint Boniface and Sisters Denise Beaudin, Saint Adélin (Parmélia Grégoire), Yvonne (Jeanne-Marie Cadoret) and Alice (Aurore Huet-Dulude), from Montréal, the latter two being Auxiliary sisters.<sup>6</sup>

In December 1909, Sisters Alice and Yvonne left Montréal for Saint Boniface to gradually become adjusted to the western climate



while awaiting the other foundresses. In December also, Sisters St-Nazaire and Saint Elisée, who had been granted a visit to Montréal prior to their assignment at Lac La Plonge, returned to Saint Boniface. The other two missionaries left Montréal in the evening of January 2, 1910 and arrived at Saint Boniface on January 5.<sup>7</sup> The group being now complete, they resumed their journey the following day and arrived at Prince Albert by train on January 8, 1910. They were met by two Sisters of Notre-Dame de Sion who welcomed them into their home until the carriages were ready for the last 400 kilometers northwest to Lac La Plonge. Father Joseph Rapet and two Oblate Brothers had come from Lac La Plonge to accompany them to their promised land. A wait of seven to nine days was needed to allow the horses some rest before the arduous return trip. The **Chroniques** indicate their arrival at Lac La Plonge on January 28 at 0630 hours after a trip of 11 days and 10 nights from Saint Boniface.<sup>8</sup> These trips to the western and northern missions were becoming an every day event for the Grey Nuns, therefore we no longer obtain the usual descriptions of mosquitoes, and rapids, and portages, or snow and ice, of earlier trips.

At the Mission, the sisters were warmly welcomed by Father François-Xavier Ancel and the beaming faces of children. In spite of their fatigue, they did not fail to notice the magnificent site on which the school was located. All this gave them the courage to begin cleaning and organizing the building which was to be their home, their classrooms and their boarding school.

### *The first years and beyond*

Right from the start, the sisters enjoyed the help of several local young women in setting up the school for its purposes: classrooms and living quarters for students and sisters. Thus a friendly relationship was well established. The school was given the name Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. By February 10, 1910, Sister Saint-Nazaire was able to write:

*We have 25 students already, and, if we gave in to all requests, we could easily increase to 50; I would not agree yet*

*to that increase until we are completely organized.*<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the school year, the chronicler gave this additional information:

*The year passed without noticeable incident. Daily unceasing labor. The children, somewhat unruly at first, have now improved their behavior. The sisters' patience in enduring their insults from the beginning, greatly contributed to this improvement. Thanks be to God!*<sup>10</sup>

The unfortunate loss of all **Chroniques** from 1910 to 1927, as explained in *note # 3* in this Chapter, makes it impossible to relate much of the life and ministries of the sisters during these first 17 years, except for a few outstanding events. These events were recorded from memory by Sister Denise Beaudin after she retired in 1935.

June 3, 1911 was a day of celebration at Beauval when the first Apostolic Vicar of the new Keewatin Vicariate, Bishop Ovide Charlebois arrived for his initial visit. The Mission offered the traditional gun salute, the chapel was decorated with many garlands and banners, the children were anxious to display their talents in singing and reciting their homages to their new Bishop. All in all, this was a majestic feast which greatly touched their illustrious guest. The following day, Bishop Charlebois gave the sacrament of Confirmation to 35 children who had been carefully prepared by the sisters for this long-desired event.

On September 10, 1912, amidst an epidemic of scarlet fever, the sisters were delighted to receive the first visit of Mother Anna Piché. It was a brief visit of 14 days, but it brought renewed courage and support to the missionaries.

In June 1913, Inspector Chisholm visited the school. Although most students had left for their summer vacation, the four boys still at the school gave him such an impressive display of their knowledge and self-assurance that the Inspector was clearly astonished. He offered high praises to the students and sisters before leaving. Other visits recorded in the **Chroniques** in June 1928, June 1929 and subsequent years were always followed by

praises and compliments.

Teaching was definitely the main responsibility of the sisters but they often had to add other tasks, such as milking the cows and feeding the animals. Occasionally, the sisters were confronted with medical emergencies that had to be attended to on site. May 3, 1924 was remembered as a sad day with the tragic accident of a little boy who had one leg badly mangled in the mill. As there was no physician around, the conclusion reached by the Oblate and Grey Nun missionaries was that his leg had to be amputated. Sister Esther Robinson reluctantly accepted responsibility to perform the operation drawing on her skills in nursing and pharmacy, as well as all the prayers of those around her. It took six days for the physician to arrive to examine the wound and apply new dressings. The missionaries shared the excruciating discomfort experienced by this little boy and attended him constantly. They were able to soothe his pain and greatly assisted his recovery.<sup>11</sup>

### *A terrible fire*

September 19, 1927! The sisters had now been at Beauval for 17 years. Their ministry of teaching, accompanied by their actions of charity and compassion had reached out to hundreds of children and families. Their presence was bearing fruit; it was highly appreciated by the people of Lac La Plonge. This peaceful spiralling of successes was abruptly shattered on that dreadful September night. In the middle of the night, while 37 students and eight sisters slept, they were suddenly awakened by the fire alarm in the boarding school. The fire seemed to have begun at the centre of the building. It quickly engulfed the corridor and filled the small boys' dormitory, blocking all access to outside doors. The children tried to escape, but were overcome by the flames. Nineteen boys died in the inferno. Sister Léa (Elise Bellerose), who attempted to help them, was also among the victims. When Father Xavier Gagnon attempted to enter the fire area, he was stopped by his superior, Father Louis-Médéric Adams, ordering him, under his vow of obedience, to not go into



the danger area.<sup>12</sup> This saved his life; the floor immediately gave in. Fortunately, all 18 girls sleeping in a different part of the building were helped to escape. The building that had a fire alarm, chemical extinguishers throughout and five emergency exit doors was totally destroyed in minutes.<sup>13</sup>

The **Patriote de l'Ouest**, a weekly western journal, published a lengthy report of the tragedy and, as had many other observers, expressed heartfelt sympathy to the children, their families and the missionaries, all profoundly affected by the disaster. A common funeral was held on September 22. The cremated remains of the 20 victims were buried in a unique coffin. Literally, death had passed through Beauval, a passage that was not soon forgotten. The faith of those who remained became the powerful anchor which helped them survive the aching grief. Surviving was indeed a *leap in faith* for all Grey Nun and Oblate missionaries who found deep consolation and strength in God's unfailing presence.

### *Temporary dwelling*

There were 11 older boys and 42 girls left as boarders along with eight sisters, all who needed accommodation. The boys and 12 of the older girls returned temporarily to their homes while 18 younger girls remained with the sisters. Little did they know that for the next five years they were to live in borrowed, crowded space located in other buildings of the Mission. In 1930, knowing that her sisters had endured these primitive conditions for three long winters, and with the government further delaying approval and funding for the building, Mother Anna Piché Superior General, wrote to the Bishop:

*What preoccupies us is the mission of Beauval. Mother [Evangéline] Gallant, Provincial Superior and Mother Saint Louis-de-Gonzague [Adrienne Vigneau] who went to visit our sisters since the fire, tell us that it is really impossible to leave them in their present dwelling for another two years. We have thought of recalling them until the government has built a new school...We have asked Mother*

*Rose-Anna Laberge [now Provincial Superior], who will be at Beauval in the near future, to bring them back if she finds it necessary...*<sup>14</sup>

An answer from Bishop Charlebois was written on December 26, 1930 expressing his sorrow and regrets at the decision of Mother Piché. Reinforcing his request, he seemed to have been able to use the sisters' decision to advantage in his dealings with the government. From then on, things changed drastically to the satisfaction of all. First, there was the visit of Mother Rose-Anna Laberge in early January, as announced. Hardly a few weeks later, on Wednesday, February 25, 1931, the chronicler was able to record:

*Saint Joseph answered our prayer. The school will be built this year and it is on the day consecrated to him that we received the good news.*<sup>15</sup>

A \$75,000.00 grant was promised by the Federal government as further proof that they were serious in approving the new construction. The school was built in quasi-record time thanks to all the help given by the priests and Brothers. The workers had an early start in cutting and transporting the wood, making the bricks and preparing all other building materials. By January 1932, the school being almost completed, all were able to gradually move into their new facility with indescribable relief and delight. In early September, the **Chroniques** still recorded that no desks for the children had arrived yet,

*so we teach songs and prayers to the children instead of regular classes.... September 25: the desks arrived.*<sup>16</sup>

Prior to constructing the main section of the school while awaiting government funding, several parts had been replaced. The chapel was completed and blessed by Bishop Ovide Charlebois on June 22, 1930. A kitchen and a laundry were also built and occupied by 1931. The opening of the new school was scheduled for January 1, 1932, although it was acknowledged that much work still remained to be done by that time.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, there was more enthusiasm in the frequent entries by the chronicler. The number of students was increasing and after five years of coping with all kinds of difficulties, life had returned to a more desirable status.

The sisters' life was one with that of their people. Whatever was occurring, it appeared in the **Chroniques**. A few examples will give an idea of the importance given to minor happenings when there are only 'minor happenings' in the small community of Beauval:

- Was there ever such a novelty as the small goat obtained by Father Victor Bleau? He proudly toured the school to show off his new pet to all!
- There was the travel incident of Brother Bruno who attempted a trip to Big River and had to turn back after falling through the ice 14 times?
- When the electricity appeared at Beauval in 1962, or Saskatchewan Telephone reached the settlement in 1974, making radiograms obsolete, there was great rejoicing for all.
- The bi-weekly mail that was unduly delayed due to weather or road conditions, created adequate and justifiable laments in the **Chroniques** with the fear of returning to the earlier years when mail would arrive whenever a traveler returned from the cities.
- Whenever there was a crisis: illness or accident among the people of Beauval, tears and grief were easily detected in correspondence and the **Chroniques**. Whenever a mother with four or five frightened children knocked on the door at night in search of a shelter from an abusive husband, the sisters took them in, comforted them and assisted in the necessary follow-up.
- The serious measles outbreak of February 1937, weighed heavily on the lives of the missionaries. Death had claimed 13 children and 30 other persons from among their friends in the settlement. The sincere love and grief of the sisters was evident in their prayers and their correspondence. They were just like the mothers of a large family of over 100 children.



Every occurrence in their lives, small or large, became important in their conversations, correspondence and records. Would not a mother rejoice when her children uttered their first word, or graduated from high school? Or would she not grieve when her little ones were sick or became orphaned? This was no different for sisters who have given years of their life to their ministry of education: the children and their parents became the sisters' adopted families.

The school, first named Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, became Beauval Indian Residential School, and later had its name changed to La Plonge School. La Plonge School became a High School in the '70s.

## *Sisters leaving Beauval Indian Residential School*

The time had come for a final decision on recalling the sisters from the Beauval Indian Residential School. Again, the decreasing number of sisters available was the main reason for this regrettable event. On their last day, July 23, 1971, the chronicler, Sister Gabrielle Simard, wrote:

*It is not without a shrinking of the heart that we think of the Grey Nuns leaving the students residence. During 61 years, they have been competent and devoted educators, fervent religious who knew how to give themselves entirely to the Natives and Métis. So it is with bitter regrets that these people heard the news. They wanted to keep the sisters. The employees wanted to keep their understanding and charming matron, Sister Irène Lefebvre; they wanted to send requests and petitions to the Major Superiors...<sup>18</sup>*

They bade farewell to the sisters with gratitude and regrets. On June 26, a special banquet was held at which a large attendance was registered. All wanted to show their sincere gratitude for the 61 years that the Grey Nuns had given them so generously.

On June 25, 1983, the School celebrated its 50th anniversary.

All Grey Nuns who had worked at the School were invited to return for the event. This time again, many were those who expressed their hope to have the sisters back in their midst.

### *Saint Madeleine School*

A public school was opened at Beauval Village on March 6, 1930. A house across the La Plonge River was rented and a non-Catholic teacher was hired by the Premier of Saskatchewan. The life of that school was rather short. Another school, Saint Madeleine opened in 1932 with lay Catholic teachers hired by the parish. Then, in 1944, at the request of the Métis and White population of the Village, including non-Catholic parents, Grey Nuns accepted the request to re-open Saint Madeleine School, which had been closed for eight months.<sup>19</sup>

Sister Catherine Boily was assigned to this new endeavor. The furniture and teaching material were in a deplorable state. After some urgent repairs, the school opened on September 11, 1944 at 0900 hours. Sister Boily lived with the other sisters at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School in the Native Mission of Beauval some three kilometers away. One must remember that there was no road to Beauval, but only mud or snow tracks which one would follow from one place to the other. Sister Boily had her own horse and carriage and traveled daily in all kinds of weather. There were times, though, when she could not make the trip and had to remain at the village several days until the mud disappeared or the snow had enough tracks that she could follow. In 1952, a Jeep was purchased to facilitate transportation, but it did nothing to improve the roads!

For 11 years Grey Nuns taught at Beauval Village while commuting to the Native Mission. Then in 1955, approval was given by Mother Rose Vincent, Provincial Superior for the sisters to live at the Village. Father Rosaire Rho temporarily ceded his rectory to the sisters and went to live in an annex of the parish hall. The following year a small house was built to accommodate four to six sisters. It became Youville Convent and was blessed by Bishop

Paul Dumouchel of Keewatin on October 7, 1956. That day was marked by rejoicing and grandiose celebrations. At the evening banquet, prepared by Sisters Yvonne Matte and Marie-Rose Gosselin for some 30 guests, Father Rosaire Rho, parish priest of Saint Madeleine gave a talk filled with unrestrained gratitude. He eloquently thanked God for the Grey Nuns who had come to teach at Saint Madeleine and had decided to establish residence in the Village. He said, at one point,

*A parish without sisters is like a family without a mother; our children know it well and they give respect and filial love to the sisters.*<sup>20</sup>

The sisters remained at Beauval Village until 1988. During those years, the number of children grew from 32 in 1944 in one classroom, to 60 four years later in two classrooms, and 112 in three classrooms in 1958. In 1959, a new school with four classrooms was built and quickly filled with 139 students.<sup>21</sup>

As successful and appreciated as the sisters were at Beauval Village, there were many times when their stay at Beauval was threatened, due to the need for the sisters in other missions. As early as 1951, Father Edouard Perreault, on hearing there was a strong possibility the sisters from the School at Beauval Village would be recalled, wrote to Mother Rose Vincent, Provincial Superior,

*I was informed that there will be a meeting of superiors at the mother house in February and that the question of Beauval Village will be discussed; I hope Mother that you will be on our side and that you will find arguments to ensure the life of our school...*<sup>22</sup>

Again in 1955, Mother Berthe Dorais, Provincial Superior, wrote:

*I regret to have to inform you of the final decision about the school at Beauval Village; our two teachers will definitively have to leave in June of this year. Always the same reason that you know too well: shortage of sisters.*<sup>23</sup>



Bishop Paul Dumouchel's comments to Mother Flora Ste-Croix, Superior General,

*The departure of the sisters will mark a backward step for the Church of Beauval....This regret is shared by the Beauval population, who already begged me to not remove the sisters from their Village.<sup>24</sup>*

No one was to suffer more than Father Rosaire Rho from the great void that would result with the sisters leaving Beauval Village:

*I cannot believe that this would be the last year that the sisters would teach at Beauval Village...I can tell you in all sincerity, I have never met children as good as these of our Village. Your sisters have played a great role, certainly the principal role in their education.<sup>25</sup>*

Other communications from Bishop Paul Dumouchel and the Oblates of Beauval were more insistent, more desperate and resulted in a reversal of the decision: the sisters were allowed to remain. A change, however, was unavoidable: the three sisters had not renewed their contracts and had already been replaced. Only the position of Principal became vacant and was filled by Sister Annette Mageau. The other sisters continued to be involved more intensively with parish work, such as: prayer meetings, parish pastoral work, singing, youth meetings, faith education, day retreats, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, catechesis, home visiting, meals to the poor, and clothing for the poor, upkeep of the rectory and church. Once other teaching positions became open, two more sisters returned to the classroom.

## *Leaving Beauval Village*

In 1988, an irrevocable decision was communicated to the sisters: the mission of Beauval Village will close. The only sister teaching at Valley View<sup>26</sup> School, Beauval Village during that last year was Sister Thérèse Chartier. Before leaving Beauval, she visited each home and gave them a large mounted picture of Blessed

Marguerite d'Youville,<sup>27</sup> Foundress of the Grey Nuns. Sister Chartier wrote in the **Chroniques**,

*The Grey Nuns may not be there in person but Blessed Marguerite d'Youville will continue to bless the people in Beauval.*<sup>28</sup>

Upon leaving Beauval, Sister Thérèse Chartier was the last Grey Nun teacher in the Saint Albert Province. She thus closed a glorious page of history, leaving behind generations of people who have benefited from this chosen Grey Nun ministry.

A total of 85 Grey Nuns ministered at Beauval Native Mission during the 61 years from 1910 to 1971, achieving a high degree of mutual respect and friendship with the Cree, Chipewyan and Métis population. They gave a cumulated total of 277 years of dedicated service that will never be forgotten.

At Beauval Village, the Grey Nuns remained 44 years, between 1944 and 1988. Together, 21 sisters gave a cumulated total of 111 years, leaving a mark indelibly written in the lives and social fabric of the Métis and White people of Beauval Village. In the Beauval cemetery, the remains of two sisters who died at Beauval will be forever a witness to the dedicated service happily given to the people of the region by the Grey Nuns. Remembered with love are Sister Saint Nazaire (Philomène Nadeau) who died November 19, 1923 and Sister Léa (Elise Bellerose) who died in a fire on September 19, 1927.

On July 1, 1999, Sister Gabrielle Simard was invited to Beauval Village by people who had not forgotten her contribution to their lives. The occasion was the dedication of the 'old convent' as the Sister Simard Centre. The convent built in 1955, was sold to the town in 1991. It was renovated to become offices and classrooms for the youth of Beauval. It is noteworthy that Sister Gabrielle Simard gave three years at Beauval Native Mission before going to Beauval Village for 14 years. Now, 14 years after her departure, in 1985, she was honored by those she had served and loved.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 3

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- 1 Name changed to Beauval in 1911. (**Historique**, p. 3, L075, MMY Arch.).
- 2 The Sisters of Saint Joseph of Lyon remained at Ile-à-la-Crosse one year, moved to Lac La Plonge and returned to France after three years.
- 3 **Beauval - Ecole Chroniques**, vol. I, p. 3, (The **Beauval Chroniques** were destroyed by fire on September 19, 1927 and reconstituted in 1935 by Sr. Denise Beaudin), GNRCArch.
- 4 Pascal, Bishop Albert to Mother Praxède Filiatrault, September 30, 1909, cited in **Beauval Chroniques**, pp. 4-5.
- 5 **Beauval Chroniques**, p. 5.
- 6 **Ibid.**, p. 6.
- 7 Boily, Carole and Magali Nayet from St.B. Arch., e-mail information.
- 8 **Chroniques**, pp. 5-6.
- 9 Saint-Nazaire, Sr. to Mother Anna Piché, Superior General, February 10, 1910.
- 10 **Chroniques**, p. 6.
- 11 **Historique**, doc. # 9a, GNRC Arch..
- 12 Potvin, Annette, s.g.m., *Réminiscences*, February, 2000.
- 13 **Ibid.**, doc. # 12a.
- 14 Piché, Mother Anna to Bishop Ovide Charlebois, December 3, 1930, (**Historique**, doc. # 19).
- 15 **Chroniques**, p. 60. (Traditionally, the Grey Nuns consecrated Wednesdays to Saint Joseph).
- 16 **Ibid.**, p. 80.
- 17 **Historique**, doc. # 25a.
- 18 **Chroniques**, p. 186. (The chronicler's modesty most likely prevented her from writing people's comments concerning herself as well)!
- 19 **Ibid.**, pp. 142-144. (The School was named after Saint Madeleine Parish at Beauval Village).
- 20 **Beauval Village Chroniques**, p. 16.
- 21 **Historique** L123, Beauval Village, p. 6, MMY Arch.
- 22 **Ibid.**, p. 4.
- 23 Dorais, Mother Berthe to Sister Aurée Corriveau, superior, March 30, 1955, **Historique**, doc. # 104.
- 24 Dumouchel, Bishop Paul to Mother Flora Ste-Croix, June 24, 1955, **Historique**, p. 4, MMY Arch.



- 25 Rho, Fr. Rosaire, to Mother Rose Vincent, Provincial Superior, December 28, 1954, **Historique**, p. 4, MMY Arch.
- 26 A new name of the school given at an unregistered date.
- 27 Marguerite d'Youville was beatified in 1959. She was to become a saint in 1990.
- 28 **Chroniques**, Beauval Village, p. 528.



# CHAPTER FOUR

1923 -

## BIGGAR: HOSPITAL AND WELCOME HOME

**B**iggar's Saint Margaret Hospital was founded on December 6, 1923 by the Grey Nuns of Nicolet<sup>1</sup> at the request of the Board of Trade, the Town Council and the citizens of Biggar. The town, in 1923, had but a handful of Catholic residents, but a hospital was needed and the people did not have the necessary resources to build and operate such an institution. They opted to request a Catholic hospital.

*The need for a hospital in Biggar, Saskatchewan, was expressed as far back as 1911-12 shortly after the incorporation of the Village of Biggar as a town. In 1913, a money by-law for ten thousand dollars was successfully passed to provide hospital facilities for the town. At that time there were already several doctors residing in the district... Things went on until 1923 at which time a hospital became a reality.<sup>2</sup>*

Meanwhile the Town Council showed wisdom in realizing that they were spending thousands of dollars every year to send patients to Saskatoon or to subsidize individual attempts to provide patients with care in private homes. The Secretary-Treasurer of the Board of Trade of Biggar, Frank Hopkins, wrote to Bishop Joseph-Henri Prud'homme of Prince Albert and Saskatoon:

*I have been requested by the executive committee of the Biggar Board of Trade to write you, to invite the Order of Grey Nuns to build a hospital in Biggar. I was to assure you that this Board will do everything in its power to support such an institution should it be decided to locate in Biggar and if there is any information we can supply, or any*



*enquiries you wish to make, we wish to place the services of this Board at your disposal.*<sup>3</sup>

In its turn, the town supported the invitation of the Biggar Board of Trade that the Grey Nuns come to Biggar to establish a hospital. Again Frank Hopkins, wearing his second hat of Town Clerk, wrote to Bishop Prud'homme:

*...In order to encourage the establishing of, say, a twenty-bed hospital, the Council is prepared to furnish a site of approximately one hectare, free, and to extend the town's water mains to that site...*<sup>4</sup>

The Grey Nuns of Montréal were well known in Saskatchewan because of Saint Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon operating since 1907. Bishop Prud'homme first presented the request to Mother Octavie Dugas, then Superior General of the Grey Nuns of Montréal. Unfortunately, Mother Dugas had to decline because of other priority projects and the lack of sisters available at that time. She referred the Bishop to the mother house of Nicolet.

Then followed correspondence between the Bishop or his Director of Social Works, Father J. A. Gagnon with Mother Alphonsine Martin, Superior General of the Grey Nuns of Nicolet. Several objections were raised by Mother Martin: difficulty finding English speaking sisters for that mission, the fact that the Sisters of Nicolet did not have civil incorporation in the western provinces, therefore could not own a hospital, and their present inability to endorse the financial part of the project. To these problems, the Bishop promised easy solutions and, before the year 1923 would end, four Grey Nuns of Nicolet would establish the Saint Margaret Hospital (SMH) in the town of Biggar.

It was now Father Jean-Marie Drapeau, parish priest of Saint Gabriel Parish at Biggar, who entered into communication with the Grey Nuns of Nicolet with all his dynamism and his faith. He was actively working on converting a Knights of Columbus Hall of seven and a half by 19 meters into a 20-25 bed hospital. With enthusiasm and evident joy, he wrote to Mother Martin and

painted the beautiful rosy picture:

*It is with the greatest joy that I learned from Bishop Prud'homme that the good Grey Nuns of Nicolet have accepted to open a hospital at Biggar. It is God who inspired you in your decision. The good to accomplish is unlimited. So, proceed, confident in Divine Providence.<sup>5</sup>*

To this, Sister Saint Alphonse de Liguori (Girard) responded for Mother Martin, who was visiting her western missions of Cardston and Brocket in Alberta. She indicated that there was no final acceptance on their part as yet, mostly for financial reasons, and that more information was required at this time.<sup>6</sup> After more letters, and especially a visit of Father Jean-Marie Drapeau to Nicolet, a final yes was given by the sisters and a contract was signed on November 21, 1923 between Bishop Joseph-Henri Prud'homme and Mother Alphonsine Martin.<sup>7</sup> No one missed the providential coincidence: November 21 being the Feast Day of the Presentation of Mary, this contract would benefit from the special protection of this heavenly Mother. The contract, countersigned by J.S. Herman Brunault, Bishop of Nicolet, clearly stipulated that the sisters were responsible for the administration of the hospital, but not for ownership, nor financing its operation. It also referred to a minimum annual salary of \$300.00 per sister. The hospital was owned by the Diocese of Prince Albert and Saskatoon.

## *The foundresses*

On November 23, Mother Alphonsine Martin announced the names of the foundresses of Saint Margaret Hospital: Sisters Alphonsine Normand, from Drummondville, as superior, l'Ange Gardien (Honorine Proulx), Amélia Lamontagne both former missionaries at the Peigan Reserve in Brocket, Alberta, and Éveline Boudreault, from Nicolet. The chronicler reported:

*December 3. The hearts, somewhat tight with the emotions of leaving, perceiving the worries inherent to a new founda-*

*tion, but confident in the One who never fails us, Sisters Normand and Boudreault leave Nicolet to go to our new mission of Biggar.<sup>8</sup>*

The travelers arrived at the Biggar train station on November 6, 1923, at 1500 hours. They were met by the two Albertans: Sisters Amélia Lamontagne and Evéline Boudreault who had arrived in Biggar five hours earlier. Several women from the town came to welcome them. All were driven to the proposed hospital where the devoted Father Jean-Marie Drapeau, with the help of a few ladies, had prepared an appetizing meal. The rest of the afternoon was spent meeting more of the women of the parish. All expressed their happiness at having Grey Nuns with them. The sisters wrote in the **Chroniques**:

*In spite of the very sympathetic welcome of our new Pastor and a few of his parishioners, we cannot ignore a certain reaction of fear when we think of our responsibilities as foundresses. So much good we will be able to accomplish! Also, what a heavy burden on our shoulders! We realize it and it is with great fervor that we place our new mission under the aegis of our good Mother in heaven.<sup>9</sup>*

## *The hospital*

The sisters were agreeably surprised when they arrived at the hospital. The chronicler's entries are positive on this point:

*We take our rest in our new dwelling which charms us in more ways than one; we are surprised to find the hospital in such a good condition.*

*Our house is a parish hall modified and transformed into a hospital. It has two storeys that could accommodate about 20 patients. The upper floor contains the chapel and the Obstetrics Unit to the left. This is separated from the Operating Room by a narrow corridor leading to the stairs towards the main entrance. On the right side, we see a large*



*common room and a recreation room, a furnace, armchairs, table and a cupboard for medications. At the other end, there is a corridor with two rooms on each side and a linen room...*

*We have water, electricity, but no sewer system... We are having a cesspool dug by the chief of the Salvation Army... We have a lovely backyard... It is very rare that a house is so well organized right at the beginning...<sup>10</sup>*

In 1923, the closest hospitals within that region were the Grey Nuns' Saint Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon, 100 kilometers to the east and Unity Hospital, 110 kilometers to the west. The chronicler comments that, in view of the distance, they expected having to respond to the health care needs of a large district.<sup>11</sup>

The overjoyed Bishop Joseph Prud'homme could not wait to visit his new daughters in their hospital. On the day after they arrived at Biggar, the sisters recorded the visit of their Bishop, the time he spent with them and, especially the blessing of the hospital which occurred on December 8, the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception. The sisters saw in this happy coincidence a sure sign that the Blessed Mother of God was with them in their ministry to the sick of Biggar. Bishop Joseph Prud'homme wrote to Bishop Herman Brunault of Nicolet about his visit to Biggar and included the following comments:

*...I baptized the new hospital: Saint Margaret. Needless to describe the joy of these dear sisters when they realized that I named the hospital after the foundress of their community...*

*A hospital directed by sisters is a pulpit for preaching. These angels from Nicolet will contribute to better appreciation of the holy Church through their prayerful spirit, their exemplary life and their selfless devotion.<sup>12</sup>*

## *Growth and outcome*

On December 21, 1923 was registered the birth of Marie

Antoinette-Marguerite Tinant, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henri Tinant from Cochery, a nearby settlement. This was the first baby born at Saint Margaret Hospital (SMH).

Another noteworthy event was the first surgical operation on January 23, 1924, a tonsillectomy that was performed by Dr. Brace who brought his nurse to assist for the procedure. A quick call to Father Jean-Marie Drapeau, and in no time, the good surgeon had a useful lesson in the policies of the new hospital concerning the hiring of staff. Such an incident did not recur!

On January 30, 1924, a letter from a grateful patient arrived to thank the sisters for the good care she received at the hospital. Such a letter was not unique and many others were reported in the **Chroniques**. Later a touching poem was written by a patient, P. H. Gallagher, praising the dedication of the sisters; he donated the poem to them.

This young institution was already very busy that first winter. There were patients with contagious diseases, such as diphtheria, and only four sisters to minister to all the needs. On April 12, 1924, a telegram was sent to Nicolet with a repeated urgent request for help. An immediate positive answer from Mother Alphonsine Martin was just what the sisters needed. On Good Friday, April 18, two sisters were enthusiastically welcomed: Sisters Jeanne Sheehy and Adélia Provencher. They would be followed by many others. As more nurses were needed, several of the newcomers were first sent to Saint Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon to pursue their nursing course and become graduate nurses.

The **Chroniques** mentioned the opening of Hospice Saint Jean for the isolation of patients with contagious diseases on June 21, 1924. A temporary expansion allowed this additional service; it also provided more space flexibility when repairs or renovations needed to be carried out on the main building. On a few occasions, three to five contagious patients were in quarantine, with a sister as their caregiver.

November 22, 1924 was a happy day as government approved both the continuation of the hospital operation and eligibility for a government grant. This was no small reward for all the efforts

deployed during this first year.

As early as January 12, 1925, as required by the government, a Medical Board was functioning and a laboratory was organized. The sisters were often in touch with the Grey Nuns in Saskatoon to obtain essential information about legal and regulatory requirements and hospital policies in the Province of Saskatchewan.

On several occasions, a number of charitable women in the town of Biggar organized minor fund raising events, such as cookie sales, chicken dinner, or other creative activities. On May 10, 1925, they formed an official organization: the Ladies Aid Hospital Society. Generous donations by this group were recorded throughout the years, but more importantly, their presence was a wonderful support for the sisters.

An innovative service originated on February 9, 1927 when two sisters began to visit patients in their homes, as precursors to Public Health Nursing, Victorian Order of Nurses and Home Care which were not yet available in Biggar.<sup>13</sup> Babies were arriving in significant numbers at the hospital and on May 28, 1927, there were 10 babies in the nursery. This wee crowd found a special place in the local paper! The sisters were happy with this opportunity to publicize their growing institution.

In Saint Gabriel Parish, the relentless Father Jean-Marie Drapeau was negotiating with the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary to have them come and establish a school at Biggar; this became a reality in 1927. He also had a new church built which Bishop Joseph Prud'homme came to bless on August 28, 1927.<sup>14</sup> Indeed this devoted priest recorded many accomplishments on behalf of his flock!

December 8, 1948 marked the 25th Anniversary of the hospital. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed by an Open House brought many friends and supporters to celebrate this quarter of a century of service at Biggar.<sup>15</sup>

Biggar was blessed with many dedicated friends who are remembered for their apostolic witness, their loyal leadership, their zealous support and the length of service. Among them are:



- *Sister Anna Beaulac*, served as a nurse for many years; she was a tremendous support to the physicians and a kindly presence to the patients.
- *Dr. A.A. Hooge*, chief of staff for almost 40 years. He recruited caring, competent doctors to his team to serve the patients in the hospital and/or in the district.
- *Jean Foster*, a founding member of the Ladies Aid Hospital Society. She possessed much initiative and remained loyal to the hospital and a friend of the sisters for decades.

It was on a note of disappointment that the chronicler entered, on September 7, 1950, the failure of an oil company to find oil in its drilling attempts. Epsom Salt would therefore remain the main industry in the town.<sup>16</sup>

## *First loss*

A young sister, Sister Ste-Marguerite (Mary Dorothy Easson) arrived at Biggar on February 8, 1930. She was only 20 years old and brought with her the energy and enthusiasm of her youth. On September 24, she became slightly ill and decided to stay in bed. Typhoid had begun to ravage this young life and continued until Sister Ste-Marguerite could no longer fight its destructive action. Death took this young woman on October 6, 1930. Health regulations precluded the exposition of her remains for fear of contagion. Nevertheless, the parlor and later the church were filled to capacity with people from all languages and all faiths. Her funeral was celebrated by Bishop Pruh'homme. His homily touched many people. Following the funeral, Sister Ste-Marguerite's remains were carried to Duck Lake for burial. The Presentation Sisters (PBVM), who were established in that region, kindly offered a place in their cemetery plot. The Grey Nuns were also effusive in their gratitude toward the good Sisters of Assumption of Mary (SASV) who were so compassionate throughout the ordeal. It was truly in grief that the isolated Grey Nuns were able to know and appreciate the warmth and support of so many friends.

## *Other problems*

The **Chroniques** registered other incidents that were of concern to the devoted Grey Nuns. They had come to be of service and so it pained them, when for no apparent reason, a dog that was often at their heels as they walked down the street was subsequently caught and killed by the police on August 8, 1924. Apparently, the dog had been trained to frighten or intimidate the sisters.

More than once, some of the local boys took delight in throwing stones at the sisters or laughing at them. On June 24, 1925, a sister received a stone to her head which fortunately, caused only short-term pain and fright.

As late as August 21, 1927 these mischievous, undesirable and frightful activities were still occurring. These occasions were simply written into the **Chroniques**, often without either words of excuse for the perpetrators, or even a prayer for peace to return. The starkness of the entries reflected the pain these hurtful events caused the gentle sisters.

There was great anxiety, coupled with fervent prayer, when a man came to Biggar intent on establishing the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) there. He was given a cold reception in both Biggar and Saskatoon: this may have contributed to his incarceration on February 17, 1933. As the thoughts of the KKK aroused intense fear, the announcement of his arrest was received with great relief for the people of Biggar. Even some of his former associates who, by that time, had turned against him, supported his arrest.<sup>17</sup>

## *Important decisions*

In 1927, Bishop Joseph Prud'homme made a proposal that the mother house in Nicolet buy the hospital from his diocesan corporation, but the sisters were unable to accept this proposal.<sup>18</sup> It seems that the prospect of having to build a 'real hospital' and exchange it for the parish hall *cum temporary hospital* was a heavy

burden for the ailing Bishop.

A letter of September 30, 1930 from Sister Claire Richard, superior, to Bishop Joseph Prud'homme described the urgency for a new hospital:

*Greater than ever is the anxiety concerning the need for a new building...The hospital was approved, it is true, but only provisionally, and we fear that, if it was visited in its present state, we would lose much credit with the Government, and their support would be withdrawn. Life would not be better. What would we do? Could we only survive?...The physicians are beginning to believe that we have abused their trust; they are very disappointed. Patients are looking elsewhere for the comfort that they cannot find here, which causes even more hardships.<sup>19</sup>*

The mother house of Nicolet had just opened another hospital at Rosthern and was involved in several other projects. It was unable to consider capital financing for Biggar. The owner of SMH, the diocese of Prince Albert and Saskatoon, seemed prepared to help financially, but Bishop Herman Brunault of Nicolet, expressed many doubts about this project, as noticed in the above-quoted letter.<sup>20</sup>

Hope and anxiety, each in turn, surfaced in correspondence until, in February 1931, when the **Chroniques** referred to 'our future hospital', was there renewed hope in the hearts of everyone. Then on May 26, 1931, the entry reads:

*We begin digging the foundation of our future hospital. We appoint Saint Joseph in charge of the project and we pray that his intercession will hasten and secure this enterprise so dear to our hearts.<sup>21</sup>*

Once more their hopes were frustrated and no building arose at that time. Negotiations continued and disappointment increased. As a helpful diversion, the hospital finally was equipped with water closets on April 5, 1935, 12 years after the opening of the institution.<sup>22</sup>



Even with the anxiety caused by WWII, a long-expected change occurred with the visit of Mr. Schaefer, from the Saskatchewan Department of Hospitals, Construction Branch on May 14, 1942 - 19 years after the sisters' arrival in Biggar! This gentleman carefully reviewed the plans and made a few suggestions, including the consideration of another site, which was later accepted by the Town Council.<sup>23</sup> The **Chroniques** were fairly silent about construction progress, except for donations received towards furniture for the future hospital and the visit of Mother Marguerite Mann, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert, 'with her experience in construction'.<sup>24</sup>

## *Life continued*

On November 2, 1943, the chronicler wrote:

*The new hospital is partly completed. One year ago, foundations were laid; these were interrupted for the winter until March 1...Today is moving day for materials and supplies and final cleaning...*<sup>25</sup>

The sisters' long wait for a new hospital was not idle time. Several events were recorded in the **Chroniques** during the interval. A flu epidemic was declared on December 21, 1932, overcrowding the hospital.<sup>26</sup> Bishop Joseph Prud'homme's diocese was reorganized with the creation of the Diocese of Saskatoon, necessitating his move to Prince Albert on June 27, 1931. Saskatoon diocese received its first Bishop in the person of Gerald Murray, C.Ss.R. in 1934.<sup>27</sup> And finally, a notable event was the fusion of the Nicolet branch of Grey Nuns to the original congregation of the Grey Nuns of Montréal on March 1, 1941. This major reorganization included the transfer of provincial boundaries, consequently, Biggar became part of Saint Albert Province.<sup>28</sup>

The hospital was ready to receive patients on December 2, 1943, a few days short of the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the sisters at Biggar, on December 6, 1923. The Official Opening of the new Saint Margaret Hospital was held on December 7, 1943.

The celebration was grandiose with the presence of Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General of the Grey Nuns of Montréal; Mother Marguerite Mann, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province; the Saskatchewan Health Minister, J. R. Hassard; the Mayor of Biggar, J. W. Wright; the first physician at SMH, Dr. Brace, and the presence of some 850 visitors to the new, modern facility.

The following day, December 8, Bishop Gerald Murray, C.Ss.R., of Saskatoon blessed the new building. This was followed by a Thanksgiving Mass with many of the visiting sisters still present. Another special event found its place in the history of SMH on that day: the delivery of the first baby in the new hospital. Ronald Kenneth Puff, child of Emma Redlick and William Puff of Biggar, arrived just as the citizens of the town were rejoicing and celebrating. The sisters provided free hospitalization to both mother and child, as a gesture of celebration.<sup>29</sup>

## *A Nursing Home*

The new hospital was hardly opened when plans for a Nursing Home, an extension behind the main building, were activated as was noted on July 29, 1944. Almost completed, the Home was blessed by the new Bishop Phillip Pocock of Saskatoon on December 17, 1944. An Open House was held on December 19, 1944. On January 3, 1945, the Home admitted its first five residents. All of them had awaited this day as residents at the hospital over a long period as no long term care facility had been available. In fact, Bishop Pocock mentioned that this was the first Nursing Home for the aged in his diocese of Saskatoon.<sup>30</sup> One of the first residents had lived at the hospital since 1931.

It was in the midst of countless other activities that SMH welcomed the introduction of the Saskatchewan Health Services Plan in 1947. This hospitalization plan, while improving the finances of hospitals, brought more stability to the level of care provided to patients.



## *Shall we leave or shall we stay?*

According to a document in the Archives, Father Armand Tombu, on behalf of the Church Trustees of Saint Gabriel Parish of Biggar sold the first hospital building to the Grey Nuns, through Mother Marguerite Mann, Provincial Superior, on September 10, 1943.<sup>31</sup>

On October 12, 1952, Mother Rose Vincent, Provincial Superior, sent a letter to Mother Flora Ste-Croix, Superior General along with copy of a recent Health Survey Report from the Government of Saskatchewan. This survey found the Nursing Home building unsafe in terms of fire protection and condemned all 38 beds of the seven-year-old building.<sup>32</sup> It should be remembered that the plans were studied, revised and approved by government officials prior to construction, but, due to changes in policies and standards, that particular building no longer met these new standards. The sisters met with Bishop Francis Klein; correspondence and meetings continued in frantic frequency. Then, on Monday, June 9, 1953, a letter from Mother General informed the sisters of the final decision of her Council: the sisters shall leave the hospital by June 1954.<sup>33</sup> The news, although feared for a long time, was received as a bomb shell by all concerned: patients, physicians, priests, Bishop and sisters.

A letter from P.E. Hunt, Acting Director, Hospital Administration and Standards to Sister Eva Morissette, Superior and Administrator, dated August 18, 1953 noted:

*It is our understanding that you propose to sell the hospital operated by your order in Biggar. The Department recently received a request from a local group to obtain permission to form a Union Hospital District at Biggar, and this request has been granted...<sup>34</sup>*

There seemed to be no hope for the Nursing Home to continue. The first thing to ensure was helping the residents to find suitable placements in other Nursing Homes. Some went as far as Moose Jaw, Wildwood and Saskatoon. The process was painful on



both sides: the residents and their families as well as the sisters, all had come to consider themselves members of one family. To sever those bonds required faith and surrender on the part of many. Slowly, residents began leaving on September 1, 1953 and over the following days, some with their family, others accompanied to their new abode by the sisters.<sup>35</sup> The Nursing Home was a home to these older persons for only eight years, since 1945.

The population of Biggar was strongly opposed to the sisters' departure and W. Hock, Chair of the SMH Lay Advisory Board, wrote to Mother Flora Ste-Croix, Superior General, in 1953:

*Saint Margaret Hospital cannot be closed. You have done a remarkable job in the past thirty-five years... I have a proposition to make that you carry on this hospital with your Order by leaving us four Sisters [...] the Board of Directors will function and take more interest to relieve the work of the Sisters by placing Registered Nurses as assistants to all the Sisters on the floors.*<sup>36</sup>

Added to this was the Bishop's comment that:

*...we cause a great harm to religion in abandoning this hospital.*<sup>37</sup>

For the hospital, the situation had a quick turnaround and the decision that the Grey Nuns would remain at the hospital was announced on December 3, 1953. A few weeks later, January 18, 1954, Mother Flora Ste-Croix wrote to the Mayor and Council of Biggar to inform them officially that the General Council had now decided to remain at Biggar a few more years.<sup>38</sup> The reasons for this change were the insistence of the people and the Church of Biggar that the sisters reconsider their earlier decision and the very valid suggestions given to reduce the workload for the sisters.

This respite was to last long enough for the Grey Nuns to experience the 1962 Medicare Crisis in Saskatchewan. At that time, in the absence of the administrator, Sister Fernande Champagne, the crisis was handled by the Acting Administrator, Sister Bernadette Bézaire and the Lay Advisory Board. This crisis situation arose from the fact that:

*On July 1, 1962, the first comprehensive, universal, government-sponsored medical care insurance went into effect in Saskatchewan. Immediately doctors in the province went on strike. Government and doctors were in conflict over who should control the provision of medical insurance throughout the province.<sup>39</sup>*

Fortunately, health care in Saskatchewan returned to near normal when the crisis was ended on July 23, 1962. As it is well known, the Saskatchewan plan was later adopted in all provinces and Territories of Canada. It became the envy of other countries and a model for universal, indiscriminate access to health care for all citizens. A significant point in that crisis was that Biggar, being in the constituency of Premier T.C. Douglas, had the eyes of the media constantly focussed on this part of the Province.

Saint Margaret Hospital registered a few more accomplishments when, on October 28, 1964, a letter from Dr. W. I. Taylor announced their provisional accreditation status, followed by another announcement on December 15, 1964 awarding full accreditation status.<sup>40</sup>

The 'few more years' of the sisters remaining at Biggar lasted 10 more years; in 1964, it became evident that a new facility was required and the Grey Nuns found themselves unable to endorse this financial commitment. Several other construction projects were in process at that time in Saint Albert, Edmonton and Saint Paul, Alberta, taking up all available resources. A final decision to relinquish ownership of SMH therefore became irreversible. On January 6, 1966, Mother Yvonne Prévost, Provincial Superior wrote to William Hock, Chair, Lay Advisory Board informing him of the Grey Nuns' decision to leave SMH.<sup>41</sup> Careful planning for this major change resulted in a final date for the transfer of ownership being set for April 1, 1967. Following that date, a few sisters agreed to continue working at the hospital in non-administrative positions. The seven sisters remaining rented a building, formerly used as a rectory for the priests, which became the sisters' new residence.

Sister Aline Bohémier, who was administrator prior to the

sale of the hospital remained as Director of Nursing. The other sisters remained in the positions they held before the transfer of ownership. A new administrator, Nicolas Werezak was appointed by the Biggar Union Hospital Board on March 29, 1967 and assumed his duties on May 8, 1967. The Accountant, Pius Sauverwald became Acting Administrator, in the interim.

As if this blow to the population of Biggar was not painful enough, it was also during that same period in 1968 that the Sisters of Assumption left Biggar after giving 40 years of outstanding educational services to successive generations of young people in Biggar and area.

The Grey Nuns were not leaving Biggar yet. They were to be seen around the hospital in smaller and decreasing numbers until 1976 when the last employed Grey Nun, Sister Germaine Roussel left the position she held since 1962.

## *Biggar Welcome Home*

Established in 1976 the Biggar Welcome Home began as an approved Home, for women with physical or mental health needs, serving Central and Northern Saskatchewan. The Home was incorporated in 1991.

Its creation resulted from the initiative of Sister Germaine Roussel who offered assistance to a charitable lady, Rose Levasseur, who had become ill and unable to attend to the women in her care. When Rose died, Sister Roussel and the Grey Nuns felt a call to continue this work of charity. For a number of years, there were two houses staffed by Grey Nuns caring for up to 10 women with physical or mental disabilities. By 1986, one of the houses was sold and the other was totally renovated and enlarged. It accommodated five women and three sisters who lived there to assist the residents and operate the Home.

Visitors to this house of charity could not fail to notice the exemplary respect of the sisters towards their residents. This was very moving. Strong bonds were established between residents, their families and care givers during those years.



## *Sisters leaving*

After 22 years of this service, the looming problem of shortage of sisters forced the Grey Nuns to look at the areas of ministries that could be passed on to competent and responsible lay people. On January 1, 1999, the project and the house were sold to Patsy Polsfut, but the two sisters remaining at Biggar continued to visit the ladies they had served with love and compassion. Sister Aline André volunteered to cook at the Home when needed, while Sister Lucille Levesque assisted in the parish and made home visits to elderly persons in Biggar. In their loving ministries, they continued Marguerite d'Youville's presence for those in need. As their predecessors, they were involved in a large number of activities to assist the people of Biggar in any way possible.

Over 22 years, the sisters showed admirable dedication to serving vulnerable women. The women and their families are forever grateful to the sisters for sharing their lives with them when they most needed care, compassion, respect and love.

Over the years, Grey Nuns were always available to bring communion to shut-ins, to participate in Bible study classes, and in parish choirs, to visit schools for talks on faith and vocation, and to be involved in Teen Encounter Christ retreats. Sister Antoinette Cyre was a teacher for several years in Biggar. On a lighter side, the sisters would be seen at picnics, dinners, birthday parties with members of the parish community. They could be counted upon to help as sacristan and in the clothing depot. Always, they would be in the eyes of all, the prayer power-house for the people of Biggar. On June 15, 2000, Sisters Aline André and Lucille Levesque left Biggar where, for 77 years 129 Grey Nuns had served selflessly for a cumulated total of 583 years.

The Grey Nuns remain grateful to the towns of Biggar and Handel for the vocations of six of their daughters to the Congregation between the years 1930 and 1956: Sisters Margaret Cass, Catherine Frohlich, Mary Fruhstuk, Mary Hagan, Josephine Kergoat and Aurore Marien.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 4

- 1 An autonomous Grey Nuns branch founded in 1886. It merged with the Grey Nuns of Montréal in 1941.
- 2 **The Independent**, August 11, 1973, p. 3.
- 3 Hopkins, Frank to Bishop Joseph Henri Prud'homme, Jan. 11, 1923, **Chroniques**, p. 2, GNRC Arch.
- 4 Same to same, April 14, 1923, **Chroniques**, p. 3.
- 5 Drapeau, Fr. Jean-Marie to Mother Alphonsine Martin, Aug. 22, 1923, in **Chroniques**, p. 8.
- 6 **Chroniques**, pp. 8-9.
- 7 **Historique**, doc. # 26, GNRC Arch.
- 8 **Chroniques**, pp. 18-19.
- 9 **Ibid.**, p. 19.
- 10 **Ibid.**, pp. 20-21.
- 11 **Ibid.**, p. 21.
- 12 Prud'homme, Bishop Joseph to Bishop Herman Brunault, December 9, 1923, **Historique**, doc. # 28.
- 13 **Chroniques**, p. 66.
- 14 **Ibid.**, p. 73.
- 15 **Ibid.**, p. 260.
- 16 **Ibid.**, p. 276.
- 17 **Ibid.**, p. 160.
- 18 **Historique**, doc. # 37.
- 19 **Ibid.**, doc. # 40.
- 20 **Ibid.**
- 21 **Chroniques**, p. 133.
- 22 **Ibid.**, p. 179.
- 23 **Ibid.**, p. 231.
- 24 By that time, the Grey Nuns of Nicolet had joined the main branch of Montréal, resulting in a broader financial base.
- 25 **Chroniques**, p. 237.
- 26 **Ibid.**, p. 158.
- 27 **Ibid.**, p. 135.
- 28 **Ibid.**, pp. 222-223, and **Historique**, doc. # 45.

- 29 **Chroniques**, pp. 239-240.
- 30 **Ibid.**, p. 233.
- 31 **Historique**, document not numbered, in GNRC Arch..
- 32 **Historique**, doc. # 97 and 98.
- 33 **Chroniques**, p. 25.
- 34 **Historique**, doc. # 122.
- 35 **Chroniques**, vol. 2, p. 27.
- 36 **Historique**, p. 6, doc. #C4, 170, MMY Arch.
- 37 **Ibid.**, p. 6, doc. #C4, 176, MMY Arch.
- 38 **Historique**, doc. #160. GNRC Arch.
- 39 Caplin, Alice, **Nurses and the Medicare Crisis: 1962**, Mimeographed booklet, p. 7.
- 40 **Chroniques**, p. 122 and p. 154.
- 41 **Historique**, doc. # 314.





A sky view of Ile-à-la-Crosse Mission



Saint Paul's Hospital: (L) 1907 and (R) 1923, Saskatoon



Saint Paul's 1989 addition, right of picture



Saint Margaret Hospital,  
Biggar, 1943, second  
building

## CHAPTER FIVE

1927 -

### ROSTHERN- HOSPITAL

Rosthern, a quiet village located 200 kilometers northeast of Biggar, was in no way less in need of a hospital than Biggar in those years. Even at that distance, competition was in style. This was especially so when the same Father Jean-Marie Drapeau was the religious and community leader of Rosthern, as well as Biggar, and Bishop Joseph Prud'homme of Prince Albert and Saskatoon shepherded over the large area which included both Biggar and Rosthern.

The people of Rosthern used multiple avenues to request the Grey Nuns of Nicolet open a hospital in their town. No doubt, their major advisor was Father Drapeau. Surprisingly though, out of 1600 to 1700 persons in Rosthern, hardly 30 families were of the Roman Catholic faith. In 1927, this openness to another's faith was considered avant-garde and augured positively for the good relationships that could ensue.

When Bishop Prud'homme made a detour through Rosthern, on his way to the Province of Québec, by train, on January 23, 1927, he was received with unrestrained enthusiasm:

*Over 500 people, citizens of Rosthern and the surrounding districts, were massed upon the station platform at Rosthern this afternoon when His Lordship Bishop Prud'homme, of the diocese of Prince Albert and Saskatoon, went through en route for Quebec. Arrangements had been made with the C.N.R. for a ten minute stop, and the mass meeting was by way of a demonstration to the Bishop of the enthusiasm and goodwill of the people toward the erection of a big hospital at this point...<sup>1</sup>*

In seeing the strong desire of the people to have Grey Nuns open their hospital, Bishop Joseph Prud'homme went to Nicolet while on other business down east. There, he met with Mother Flore Doucet, Superior General of the Grey Nuns of Nicolet, as well as with Bishop Herman Brunault of Nicolet to inform them of this possibility and obtain their support. This was like a replay of earlier pleas by Bishop Prud'homme concerning the founding of Saint Margaret's Hospital in Biggar four years earlier.

In a letter of May 28, 1927, to Mother Doucet, Bishop Prud'homme could hardly conceal his joy at the possibility of establishing a hospital at Rosthern:

*The population [of Rosthern] will experience a real delirium if you accept [to come] and I cannot see how you could resist the pressing demands of these brave people.<sup>2</sup>*

After many letters and visits, the Grey Nuns of Nicolet and the Bishop of Prince Albert signed a contract on October 19, 1927 to establish a hospital in Rosthern. In this contract, the hospital was to be directed by a Committee to be established by the Bishop, hence, as in Biggar, this hospital was a diocesan institution, operated by the sisters.<sup>3</sup>

## *The foundresses*

While two sisters from Biggar, Sisters Evéline Boudreault and Claire Richard, were busy preparing a residence for the foundresses at Rosthern, those chosen by Providence were informed by Mother Flore Doucet of their new mission. Only two were named until the hospital was ready to receive more workers: Sisters l'Ange Gardien (Honorina Proulx), superior, and Félicité Héroux. They arrived at Rosthern by train on November 3, 1927 at 2:10 hours. By December 16, two more had arrived: Sisters Anna Beaulac and Hébert (Emma Bergeron).



## *The hospital*

The story of Rosthern presented some research difficulties in preparing this manuscript. A fire at the Grey Nuns Provincial House of Nicolet<sup>4</sup> on December 31, 1955 resulted in the total loss of all **Chroniques** from Rosthern. By the mid-1960s, some of the surviving sisters reconstituted the history of the Grey Nuns mission in Rosthern, over 40 years after its foundation. Along with information collected from other sources as well, we find that there was a hospital building at Rosthern prior to inviting the Grey Nuns to establish a health ministry, but it was likely not in use at that time. To substantiate the fact that it was not in use, was the insistence of the people to have sisters come to open a hospital at Rosthern. The Mayor and President of the Rosthern Board of Trade, George Braden, wearing his hat of President of the Board of Trade, wrote to Bishop Prud'homme on January 10, 1927:

*Mr. George Braden, the Mayor of this town, is of the opinion that the present Hospital Building is not situated at a convenient location for the Sisters, being too far distant from the Catholic Church. Taking into consideration that the town of Rosthern will gladly donate grounds to the Sisters for the Hospital, in a more suitable location, where sufficient and good water can be obtained, Mr. Braden would recommend to have a new Hospital Building erected...<sup>5</sup>*

When Sisters l'Ange Gardien and Héroux arrived on November 3, 1927, they found three generous volunteers working in their home to make it ready for their arrival: Sisters Boudreault and Richard and Father Drapeau, all from Biggar. A spacious house had been purchased by the diocese, within close proximity to the Roman Catholic church, for the sisters' residence. To this house was attached the new building still under construction, that would become the hospital with a 20 bed capacity.<sup>6</sup> That hospital was to serve a population of 5,000 to 6,000 persons from the 11 surrounding municipalities, which were all committed to

financially support the hospital. This was a happy start.

The first patient was admitted in the newly completed hospital, on December 27, 1927, the Feast Day of Saint John the Evangelist. One more reason to name the hospital Saint John's Hospital; another reason being the sisters' desire to honor the patron saint of their devoted Father Jean-Marie Drapeau.<sup>7</sup> The sisters welcomed the Blessed Sacrament into their chapel on December 31, 1927 and the first Mass was celebrated on April 8, 1928. It was August 14, 1928 when Bishop Joseph Prud'homme blessed the hospital.

Those were the years when the influx of patients was very irregular, so was the income to the hospital. One comical incident, included in Sister Hébert (Emma Bergeron)'s account referenced previously, could find a place here regarding the financial situation of the hospital:

*Sister l'Ange Gardien was pessimistic and when the number of patients decreased, she would request that we made novenas.<sup>8</sup> As we had made many, without notable results, we decided to organize a party to change the heavy atmosphere pervading in the house. Sister Evéline Boudreault took out her violin from her trunk, we pushed the furniture into a corner of the dining room and the dance began. Within an hour, three patients arrived at the hospital, which made us conclude that the dance was more successful than novenas!<sup>9</sup>*

Times were difficult for everyone in those years and the financial crisis did not spare Rosthern. On January 26, 1931, the town decided to reduce their grant to the hospital from \$900.00 to \$500.00, while at the same time, reducing their per diem rate from \$2.00 to \$1.50.

On June 6, 1932, Mother Marie-Anne Cayer, Superior General, concluded her visit at Saint John's Hospital with the following report:

*The financial state is more than precarious. This is likely due to the current economic crisis which is more severe in this province...the administration seems efficient and the*



*patients, even in too small a number, appear satisfied of their care. The Board of Directors is well aware of the situation and Bishop Joseph Prud'homme, who is the chair, already took certain steps in order to improve the finances, but without much results. At a previous visit, made especially to review the financial situation, in 1930, by Mother Flore Doucet, then Superior General, there was serious consideration of closing the hospital. The situation today is not improved, but, like the previous time, it does not seem opportune to take this extreme decision.<sup>10</sup>*

## *Leaving Saint John's Hospital*

Another visit by Mother Marie-Anne Cayer, in July 1935, reported no less concerns on the future of the hospital. The General Council conveyed its final decision to leave the administration of the hospital to Bishop Joseph Prud'homme on September 28, 1935. The Bishop was able to obtain Franciscan Sisters of Saint Elizabeth of Humboldt (OSE) to replace the Grey Nuns on December 31, 1935.

During the eight years that the Grey Nuns worked at Rosthern, 22 sisters contributed 79 years of service to the care of the sick and ministry to the people.

They had the painful experience of closing the eyes of Sister Félicité Héroux, one of the foundresses, who died on February 16, 1930 at the age of 37. Without obvious earlier symptoms, she had a pulmonary hemorrhage on February 5, which had weakened her considerably. This occurred again on February 16; she died on that day, to the consternation of all. She was buried at Duck Lake in the plot of the Sisters of the Presentation (PM), who lovingly offered this ultimate service to their neighbor.

On December 31, 1935, the following sisters were present to give a brief orientation to their successors after which they left for Biggar the same day: Sisters St. Marjorique (Laura Turcotte), superior, Marie de la Visitation (Eva Morissette), Annie Caya, Ste-Émérentienne (Émérentienne Thérour), Marie-Jeanne Marcotte



and Anna Beaulac. They, along with other former missionaries of Saint John's Hospital, deeply felt the pain of breaking the bonds established with the people of Rosthern. Visitors over the last weeks, and on the last day, were also saddened, but the prospect of having the Sisters of Humboldt continue the ministry of caring begun by the Grey Nuns, was a comfort highly appreciated.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 5

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- 1 Staff Reporter, **The Saskatoon Daily Star**, January 23, 1927, Nic. Arch.
- 2 **Historique**, doc. # 12, Nic. Arch.
- 3 **Historique**, doc. # 18.
- 4 The Grey Nuns of Nicolet became a Province of the Grey Nuns of Montréal in 1941.
- 5 **Historique**, doc. # 6, Nic. Arch.
- 6 **Ibid.**, doc. # 67, Notes from Sister Hébert (Emma Bergeron), November 22, 1964.
- 7 **Ibid.**
- 8 Roman Catholic tradition of nine days' devotions.
- 9 **Historique, Op. Cit.** doc. # 67.
- 10 **Historique**, doc. # 1

## CHAPTER SIX

1943 -

### PORTAGE LA LOCHE: TEACHING AND HEALTH CARE

Who would think that in 1943, there was still a place in Canada with no electricity, no running water, no telephone, no car, no roads? Shall we begin our journey to this place called Portage La Loche in northwest Saskatchewan?

When Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme wrote to Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General on November 20, 1942, to again request Grey Nuns for his mission of Portage La Loche, he partly described the primitive state of the settlement, leaving more surprises for the sisters when they arrived:

*... Communications are difficult, because we are outside the usual routes. Trips are rare and expensive... The Chipewyan whom we serve... are gifted with a lively spirit and children learn easily... Climate is rigorous, food not elaborate but sufficient, housing is crowded, but comfortable. Mail is delivered once a month by a plane from Ile-à-la-Crosse... The sisters who will come to this place will need a solid spiritual life, because they will not find the natural advantages that help to forget the isolation... They will have to turn to God and the souls or they will experience cruel deceptions. But if they have that spirit, let them come without fear; they will rival in zeal with the 'Heroic Women' who have transformed more than one generation of Natives who now bless them...<sup>1</sup>*

Mother Gallant's answer to an earlier letter, September 8, 1938, did not seem to have dampened Father Ducharme's energy in his request, although that letter seemed to leave no possibility that Grey Nuns could come to Portage La Loche:

*The realistic picture that you made of your mission tripled my desire to send sisters. Isolation, poverty, fasting, black misery: that responds to our vocation! However, remembering the wise answer of Pope Pius XI to a superior general in similar circumstances: 'We have to refuse to do the good that we cannot do well', I am forced to refuse for lack of sisters.'*<sup>2</sup>

Following several letters exchanged between Father Ducharme, the Oblate priest superior of that isolated mission of La Loche and Mother Gallant, the Grey Nuns' Superior General, the undaunted missionary won his plea. The General Council of the Grey Nuns of Montréal accepted, on October 29, 1942,<sup>3</sup> to open a mission at Portage La Loche to teach children and to care for the sick. Soon, four sisters were nominated for one of the most primitive areas of all Grey Nuns' postings to date.

## *The foundresses*

It was with extraordinary faith in Divine Providence that the General Council had accepted the mission of portage La Loche. Calling upon the Holy Spirit's guidance, they immediately proceeded to choose the foundresses. Sister Marie-Anne Fréchette was named superior. She had founded the mission of Chesterfield Inlet in 1931 and had therefore earned her colors. Sister Thérèse Arcand, a Métis of French and Cree descent, from Ile-à-la-Crosse was the ideal person to teach people with whom she had much affinity. Sister Marie-Claire Gervais was named to the new mission for her culinary talents. She had spent several years at the Blood Reserve in Cardston, Alberta. Sister Béatrice Webber, a nurse who graduated from Saint Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon, had served at Beauval for the last 10 years and became the first nurse stationed at La Loche.

On August 10, 1943, the provincial house in Saint Albert was filled with sisters who had arrived for their annual retreat. In the midst of all that life, strong emotions were noticeable as the missionary quartet was leaving that morning for Portage La Loche. Accompanied by Sister Anna Beaupré, the guardian angel of the



new mission, they were taken to the Northern Alberta Railways for the trip to Waterways near Fort McMurray. In Fort McMurray, they were welcomed on August 11 by the Grey Nuns who had established Saint Gabriel's Hospital in that town in 1938. The Portage La Loche missionaries' patience was tested right at the beginning. A Canadian Pacific Airlines plane was unable to depart for several days due to weather conditions. God's Providence largely compensated their disappointment by the warmth and companionship they experienced with the spirited missionaries of Fort McMurray: Sisters Marie-Louise Champoux, Thecla Andruchow, Rita Comeau, Joséphine Létourneau and Germaine Rheault. With them they were able to reminisce on the good old days lived in Montréal, Nicolet, Saint Boniface and Saint Albert as all these places were part of the personal history of one or the other.<sup>4</sup>

The plane did finally take off on August 14 for the short distance to Portage La Loche, where they landed at 1930 hours to the sound of bells and gun salutes. Being in mid-August, it was still daylight, but due to the late hour, a more official welcome was reserved for the following day. The joy of the Oblate missionaries in receiving these four sisters was filled with thanksgiving to God and unlimited hope for the future. This provided a wealth of conversation topics, but the newcomers were most anxious to reach their home nearby. On their way, they stopped at the church to offer their homages to the God who had called them so far for their new ministries. Arriving at their convent, they were elated to see that:

*their little house was more comfortable than the one that housed the first sisters at the Mackenzie.*<sup>5</sup>

Being overly positive, this chronicler was perhaps comparing their new house in 1943 with that provided for the sisters more than three quarters of a century earlier in Fort Providence, Northwest Territories. A description of the house by Father Aristide Philippot gives us a different interpretation:

*The house all natty in its new attire where the good sisters will reside, does not transgress against religious poverty*

*through excessive comfort and luxury. Simple house in timber, like so many others in the North, it had the disadvantage to be built with wood of low quality and half green. It was hardly completed when its walls were cracked like a house abandoned a long time ago, so that it already needed patching and repairing.<sup>6</sup>*

Perhaps, too, the optimistic sister was simply looking into the future and dreaming of the day when modern conveniences, now available all around Portage La Loche, would arrive in this remote settlement.

On August 15, the day after their arrival, the sisters had occasion to meet most of the people they were coming to serve. The day was the annual celebration at La Loche, the Feast of the Assumption of Blessed Mary. It was also a Sunday and Father Ducharme made sure that a special and joyous welcome was given to the Grey Nuns who had just arrived. When addressing the congregation during Mass, he expressed his joy that he and his people would finally receive the benefit of the Grey Nuns' presence and ministry in their midst. His words of welcome set the tone for the people to come forward for a warm handshake with each of the four delighted sisters.

On that first day, August 15, all re-assembled at the church at 1400 hours for the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament after which, a long procession followed Bishop Martin Lajeunesse to the convent. The Bishop then proceeded to bless each room, calling on God's special blessings for the sisters and their ministries. The convent was placed under the protection of Saint Martin, the Bishop's patron saint. A first Mass was celebrated by Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme, assisted by Brother Montgrand, in the convent chapel on September 8, 1943. Having Jesus present in their home inspired the chronicler to note:

*To Jesus we confide everything: joys, sorrows, successes and failures. He will understand.<sup>7</sup>*

All joined in singing a *Te Deum* in praise and thanksgiving to the God who had called them to Portage La Loche and assured



them divine blessings in this mission.

The following day, Father Giovanni Bragaglia was the celebrant, assisted by Brother Alfred Dionne. Noting that the tabernacle key was bare, Father Bragaglia gave part of his watch chain and a lovely little gold cross to adorn the key. A delightful gift to the poor La Loche Mission.

## *Their ministries*

Although it is known that there were people living at Portage La Loche as far back as the mid-1800s when Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault, a diocesan priest, visited the mission yearly beginning in 1845 and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established a post in 1858, there is little else written on its history. Father Jean-Marie Pénard was the first resident priest in 1895. The mission was placed under the protection of Our Lady of the Visitation with the yearly celebration for all the people on August 15. Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme had been parish priest at La Loche for 27 years before the Grey Nuns arrived. Most of his 27 years were spent responding heroically to the spiritual needs of the Chipewyan and Métis people of the huge area under his care and hoping for Grey Nuns to join him in his demanding task.

A formal agreement between Bishop Martin Lajeunesse of Keewatin and Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General stipulated that the sisters would have the internal administration of the establishment; they would give elementary teaching to Native and Métis children and care for the sick; and they would assist the priests in all ways they could and the priests would do the same in providing spiritual and material assistance to the Sister.<sup>8</sup> The house which served as convent and hospital never belonged to the sisters, but to the Oblates.<sup>9</sup>

Teaching and care of the sick were thus the major responsibilities of the sisters from the moment of their arrival. Unwritten, but expected responsibilities were: care of the church and chapels, food services and care of clothes for all personnel at the mission. To this, the industrious sisters could not fail to add gardening,



laundry without running water, and occasionally by replacing the men at the barn and farm chores.

## *The School*

A school, built by the government, was opened in 1941 and two lay Roman Catholic men taught there for short periods until June 1943: Peter Klotz and Alex Sebulskey. At the time of the arrival of the sisters, there was no one to teach the 125 children that Father Ducharme had calculated would want and need to attend school, although many lived too far-away to consider day school.<sup>10</sup>

Requests for a boarding school were made to the government and the missionaries, by School Inspector Waugh in order to accommodate surrounding localities. This hope never materialized.<sup>11</sup> Instead, bus transportation of students became available when Portage La Loche was linked to the outside world with roads in the 1960s.

After the blessing of the convent, on August 15, 1943, at 1600 hours, everyone went to the school to discuss plans for beginning the school while the sisters found their first moment of solitude in their convent and began recuperating from their emotion-filled first day. In the evening, the president of the School, Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme and his secretary, John Blackhall came to the convent to request a teacher for 0900 hours on August 16, just a few hours away.<sup>12</sup> The reason for such an early start was that September 1 to November 1 was to be a vacation to allow parents and children time for hunting and fishing during these two months. This haste did not surprise the teacher, Sister Thérèse Arcand, who was well familiar with the needs and customs of the Natives and Métis.

When the door of the school opened at 0900 hours, there were 55 children of all ages up to 18 years. Father Ducharme introduced Sister Arcand to these beautiful children who were already showing open spirits, kind hearts and eagerness to learn. Accommodation was rudimentary at the school: children sat on

long benches three meters long, with no back rest, in front of a long table 40 centimeters wide, with just enough space to lay their limited writing materials.

After class that first day, all sisters went blueberry picking as an introduction to the life at La Loche and, of course, to begin making preserves for the winter.<sup>13</sup>

For 12 days, the teacher developed closeness and trust with her large family, assessed their level of knowledge and began to proceed toward their goal of learning. Too soon, August 31 came and it was time for a two-month vacation. During that time, Sister Arcand became available to assist in the work of setting up the house at the convent and the infirmary, and helping the other sisters as much as she could.<sup>14</sup>

By October 25, all 55 students returned to the classroom with the same eagerness to learn. At that time the School Board requested that French be added to the school program. This was easy for the versatile Sister Arcand who, at that time, was fluent in at least three languages: Cree, French and English. The Chipewyan language, spoken by many of the families and students at La Loche was not yet known by Sister Arcand.

Not surprisingly, in 1945, the school system at La Loche was affected by the same fanaticism and discrimination experienced at Ile-à-la-Crosse in which a Saskatchewan Government school Inspector in the '30s and '40s had his name sadly passed on to history. Thanks to the competency of Grey Nuns teachers, especially Sister Yvette Lapointe in Ile-à-la-Crosse, a relative tranquility returned to this isolated settlement. This series of events appeared in the description of Ile-à-la-Crosse in Chapter One of this book. An article printed in Saskatchewan News on October 28, 1952 and reproduced in The Prairie Messenger on November 6, 1952 speaks eloquently of the quality of the education given at La Loche at that early time:

*Sister Arcand, Robert Peters and Maurice Parent, along with the other teachers in northern areas schools today, are rewriting the story of northern education. It can best be described as a success story, for during the past seven years*



*enrolment has nearly tripled and the number of schools doubled. At present, 95 percent of the Native children in the north are attending school.*<sup>15</sup>

From the one-room school and one teacher for 55 students in 1943, the school grew to three classrooms in 1951 and four in 1960 with 112 students. In 1964, a new school was built with seven classrooms. It was named Ducharme School to honor Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme, pastor of the mission from 1916 to 1951. By 1968, there were 12 teachers for 340 students. During all these years there were between one and four of the teachers who were Grey Nuns. In 1970, a young woman from La Loche was on the teaching staff for the kindergarten children who did not speak English. The staff then numbered 20. There were vast improvements at the school building when running water, wash-rooms and showers were installed in 1971.<sup>16</sup> Only one Grey Nun was teaching at La Loche for the last year 1971-1972. The student body numbered 440 that year. In September 1972, it was noted:

*For the first time since 1943, there is no Grey Nun. The last one, Sister Leda Belley, left at the end of June. The two same Ursuline Sisters are here, they teach catechesis.*<sup>17</sup>

The sisters had taught at La Loche School, now Ducharme School for a total of 29 years. The bonds connecting teachers and students can still be measured by the mutual fondness noticed when they meet again at the Annual Lac Ste-Anne Pilgrimage or on other occasional visits.

## *Health Care*

When the convent was built for the arrival of the Grey Nuns at Portage La Loche, an infirmary was part of the plan. It included two, two-bed patient rooms and a medication room. Up to that time, there was a small reserve of emergency medication at the Oblate's house. Rudimentary supplies and equipment were also stored for use by the physician visiting from Ile-à-la-Crosse. After the full day of celebration of Sunday, August 15, 1943, the



nurse, Sister Beatrice Webber began receiving the sick at the Oblate house on an out patient basis. The following day, she moved her meager inheritance to the sisters' residence where larger numbers of sick people with a variety of ailments came to see their nurse. By October 16, 1943, after two months at Portage La Loche, Sister Webber wrote that:

*You will see by the letterhead that our house is known as a hospital. The two governments [provincial and federal] have consented to pay the board of patients cared for...Since my arrival: dressings, 228; consultation and medicine, 565; visits to the sick, 64 and days of hospitality, 16...<sup>18</sup>*

The first baby born at Saint Martin's Hospital was a girl named Beatrice Marguerite in honor of the nurse, Sister Beatrice Webber and Marguerite d'Youville, Foundress of the Grey Nuns. This was in the convent-hospital on September 15, 1945.<sup>19</sup> It was not long before the four-bed hospital became overcrowded and the dispensary was packed with long queues of people waiting for medication. Far from objecting to medications, they often requested them in order to prevent sickness, thus the reason for the long waiting line.

There were no resident physicians at La Loche, but the very dedicated, over-extended medical personnel from Ile-à-la-Crosse served La Loche, traveling by plane twice a month and more often if called for emergencies. These plane trips continued until a road was constructed in 1963, linking Portage La Loche to Ile-à-la-Crosse.

Dr. Philippe Lavoie was the faithful bi-weekly visitor from Ile-à-la-Crosse between 1943 and 1954. On September 28, 1943, he performed his first surgical operation at La Loche. After his departure, in 1954, Dr. Meirad Hoffman arrived from Germany to replace him with the same dedication, the same respect of his patients and the same professional competence. Dr. Hoffman remained available for La Loche until 1978. Upon returning from one year in Germany, he was back in northern Saskatchewan, this time as the first full-time resident physician at La Loche.

At first there was no government support for the hospital,

although the patients were numerous and health care needs were enormous. Through presentations made to the governments by Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme, the Federal Government agreed to pay \$2.00 per day for each patient and the Provincial Government added \$0.50 per day after September 28, 1943. Then the convent officially became a hospital.<sup>20</sup>

By 1949, the sisters were hoping for much needed space for both the convent and the hospital which, for six years, were crowded under the same roof. A new seven-bed hospital was built behind the existing building and connected with a passageway. Gratefully, the sisters regained the use of their entire convent building. The new Saint Martin's Hospital was blessed by Bishop Martin Lajeunesse and officially opened on May 14, 1950.

A new position was offered to Sister Claire Guyon on July 6, 1974, that of Public Health Nurse for Portage La Loche and region. In that position, she replaced Janet McKenzie who held that post for several years and had set up good programs for school visits and immunization of children. On January 10, 1975, she received a skidoo from the Government for winter traveling to various clinics and families, a sport she both enjoyed and dreaded! Sister Guyon remained in that position for seven years, until May 5, 1981.

## *Changes in administration*

At the opening of the hospital, on August 15, 1943, the administrator was Oblate superior of the Mission, Father Jean-Baptiste Ducharme. He remained in that position until 1950 and was replaced by Father Joseph Bourbonnais for the next six years. In 1956, Father Bertrand Mathieu became the administrator for 21 years, until he resigned in 1977. During those years, the hospital was owned by the Keewatin Diocese.

The administration of the hospitals in La Loche and Ile-à-la-Crosse was becoming more demanding and was taking precious time from the missionaries' schedule, time that would be much needed for their ministry. As early as 1975, there was a question



of selling the two northern hospitals, Portage La Loche and Ile-à-la-Crosse, to the Government of Saskatchewan. Progress in those plans was being made when, in 1977, the Bishops of Saskatchewan formed the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Council (SCHC), making it possible for that new Corporation to assume ownership and operation of Catholic hospitals when owners could no longer maintain them.<sup>21</sup> On December 1, 1976, a letter from Archbishop Charles Halpin of Regina to Bishop Paul Dumouchel of Keewatin, announced the possibility of SCHC accepting the transfer of ownership of these two hospitals and operating them as Catholic institutions.<sup>22</sup>

There was no fanfare announcing this transfer of ownership, but, rather, on November 6, 1978, a simple dinner table at the convent was the setting around which gathered members of the SCHC Board presided by Archbishop Halpin, the Oblates and the Grey Nuns who had served at the hospital and Sister Philomena Dobmeier, o.s.e., present Administrator. The Archbishop presented a medallion with a personalized inscription and the number of years they had served at Saint Martin's to eight persons as a mark of gratitude. Recipients were Brother Alphonse Vachon, 32 years; Father Bertrand Mathieu, 21 years; Sisters Thérèse Langlois, 17 years; Fernande Champagne, 13 years; Julia Haudegand, 13 years; Marie Laforce, 10 years, Hélène Desmarais, 10 years and Mary Fruhstuk, 6 years. Sister Rose Becker, S.P., SCHC Board chair offered the SCHC's congratulations and gratitude to the recipients and noted the 122 years of service given to the hospital by these eight dedicated missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

This was not the departure of the Grey Nuns from the hospital yet. As the SCHC began planning for a new hospital, they also insisted the Grey Nuns remain at least until the new facility opened. They especially hoped to have the Director of Nursing, Sister Helen Desmarais with them when the transfer was to be implemented and new staff oriented. Sister Germaine Hétu, Provincial Superior was consulted on this possibility and a few Grey Nuns remained, as required, until September 30, 1981.



## *Life at La Loche*

When a private generator at the Mission brought electricity to La Loche on August 15, 1950, and the power became available in the village in 1963, and the first six electric street lights were lit that year, and the first electric refrigerator was purchased in 1965, La Loche thought they had seen the ultimate in modernization. With the arrival of two Royal Canadian Mounted Police (R.C.M.P.) officers at La Loche in 1967, residents appreciated the greater security in their settlement. Cars were of no use in the settlement in 1943, as there was no road linking La Loche with the outside world until the 1960s. That road was paved even much later, in the '70s.

The only telephone in La Loche since August 30, 1947 belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and was located in their own building. What an incredible improvement for La Loche when this modern means of communication became available on April 17, 1974, and especially when long distance calls became possible the following October.

There was mail delivery every other month at La Loche when the sisters arrived in 1943. Of course, there were missed deliveries when the thin ice prevented the plane from landing, but four months without mail was not too frequent. The pilot found a way to circumvent these weather difficulties: for example, by attaching a large rock to the mail bag, it became easy to just drop it at a designated location. All were delighted with such a bright idea. Starting in early June 1975, there were three mail deliveries per week and, at the time of writing, mail is brought in daily by a plane from Ile-à-la-Crosse.

Celebrating at Portage La Loche meant looking for any occasion to offer birthday greetings, congratulations on some achievements, special anniversaries feasts: wedding, religious life, episcopal or priesthood ordination. It also meant marking friendship occasions such as arrivals or departures, or bereavement. The joys and the sorrows of one member were shared by all; this was celebrating.

On Sunday, June 16, 1968, there was a small, but meaningful 25th Anniversary celebration of the sisters' arrival at La Loche. Bishop Paul Dumouchel presided at the festive Eucharistic Celebration. In his homily, he reminded all of the benefits of education and health care brought to the community during these 25 years. A reception followed for all present and in the evening, an intimate Agape brought together the missionaries: Oblates and Grey Nuns. Three of the four foundresses were present and received friendly accolades. The absentee, Sister Marie-Anne Fréchette, was fondly remembered for her six years of total dedication to the people of La Loche. There was much reminiscing with humor and gratitude as thoughts of isolation, poverty and hardships were brought to memory. The heroism of the first missionaries was remembered with emotion, and the apostolic successes were recounted with great joy. A few examples need to be recorded.

There was a mischievous spirit among the sisters when they accused Father Mathieu of building a round table, designed to trick those sitting around it. The problem was that as soon as a hand was trying to reach out for some food placed on the rotating inner circle, the inner circle mysteriously turned away. Did some fasting at La Loche result from that clever, but naughty invention?

Success was celebrated when the group recalled the sisters' hard work in transcribing, duplicating and binding the 100 hymn books in Chipewyan for use in the church. This was achieved in 1959, before modern duplication equipment found its way to La Loche.

Sisters shared the shock and grief of a tragedy when, Sister Laurence Savidan, her brothers Paul and Albert with his wife Marielle, inadvertently drove into the water near Buffalo Narrows, missing the ferry. It was February 25, 1965, a foggy and cold evening. Albert and Marielle could not be saved, while Paul and Sister Laurence survived with a deep sense of loss, thanksgiving and for a long time wondering how inscrutable are God's design in one's life.<sup>24</sup>



## *Sisters leaving La Loche*

After 38 years of presence at Portage La Loche in teaching and health care, the Grey Nuns, reluctantly, decided to move on due to lack of younger sisters to replace them. On the last day, September 30, 1981, only three sisters remained: Sisters Marie Laforce, superior, Julia Haudegand and Thérèse Langlois. During these 38 years, 58 sisters gave a cumulated total of 304 years to the people who won their lasting affection and prayers. The chronicler captured the feeling of loss of their last day when she wrote:

*The Grey Nuns definitely leave La Loche because of lack of sisters. It is with much regret that the people see the sisters leave. It is with even more regret that Father Bertrand Mathieu sees them leave. May God bless the La Loche Parish [Our Lady of the Visitation] and allow the influence of the Grey Nuns to remain alive for many years to come.<sup>25</sup>*

## *Postscript*

Since its opening in 1943, Saint Martin's Hospital was operated as a Catholic institution, until June 7, 1999, when ownership of the hospital was transferred from the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation (SCHC) to the Keewatin Yathé Health District. This transfer ceremony was appropriately entitled 'New Beginning' as it marked the courageous step taken by the Natives to administer their own health care services. A Mass was celebrated by Archbishop Peter Sutton.<sup>26</sup> Jean Mahoney, Chair of the SCHC, welcomed the residents and visitors to this celebration and explained: This...

*...is the recognition of a community response to setting the direction of health care in La Loche... and of the leadership of the Keewatin Yathé Health District in meeting the health needs of this community.<sup>27</sup>*

A new page was turned in the history of La Loche. The Grey



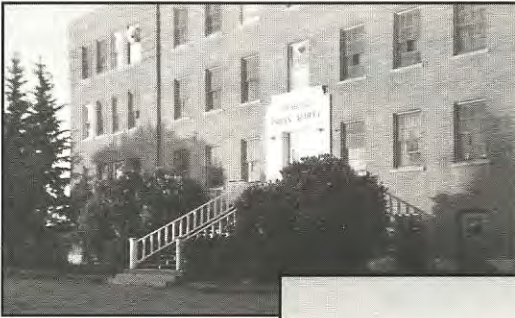
Nuns witnessed this departure with sadness and with pride in the people who assumed responsibility for their own health care. A prayer for their success was in the heart of many as they left Portage La Loche at the end of the event.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 6

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- 1 **La Loche Chroniques**, vol. I, pp. 10-11, GNRC Arch.
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- 3 **Historique**, doc. # 12, GNRC Arch
- 4 **La Loche Chroniques**, pp. 9-10.
- 5 **Ibid.**, p. 9.
- 6 Philippot, Aristide, OMI, in **La Survivance**, August 16, 1943, in **Historique**, doc. # 19, GNRC Arch.
- 7 **Chroniques**, p. 16.
- 8 **Historique** L113, MMY Arch., p. 2.
- 9 **Ibid.**
- 10 Ducharme, Fr. Jean-Baptiste to Bishop Martin Lajeunesse, November 20, 1941.
- 11 **Historique**, Doc., # 117 and # 120.
- 12 **Chroniques**, pp. 11-12.
- 13 **Ibid.**, p. 13.
- 14 **Ibid.**, p. 14.
- 15 "Success story in Education of Natives," **Historique**, doc. # 37A.
- 16 Laforce, Sr. Marguerite, **La Loche**, unpublished manuscript dated, 1991, p. 4.
- 17 C1, 12, MMY Arch.
- 18 Webber, Sr. Beatrice to Sr. M. Anna Beaupré, October 16, 1943, **Historique**, doc. #35.
- 19 **Historique**, doc. # 248A.
- 20 **Chroniques**, p. 17.
- 21 Bézaire, Sr. Yvonne, **Our Roots: A Promise**, Saskatoon, The Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan, 1993, p. 25.

- 22 **Chroniques**, p. 182.  
 23 **Historique**, doc. # 310.  
 24 **Chroniques**, 1965, p. 4.  
 25 Laforce, Sr. Marie, in **Chroniques**, p. 96.  
 26 Archbishop of Keewatin since 1986.  
 27 Poirier, Sr. Bernadette, "A New Beginning At La Loche," **Family News**, June 1999, p. 133.



Beauval Reserve  
School



Beauval Village  
Mission



Beauval, beautiful site

## CHAPTER SEVEN

1955 -

### PRINCE ALBERT AND ALBERTVILLE

In 1953, Mother Rose Vincent, Provincial Superior, sent a letter to Bishop Léo Blais of Prince Albert requesting his approval for a Grey Nun to visit one of his parishes, in response to an invitation by the parish priest. The purpose of such a visit was to provide young women with information about religious life. The answer from the Bishop was 'NO' because there was no Grey Nun working in his diocese.<sup>1</sup> So, his letter was filed at the Grey Nuns Archives!

When a new Provincial Superior, Mother Berthe Dorais, came on board two years later, and noted this exchange of letters, her curiosity was awakened. Marcellin, being her birthplace, and located in the diocese of Prince Albert, was given a special place in her heart and she lost no time contacting Bishop Blais. Visits and an exchange of letters resulted in a request by the Bishop to have Grey Nuns come and organize the Catholic Centre, in the town of Prince Albert, in order to help the advancement of faith in his diocese.

This was a pressing invitation, which happened to be much in line with the wishes of the Grey Nuns. This new ministry was approved by the General Council on July 7, 1955. Bishop Blais was delighted and requested that the sisters begin their work at the Centre on August 15, Feast Day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, undoubtedly, would become a powerful protectress in this new diocesan ministry.<sup>2</sup>

### *The foundresses*

In haste, the Saint Albert Provincial Council chose four



foundresses: Sisters Marie-Louise Grégoire, director and Aurore Blanchette who arrived on August 12, 1955. Both were welcomed at the Prince Albert train station by Bishop Léo Blais, who drove them to the convent of the Sisters of the Presentation. They would be boarders at Villa Sainte Marie until a permanent dwelling became available. On September 15, the other two foundresses arrived: Sisters Irène Gauthier and Anna Laforce.<sup>3</sup> That same day, their home was available for occupancy at 325-13th Street West, near the cathédrale Sacré-Coeur. Sister Eva Morissette, Provincial Assistant, also arrived that day to help with the installation of the new community.

### *Their home and ministries*

With the efficient help of J. A. Fournier, real estate agent, a house for sale was found near the Catholic Centre. Built 11 years previously, it appeared in good condition. The contract was signed on August 25, 1955, exactly 200 years after Mother d'Youville and her sisters received their distinctive habit blessed by Father Louis Normant, p.s.s., on August 25, 1755. It did not require much searching for the sisters to suggest a name for their home, 'Résidence Louis Normant', which was heartily approved by the General Council.<sup>4</sup>

On September 22, 1955, the sisters had their first Mass celebrated in their chapel by Father Arthur Machildon, visitor of the Prince Albert Catholic Schools district. From that day on, they kept the Blessed Sacrament in their home, a deeply appreciated privilege. A few weeks later, on October 31, Bishop Léo Blais blessed the Way of the Cross in the chapel.

As soon as they arrived, Sisters Marie-Louise Grégoire and Aurore Blanchette began their work at the Catholic Centre. This consisted of several activities required for the spread of the Gospel through radio programs aired on three different stations, correspondence, telephone calls, individual interaction with visitors, while at the same time managing a heavy load of religion courses by correspondence. Initially, there was a regular mailing

list of 3,500 courses a week. A usual return of 1,500 copies a week meant marking 1,500 homework papers, with the help of trained volunteers from the town. In addition, a diocesan Newsletter, *The Call* in English and *Appel* in French was sent out to 3,000 children, in their respective language, every other week. The bilingual materials were necessary, as Prince Albert was still predominantly French in the 1950s.

Their ministry was multi-faceted. Wishing to evaluate their radio productions, the sisters borrowed a radio from a friend to listen to their first program in September 1955. This 30-minute presentation, prepared by the Catholic Centre in cooperation with schools, included: a hymn, a conference for adults by Father Martin Foley, C.Ss.R. and a sketch by students on a selected part of the catechism. The purpose of these programs was to reach out to children in the diocese who had no catechism in their public school, and to their parents. A French translation of Father Foley's talk was read by Father Charles Charron. The English program was aired by Stations C.J.N.B. of North Battleford and C.K.B.I. of Prince Albert, while the French program was heard on Station C.F.N.S. of Saskatoon. In their **Chroniques**, the sisters rated this program as very interesting and promising for positive results for the faith of listeners.<sup>5</sup> Many students in the diocese had no access to Catholic Separate Schools in their village or town.

Prince Albert diocese hosted a National Eucharistic Congress from July 5 to 7, 1957. The contribution of the Grey Nuns at the Catholic Centre, to the organization of this event, was phenomenal as noticed in the many entries in correspondence and **Chroniques**.

In 1958, Sister Aurore Blanchette was asked to teach part time at Collège Notre-Dame and Académie Sainte-Marie, while continuing to assist at the Centre during peak periods of activities. Although very taxing on her time and energies, these added tasks were gracefully accepted by the gifted sister.

The finances of the little convent were in a direful predicament from the beginning. By the first winter, they found out that major repairs would be required to the house. Being itself in no

more advantageous circumstances, the diocese of Prince Albert, was seriously considering closing the Catholic Centre, which eventually happened in 1959. Teaching positions in Prince Albert were scarce and the Grey Nuns' available membership was diminishing. That year Sister Aurore Blanchette continued to teach at the College and at St. Mark's School while plans were being made to definitely leave Prince Albert. It became clear that the town of Prince Albert had no need for one more religious congregation after the closure of the Catholic Centre. At the same time, the presence of Sister Aurore Blanchette on the teaching staff at Collège Notre-Dame, a Minor Seminary, was not considered by the Grey Nuns to be a desirable ministry to be continued, as it was quite unusual for sisters to teach in Seminaries at that time.

On May 30, 1959, Bishop Léo Blais moved to less strenuous responsibilities and ceded his diocese to Bishop Laurent Morin, along with the hope of keeping the Grey Nuns in his diocese. The new Bishop reiterated the offer to Mother Marie Laforce, then Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province, along with other possibilities of a few teaching positions being available at Meadow Lake, 250 kilometers northwest of Prince Albert. After careful study of the offers, and in the hope of ensuring the future of the Catholic school in Albertville, Saint Albert Provincial Council opted to recommend that the sisters leave Prince Albert and go to Albertville in September 1960. This was approved by the General Council on March 16, 1960.<sup>6</sup>

In his letter of March 27, 1960 to Mother Marie Laforce, Bishop Laurent Morin stated:

*I cannot fail to express my deeply felt gratitude for the immense help that your sisters have contributed to Collège Notre-Dame and to the Catholic Centre. May God reward you...*<sup>7</sup>

Departure from Prince Albert was decided for July 5, 1960. The last sisters leaving Résidence Louis Normant were: Sisters Léonie Beaulieu, superior, Aurore Blanchette and Anna Laforce. After meeting many of their friends to bid farewell and share



promises to pray for each other, the sisters left at 1410 hours in cars driven by Father Joseph Beaulac, their future parish priest, and Lucien Gignac, a brother-in-law of Sister Germaine Roussel.

## *Albertville*

The town of Albertville was founded in 1910 by Father André Louison with settlers originating from the nearby settlement of Henribourg, and mostly from the Province of Québec. In 1913, the church and rectory buildings were moved five kilometers east to Albertville.

A new diocesan school opened in Albertville in 1956 was still struggling with leadership and staffing. Located 35 kilometers northeast of Prince Albert, it included Grades I to XII in six classrooms. During the time of its construction, Bishop Blais had written to Mother Berthe Dorais, telling her that he was looking for sisters to teach in the new school.<sup>8</sup> At that time, there were no sisters available for this additional posting.

## *The foundresses*

As soon as the move to Albertville was approved, the Provincial Council chose five sisters to assume a ministry in Albertville: Sisters Léonie Beaulieu, superior, and Aurore Blanchette, principal of the school, both moved from Prince Albert. The other foundresses were: Sisters Cléopée Beaudoin, and Alice Toullelan, both teachers, and Marguerite Etcheverry as cook for the sisters' residence. All arrived at Albertville on July 5, 1960; their first stop was at the church where, silently, they renewed their resolve to use their time and talents for the success of their educational ministry. Within two months, Sister Etcheverry, whose health was failing, was replaced by Sister Aurore Henley on September 4, 1960.

The school had been staffed by the Sisters of the Child Jesus from 1943 to 1958, then temporarily, 1958-1959, by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary and by lay teachers for the year 1959-

1960. There was hope for more stability as this new group of sisters arrived.

## *Their home and ministry*

The convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus (s.e.j.) became vacant when that Congregation left the school in Albertville in June 1958. The Grey Nuns rented it as their residence. Upon arrival in their new home, on Monday, July 5, 1960, the sisters set out to organize furniture, unpack boxes and clear essential areas of their residence, with the help of Father Beulac and two of his parishioners, Joseph Roberge and Joseph Roussel.<sup>9</sup> The area made immediately ready for use was the chapel. Father Beulac, anxious to surprise the sisters with the presence of Jesus in their home, brought a ciborium containing consecrated hosts in the tabernacle, that same evening. Their new home had the same name as their former home in Prince Albert, Résidence Louis Normant.

The following evening, the whole parish held a special welcome celebration at the church. Town officials eagerly volunteered to drive the sisters to St. James parish church for a Mass at 2030 hours. It was said that 90% of the parishioners were present.<sup>10</sup> At that celebration, the parish priest, Father Joseph Beulac, officially welcomed the sisters to Albertville. He then invited Father Claude Allard, p.s.s. to give the homily. This Sulpician, the new Rector at Collège Notre-Dame, was well known to the sisters, having celebrated Mass at the sisters' residence several times since his arrival at Prince Albert during the summer.

Classes began on September 6, 1960. There were 164 students registered in Grades I to XII. Among the six teachers, were three Grey Nuns, one of them, Sister Aurore Blanchette, being the Principal. A note in the **Chroniques** gave the impression of a promising new ministry:

*Our sisters teaching at the school are encouraged: the children from Albertville give them a good impression...At the Mass of the Holy Spirit, all are present and pray with fervor.<sup>11</sup>*

Contribution to parish life was evident from the first days of the sisters' arrival in Albertville. On Sunday, October 16, 1960, Father Beaulac celebrated the Mass in honor of the new 'Blessed' Marguerite d'Youville<sup>12</sup> in which all parishioners joyfully participated. Two weeks later, a parish bazaar included the raffle of a cake, a replica of the parish church, artistically constructed and decorated by Sister Aurore Henley. The raffle brought \$100.00 for the parish. In reading through the **Chroniques**, one finds that Sister Henley's artistic and culinary talents were often called forth on occasions such as weddings, anniversaries or bazaars.

On November 1, the sisters encouraged the students to replace the Halloween parade with a parade of saints, each student representing a saint of their choice. This event, a welcomed novelty, was so successful that students wished to make it a tradition to re-live in future years.<sup>13</sup>

There were the occasional mundane problems with the water system. With each problem, the Grey Nuns had to call the Sisters of the Child Jesus in Vancouver, the owners of the house, for approval of the necessary repairs. Once, on January 23, 1961, Sister Léonie Beaulieu, superior, ready to begin the laundry, experienced a recurrence of the problem: lack of water. Rather than calling Vancouver, she chose another avenue. Searching among her friends above, she chose one, whose interest in the Grey Nuns was unequivocal, and placed a relic of her heavenly protector on the well. Then, carefree, she began to do the laundry, completed her task and, in the evening, the water was still running. Sister Beaulieu then revealed the true identity of her heavenly protector: none other than the Grey Nuns Foundress, Blessed Marguerite d'Youville.<sup>14</sup>

## *Sisters leaving*

It seems that not everyone can live in perfect peace, nor can some people allow others to enjoy such a blessing. Within six months of their arrival at Albertville, the Grey Nuns were made aware of this sad fact of life. In retrospect, this seems to have



resulted in the instability experienced at the school. On February 1, 1961, School Trustees came to enquire whether the reason why the sisters were not yet building their new residence might be because they did not intend to stay in Albertville. They insisted that if there was anything they could do to ensure that the sisters remain, they would not hesitate to correct any failure on their part. Several visits and discussions followed. At one point, Sister Léonie Beaulieu, superior, informed one of the trustees that if one of his relatives could cease writing ungentle letters to the parish priest, things might improve. This was a complex situation indeed, where the words and actions of well-intentioned people, unknowingly hurt each other and worked against each other. Throughout these controversies, the sisters attempted to defuse situations of misunderstanding and, as much as possible, remained outside crucial controversies.

When, on February 4, 1963, Sister Aurore Blanchette wrote to the very supportive School Inspector R. B. Gould to enquire about the future of the school, his answer of February 12 informed her that the Prince Albert Unit Board had decided that, by September 1963, Grades IX to XII of Albertville would be transferred to Meath Park School, confirming rumors that had been circulating in recent months.<sup>15</sup> Hence the Albertville School was no longer a Catholic School.

It was said this decision was based on educational needs of the students and fiscal responsibility of the Board and seemed to be unrelated to the unrest described above. However, it just happened to reinforce the sisters' desire not to become embroiled in the friction between the school trustees and the parish priest.

In view of this announcement, the Provincial Council recommended to the General Council on April 16, 1963, that the Sisters leave Albertville at the end of the school year 1962-1963. Approval was dated April 24, 1963.<sup>16</sup> A letter from Mother Marie Laforce informed the sisters of this final decision.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, the sisters felt a deep sadness at this regrettable outcome and there was consternation among the people of Albertville as soon as the news became known.

The **Chroniques** include frequent entries of the many visitors to the Résidence Louis Normant and there were many letters sent to the Provincial Council in Edmonton. For a long time, people remained hopeful that the decision could be reversed. The sincerity of the regrets expressed was very touching and was shared by the sisters.

*Visitors continue to come. All are afflicted at the news of our departure...Farewell visits were uninterrupted, each sadder than the others...July 1, 1963: Last Mass in our chapel. Then, not unlike Holy Thursday, we proceed to bare the altar...<sup>18</sup>*

July 4 was the sisters' last day at Albertville. They had made many friends, had contributed their talents generously, and they knew they were leaving a legacy of true Christian submission to God who speaks through events and people. During five years in Prince Albert and three years in Albertville, 17 sisters gave their generous contribution for a cumulated total of 37 years to the diocese of Prince Albert and the people they had come to serve.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 7

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- 1 **Historique**, doc. # 4 and 5, GNRC Arch.
- 2 **Chroniques**, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 3 **Ibid.**, p. 2.
- 4 **Ibid.**, pp. 4, 5.
- 5 **Ibid.**, p. 10.
- 6 **Historique**, doc. # 223 and 224.
- 7 **Ibid.**, doc. # 227.
- 8 **Historique**, doc. # 64.
- 9 Father of a Grey Nun, Sister Germaine Roussel.
- 10 **Chroniques**, p. 5, GNRC Arch.
- 11 **Ibid.**, p. 9.

- 12 Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Grey Nuns was beatified by Pope John XXIII on May 3, 1959. She would become a saint proclaimed by Pope John Paul II on December 9, 1990.
- 13 **Chroniques**, pp. 11, 12.
- 14 **Ibid.**, 1961, p. 2.
- 15 **Historique**, doc. # 128.
- 16 **Ibid.**, doc. # 148.
- 17 **Ibid.**, doc. # 149.
- 18 **Chroniques**, pp. 7, 10, 11.

Portage La Loche,  
St. Martin  
Hospital, 1977



Buffalo Narrows  
Graduation of  
Kindergarten class



## CHAPTER EIGHT

1968 -

### BUFFALO NARROWS

While making a canonical visit of the Grey Nuns missions in the archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas,<sup>1</sup> in September 1968, Sister Thérèse Chaloux, Provincial Superior,<sup>2</sup> also visited Buffalo Narrows at the request of Archbishop Paul Dumouchel. Keewatin already had Grey Nuns at Ile-à-la-Crosse, Beauval and Portage La Loche, but Buffalo Narrows was among the poorest of the poor and the Oblate missionary, Father André Darche, had been asking for sisters to teach religious education to children and look after the social service needs of families. The isolated location and lack of help was becoming a factor in his declining morale, now bordering on discouragement.

Sister Chaloux's apostolic zeal was called forth as she became aware of the distressful situation which Archbishop Dumouchel and Father André Darche described to her. Buffalo Narrows had a population of 1,100 Chipewyan, Cree and White; 75% were of the Catholic faith. There was one public school for 238 students from Grades I to XII with no religious education provided.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The foundresses and their ministries*

When the Provincial Superior returned to Edmonton and met with her Council, a decision was reached to send two sisters, on a trial basis, for one year. Recognizing the need for catechetics and assistance to families, they chose one teacher for religious education, Sister Alice Houle and one social worker for assistance to families, Sister Blandine Roussel-Galle.<sup>4</sup> The latter happened to have musical and voice talents which were very precious for

enriching liturgical celebrations.

Both of these sisters were available on a short notice. They were ready to leave for their new mission six days after the letter of Sister Chaloux to Archbishop Dumouchel announced their nomination. When they arrived from Edmonton on September 30, 1968 at 1730 hours, they were met at their apartment within the rectory, by Sister Aline Bohémier, Provincial Councillor and a lady from Ile-à-la-Crosse, Miss Bouffard<sup>5</sup> who were busy spreading the welcome mat in this temporary residence.

The following day, as soon as Father Darche returned from business at Meadow Lake, his first priority was to meet the sisters and begin orienting them to the many problems of the Mission.

*He is so enthused that he seems to think that just our presence can change everything. We do not have this magic wand, but with our good will and the help of prayer, we hope to contribute to the extension of the Church.<sup>6</sup>*

The School Principal, Ray Wanhella, came to welcome the new sisters a few days after their arrival. He was especially interested in arranging a teaching schedule for Sister Alice Houle, who was accepted to teach catechetics. She began her mission on October 7, 1968 and had in total 104 students participating in her classes. Each group was now privileged to have 90 minutes of religious education per week.

As for Sister Blandine Roussel-Galle, she was accepted on November 14, for a position with the Department of Social Services. Her posting was effective on November 28. Being the first sister employed by the agency, she had the honor of a visit by Honorable Cy MacDonald, a Catholic and Provincial Minister of Social Services, accompanied by M. Wescott, deputy minister and Robert Shaak, director of the local Agency where Sister Roussel-Galle was employed.

Her new position gave the sisters the privilege of obtaining an apartment in a provincial government building. In addition to being more conveniently located, although somewhat further from the church, this new accommodation had the advantage of

being more salubrious, with no cold and humid basement for their bedrooms, as in their previous abode. It allowed easier access to running water, thus the sisters could do their own laundry rather than sending it to Ile-à-la-Crosse. This new residence was ready to receive the sisters on November 30.

In 1968, the Mission of Buffalo Narrows, like the other northern Saskatchewan Missions, had only radiograms for communication with the outside world. In order to talk to Sister Florence Keegan, Provincial Superior, in Edmonton, by telephone, the sisters had to go 200 kilometers, and this was as late as April 28, 1973. There was no telephone at Buffalo Narrows for long distance calls until 1974. Mail service was more regular than at the beginning of other missions in northern Saskatchewan, but still was available only three times a week. After January 4, 1977, daily mail service became available five days a week. Roads were usually fairly safe for travel, but the sisters did not own a car until May, 1970. In the meantime, they always marveled at the kindness of Father André Darche who frequently left his car for their use. Perhaps, if a feeling of isolation was noted, it was mostly because there were only two sisters at Buffalo, three for short periods. Their next door neighbors were located 100 kilometers south at Ile-à-la-Crosse and Beauval and the same distance north at Portage La Loche.

## *Changes in missionaries*

Sister Alice Houle's health began failing in the spring of 1969. She reluctantly had to leave the mission on March 25, 1969. On August 9, 1969, Sister Catherine Frohlich arrived as a replacement teacher for Grade III, adding two classes of catechetics in Grades III and V.

At the request of Father Darche, and after confirmation was obtained from Sister Fernande Dussault, Provincial Superior, Sister Blandine Roussel-Galle resigned from her position with the social agency, on February 9, 1970 in order to be more available for the Mission. It is true that Father Darche had himself suggested this position, thinking that both functions could be carried



out concurrently, but realizing this impossibility, and missionary work remaining a priority, his position changed.<sup>7</sup> When Sister Roussel-Galle began visiting families in need, she often had to travel to Portage La Loche where several older people needed her support. In the parish, she was appreciated and very well liked. She continued visiting homes and doing parish work until January 1971 when she was assigned by the Provincial Superior to another ministry in Alberta.

On September 4, 1970, Sister Thérèse Chartier arrived to teach a Kindergarten class. With this new position, the sisters were able to obtain accommodation in a teacherage where they lived until the mission closed in 1982.

When Archbishop Paul Dumouchel visited Buffalo Narrows in June 1970, he remarked that the children's behavior had improved by 500% and the rectory was sparkling clean. He kindly attributed these changes to the visible influence of the sisters in this village, but expressed his sorrow that there was no priest to assign there at this time.<sup>8</sup>

Earlier that year, Father André Darche had left the Mission for reasons of health. He was replaced at the beginning of August by Father Raymond Le May who also served the Mission of Dillon across Peter Pond Lake, 50 kilometers away by road.

## *Student progress*

How proud were the parents as they admired their children, students of Home Economics in Sister Catherine Frohlich's classes, showing off their talents with various crafts at expositions and fashion shows, or the little ones from Sister Thérèse Chartier's Kindergarten classes, performing plays, songs and displaying crafts.

The Kindergarten graduation always attracted all the parents, grandparents and friends to the Twin Lakes School at the end of the school year, presentations and programs no one wanted to miss. The chronicler noted on several occasions the highlights of the year being the kindergarten graduation:

*Sister Thérèse Chartier does a wonderful display of her*

*teaching ability. The 24 children's behavior and performance as well as their display of work give evidence to this.<sup>9</sup>*

At the Christmas concert at Twin Lakes School in 1981, her little kindergarten children stole the show. All dressed as angels, except for the holy family, they sang and acted out 'Silent Night' to the delight of their parents.

While Sister Chartier was busy at school, one of Sister Catherine Frohlich's occupations was to be present with those who suffered and those who mourned the loss of a loved one. She was also most attentive to the lonely, the anxious and the sick.

*The wakes in our northern communities are impressive. There are always large crowds present to pray for the departed and to console the family. We join them...<sup>10</sup>*

With two parishes to serve, Father Raymond Le May often called upon Sister Frohlich to coordinate celebrations in his absence, especially during Holy Week.<sup>11</sup> On those occasions, she took care to recognize and call upon the skills of parishioners who were always happy to contribute their talents.

## *Leaving Buffalo Narrows*

Having reached retirement age from teaching, it was with sadness that, on May 31, 1982, Sister Thérèse Chartier presented her resignation from the profession she had enjoyed immensely. She did so after having participated in a 24 kilometer walk-a-thon and earning \$600.00 for the new church of Buffalo Narrows, on May 16, 1982; she left tangible proof of her attachment to the people she had served over 13 years. Sister Catherine Frohlich was also recalled to the Edmonton headquarters for a needed rest after 13 years of commitment and service to the people of Buffalo Narrows. Both were granted the 1982-83 year of spiritual renewal at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.

At the closing of the Grey Nuns mission at Buffalo Narrows, Archbishop Paul Dumouchel wrote a letter of appreciation to Sister Germaine Héту, Provincial Superior,

*The departure of your sisters from Buffalo Narrows will leave a great vacuum in the life and pastorate of the Mission. Your sisters were a live witness of the apostolate of the Church in this village. The Mission will be the poorer since your sisters will have no replacement.*

*Be assured of the appreciation that people had for the work of your sisters. Father Le May talked incessantly about their contribution. All will miss them.*

*I want to express all the gratitude of the Church of Keewatin for the magnificent work that your sisters have accomplished at Buffalo Narrows.*

The people's sorrow at the sisters' impending departure was shown in the many visits they made and the many parties they organized to express their farewell again and again. The four sisters who worked in the Mission of Buffalo Narrows, over a period of 14 years, cumulated a total of 33 years of dedicated service. The impact of their ministries is undoubtedly inscribed in God's book and is deeply engraved in the hearts of the people for whom they offered their loving service.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 8

- 1 The diocese of Keewatin became the Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas in 1967.
- 2 The title 'Mother' was no longer required for the Provincial Superior since 1967.
- 3 **Historique**, doc. # 4, GNRC Arch.
- 4 **Historique**, doc. # 6.
- 5 **Ibid.**, doc. # 11.
- 6 **Chroniques**, p. 3, GNRC Arch.
- 7 **Ibid.**, p. 29.
- 8 **Ibid.**, p. 37.
- 9 **Ibid.**, p. 76.
- 10 **Ibid.**, p. 128.
- 11 **Ibid.**, p. 138.
- 12 **Historique**, doc. # 63.



## CHAPTER NINE

1972 -

### ZENON PARK

A letter arrived on the desk of Sister Florence Keegan, Provincial Superior, on May 9, 1972, requesting sisters to administer a hospital at Zenon Park, located approximately 250 kilometers east of Prince Albert. The letter, signed by Maurice Renaud, Chair of Notre Dame de l'Assomption Hospital's Board of Directors, explained that the Sisters of Notre Dame d'Auvergne of Ponteix owned and operated that hospital since 1952. It was a 10-bed hospital. The building had been kept in good condition by the Sisters who owned it for 20 years. It was well furnished and was supplied with the necessary basic equipment.

The Sisters of Notre Dame d'Auvergne were unable to continue operating this institution because of the shortage of available sisters. In preparation for their departure the sisters had ceded ownership of their hospital to the Community of Zenon Park through a Corporation under the Societies Act. In his letter, Maurice Renaud added a P.S.:

*Would you be interested in purchasing the hospital at a moderate price?*

Such a request, even if it sounded appealing, could not be considered by the Grey Nuns, for they, too, were beginning to have fewer sisters available for a new ministry. Prayer and discernment, being the usual method of the Grey Nuns to ensure the Spirit's light and strength, continued for a few weeks before a decision was reached.

## *Request accepted*

As much of the communications were made by telephone, very few documents were processed in relation to this request. There was, however, a second letter from Maurice Renaud in which he named one sister as a possibility for this hospital. Following up on this lead, Sister Florence Keegan found two sisters who were missioned at Zenon Park on a one year contract.

Sister Yvonne Daigle was appointed Matron and Director of Nursing and Sister Marguerite Bourgeois was hired for general duty nursing. Both were bilingual, French and English, an essential asset important for the village residents, the majority of whom were French speaking. It was understood from the beginning that the sisters acceptance was conditional upon there being one physician; this was also a requirement of the Hospitals Act in order to maintain an open hospital.

On August 18, 1972, the new Matron began her functions, ensuring that the material and equipment was all in good order and ready for operation. Her companion arrived on August 29. The hospital had been closed for the past several weeks. When Dr. Toukan from London, England opened his office, the re-opening of the hospital was announced.

This event occurred on October 16, 1972, the Feast Day of Marguerite d'Youville, Foundress of the Grey Nuns. On that day, a solemn Mass in the hospital chapel was celebrated by Monsignor Ulinski, parish priest of Zenon Park. In his words of welcome and homily, he highlighted the life and mission of the future Saint Marguerite d'Youville, welcomed her spiritual daughters, the Grey Nuns to the hospital, and profusely thanked the Sisters of Notre-Dame d'Auvergne for their 20 years of dedicated health care service to the people of Zenon Park.<sup>2</sup>

## *Leaving Zenon Park*

There were very few patients at the hospital, sometimes one or two, and there was a limited clientele for Dr. Toukan in his

office as well. A medical practice sometimes takes time to build. Furthermore, the people from Zenon Park had easy access to other health care services within short distances, such as, Carrot River, 12 kilometers northeast and Nipawin 25 kilometers north.<sup>3</sup>

In May, 1973, the physician, seeing no growth in his medical practice, decided to leave the town. Without a physician, the hospital was not in a legal position to remain open. Consequently, the sisters also left Zenon Park on Saturday, June 9, 1973.

Their stay in this quiet, friendly surrounding was brief; they may have made short term bonds among the people, but their dedication was genuine, their service was respectful and the people of Zenon Park are kept in their prayers and fond memories.

NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 9

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1. Renaud, Maurice to Sister Florence Keegan, letters of May 9 and June 19, 1972, GNRC Arch.
2. **L'Eau Vive**, a monthly publication for French speaking in Saskatchewan, November 16, 1972, p. 1.
3. Daigle, Sr. Yvonne and Sr. Marguerite Bourgeois, primary source





# CHAPTER TEN

1975 -

## SASKATOON, ELMWOOD RESIDENCES

If God had decided to send Marguerite d'Youville on a mission to Saskatoon in 1975, this Mother of Universal Charity would have chosen to settle in a duplex at 2749 Preston Avenue where mentally and physically challenged children and adults needed her unconditional love. In her person, Marguerite d'Youville was no longer on the earth at this time. However, in her exceptional love of God and love of her brothers and sisters in need, she founded a community of religious sisters, in 1737, the Grey Nuns, who would be an extension of her charity on Preston Avenue in 1975.

In the summer of 1975, Elmwood Residences Limited was in need of caring women to staff a second home, a Resource Residence, for physically and mentally challenged children and adults. They contacted the Grey Nuns through Sister Aurore Marien who was doing volunteer work with the Sisters of Sion (NDS) in their Children's Residence at 2902 Preston Avenue.<sup>1</sup>

Elmwood Resource Residences were planned to allow people with handicaps to have a vacation of their own while parents took a holiday. These were short stay clients. On the other end, the Elmwood Children's Residences received more permanent residents. The Resource Residence, set up for a maximum of eight persons, needed personnel who could administer medication and provide a loving home atmosphere.<sup>2</sup>

### *The foundresses*

Sister Florence Keegan and her Council, having obtained approval from the General Council in Montréal, accepted this

new ministry and selected the foundresses: Sisters Aurore Marien, coordinator and Laurence Savidan, assistant coordinator. Elmwood Residences Limited were delighted to receive a positive answer to their request.

On Friday, October 17, 1975, Sisters Marien and Savidan met with Richard Stevenson of Elmwood Lodge to formalize their appointment and plan the operation of the Elmwood Resource Home for handicapped children. Upon visiting the house, they found that the building was in good repair, but in need of a thorough cleaning. They set out for the cleaning task and went upon a shopping spree to re-furnish the house. The previous operators, who had used their own furniture throughout the house, removed it all before leaving.

On November 1, two former residents from Elmwood Lodge, Cathy, 43 years old and Ellen, 26, were received for a short period of time. The first regular resident, Alma, a 26 year old woman arrived on November 5, 1975. The following day, two more women and a child arrived ranging in ages from six to 43, all presenting with varying degrees of mental handicaps. All requests for admission and bookings were handled through the Central Office of Elmwood Residences Ltd. Over the years, Alma and several others returned frequently, while their parents or guardian were away on vacation or business. Their care, in a way, required more attention and frequent adjustments from the caregivers than in the Children's Residences where the clientele remained unchanged for long periods of time. It was also more difficult to establish a regular plan of care and a familiar routine. Knowing these challenges only increased the eagerness of the Grey Nuns to accept this additional responsibility.

One of the two foundresses, Sister Laurence Savidan became ill in March 1976 and was replaced on June 18 of that year by Sister Aline André. In the interval, Elmwood Residences Limited provided one part time employee, Hazel Barnes and the Central Office kept the bookings down so that the workload and responsibility would not be too overwhelming for Sister Marien and her new helper.



On June 6, 1977, the Blessing of the chapel and a first Mass were celebrated by Monsignor John Robinson. This event gathered 20 guests in the small chapel and for the gala dinner that followed. The kind Monsignor returned to celebrate Mass at the Residence every two weeks, while his health allowed, and until his last illness and untimely death on April 4, 1979.<sup>3</sup>

## *Evaluations and praises*

Personal Care institutions are subjected to frequent visits and evaluations by the owners and by paying agencies, in this case, the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services. The Elmwood Resource Residence, in addition, received a large number of other visitors: Bishop James Mahoney, the Provincial Superiors, Sisters Florence Keegan, Germaine Hétu and Marguerite Laforce during their respective terms of office, as well as many other Grey Nuns, families and friends of the caregivers. These visits were always an occasion for encouragement for the sisters, a delight for the residents and a source of admiration for the visitors.

On November 12, 1975, hardly two weeks after the admission of the first resident, Warren Volding, chair of the Resource Home Admission Committee expressed his, and his Committee's appreciation to the sisters for the work done so far. Sisters Denise Lefebvre, Superior General, and Florence Keegan, Provincial Superior both visited during the first year of operation. They showed immense admiration of the sisters for their loving care and dedication.

On February 10, 1977, Richard Davidson, Executive Director of Elmwood Residences Limited, wrote to Sister Lydia Noel, Superior at the Sisters Residence, Saint Paul's Hospital, to express his deep appreciation of the work done by the Grey Nuns at the Resource Residence:

*Needless to say, they are doing an excellent job. We know that the children living with them are very happy in the loving home that the sisters provide. It is through the dedication and devotion of Sister Marien and Sister André*

*that their home is doing so well, and that the children are happy, are growing and are enjoying life.<sup>4</sup>*

Richard Stevenson, of Elmwood Lodge, brought in two Government inspectors on July 11, 1978 and they made a very favorable report, according to the chronicler.<sup>5</sup>

Among several other appreciative comments received by the sisters at Elmwood Residence, one more will be highlighted in this brief collection. At the 1980 Provincial Chapter,<sup>6</sup> a Resolution was passed including the following:

*Since the opening of the first Residence, the sisters who have operated it have been remarkable by their devotion towards these suffering persons. Their generosity to respond to the needs of these children has highly witnessed to their truly 'youvillian heart'. Therefore one more house will be opened in September 1980.<sup>7</sup>*

Thus, in view of the obvious benefit to the children, the admiration that these sisters had gained from their peers, as well as from the many visitors to their home, and the personal fulfilment they experienced, a second Residence at 2902 Preston Avenue did open on September 1, 1980, months after the departure of the Sisters of Sion. Pioneers in this service, Sisters of Sion Gertrudine and Therese, had devoted six years to this work of mercy. With their age catching up to them, and their health diminishing, they were ready for retirement on May 31, 1980.

The first Grey Nuns who volunteered to take responsibility for this second home, and the selfless service of care for the suffering members of Christ's body were, Sisters Marie-Anne Lavoie, Pauline Plante and Rita Létourneau. Also a lay volunteer from Alberta, Debbie Mills joined them for a period of time.

With the second house in close proximity to the Resource Residence, and six sisters now employed by Elmwood Residences Limited, it became necessary to ensure a regular 'pied à terre' for those who were on days off and enabling community life to grow and blossom. A basement suite was rented nearby, and Sister Aurore Marien was named community leader on October 15, the

birthday of Marguerite d'Youville. On November 17,

*Amidst general rejoicing the sisters from the Elmwood Residences moved their furnishings into the three-bedroom suite next door to the Resource Home [Residence] which [...]was fittingly named Marguerite Residence.<sup>8</sup>*

A few days later, Father Ralph Kleiter, parish priest at Holy Spirit Church, celebrated Mass at the Children's Residence; then all went to Marguerite Residence to bless this newly created abode.

In November, 1982, in their admirable zeal, the sisters decided to offer some of their free time on their days off to visit elderly people within the parish and to help at the Friendship Inn.<sup>9</sup>

## *Leaving Elmwood*

After nine years of commitment with physically, psychologically or mentally challenged children and adults, and lately, in two Residences, the sisters began to realize that some of them would soon need to be replaced and move into some other ministry, as their own health would require. When Sister Marguerite Laforce, Provincial Superior came for her official visit on April 11, 1984, discussion took place with the sisters and it was realized that it would not be possible to find other Grey Nuns to replace them. A meeting was arranged with the Elmwood Administrative Council and a conclusion was reached that the Sisters would withdraw from one of the two Residences and concentrate on care at the Resource Residence.

On May 23, 1984, Sisters Aline André, Angèle Brémaud and Fernande Maranda left and were replaced by lay personnel hired by Elmwood Residences Limited. Their departure was received with regrets by the Operators of the Residences; it was also with sincere sadness that the sisters saw their last day draw near. At a farewell dinner offered by the Elmwood Residences administration, Sister André received a plaque recognizing her eight years of service, while the dedication of all sisters was highly praised.



Those remaining, Sisters Pauline Drolet, Marie-Anne Lavoie and Mary Fruhstuk, decided that they did not require the suite for their days off, being such a small group. They became part of the community of Grey Nuns working at Saint Paul's Hospital, where they were welcomed for their rest, prayer and days off. In 1985, only two sisters remained at the Resource Residence and their health required special attention. Very reluctantly, the Grey Nuns saw it necessary to withdraw completely from the marvelous ministry with Elmwood Residences Limited.

Sister Pauline Drolet resigned on November 1, 1985 and Sister Marie-Anne Lavoie followed on November 15. It had been 10 years since the Grey Nuns began this ministry. They were replaced by lay personnel and the children continued to receive the care they required, a sign that God's Providence always provides for those in need.

The 11 Grey Nuns who served at the Elmwood Residences during these 10 years, gave a cumulated total of 44 years of loving care to those so much in need: so close to Marguerite d'Youville's original ministry of love and tenderness.

#### NOTES: Part 1, Chapter 10

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- 1 Marien, Sister Aurore, interviews in January 2000.
- 2 **Prairie Messenger**, July 18, 1976, "New home for mentally retarded permits short term vacation."
- 3 **Chroniques**, p. 21, GNRC Arch.
- 4 **Historique**, doc. # 3A, GNRC Arch.
- 5 **Chroniques**, p. 27.
- 6 Provincial Assembly of Grey Nuns.
- 7 **Historique**, doc. # 4.
- 8 **Chroniques**, p. 39.
- 9 A Soup Kitchen in Saskatoon for the homeless and the poor.

PART 2

*The Grey Nuns in the  
MacKenzie-Fort Smith Diocese*





## CHAPTER ONE

1867 -

### FORT PROVIDENCE

A new journey north of the 60th parallel is about to begin for the Grey Nuns of Montréal. Since 1859, Bishop Vital Grandin was the Auxiliary to Bishop Alexandre Taché for the large Vicariate of the Northwest Territories, extending from the Red River west to the Rocky Mountains and north to the Arctic Ocean. These areas are now known as the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta and the Northwest Territories. In 1861, Bishop Taché asked his Auxiliary,

*to choose a central place in which the Bishop to be appointed for Athabasca-Mackenzie might fix his residence, and where a Convent might be founded. "Without Nuns," said Mgr. Taché, "we shall not be able to do any permanent good in these Missions." <sup>1</sup>*

The new Apostolic Vicar's ministry took him to the Far North where he visited the Oblate Missions along the lakes and rivers: Nativity Mission on the shores of Athabasca Lake; Our Lady of Sorrows at the far end of the same lake; Sacred Heart Mission at Fort Simpson; Saint Raphael Mission on Liards River; Saint Joseph Mission on Slave Lake; Saint Therese Mission at Fort Norman; and Our Lady of Good Hope Mission at Fort Good Hope.<sup>2</sup> Bishop Grandin also made a stop at a new location and chose it for a future mission which he named La Providence, because he saw it as the Providence of the North. The name later became Notre-Dame de la Providence, when the Assistant General of the Oblates, Father Isidore Belle visited the Mission in 1915. For the Hudson's Bay Company, it was Fort Providence.<sup>3</sup>

## *Mission accepted*

The new Bishop was determined to obtain Grey Nuns for his Far North missions. By that time, the Oblates knew their way to the Grey Nuns mother house. There were Grey Nuns in Manitoba since 1844, in Alberta since 1859 and in Saskatchewan since 1860. In most places, they were the first white women to travel towards, and come to reside in, these unknown territories. On May 3, 1862, the indomitable Bishop Vital Grandin wrote to Mother Julie Deschamps, Superior General, to present his urgent request:

*... to sacrifice several of her daughters to come and suffer in this land, to carry a heavy cross, and to lighten that of others [...] these poor Natives need to be enlightened and for that reason, we need you to come to our assistance.<sup>4</sup>*

Granting this request was not possible at that time due to lack of personnel and resources, but it was not forgotten. Mother Deschamps passed it on to her successor, Mother Jane Slocombe in October 1863, as a dream still to be realized.

Meanwhile, Bishop Grandin had turned the new Mission into a real beehive of activity. Providing what was absolutely necessary for the Missionary priests and brothers, he directed his attention to building a house for the sisters with the help of Father Emile Grouard, Brother Raynard Alexis and hired men.

*By way of laying the first stone of the building, Bishop Grandin drove the first peg. Father Grouard drove the second. Nails were quite unknown in the Far North at that date.<sup>5</sup>*

When the future Bishop Emile Grouard heard in 1866 that the Grey Nuns were coming so far north, his first reaction, as he related later, was:

*...what hardihood! Providence! But we ought not to tempt Providence. How can those Sisters suddenly leave their convent in Montréal and come into these desolate regions, to live among Natives whose conversion has only begun?*

*Will they ever arrive? We have known of explorers, Government officials, well supplied with all manner of provisions, who were so delayed that they had to eat the dogs which drew them. If the Sisters ever arrive, how will they be able to live through our terrible and long winters, without bread, without anything? We can sometimes snare or shoot a hare or a musk-rat. What will they do?®*

The Grey Nuns came! The Mission was accepted by the General Council on March 23, 1865.<sup>7</sup> As had been agreed for the foundation of Lac Ste-Anne between Mother Julie Deschamps and Bishop Alexandre Taché, back in 1859, the one condition prevailed: "together we will pray, work and fast".

## *The foundresses*

It was 1865 when sisters were selected for this extraordinary enterprise, considering many factors, such as: the willingness of the sisters, their health and stamina, resourcefulness, versatility, age, and, the importance of avoiding disruption of their present ministry. Having difficulty to find enough sisters who could leave at that time, the General Council decided to appeal to the Grey Nuns of Saint Hyacinthe<sup>8</sup> for volunteers. In March 1865, Sister Emélie Jauron, Superior General of Saint Hyacinthe, and her council approved the request and allowed Sisters Rosalie Brunelle and Emilie Michon,<sup>9</sup> to join the Grey Nuns of Montréal and complete the number required for the new mission at Fort Providence, Northwest Territories. Also named at the same time, in Montréal, were Sisters Lapointe (Adéline Audet), St-Michel-des-Saints (Marie-Louise Blanchet) and Elizabeth Ward. Two generous women also volunteered for the mission: Domitille Letendre and Domitille Lortie.<sup>10</sup>

Sister Adéline Lapointe was 22 when she entered the Grey Nuns novitiate in 1854. At that time, the novitiate was under the direction of a future Superior General, Mother Jane Slocombe. Sister Lapointe's early apostolate as a Grey Nun was an untiring exercise of charity, be it as a teacher, a home visitor, or a protec-



tor and servant of the poor.<sup>11</sup> Ten years after her profession, in 1865, it was Mother Slocombe who invited Sister Lapointe to become superior-foundress of the first Grey Nuns mission in the Northwest Territories, Fort Providence.

Sister Elizabeth Ward was born in 1845 in Montréal of Irish parents. Her ability to speak English was precious throughout her teaching career. It was with joy that she accepted her nomination for the Far North shortly after her profession which occurred in December 1865.

Sister St-Michel-des-Saints (Marie-Louise Blanchet) was born in the Province of Québec in 1842. She made her profession as a Grey Nun in 1865 and was called for the Far North mission within one year. Her role was multifaceted. Using her many gifts, she was educator, cook, seamstress. No task was beyond her abilities.

Sisters Rosalie Brunelle and Emilie Michon, both formerly from the Saint-Hyacinthe Grey Nuns branch, joined the Grey Nuns of Montréal when heroic missionaries were needed for the Far North. Both remained and died in the Far North, never returning home. Sister Michon spent 29 years and Sister Brunelle, 41 years in the NWT.

Domitille Letendre came North as a lay volunteer, filled with generosity and zeal; she was 25 years old. She became an Auxiliary sister in 1893. For most of her life, she helped in the hard work of life in missions, never searching for earthly reward. Reaching the age of 80, she died in 1922 in Saint-Albert, Alberta. The other Domitille (Lortie) had a brief sojourn with the northern missionaries.

## *The journey*

Not even the thickest history book could contain all the details of the missionaries' journey from Montréal to Fort Providence which began on September 17, 1866. The travelers to Fort Providence were not spared the variety of experiences related in earlier trips made by Grey Nuns heading west. They left



Montréal by train for La Crosse, Wisconsin, then by steamboat on the mighty Mississippi to St. Paul, Minnesota, where they arrived on September 22. It was only on September 29 that they could begin the next 800 kilometers to Saint Boniface. To their surprise, they were ushered aboard sturdy, handsome, brand new wagons. At every night stop, they had to shelter the wagons and conceal the tents to mislead the Sioux, who frequently passed by, awakening shivers of fear for all travelers.

They arrived at St. Boniface on October 13, 1866, after 27 days on the road. As with previous missionaries going further west, they too spent the winter months in St. Boniface. On June 8, 1867, they began their 1,420 kilometer journey to Fort Providence. They were to meet Bishop Henri Faraud at Lac LaBiche in mid-July. As the days passed, the sisters' anxiety increased as they feared they would not make it on time for the rendezvous, owing to many delays along the way.

*The Red River to Lac LaBiche was a long way by dirt roads, with oxen and rugged carts via Portage-la-Prairie, Qu'Appelle, Carlton and Fort Pitt, a route fraught with many streams and rivulets which had to be crossed in various ways.<sup>12</sup>*

Because of a recent attack by the Sauteux in which many Métis were killed, the travelers decided to avoid that route and take another one much longer and more difficult. Sometimes, the men had to build temporary bridges out of branches to cross a river. When the waters were too high, they built rafts with the carts, wrapped them in large specially-treated skins and launched them into the river, a new style of transport boats. A rope, fastened to each extremity, was pulled in turn by men on both shores. The sisters reported having made more than a hundred crossings, great and small.

By the end of June, still fearing they would miss Bishop Faraud at Lac LaBiche, they began to shorten their nights and lengthen their days from 0300 hours to 1800 hours. Near Tundra Mountain, one of the men shot a young bear cub in the path of

the caravan, and the travelers feasted on it for days. On July 31, at 1330 hours, they met Bishop Faraud who had come to search for them, fearing they were lost. Two hours later, the traveling Grey Nuns were in the arms of the Grey Nuns at Lac LaBiche. The joy of this reunion was indescribable, but it was to be of short duration.

On August 3, they departed for Fort Providence through River LaBiche, Lake Athabasca, Slave Lake River, and finally, the magnificent Mackenzie River. River LaBiche was full of shoals and rapids. Men had to drag the barge and sisters had to walk, while the Bishop, ax in hand, had to clear a path in the forest.

*The rain fell, the sun beat down, the wind blew and the mosquitoes stung. Food was getting short, so the Bishop went to buy dried meat from a Native camp. The sisters ate it with such good grace that Bishop Faraud pronounced them true missionaries.<sup>13</sup>*

When the men decided that they needed help to tow the barge at a portage, they held a conference and declared that the sisters could help. They hitched the sisters two by two to yokes and the barge moved as if by a miracle.

Along the way, they visited Oblate Missions established on the shores. On August 12, they disembarked at the Oblate Nativity Mission, Chipewyan, on Lake Athabaska, the first Oblate Mission in the area that was to become the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. At Chipewyan, Bishop Henri Faraud consecrated his new Coadjutor, Isidore Clut, on August 15, 1867.

Their next stop was on Great Slave Lake, at the St. Joseph's Mission. There, Father Zéphirin Gascon prayed so hard to retain the visitors that a strong wind prevented them leaving for two days. They set out again on August 27 and sailed all day and all night until they were on the long-desired, magnificent Mackenzie River in the early morning of August 28.

*At 1600 hours, we stopped ashore to prepare dinner and we took advantage of these moments to penetrate into the thick forest to wash and refresh ourselves.*

*At 1800 hours, in the distance, we saw a pretty house built on a hillside: it is the Providence General Hospital. Our hearts beat faster as we greeted this foreign land, now becoming our country, our home and our tomb.<sup>14</sup>*

The people they were coming to teach and care for were Chipewyan, Loucheux, Dog-rib, Hare, Yellow-Knife and Slave. Among them, were women and children who needed care and protection from violence and neglect. The main areas of Christian teaching were the dignity and respect of women and men, the love and care of children and respect of monogamy.

## *Home at last*

That 'pretty little house on the hillside' was the former Bishop's residence. As they approached the shores, the scenery became clearer and they were able to see people moving about. They intoned a solemn 'Magnificat'. From the shores,

*It was with a hymn to the Queen of Heaven that Father Emile Grouard, Brothers Raynard Alexis, Louis Boisramé and the Natives welcomed us to this foreign land so eagerly desired [...] We entered the church to thank Jesus for the protection he had visibly granted us during this long and perilous journey which had just come to such a happy end.<sup>15</sup>*

Their home was a two-storey building 14 by 15 meters with a balcony. Inside, there were no partitions and no furniture. Bishop Faraud explained that he wanted the sisters to decide these details according to their needs once they arrived. By the end of October, Sister Ward was able to write in her **Journal** the description of each room, but furniture still seemed to be very limited.<sup>16</sup> This abode was called 'Couvent du Sacré-Coeur', which housed the orphanage, boarding school, classrooms, hospital and sisters' residence.

The day after their arrival, on August 29, Sisters Adéline Lapointe and Elizabeth Ward began visiting a young Scottish man who had a terrible leg wound, caused by the neglect of an accidental toe amputation. They went daily to clean the wound,



change the dressing and help this young Hudson's Bay Company<sup>17</sup> employee to complete recovery. Very soon, visitors flocked into the convent to receive medications, to have wounds dressed, teeth extracted and learn basic hygiene skills for healthier living.

On October 7, the sisters opened the 'Académie' with 11 students registered, including boarders, orphans and day students. They were the joy of Sisters St-Michel-des-Saints and Elizabeth Ward; the group soon grew to 33. At first most of them were Métis, children of the Hudson's Bay Company employees. Later, Chipewyan children nearby came in large numbers. Likewise, other members of the Déné nation brought their children to the first school in the Northwest Territories, Sacred Heart School at Fort Providence.

While the sisters devoted themselves to teaching and care of the sick and the orphans, they had to endure the extreme poverty of the early years and share in hard work,

*The early years at the convent were ones of extreme poverty and back-breaking work for the Sisters. They ate fish and potatoes three times a day and dressed in canvas habits. They dug up stumps and roots, cleared glades in the forest to cultivate small gardens, chopped wood and built cabins. In the autumn they went fishing with the Déné to gather enough food for all the children at the convent.<sup>18</sup>*

Upon returning to Montréal from a visit of the northern missions in 1893, Mother Victorine Stubinger, Assistant General, was sometimes seen to be weeping in the refectory. She had confided in the report of her visitation,

*Their courage and generosity are beyond all praise. They are cheerful and gay, even in the refectory, for them a place of special mortification. Three times a day, the same two dishes are laid before them, fish and potatoes.<sup>19</sup>*

To make it worse for the sisters, fasting was accompanied by having to endure the extreme cold, sometimes as low as minus 60 celsius. Fishing was a major activity in preparation for the winter months. In October 1894, for example, they caught 26,000 fishes

to be stored for the winter.<sup>20</sup> Even with that, and the addition of minimal amounts of other food items, such as caribou meat and potatoes, rationing was essential so that the reserve would last until spring. They had to adjust to the short days: by November 25 each year, there were only six hours of daylight and this would last for a long six months. It is not surprising that their health was affected by such miserable conditions. In spite of all, the sisters were happy in their ministry. Not for any material gain or comfort had they come to Fort Providence. Sister Elizabeth Ward explains the source of their courage:

*Let us hope that the flame of faith beginning to shine in this vast Vicariate will be a beneficent light spreading as far as its boarders, enlightening the minds and warming the hearts of those who dwell on these bleak shores.<sup>21</sup>*

Everyone in the Far North Missions knew the wonderful Brother Raynard Alexis who was martyred along with a little girl, at the hands of a Native guide, while traveling from Fort Providence to Lac LaBiche, in the summer of 1875. The missionaries and the people of Providence were deeply grieved by this senseless tragedy and continued to remember Brother Alexis as a friend, a devoted missionary and one to whom everyone was indebted.<sup>22</sup>

## *Sisters recalled*

On March 29, 1879, Mother Julie Deschamps, Superior General, wrote to Bishop Henri Faraud concerning the Fort Providence mission:

*What [...] afflicts me, is my inability to relieve them, at least in the manual work that is surely beyond their strengths. [...] Since you are also unable to help them, it would be advisable for us to abandon the Mackenzie mission [...]<sup>23</sup>*

Two years later, Bishop Faraud decided to close the Mission without any further communication with Mother Deschamps.

The latter expressed her surprise in her letter of July 22, 1881. The Oblate missionaries pleaded the cause of the people of Fort Providence in a collective letter to the Bishop:

*Who would take care of the children? Who would help harvesting? Who will take care of little Joseph, a mentally retarded child that nobody wants to adopt? [...] You mention the scarcity of resources. This is true at all times, it is true more than ever. However, before compromising the future of a whole vast district by the suppression of a mission that contributes most to its Christian future, would it not be preferable to call upon every means that heaven always blesses when we place in God all our trust.<sup>24</sup>*

Bishop Alexandre Taché, who heard of the critical situation at Providence, wrote a winning letter to Bishop Faraud that changed the turn of events to the satisfaction of all. The children and their parents, the Oblate and Grey Nun missionaries, Bishop Taché and Bishop Isidore Clut were all filled with joy and thanksgiving that the mission would remain open.

In Montréal too, there was great rejoicing, knowing how much the missionaries wanted to remain in this land of many challenges and miseries, but of unquestioned hope:

*Sacrifices give the missionaries the satisfaction of assisting in the education and evangelization of Native children. Their joy does not burst forth from the frozen earth, nor from the breath of storms. The following thought of one of our missionaries carried us to the true height, the true source of joyous courage. She writes: "From a human point of view, educating 40 children would appear little compared to the prosperous works of other missions. Yet, reflecting on the worth of a soul, we value highly the little good that we are able to do to those who are entrusted to us in this poor country and who, without missionaries, would be deprived of the knowledge of truth, or immersed in error. The worth of a human being! Such is the motive for action."<sup>25</sup>*

## *A Novitiate at Fort Providence*

Bishop Gabriel Breynat asked Mother Mathilde Hamel, in 1905, to open a Novitiate at Fort Providence for the girls who would find it too hard to acclimatize at Saint Boniface or Montréal. Such a move needed approval by Rome, which was received on June 22, 1908. Two Auxiliary Sisters were accepted at Providence: Sisters Cecilia (Cecilia Lecou) and Noëlia (Voedz-Jen). They both made profession in 1912. Soon after that, young women from the Far North joined others in the Novitiate of Saint Albert, Saint Boniface or Montréal.

## *Major changes at the Mission*

The number of sisters at Fort Providence decreased in the early 1960s from 15 to five. This resulted from lower recruitment of sisters in these years, coupled with the decision of the Federal and Territorial Governments in 1960 to transfer the education of Native children from Providence to Lapointe Hall at Fort Simpson.<sup>26</sup> At that time, there were 93 boarders and 27 day students. A new school for day students was built at Providence in 1967. It was named Elizabeth Ward School to honor the first teacher in the NWT in 1867.<sup>27</sup>

The Sacred Heart Convent was transformed into a Nursing Station, where two Grey Nuns were employed as nurses. Other sisters taught crafts to Native girls and women. Part of the house became a welcoming home for visitors to Fort Providence. Sacred Heart Convent assumed these new roles after having been, for 93 years, the witness to countless heroic actions and the center of all Grey Nun missionary activities for the people of Fort Providence.

The convent named Sacred Heart Hospital on several occasions, was really more a dispensary than a hospital, being too small to accommodate more than seven in-patients at a time. There was no physician at Fort Providence and the variety and amount of medications available was extremely limited. Consequently, the opening of a government-sponsored Nursing



Station was a vast improvement to modernize health care offered to the people.

In the 1980s, there were only two sisters remaining at Fort Providence. They were a presence highly valued by the people, especially when there was no priest residing at the Mission from 1987 to 1991. At that time, the laity discovered their own skills and enthusiasm to take charge of their own growth as church people with the loving guidance of the sisters.

## *Celebrations*

July 4, 1917 was the Golden Jubilee of the arrival of the Grey Nuns at Providence in the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. For that event, Bishop Gabriel Breynat presided at the Eucharistic Celebration where a large number of Natives were present. Also attending the celebration were Mothers Anna Piché, Superior General, Saint-Jean-Baptiste (Ada Lefebvre), Assistant General and Marie-Louise Léveillé, Provincial Superior of Province Divine Providence.<sup>28</sup> All were invited to the banquet; at least 30 Native people were able to join. To ensure a permanent reminder of this event, Bishop Breynat had commissioned Father Pierre Duchaussois to write the history of the Grey Nuns in the Far North since 1867. In his Prefatory letter to Mother Anna Piché, he wrote,

*The following pages have been written to show how generously the Grey Nuns hearkened to the call which they heard, and how faithfully and fruitfully they have worked in the various duties of their holy vocation. This book does not tell all. There is only one book in which all is told, the Book of Life, as we chant in the Dies Irae. But the Book of Life is under the jealous guard of the Angels until the day when all hearts shall be revealed.*<sup>29</sup>

The 75th Anniversary of the Grey Nuns at Fort Providence was celebrated on July 4, 1942 along with the 50th Anniversary of Bishop Gabriel Breynat's consecration as Bishop. The celebration

was enriched by the presence of Mothers Evangéline Gallant, Superior General, Léonie Ferland, General Secretary and Emérentienne Martin, Provincial Superior. Presiding at Mass was Bishop Joseph Trocellier, Coadjutor to Bishop Breynat since 1940. At the end of Mass, the elder among the Canadian Episcopate, Bishop Breynat gave his emotional and sincere message to the Grey Nuns:

*They came to the Mackenzie to help the Oblates to extend God's reign to the extreme parts of the globe. The task was rough; it was so far, it was so cold! No wonder that so many other communities had refused this heroic mission.<sup>30</sup>*

In 1967, Centennial year for Canada, the Grey Nuns celebrated their own Centennial in the Far North. Both Fort Smith, established as the headquarters of the Province Divine Providence since 1914, and Fort Providence held grandiose celebrations to mark the event.

There was rejoicing and thanksgiving on July 1, 1967, coinciding with Canada's Centennial celebrations. Mother Lucienne Elie, General Councillor, represented the Congregation; Mother Alice Gauthier, Provincial Superior and Sister Euphémie Boisvert, Provincial Assistant, along with many other sisters and Oblates, represented the pioneers and the present missionaries of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. Bishop Paul Piché celebrated Mass and presided at an open-air banquet with 800 guests from the Mission. No one wanted to miss this joyful get together. The attentive Bishop led a pilgrimage to the cemetery recalling the memory of the four Grey Nuns buried at Fort Providence: Sisters Emélie Michon, 1896; Galipeau (Georgianna Gratton), 1898; Augustine (Joséphine Mahé) Auxiliary, in 1903 and Yves (Mathurine Legal) Auxiliary, in 1920. The Bishop gave a touching homily in honor of these great women whose selfless ministry have contributed to the growth of faith in this northern land.

If one asks former Far North missionaries for anecdotes of their life in the North, one is sure to receive a whole bundle of notes containing the most humorous, the most unique and the

most inspiring incidents they experienced over the years. Sorting out these anecdotes through a maze of papers leaves a constant desire to include them all in this history of the northern missions. Using reasonable guidelines, only a few will find their way into this volume.

There was a time when all things needed for one year had to be ordered through the Oblate superior of the Mission. That included everything from pencils to clothes or candies. When Sister Eva Sauka was at Fort Providence in the 1940s, she wished to have a supply of *candies* for occasional rewards to the students. But, when she asked for 12 boxes of candies, the request was understood as *candles*. By the end of the year, she received 12 big boxes of candles! There were no gifts for the children that year, but there were many candles to brighten the mission!

### *The last years*

In 1960, once Sacred Heart School was closed, the students were transferred to Fort Simpson. At the same time, Sacred Heart Hospital was no longer in operation, but the space it had occupied was converted into a Nursing Station where two Grey Nuns were employed to provide health care and counseling. Other Grey Nuns remained at Providence to render personal services to their people: home visiting, teaching crafts, doing catechetics, being with those who needed a listening ear, helping at the church and in the parish, and preparing Natives for active contribution in the parish.

On January 7, 1998, the Federal Government formally recognized weaknesses in the way the Government of Canada dealt with Aboriginal peoples in the past, and pledged financial assistance for healing and community counseling. The **Chroniques** made a brief mention of the effect of such a move in the people of Fort Providence,

*Throughout the day, people have been dropping by or phoning to say that they don't like what is happening. Many admit it was difficult in Residential Schools, but they add*

*that they did not experience abuses. The elders are strong to say "the sisters were good for them because without the sisters they would have had no food, clothing and an education."*<sup>31</sup>

In the midst of that controversy, a light shone for the encouragement of those who have given their entire life for the education and care of the people at Fort Providence. Member of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly in 1998, Samuel Gargan, wrote his appreciation for the education he and his peers received:

*My learning, as with most of my peers, is different from the learning of today. That's because I was taught in the aboriginal tradition by my parents, uncles and grandparents as a youth and during my summer breaks from school. I also learned in the non-aboriginal tradition while attending Residential School, Federal Day Schools and Hostels. To me, this has been an asset because I can now live and work, in comfort, in both worlds. I understand, and see, the differences between both cultures. I have also observed the difference in the thinking, learning and behavior patterns of these two cultures. I am afraid that the future for aboriginals won't be as bright as it could be if the trend of molding education, to suit one culture, continues. To survive and succeed, in both worlds, education must use both cultures to complement each other. No benefit can come from one culture devouring another.*<sup>32</sup>

## *Preparing the people for new roles*

For many years, special care was given to prepare the people for the sisters' imminent departure. This, in fact, became the sisters' main occupation. Sister Yvette Nadeau, who spent almost 10 years at Fort Providence, contributed much to awaken a sense of belonging and ownership in the church for the people of Fort Providence. Among her memories of her time at Fort Providence,



she related a story that is most typical of nervous young mothers:

*A young mother took part in every session given in preparation for Baptism. At the ceremony, she was there and was proud to say that she knows every step of the ceremony. Suddenly, she raised her arms and announced: Sister, I forgot my baby at home! There was a burst of laughter among her friends and the young mother was quick to run home and return with her precious little bundle of joy.<sup>33</sup>*

Oblates and Grey Nuns were delighted to report significant progress in the faith life of the people of Fort Providence, as found in September 1992:

*More people are attending Alcoholic Anonymous; solvent abuse has sharply declined. During the past year, 35 Baptisms were celebrated, one marriage and 10 First Communions [in a population of 600]. As more people become sober, they are looking for a new direction and are getting more involved in the Church.<sup>34</sup>*

After 1996, Sisters Joséphine Bouvier and Renée Klee, continued to nurture a close relationship with the people of Fort Providence; they helped them accept the unavoidable. Many of them experienced enhanced self-confidence and by January, 1998, there was more gratitude than fear expressed in the lovely Farewell given to the Grey Nuns. The Farewell was attended by Sister Marcia Wiley, Provincial Leader, Sisters Antoinette Cyre and Dora Durand from Yellowknife and Agnes Sutherland from Fort Smith.

On January 10, 1998, Sister Renée Klee, being the last Grey Nun at Fort Providence, hosted the visitors and gracefully participated in the Prayer for the people and the missionaries; this was followed by a Reception. Approximately 150 persons attended the Farewell; many were moved to tears. All joined in celebrating 130 years of Grey Nuns presence in the 'Mother Mission', Fort Providence by 151 sisters, making a cumulated total of 1,024 years of heroism and unparalleled devotion for the people of Fort

Providence. Many happy memories live in the hearts of former Fort Providence missionaries.

NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 1

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- 1 Duchaussois, Pierre, OMI, **Femmes Héroïques**, Paris, Editions Spes, 1927, pp. 75-76.
- 2 Jonquet, Emile, OMI, **Msgr Grandin - Oblat de Marie Immaculée - Premier Evêque de Saint-Albert**, Montréal, 20 rue Saint-Vincent, 1903, p. 111.
- 3 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 76-77.
- 4 Mitchell, Estelle, s.g.m., **Le Soleil Brille à Minuit**, Montréal, Librairie Beauchemin, 1970, p. 14. (Other documents identified Bishop Henri Faraud as having requested Grey Nuns. He was consecrated Bishop for the Vicariate of Athabaska-Mackenzie on November 30, 1863. On his return from France, he reiterated Bishop Grandin's request to Mother Jane Slocombe, recently elected Superior General).
- 5 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 77.
- 6 **Ibid.**, p. 61.
- 7 **Doc. C 1,9**, MMY Arch.
- 8 An autonomous branch of Grey Nuns founded in 1840.
- 9 Sister Michon was a substitute for Sister Denise Senay, whose health prevented her leaving for the mission.
- 10 Readers are earnestly invited to consult the excellent works on the Far North missions, by Duchaussois, Leising, Mitchell and Sutherland listed in the Bibliography for more information on the NWT missionaries.
- 11 **Biographical sketch**, Sister Adéline Lapointe, GNRC Arch.
- 12 Drouin, Clémentine, s.g.m., **L'Hôpital Général de Montréal - Soeurs Grises, Tome III**, translated by Sr. Antoinette Bézaire as **Love Spans the Centuries**, Volume III, p. 182.
- 13 Mitchell, **Op. Cit.**, p. 38.
- 14 Ward, Elizabeth, s.g.m., **Journal de Voyage**, p. 102.
- 15 **Ibid.**, p. 103.
- 16 **Ibid.**, p. 114.
- 17 **Ibid.**, p. 106.
- 18 Cooke, Lanny, in **Liidli Koé - Two Rivers of Faith**, manuscript, 1985, p. 20.

- 19 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 104.
- 20 **Chroniques**, 1894, p. 2, GNRC Arch.
- 21 Ward, Elizabeth, s.g.m., **Letter** of November 1, 1869.
- 22 This gloomy event was included at length in Volume I, Chapter Five.
- 23 Deschamps, Julie, s.g.m. to Bishop Henri Faraud, **doc. # C4**, 123, MMY Arch.
- 24 **Doc. # C6**, 182, MMY Arch.
- 25 Drouin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 197.
- 26 Named in honor of the superior-foundress of Sacred Heart Convent, Sister Adéline Lapointe.
- 27 Sister Elizabeth Ward was one of the foundresses of Sacred Heart Convent in 1867 and the first teacher in the NWT.
- 28 New Province established in 1914 for the Grey Nun missions of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese.
- 29 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 12.
- 30 **Doc. # C11**, 312, MMY Arch.
- 31 **Chroniques** 1998, p. 209.
- 32 Gargan, Samuel, MLA, **Fort Providence Deh Gáh School 1997-1998 Yearbook**, p. 87.
- 33 Nadeau, Yvette, s.g.m., in **Family News**, June 1992, p. 106.
- 34 **Ibid.**, September, 1992, p. 136.

## CHAPTER TWO

1874 -

### FORT CHIPEWYAN

The Fort Chipewyan settlement, although now located within the Alberta boundaries, was part of the Northwest Territories until 1905. When Alberta was federated as a province, Fort Chipewyan became part of that new province. For the allocation of territories to various vicariates or dioceses, as they were created, Fort Chipewyan has always been part of those Missions located in the Northwest Territories. The first Oblate Mission in the future Mackenzie-Fort Smith Vicariate was Fort Chipewyan. The people in that settlement were Cree and Chipewyan Natives. There were also Métis and a small number of transients from other races.

*Fort Chipewyan is on the edge of the Canadian Shield on the northwest shore of Lake Athabasca, in longitude 111 degrees N and latitude 59 degrees W. It is the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the province of Alberta, Canada.<sup>1</sup>*

*The rocks around the community are some of the oldest exposed rock on earth. Worn, eroded, clawed and crushed by age, the rounded red granite stands 100 to 600 feet [30 to 180 meters] high, especially along the north shore of the lake.<sup>2</sup>*

When the future Bishop Alexandre Taché visited Fort Chipewyan in 1847, he named it La Nativité and he gave it priority as a place for a school.<sup>3</sup> However, Bishop Vital Grandin, in a letter to Mother Julie Deschamps, Superior General, on May 3, 1862, asking for sisters at both Providence and Chipewyan, concluded:

*...if this was not possible at least one community of sisters should be sent to Fort Providence where the need is greatest.<sup>4</sup>*



## *Founding of a Mission*

During the winter of 1873-1874, Bishop Isidore Clut, Auxiliary to Bishop Henri Faraud found that a school was urgently needed in Fort Chipewyan. Communications with the legitimate authorities, at the Grey Nuns headquarters in Montréal, to obtain sisters for that mission would have delayed the project by at least another year. Likewise, Bishop Faraud, then in Europe, could not be reached for a much longer time. Bishop Clut's next resort was to send a letter to Sister Adéline Lapointe, superior of Sacred Heart Convent at Fort Providence, on February 18, 1874, asking for two sisters to come and open a school at Fort Chipewyan, a letter she received on March 25. In doing so, he was leaving the decision in these unusual circumstances on Sister Lapointe's shoulders, while reassuring her that he would surely obtain approval from Montréal in due time.<sup>5</sup>

Bewildered with such a dramatic departure from familiar customs, Sister Lapointe prayed and consulted. Father Emile Grouard, Superior of the Oblate Mission at Fort Providence, suggested that, in view of the evident urgency, the school should be opened at Fort Chipewyan, as soon as possible; this, in spite of being contrary to the Grey Nuns Constitutions.<sup>6</sup> In this heart wrenching situation, Sister Lapointe decided to go with Sister St-Michel-des-Saints (Marie-Louise Blanchet) and Domitille Letendre to open the school. They left on June 30, 1874, sailed 20 days on the Mackenzie River, Great Slave Lake, Slave River, Athabasca River and arrived at Fort Chipewyan on July 19, under the protection of Saint Vincent-de-Paul who had his Feast Day on that day.

Upon arriving, the foundresses were welcomed by Father Arthur Laity on the shore of Lake Athabasca. They immediately went to the church to offer their homage to the Blessed Sacrament, then, they were introduced to their new dwelling: an old shed on which some repairs had been begun. This was to serve as a temporary residence, which lasted for seven long, cold

years. There was hard work awaiting the sisters since they were anxious to begin teaching, even in these appalling accommodations. After eight days, the garret and the ground floor were disencumbered of storage and useless items, cleaned up, first with a pitchfork, then a shovel and lastly a broom. By Monday, July 6, the building was ready for the beginning of classes with 15 children, including two boarders.

The garret, destined for the dormitory, had one room, one table and one pallet. Each sister and volunteer took turn sleeping on these luxury pieces of furniture, while the students had the whole floor and blankets for their use, just like at home. When winter arrived, they found that snow and wind and -50 degree celsius cold chills had free access to their shed through the four walls and the roof. It was bitterly cold. No amount of heating with the one stove could bring any warmth to the children and the sisters. As for food,

*...the first meal consisted of dried meat softened with suet, boiled fruits and milk, all served in old tin porringers. For dessert, there were two enormous tarts, seasoned only by appetite, proverbially the best of all sauces.<sup>7</sup>*

In addition, the news of this foundation was received with no applause in Montréal, to put it mildly. Mother Elizabeth Dupuis wrote her discontent to the sisters on August 14, 1874, in a letter they received only a few days after Christmas. She summoned the sisters to return to Fort Providence immediately after receiving her letter. This was likely not in the plans of Divine Providence, as it was not possible to begin a three-week journey on the winter roads over rivers and lakes and in the deep winter cold. Only after the break-up<sup>8</sup> of the ice could they comply with the order. With a heavy heart, they continued their teaching and education tasks with the children and their giving unrelenting assistance to the sick, the elderly persons and the orphans. Although heartbroken, they were determined to obediently follow the order as soon as travel became possible, which would have to be at the end of the school year.<sup>9</sup>



Meantime, Bishop Clut, Father Grouard, the Brothers and the people of Fort Chipewyan were one in regretting the decision made in Montréal, which would result in the loss of the sisters they had come to appreciate. Prayers were fervent for a change to happen. Father Grouard assured Sister Lapointe that he would write to Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montréal and visit Mother Elizabeth Dupuis, Superior General, on his way to France. On this visit, he was such an eloquent advocate and he pleaded the case so convincingly that the reproaches changed into blessings and, on October 21, 1874, the foundation of the Holy Angels School at Fort Chipewyan was formally approved by the Grey Nuns General Council.<sup>10</sup> The letter which took four long months to arrive, on February 26, 1875, announced the answer to the prayers of the people. In this letter, Sister Lapointe was asked to return to her post of superior at Fort Providence while Sisters Valentine Brochu and Alphonsine Fournier along with an 'excellent girl' volunteer, Virginie Bernier were soon to join Sister St-Michel-des-Saints ( Marie-Louise Blanchet) at Fort Chipewyan. It was with lightened hearts and much gratitude that the news was received.

*New efforts were made to turn the temporary convent, the shed, into a more habitable sort of lodging. The inside was wainscotted as far as the window frames; some articles of furniture were made; everyone gave up all free time of day and night to preparing some kind of home for the expected Sisters.<sup>11</sup>*

## *The foundresses*

Sisters Adéline Lapointe and St-Michel-des-Saints and the volunteer, Domitille Letendre were considered first foundresses of Holy Angels Convent. Likewise, the new missionaries, properly named for Fort Chipewyan, also deserve the title of foundresses: Sisters Valentine Brochu and Alphonsine Fournier and the volunteer Virginie Bernier.

These new recruits left Montréal in early Spring 1875. After countless delays, difficulties and hardships, including long portages - one was close to 30 kilometers - and a four-day tenting, near 200 Natives who made a racket every night, they arrived on the bank of Lake Athabasca, on August 13, at 2100 hours. Three days earlier, Fathers Auguste Lecorre and Louis Le Doussal and Brother Olivier had preceded them in canoes, the barges being too crowded to accommodate all passengers.<sup>12</sup> As usual, these arrivals were bearers of mail. This time, the sisters learned with no surprise, but great joy, that Sister St-Michel-des-Saints would be their superior at Fort Chipewyan. The newcomers were delighted, but the 'victim' could not hide her tears. Her eight years under the guidance of Sister Adéline Lapointe at Fort Providence and at Fort Chipewyan, had no doubt taught her the pains and rewards of such a posting. Nevertheless, she immediately proceeded to orientate her new co-workers and, together, they determined their respective assignments. While everyone answered calls from the sick, the dying, the bereaved, other specific responsibilities were as follows: Sister Valentine Brochu took charge of the 10 little girls, Sister Alphonsine Fournier, began preparing for her teaching functions and the care of the eight little boys, while Virginie Bernier became the creator of sustenance for the whole Mission, from the meager reserves of dried meat, the scarce supply of fish and the garden produce, sometimes totally deficient. Virginie Bernier was to become Auxiliary Sister in 1895 with the name of Sister Bruno. On August 23, Sister Adéline Lapointe returned to the mission she had founded at Fort Providence. Bishop Isidore Clut and Domitille Letendre were her co-travelers.

### *The poorest mission*

Distance, isolation, cold and fasting were persistent companions of the missionaries. Yet their courage and their joy were kept alive with the knowledge that their Mission was consistent with that of their God and Savior.

*Bishop Faraud used to say that nowhere had there been*



*heavier trials than at Lake Athabaska - harder labors, longer fasts, or more destructive storms.*<sup>13</sup>

For many years, the Sisters slept on the floor, used plain boards for chairs, ate fish three times a day, were thankful to have bread for Christmas.

To top all this incredible assortment of concerns, and in spite of the fact that the sisters were overworked, they received little support when they presented their need for additional help to Bishop Faraud. He clearly wrote to Mother Elizabeth Dupuis on February 25, 1877 that three sisters and two volunteers were sufficient at La Nativité, because of the famine. However, Bishop Isidore Clut had, less than a year earlier, written a different letter'

*They [the sisters] presently have 19 girls, 17 of whom attend school. Of that number, 10 are orphans; in addition, they have eight boys of whom only five attend school. Two are infirm and require a considerable amount of care.*<sup>14</sup>

Was there anyone else who cared about the sisters having to endure such hardships, becoming frail and ill under the burden? While the sisters themselves were living heroically their contract of *fasting together with the priests, and pray for God's assistance*, there were others whose concerns for the sisters' survival were unceasing. A few more examples testify to this: Father Auguste Lecorre, in a letter to Mother Julie Deschamps, in 1880, exposed the crude reality of poverty, famine and much too hard work that the sisters had carried. As a result, Mother Deschamps wrote to Bishop Henri Faraud,

*I am worried about our sisters, for we have learned from a reliable source that they have been suffering a lot in these latter years, although they have never uttered a complaint. Sister [Ursule] Charlebois, who is sincerely devoted to our missions, will give a fair judgement of our sisters' situation[...] If they cannot go on there in the Mackenzie, I beg her to come to an understanding with Your Grace so as to bring them back with her.*<sup>15</sup>

In 1878, Mother Julie Deschamps, Superior General, wrote to Father Arthur Laity, also worried about the sisters conditions,

*I am easily convinced that a fourth sister would be useful for your dear mission and I would be anxious to give you one, but, I heard that His Grace, Bishop Faraud himself, prefers that we send no new sister in his diocese presently. I admit that I am sorry, because if we continue to not help our dear missionary sisters already tired, there will come a time where we would need to replace them. Then it would be much more difficult to replace them all than to help them a little now.<sup>16</sup>*

At one time, there was question of closing the convent, a tragedy, happily aborted through the intervention of Bishop Alexandre Taché who wrote,

*There is one thing of which I am proud, it is to have contributed to quiet the storm which menaced your school of destruction. God did not allow this to happen...<sup>17</sup>*

Was not Divine Providence constantly watching over the sisters in these difficult times? The sisters themselves have always maintained the conviction that God was present in their lives and God's Providence was lovingly protecting them. This assurance was a powerful anchor for their faith and courage. And they had frequent proof of God's loving benevolence, especially when they admired the Aurora Borealis more breath-taking at Chipewyan than anywhere else.<sup>18</sup>

On February 26, 1877, a School Evaluation was held which the whole *bourgeoisie* attended. The officers of the Hudson's Bay Company were astounded in noticing the rapid progress of the students; they even admitted that the sisters' school surpassed theirs.<sup>19</sup>

The missionaries were ingenious in working a garden and farming areas amidst the rocks when early frost or snow were not in the way. One year, they celebrated the harvest of 32 shyly red tomatoes, five bunches of celery and 30 spike of wheat;<sup>20</sup> the rest had drowned in the mud or frozen in the snow. There were also



years of relative abundance. Did we not hear that a Bronze Medal was earned at the International Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 for wheat produced at Fort Chipewyan?<sup>21</sup> And who did not hear of the first rose that bloomed in the Far North, at Chipewyan? A few months earlier, Bishop Emile Grouard brought back from France a tender shoot which he gave to Sister Rosalie Brunelle. Her constant care, watering, turning toward the sun, watching for the least sign of growth, and the ecstasy at the appearance of the first tiny bud were important enough to enter into a letter to the mother house and to the Bishop.<sup>22</sup>

After seven years of living in the unhealthy condition of their shed, they were finally seeing a new, small building coming up out of the ground. It was their new convent which was completed and blessed in 1882. Subsequent additions in 1898 and 1904 provided them with a chapel, classrooms and boarding space for a growing number of students. More structures came up in the following years, adding an orphanage, 'so long desired', in 1942, a new convent in 1944, the Indian Day School in 1959, and the new Bishop Piché School in 1964.

*Like in other missions the chores were numerous during the summer months: planting and reaping potatoes, piling wood for the furnaces, picking up blueberries as it was the only dessert for the whole year and for the whole family, i.e., children, priests, sisters and men employees.*<sup>23</sup>

Life, however, was not all work and no play. The sisters knew how to enjoy leisure time, wrote Sister Délia Bourque:

*On one occasion, I remember Sister Marie-Anne Deslauriers, a very special and good teacher, but not a fisherwoman. She tried her luck fishing. Alas, she slipped into the deep waters of Lake Athabasca - clothes and all. Suddenly, we heard a loud cry: Help, Help! Dear Sister was floating almost completely submerged, except for her face and two hands. In a split second, Brother Henri Sarreault jumped into the cold waters and rescued her safely to the shore.*<sup>24</sup>

The mission of Fort Chipewyan has often been cited for the faith and inventiveness of its people. Among other delightful incidents, is the story of little Georges Robillard, an 11 months old Chipewyan orphan, confided to the sisters in 1921. Georges showed an extraordinary interest in anything that pertained to God. As the sisters explained that Jesus gave himself to people in the Host, little Georges began asking Bishop Célestin Joussard, Auxiliary to Bishop Gabriel Breynat, to please give him Jesus. He was not successful in his request, obviously due to his age. Impatient of waiting, on March 15, 1922, he went to the chapel, found a stepladder and climbed up unto the altar. Opening the tabernacle, which he called 'God's little house', he took the ciborium and gave himself communion. Sister Denise Senay caught him in the act. To her, Georges explained that he had done *like the Bishop*. To Sister Anna Lusignan, he added that *Bishop did not want to give Jesus to Georges, so Georges took Him*. Georges was not scolded. Instead, he was admitted to frequent communion. God was thus preparing this special child to eternal communion. Georges died on July 12, 1923.<sup>25</sup>

Marguerite d'Youville was considered a star by the people of Fort Chipewyan. This was clearly ingrained in their mind and heart. An incident was recounted to Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General and her secretary, Mother Léonie Ferland while visiting the Far North in 1937,

*One of the Métis, Victor Mercredi, tells us of the marvelous protection by Mother d'Youville which he experienced. Last year, during a forest fire, all Natives lost their cut wood piled up under trees. Victor had a large quantity located on the destructive trail of the fire. He placed a picture of Mother d'Youville on his possession and remained trusting. The fire destroyed everything around, but respected Victor's pile of wood and the picture which had kept vigil over it.*<sup>26</sup>



## *The last years*

When Bishop Piché School opened in 1964, the sisters had already ministered to the people of Fort Chipewyan for 90 years. On that occasion, Bishop Piché said,

*What we see today [...] makes one forget the hard reality of the difficulties and privations, the dangers and disappointments of these early days when missionary Fathers and Sisters, who dedicated their lives to the material and spiritual well-being of the inhabitants of this land, had to share the poverty of the people they had come to educate; the poverty so extreme [...]*<sup>27</sup>

The sisters remembered with thanksgiving to the God of all consolations, the many successes they had with the education and care of their people. The first boy admitted at the school in 1874 was Pierre Mercredi, whose son Victor became a member of the School Board in 1961. Sophie Tourangeau, the first girl at Holy Angels School became a Grey Nun named Sister Louise, in 1896. She was followed by five others who joined the same Congregation. Two future Oblates also were students of the Holy Angels, Fathers Napoléon Laferte and Patrice Mercredi. Almost all the distinguished citizens of Fort Chipewyan can trace their antecedents to the education they, or their parents, received with the Grey Nuns.

The Oblate Assistant General and Visitor of La Nativité Mission, in 1968 wrote,

*I take pleasure mentioning the excellent missionary spirit of the Grey Nuns, here as in many other places where I saw them at work in this Diocese of Mackenzie [...] I am wondering if I have observed anywhere else so much kind and devoted charity, so much selfless zeal as a congregation as I have witnessed in the many Grey Nuns communities in the Mackenzie. May Divine Providence reward them a hundred fold.*<sup>28</sup>

These are soothing comments when read in the midst of the criticisms voiced in the 1990s by some who had received their education in the northern Missions. Dr. Robert Carney suggests a thoughtful counterbalance to contemporary criticism in the Proceedings of the Bicentennial Conference of Fort Chipewyan and Fort Vermilion,

*...it would appear that for many the meaning of the residential school experience has become more a matter of present-day insights than of understanding past events. Under such circumstances there is a danger that past residential school practices and outcomes will be misinterpreted or exaggerated by those seeking to identify the causes of current problems within the Native community.<sup>29</sup>*

Sister Marcelle Chauvette knew that skills in Home Economics would be helpful to her students and she was able to convince the School Inspector of this need. Approval was received to provide her with space and equipment and, beginning in 1956, she taught homemaking to her female students with great success. She further helped her older students to teach those skills to the younger ones and she obtained approval to hire a few Native ladies to whom she imparted her teaching skills. Henceforth, the students learned from their own people. This was a very successful experiment. When she left Fort Chipewyan four years later, there was no problem to continue the courses.<sup>30</sup>

In 1974, two historical events occurred at Fort Chipewyan: the Centennial of the arrival of the Grey Nuns on June 23 and the closure of the Holy Angels School on July 31. Seven sisters were soon to leave the mission while four would remain as teachers at Bishop Piché School: Sisters Archange Brady, Françoise Côté, Marcelle Chauvette and Michelle Monchamp. A Centennial is an occasion for rejoicing; yet, on this day, there were tears in the eyes of many. It was the last Mass before the closing of Holy Angels Boarding School. At the evening banquet, organized by the ladies of the parish, Mrs. Elsie Yanik said,

*The women of prayer did their best. They helped the women*



*take their place in society, taught those who came to them. The nurses took care of the sick, and the homeless. Tonight, I want to thank the sisters in the name, not only of the C.W.L. [Catholic Women's League], but in the name of all the people of Chipewyan.<sup>31</sup>*

Another event ten years later brought grief, but consolation as well. On April 3, 1984, Sister Archange Brady died suddenly at the sisters residence at Fort Chipewyan. She had given 34 years of her missionary life to the people of Fort Chipewyan. She was dearly loved by all. Her departure was so sudden, so unexpected that it did not allow people to pay their respects before her remains were taken to Edmonton. However, on April 7, Sister Brady's remains returned to Fort Chipewyan for a few hours, at the request of the grieving people. She was buried in the Grey Nuns' plot in Saint Albert.<sup>32</sup>

A former student of Holy Angels School, George Tuccaro gave an eloquent message over the radio in Yellowknife after learning of the passing of Sister Brady:

*People from Fort Chipewyan will miss her. A great many will take pride in saying that they had the opportunity of learning from her all the things she stood for: kindness, understanding, love and respect for her fellow human beings.<sup>33</sup>*

Sister Brady had received public recognition for her services at Fort Chipewyan. In 1974, she was made Honorary Chief for her 25 years as Principal at the Bishop Paul Piché School in Fort Chipewyan and in 1982, she was named Honorary Elder to the Advisory Board of the Alberta Native Women's Native Society. With her passing, she had become a legend not soon to be forgotten.

Dwindling numbers of sisters made it imperative for the Grey Nuns to leave the place of predilection that has been Fort Chipewyan. The decision was communicated to the last sisters working at Fort Chipewyan, Sisters Anna Neumier and Délia Bourque, in January 1993, by Sister Faye Wylie, Provincial



Superior. It was received by the people of Chipewyan with sadness, but with no surprise. They knew that the number of sisters was decreasing, that other missions had already been closed, and that there were no specific urgent need of the sisters' ministry in Fort Chipewyan at that time. They also knew that, among themselves, there were dedicated parish workers who would continue to help the growth of the Church in this Mission.

During 119 years, 168 Grey Nuns had contributed a cumulated total of 1,214 years to the education and care of the people they now were leaving with sadness. There were several farewell gatherings, allowing all to express their friendship and their regret at this parting. It was an emotional moment for Sisters Anna Neumier and Delia Bourque to receive a plaque of recognition from the Parish Council, thanking the Grey Nuns for their dedication to the people of Fort Chipewyan during these 119 years.

Before leaving, the sisters, with their good friend Elsie Yanik, went to place flower wreaths on the grave of the four Grey Nuns buried at Fort Chipewyan over the years: Sister Louise (Sophie Tourangeau) who died on April 11, 1901; Sister Marie (Jeanne LeDréau), January 9, 1903; Sister Rosalie Brunelle, December 10, 1908 and Sister Bruno (Virginie Bernier), November 15, 1917.

On February 15, they were happy to welcome Sisters Aurore Larkin, Provincial Councillor and Louise Fortin, to help them pack and carry loads of boxes back to Edmonton. When the two generous helpers left on February 17, they brought along Sister Anna Neumier, leaving Sister Délia Bourque to complete the cleaning of the house. She was the one to receive the last accolades and prayers of the people at Mass on Sunday, February 28, 1993. Her last goodbye was on March 2, 1993. The Grey Nuns know that God will continue to be loved and served by the people of Fort Chipewyan long after their departure and the bonds secured over 119 years are solid and lasting.

## NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 2

- 1 Brady, Archange, s.g.m., **A History of Fort Chipewyan**, Athabasca, Gregorach Printing Ltd, Publisher, 1983, p. 7.
- 2 Sutherland, Agnes, s.g.m., **Northerners say: "Thanks, Sisters,"** Montréal, Les Oeuvres de Mère d'Youville, 1996, p. 14.
- 3 Drouin, Clémentine, s.g.m., **Hôpital Général de Montréal**, Montréal, Maison Mère, 1943, p. 253. A difficult fact to ascertain: Henri Faraud was born in 1823. In the original **Femmes Héroïques**, Duchaussois named him as the founder of La Nativité in 1849 (p. 114). However, the translator of the book named Alexandre Taché as founder of the first Oblate Mission in the Far North in 1847 (p. 145).
- 4 Grandin, Bishop Vital to Mother Julie Deschamps, May 3, 1862, MMY Arch.
- 5 **Chipewyan Chroniques**, 1873-1887, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 6 According to the Constitutions, a new foundation must have a prior approval from the General Council.
- 7 Duchaussois, **Femmes Héroïques**, Paris, Editions Spes, 1927, p. 115.
- 8 A spectacular event that usually occurs in May in the Far North. The icy shell covering the Mackenzie could be 3 to 3.5 meters thick, and when cracked open by the force of the current, enormous chunks of ice bump and shatter each other or break up on the banks accompanied by rolling thunder. A grand but terrifying spectacle.
- 9 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, pp. 1-3
- 10 Drouin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 251.
- 11 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 117.
- 12 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. 3.
- 13 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 118.
- 14 Clut, Bishop Isidore to Mother Elizabeth Dupuis, October 4, 1876, MMY Arch.
- 15 Mitchell, Estelle, s.g.m., **Le Soleil Brille A Minuit**, Montréal, Beauchemin, 1970, p. 97.
- 16 Deschamps, Mother Julie to Father Arthur Laity, May 14, 1878.
- 17 Taché, Bishop Alexandre to the sisters of Fort Chipewyan, October 22, 1883.
- 18 Mitchell, **Op. Cit.**, See the splendid description of Aurora Borealis, p. 77.
- 19 St-Michel-des-Saints, Sister (Marie-Louise Blanchet), C1, 46, MMY Arch.
- 20 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 120.
- 21 Brady, **Op. Cit.**, p. 99.
- 22 **Circulaire Mensuelle - 1895-98**, p. 55.
- 23 Lapointe, Simonne, s.g.m., **Reminiscences of 1947-1950**, notes written in March 2000.

- 24 Bourque, Délia, s.g.m., **Reminiscences**, March 2000.
- 25 **Chroniques**, pp. 46-47.
- 26 Ferland, Léonie, s.g.m., **Un Voyage Au Cercle Polaire**, 1937, p. 4.
- 27 Piché, Bishop Paul, **Talk** at the Official Opening of the School, 1964, C5, 233, MMY Arch.
- 28 Larochelle, Stanislas, OMI, Correspondence 1874-1893, GNRC Arch.
- 29 Carney, Robert J., Ph. D., "The Grey Nuns and the Children of Holy Angels, Fort Chipewyan, 1874- 1923", **Proceedings of the Fort Chipewyan and Fort Vermilion Bicentennial Conference**, Patricia McCormack and R. Geoffrey Ironside, Editors, 1990, p. 290.
- 30 Chauvette, Marcelle, s.g.m., **Verbal Reminiscences**, July, 2000.
- 31 **Chroniques, 1963-1973**, p. 336.
- 32 **Ibid.**, p. 112.
- 33 Tuccaro, George, **Radio message**, April 3, 1984.





# CHAPTER THREE

1903 -

## FORT RESOLUTION

In 1901, Bishop Emile Grouard wrote to Mother Praxède Filiatrault with a view to obtain Grey Nuns to open a school at Fort Resolution, where the Oblates had arrived in 1858. After explaining the great need for that mission, he concluded,

*Humanly speaking, you are right to fear making a hasty decision, but we have to hope even against all hope.<sup>1</sup>*

His successor, Bishop Gabriel Breynat, was not one to easily take "No" for an answer, he pleaded again for help in February 1902:

*It would be for me a pleasant consolation and a strong encouragement at the beginning of my ministry to be able to begin this foundation this year, or next spring.<sup>2</sup>*

The General Council approved this new Mission in 1902. From Montréal, Bishop Breynat wrote to Father Louis Dupire at Fort Resolution, that his request had been accepted and asked him to prepare a dwelling for the sisters.<sup>3</sup> His letter, dated in November 1902, was not received at the Mission until one month after the sisters had arrived at their destination. Therefore, as could be expected, there was no house ready to receive them.

### *The foundresses*

As soon as the Mission was accepted, the first action of Mother Mathilde Hamel, Superior General and her Council was to choose the foundresses and help them prepare for the challenge ahead. As superior-foundress, Sister Virginie Boisvert was the obvious choice. At 46 years of age, and having spent 20 years

at Fort Providence, she became a precious support and guide for the new missionaries to the Far North. Two newly professed sisters of March 13, 1903, were assigned as teachers: Sisters Généreux (Délia Magnan), 33 years old and Alice McQuillan, 27 years old. Two Auxiliary Sisters were also to join the group: Sisters Ernestine (Lemay), 29 years old, as cook and Honorine (Caron), 45 years old, as child care worker.<sup>4</sup>

## *The journey*

Their trip from Montréal to Fort Resolution took 57 days during which an astounding variety of delays, hardships and frightening experiences were encountered. Leaving Montréal by train, on April 20, 1903, they arrived at Saint Boniface four days later where they remained for two days in order to rest, meet the sisters, observe their ministries, and prepare for the rest of their journey.<sup>5</sup> Again, they were fortunate to ride on the train to Calgary, then to Edmonton where the new Superior Vicar of the new Saint Albert Province, Mother Eugénie Letellier,<sup>6</sup> made sure that they were in form for the last, but hardest weeks ahead.

On Thursday, May 7, 1903, a large carriage drawn by a team of horses was ready to take the missionaries to Athabasca Landing, a distance of 240 kilometers northeast of Edmonton. It took two days, including their first night under the tent. The second night, a kind Métis woman graciously hosted them. Even in May, they met unfriendly weather: rain, snow and wind. Then, two surprises awaited them: the pleasant one was the arrival at Athabasca Landing of Bishop Gabriel Breynat and two other priests also heading North; they would be their co-travelers. The second surprise was that the men, hired for the next part of the trip on lakes and rivers, had stopped home for their two-week spring farm work and were not available yet to begin the trip.

The missionaries waited and camped until May 14 when they resumed their memorable excursion. Leaving in the evening, they glided smoothly all night on Athabasca Lake. When the gleeful rowers had finished their singing and huzza, the sisters continued



with the hymn *Ave Maris Stella* and the calm of the night enveloped the barges and their passengers.

This smooth sailing continued for five days, interspersed with stops for camping and for lunch. No one was complaining until they arrived at Grand Rapids. Like previous voyagers, they took 10 days to portage the 150-kilometer walk; only these voyagers had to struggle with the 30-centimeter of new snow and the bitter cold. This time, they were able to use the tramways, built by the Hudson's Bay Company, in 1902, to facilitate the transfer of heavy articles during that long portage. What a marvelous improvement!

More frightening moments were in store for the missionaries when they approached the usually furious Lake Athabasca on their way to Fort Chipewyan. In spite of a terrible wind, that seriously threatened the embarkation, the travelers arrived on June 3, for a too short visit with the sisters of Holy Angels Convent, a mission they had served since 1874.

There were a few more hurdles to overcome before the end of this two-month endurance test. One morning, they woke up to find their barges stopped on a bank of sand. It took the whole day to start moving again on June 4,

*Jesus seemed to be sleeping, but his heart is attentive, and we finally were afloat again. The following two days, the wind was against us. Bishop Breynat went back to Fort Chipewyan, by canoe, to find some help to bring the barges to Smith Landing. On June 8, there were no more problems in sight and we spontaneously intoned the hymn *Te Deum* [...] Nature is the sanctuary door always open where the soul sees her God.<sup>7</sup>*

Arriving at Fort Smith, on June 11, they changed transportation. They were now to travel on the Saint Alphonse, the boat built by the Oblates for the northern Missions. In 1903, Oblate missionaries were already at Fort Smith; they were always available to welcome the travelers and attend to their needs. The Fort Resolution group remained at Fort Smith four days while all bag-

gage was moved from the barges to the Saint Alphonse.

On June 15, Bishop Breynat celebrated Mass at 0200 hours and all boarded the Saint Alphonse for Fort Resolution. Shortly after leaving Fort Smith, the missionaries found themselves prisoners between huge icebergs. By the next morning, their boat was freed and they sailed easily, arriving at Fort Resolution, the *Promised Land*, on June 16, 1903, at 1100 hours. Fort Resolution was now their home. Sister McQuillan described the settlement as she saw it from the boat,

*a bunch of small white houses, built in wood and canvas,  
thrown here and there, on the bank of the lake.*<sup>8</sup>

This bank was bordered with a joyous crowd of Natives who came to meet the Bishop, and perhaps, to examine the sisters from head to foot. One lady said,

*Their dresses would be nicer if they were red.*<sup>9</sup>

## *Their home*

The sisters first went to greet the Lord in the church, wrote Sister Virginie Boisvert,

*to thank our divine Master and offer our lives to work for  
God's glory.*<sup>10</sup>

The Oblates welcomed them in their poor house and explained that the Grey Nuns, too, will have their own house, but, as usual in a beginning mission, the house was not ready on their arrival. The regular scapegoat, delayed mail, explained this unfortunate happening. As they knew nothing about the sisters coming, the Brothers had been busy building a steamboat. A structure, though, had been started for the sisters' house, but there was yet no roof and no windows. In compensation, the sisters were offered the attic of the Oblates' house. This place was only 1.2 meters high and was used to keep the dogs harnesses, dried meat and fish, mice and mosquitoes. The latter live elements were



rather unhappy to see their kingdom invaded by strangers. This was their home for seven weeks while the brothers and a few Natives worked hard to build a better dwelling.

*The Saint Joseph School was born in the attic of the Oblates house where we walked on our knees.<sup>11</sup>*

Missionaries in the Far North are known for their sense of humor and their marvelous ability to accommodate themselves with any adversity. Bishop Breynat was not the last one to invent tricks, as the sisters soon noticed. On one of the first nights, the sisters began hearing a loud rattling coming from the corner where the dog harnesses had been stacked. The sisters' initial reaction of fear, soon followed by a surge of adrenaline, got them all out of bed, searching for the source of that noise. When Sister Ernestine (Lemay) discovered a string through the floor of the attic, down to the first floor, she cut the little intruder and immediately the uproar ceased. The sisters went back to sleep and the culprits downstairs remained silent. If a court proceeding had been held on that case, the Bishop would have been first to plead guilty to the prank.

## *The School*

Thanks to the brothers' diligence, the small convent was almost ready for occupancy on July 24, 1903. Some parents happily brought their children to the sisters as they were returning to the woods for the winter. Three girls and two boys were thus the first boarders and students. On that day, Saint Joseph School was opened.

The convent/school was a humble building of six by nine meters. It had no partitions, no stairs to go to the upper floor. A ladder was installed instead. By degrees the new convent got into working order, and began to have some furniture. Father Louis-François Dupire wrote in his chronicles,

*On August 30, Brother James O'Connell set up the stoves in the Hospice, where the Sisters had been shivering with cold,*



*for their house admitted the too fresh breezes on all sides. God alone knows what immense treasures of merit those good Sisters acquired in the trying circumstances in which they were placed. I certainly did all that was possible - and impossible - to spare them so much suffering, although they bore everything not only with courage and patience, but with a smile on their lips. No one has more reason than I have to recognize their pre-eminent worth as auxiliaries of the Missionary Priests, and to appreciate their self-abnegation and devotedness.<sup>12</sup>*

This temporary building was used for six years and was much too small for the number of people accommodated: five sisters and 25 children at that time. Three years later, in 1906, there were nine sisters and 45 children, making the crowding situation intolerable for all. By December 1909, a new, larger house was ready for occupancy. There was great exhilaration among the students who all wanted to carry little pieces to their new home to hasten the move. A Mass of thanksgiving, on December 1, 1909, followed by a festive meal on December 8, marked the joyous celebration.<sup>13</sup>

The population of the school grew from five in 1903 to 70 in 1923, and to 138 in 1950. Among these students, 15 to 20 were day students while the remainder were boarders. Some of the boarders were orphans too young to begin school and requiring constant care and supervision. There is difficulty, from the information available, to determine the numbers. It is evident, however, that the workload of the sisters surpassed a 0900 hours to 1700 hours schedule. In spite of overwork, correspondence includes frequent entries showing the loving milieu provided for the children,

*I cannot conclude without talking about our two little twins. Alexis can walk, but Louison is too fat. I think his legs are paralyzed. We are doing novenas to Mother d'Youville to obtain a cure. [...] we just received a little boy; it is the most miserable that I have ever seen. He was shivering with cold, wearing ragged clothes, no socks or hat [...] now, he is all beaming with warm and clean clothes.<sup>14</sup>*

*All children have been ill. Four boys are gone to heaven; really, I grieved for them, I love them a lot.*<sup>15</sup>

In 1924, Dr. Clermont Bourget, Agent of the Natives, wrote to Sister Ste-Eugénie (Marie-Louise Girard), superior, following his inspection of the school,

*Allow me to offer my congratulations, as inspector of the School for Natives, to you and your teaching staff for the very evident progress of the students under your direction. The inspection made yesterday proves that the students know how to avail themselves of your good teaching.*<sup>16</sup>

Amidst congratulations for a job well done, there was another refrain often echoed in the **Chroniques** and correspondence concerning the hunger felt by the people of Fort Resolution, including the Mission. Fish was scarce, caribous were hiding: 'No more meat, what are we going to do?' was a recurrent fear. February 1917 was especially poor and prayers were fervent for help, even among the little children. Sister Célanière Olivier, superior, decided to place a little statue of Saint Joseph, their great provider, in the hands of a little girl, Alma Beaulieu, encouraging her to request 100 caribous. The hunters returned with 103; the missionaries explained that God had delayed three days in granting this favor, thus the extra three caribous.<sup>17</sup>

One missionary, Sister Simonne Lapointe remembers her years at Fort Resolution from 1940 to 1944. She was in a small plane piloted by the faithful Louis Bisson, en route from Fort McMurray to Fort Chipewyan and Fort Resolution. Seeing another plane on his path, he landed in a bush to avoid a collision. For security, he locked the young sister inside the plane and went for help. He returned with a tractor, horses and a few helpers; with all that help, the plane was brought back into service. When they took off again, the door opened wide and the pilot advised the sister to hold on to his seat. Then, he opened his window, stood on the wing and closed the door from the outside. Sister Lapointe concluded:



*There was certainly another PILOT controlling the plane and that was DIVINE PROVIDENCE otherwise we would not have made it.*<sup>18</sup>

*Like other missions the chores were numerous during the summer months; planting and reaping potatoes, piling wood for the furnaces, picking up blueberries during the summer as it was the only dessert for the whole year and for the whole family, i.e., children, priests, sisters and men employees. [leaving in the spring of 1950] it was the last plane of the season. When we arrived in McMurray, the ice was melting and instead of landing the usual way, the pilot had to go straight down and then turn in circle until he could find a solid spot to stop. There was so much water on the ice, that we could not get off the plane, so men with high rubber carried us to shore where a truck was awaiting us and brought us to the hospital.*<sup>19</sup>

The voice of former students brings eloquent testimony of their appreciation as well. One is impressed by the sincerity of the comments of a student of the 1940s, in a series of articles he submitted to **Mackenzie Times**, in 1991,

*To understand why some of us went to mission boarding schools in the late forties, or even prior to that time, it is necessary to know that many of us came from large families. Having little or no resources to support these families, many of our parents solicited the help of the Church to assist them through hard times. [...] [At the school], there was never a shortage of food, so we didn't go hungry. You have to remember that nobody at that school was born 'with a golden spoon'. [visiting the cemetery with the sisters...] Sometimes Sister would come along and she would tell us a little story about everyone she knew lying there. One thing I learned about those nuns, was that they never said anything derogatory about anyone. [...] Our teachers in the mission school had the same foresight as our parents. The world was changing, and we were told that we were the future devel-*



opers of this great country. 'So study hard' was echoed by our teachers. [...] <sup>20</sup>

## *Closing of the School*

The 1950s developments in the education of Natives began at Fort Resolution. In 1957, a hostel was built at Fort Smith,

*In October 1956, the Minister of Northern Affairs, Mr. R. G. Robertson informed Bishop Joseph Trocellier, Apostolic Vicar, that, when the federal school at Smith (hostel) open, in September 1957, the school at Resolution will close and students and staff will move to Smith.*<sup>21</sup>

By 0630 hours, on Friday, June 28, 1957, the government seaplane was on the lake shore, waiting to bring the children to their respective settlement. At 1500 hours, there was only one little eight month-old orphan, Marguerite Rose Beaulieu, who was waiting to be adopted. A few months later, in September, as the sisters were leaving the chapel, they saw a wee little boy in one of the last pews. Asking him if he needed anything, he answered: 'No, I just came to pray'.<sup>22</sup>

The new facilities in Fort Smith were not ready at the beginning of the 1957-58 school year. This meant that September 1957 brought a larger number of students to the Fort Resolution School; 150 when the space available could accommodate 115. Brothers got busy building more bunk beds and re-opening the older boys' house.

December 20 was the last day of class at Fort Resolution and the students left by groups on December 27, 28 and 29. Saint Joseph School was definitely closed on December 29, 1957. Warm memories keep it alive in the hearts of many former students, their parents and the missionaries.

These moves necessitated several changes in the number of sisters assigned to Fort Resolution. During the year 1957-58, a number of them, involved in teaching and as child care workers, were transferred to other missions. Many went to the new hostel

in Fort Smith, while several new nurses and nursing assistants arrived at Fort Resolution to increase the hospital personnel.

### *The hospital*

The 1916 contract between Bishop Gabriel Breynat, Apostolic Vicar of the Mackenzie and Mother Anna Piché, Superior General of the Grey Nuns stated:

*The sisters agree to give elementary instruction to the Native children of the Mission and to take care of the poor and the sick entrusted to them, using the resources of the Oblate Mission.*<sup>23</sup>

Until 1939, the health care services provided by the sisters were given in home visits and also to people coming to the Mission for medication, dressings and consultations. There are always some who do not want to consult the physician, they trust the sister's medicine.

In September 1923, there was a need for space to admit patients with curable diseases and accident victims. It was decided to transform the parlor into a hospital. This make-shift facility served a number of patients for short stay and contributed to reduce the number of home visits from 900 for the year 1920 to 182 in 1925.<sup>24</sup>

The government asked Bishop Gabriel Breynat, in 1938, to build a hospital of eight to 10 beds next to the school, and offered to pay 40% of the cost. This was accepted and builders immediately began their new contract. The Saint Joseph Hospital opened its doors on February 20, 1939. It was a three-storey building with a 24-bed capacity, joined to the school with a corridor. A blessing ceremony by Bishop Pierre Fallaize was held on March 19.

The little hospital was always filled to capacity, even beyond its capacity. Nine years later, in 1948, an extension was built to raise the capacity to 60 beds. This need was of short duration since in 1958, there was discussion about closing the hospital and replacing it with a Nursing Station. There were proposals to



admit older persons, orphans and abandoned children in the now empty building, but such plans did not materialize.

Recruitment of new missionaries was always the occasion of major adjustments for the sisters, especially in terms of climate, culture and language. In 1952, Sister Cécile Asselin, a unilingual French-Canadian from Montréal, was asked to go to Fort Resolution. The train ride from Montréal to Fort McMurray was rather uneventful. Taking a small plane from McMurray to Fort Resolution, during a storm, she was unaware that the pilot had to land at Yellowknife instead. She was oblivious of the explanation given in English to the passengers.

Upon landing, she presented a note for the taxi driver which said to *drive her to the mission*. Seeing the small building, she refused to stay there and the driver kindly obliged to take her to the hospital. Upon finding out that there were no sisters at the hospital, she returned to the taxi driver and they went back to the mission. Thanks to Father Maurice Beauregard, who opened the door of his chapel, she believed that she was in good hands and waited there for the next plane. When interviewed for anecdotes on the northern missions, in 2000, the 90-year old sister remembered all details of this series of incidents and was still thankful to her 'savior' of that day.

On July 10, 1967, permission was requested of the General Council to withdraw the sisters from Fort Resolution. Bishop Paul Piché, favored this outcome as he wrote in his letter of July 27, 1967,

*Saint Joseph Hospital was built in 1939 to respond to the needs of the Natives, of whom a large number suffered from tuberculosis. The control of this disease, along with the policy of the Government to send these patients outside this settlement, have cancelled the need for a hospital at Fort Resolution. This hospital, since a few years, was in fact only a Health Unit which still required, because of the size of the building and the need for maintenance, the presence of five Grey Nuns and two Oblate brothers.*



*It is with regrets that we transmit this decision [...] but not without expressing the deep gratitude of the Church of Mackenzie for the 64 years of untiring apostolic devotion of the Grey Nuns for the spiritual and material good of the Natives of the region. Those are consternated on the departure of the sisters.*<sup>25</sup>

## *Sisters leaving*

Grieved by the ultimate decision, the sisters closed the hospital on July 1, 1967, even before the above letter was received; its content having been communicated earlier. Several families came to visit the sisters over the last few days to express their sorrow at their departure. On July 11, the remaining five sisters left Fort Resolution, assured of the gratitude and kind memories of the people they are leaving with sincere regrets.

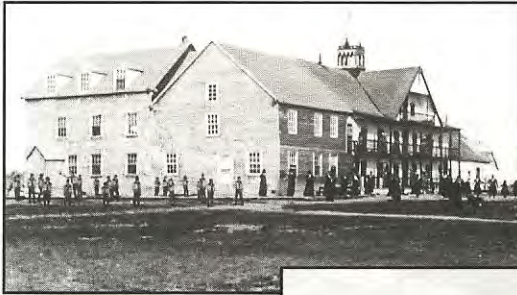
Four sisters were buried at Fort Resolution between 1932 and 1946: Sisters Honorine (Caron), who died on January 2, 1932; Rogatien (Marie-Anne Coignard), January 17, 1935; Lydia St-Hilaire, February 24, 1941; and Béatrice Desrochers, September 19, 1946. Together, their headstones will serve as a faithful reminder of the 64 years when 136 Grey Nuns gave a cumulated total of 750 years to the people of Fort Resolution.

### NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 3

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- 1 Grouard, Bishop Emile to Mother Praxède Filiatrault, February 18, 1901, L064, MMY Arch., p. 1.
- 2 Breynat, Bishop Gabriel to Mother Praxède Filiatrault, February 1902, L064, MMY Arch., p. 1.
- 3 McQuillan, Alice, s.g.m., "Il y a cinquante ans et aujourd'hui," **Historique**, doc. # 2, p. 5., GNRC Arch.
- 4 McQuillan, **Op. Cit.**, p. 1.

- 5 **Chroniques, Fort Resolution**, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 6 The Saint Albert Province was established in 1897.
- 7 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, pp. 3, 4.
- 8 **Ibid.**, p. 4.
- 9 **Ibid.**, p. 4.
- 10 Rouleau, Fernande, s.g.m., **Historique**, doc. # 3, p. 1.
- 11 Rouleau, **Op. Cit.**, p. 1.
- 12 Duchaussois, **Op. Cit.**, p. 141.
- 13 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. 6.
- 14 Rouleau, Alma, s.g.m., to the mother house, September 12, 1922, L064, MMY Arch., p. 6.
- 15 Gilbert, Clara, s.g.m., to the mother house, July, 1920.
- 16 Bourget, Clermont, M.D., to Sister Ste-Eugénie, February 22, 1924, L064, MMY Arch., p. 9.
- 17 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, p. 40; Mitchell, **Op. Cit.**, p. 165; **Les Annales de Saint-Joseph du Mont Royal**, June 1940, p. 183.
- 18 Lapointe, Simonne, s.g.m., **Reminiscences**, March 2000.
- 19 Lapointe, Simonne, s.g.m., **Op. Cit.**
- 20 Mercredi, Joe, 'My life in a Residential School', **Mackenzie Times**, January 1991, GNRC Arch.
- 21 See: L064, p. 9, MMY Arch.
- 22 **Chroniques, Op. Cit.**, pp. 333 and 336.
- 23 **Historique**, doc. # 1, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 24 L064, p. 7, MMY Arch.
- 25 Piché, Bishop Paul to Mother Alice Gauthier, Provincial Superior, July 27, 1967, **Historique**, doc. # 20, GNRC Arch.



Fort Providence  
Hospital and school,  
1899, demolished in  
1930

Fort Providence -  
Sacred Heart School,  
built in 1930



Fort Chipewyan -  
Holy Angels  
Mission, 1913



Fort Resolution Saint Joseph Mission

1. Church, 2. Oblates' Residence, 3. Convent/school, 4. Sisters' residence, 5. Hospital



Will these caribou ever  
reach our tables?

- Fort Resolution



## CHAPTER FOUR

1914 -

### FORT SMITH

The future provincial headquarters of the Grey Nuns Missions in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Fort Smith, was not unknown to the Grey Nuns when, in 1912, Bishop Gabriel Breynat, Apostolic Vicar of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Vicariate requested Mother Anna Piché, Superior General, to open a hospital and a school in this settlement. The first Grey Nun missionaries to the Far North made a stop in that settlement in 1867, on their way to Fort Providence.

Mother Anna Piché was the first Superior General who dared to travel north of the 60th parallel, in 1912, to see for herself the heroic lives being lived by her sisters in the Far North. Upon returning to Montréal, she presented the request of Bishop Gabriel Breynat to her General Council, who accepted this fourth foundation in the northern Vicariate.

*Fort Smith, "The Garden Capital" of the North, sits on the 60th parallel, just north of the Alberta border. It was once a crucial link in the chain of trading posts along the Mackenzie route to the Arctic. [...] a trading post was established in 1874 at the foot of the Rapids of the Drowned and named in honor of Donald Alexander Smith, later Lord Strathcona, a Hudson's Bay Governor, a member of the first Council of the N.W.T. and a builder of the Canadian Pacific Railways.<sup>1</sup>*

The Hudson's Bay Company established a post at Slave River Rapids, Fort Smith, in 1874, where they settled their district headquarters in 1908. Responding to the invitation of Patriarch Beaulieu, the future Bishop Vital Grandin was the first Roman

Catholic missionary who came to Fort Smith. This was Christmas 1856. Not content with making all arrangements for this visit, the Patriarch moved out of his house to accommodate Father Grandin. He also taught him the Chipewyan language. A first church was built in 1876 and the first resident priest, Father Emile Jousard, arrived in 1888.

## *The foundresses*

In January 1914, Sister Marie-Louise Léveill , local superior at Saint Boniface, was called to Montr al where she received a new posting. She would be the superior-foundress of the future mission of Fort Smith. During her first years with the Grey Nuns, this energetic sister learned all she could of the abilities needed in missions. She knew how to extract teeth, bandage wounds, prescribe and serve medications, all skills that she learned at the Novitiate and at H pital Notre-Dame, in Montr al.

There were many missions that required that variety of skills, especially those located in western and northern Canada. By the age of 55, Sister L veill 's previous work as superior in Lac La Selle, Alberta, foundress at Lestock, Saskatchewan and superior at Saint Boniface, Manitoba had given her countless opportunities to use all her abilities and develop new ones.

Three companions were called as co-foundresses of the new mission in Fort Smith: Sisters C lina Fortin, a nurse, 37 years of age, assistant superior; Adrienne Gadbois, a teacher, age 27; and Beaudry (Corinne St-Germain). The latter made only a brief appearance at Fort Smith as she was asked to continue on to Fort Providence replacing Sister Corinne Delorimier who was ill. In exchange for Sister Beaudry, the new acquisition at Fort Smith was Sister Jobin (Zo lla Turcotte), a cook, 41 years old.

## *The journey*

In 1914, travel in the west had reached some degree of modernization. There was now a railroad up to Athabasca Landing,

thus depriving the missionaries of the glamorous experience of oxcart travel, through rain, and snow, and wind, and mosquitoes, and over rough roads. In compensation, they could reach Edmonton from Montréal in four days instead of the usual 90 some days of earlier years.

The missionaries for Fort Smith left Montréal on the morning of May 7, 1914. Traveling with them were Sisters Marie-Anna Verdon and Ste-Albine (Albina Ferland) going to Fort Chipewyan and Fort Resolution respectively. Along the way, they were met by other Grey Nuns who were in various missions. First, on May 9, at Kenora, Ontario, where Grey Nuns had opened Ecole Saint Antoine in 1898: Sisters St-Barthélémi (Elise Lachapelle) and Margaret Gilbert provided them with a delightful surprise when they appeared at the station during a 15-minute train stop. A similar joy was experienced in Winnipeg a few hours later, where Grey Nuns arrived in 1844. Sisters Foisy (Anastasie Vinet) and M.-Louise Caroline Lagarde met them at the station and took them to the Saint Boniface provincial house where they visited until Wednesday, May 13. In Edmonton the following evening at 2330 hours, they were again hosted with warm hospitality by the sisters of the Edmonton General Hospital which opened in 1895 and of Saint Albert, where Grey Nuns arrived in 1863.<sup>2</sup>

While in Saint Albert, they received a radio message announcing their departure for Athabasca Landing on May 20, where they arrived at 1600 hours. Father Camille Lefevre was at the train station to welcome them. He was to travel with the Grey Nuns up to Fort Smith, three weeks later. Meantime, the whole flotilla of 12 boats or scows<sup>3</sup> was not ready to leave. So, the Grey Nuns were kindly hosted by the Sisters of Providence, who had a mission at Athabasca Landing. They were afloat on the Athabasca River, in the evening of May 21, amidst the joyful shouting of the paddlers. That night, the new missionaries had their first night under a tent, but not the last one. They would often set up their tents on the scows, especially when weather conditions were favorable to all night gliding on the peaceful water. Then, in the wee hours of the morning, a period of rest was needed by the



hired men, who would stop to sleep on shore under the stars. These were the initial steps into a life so often experienced by travelers on the Athabasca River, the Mackenzie River and Great Slave Lake, but so totally new to the Grey Nuns passengers.

What was a bed like for the travelers? One description found in the **Chroniques** gives us an idea of what we would prefer not to experience!

*A large tent canvas called tarpaulin, three blankets as mattress, one or two pillows and two or three blankets in which we wrap ourselves carefully. All that is covered by the tarpaulin, snugly tucked all around to keep the heat energy inside. So well wrapped up, we feel like we are into warm swaddling-clothes.<sup>4</sup>*

It was 0200 hours, on June 15 when their canoe arrived at Holy Angels School in Fort Chipewyan. The whole Mission was awakened by the excitement in the still night air. Father Camille Lefevre celebrated Mass, then all had breakfast, and by 0400 hours, the travelers fell on real beds until 12 noon. Then, talking began again. The 12 sisters at Holy Angels School were so eager to know every detail about the mother house and the sisters in Montréal, and of the experiences that the Fort Smith missionaries lived through on their journey that the hours passed too quickly. The time for departure arrived on June 17. Leaving Sister Marie-Anna Verdon at Fort Chipewyan, her new mission, they embarked, trusting in the ever-present protection of Divine Providence.

On a few occasions during the trip, Father Camille Lefevre took advantage of a stop for meals or for tenting to visit nearby families he knew, or who were recommended by a confrere. Occasionally, he celebrated a funeral in the absence of the resident priest. Always available to bring God's comfort to the suffering and the bereaved, a missionary's whole life belongs to their people. The sisters were receiving first-hand experience for their future role, their future life.

## *Their house*

They arrived at Fort Smith on June 23, 1914 and found the construction of the hospital hardly started. History was repeating itself from Fort Providence, Fort Chipewyan, Fort Resolution. There was never a house ready, let alone a home. The Fort Smith missionaries expected no different treatment than their predecessors.

*The eminent Bishop (Breynat) had but one specific plan in mind: to provide health care for the sick. To reach that goal, he had to start with nothing. A saw-mill begins functioning. At the Bishop's request, Oblate Brothers measure the forest, cut wood, prepare planks and joints, in a word all that is required for the construction of the first hospital of 7.2 by 12 meters, three-storey in Fort Smith. We are in 1914.<sup>5</sup>*

The first patient had to be admitted into the Bishop's room at the Oblates' rectory and the sisters resided in a narrow shed for two months until August 24. The chronicler wrote,

*We are doing hard cleaning work from morning to night and what makes it even more difficult is the lack of running water. We have to go and draw it from the priests residence. This is most tiring. None of us is lacking courage. We are all very happy. We accomplish God's will and we prepare God's work in the obscurity of our life. We like to believe that Mother d'Youville has a look of particular benevolence toward our little group who has no other desire than to become worthy of so many blessings.<sup>6</sup>*

The Archives contain a message from Bishop Gabriel Breynat to Mother Marie-Louise Léveillé concerning the sisters' meteorological services for the government. In fact, they registered daily observations on the weather conditions and the temperature. This service was remunerated and Bishop Breynat agreed that the sisters could keep this income.<sup>7</sup> Similar arrangements were made at Fort Resolution, Fort Simpson and Aklavik in later years.<sup>8</sup>



The Grey Nuns Mission at Fort Smith is one that presented a multifarious and diverse response to the needs of the population. It was the northern provincial headquarters of the Grey Nuns from 1914 to 1977. It was also the northern Bishop's headquarters from 1926 to 1986. Fort Smith was the Northwest Territories capital until January 1, 1967 when their title was lost to Yellowknife. These are some of the reasons why this mission is most complex to describe and, for the reader, it might present a somewhat confusing labyrinth.

### *A new Grey Nuns Vicariate*

Sister Marie-Louise Léveillé had the surprise of her life when she received a double nomination: foundress of the Grey Nuns Mission in Fort Smith and first Superior Vicar of the new Divine Providence Vicariate, for the missions of northern Canada with headquarters located at Fort Smith. The Vicariate just established was to become a Province following the October 1915 General Chapter. For the chroniclers of that time, the titles of Vicar and Provincial seemed almost interchangeable even from June 23, 1914, the day the sisters arrived at Fort Smith. On June 29, we read,

*Departure of Mother Provincial for her first official visit of our houses at Fort Resolution and Fort Providence.<sup>9</sup>*

At that time, the new Vicariate temporarily included the North Saskatchewan mission of Beauval and the four missions in the Northwest Territories. These were: Fort Providence, opened in 1867; Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, opened in 1874; Fort Resolution, a 1903 foundation; Beauval, Saskatchewan, opened four years previously, in 1910 and Fort Smith, in 1914. There were 41 sisters in these five missions under the tutelage of Mother Léveillé in 1914.

With her assistant, Sister Céline Fortin, Mother Marie-Louise Léveillé, courageously began organizing the new Vicariate and the new hospital, visited her missions and welcomed under her roof the sick and retired sisters of her Vicariate. Sister Ste-Albine



(Albina Ferland) arrived in September 1914 and Sister Pulchérie (Marie-Anne LeDréau) in June 1915. Both were admitted to the infirmary where Sister Pulchérie died in April 1916, likely as a result of anxiety over the war in France, her beloved country. She was the first Grey Nun to be buried in Fort Smith.<sup>10</sup>

Having completed her two terms as Provincial Superior, Mother Léveillé was recalled to the mother house in December 1920 where she became treasurer. Remaining to her credit were the organization of the new Vicariate, the foundation of the first hospital in the NWT at Fort Smith, and the opening of the Grey Nun mission at Fort Simpson. The 1920 Provincial Council for Divine Providence Province was composed of Mother Girouard (Zoé Chartier), Provincial Superior, Sisters Céline Fortin, Provincial Assistant, Ste-Eugénie (Elisabeth Girard) and Pinsonnault (Delphine Giroux), Provincial Councillors. One major achievement of this Council was the creation of the first Grey Nuns Mission near the Arctic: Aklavik, in 1925. Mother Girouard was also a skilled denturologist and one day she successfully completed a new denture for Sister Davy (Julienne).

Communications were greatly improved on October 3, 1915 when the telegraph was installed at Fort Smith,<sup>11</sup> and in 1928 when telephone services became available.<sup>12</sup> The development of Fort Smith grew and more modernization occurred over the following years.

Mother Anna Lusignan, Provincial Superior from 1933 to 1939, founded the mission at Fort McMurray, Alberta in 1938. Although located in Alberta, that Mission was placed under the diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith and the Grey Nuns Province Divine Providence. Rae-Edzo was founded in 1940, during the mandate of Mother Emérentienne Martin. It was during the term of Mother Thérèse Chaloux as Provincial Superior that Aklavik Mission was transferred to its new site at Inuvik, in 1959. Hay River Mission was opened in 1962, during the term of Mother Alice Gauthier.

Uranium City in 1968, Holman Island in 1969, Fort McKay in northern Alberta and Fort Good Hope in 1971, and Fort Liard in

1972 were founded under the leadership of Sister Yvette Lapointe.<sup>13</sup> With these multiple accomplishments, she was ready to return to her Creator who suddenly called her home on June 25, 1972, at the age of 64.

When taking her new position, the last Provincial Superior of Province Divine Providence, Sister Marie Lemire, saw to the final details of the newest mission at Fort Liard in 1972, the establishment of Snowdrift Mission in 1974, and Arctic Red River and Yellowknife missions in 1977. Sister Lemire also helped with finalizing the decisions and implementing the new organizational structure which joined the Divine Providence Province to the Saint Albert Province in 1977. This change was necessary in view of the decreasing number of sisters in the NWT missions. For three years, the Far North missions were a region of the Saint Albert Province before total amalgamation in 1980.

During these transitional years, Sister Thérèse Pelletier was Regional Superior. In 1980, she was elected Provincial Councillor for the Saint Albert Province, and later, Provincial Assistant and secretary. In 1977, there were 62 sisters in 12 postings north of the 60th parallel. This included 32 at the provincial house, most of whom were retired or semi-retired. Comparing this lean situation to as many as 112 sisters in a richer year, like 1962, one could easily see the writing on the wall. On the occasion of the amalgamation with Saint Albert Province, the retired sisters, living at Fort Smith, were given a choice of residence. At that time, 20 sisters moved south to Edmonton, Saint Boniface or Montréal.

*A few of the departing sisters have spent most of their life in the North working as nurses, teachers, hostel supervisors or wherever needed. Sister Marie-Louise Champoux first came North in 1922 and, although 87 years old, plans to continue teaching English to French speaking sisters in Edmonton. Sister Louise Dupont has spent 53 years in the North and will be going to Montréal. Sister Edna Gagnon will be leaving after 44 year in the North, many of which were spent teaching in missions schools from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta to Aklavik, NWT.<sup>14</sup>*



The spirit of Marguerite d'Youville was familiar to the people of Fort Smith. In 1983, an Associate ministry program was initiated in the Saint Albert Province. At that time, Fort Smith developed a satellite group of Associates led by Sister Agnes Sutherland. On December 8, 1983, seven women made their formal commitment, most of them were former employees and friends of the Grey Nuns.

## *The Church in the NWT*

The Roman Catholic Church in the NWT recorded progress by leaps and bounds since the first visit by Father Vital Grandin at Fort Chipewyan, in 1847. The first Vicar Apostolic was Bishop Henri Faraud, from 1862 to 1889, followed by Bishop Emile Grouard, from 1890 to 1902. By 1914, when the Grey Nuns arrived at Fort Smith, the Oblates were established in several missions around Great Slave Lake. The Vicariate of Mackenzie was headed by its third Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Gabriel Breynat since 1902. The Bishop's seat was at Fort Resolution from 1909 to 1926 when it was moved to Fort Smith, and then to Yellowknife in 1986.

Bishop Breynat's leadership and long tenure of 41 years are credited with the foundation of most of the schools and hospitals in the Northwest Territories. Thanks to his strong ties with the Church Extension Organization and with the Federal Government, he was able to ensure relative financial security for the Roman Catholic Church of the Mackenzie.

In 1943, the Co-Adjutor to Bishop Breynat, Bishop Joseph Trocellier, became the fourth Vicar Apostolic until his death in 1958. During his administration, in the 1950s, all mission schools were transferred to the Federal Government. He also authorized building the Fort Smith Cathedral, which was blessed and officially opened in 1959, by his successor, Bishop Paul Piché. The cathedral was named Saint Joseph in honor of Saint Joseph and in memory of Bishop Joseph Trocellier.

Fort Smith built its cathedral in 1959. The settlement, how-



ever, had its own church since 1923, when Saint Isidore Church was blessed by Bishop Gabriel Breynat. It was named after Bishop Isidore Clut, Auxiliary to Bishop Henri Faraud and Bishop Emile Grouard successively between 1864 and 1903. In 1963, the church was moved closer to the Indian Village at Fort Smith and re-named Saint Alphonse, in honor of Father Alphonse Mansoz, a long time missionary at Fort Smith. In the year 2000, the church returned to its original vocable of Saint-Isidore.

The first Canadian-born Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Paul Piché directed the Church in the NWT from 1959 to 1986, a period of 27 years. During this time, in 1967, the Apostolic Vicariate became the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese.

*[Bishop Piché] came north at the peak of mission activities and when the Roman Catholic Church had the highest number of mission personnel [...] All church personnel working in the government schools and hospitals were salaried and all that money was turned over to the diocese so that financially speaking the church had many advantages which was not available previously. [...] It was also known as the period when church activities in the late 1970s slowly but gradually decreased as the government took over all schools and hospitals and church staff gradually dwindled.<sup>15</sup>*

In September 1984, Bishop Piché had reached retirement age as a Bishop. His resignation was accepted by Rome on February 1, 1985. He moved to Edmonton where he died on September 10, 1992. His successor, Bishop Denis Croteau was appointed on January 24, 1986 and was ordained at Rae-Edzo on June 20 of that same year. At the time of writing, the immense Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, measuring over 1,000,000 square kilometers, receives temporary help from Alberta and Saskatchewan diocesan priests to supplement the four Oblate priests still serving the people of the North.

In 1940, Father William Leising, arrived at Fort Smith. A young American, newly ordained, he came with an intense desire

to serve in the northern missions. The 'real thing' could not start soon enough for his youthful anticipation. Bishop Joseph Trocellier ensured that he was well oriented to this new world. As part of the essential information to pass on to him, he said,

*You'll like the Grey Nuns, Father. They have been working with Oblate Fathers for over 70 years, teaching in our schools and nursing in our hospitals. Frankly, I believe they do more with their great works of charity for the people and especially the children, than we missionaries who follow the people to their hunting grounds.<sup>16</sup>*

Father Leising's arrival in the North brought wings to the Bishop, literally. This young Oblate's dream of becoming a pilot and having his own plane became an unexpected reality when, in the summer of 1950, he lived through a blissful sequence of events which were to change his life and the lives of northern missionaries.

While traveling with Bishop Trocellier in eastern Canada, he called his mother in Buffalo, New York. Coincidentally, his mother had been desperately trying to find him for an important message. There began another success story for Father Leising. A film on the Arctic Missions of the Mackenzie, with Father Leising's production contributions, had been shown to a congregation in Rising Sun, Ohio. Monsignor Raymond Scheckelhoff, responsible for the Office of the Propagation of the Faith in Ohio, was contacted by a benefactor, Robert Lehman, who had been won over by the film and decided to donate his small plane to the missions!

*On the way to Ottawa next day we [with Bishop Trocellier] discussed the future possibilities of reaching the people in the hidden recesses of the large Mackenzie Vicariate, and the Bishop predicted great things for our people now that we had a plane. We could fly the sick to our hospitals and the children from the hinterlands out to our schools. [...] On the trip to Belleville, [Illinois - for a flying course] I practically rode a magic carpet. The prospect of being able to help my brother missionaries conquer their most formidable adver-*



*sary in that vast Arctic country - distance - was such a long-cherished dream. Now it was becoming a reality. I was trading my lead dog for a propeller!*<sup>17</sup>

Apart from such flashing events, millions of obscure and humble missionary activities by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, each one inscribed only in God's registry, will forever be absent from any historical account. As does each stone that makes a cathedral, each grain of sand that makes transcontinental roads, each drop of water that makes oceans. Nevertheless, we will let at least a few accomplishments receive a moment in the limelight:

- The first printing press in the NWT arrived at Fort Smith in 1873.
- Oblate Brothers installed the first generator in Fort Smith to produce electricity, in 1935. Then, the first radiography equipment purchased for the NWT was at Fort Smith. The generator was only strong enough for one outlet at a time. So, when an X-Ray was being taken, all other electrical equipment or lights were shut off.
- Brother Henri Sarrault opened the first Museum in the NWT at Fort Smith, in 1964, using the basement of one of the Grandin residences. Later, Father Francis Ebner continued this ministry.

## *The hospital*

Still unaware of the beginning of World War I (WWI), on August 2, 1914,<sup>18</sup> the sisters' beehive was buzzing with activity to help complete their convent-hospital building. On September 7, 1914, Father Alphonse Mansoz, superior of the Oblate Mission of Fort Smith, blessed the 20-bed hospital in a simple but meaningful ceremony. On Tuesday, September 8, the feast of the Nativity of Mary, Father Mansoz celebrated the first Mass in the hospital chapel. The chronicler noted the immense gratitude of the sisters on these occasions and the spiritual strength they felt with the sacramental presence of the Savior inside their house. Also noted was the enhanced beauty of their chapel with the precious gifts



received from the mother house.<sup>19</sup>

Even before the hospital was ready to open, patients were coming in large numbers to obtain medicine, have dressings changed and teeth extracted. They were not as quick, however, to seek admission to the hospital; at first, they would not trust the hospital to care for anyone, except the dying. On the other hand, out-patient services and home visits were highly popular.<sup>20</sup> Barely six months had passed, and the December 31, 1914 statistics reported 295 dressings applied; 303 medicines served and 21 visits to patients at home.<sup>21</sup> Even with the initial hesitation, it did not take too long before in-patients flocked into the hospital.

*The people seemed to believe that the sisters had magical cures and powers so they were anxious to go to them for all their medical problems.*<sup>22</sup>

*Here, we have a real dispensary opened day and night. Visits of patients in their homes is done regularly. Sister [Céline] Fortin is nurse, doctor, dentist, surgeon when needed, so much so that she has hardly any rest.*<sup>23</sup>

As the hospital became more familiar to the Slavey, Chipewyan, Wood Crees and Métis, the sisters continued to improve on their primitive installation. They made patients' dressers out of wooden packing cases they had received, filled with useful items and surprises, from the mother house. The results looked somewhat like dressers and the sisters candidly admitted being apprentices in the art of carpentry.

The first physician, Dr. McDonald arrived in 1917 soon after the 1916 addition of a wing to the hospital. The Fort Smith General Hospital changed its name to Saint Anne Hospital in 1924.

At the end of WWI, on November 11, 1917, Fort Smith was heavily hit by the Spanish Influenza. The chronicler often wrote of the heartbreaking experiences when whole families disappeared, or when young children were left orphans. The sisters visited those who could not come to the hospital. They also cared for a large number of in-patients at the hospital. When overcrowding

became too excessive, tents were added around the hospital to house the sick.

Due to a severe Smallpox epidemic in 1921, the hospital was placed in quarantine from July 15 to September 3. A large tent was brought in to accommodate 12 more patients at a time.

*Three more patients admitted with Smallpox. The house and annexes are full.*<sup>24</sup>

Good care provided at the hospital cured all patients who were admitted, while some families who stayed at home were almost entirely lost to the deadly disease. Oblate Brothers fabricated coffins continually, to bury the victims.

On November 11, 1934, a joyful entry is found in the **Chroniques** relating a simple, but meaningful ceremony: the blessing of the hospital's new wing by Father Adolphe Laffont. This greatly needed expansion added 50 beds to the constantly overcrowded hospital which opened 20 years earlier. On June 26, the following year, electricity was available at the hospital. Readers in the third millennium will find it hard to imagine how a busy hospital had been able to function for over 20 years without electricity! This was not rare in mission fields in the early 1900s; it still happens in the year 2001 in some less privileged areas of this planet. The first patient to benefit from the new radiology equipment was Sister Clara Gilbert, on August 3, 1935. It was almost the mid-1900s, September 15, 1940 when running water was installed in the hospital; water was also heated on site. From 1938, both patients and caregivers benefitted when the out-houses, in place for 24 years, were replaced with chemical toilets indoor.

A new wing was added to the hospital to house the provincial headquarters of Province Divine Providence. It was blessed by Bishop Paul Piché and officially opened on December 14, 1961. Until then, the provincial administration shared space and services with the hospital.

In 1920, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) were welcomed by the population of Fort Smith. The RCMP always



had supportive and friendly relationships with the missionaries, Oblates and Grey Nuns. A former RCMP, now living in Edmonton, Stan Byer and his wife Jean became Grey Nuns Associate, in 1983. They often reminisce on their appreciation and fond memories of their years in the Far North and their friendship with the missionaries. Likewise, Ed Lysyk, another former RCMP, sent a most interesting letter from Richmond, British Columbia, in February 2000. He recounted how the Grey Nuns in the Far North helped him and his growing family,

*My posting [in 1945] was to Fort Smith, N.W.T. and the Grey Nuns there played a huge role in the welfare of the community. They ran the hospital, they taught in the school [...] The sister who was head nurse at the hospital (Sister [Thérèse] Chaloux) stands out in my mind as a very special person because of her hard work - almost always on duty - and her very competent ability. [...] She encouraged me to visit the hospital, often visiting patients, etc. And she went one step further - she got me to visit the operating room and observe different operations, appendectomies, etc. Occasionally, I would get a bit pale and she would immediately whisk me out until I regained normal color. The doctor did not seem to mind, but it was Sister Chaloux who did all the arranging.<sup>25</sup>*

It is legendary among northern missionaries that members of the RCMP were always most generous in assisting the missionaries in their needs for transportation, information, security or friendly company.

In 1951, Bishop Joseph Trocellier, then Apostolic Vicar, decided to build a new 110-bed hospital. A unique feature of this new building was the first elevator installed in the Northwest Territories in 1952. The 70 beds on the second floor were reserved for tuberculosis patients until the 1960s when these patients were transferred to the Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton.

A School for Nurses Aides was organized by Sisters Marie Lemire in 1953. The first graduation of six students was held in



May 1954. Sister Julienne Chaillé was responsible for the program after 1955 until the 1970s. This program helped prepare a number of caring Nurses Aides for several northern hospitals.

One tragic event occurred on August 9, 1968 when, at 1915 hours, a major landslide damaged four houses and buried one person, Kay Ferguson, in the debris. Father Maurice Beauregard braved the danger and went by helicopter to give a blessing to the victim. Providentially, without a last minute change of plans, Father Beauregard and Sister Agnes Sutherland would have been guests of Kay Ferguson for dinner that evening. Bishop Paul Piché celebrated the funeral mass, assisted by Fathers Maurice Beauregard and Walter Beaulac, on August 15. At least 750 persons attended and mourned the sudden departure of a friend.

Sadness and grief fell on the sisters living at the Religious Education Centre Residence on Sunday, February 9, 1975 when Sister Claire Cardinal, Directress of Nursing, died suddenly at the age of 54. It was 0045 hours. A loud noise was heard from her room as she fell on the floor stricken by a massive heart attack. Bishop Paul Piché celebrated her funeral mass at Saint Joseph Cathedral. Her remains were transported to Montréal for a funeral mass at the mother house and burial at Châteauguay. Her grieving family was grateful that she returned home for her last repose.

Another loss for Fort Smith was the death of Paul Kaeser, mayor of the town since the 1960s. After a cerebro-vascular accident (stroke), the dedicated mayor died at the Edmonton General Hospital on August 16, 1980. A moving funeral was celebrated at the Fort Smith Saint Joseph Cathedral. Almost the whole population of Fort Smith was present for this last tribute of respect and gratitude.

In the 1970s, the Federal Government decided to take over all health care institutions in the NWT; Saint Anne General Hospital was replaced by a new building, the Fort Smith Health Centre, on August 1, 1979.

*With the closing of St. Anne General Hospital the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in health care in the diocese*

*of Mackenzie-Fort Smith will formally come to an end.*

*The era spans 112 years, from a beginning in the grey building on the banks of the mighty Mackenzie at Fort Providence, where the Klondike gold seekers of 98 [1898] sought relief and care, to institutions in Fort Simpson, Fort Resolution, Aklavik and Fort Smith.<sup>26</sup>*

For years, Grey Nuns provided health care ministry at Fort Smith with utmost dedication. The opening of the Health Centre ended 65 years of joint health care ministry where the Oblates were owners and administrators of Saint Anne Hospital and the Grey Nuns were Nursing Service managers and caregivers. The last Oblate administrator was Father Charles Gillis. In 1960, his replacement was Peter Verhesen who remained as administrator until the closure of Saint Anne General Hospital. Sisters were responsible for Nursing Service until the hospital closed on July 31, 1979. The last in a long line of sisters in that position was Sister Thérèse Plante.

Memories of the dedication and caring provided at Saint Anne General Hospital are cherished by the residents and the former missionaries of Fort Smith. These 65 years solidified a bond of gratitude and mutual admiration.

On the 20th Anniversary of the Fort Smith Health Centre in 1999, former missionaries were invited to the celebration. Sisters Thérèse Brunette and Simonne Lapointe flew from Edmonton and were delighted to meet again with friends of Fort Smith. During the few days of their visit, they were hosted by Sister Agnes Sutherland and attended the event as it unfolded. The **Slave River Journal** reported an interview with the visiting sisters,

*The sisters were applauded last week during the Health Centre's Anniversary banquet, and both had smiles during the entire evening. Many current members of the health staff spoke lovingly about all they learned from the Grey Nuns who instructed them at old St. Anne's Hospital. It was a nice recognition of the tireless work the Sisters have done over the years.<sup>27</sup>*



## Education

St. Thérèse School, a one-room school building at Fort Smith, which opened in 1915, registered between 22 and 26 children from its beginning. When Sister Adrienne Gadbois, the first teacher, noticed that her students loved music and singing, she requested music lessons for herself so that she could teach music to her talented students. During the summer of 1915, Sister Zéphérina Dufault came for a short period from Fort Chipewyan as music teacher for Sister Adrienne Gadbois.

The school saw its population increase to the point where more space was required. When a new Saint Thérèse School was built, in 1948, there were then over 75 students attending school with three Grey Nuns as teachers. Meantime, the first Public School, with eight classrooms, had been in operation since 1930.

In January 1958, Saint Thérèse School was closed and replaced by a new federal school. The new J. B. Tyrell School was a non-denominational institution with 14 classrooms. Among the teachers, six Grey Nuns continued to impart their knowledge and educational principles to the student population. It was at this time that Breynat Hall opened as a residence for students from Yellowknife, Fort Resolution, Fort Rae and Snowdrift, among other communities. Sisters served at Breynat Hall as child care workers from 1958 to 1975.

The new Grandin College began receiving students in 1964 and closed in 1985. At the Official Opening of Grandin College, on June 18, 1965, in the presence of some 200 guests, many significant comments were made by speakers, some of which are recorded in this brief history.

*The aim of this College is to train for responsibility and leadership, boys and girls desirous of higher education and talented enough to enable them to give a greater contribution to the Church and country. [...] We hope that one day will come when the position of Commissioner of the NWT, the Administrators of the Mackenzie and all the government*



*representatives here tonight will be filled by the young [people] who will have the ambition and the courage to prepare themselves for these responsibilities.<sup>28</sup>*

*Ten years ago only 15 to 18% of the children living in the Mackenzie District were attending school. Today that total has reached 85 to 90%.<sup>29</sup>*

In a letter to the clergy of his diocese, Bishop Paul Piché, reminiscing on the progress of the Church in the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese over the years wrote,

*Grandin College will remain, in the history of the Diocese, as a courageous attempt made through the years to bring the dream of a local Church to reality. For 25 years, the Church has poured manpower, money, talents, efforts and energies into that institution with the hope of bringing about a generation of men and women who would contribute to society at large as well as to the Church. That goal has been partially achieved: many [former] Grandin students are now leaders and educators of Northern Society, yet, many among us feel that due to changing circumstances, it is time for a change of format.<sup>30</sup>*

The 53-year teaching ministry of the Grey Nuns at Fort Smith ended with Sister Cécile Gagnon's last day, in 1968, but Marguerite d'Youville's followers remained present in Fort Smith into the third millennium in a diversity of ministries.

## *Religious Education Centre*

The old hospital building found new life when the Diocesan Religious Education Centre was established within its aging walls. In 1970, Bishop Paul Piché appointed Sister Agnes Sutherland as Director of this new service to the northern missions.

In this position, Sister Sutherland was responsible for all religious education programs in the vast Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. For the next 16 years, she visited, advised, and encour-

aged all catechists from the Arctic to the Alberta border; obtained, and kept updated, a rich provision of educational materials available for loan to the missions; and remained available for consultation.

Along with this ministry, Sister Sutherland used available space in the old hospital building to accommodate women suffering personal difficulties, the homeless, victims of violence, recent immigrants and other community activities, just as Marguerite d'Youville had done in her day. This multifaceted service to the population opened the eyes of many on the need for a permanent social service organization in Fort Smith, especially to serve women in need. Recognizing the immense contribution of Sister Sutherland's ministry, the town of Fort Smith and the Tawow Society opened Sutherland House for women in difficulty on December 11, 1987.

Other recognitions awarded to Sister Sutherland included: *Citizen of the Year* in 1985; *Honorary Diploma in Social Service* from Aurora College, Fort Smith, in 1991; and a *Thank You* plaque from the Native Nation of Fort Smith in 1997.

### *The recent years*

Once the sisters discontinued teaching in 1968 and the hospital closed in 1979, other ministries were expanded. Sisters lived in small residences and became more readily available to listen to the people, visit families, prepare children and parents for the Sacraments, hold Bible Study Groups for Natives and prayer groups with young women. The list grew as the days and weeks passed.

At the time of writing, Sister Agnes Sutherland remains in Fort Smith. The extent of her involvement with, and caring for, the people of Fort Smith is staggering. This includes: identifying and meeting the needs of disabled persons, and chairing a Board for advocacy on behalf of the disabled; acting as proxy for a poor, elderly woman; listening to the lonely or worried persons; being active in women prison ministry and responding to calls for



advice in a multiplicity of areas. She also spearheaded a project with volunteers to restore and paint a small shrine dedicated to Mary, Mother of God. This shrine was erected by Father Napoléon Laferté and his people of Fitzgerald in thanksgiving for Mary's protection against a forest fire in 1952.

The drowning of Fathers Joseph-Benoît Brémond and Joseph-Marie Brohan, at the Rapids, in 1908, left the population in a prolonged grief. A huge wooden cross was planted near the site in 1908 and 90 years later, it had reached a pitiful state, an eyesore for history. The energetic Sister Sutherland again found volunteers to replace it with a beautiful metal 8 foot cross, a gracious gift from Sam Lepine, from Hay River. It was installed by volunteers and can be admired from far into the distance as a religious, historical symbol.

Another recent restoration project was the graveyard. There are eight Grey Nuns, four Bishops and 45 Oblates buried in that area along with many former Fort Smith residents. Calling again on volunteers, Sister Sutherland obtained free gravel and soil from Bryan Heron, Sister Annie Cooper's nephew. She hired young Philippe Paquin, who was helped by his parents, Gail and Gilles. The restoration work commenced in the summer of 1999 and was proceeding in the summer of 2000.<sup>31</sup>

Eight Grey Nuns are buried in the Mission cemetery: Sisters Pulchérie (Marie-Anne LeDréau), April 10, 1916; Noélia (Voedz-Jen), July 30, 1926; Davy (Julienne), July 4, 1939; St-Adélard (Rose-Anna Chartier), October 9, 1939; Eustache (Claire Catherine LeBrise), November 27, 1940; Julienne (Kersuzan), December 6, 1940; Firmin (Obéline Pothier), June 29, 1951; and Médérise (Gaboriau Lapalme), June 29, 1967. May the monuments to these sisters, whose entire lives were spent for the service of God's people, be a lasting symbol of their tireless dedication.

The Grey Nuns, 206 of them, have been at Fort Smith over a period of 87 years, giving a cumulated total of 1,130 years. Many were unsung heroines who gave the best of themselves through their humble daily tasks.



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- 21 **Chroniques**, p. 21.
- 22 Sutherland, **Op. Cit.**, p. 25.
- 23 **Chroniques**, p. 20.
- 24 **Ibid.**, pp. 51-52.

- 25 Lysyk, Ed, **Letter** to this author, February 13, 2000. (Sister Thérèse Chaloux died on April 14, 2000).
- 26 Verhesen, Peter, "The End of an Era," **The Capsule**, Summer 1979, p. 4.
- 27 Kerrigan, Brent, **Slave River Journal**, September 28, 1999, p. 7.
- 28 Piché, Bishop Paul, at the Official Opening of Grandin College, June 18, 1965.
- 29 Orange, R. J., Administrator of the Mackenzie, same event, June 18, 1965.
- 30 Piché, Bishop Paul, **Letter** to the clergy of his Diocese, June 4, 1985, GNRC Arch.
- 31 Damphousse, Lucille, s.g.m., "News from Fort Smith," **Family News**, September, 1998, pp. 175-176.





## CHAPTER FIVE

1916 -

### FORT SIMPSON

The Oblate Mission of Fort Simpson, first visited by Father Henri Grollier in 1858, was to have its own resident priest, Father Laurent Brochu, only in 1894. The Anglican Mission was opened since 1858.

Fort Simpson, 1,350 kilometers northwest of Edmonton is located on a small, low island at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers. Around 1804, the Northwest Company established a trading post on that site, which is now considered the oldest continuing trading post on the Mackenzie River. It was first known as *Fort of the Forks* and later renamed after George Simpson, the first Governor of the newly merged Northwest Company with the Hudson's Bay Company. In the late 1960s, an all-weather road was built connecting the island to the Mackenzie Highway system. In earlier years, Fort Simpson was linked to the outside world by the use of a ferry on the Liard River in summer and the frozen river in winter.

In 1911, a first request for a Catholic hospital came from the Indian Agent Gerald Card, who had good relationships with the Catholic mission, though of the Anglican denomination himself. He wrote to his Department in Ottawa, recommending the proposal and explaining the need for such a service to the people of Fort Simpson,

*In the name of the elders and those who suffer, and in order to save lives, I would recommend the Department discuss this point with Bishop Breynat as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1912, Bishop Gabriel Breynat, then Apostolic Vicar for the Northwest Territories, sent a request to Mother Anna Piché,

Superior General, to have Grey Nuns at Fort Simpson. However, because the opening of the Fort Smith Mission was a priority, granting the request had to be delayed. On October 11, 1915, the Bishop sent a telegram to Mother Piché, reminding her to remember the foundation at Fort Simpson for the next spring.<sup>2</sup>

## *The foundresses*

The General Council of the Grey Nuns accepted the Mission on May 24, 1916 and delegated its organization to Mother Marie-Louise Léveillé, Provincial Superior for the Northwest Missions. The four Grey Nuns named for the new mission were already working in the NWT. Sisters Girouard (Zoé Chartier), superior and Antoinette Latrémouille were both from Fort Resolution. They left this mission by the steamboat Northland Traders Co. at midnight, on the night of July 17-18, 1916, under a torrential rain. With them was a student from Saint Joseph School, Annie Tcho, who volunteered as a helper for the future hospital. Sailing all night, they arrived at Fort Providence at 0930 hours, on July 19. There they were joined by the two other foundresses: Sisters Albina Bourcier and Marie (Kahppaxconne). Sister Marie was an Auxiliary Sister, Native from Fort Good Hope.

Other passengers on the steamboat from Fort Providence included the first patients for Fort Simpson: one elderly blind woman, one woman with tuberculosis, a young boy and his little sister named Kota, both suffering from advanced tuberculosis, and Jessie, an epileptic patient. All traveled from Fort Providence to the nearest future hospital at Fort Simpson.<sup>3</sup>

On July 20, the Feast Day of the Grey Nuns' Foundress, Marguerite d'Youville, the new missionaries arrived at Fort Simpson where they were welcomed by Father Germain Andurand, Superior of the Oblate Mission.

Hardly four weeks later, Sister Latrémouille was asked to return to Fort Providence where her help was needed for the next few months. Always putting the needs of the people before her own, she moved back to Fort Providence on August 16 where she

stayed for another 11 years! At Fort Simpson, this fourth sister was replaced one year later, on July 17, 1917, by Sister St-Dosithée (Rose-Délina Arseneault). How anxious were the foundresses to receive this precious replacement for Sister Latrémouille!

## *The hospital*

This was one more mission where the sisters arrived before their dwelling was ready! The hospital, still under construction, was a spacious three-storey building, 12 by 18 meters. It had two floors and an attic. By August 30, it was almost completed when Father Germain Andurand blessed the new building in the presence of the delighted people of Fort Simpson. While waiting for their new dwelling, patients, sisters and helpers,

*were given temporary refuge at the Fathers' residence sitting yet on its original site near the Bay [Hudson's Bay Company]. They occupied the main floor, while the Fathers moved to the second, and the Brothers took shelter in the attic.<sup>4</sup>*

There was much to do for the new missionaries. Patient care remaining a priority in the temporary hospital, Sister Albina Boursier remained at the Mission to care for the five patients while two of the sisters traveled daily to the future hospital - a 20 minute walk - to prepare the new location. The two volunteers remained available wherever they were needed to help Sister Bourcier with patient care or to clean and furnish every area of the new hospital and stock up the required supplies. Much of the equipment and materials, destined for Fort Simpson, was lost or badly damaged in the shipwreck of the Mac Murray that occurred on the Peace River that year.

In spite of this unfortunate event, the new building was ready for occupancy, albeit with limited equipment and supplies, on September 7, 1916, seven weeks after the sisters' arrival. The following day, Mass was celebrated in the hospital chapel for the first time by Father Germain Andurand and the Blessed Sacrament



was placed in the tabernacle, amidst silent tears of joy and thanksgiving among the sisters. Saint Marguerite Hospital was actually founded on July 20 with the arrival of the sisters and the first five patients.

*We thank the Oblate Priests for their kind hospitality since July 20. We are now moving out to live and work in our new hospital. Our two elderly ladies and the elderly Mr. Lamoureux got into a sleigh (in September, is it not hilarious) drawn by a big black ox. Stronger patients follow the sleigh. Everyone is happy.<sup>5</sup>*

For 10 years, the hospital functioned without the presence of a resident physician. During most of those years, Sister Béatrice Desrochers was, as in all missions, the nurse, doctor, dentist and surgeon. Her memory lives on as one who handled the scalpel as a seamstress her scissors. It was a sinecure for her to sew a gaping wound, cut open an infected hand or amputate a gangrenous finger or toe. When Dr. Arthur Trusdell arrived, in July 1926, Sister Desrochers was ready to pass on her responsibilities to another nurse. To replace her was Sister St-Adélard (Rose Anna Chartier), who arrived at Fort Simpson in August of that year.

The first air mail service was inaugurated on the Island on January 29, 1930. The whole town, especially the missionaries, hailed the event as a wonderful innovation. Soon after that, June 3, 1930 a sinister occurrence struck the people of Fort Simpson. Their hospital was completely destroyed by a fire which seemed to have started in the attic. Through divine protection, no human casualty was registered. The 16 patients present on that day were evacuated to safety in the Fathers' residence. Only a few items of furniture from the first and second floors were saved from the flames. It was by an act of Divine Providence that the wind changed direction before the church, the mission and a large part of the Fort were also destroyed.

Sharing is always at its best when a tragedy strikes. This was experienced again with the need to accommodate all the patients and sisters from the hospital. All those who had a reasonably comfortable house came to offer space for the victims and, gen-

erous as ever, the Oblates temporarily gave up their own residence and moved into a warehouse. Bishop Gabriel Breynat came to visit his people and missionaries, bringing them support and plans for rebuilding. He immediately left for Ottawa where he was successful in obtaining approval for a new, larger hospital and a grant of \$20,000.00. The re-construction was to be completed in September 1931.<sup>6</sup>

Generosities did not stop there. The sisters received five trunks from the mother house, filled with the most useful items needed to replace some of those destroyed by the fire. A telegram of sympathy from Mother Octavie Dugas, Superior General and an equally compassionate note from Mother Eloïse Lachance, Provincial Superior, were received as God-given balm at this tragic moment.

By the end of August, thanks to the industrious Brothers and other helpers from the Fort, the first floor of the new hospital was completed. Bishop Gabriel Breynat presided at a solemn blessing of the corner stone on September 11, 1930. As usual, construction had to be discontinued for the long winter months; it resumed in the spring with work on other floors. The new 12 by 30 meter, 50-bed hospital was indeed ready for September, 1931. The sisters wrote that they had supper in their new hospital on August 12, the kitchen and refectories being the only areas completed. On September 30, all of the patients happily moved into their new rooms. Everything was not 'spic and span' yet, there was still some painting to do during the next few years, but everyone was so grateful for their new and spacious hospital! That year, a home-made telephone line was connected between the physician's residence and the hospital.

Once the ordeals of the fire, of the temporary borrowed space and the move into their new facilities were over, the sisters were writing about their farming interests with much enthusiasm,

*The harvest is finished; about 550 bags of potatoes, 100 of carrots, some turnips, lovely cabbages and cauliflowers, tomatoes and beets. We have a good provision for the winter[...] three apple-trees are rushing to grow; we will*



*graft them if possible. We also want to plant strawberry-plants. Don't we have a lot of ambition!'*

Beginning in 1921, planes became frequent visitors at Fort Simpson with the faithful Louis Bisson as pilot. In 1937, the oil lamps were replaced by electricity produced by a diesel engine running a generator which was installed for the Mission by the Brothers. A highly appreciated improvement for the hospital. With the gas restrictions brought on by World War II, it was very reluctantly that Bishop Gabriel Breynat decided to sell his plane, the Santa Maria, in 1940. Their pilot, Louis Bisson, moved to Regina as Pilot Inspector.

People continued to bring their sick and injured to the hospital. A severe influenza epidemic from early July to the end of August 1928 took the lives of 600 Slave Dene. The hospital was overcrowded for weeks. A measles epidemic in 1935 again brought a large influx of patients into the hospital. Later, on September 26, 1938, we read in the **Chroniques**,

*A patient named William Clae arrived at noon. He cut his own foot quite deeply with an axe yesterday. His father used black thread to sew the wound in order to make the trip here.<sup>8</sup>*

A new wing was added to the hospital, in 1951, raising the bed capacity from 50 to 110. This was considered a band-aid solution to the aging institution. By the late 1960s, there were plans to have a government hospital; this became a reality in 1973. Some Grey Nuns continued to work with this new organization until 1984 when the last nurse, Sister Réjeanne Lamarche, left her employment with the Fort Simpson General Hospital.

In 1969, Sister Marie Lemire, head nurse at Saint Marguerite Hospital, was named Officer of the Order of Canada by the Governor General Roland Mitchener. This presentation was a fitting tribute recognizing her significant services in the field of health in the Northwest Territories.



## *The School*

A small one-room school was opened on September 3, 1918 by the Superior of the Oblate Mission, Father Germain Andurand. The first teacher, Sister Ellen McGuirck, began teaching her little flock of seven boys and four girls in Saint Marguerite School. The initial group of 11 students gradually grew and, at that time, included only elementary Grades. Statistical information revealed that, during her posting at Fort Simpson, until 1921, Sister McGuirck taught Grades I to IV with up to 15 children. From 1921 to 1926, Sister Firmin's (Obéline Pothier) enrollment rose to 20 in Grades I to VIII. In the following 14 years, Sister Alida Gamache continued to teach up to Grade VIII with an enrollment varying from nine to 25. The last Grey Nun teacher in that school was Sister Cécile Pedneault from 1949 to 1953 with an enrollment of between 15 and 26 for Grades I to VIII.

There was much unrest in the Settlement concerning the future of the Saint Marguerite School, and strong supporters of Catholic education began study groups to deepen their knowledge of Christian principles. A group of them were elected to a new Advisory School Board in 1953: Stan Byer, R. Chenier, R. Gaudry, E. Lafferty and F. Sibbeston. Their advice became precious to the Oblates and Grey Nuns, especially at a time when the latter had to relinquish their teaching position, being unable to find a replacement among their members. Grey Nuns had taught for 35 years at Saint Marguerite School.

Coincidentally, women were also committed to strengthening their faith and contributing to the growth of the Church in their milieu. A local Catholic Women's League (CWL) was formed, supported by Sister Thérèse Chaloux, Superior of Saint Marguerite Hospital. Jean Byer was elected first president of this emerging group.<sup>9</sup>

At that time, lay men were employed as teachers until the school closed in 1956.<sup>10</sup> During the next three years, all students were taught in the non-denominational school.

In 1959, a new school opened, the Sir Thomas School, a

Public School where a few Grey Nuns remained as part of the teaching staff. It became necessary to provide residential facilities for children residing outside the village. On October 1, 1960, Lapointe Hall<sup>11</sup> and Bompas Hall<sup>12</sup> opened as students residences. Lapointe Hall was administered by the Oblate Superior of the Mission and staffed mostly by Grey Nuns. It had been built by the Department of Indian Affairs, spacious and attractive, with a capacity of 150 students. In addition to students, it accommodated the staff composed of eight to 10 sisters and 10 to 12 lay persons.

Lapointe Hall had the distinct honor of hosting Governor General Georges Vanier and his spouse, Pauline with their entourage for several days in June 1961.

Among the achievements recorded, were the Girl Guide Association organized by Sister Anna Bisson in 1960 and the Boy Scouts Association and the Louveteaux (younger Boy Scouts) organized 10 years later by Sister Rosanna Hébert. Sister Hébert was to receive the Silver Acorn on July 23, 1970. This was the highest recognition awarded to a woman in her work with the Scouts organization, for especially distinguished service to Scouting. In 1970 also, Sister Pauline Drolet organized the Legion of Mary with a group of 15 girls and women who were formally accepted into the Legion in 1970.

Lapointe Hall and Bompas Hall had a short life of 12 years between 1960 and 1972. The **Chroniques** of Lapointe Hall indicate on December 14, 1971,

*It was decided [at a meeting held in Yellowknife] that the Anglican Hostel, Bompas Hall will close its doors in September 1972. The building will be used as a residence and school for mentally challenged children. The non-Catholic students will be accommodated at Lapointe Hall which will become non-denominational.<sup>13</sup>*

As announced, Lapointe Hall was transferred to the Territorial Government to be used as a non-denominational residence. When applications for staff were invited, none of the pre-



vious Roman Catholic staff was accepted to serve in the re-organized Lapointe Hall. For the last Grey Nuns, Sisters Marie Philippe, Pauline Drolet and Rosanna Hébert, it was with much regret that they left Lapointe Hall on June 29, 1972. For 12 years they had ministered in this work with selfless love and dedication.

### *Life after the hospital and school*

With both Saint Marguerite Hospital and Lapointe Hall being closed by the end of 1972, the sisters were now free to offer their ministry to other unmet needs in Fort Simpson. These unmet needs were the Grey Nuns' predilection since their foundation by Saint Marguerite d'Youville in 1737. Surprisingly, care of the sick in the new Fort Simpson General Hospital remained one of the priorities on the Grey Nuns' list of activities until 1984. On April 16, 1972, it was a Grey Nun, Sister Cécile Jeannotte who was first employed, along with the nurse Glenda McGowan, to organize the Nursing Department and Units before the opening of the hospital scheduled for May 1, 1972. Other sisters became involved in the establishment of a Catechetics Centre where three sisters devoted the best of their knowledge and apostolic zeal for 12 years, from 1973 to 1985. During these years, the sisters lived in small residences. Parish work, home visiting, occasional baby sitting allowing a mother to engage in some ministries, accompanying bereaved families, preparing future leaders for Church activities, organizing the newly built Nursing Home and initially directing its operation, all were part of the Grey Nuns' lives until their unavoidable decision to leave Fort Simpson in 1990.

### *The Pope's visit*

An unexpected culmination to the sisters' ministry at Fort Simpson was the glorious visit of Pope John Paul II to the northern Nations. The announcement that Pope John Paul II chose Fort Simpson for his visit to the Aboriginal Nations was unbelievable to Bishop Paul Piché and his people when first plans were



made for September 18, 1984. The heavy fog over Fort Simpson on that day made it impossible to attempt landing. In his kindness and determination to spend time with the Natives, in their land, the Pope re-scheduled his visit for September 20, 1987. At that time, the new Bishop Denis Croteau had the distinct honor of welcoming Pope John Paul II to Fort Simpson for an unforgettable day of celebration. The Pope came for the Natives, and it was with this specific intent that the day was planned, ensuring that his attention could be totally focused on them. The pictures collected for the souvenir book<sup>14</sup> speak loudly of this unique and superb occasion for the northern Nations to celebrate their faith.

### *Leaving Fort Simpson*

The numbers of available sisters for missions continued to decrease, and, the two major ministries they carried on at Fort Simpson, hospital and school, were no longer in need of the pioneering Grey Nuns. Several generations had now received education and guidance, and the sisters were able to consider leaving Fort Simpson. On August 28, 1990, a decision was made by Provincial Council, and approved by the General Council, that the Grey Nuns would leave Fort Simpson in October 1990 after 74 years of isolation, privations, hard work and precious friendship with, the people of this Island.

The last Grey Nun to leave Fort Simpson was Sister Alice Rivard. She continued to the last minute in her ministries of preparing people for the Sacraments, attending parish meetings and praying with and for her beloved people of Fort Simpson. On September 19, Sister Alphonsine Martineau arrived from Edmonton to spend the remaining few weeks with Sister Alice Rivard. While looking after the last tasks of packing and cleaning their home, they visited with the many people of the village and remote areas. They shared their mutual grief at the experience of parting and frequently thanked God for the life they shared.

Visiting the cemetery, they thanked God for the lives of three sisters who had found their final resting place: Sister Cécilia

(Cécile Lecou), on October 3, 1920; Sister Donatien (Marie Kahppaxconne), on June 15, 1934 and Sister Albina Bourcier on June 14, 1937.

Between 1916 and 1990, a period of 74 years, 563 cumulated years of service by 161 Grey Nuns were happily given to the people of the small, remote Island of Fort Simpson. In this ministry, the Grey Nuns worked side by side with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Self-giving for their people was their everyday agenda. Helping to spread the Good News was their Mission fulfilled.

#### NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 5

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- 1 Breynat, Bishop Gabriel, **Cinquante Ans au Pays des Neiges, vol. II**, p. 239.
- 2 **Historique, LO86**, p. 1, MMY Arch.
- 3 **Fort Simpson Chroniques**, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 4 Lesage, Sylvio, OMI, **Sacred Heart Mission - Fort Simpson - 1858-1958**, p. 29, Mimeographed Historical Sketch, 1959.
- 5 **Chroniques**, p. 9.
- 6 **Ibid.**, p. 152, 153.
- 7 St-Adjutor, Sister (Anna Henri), **Letter** to the mother house, October 4, 1932.
- 8 **Chroniques**, p. 260.
- 9 Lesage, **Op. Cit.**, p. 147.
- 10 **Ibid.**, p. 78-79.
- 11 Named after Sister Adéline Lapointe, superior foundress of Fort Providence in 1867.
- 12 Named after the first Anglican Bishop William Bompas. This Hall was for Anglican students.
- 13 **Chroniques, Lapointe Hall**, pp. 251-252.
- 14 **A Promise Fulfilled - The Visit of Pope John Paul II**, 1988.





Fort Smith - St. Anne Hospital, 1914



The boat, San Anna distributes merchandise to all missions  
- Fort Smith



Fort Simpson, Saint Marguerite Hospital, 1916



## CHAPTER SIX

1925 -

### NEAR THE ARCTIC

For the Grey Nuns, moving near the Arctic Ocean was an unprecedented daring adventure, a courageous leap in faith. Yet, on the invitation of Bishop Gabriel Breynat, Vicar Apostolic of the Mackenzie, Mother Octavie Dugas, Superior General of the Grey Nuns, showed no hesitation. God was calling her spiritual daughters to bring their ministry to 'the end of the world'; nothing would be spared to respond with faith and enthusiasm.

The Oblates were making regular visits to the inhabitants of this 'barren land' for many years before they would establish a permanent mission, realizing that, only when they could remain with their flock, lasting discipleship would result with the Eskimos. Furthermore, only with the presence of sisters among them, generations of Eskimos would receive adequate education and health care. Thus the Grey Nuns were invited to go to Aklavik in 1925, Inuvik in 1959, Holman Island in 1969, Fort Good Hope in 1971, Arctic Red River in 1977 and Tuktoyaktuk in 1987.

#### 1925 - Aklavik

Aklavik, the Eskimo word for *Place of the Grizzly Bear*, was a small settlement of some 20 families in 1925. It is located on one of the islands of the Mackenzie Delta, 120 kilometers southwest of the Arctic Ocean. At the 70th parallel, it is within the Polar Circle and it was, in 1925, the furthest northern Mission of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This settlement is

2,150 kilometers northwest of Fort Smith, the Grey Nuns' northern headquarters, and 22,600 kilometers by land from Montréal, where most of the sisters had begun their religious life.

Being situated at the edge of the tree-line, Aklavik has no protection from the furious winds and winter storms coming from the nearby Beaufort Sea, the entrance to the Arctic Ocean. This part of the world is known to have registered temperatures of minus 65 degrees Celsius at times; it is an extremely cold climate for the eight months of frigid, dark winter. This is also the place to see the midnight sun and on another occasion, the moon and stars at noon. From approximately November 24 to January 14, there is barely a second of sun to warm up or brighten the day. Then, from May 24 to July 14, one cannot escape the blazing rays of the sun for 24 hours every day. For the 1925 missionaries, Aklavik was indeed at the end of the world!

Vivid descriptions of the climate at Aklavik were given several years later by Sister Léonie Ferland, recounting her trip to this Mission with Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General,

*At Aklavik, we saw this natural cooler which was dug three storeys into the earth, or rather inside a block of ice. [...] The ground had hardly 0.6 or 0.9 meters of dirt where the roots of poor vegetation draw their meager moisture even if for eight or nine months a year, this land is covered with snow. In the cellar of the house, the inside heat melting the foundations, which are blocks of ice, we have to pump water every day. Every two or three years, we raise the house [as it keeps sinking into the ice].<sup>1</sup>*

In 1860, Father Henri Grollier, the saint Francis-Xavier of the North,<sup>2</sup> visited Aklavik on one of his trips to Arctic Red River. Being aware of the constant dislike and bitter fights between the Eskimos and the Loucheux, the young priest,

*made an Eskimo chief and a Loucheux chief join hands in his, and swear, at the foot of the Cross, that they would henceforward live in peace with each other. It was a triumph of religious influence over old customs of treachery*



*and slaughter - a triumph on one side at least, for the Loucheux in great numbers have been made Christians.*<sup>3</sup>

When two Oblate missionaries, Fathers Jean-Baptiste Le Roux and Guillaume Rouvière, were brutally killed by two Eskimos in October 1913, the compassionate Bishop Gabriel Breynat, Vicar Apostolic of the Mackenzie, without hesitation, pleaded for their pardon and rehabilitation,

*...our vengeance should consist in doing for them as much good as we could and return them to their community as friends of the White people.*<sup>4</sup>

Several Oblate missionaries have visited the people of Aklavik over the years, but the first resident priest was the future Bishop Joseph Trocellier who arrived in 1925, shortly before the Grey Nuns. Thus was founded the Immaculate Conception Mission in Aklavik. As for the Grey Nuns, the **Annales** indicated that Mother Octavie Dugas had committed her community to this mission, in December 1923, when she told Bishop Gabriel Breynat,

*You can always count on the Grey Nuns. They will go as far as you will decide. Rather than refuse, we would consider closing other missions where we could be replaced more easily...*

*Our missionaries, these valiant among the valiant, who are tormented by the salvation of souls, wish to go further to work for the glory of God. The missions of the Eskimos are opening. The blood of two Oblates, Fathers Le Roux and Rouvière consecrate them. Do you know what this news inspires in some of our missionary sisters: "How much we would love to be sent there!"*<sup>5</sup>

Assuming that the Mission, approved in 1923, was ready to open while she was visiting the North, Mother Octavie Dugas made a special trip to Aklavik, on August 5, 1923, accompanied by Mothers Girouard (Zoé Chartier) and Saint Grégoire (Marie-Louisa Béliveau), both Provincial Superiors of Divine Providence



and Saint Albert Provinces respectively. Mother Octavie Dugas symbolically took possession of the site selected for the sisters' mission by placing inside the trunk of a tree, statues, medals, pictures and a prayer. To Mother d'Youville, she wrote,

*I entrust to you the mission of Aklavik; bless it, please, and ask our Eternal Father, for all the missionaries who will devote their lives here, the grace to become saints in making God known and loved by these dear Eskimos, who are the reason for establishing this Mission.<sup>6</sup>*

In her **Journal de Voyage**, Mother Octavie Dugas wrote this insightful and realistic note,

*No illusion, this mission will require a strong love of God as in any true apostolate. But the material privations endured at Fort Providence and Athabasca [Fort Chipewyan] are not expected. The climate is what we can expect near the Arctic Ocean, at 120 kilometers. It is possible to protect ourselves inside a house, but we should not attempt to stay outside on some of the most rigorous days.<sup>7</sup>*

## *The foundresses*

The future Grey Nuns mission nearest to the Arctic Ocean was accepted by the General Council in 1923. When Sister Saint Adélard (Rose-Anna Chartier) arrived at Fort Smith that year, it was announced that she was destined for a mission opening the following year in the land of the Eskimos.<sup>8</sup> During her 1924 visit, Mother Octavie Dugas made a short stop at Fort Resolution, on August 15, where she announced to Sister Alice McQuillan that the General Council had named her superior-foundress of the future mission of Aklavik. Thus, two of the foundresses were named; the third one, Sister Firmin (Obéline Pothier), was to receive her nomination from her Provincial Superior, Mother Girouard (Zoé Chartier) in the near future.

Sister Alice McQuillan was not a newcomer to northern min-

istries. As she often taught adults as well as children, it could be assumed that her teaching reached four generations at Fort Resolution since 1903. During those years, she had frequent opportunities to thank God for the light of faith placed in the hearts of her students, and later, through them, in the hearts of their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Her zeal, her love of the children she taught, and her dedication were proverbial, and were equaled only by the silent joy she radiated in her life of service.

When the foundresses and their Provincial Superior, Mother Girouard, arrived at Aklavik, at 0500 hours in the morning of Monday, June 29, 1925, several Eskimos and a few White persons, including the Oblates, were standing on the shore of the Mackenzie River to welcome them. The Eskimos examined the sisters from head to foot and seemed satisfied. This was considered a warm and joyful reception.

*[...] our hearts are full of joy at the thought that we have been chosen among hundreds to plant the cross and make known the Sacred Heart to this country.<sup>9</sup>*

## *Their dwelling*

After greeting Fathers Joseph Trocellier and Alphonse Duport, Brothers Wilhelm Beckschaefer and Henri Latreille, and all those who were on the shore, they all went to the chapel where Father Alphonse Duport, Diocesan Administrator for Bishop Gabriel Breynat,<sup>10</sup> celebrated Mass. Thanksgiving for a successful trip and the request of God's many blessings on the new Immaculate Conception Mission was in every heart during these solemn moments. Mother Girouard (Zoé Chartier) began to sing a French Hymn: *Salut, ô Vierge Immaculée*. All were able to join in, in spite of choking back emotion.

Following Mass, everyone was served breakfast by the devoted Brother Wilhelm Beckschaefer. As there was no house ready for the sisters, they were informed that the Oblates were giving up



their residence as a temporary dwelling for the sisters while the Grey Nuns building was under construction. The Oblates, generous as ever, had built themselves a hut, which was their temporary home for the next two months. Thus the new missionaries lived in this borrowed six by six meter log cabin until August 27. In order to keep out the rain and wind, previous inhabitants had carefully filled the cracks between the logs of the cabin walls with moss. There was no ceiling. A few planks were placed on the beams to make an attic which became the sisters' sleeping quarters, easily reached with a ladder.<sup>11</sup>

*The mosquitoes rejoice at our arrival and manage to get into our mosquitoes bars to try and trap us from sleeping.*<sup>12</sup>

At mealtime, there was a faithful reunion of all the 21 people giving service at the Mission: priests, Brothers, hired men and sisters. With only nine place-settings, sisters had to constantly wash dishes throughout each meal.

*To the great joy of everyone, the sisters immediately picked up the frying pan and our workers' stomachs had only to congratulate themselves.*<sup>13</sup>

On July 3, a ceremony that astonished the Eskimos present took place in the chapel. It was the Enthroning of the Sacred Heart in the new Mission, a meaningful tradition dear to the Oblates and the Grey Nuns.

The unusual traffic around the Mission was observed with amazement by the Eskimos, Loucheux and Métis. One can easily imagine the burst of activity the Oblate Brothers experienced during these two months of full daylight: working until 2100 hours in the evening, valiantly continuing their task as builders of the Northern Missions. By August 26, there were two rooms completed in the new house: the kitchen and one that would later be a children's refectory. Father Joseph Trocellier presided over a prayerful Blessing ceremony and life began to evolve in the new dwelling. Initially, all took their meals in the kitchen while the other room served as the sisters' bedroom, the sewing room and



visiting room. Gradually, more space was to become usable.

Meanwhile, the sisters confided their childlike joy and loving gratitude to the **Chroniques** on a few occasions, especially when they received and opened boxes of essential items arriving from the mother house. Delightful surprises that made them laugh and cry exuberantly! Several times throughout the years, all surrounding missions competed with each other in providing food items to the Immaculate Conception convent.

*So I hear of eggs received from one mission, carrots from another place, cabbage from elsewhere, molasses expected from Resolution...<sup>15</sup>*

Advancing modernization arrived at Aklavik on October 6, 1925 when a new wireless system of communication was installed. The same day, Father Joseph Trocellier brought the sisters a telegram announcing the names of the newly elected General Council with Mother Octavie Dugas being re-elected Superior General. Shortly after, the Grey Nuns of Aklavik responded with their first telegram of congratulations to their leaders in Montréal.

The first Christmas at Aklavik for the intrepid missionaries, December 25, 1925, brought them a welcomed answer to their prayers. Sister Alice McQuillan, superior, wrote of her joy at the first visit by Eskimos to the chapel,

*At the end of Midnight Mass, 40 Eskimos, clad in fur, with a large knife fastened to their belt, entered the chapel, examined the crib and said: We will be back. [...] They did return the following Sunday. I explained to them why Jesus came down on earth, how long he stayed among us and, showing them my cross, how he died for our sins.[...] Then we prayed together. [...] How happy I was to have had the honor to kneel down before the tabernacle with my Eskimos!<sup>17</sup>*

On the Feast Day of their beloved Foundress, Marguerite d'Youville, the Grey Nuns and the children were treated to a special surprise when Father Joseph Trocellier, Superior of the

Mission, brought them boxes of oranges. A pure novelty for the children and a mouth-watering sight for the sisters who had seen little of those fruits since they arrived in the North. The children first played ball with these *yellow apples* until they could not wait any longer to taste them.

There were sad moments, too, in the lives of the missionaries. One of those was the accidental drowning of Father Jules Lécuyer on October 24, 1929 during a fishing trip with a Native male companion. Father Joseph Trocellier was heartbroken; he immediately left to be with the people who were mourning their devoted pastor.<sup>18</sup>

There were also memorable events, such as September 1, 1931 when a horse was imported to the village causing awe and exclamations among the children. A year later, on April 4, 1932, electricity arrived to the great amazement of the people and the relief of the missionaries working in the hospital and the school.

## *The hospital*

There was some urgency felt among the missionaries to begin their major ministries, hospital and school, as soon as possible. An early opportunity for emergency health care was provided on July 18, 1925, when a 3 year old girl, Adéline Simon, who had been severely bitten by a dog, was brought to Dr. Cook for treatment of several gaping wounds. Bringing her into the sisters' crowded temporary residence for surveillance and care by Sister St-Adélard, the physician expressed sadness noting that she would likely not survive. Immediately, the two communities, Grey Nuns and Oblates began a novena to the recently canonized Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus. After thoroughly examining Adéline a few days later, Dr. Cook concluded that something unusual must have happened. Realizing that she had made remarkable progress, he confided that he never thought she would pull through.<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, everyone was grateful for this surprising cure. Thus little Adéline was the first patient at the Immaculate Conception Hospital, Aklavik.



Accommodation at the temporary 'hospital' left much to be desired and plans for improvement were constantly on the minds of the Oblates who owned the temporary facilities of the Mission. Patients kept coming, even though the facilities were less than adequate. Until a building was appropriated entirely to the hospital, care of the sick was carried out in space provided in the convent with one patient room on each of the two floors. It was short on meeting standards, considering that the classrooms and boarding space for children were in close proximity to patients' rooms.

*It was agreed between Father Joseph-Marie Trocellier and the Grey Nuns that the large new house would serve exclusively and temporarily as a boarding school. A house built at a short distance, to serve as a laundry and hangar would be transformed into a hospital for one to 10 patients.<sup>20</sup>*

The hospital was not approved by the Government until September 1928. It was only through the persistence and farsightedness of Bishop Gabriel Breynat that this approbation was obtained and adequate funding was received. With this welcomed help, it was possible to plan for improvement of the facility. On December 27, 1932, the former convent became the new hospital for as many as 20 patients at a time. Once all painting was completed, this was a vast improvement from the previously tight accommodations. With the addition of an extension in 1932 and re-organization of space, the number of patients peaked at 54 in January 1953, with every visible nook and cranny used for patient care.

The care received at this small hospital continued to be a focal point for praise and congratulations from patients, families and visitors. People returned home cured of their physical ailments and/or healed of deeper pain in their hearts and souls. Many returned to the God of their youth, or found new avenues of worship; there was new peace in their hearts. The missionaries always noted their gratitude in their correspondence or the **Chroniques** as evidence of God's presence in their midst.



There were definitely many Christ-like kind actions that constituted the lives of missionaries; most will be revealed only in heaven. Occasionally, former students, patients, colleagues in ministry, or retired members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) send notes that are most heartwarming for aging missionaries. One such letter was received from a retired RCMP officer reflecting on his memories of the Grey Nuns' part in his life at Aklavik, in the late 1950s,

*While traveling to Aklavik I kept wondering how we, a large family [of five children], would fit ourselves into the RCMP house, which I knew to be a small two bedroom one and which would be furnished with only one double bed in each of the two bedrooms. Imagine my pleasant surprise when we arrived - one bedroom had a double bed and a crib and the other bedroom had two double bunk beds (one above the other type). That accommodated us perfectly. And who was so kind and so considerate to arrange all this, even before our arrival? The Grey Nuns of course - they heard of our coming and the problem we faced and in their usual kind, considerate manner rectified the problem before it occurred. Needless to say, it was such a pleasure to see sisters again - those who were northbound to Aklavik 14 years earlier.<sup>21</sup>*

Not only missionaries were credited with such acts of kindness, there was also frequent mention of similar kind actions by members of the RCMP toward the missionary priests, Brothers and sisters. Life in isolated missions is blessed with God's Providence under the guise of benevolent activities by so many big-hearted people!

This visible Providence was oftentimes identified among the missionaries. Another example was the 1950 flood of the Peel River which brought the furious water up the first step of the hospital. On the invitation of Sister Louise Duport, superior, all the sisters went to the chapel to pray the Litany of the Saints. At that very moment, the water level stopped, and a few hours later, began receding.<sup>22</sup> There was no surprise, just overjoyed thanks-

giving among missionaries and patients.

However, the geographical location of this settlement, built on icebergs, did not cease to be a source of concern to governmental authorities. In 1960, the Federal Government built a new Inuvik Regional Health Care Centre and, at the same time, notified the owners and operators of the two Aklavik hospitals<sup>23</sup> that their institutions would no longer be subsidized for patient care in Aklavik. People living in the settlement were encouraged to consider moving to more stable land at Inuvik once the new health care facility was completed. Saturday, January 28, 1961 marked the transfer of the patients to Inuvik. This was also the last day for the sisters to minister at the Immaculate Conception Mission of Aklavik.

Government authorities had hoped that the people would follow, knowing the instability of their land, or rather their iceberg! Surprisingly, several families decided to remain in Aklavik and continue as the Immaculate Conception Parish community. The departure of the sisters from Aklavik was experienced with sadness by the people, the Oblates and the sisters themselves.

## *The school*

Almost simultaneously with the opening of the hospital, the school opened with 18 students on September 1, 1926.<sup>24</sup> Sister Alice McQuillan resumed her teaching career in this new mission with the same enthusiasm she had shown in Fort Resolution.

The number of students grew and included both day and boarding students. Three years after the opening, at the end of 1929, the School registered 50 students, including two non-Catholic day students.<sup>25</sup> Within five years, the **Annales** reported a huge increase in enrolment, with the special mention of Eskimo students,

*On August 27, 1934 we had the opening of the school year.  
We now have 30 boys and 40 girls; 20 of them are Eskimos.*<sup>26</sup>

Sisters Joséphine Dussault and Valérie Métivier must have



been unusually busy teaching such a large group of students. Fortunately, they received welcomed assistance from other sisters working as child care workers, whose tasks usually included life skills education and other elementary knowledge.

A miracle omelette was served to six Brothers during an ice-fishing trip. Sister Eva Sauka recounts that around 1944, she and a student as helper were assigned to accompany the Brothers as cooks while they were ice-fishing. Seeing that provisions were scarce, Sister Sauka and her little assistant walked along the shore praying for a solution to the dilemma. They suddenly spotted a duck nest with 12 gorgeous, big eggs. No surprise that the Brothers were delighted with the delicious and large omelette presented to them for lunch.<sup>27</sup>

An interview by Annette Westley with Sister Alice Rivard, former missionary of Aklavik gave a glimpse of the food situation in Aklavik in the 1950s.

*I remember the day a chartered plane from Whitehorse arrived at Aklavik. We noticed some fruit being unloaded and since I had not seen a banana for six years, we decided to treat ourselves. With only \$1.50 to spend, we bought three at \$0.45 each and split them among 16 sisters. We were so happy to get a piece. Those days you were pleased with so little.<sup>28</sup>*

The instability of the school building became more acute, as had been experienced earlier at the hospital, given that all buildings were constructed on icebergs. This situation did not cease worrying government officials. As plans were being studied by the Federal Government to provide more security for the students and a more stable base for the buildings, the Immaculate Conception Mission personnel were informed that closing the school was a definite possibility. In the spring of 1958, the missionaries knew that a new and larger school was being built at Inuvik and would be ready to open by September 1959. The responsibility for the education of children was thus transferred to Inuvik, across the Mackenzie River, on August 26, 1959.



At the news of the sisters' departure from Aklavik after 36 years of selfless community service, Edward Cook, a former student of the Immaculate Conception School, confided his personal reflections in an article,

*I felt as though I was losing my mother for the second time. The key was turned not to open but to close a place where I spent the happiest five years of my life. It was there that we children learned to speak the language of the white people. Few of us knew English, yet after September to June 1926 we became almost fluent in the language and how proud we were. Moreover we are grateful to the Oblates and the Grey Nuns for the Christian upbringing we received. Their teachings will remain in our hearts as well as the happy memories of the years passed at the Immaculate Conception School. Farewell to our Alma Mater.<sup>29</sup>*

This sadness was shared by the sisters as the day came to leave Aklavik and the people they loved. An entry in the **Chroniques** on their last day speaks for itself,

*To close the Mission of Aklavik seems to us impossible, but acceptable for the love of God only. Now is the time more than ever to place all our trust in God, [...] thinking that God will never abandon our dear Eskimos.<sup>30</sup>*

## 1971 - Returning to Aklavik

**T**hrough the pleading of Bishop Paul Piché, the Oblate Missionaries and the people of Aklavik, the sisters returned, reinforcing the mutual trust and love of earlier years. On August 16, 1971, a rather dull and gray day, two Grey Nuns arrived from Inuvik by boat. Facing them was the new look of Aklavik: a village of neat little houses sheltering a population of 700 Eskimos and Native people. One third of the population were of school age.

It was 10 years after the Grey Nuns' departure for Inuvik that Sister Yvette Lapointe, Provincial Superior, asked approval from the General Council to return to Aklavik and answer the needs of the people in this place of predilection, the first Grey Nuns mission near the Arctic Circle. Two sisters were named and dedicated their ministry to the Immaculate Conception Parish and the Moose Kerr School, built in 1969: Sisters Denise Emond and Yolande Delisle.

During her four years in Aklavik, Sister Denise Emond taught full-time at the school, reaching each year at least half of the 235 students, through kindergarten classes, Grades V to VIII Home Economics, and Grades I to VIII Religion. Furthermore she established the *Girl Guides* and *Jeannettes* movements in Aklavik where she recruited 200 guides. She was named Division Commissioner of the Delta in 1974.<sup>31</sup> Sister Denise Emond also worked with the *Catholic Women's League* during her years of ministry at Aklavik. All these activities had a lasting influence on more than one generation.

In 1973, Sister Anna Brodeur arrived to replace Sister Yolande Delisle, whose health was declining. Sister Brodeur remained until the closing of the Mission. During her last year, she was accompanied in her ministry by her blood sister, Sister Eva Brodeur, s.n.j.m., who took part in the visits to the homebound and the sick, the poor and those experiencing difficulties. Father Jean Franche, parish priest at Aklavik, wrote on April 1, 1973,

*I know that I could not do one quarter of the work at the Mission if the sisters were not there [...] The relationships between the priest and the sisters are not so difficult to harmonize if we trust in God and remain in contact with our Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>32</sup>

A little more than one year later, on May 25, 1974, a terrible tragedy occurred at Inuvik when a young, inebriated Eskimo knocked at the door of Father Jean Franche, around 2300 hours and fatally shot him. The noise was heard by Sister Anna Brodeur who immediately received help from the Oblate and Grey Nun's



communities to deal with the tragedy. Transferred to the hospital in Inuvik by a chartered plane, Father Franche was assisted by Father Joseph Adam who remained at his side until his death at 0300 hours on May 26. Father Franche was loved by the people he had served so generously since 1936. He was also a precious member of the Oblate Missions in the Northwest Territories. His passing was deeply mourned by everyone who knew him. On May 30, his body was returned to Aklavik by chartered plane. On the same day, Bishop Paul Piché presided at the funeral mass held in the largest site available in Aklavik, the auditorium of the Moose Kerr School. Father Jean Franche was buried in the Aklavik cemetery where visits, prayers and flower tributes abound from the missionaries and all the people of Aklavik.

For five years, Grey Nuns lived and worked again with the people of Aklavik, in good and not-so-good days. The main topic of discussion when Sister Marie Lemire visited Sister Anna Brodeur, in March 1976 was the shortage of available sisters making it necessary to leave Aklavik for a second time. In 1976 it was no secret that religious vocations were decreasing in Canada, indeed around the world. The people of Aklavik had been prepared for the eventual departure of their Grey Nuns. Caring leaders began to emerge in their midst. They were ready to follow in the footsteps of their former teachers, the Grey Nuns.<sup>33</sup>

The selfless dedication of 72 sisters during 42 years with the people of Aklavik, for a cumulated total of 395 years, will not be easily erased from the hearts of the Eskimos, Loucheux and Métis, nor from the hearts of all missionaries in this still barren and formidable land.

## *1959 - Inuvik*

**I**nuvik was a new development located 130 kilometers east and 65 kilometers north of Aklavik. Its neighbor to the northeast is the Beaufort Sea, the entrance to the Arctic Ocean, is a distant 95 kilometers. Alexander Mackenzie paddled



by the site of what would one day be Inuvik in 1789, but little attention was given to it until 1954 when it was decided by the Federal Government to relocate and enlarge the facilities of Aklavik: hospital, school, airport and administration. Once a site was chosen, a frenzy of activities began and the world's first truly modern Arctic town emerged from a construction period that lasted from 1955 to 1961.

*This was the first community north of the Arctic Circle built to provide the normal facilities of a Canadian town. It was designed not only as a base for development and administration but as a centre to bring education, medical care and new opportunity to the people of the Western Arctic.<sup>34</sup>*

Inuvik is the Eskimo word for *The place of Human Beings*. Beneath Inuvik, the soil is frozen to a probable depth of 300 meters, the *permafrost*.<sup>35</sup> Most of the buildings are elevated on piles to isolate the floors from the intense cold of the permafrost. Its location, 2,050 kilometers north of Edmonton, and its rapid growth made it, in 1959, the largest Canadian city north of the Alberta Capital, Edmonton.

At 2300 hours, on August 26, 1959, 11 Grey Nuns arrived from Aklavik to serve within the new system of education at Inuvik. Brothers Eugène Morin and Jean Boucher met them at the shore with their vans. As they passed the Igloo Church on their way *home*, they stopped and presented a brief greeting to Jesus. Then they went to Résidence Notre-Dame and were greeted by Fathers Jean Franche, administrator, and Max Ruyant, business manager. The following morning, they arrived for Mass and renewed their resolve to serve as loving instruments of God's plans for the Inuvik Mission.<sup>36</sup>

## *The foundresses*

The foundresses were: Sister Joséphine Dussault, superior, Sisters Thérèse Béliveau, Marcelle Chauvette, Annie Cooper, Laurence Côté, Pauline Drolet, Berthe Gaudette, Irène Gallant,

Rosanna Hébert, Béatrice Leduc and Anna Neumier. Two sisters were employed on the teaching staff at the Federal School of Inuvik, later called Alexander Mackenzie School: Sisters Irène Gallant, hired as Vice-Principal and teacher for Grade VIII and Béatrice Leduc, teacher for Grade III.

The other sisters worked at Résidence Notre-Dame, later called Grollier Hall, a new students' residence, administered by the Oblates. Some of their functions were: house-mothers, nurse, choir director, sacristan, sewing room workers and instructors, music instructor, laundry aides, and any other work that required their help to provide a home-like atmosphere for the children.

Grollier Hall, with a capacity for 250 student boarders, admitted 207 students in 1959 as boarders, including 53 Inuit children. They were from at least 15 different localities including: Fort Smith, Fort Providence, Fort Simpson, Fort Liard, Aklavik, Arctic Red River, Tuktoyaktuk and Fort Good Hope. There was also an Anglican Residence in Inuvik, called Stringer Hall, similar in size and enrolment.

The Alexander Mackenzie School, built for a capacity of 1,000 students, held its Official Opening on September 8, 1959. The first year enrolment of 500 in 25 classrooms increased to 960 in 1971, with 500 students living in the residences.

Mr. Jacobson, Superintendent of Public Education for the Northwest Territories gathered the 30 teachers on September 3, 1959, at Grollier Hall. The purpose of this meeting was to study the regulations and clarify the adaptation required in order to conform with the School Program in the Province of Alberta.<sup>37</sup>

On September 10, 1959, the federal Minister of Northern Affairs, Elvin Hamilton visited Inuvik and the school, as many other officials had done over the first few months of operation. He was lodged at Grollier Hall, as its first guest, and upon leaving, he left the following message,

*It seems appropriate that the first visitor be the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources. These great hostels and schools are the tangible evidence of the conscience of Canadian people. In spite of geography and*



*the engineering difficulties these fine facilities for the education of the children of the North have been well and truly built. Now this plant is in the hands of all of you who serve God by helping His children. (Elvin Hamilton)<sup>38</sup>*

Inuvik holds the distinct honor of having a church of unique architecture, an Igloo church. It was designed and built by Brother Maurice Larocque. Construction began in June 1958 and resulted from Brother Larocque's excellent teamwork with Brothers Joseph Brodeur and Hermann Delisle while Father Jean Colas did the paintings for the windows, and Father Joseph Adam, in addition to the embossed decorations, did the cooking for the crew of workers. Other important activities were carried out by people like Mona Thrasher,<sup>39</sup> who did some of the other paintings, Bill Laylor and Joe Pinsonneault who did the inside finishing, furniture and pews. The church was blessed by Bishop Paul Piché of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, on August 5, 1960. Our Lady of Victory was chosen as the patroness of the new church. Someone called this church the eighth marvel of the world. This church still exists at the turn of the 21st century and visitors come from distant places to admire this marvel of architecture and creativity.<sup>40</sup>

On November 25, 1960, the first radio station, CHAK, was installed in Inuvik. It was to be followed in August 1969, by a television station. Another noteworthy event was the visit of Governor General Georges Vanier and his wife, Mrs. Pauline Vanier, in June, 1961 when they were hosted by the Grey Nuns at Grollier Hall.

During her first visit to Inuvik, Mother Georgette Leduc wrote on May 16, 1963,

*[...] What I have seen so far of the children, their discipline and their 'joie de vivre' amazes and delights me! The transformation achieved by each little one with a bright and intelligent phiz during their stay here is inconceivable and deserves praise.<sup>41</sup>*

Sister Marie-Ange Pinet's dedicated service at Grollier Hall,



from August 18, 1961 to January 4, 1975, became legendary. Her years of experience with the older girls, these future leaders, during that period of time brought her close to many of the people of Inuvik. The recently named superior of the community living at Grollier Hall, was soon to experience a second burden in her personal life. Illness struck her in mid-December 1974. Sister Marie Lemire, Provincial Superior, was reached on her way to Montréal for a retreat. Immediately cancelling her trip, she returned to Inuvik to bring support to her sick sister and her shocked companions in ministry. Following sudden and severe discomfort, Sister Pinet underwent abdominal surgery on December 20. No relief followed. The pain intensified and a fast growing cancer of the pancreas was found after a second surgery. On January 4, 1975, after much suffering, Sister Pinet was called to her eternal reward at the age of 49; a call she received peacefully, trusting in God's infinite love.

There was shock and consternation in the whole city of Inuvik. People came to Grollier Hall to pay their respects and many came for a Memorial Mass and special prayers for their friend. At the request of her deeply grieved family Sister Pinet's body was transferred to Montréal for a solemn funeral and burial on January 8. A memorial service was held on January 8, 1975 at Our Lady of Victory church in Inuvik where all her students and former students came to thank God for Sister Pinet's presence in their lives, pay their respects and receive comfort from each other's presence.

When the Immaculate Conception Hospital at Aklavik closed, on January 28, 1961, the remaining patients were transferred to the new hospital in Inuvik. At that time, there were no Grey Nuns available to work at this new hospital. Later, in 1984 and 1985, Sister Louise Brosseau was employed at the Inuvik Regional Health Centre.

Inuvik seemed to be a place of predilection where Marguerite d'Youville often used her power of intercession to prevent major fires. One such incident happened on May 21, 1982. The furnace at the Igloo church filled with smoke and the floor was slowly

burning. The fire department quickly answered the call. Once the fire was extinguished, the fire chief came to the conclusion that *someone up there* was protecting the church from a greater tragedy and he wanted to know who it was. Father Joseph Adam replied that it was Marguerite d'Youville. As he looked up, there was her picture on the wall. The fire chief would not leave the church without taking this picture to place in his fire hall.<sup>42</sup>

The number of sisters available for mission assignments continued to decrease as the years advanced. In September, 1976, Sister Thérèse Chaput ended the list of Grey Nuns teachers at Alexander Mackenzie School. Ten years later, Sister Christiane Beaulieu came as French teacher for two years, while devoting her remaining hours to parish pastoral work. Social Work was carried out by Sister Délia Bourque, for short intervals between 1976 and 1983. In June 1987, after 27 years of service at Grollier Hall, the Grey Nuns left this institution in order to devote all their time to parish work. This change coincided with Father Max Ruyant's resignation from his position as administrator after 28 years of service at Grollier Hall.

In 1985, Father Denis Croteau, parish priest at Inuvik for several years, moved to other pastoral duties in Fort Smith. A year later, he was ordained Bishop of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, replacing the retiring Bishop Paul Piché. Bishop Piché had completed a long 27-year term in that demanding position.

There were to be Grey Nuns in Inuvik for several more years. When the sisters left their ministry at Grollier Hall, they also looked for another place to live as other needs claimed their presence. For several periods, the Family Hall, located above the Parish rectory, was placed at the disposal of the sisters. This Hall was quite convenient for receiving people who needed a listening ear or meeting with families following the Sunday Mass.

## *Sisters leaving*

In April 1996, Sister Anna Neumier's health became a source of concern. Later, a fall and a shoulder fracture qualified her for a



well-deserved rest at the Grey Nuns Regional Centre in Edmonton. This left Sister Denise Emond alone in Inuvik. With no other sisters available to continue a ministry at Inuvik, the Provincial Council decided to bring to a close the 37 years of experience of the sisters near the Arctic Circle. On July 4, 1996, Sister Aurore Larkin, Provincial Superior, notified Sister Denise Emond that her next place of ministry would be in her province of origin, Manitoba. With much regret and sadness in her heart, she prepared the people for her departure. She had made many friends over the years. Undoubtedly, she had given herself with much love and dedication and thoughts of her departure were received with deep regret from all the people of Inuvik.

On September 9, 1996, the Grey Nuns mission at Inuvik was completed. Leaving the people in the hands of God, Sister Denise Emond's departure was seen as the last in a long series of events that created enduring friendship between the Eskimos and the Grey Nuns. For 37 years, from the opening of the town of Inuvik in 1959, 51 sisters gave a cumulated total of 199 years of dedicated service to the people of Inuvik. It was a mission well accomplished.

## *1969 - Holman Island*

Located slightly east of Inuvik is a tiny, remote Oblate Mission named Holman Island. One sister was named to this mission in 1969 and another one in 1984. Each period of ministry lasted only one year.

In 1969, Sister Thérèse Béliveau worked as parish worker. She was fortunate to share residence and ministries with Monique Piché, OMMI, the niece of Bishop Piché.

Again, in 1984, another Grey Nun, Sister Aurise Normandeau was the parish worker at Holman Island, in the absence of the parish priest, Father Henri Tardy who had moved to another mission.

For both assignments, the ministries included: visits to fami-



lies, the poor and those grieving, organization of youth groups for prayer and recreation, preparation of liturgy, retreats, Bible study, and Celebration of the Word in the absence of the priest.

On these two separate occasions, two Grey Nuns gave a total of two years of ministry to the people of Holman Island. Their time was well rewarded in seeing the number of people they reached with the Good News of God's love for all.

## *1971 - Fort Good Hope*

**F**ort Good Hope, situated southwest of Holman Island and 35 kilometers below the Arctic Circle, was peopled by 360 Natives of the Hareskin nation and 40 white settlers. English was the language spoken by almost everyone at the Fort; a small number of unilingual Natives spoke Hareskin. Fort Good Hope is considered the coldest settlement of the region. In June, there is a novelty for southerners to experience: the midnight sun.

Father Henri Grollier was the first Oblate missionary at Fort Good Hope in 1859. Exhausted by long journeys and extreme hardships in the Arctic missions, he died five years later at the age of 38 in Fort Good Hope: his body lies buried in the churchyard. This intrepid missionary was replaced by Father Emile Petitot in 1864.

After years of intermittent and hard work in building a church, Brother Joseph Kearney and Father Jean Séguin were ready to finish the floor and ceiling in 1872. A patron saint was easily found for the new church: Notre-Dame de l'Espérance (Our Lady of Hope). Then followed a surprising number of donations from many Oblate and Grey Nun missions in the Far North which made Notre-Dame de l'Espérance a jewel in the harsh north. The bell was a gift from the sisters at Fort Providence; a statue of Our Lady of Hope was given by a bourgeois of the Hudson's Bay Company, Tim Gaudet who ordered it from France. Sculpted in wood, by Father Emile Petitot, was the beautiful altar; paintings were made by Bella Gaudet, Fathers

Bernard Brown and Antoine Binamé. Frank Rivest, Patrick Stein and George Banksland from Grollier Hall in Aklavik also contributed lovely paintings. Being so dearly endowed, Our Lady of Hope was to become the Mother Church of the Arctic Missions, 'a pearl in the midst of the Arctic splendor'.

Two Grey Nuns were in Fort Good Hope for a short assignment in July and August 1962 assisting the parish priest at Our Lady of Hope Mission: Sisters Julienne Chaillé and Lucille Levesque. While Catechetics was their primary focus of ministry, their work ended up being that of parish assistants. Their presence was supportive and encouraging to Father Aloyse Brettar whom they helped immensely by refreshing the church and rectory, visiting families and bringing God's Word where appropriate.

In the winter of 1970-71, Bishop Paul Piché of Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese approached Sister Yvette Lapointe, Provincial Superior of the Grey Nuns, for sisters to the remote mission of Fort Good Hope. Sister Lapointe and her council accepted the challenge and named two sisters for this mission: Sisters Blanche Matte and Gabrielle Létourneau.

On April 3, 1971, Bishop Paul Piché gave a hand-written letter to Sister Matte, giving her almost all the duties of a deaconess and placing her in charge of the parish in the absence of Father Aloyse Brettar. Sister Matte left Fort Smith on April 7, 1971 and arrived the following day in Fort Good Hope. At the air strip, she was met by Father Brettar with a ski-doo, the temperature was minus 40 degrees Celsius. They made a short visit to the chapel in thanksgiving for a safe trip and asked God's blessings on their ministry. Less than two weeks later, Father Brettar began a five-month absence to conduct some business and for medical consultations.

In a short history of the Fort Good Hope Mission written in 1971, Sister Blanche Matte described the work of her position and that of her future companion. The sisters helped at the parish in all aspects: teaching religion at school, visiting families, helping the priests to upkeep the church and sacristy, leading music and



singing, always being available to listen and help people in need. They taught domestic arts and Sister Matte was the editor of the local journal, **The Hare Express**. Sister Matte was also responsible of recording weather conditions and water levels.

Following his first visit to the Grey Nuns residence, while Sister Matte was still the only sister present at Fort Good Hope, Bishop Piché wrote,

*[...] I have been impressed by the meritorious apostolate that the Grey Nuns accomplish here. Sister Matte, to whom I have granted almost all the powers of 'a deaconess,' directs the parish, presides at the exercises of prayer every evening, distributes communion, visits the sick and brings them communion, teaches catechetics, prepares people for Baptism, directs rehearsals for liturgical hymns, gives everywhere and to all her good advice, especially to the youth with most edifying apostolic zeal. [...] People from Fort Good Hope truly appreciate the presence of the sisters here and earnestly request that they remain permanently.<sup>43</sup>*

A new ministry was initiated by the Federal Government at Fort Good Hope when Sister Rita McGuire, Grey Sister of the Immaculate Conception of Pembroke (GSIC) was hired for a pilot project in Adult Education for the Natives living along the Mackenzie River. She arrived on October 24, 1972. In her employment contract, it was made very clear that,

*[...] she is going as a Federal employee, an educator, not as a missionary, although she is free to use her time outside the school as she pleases.<sup>44</sup>*

Sister McGuire decided to live with the Grey Nuns during her one year contract. This provided much appreciated mutual support amongst the isolated missionaries.

The Province Divine Providence for the Northwest Territories experienced continuing difficulties recruiting new missionaries. Furthermore, the age and health of those still active did not cease to be a problem in keeping missions opened. It was



therefore decided, in 1976 to leave three places of ministry in the north, one being Fort Good Hope.

The five sisters who were present at Fort Good Hope from 1971 to 1976 gave a total of only 11 cumulated years of service to the people and the Church. When they left on August 31, 1976, they were confident that the people they had helped, and worked with, were well prepared to serve in the parish. There was, however, a genuine sense of loss at the moment of parting, but also a sense of accomplishment and joy in friendships developed.

### 1977 - Arctic Red River

**A** former missionary at Holman Island, Sister Blanche Matte was given a new mission for Arctic Red River in 1977. This settlement of Loucheux natives is located 100 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle and at the confluence of the Red River and the majestic Mackenzie River. The population numbered 110 in 1977 after frequent reductions caused by epidemics, starvation and moves to other places, mostly Inuvik.

*[They] live on three rises of land where the Mackenzie and the Arctic Red River met [...] became a permanent settlement in the 1870s with the establishment of a Mission and a trading post. Arctic Red River is accessible by boat in the summer and car or plane throughout the rest of the year.<sup>45</sup>*

As for most Arctic missions, the untiring Father Henri Grollier was the first missionary to visit Arctic Red River in 1860. He is therefore considered the founder of Holy Name of Mary Parish. The first mission-chapel was built in 1868 and demolished almost 100 years later, in 1961, to make room for a new structure. This new church was still in use when the sisters were at Arctic Red River.

After several Oblate priests in this parish over the years, the last resident priest, Father Jean Colas was transferred to Aklavik in 1977. At that time,

*A shortage of [Oblate] missionaries and the desire to maintain a religious presence in Arctic Red River prompted Bishop Paul Piché, O.M.I., of Mackenzie-Fort Smith diocese to appeal to the Sisters of Charity of Montréal "Grey Nuns" who labor in the Northwest Territories since 1867. [...] to go and live in Arctic Red River and occasionally visit Fort McPherson.*<sup>46</sup>

Yet again, the Grey Nuns were to experience their sisters living alone, in an isolated mission, when Sister Germaine Hétu, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province,<sup>47</sup> named Sister Blanche Matte for this service of the Northern Church. Sister Matte had done similar work at Fort Good Hope from 1971 to 1976. The Bishop continued to assign her the spiritual welfare of a northern population: therefore the privileges and responsibilities assumed by her at Fort Good Hope were to guide her in this new assignment. As a consolation in the absence of a resident priest, the people were assured that a priest from Inuvik would come every Sunday for celebration of Mass and other sacraments.

Sister Matte arrived at Arctic Red River on October 6, 1977, one day short of the 230th anniversary of a memorable day when Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Grey Nuns assumed the administration of *l'Hôpital Général de Montréal* on October 7, 1747.

For the first 10 years, Sister Matte, being alone at Arctic Red River, was a member of the Grey Nun community of Grollier Hall in Inuvik. On September 3, 1987, Sister Anna Neumier joined her as superior and helper.

The pastoral and social work at Arctic Red River covered a whole range of activities, as was the case in Holman Island. There were a few additions: visiting Fort McPherson to prepare people for the priest ministry, assisting the priest with celebrations in the settlement; and helping at the local Post Office while training people to assume this responsibility.

In 1990, in consultation with Bishop Denis Croteau, Sister Faye Wylie in council requested approval from the General Council to withdraw the sisters from Arctic Red River. This was



approved by Sister Marguerite Létourneau and the General Council on April 24, 1990. It was noted that during 13 years at Arctic Red River, two sisters gave a total of 16 years with untiring devotion.

Sister Anna Neumier left on June 20, 1990, taking with her the memories of the beautiful people she had served at Arctic Red River. Many came to visit on her last days at the mission, sharing their grief, and hoping to see each other again.

The next two months were busy for the lone missionary, Sister Blanche Matte. After 40 years in northern missions, soon came her turn to bid farewell, not only to Arctic Red River, but to the Far North. Her aging body and declining health were sure signals that God was calling her back to her native Québec Province. Prior to her departure, there was a last moment where people gathered to express their gratitude to Sister Matte for her love, her presence and multiple services to them over 13 years. Chief Peter Ross repeated the people's desire to keep their 'friend' in their midst. But the hour had come. In the evening of September 4, 1990, Sister Matte left the people of Arctic Red River, confiding their future to God's Divine Providence.

## 1987 - Tuktoyaktuk

**S**ituated on the shore of the Beaufort Sea, Tuktoyaktuk is at the top of the world. Its name in Eskimo language means *what resembles caribous*, a term that describes the sight of rocks that appear when the water is low.

This Oblate Mission *Our Lady of Grace* was founded by Father Jean Franche in August 1938 when the total Eskimo population was 100. By the 1980s, it had climbed to around 900 and included 100 white settlers. There was one school for Grades I to IX. All had the opportunity to complete High School at Inuvik.

The Hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk's quick growth appeared related to several factors. Its strategic location near Beaufort Sea made it a natural port for transport on the Arctic Ocean; Tuktoyaktuk



had a high birth rate; the 80 Eskimos from the neighboring Stanton Hamlet moved into Tuktoyaktuk; and, a number of gas companies established their industry in Tuktoyaktuk, thus attracting Eskimos from the Mackenzie Delta for high-paid positions.

In 1987, arrangements for sisters ministry were made between Bishop Denis Croteau of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese and Sister Faye Wylie, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province. The two sisters who left Inuvik at the closure of Grollier Hall, were named for this far northern posting. On August 12, 1987, Sisters Françoise Tremblay and Denise Emond arrived by plane at Tuktoyaktuk where they were met by Father Max Ruyant. Prior to the arrival of the sisters, Father Ruyant vacated his residence, built the previous year, in their favor and moved his belongings to the smaller mission building which became his new quarters.

Their new assignment included Catechetics, Sunday School, preparation of future teachers for catechetics, home visiting, care of the church and chapel of the Mission and other pastoral and social activities to help the population, as in other northern missions. One woman, a former music student of Sister Elizabeth Kristoff in Aklavik, Rose-Marie Lundrigan, was the official organist at Tuktoyaktuk for years. The people and the priest were most welcoming to the sisters. Not only were they happy to have sisters assist them in their faith, but they received them as friends, as testified in frequent **Chroniques** entries.

However, sisters available for ministries continued to decrease and it was decided in 1990 to have one residence for active personnel at Inuvik. From there sisters could travel to nearby places such as Arctic Red River and Tuktoyaktuk. This was approved by the General Council on April 24, 1990.

Sister Françoise Tremblay's departure was precipitated by the serious illness of her father in Montréal. She left on May 23. Many came to bring their greetings and express their regret at her leaving, knowing that she would not return to Tuktoyaktuk. As for Sister Emond, she was happy to remain and continue her untir-

ing ministries with the people of Tuktoyaktuk until June 15.

*When we heard that the sisters were leaving us, we were very sad [...]. They would visit our homes and the elders. They were there for us when we were troubled, we would go home happy after visiting them.*<sup>48</sup>

*People expressed their sincere gratitude. They would have wanted to keep us. We are confident that the training they received in teaching religion by Sister Denise Emond will pay dividend.*<sup>49</sup>

Two Grey Nuns ministered at Tuktoyaktuk for three years, giving a cumulated total of six years filled with dedication and mutual friendship.

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- 9 **Chroniques**, Aklavik, p. 2.
- 10 Bishop Breynat was in France for a one year sick leave. He had recommended to his Administrator to keep Aklavik as a high priority in his planning.
- 11 **Chroniques**, p. 2.
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- 20 Breynat, **Op. Cit.**, vol. III, p. 69.
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- 22 Lemire, Marie, s.g.m., **Reminiscences**, June 2000.
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- 30 **Aklavik Chroniques**, p. 330.
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- 34 Engraved on Inuvik's Official Opening monument, June 21, 1961.
- 35 *Permafrost*: permanent frozen subsoil.
- 36 **Annales 1959**, pp. 355-356.
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- 43 Piché, Bishop Paul, **Acts of Visit**, July 16-19, 1971, in Oblates Codex, GNRC Arch.
- 44 **Doc. C1.6**, Mmy Arch.
- 45 **The Birthday Drum**, July 1983, p. 8.
- 46 Laforce, Marguerite, s.g.m., **Arctic Red River**, Mimeographed summary, October, 1991, GNRC Arch.
- 47 The Province Divine Providence was amalgamated with Saint Albert Province in 1977.
- 48 Gruben, Jean and Friends in Tuk, in **Family News**, July 1990, p. 138.
- 49 **Tuktoyaktuk Chroniques**, June 14, 1990, p. 90.



Midnight sun in the Arctic (picture taken with a stationary camera set to repeat exposure every 20 minutes from 2200 hours until 0200 hours)

Aklavik - aerial view



Aklavik - Immaculate Conception School, 1925

Inuvik, the famous  
Igloo Church, 1960



Fort Good Hope -  
aerial view of  
the settlement and  
mission

Arctic Red River, Roman Catholic  
church and rectory, 1983



Tuktoyaktuk in winter



## CHAPTER SEVEN

1938 -

### FORT McMURRAY

Fort McMurray, Alberta, owes its new fame to the much publicized oil discovery and the arrival of major oil companies in the 1900s. Located 460 kilometers north of Edmonton, at the confluence of the Clearwater River, from the east, and the Athabasca River, from the south, it became an ideal transportation route to the Northwest Territories (NWT). Because of Fort McMurray's strategic northern location, the Roman Catholic Church placed it under the diocesan administration of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, hence its inclusion in this Volume under the Far North Missions, instead of in Volume I with Alberta Missions.

In its earlier history, we find names like Peter Pond, the great explorer and trader, who stopped in this settlement in 1750 on his western tour.<sup>1</sup> and Father Alexandre Taché, who visited Fort McMurray on his way to Fort Chipewyan in 1847.<sup>2</sup> For a long time the missionaries could do no more than pay an occasional visit to the very small population at the Fort.

*In 1906, there came a sudden change. Asphalt, petroleum, and the promise of other sources of wealth, brought commercial companies to McMurray and the population began to increase. It was decided to make a railway connection with Edmonton in the south.<sup>3</sup>*

The railroad did reach Waterways, five kilometers from Fort McMurray, in 1925. Once a two-story log mission-chapel was built, in 1914, the first resident priest, Father Adolphe Laffont, arrived. This first log church, with a capacity of 100, was moved in Heritage Park in 1958, thanks to the untiring efforts of Father



Bernard Brown.<sup>4</sup> The parishioners were Chipewyan and Crees and white settlers from various parts of the world. The multi-lingual Father Laffont preached every Sunday in French, English, Chipewyan and Cree, keeping his other languages, Italian and Spanish dormant for several years!<sup>5</sup>

A small salt plant erected in 1925 and the development of the Abasand oil plant caused some population growth, thus a need for a larger church, which was completed in 1926. As early as 1915, Father Laffont saw the need for a hospital. So did the people of Fort McMurray as more industrial machinery was being used and more accidents were occurring.

*The missionary wants to have a hospital. Or rather, not he, not the priest, but the people, the parishioners. McMurray is becoming what they call a hive of industry. [...] We must have a hospital and we must have Nursing Sisters. [...] we are 300 miles [460 kilometers] away from all possibility of medical or surgical treatment. I have seen Nursing Sisters at work, and I know that with them we shall have a good hospital and we shall be content. Now the children also must be considered. [...] So we must have a school.<sup>6</sup>*

There was active correspondence between Father Laffont and Bishop Célestin Joussard, Auxiliary to Bishop Gabriel Breynat for Athabasca. In 1929, Father Joseph Le Treste became the pastor at Fort McMurray and continued to expose the urgent needs of this Mission.

Bishop Breynat had other priorities in his vast diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith and was not able to endorse the building of a hospital at Fort McMurray until the 1930s. On November 14, 1936, he sent a formal request to the Grey Nuns in a letter to Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General. Seven days later, the Grey Nuns' General Council approved the foundation of a hospital at Fort McMurray. It was not a coincidence, but the special attention of Divine Providence that this approval occurred on November 21, the Feast Day of the Presentation of Mary. Mother Gallant wrote:

*For almost a century, our two Congregations have journeyed together on the road of sacrifice and apostolate; I would feel like I was failing a duty, if I was the first one to break this tradition. On behalf of our General Council, I convey to you the 'YES' that you expected in answer to your letter of November 14.<sup>7</sup>*

The letter indicated that, for the time being, only the hospital could be staffed by sisters. The hope of providing teachers as well could not be fulfilled immediately.

A heavenly patron needed to be named for the future hospital and Bishop Breynat suggested that the Grey Nuns themselves make that choice. In a prayerful gathering on December 7, 1936, the General Council chose the name: 'Saint Gabriel Hospital', thus honoring the patron saint of Bishop Gabriel Breynat, to the Bishop's delight.

## *The foundresses*

Between Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General and Mother Anna Lusignan, Provincial Superior, three foundresses were selected: Sister Marie Nadeau, superior, arrived on May 14 from Fort Smith. She was a 42 year old nurse who had served at St. Anne Hospital in Fort Smith since 1935. Several months earlier, on March 21, Mother Anna Lusignan and Sister St-Adjutor (Rose-Anna Henri) came to the almost completed Saint Gabriel Hospital to clean, paint, and arrange the furniture, equipment and supplies. Fifty year old Sister St-Adjutor had just completed her mandate as superior at St-Joseph Hospital at Fort Resolution; she was to serve as cook in this new hospital. One other nurse for Saint Gabriel Hospital completed the group: Sister Aldéa Roberge, 28 years old who arrived May 18.

## *The hospital*

These three sisters were given the internal management of a brand-new, two-storey hospital complete with a vast basement

floor. A Government of Alberta construction grant contributed to this lovely brick building, the first such built in the region. It was constructed to accommodate 27 patients and four babies. For the first 10 years, until 1948, the top floor was used as a residence for the sisters and female employees, leaving 15 beds for patients on the first floor. This proved sufficient to meet the community's needs at that time.

The foundresses were guided in their mission with a contract signed on November 29, 1937, by Bishop Gabriel Breynat, Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie-Fort Smith and Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General of the Grey Nuns:

*While the hospital is under the direction of the Reverend Father Superior [of the Oblate Mission] and depends entirely on its financial support, the sisters will have the internal management of the institution. [...] the sisters are committed to care for the sick committed to them, using the resources provided by the Reverend Fathers.<sup>8</sup>*

In an interview in 1987 with two of the surviving foundresses, historian Sister Agnes Sutherland, collected interesting facts which she included in her 1996 publication. Sister Marie Nadeau, then 92 years old, recalled,

*We worked almost day and night to unpack, open and place all the donations we received from: the C.W.L. [Catholic Women's League], the Ryan Brothers, the Salt Plan, Dr. [Aristide] Blais, Northern Transportation, the Hudson's Bay Company and Cooper Corporation in Edmonton. Everybody was so happy to get a hospital and they were anxious for it to be officially opened.*

*The hospital was not yet ready for service when the first patient arrived [May 16, 1938]. Rachel Bourque, the mother of Délia Bourque, [a future Grey Nun] was already in labour and in great pain so she was immediately admitted. Brother Laurent Bruyère, head of the construction crew, noticed that there was an emergency and we needed help.*



*He rushed over to help unwrap and install a mattress and a bed. [...] sad to say, the mother died shortly after giving birth. [...] That was a terribly sad moment for me and for the family. We were heartbroken and wept and tried to console the family. We had very few deaths in the hospital from then on. With God's help and our best efforts, we did miracles without antibiotics and modern day medicines.<sup>9</sup>*

A Mass was celebrated by Father Gérard Chouinard on Saturday, May 21 in the hospital's 'lovely little chapel' with music and singing provided by the Oblate Brothers. With pride and gratitude, the chronicler described the precious chalice, gift of Pope Pius XI to Bishop Gabriel Breynat for a future Eskimo mission; the richly decorated tabernacle, a gift from the sisters of the Edmonton General Hospital, and the delightful surprise of a full ciborium of hosts made at the mother house. The Stations of the Cross, that were to be blessed by Father Gérard Chouinard on June 7 was also recorded with gratitude as a gift from the Grey Nuns operating Saint Mary's Hospital in Montréal at that time.<sup>10</sup>

On Saturday, May 28, Bishop Gabriel Breynat celebrated Mass at 0600 hours, a regular time in those years. In the afternoon, he proceeded to the Blessing and Official Opening of Saint Gabriel Hospital. While the C.W.L. and the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE) graciously served tea to the guests, tours of the hospital fascinated and delighted the many visitors from Fort McMurray and Waterways.<sup>11</sup>

God's marvelous Providence always watches over us sustaining and supporting our faith, enthusiasm and courage. An example, showing the need for a balance of spirituality and leisure in this new venture, was the kind letter from Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General to her new missionaries of Fort McMurray:

*[The mission of Fort] McMurray will be what we make it. Think about that often, especially in this first year where sacrifices may abound. Think about it when it gets cold and dark, and fill the hospital with the lovely sun of trust, joy and surrender to God. Be joyful. Be holy. [...] I hope you*

*have at least the essentials in your house. As for the game of parchesi, it will come as soon as we have a chance to send you this indispensable item!*<sup>12</sup>

Nursing care in those years meant much more than the clinical aspect of patient comfort and curing. In a small hospital, it meant also housekeeping, laundry, gardening for food, blueberry picking, admitting and accounting duties, work in pharmacy, cleaning and sterilizing supplies, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Additional staff was soon required, even with a daily census of one to 11 patients. The first two nurses arrived in July and August: Miss McNeil, a graduate from Edmonton General Hospital, came from July 12 to September 22 and Sister Eva Bouchard arrived as a permanent addition on August 31.<sup>13</sup>

Once the first hurdles of beginning a new hospital were past, the sisters joined in the Grey Nuns' celebration of the 200th Anniversary of their foundation by Marguerite d'Youville in 1737. A Thanksgiving Mass, celebrated by Father Joseph Serrurot filled the 31 person chapel to capacity. Fathers Joseph Ehmann and Gérard Chouinard were present. Music was provided by Miss Poitras, a former student of Fort Chipewyan. The air was full of rejoicing and hope.

Ironically, survival of the hospital was a frequent concern during those years as so many patients were unable to pay for the care received at the hospital and government support was very minimal. In August 1938, the Ladies Aid Society organized a bazaar which raised \$186.00 for the hospital. In December the same year, they held a raffle, a tea, and showed a film netting another \$255.57. In addition, the hunters decided to bring wild game to the hospital.<sup>14</sup>

Obtaining electricity from the village was very expensive for the tiny hospital. To circumvent the problem, the Mission installed its own Lister generator on October 5, 1938. There was nothing in the way of the ingenious Oblate Brothers when it came to serve their hospital.

In December 1939, rumors were heard that the Bishop might have to close the hospital for financial reasons. Immediately, a

benevolent Mrs. McDonald organized a fund raising program and shortly thereafter brought in \$250.00 to the hospital. Using more of her remarkable energy, she convinced many former patients to accomplish the impossible and pay their outstanding bills to the caring institution.<sup>15</sup> Once more the hospital was saved.

A more sober moment was experienced when the 13-year old Saint Jean-Baptiste parish church was totally destroyed by fire on February 19, 1939. Its location near the hospital and the Oblates residence created fears that the whole Mission would become engulfed in the terrifying blaze. Necessary precautions and prayers prevented a cataclysm.

From then on, alternate arrangements were made for a place to offer public worship to God and a suitable environment for people to receive support, peace and guidance from above. The sisters vacated a shed used for storage and the Brothers renovated the large area which became a house of worship until another larger church was built in 1950. Twenty years later, this building was sold and became the Trinity Lutheran Church. On March 22, 1970, parishioners entered their new modern church for Pentecost Sunday Liturgy.<sup>16</sup> The church was blessed by Bishop Paul Piché on June 7, 1970 amidst music, and songs and flowers, and much thanksgiving.

After the church fire, came the financial boom experienced at Fort McMurray in the 1940s with the discovery of oil, the influx of American soldiers working on the CANOL pipeline resulting in a marked increase of the population and more need for hospital beds. While 1938 registered 108 patient admissions to the hospital, there were 614 in 1944. That year, Father William Leising graduated from a course in dentistry and began practicing his newly acquired skills at the hospital, in addition to his piloting duties for the whole diocese.

Over the years, the sisters often received supportive approval for their dedication, be it from their own Superiors in Montréal and Fort Smith, or the Brothers, priests, Bishops, and other visitors. Physicians also noted their appreciation. Comments from Mother Léonie Ferland, General Secretary during a visit and Dr.



Brown before leaving Fort McMurray are noted at random:

*We have seen much greatness, supernatural dedication and heroism which could surely dilate the heart of [Mother Marie-Théodora Courville], the one who is responsible for Mother d'Youville's spiritual heritage.<sup>17</sup>*

*My sincerest thanks for all your kindness and devoted and skillful help to all the staff. You have made my work here a pleasure and the years spent with you are very precious to me. May God be ever with you.<sup>18</sup>*

By the late forties, the 1938 building was becoming far too small for the growing population and the health care needs of the region. Its physical layout was no longer adequate in view of changing standards and new services such as radiology, laboratories and central supply, to name a few. The Government of Alberta was acutely aware of its responsibility to improve health services for the citizens of Fort McMurray and Waterways. Visits and evaluations by government officials concluded that a new structure was needed. The 1938 building was replaced by the 34-bed ultra-modern Fort McMurray General Hospital which opened in August 1966. The capacity later increased to 50 beds and the hospital was replaced by a new structure in 1977. Two years later, in 1979, the 1938 Saint Gabriel Hospital building was demolished to make room for the city library.<sup>19</sup>

Working at the hospital, for Sisters Thérèse Pelletier and Thérèse Lafrenière, was not all work and no play, as one incident testified. During one of their days off, both nurses went walking on the shore of the Athabasca River and enjoying God's magnificent nature. First thing they knew they were stuck in the Tar Sands. Removing their shoes, they hanged them around their necks, removed their socks, but the situation worsened with each step. By now, the Tar Sands were engulfing their legs to mid-calves. Suddenly, there was a boat up the river. *Do you need help?* was the friendly call which received the immediate answer, *Of course, we do*, as they recognized the parish priest, future Bishop of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, Father Denis Croteau. By

that time, they had Tar Sands up to their knees. Father Croteau 'reverently' helped them to the boat, but there began the merciless teasing for which the two victims had no choice but forgive their savior.

When the General Hospital opened in 1966, the new Board hired Sister Claire Cardinal as Director of Nursing and Sister Cécile Jeannotte as head nurse of the Operating Room, the latter for a one-year posting. Sister Cardinal remained in her position until November, 1969 at which time she returned to Saint Gabriel Hospital, as Administrator, until its closure on July 31, 1970.

There were genuine expressions of gratitude and sadness from staff and patients at the General Hospital when Sister Cardinal announced her departure: notes of thanks, flowers, gifts, and a testimonial dinner at the Islander Restaurant on November 12, 1969 for all staff. It was recognized by all that Sister Claire Cardinal's services in these first three years of the hospital had placed its future on the road to success. This was a comforting thought for the departing Director of Nursing.

## *The school*

A Separate School District was formed by the Oblates in 1936, when they opened Saint John's School and hired two Catholic teachers. Forty-three students were registered in Grades I to X in 1936. By 1949, the number had risen only to 54 students in Grades I to IX, higher Grades went to the Public High School for a number of years. Sister Marie Boulet was Principal of Saint John's School from September 1949 until 1953. There was a dramatic increase in the school population after 1950 as Fort McMurray continued to grow: in 1962, 207 students were registered in Grades I to XII. The other two Grey Nun Principals at Saint John's School were Sister Yvette Lapointe from 1954 to 1962 and Sister Agnes Sutherland from 1963 to 1969. Saint John's School completed a new addition in 1974, a wing dedicated to the Grey Nuns of Montréal. Sister Sutherland was delegated to receive and acknowledge this congregational recognition.<sup>20</sup>

The J.A. Turcotte School opened on January 6, 1969 for 300 elementary students. In that new school, Frank Peters was hired as Principal and Sister Eveline Gagnon as Vice-Principal, with a major emphasis on Religious Education. The name of the school, *J.A. Turcotte* was chosen in memory of the Oblate priest, Joseph A. Turcotte, who was instrumental in building the Catholic Education system in Fort McMurray.

### *Sisters leaving*

In 1970, Sister Gagnon was called further North and, reluctantly left Fort McMurray where she had given so much of herself over 10 years. The Principal, Frank Peters did not conceal his deep regrets at losing Sister Gagnon in his letter to the Provincial Superior, Sister Yvette Lapointe:

*I have a matter which is causing me quite an amount of concern and it is Sister Gagnon's departure from Fort McMurray. I know that this is practically finalized and as you are well aware she will be sadly missed. I am convinced of the value of having a Sister on staff who has a vigorous, fresh approach to the teaching of Religion.<sup>21</sup>*

This was not the last of a series of regrets when, one after the other, Sisters were called to serve in more destitute areas further North. When the last sisters left Fort McMurray Separate School District, on July 23, 1971, the Chair of the Board of Trustees wrote to Sister Yvette Lapointe, then Provincial Superior,

*After 22 years of apostleship in our schools of Fort McMurray, eight of which were filled by yourself as Principal and Teacher, your Sisters have now turned their sight towards more destitute pastures.*

*We would be most ungrateful, if we forgot to convey to you, and your Sisters, who have so generously given to us the benefit of their talents, their health, their time and their virtues, the cordial expression of our sincere gratitude. [...]*



*We read in the diary of the Oblates, August 28, 1953. Sister Yvette Lapointe, our new Principal, visited St. John's School this morning. Having consulted the registers, she decided to teach herself Grades 7, 8, 9, 10, & 11. Mr. Jacques Moquin will teach Grades 4, 5, & 6. Sister [Agnes] Sutherland will look after Grades 2 & 3. Miss Germaine Godbout will take charge of Grade 1. We know that, in the following years you alone have taught, and with great success, all High School grades, including Grade 12.*

*Although somewhat better supported in the following years, your Sisters have continued to serve in the same spirit of total abnegation and unfailing perseverance until their departure one month ago.*

*We would like you and your Sisters to know that the people of McMurray will never forget you. We shall pray daily that your labors continue to blossom and bear much fruit here, and in the fields of your past, present, and future apostolate.<sup>22</sup>*

More recognition was bestowed upon the Grey Nuns in the following years. On June 30, 1971, Sister Denise Emond was named *1971 Citizen of the Year* by COSMOS (Cosmopolitan Club) as a tribute for her service to the Girl Guide movement over many years in all capacities and positions, for her numerous church affiliations, for her activities with all children, for her teaching at J.A. Turcotte Elementary School, for her precious work as member of the CWL and Parish Council, and as Director of the Knights of the Altar.<sup>23</sup>

In April 1982, Sister Eveline Gagnon was delighted to represent the Grey Nuns at the Blessing and Official Opening of Saint Gabriel School by Bishop Raymond Roy of Saint Paul, Alberta.<sup>24</sup> In recognition of the immense service rendered by the Grey Nuns in Fort McMurray over the years, the Catholic School District decided to encase the corner stone of the original Saint Gabriel Hospital, which was engraved: AD 1937.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout a period of 33 years, 92 Grey Nuns have been present at Fort McMurray, giving the best of themselves for a

cumulated total of 324 years. Involved formally in health and education, and informally in all areas of the lives of the people, the Grey Nuns developed fond relationships with the Chipewyan, the Crees and the Whites settled in Fort McMurray. The town grew from a few hundred people in 1936 to over 30,000 in the 1980s. Currently, the population is about 50,000. Throughout the years, the sisters were part of every family in town; they taught and cared for virtually all members of two generations and they are remembered with gratitude.

*If the people of McMurray remember...the Grey Nuns who lived there also remember!*<sup>26</sup>

#### NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 7

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  - 24 In 1979, McMurray transferred to the Diocese of Saint Paul.
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# CHAPTER EIGHT

1940 -

## RAE-EDZO

**L**ocated at some 16 kilometers apart, Fort Rae and Edzo, the Oblate and Grey Nuns Mission was initially located at Fort Rae. Occasional visits were paid by the Oblate priests to Edzo for a number of years. The settlement was named after John Rae, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, who opened a trading post at the old Fort Rae site, in 1852. Around 1899, the Dogrib people began to move to Fort Rae, toward the southeast shore of Marian Lake, about 110 kilometers northwest of Yellowknife.<sup>1</sup>

By 1940, there were close to 800 Natives at Fort Rae. The Dogrib people of the settlement were first visited by Father Henri Grollier when he performed the first Baptisms and celebrated a first Mass at Fort Rae on April 17, 1859. Thus was founded Saint Michael Mission at Fort Rae. The people were grateful to obtain their first resident missionary for Saint Michel Mission, Father Bruno Roure, in 1872.

In 1938, Bishop Gabriel Breynat informed Mother Evangéline Gallant, Superior General that the Government wanted to build a hospital at Fort Rae, and that they would need sisters to staff the institution. The following year, he wrote again,

*The construction of our hospital is well underway. It should be ready to open in the fall [...] You know that we can count only on you. The superior should be on site in August, at the latest, with a companion, to direct the internal organization of the hospital.*<sup>2</sup>

And, on April 10, 1940, Mother Gallant responded that the General Council was unanimous in accepting the request for sisters at the future hospital in Fort Rae. She added,

*I must admit that we had to close our eyes to human prudence in that decision, because right now, we really do not know where to find foundresses, not that we are lacking sisters who are apt and generous, but because all our houses are already short of sisters. How to take from these workers already too few?*<sup>3</sup>

Immediately, on May 4, 1940, a contract was drawn and signed by the Bishop and the Superior General. The conditions were similar, if not identical, to those of other northern hospitals administered by the Oblates in which Grey Nuns served. The sisters were responsible for the internal management of the hospital, the care of patients, and providing services to the Oblates, such as meals, laundry and housekeeping. The Oblates were responsible for the spiritual and material assistance required by the sisters.

## *The foundresses*

Sisters Alida Gamache, superior, Berthe Gaudette, Félixina Lamoureux and Gertrude Lemire were the four women chosen to open the Faraud Hospital in Fort Rae, named in recognition of Bishop Henri Faraud, first Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie-Fort Smith. It was the custom that the Provincial Superior would accompany the foundresses to their new mission and help them organize their abode. This time, Mother Emérentienne Martin, unable to be free, delegated this service of love to Sister Marcelline Vermette, her councillor and superior at Fort Resolution.

When on August 26, 1940, this group of six sisters arrived aboard the Guy boat, the Oblate missionaries and some 200 Natives were on shore to welcome them with obvious delight. The Natives greeted them with their traditional handshake and all marched happily to the church for prayer. Kneeling at the altar, Sister Vermette read a prayer of consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Then, guided by their pastor, Father Nicolas Laperrière, the Natives sang with joyful hearts, a hymn to Mary, their heavenly Mother.



A little more than a month later, the Mission being named Saint Michel, meant September 29, the Feast Day of saint Michel, was a major celebration at Fort Rae. Many joined the missionaries for Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament with singing and music, including Bishop Joseph Trocellier, Coadjutor to Bishop Gabriel Breynat.

### *Their hospital and home*

Contrary to a custom established in the Far North, the building was almost ready when the foundresses arrived. As a result, instead of living in a temporary shed or attic for months or years, the sisters were able to move into their living quarters inside the hospital within a week of their arrival.<sup>4</sup> This status 'almost ready' did not keep the sisters from wielding tools and paintbrushes before admitting their first patient, on October 12.

The efficient and dedicated Brothers had built a two storey 35-bed hospital, the best in the North so far. Part of the upper floor was initially used as a residence for sisters and female staff, thus leaving about 15 beds for patients. A generator began to provide electricity on October 8. On December 1, the **Chroniques** noted the first mail received since their arrival in August.

The furniture in the hospital was rather rudimentary, if not almost totally absent in some areas. When Mr. Darwish, bourgeois of the Northern Transportation Co. Ltd., visited on December 8 and noticed the poverty of the hospital, he took no time to offer his kind contribution. The following day, he sent an armchair; this was the only one in the hospital. Mrs. Buffum, employee of the same Company, sent a phonograph and records for the patients and sisters. Both donors were profusely thanked and often named in prayers.

December 8, 1940, Father Nicolas Laperrière blessed the hospital, a ceremony attended by almost 60 persons, including 50 Natives. There was standing room only in the chapel for two reasons: the exiguity of the area and the absence of pews. These were to come at a later date.

The **Chroniques** entry for December 25, 1940, the Grey Nuns' first Christmas at Fort Rae, was one of thanksgiving and consolations.

*Our first Christmas at Rae [Fort Rae]. Many come for Midnight Mass, (about 250 Natives)... All pray and sing fervently; it is very edifying. Throughout the day, they all come to the hospital to visit and 'touch hands'.<sup>5</sup>*

In the early years, a 10-year old boy was admitted to the hospital with high fever. As soon as he was put to bed, he started crying uncontrollably. Sister Gertrude Lemire asked him what was the matter. Between sobs, he answered that it was *like death: white sheets, high bed*. Immediately, a mattress was placed on the floor, covered with dark sheets. Sister Lemire recalled 60 years later that the boy's laughter became as uncontrollable as his crying.<sup>6</sup>

Fort Rae was never able to obtain a resident physician for any length of time, but patients were still coming for cuts, bruises, toothaches, and the like. They were also coming for admission: a daily census of between nine and 12 patients was noted in the 1940 and 1941 reports.<sup>7</sup> On occasional visits from Fort Resolution, Dr. Joseph Riopel was kept very busy, but these visits were irregular and infrequent. Needless to say that the sisters found the situation stressful and unpredictable. The load on their shoulders was somewhat relieved with the arrival of two more nurses: Sisters Anita Ménard and Aldéa Roberge in April and September respectively.

Bishop Gabriel Breynat was mindful of the Federal Government's unkept promise to provide a physician for Fort Rae. He was also concerned for the safety of patients and staff in a hospital without medical presence. Added to the serious financial restrictions of his Vicariate, the Bishop decided, in July 1942, to temporarily close Faraud Hospital until a physician was assigned to Fort Rae. There was disbelief and sorrow amongst the missionaries and the residents of Fort Rae. An endless line of visitors, Natives and Whites, came to express their regrets, their pain,

*Our hearts are aching, we do not want you to leave.<sup>8</sup>*

Nevertheless, on September 11, 1942, after turning the key of the hospital door, the sisters returned to the provincial house in Fort Smith, consoled by the support of their many sisters, especially Mothers Evangéline Gallant, Superior General and Léonie Ferland, General Secretary, on their return trip from their visit to the Far North missions.

In 1943, Bishop Joseph Trocellier, newly appointed as Vicar Apostolic of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, who replaced the retired Bishop Gabriel Breynat, went to Ottawa in order to resolve the issue of Faraud Hospital. He was successful in having the Federal Government plan to find a physician and re-open the hospital which had been closed for 10 months. That good news was received by the sisters on March 19, 1943, the Feast Day of Saint Joseph.

*I have no doubt that the great Saint Joseph is responsible for the success of the Bishop's trip to Ottawa.<sup>9</sup>*

Traveling in the Saint Gabriel boat, the sisters left Fort Smith in the evening of June 28, stopped at Fort Resolution the following evening, to wait for a fifth sister, Sister Marie-Anne Lacasse, to join their group. On the morning of Saturday, July 2, they landed at the long-desired Fort Rae. It was a special Feast Day at Saint Michel Mission, the solemn feast of the Sacred Heart. The Oblates and the Native population were just leaving the church following Mass. They all came to shore, delighted to welcome the returning missionaries. Another Mass was celebrated by Father Alphonse Mansoz with the sisters in their little chapel, all neat and tidy, thanks to the care of the devoted Oblates. With one heart, all sang a vibrant Magnificat, followed by hymns to the Sacred Heart. It was indeed a joyful day for all.

Were the people ever happy to have their sisters back! And their nurses on duty! All lined up to enter the hospital and greet the sisters. Three patients were admitted to the hospital the following day. And, it was 'business as usual' in the resurrected Faraud Hospital.

On July 6, an official from the Department of Mines and



Resources in Ottawa, Mr. Mickle, visited the hospital and noted in the guest book,

*A very fine institution for the North.*<sup>10</sup>

The activities at the hospital kept increasing to the patients' and missionaries' satisfaction. By July 15, there were 15 in-patients receiving 'tender loving care', a number that increased to 20 by August 9. At the end of 1943, 138 patients had been admitted since the re-opening of the hospital six months earlier. Fort Rae did not obtain a resident physician immediately, but more frequent attentions of visiting physicians were noted after 1943. Dr. Otto Rath, the first resident physician at Fort Rae, arrived only in 1950. By 1953, a well-deserved promotion was his lot; he was placed in charge of medical supervision for the NWT.<sup>11</sup>

By the mid 1900s, epidemics were rather rare, even in the Far North. The most widespread in previous years was tuberculosis. This disease was almost eradicated with the isolation of patients, the arrival of diagnostic procedures, especially Radiology, which was installed in 1949, and new pharmaceutical discoveries.

In 1947, there was no immunization against a number of contagious diseases and in August of that year, a measles epidemic was recorded in Fort Rae. There was an unusually large number of patients in the hospital: 32 on August 13, and 44 on the 15th. With a lack of space, many preferred to lie on the floor, however, rather than going back home. This makes one wonder how adequate isolation techniques could be practiced in such crowded conditions. Nevertheless, in August, 107 patients had been admitted and 79 had returned home by the end of the month, while some of the remaining patients were transferred to Fort Resolution's Saint Joseph Hospital or Edmonton's Charles Camsell Hospital.

A fire began in the chimney on December 13, 1948. When relics and pictures of Marguerite d'Youville were placed near the chimney, the fire surprisingly stopped. The following day, Father Nicolas Laperrière and the congregation gathered to offer a special Mass of thanksgiving in honor of the future Saint Marguerite.<sup>12</sup>

September 1953 marked the arrival of street lights at Fort Rae

and the installation of a telephone between the hospital and the physician's residence. Then on November 13 of that year, an unusual event excited the whole population. A defective plane landed close to Fort Rae; it was towed to the village by 22 dogs that were guided by some 30 men to keep them in line! By 1953, to see a plane landing or taking off at Fort Rae had become a frequent sight, but to see the 'big bird' being pulled by dogs was another story worthy of mention in the Guinness Book of Records!<sup>13</sup>

Shortage of beds in the hospital was a daily concern. Therefore, when a new wing, which raised the bed capacity from 35 to 60, was completed in September 1955, it was received with enthusiastic welcome. There was no panicking for space when the typhoid epidemic struck in 1958 and bouts of influenza in 1959 and 1960.

This improved health care service, coupled with road construction between Yellowknife and Fort Smith, through Fort Rae, ended the reputation of Fort Rae as the most isolated mission in the NWT. Modernization of services meant water closets were given a 'red carpet' welcome when they replaced the chemical toilets in 1968.

Federal health officials often visited Fort Rae and voiced their uneasiness at the poor hygienic and safety conditions available to the population. Many possibilities were discussed, including the relocation of people and services to Edzo, some 15 kilometers west of Fort Rae. In view of the objections of the people, no pressure was used to move to a more salubrious environment, but a decision was reached that the Edzo Cottage Hospital would be built, leaving a Nursing Station at Fort Rae. On September 1, 1974, the Department of National Health and Welfare assumed the administration of Faraud Hospital facilitating the transition to the new facility. Faraud Hospital closed on September 30, when the last and only patient at Faraud Hospital, a baby, was being transferred at the new Edzo Cottage Hospital.

On Thursday, August 29, 1974, members of Fort Smith Provincial Council: Sisters Marie Lemire, Provincial Superior,



Germaine Ménard, Assistant and Cécile Jeannotte, secretary were invited by the people of Fort Rae to a celebration of gratitude for the presence and services of the Grey Nuns at Fort Rae over 34 years. On September 30, 1974, the sisters left Fort Rae and moved to Edzo. The thought that the sisters would continue to serve at Edzo eased the pain of this day.

The Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese owner of that defunct hospital was left with a large building to empty. Sister Eveline Gagnon, missionary at Edzo, in a letter to her parents, described the activities surrounding this huge task left in the hands of Sister Cécile Montpetit,

*People come to pick up doors, windows, closets to fix their house before winter. There are many beds, sheets, wool blankets; this makes a lot of families happy. [...] We also found 12 cases of yellow Sunlight bars of soap (at least 1,700). This is about the population of Rae and Edzo; so there will be just distribution. There were seven dozens of black shoe laces and 15 Bank of Montréal calendars of the year 1940, the year the hospital opened.<sup>14</sup>*

Sisters Louise Brosseau, Fernande Maranda and Thérèse Plante left their residence on the third floor of Faraud Hospital and moved to Edzo where Sisters Cécile Montpetit and Eveline Gagnon had a residence since 1971. Both Sisters Brosseau and Plante, nurses, and Sister Maranda, a cook, were employed at the 12-bed Edzo Cottage Hospital. This new hospital experienced periods of growing pains. It even receded to the status of Nursing Station for several months in early 1975, due to the unavailability of nursing personnel.

When more personal security was provided for women traveling at night, to and from work, in Edzo, the main problem with recruitment and retention of nurses eased and the sisters' load of work improved. Providentially, Sister Thérèse Plante was able to respond to an urgent call, in March 1975, to replace, in Fort Smith, Sister Claire Cardinal who died suddenly on February 9.<sup>15</sup>

During their stay at Edzo until 1982, the sister-nurses, Sisters



Louise Brosseau and Cécile Montpetit, continued to serve at the hospital and the school, visiting homes and attending clinic days at Fort Rae. The first Public Health nurse at Fort Rae was Sister Marguerite Lachambre who filled this role from 1965 until 1971. Moving to Edzo at that time to be closer to the school, she focused more specifically on nursing at the school and student residence. Sister Cécile Montpetit was the second Public Health nurse at Rae-Edzo, arriving in April 1972. Her functions included coverage of the settlements of Fort Rae, Lac La Martre, Rae Lake and Snare Lake. Some 150 home visits and several group clinics were required each month, in addition to visits at the Jimmy Bruneau School.

In 1982, the only two Grey Nuns ministering at Rae-Edzo were Sister Louise Brosseau, working in Public Health and Sister Aurore Larkin, Parish worker. That year, they moved their residence back to Fort Rae where Bishop Paul Piché had a new house built for the sisters on the site of the former Faraud Hospital.

In the health care sector, Sister Cécile Montpetit gave a total of 40 years to the missions of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, including 15 years in the Rae-Edzo region. Her long and dedicated contribution did not go unnoticed among the Natives for whom she devoted most of her life, as well as among those granting prestigious honors. On October 24, 1990, she was made a Member of the Order of Canada; on October 15, 1992, she was officially received as Sister Servant of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem; and in December of that year, she was awarded the Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Canadian Confederation.

## *Education*

The history of education at Fort Rae highlights the admirable efforts of Chief Jimmy Bruneau of the Dogrib Band located in the settlement. When a school, bearing his name, opened in Edzo, in 1971, it made the headlines in **News of the North** and created pride and hope for the people. Earlier accomplishments by Chief

Jimmy Bruneau were cited,

*As early as 1938, the chief of the Dogrib people, Jimmy Bruneau, was pressing the government of Canada for a school for his people. But it wasn't until 1946 that the first government school was built in the community of Rae. It had one classroom, and later, in 1967, its size was increased to four classrooms. During the same year, Chief Bruneau requested that a proper school be built at Rae and that it be operated by his people.<sup>16</sup>*

Other sources indicate that the first school opened at Fort Rae on Wednesday, April 14, 1948 with 17 students.<sup>17</sup> It was also noted that the majority of the lay teachers who were hired were of the Roman Catholic faith.

The Jimmy Bruneau School had a capacity for 400 students and the residence could accommodate 100 students coming from distant areas. Students from nearby Fort Rae were transported to school daily by bus. There were 21 teachers, including four Natives.

Sister Eveline Gagnon's teaching at Edzo reveals the overwhelming impact of her ministry in the area of Catechetics from 1971 to 1979. In addition to almost 400 students of the Jimmy Bruneau School, divided into 32 groups, her zeal reached many Grey Nuns and Natives desiring to learn new methods of teaching religious subjects in schools. Some would come for weeks to observe her approach in teaching all grades, ask questions, take notes and return, with more self-confidence, to their home-base in Inuvik, Holman Island, Yellowknife, and countless other places to impart their knowledge and use their newly-acquired skills.

When Sister Gagnon was accepted for a program in Religious Studies in Rome, in the fall of 1979, many regrets were voiced, at the news of her departure, from the people she had helped with much dedication. Their good wishes and prayers accompanied her during her studies in Rome.

## *Sisters leaving*

In 1995, Sister Cécile Montpetit was the last Grey Nun remaining at Rae-Edzo. Her last companions, Sister Ann Neumier, had left on June 19, 1995 for another mission further north, while Sister Carol Borreson's last day was August 25, as she left for a mission in Saskatchewan.

Until the day of her departure, November 22, 1995, Sister Montpetit continued her functions as a Public Health nurse. This day sent an unmistakable message that the Grey Nuns, having joyfully given their unfailing contribution to the health, education and well-being of the people of Rae-Edzo for 55 years, had now reached the moment where it was no longer possible to find replacement. A total of 66 sisters had come and gone, after having spent the best of themselves in giving a cumulated total of 268 years with joy, compassion and total dedication.

During a last official visit at Rae-Edzo, Sister Bernadette Poirier, Superior General, was present at the Mass of Sunday, October 8, 1995. The celebrant, Father Jean Pochat, took the opportunity to thank the Grey Nuns for their ministry in this region since 1940. He then, asked Sister Poirier to speak to the assembly. It was a delicate task to respond to the people's main question: *Why are the Grey Nuns leaving?* Trust and faith in Divine Providence came out clearly in her response, indicating that for 55 years, the people of this region had observed the ministry of the Grey Nuns, and they had learned to use their God-given talents and skills in the service of God and their brothers and sisters. They were now ready to take over their own destiny, remembering that Divine Providence will be with them always.

*Going to the microphone, the Great Chief Jos Rabesca profusely thanked the Grey Nuns, saying, I learned from the Sisters at the Residential School to read the Bible and to practice it and these were happy moments. Always we will be united in prayer.<sup>18</sup>*



NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 8

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- 2 Breynat, Bishop Gabriel, **Letter** to Mother Evangéline Gallant, March 27, 1940, MmyArch.
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- 5 **Ibid.**, p. 6.
- 6 Lemire, Gertrude, s.g.m., **Reminiscences**, May 2000.
- 7 **Personnel et Oeuvres**, 1940-1941, GNRC Arch.
- 8 **Chroniques**, p. 17.
- 9 Gamache, Alida, s.g.m. to the mother house, in **Annales 1942-43**, pp. 914-915.
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- 11 **Ibid.**, p. 135.
- 12 **Ibid.**, p. 120.
- 13 **Ibid.**, pp. 135-137
- 14 Gagnon, Eveline, s.g.m., **Letter**, September 23, 1974.
- 15 See: Chapter IV of this Volume .
- 16 *Officials hand over School*, in **News of the North**, Yellowknife, January 13, 1972, GNRC Arch.
- 17 **Chroniques**, p. 76.
- 18 **Chroniques**, pp. 423-424.



Fort McMurray - Grey Nuns' cottage, now located in the Historic village



Fort Rae, Farquhar Hospital, 1940



Fort Rae, dog sleighs - those dogs did pull an airplane!





# CHAPTER NINE

1962 -

## HAY RIVER

The year 1962 marked the opening of another Grey Nuns mission in the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. At that time, Bishop Paul Piché, noticing the great need for a Catholic school at Hay River, asked Mother Alice Gauthier, Provincial Superior of the Grey Nuns' Province Divine Providence, to assist his Diocese in opening Saint Paul School at Hay River. Coincidentally, both Mother Alice Gauthier and Bishop Piché hailed from Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan.

*Hay River is situated south-west of Great Slave Lake. Electronically measured, this lake is said to have a surface area of approximately 12 to 13,000 miles [20,280 kilometers]. It is believed to be the deepest body of water in the world. Its depth averages 2,500 to 3,000 feet [525 to 870 meters] below sea level. [...] Hay River had neither running water nor drainage systems due to the muskeg. Drinking water was delivered by truck.<sup>1</sup>*

### *The foundresses*

At this new mission, having been duly approved by Mother Georgette Leduc, Superior General and the General Council,<sup>2</sup> a convent and a school were built by the Diocese and, as always, with the assiduous work of the Oblate Brothers.

Two sisters arrived on Wednesday, July 18, 1962 piloted by Father William Leising, aboard a CF-OMI aircraft: Sisters Blandine Lévesque, superior-foundress and Irène Gallant, acting

principal. Both the convent and the school were almost completed to receive the sisters.

*In an intimate colloquium with the Lord, Sister superior earnestly recommended the new ministry of the Grey Nuns in Hay River.<sup>3</sup>*

On Sunday, July 22, Father Francis Ebner, parish priest, officially welcomed the Grey Nuns to Hay River to assume the direction of Saint Paul School. Within a few weeks other sisters arrived to help organize the convent and the school: Sisters Lucie Arsenault, Alice Decoine, Isabelle Hamelin, Germaine Lapointe and Aurise Normandeau. Sister Florence Nolin, whose qualifications from the United States did not find equivalence in the Territorial system of education to allow her to function as principal, came as a teacher for Grades X to XII and Sister Irène Gallant became principal.

## *The school*

A first Mass was celebrated by Father Marc Barrier in the convent dining room on August 24, 1962. By October 8, the chapel was finally ready for a celebration of Mass by Father Gabriel Duchaussois, who was visiting Hay River at that time.

On September 4, 1962, Saint Paul School opened with a registration of 184 eager learners in Grades I to XII. For a larger than anticipated group of students, there were four Grey Nuns and three lay teachers. All prevailing conditions gave hope for a successful year.

For five months following the opening of the school, Sister Blandine Lévesque, superior of the new mission, was hospitalized for recurrent lung problems. During that long period, in her heart and with her prayers, she frequently visited with the missionaries of Hay River. Happy to return on February 1, she might have hoped that the now complete community would enjoy a relatively peaceful year 1963. This was not to be.

## The flood

On April 30, Sister Irène Gallant, on her way to school, saw a large number of women and children who, at the order of the town's authorities, were waiting at the door of Saint Paul School. With a flood raging in the town, people from imminent danger-areas were evacuated. All sisters quickly went to the school to arrange accommodation space and prepare food for all. At the height of the flood, there were as many as 700 people to feed. The federal school also had a number of refugees until their area became inundated with the flood waters as well.

It was estimated that the level of the Hay River climbed a record 5.9 meters above normal. Hay River village was located on the Vale Island, linked to one of the other 10 islands by a 'fill', a road made by workers on a narrow part of the river.

Significant help was received from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian Army, the Red Cross, the food stores and general stores in the village. As soon as the emergency became known to other towns, cities or settlements, help arrived from there as well, especially Fort Smith and Yellowknife. The latter, received 90 persons grateful to find refuge in schools, but after two days, Yellowknife was unable to continue receiving refugees from Hay River as the flood from the Liard River had paralyzed Fort Simpson only two days later. That mission became Yellowknife's priority because of its location. Fort Smith organized classrooms for the displaced students; no one knew how long the forced exile would last. Space was also found for the parents and teachers who followed their students. Indeed it was a major crisis.

By May 3, the water began to recede, but the damage was immeasurable. Sisters were offered to survey the village by helicopter and each one returned brokenhearted, but thankful that the people could now begin to repair the damages and rebuild.

*A few cars can move about. Mackenzie Drive [main street] is impassable. What a havoc. Houses that are still on their site have not been spared by the water. Boats are turned over*



*on the streets. There are none left at the harbor. The wooden sidewalks have moved across the streets. Telephone and electricity wires are scattered on the ground. In areas where the water subsided, furniture is spread out around the houses to dry. Immense blocks of ice meddle among all this. Poor people!*<sup>4</sup>

The devotion and good organization of the sisters were highly praised by town officials and all the families who benefitted from their help. They also received a visit from Arthur Laird, Minister of the Canadian North, on May 3, who assured Sister Blandine Lévesque that the whole population was unanimous in praising the sisters for the devotedness and organization skills they displayed.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to the hard work of Sisters Blandine Lévesque, Irène Gallant and a few helpers who did not evacuate to Fort Smith, the convent re-opened on May 3 and the students returned to school on May 13. In quick succession, noteworthy events filled the life of the young mission:

- June 27 - Blessing of Saint Paul School by Bishop Paul Piché in the presence of Mothers Georgette Leduc and Alice Gauthier, Sister Paulette Fortier, the sisters from the mission, the lay teachers and students.
- July 20 - Total eclipse of the sun which attracted to Hay River viewers from other parts of Canada and the United States.
- September 15 - The recall to Montréal of the superior, Sister Blandine Lévesque, which saddened those who had observed her dedication since the arrival of the sisters at Hay River.
- October 23 - The arrival of a new superior, Sister Marie-du-Carmel (Claudia Landry).

The first few years of Saint Paul School showed a marked increase in enrolment, but there was a change in classes distribution. In 1966, there were 230 students at Saint Paul School in Grades I to IX. That year, Grades X to XII were moved to Vale Island Federal School, in a neighboring town. This constituted the beginning of 'classes categories' replacing the 'separate' and

'public' classification in use since 1962. This change was brought on through some unrest in the population, mostly concerning the costs associated with conducting the same grades in two separate locations.

Bishop Piché, for his part, sent an urgent invitation, on February 1, 1968, to pray for the survival of Saint Paul School which was threatened with financial problems. A year later, a major meeting was held between the Territorial Government, the School Board and Bishop Piché at which a final decision was made to sell the school and convent to the Territorial Government in June, 1970.<sup>6</sup>

June 19, 1970 was the last graduation at Saint Paul School for Grade IX. It was an emotional moment for all: students, parents and teachers, but a proud moment too in reminiscing on the achievements of the school in eight short years of existence. In his Sunday announcements, Father Ebner informed his parishioners that the Separate School District had been dissolved by the Northern Commissary, Stewart Hodgson, as was expected. This marked the disappearance of the last vestige of a Catholic school in Hay River.

When the last day of class came, on June 26, all teachers were on hand to bid farewell to their cherished flock of 177 students. The teachers remained until June 30 to complete the packing and distribution of furniture and materials that belonged to the Diocese before the take over of the School by the Territorial Government.

When the School closed, there were three sisters left at Hay River: Sister Germaine Côté, superior, Anna Bisson, the former principal and teacher and Cécile Allard, who had come for a four-month initiation to catechetics.

## *New ministries*

During the summer of 1970, Father Francis Ebner directed the transformation of the old church into a new Religious Education Centre. A new ministry was therefore ready to begin

under the direction of Sister Anna Bisson, who had many reasons to be grateful. She received marvelous support from Father Ebner and dedicated assistance from Sister Anna Neumier. The first meeting, on September 3, with women interested in catechetics was a great success; at least six volunteered to help in this new educational role. Sister Agnes Sutherland, Diocesan Director of Religious Education was present at the meeting and provided support and encouragement to the new pioneers. The group was well on the road to a new successful venture. Through this new venue, a larger number of students, over 240 in four schools, were reached and a new generation would receive the Good News. Sister Bisson was also responsible for the spiritual program of the CWL in Hay River. She remained in Hay River until 1984 when she was well beyond 75 years old.

A Public Health nurse, Sister Rosalie Cherlet, was in Hay River from 1972 to 1976. In this capacity, she visited the schools, carried out the immunization programs and visited families in need of health care or health teaching. With a certain amount of specialization in working with alcoholics, she took part in sessions given for them. Again, from 1980 to 1989, another Grey Nun, Sister Cécile Montpetit, was hired as Public Health nurse for Hay River and District.

Sister Pauline Drolet's employment, from 1972 to 1980, brought her daily to the Receiving Home, operated by the Town's Social Service for teenagers in difficulty. In this role, she was the mother-substitute for 12 to 20 teens who were hungry for love, appreciation and affirmation, all essential for growth and fulfillment.

The cook was Sister Louise Fortin, from 1971 to 1975 who, in addition, was available to welcome those in need to be heard and be fed. She was also a frequent volunteer driver for the poor and the missionaries as required.

## *Sisters leaving*

With the departure of Sister Anna Bisson from catechetics in



1984, and her replacement, Sister Thérèse Chaput in 1987, Grey Nuns could now turn the helm over to the group of devoted catechists they had so lovingly prepared for that role.

By 1988, there were only two sisters left at Hay River: Sisters Pauline Drolet, parish worker and Cécile Montpetit, Public Health nurse. Noting the precarious health of Sister Drolet and the fact that there were no other Grey Nun available to replace her; noting also that Sister Cécile Montpetit's work for the Territorial Department of Health was now taking her to Fort Rae, Sister Faye Wylie, Provincial Superior of the Grey Nuns' Saint Albert Province and her council decided to request the General Council approve the closure of the Grey Nuns mission at Hay River. A positive response from Sister Marguerite Létourneau, Superior General arrived on December 20.

Bishop Denis Croteau, in a letter to Sister Faye Wylie, on January 4, 1989 expressed high praises of the sisters ministries at Hay River,

*The sisters have served well in Hay River and they will leave many sad hearts behind. But they will go elsewhere and make many hearts beat with love and gratitude.<sup>7</sup>*

The parish Sunday Bulletin of January 8, 1989 paid a special tribute to the Grey Nuns and a farewell reception was given at the parish hall, following Mass. A plaque was presented by Father James J. Wynne, parish priest, on behalf of himself, parish council and parishioners to each sister who also received a framed commendation from W.R. McBryan, Town Councillor.

As further evidence that the people of Hay River did not forget the Grey Nuns, they happily held a celebration for Saint Marguerite d'Youville, who was canonized in Rome on December 9, 1990. This celebration was on Sunday, March 17, 1991. Five Grey Nuns responded to the invitation and came to Hay River from Yellowknife, Fort Rae and Fort Providence for an unforgettable event. Parishioners requested that the statue of Marguerite d'Youville be kept in their church. They also had a large plaque engraved with the names of each Grey Nun who served at Hay

River since 1962. Both the statue and the plaque were blessed and installed inside the church for all to remember the years 1962 to 1989 when Grey Nuns were part of their lives.

For 27 years, 35 sisters were part of the Hay River community. Together they gave a cumulated total of 123 years of dedicated service in teaching, religious education, health care, social service, parish work and a multiplicity of other services. There will always be a special place in their hearts and prayers for the people of Hay River.

#### NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 9

- 1 Laforce, Marguerite, s.g.m., **Hay River Saint Paul Convent**, Mimeographed Summary, November 1991.
- 2 Leduc, Georgette, s.g.m., **Letter** to Bishop Paul Piché, March 23, 1962, Doc. #1, GNRC Arch.
- 3 **Hay River Chroniques**, p. 1, GNRC Arch.
- 4 **Ibid.**, pp. 35-36.
- 5 **Ibid.**, pp. 34-35.
- 6 **Ibid.**, pp. 132, 243-244.
- 7 **Historique**, Doc. # 9, GNRC Arch.

## CHAPTER TEN

1968 -

### *SHORT TERM MINISTRIES*

From the 1960s to the 1990s, there were a number of sisters' assignments of short duration, aiming mostly at preparing the local community to assume responsibility for their own Church membership, education and health care. On several occasions, these appointments were individual ministries: one sister would live and work in one settlement for periods varying from one to several years. Other experiences involved two sisters, each engaged in some ministry.

Highlights of these opportunities to serve God's people have been carefully recorded in the leaps in faith experienced by the heroic women of the Far North, the Grey Nuns.

#### *1968 - Uranium City*

Uranium City is located at the frontier of Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. It can be reached only by air; there is no road connection with the outer world. Its proximity to Fort Chipewyan, Alberta - 35 minutes by air - and Fort Smith, NWT - 90 minutes by air - provide travel connections to Uranium City. This community was established in the early 1950s, as a result of important uranium finds.

In 1968, the population was 2,500, most of whom belonged to either of three Churches: Northern Evangelical, Roman Catholic or United Church of Canada. Santa Barbara was the patroness of the Roman Catholic parish. Most residents of Uranium City were employees at the mines; others were teachers, missionaries, health care workers or civil servants.



Unemployment was non-existent in this mining town. Health care was provided by the Uranium City Municipal Hospital with a capacity of 35 adult and children beds, and 14 bassinets for newborns. A public health nurse, employed by the Government of Saskatchewan, provided health supervision and disease prevention programs for the schools and industries.

As for education, there were 22 elementary, four kindergarten and eight high school classes in operation. Shannon Separate School opened in 1962 but, due to financial difficulties, had to be amalgamated with the Public School system in September 1968. This greatly concerned the Roman Catholic parents and the missionaries as no Religion was taught in the Public system where Catholic children would receive their schooling. A message from Bishop Piché to the parishioners of Santa Barbara church showed the depth of his concerns,

*This is a sad day in the history of our parish, but do not be downhearted; if you assume your responsibility for the religious education of your children, we will help you and God will provide. May this trying time be like Good Friday before the glorious day of Easter.<sup>1</sup>*

Father André Brault and Bishop Paul Piché saw only one alternative: obtain the assistance of Grey Nuns to offer a comprehensive religious education program to adults and children of Uranium City. Correspondence ensued between the Bishop and the Provincial Superior, Sister Yvette Lapointe.

The following months recorded approval from the Provincial Superior, Sister Yvette Lapointe, the Superior General, Sister Georgette Leduc, Sister Annette Potvin, from the Saint Albert Province, and the latter's Provincial Superior, Sister Thérèse Chaloux. Providentially, the Grey Nuns could count on a well-prepared teacher of catechetics to fill the needs of Uranium City. Sister Annette Potvin held a Baccalaureate in Education from the University of Alberta, a Diploma in Pastoral Catechetics from the Université de Montréal and a Master's in Arts (Religious Science) from the University of Ottawa, in addition to years of teaching

experience. She was 'loaned' for one year to the Province Divine Providence, a year that extended to nine.

Another missionary to make community with Sister Potvin was Sister Thérèse Pelletier. A registered nurse and radiology technician, then employed at Fort McMurray General Hospital, she had no difficulty finding a position at the local hospital in Uranium City.

The two foundresses arrived by plane on Thursday, August 26, 1971 and were met at the airport by Father André Brault and Brother Ovide Marchessault. Once alone in their home, the two sisters found two small oil lamps, gifts from Sister Yvette Lapointe. They lit them, reflecting on the flame as a symbol of the comforting presence of Jesus and Mary. Sister Potvin then opened her Bible at random and read from Matthew 16:24-28: *Conditions to follow Jesus*. Reflecting once more that to follow Jesus requires one to take up one's cross or duties and follow in faith was therefore their line of conduct. Their new ministries were now placed under sure guidance and protection. On that day, the two sisters began a more than 30-year tradition where individual ministries were facilitated in allowing two sisters to live in one isolated location in response to a call for mission.

At the parish Mass of Sunday, August 29, the sisters were officially welcomed by Father André Brault and they had an opportunity to meet several of their future friends and gathered a feel for the culture and atmosphere of their new home town.

While Sister Annette Potvin was completing plans for her ministry in Religious Education, Sister Thérèse Pelletier began working full-time at the hospital on September 3. On September 9, Sister Potvin, together with Father André Brault, visited the United Church minister, Reverend Dave Gilchrist. They decided to work together in planning their parishioners' visits, a first step in the post-Vatican II ecumenical endeavors. In subsequent chronicle entries, one finds frequent mention of the excellent relationship of the Roman Catholic missionaries with members of other faith persuasions. Examples included: the United Church organist would play in the absence of the Santa Barbara organist at Sunday Mass;



the sisters brought boxes of items from a church bazaar to those organizing a Rummage Sale at the United Church; there was exchange of information when parishioners needed assistance such as families of mixed marriages, or those in a grieving situation. The list goes on.

At her first Religion course for adults on Sunday, October 6, 77 men and women registered. The next Sunday, Sister Potvin's first choir practice was held with good attendance and interest. On the same day, she began catechetics classes for children and their parents after Mass. The students of Grades VII to IX, with guidance from Sister Potvin formed the Reactors Club, combining religious learning with social activities. For example, the children would organize live plays, raise funds for charities or prepare hampers for the poor. It was indeed a very successful experiment.

The years went by quickly as God became better known to the eager learners in Sister Annette Potvin's Bible and catechetics groups. God was also revealed through Sister Thérèse Pelletier's health care ministry, as well as in the witness of the lives of the two Grey Nuns. People were gradually getting acquainted with their new responsibilities for their own spiritual growth and their contribution to others' religious and personal needs. This was evidenced by their willing participation in Parish Council, Welcome Committee, music, singing, and their volunteering assistance with Bible studies and Catechetics which included people of the neighboring mining town of Eldorado. These volunteers in Bible studies and Catechetics were formed by Sister Potvin.

In July 1972, Sister Thérèse Pelletier was asked to serve for one year as Director of Nursing Service at Saint Anne Hospital in Fort Smith. The hospital personnel, her companion, Sister Potvin, and the parishioners sincerely regretted losing a friend they had come to appreciate for her sincerity and her competence as a nurse. During her absence Sister Marie Philippe joined Sister Annette Potvin as companion and helper. Sister Pelletier's return to Uranium City in September 1973, was welcomed with joy by all who cherished her personal friendship and gracious help in many projects.

A great consolation was accorded to Sister Annette Potvin



when her request to take a six-week course in the Holy Land was approved. This experience was lived in the company of Sister Germaine Roussel in June and July 1973.

On December 18, 1975, Sister Thérèse Pelletier was mandated to return to Fort Smith, this time, as local superior for the provincial house. Again Sister Potvin's long-time companion was leaving. She was replaced in August by Sister Anna Neumier.

In March, 1977, it was Sister Annette Potvin's turn to answer a call to a change of mission, as her one year 'loan' had long been extended. She was to return to her province of origin and continue her work in biblical studies, especially in the Diocese of Saint Paul. People were stunned by the news. They never anticipated losing over their friend, their teacher and counselor. Immediately, they requested volunteers to continue the multiple services they had become accustomed to receiving from Sister Potvin. On June 13, a Farewell Tea was held where much gratitude was expressed. Father Joseph Dauvet offered eloquent praise of Sister Potvin's competent and caring assistance to those who wished to learn more about Jesus through the Bible. Likewise, he recalled the legacy souvenir left by Sister Pelletier and spoke on the merits of the sisters' presence in his parish. Sister Annette Potvin had the last word. She expressed her regrets to leave Uranium City, but also her trust in the parents' perseverance in their beautiful task as Christian educators for their children.

Four Grey Nuns lived and ministered at Uranium City over a period of nine years giving a cumulated total of 18 years of loving and caring ministry to children and their parents, revealing God's love to all.

## *1971 - Fort McKay*

A request by Bishop Paul Piché for a sister to teach at Fort McKay, Alberta was approved by the Grey Nuns for the fall 1971. This settlement is situated 12 kilometers from Fort McMurray where Sister Eveline Gagnon held the position of

Vice-Principal until June, 1971.

Sister Gertrude Villeneuve, a young sister, was named to teach Religion at the school in Fort McKay. Knowing the hardships of beginning a ministry in a new setting, Sister Yvette Lapointe named Sister Eva Bouchard to be a companion and support for the beginning teacher. The teacher and her companion arrived by airplane from Fort Smith on August 26, 1971.

This was a short assignment as Sister Villeneuve did not renew her contract for the year 1972-73. Nonetheless, their ministries are recorded in God's book and in the hearts of grateful students for whom these two Grey Nuns gave a cumulated total of two years of loving service to the small population of Fort McKay.

## *1972 - Fort Liard*

When Marlene White, one of the only two teachers employed at Fort Liard's Atcho-Dene School, left her classroom in December 1971, this small community of 250 people felt abandoned. Fort Liard is located at the confluence of the Liard and Petitot rivers. By air, it is 150 kilometers east of Fort Nelson, British Columbia (BC) and 260 kilometers west of Fort Simpson, NWT. It is 55 kilometers from the BC and the Yukon borders.

Faced with the predicament of only one teacher for this isolated population, Father Pierre Mary and Bishop Paul Piché, of Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, approached the Grey Nuns for help. Their request was approved by Sister Yvette Lapointe, Provincial Superior, and two sisters were named to this new posting: Sisters Aurise Normandeau, teacher and Gabrielle Létourneau, as housekeeper and family visitor.

The two missionaries arrived on January 28, 1971 and were welcomed by Father Pierre Mary. Theirs was an old residence built 70 years ago, with no electricity or running water. A wood stove in the basement was all they had to fight the frequent minus



50 degree Celsius temperatures experienced in this northern country. In deference to her senior companion, the young Sister Aurise Normandeau learned a new trade, that of splitting wood for the stove.

Within three days of arrival, Sister Normandeau had taken charge of the Kindergarten and Grade I classes. Matthias White had the remaining Grades II to VI in the 60-student school population. Three months later, the most welcomed visit of Sister Yvette Lapointe, in April 1972, resulted in quick action. Brother Georges Nadeau, from Fort Simpson, came to examine the house and its deficiencies. He later returned to install a new heating system, running water and electricity, while the sisters continued to clean and paint their now more comfortable abode.

On September 16, 1972, Sister Rosalie Cherlet arrived at Fort Liard to work at the Nursing Station during the absence of Margaret Pearson. Her mission completed, she returned to her Public Health functions in Hay River on November 18, 1972. Her presence in the small community was a happy distraction for the two sisters who were able to enjoy her company, hear new stories, and share prayers with a third person. This alone made a major difference in the isolated lives of the sisters.

While the **Chroniques** are filled with anecdotes of teaching and catechesis, visits to families, deaths and funerals, marriages and Baptisms, there is also evidence of much social assistance given by the sisters. Examples include the frequent mention of temporarily sheltering a woman with several children during an inebriated husband's violent outburst, occasionally babysitting the children of a sick mother, hosting visitors from other settlements and from the Territorial or Federal Government, or from France, Belgium, the United States or other parts of Canada. Just like an international hotel! Recordings were always accompanied by a distinct flavor of hospitality and the joy at being useful.

These acts of Christian charity will not have gone unnoticed in the eyes of God. They were gratefully registered in the hearts of the people of Fort Liard. It was with sorrow that the decision to leave Fort Liard was received, in 1982. The last two sisters to leave



Fort Liard on August 30, 1982 were Sisters Marie Philippe and Olga Vigoureux. During the 10 years Grey Nuns were in Fort Liard, eight sisters gave a cumulated total of 24 years of undivided, selfless care and attention.

### *1974 - Snowdrift*

**S**nowdrift is situated in the path of wind-driven snow, as its name suggests. At 235 kilometers by air, northeast of Fort Smith, and 200 kilometers east of Yellowknife, this settlement is the most eastern of the Grey Nuns' missions in the Northwest Territories. It was first visited by missionaries from Fort Resolution in 1858. Its first resident priest, Father Charles Gamache, built the present Holy Family church in 1954.

The population of about 250 was mostly Natives who spoke Chipewyan, Dogrib or Yellowknife. Almost all of them were of the Roman Catholic faith in the 1970s. As was the case in Fort Liard and several other northern settlements, alcoholism was rampant among these isolated people.

The small Territorial School for 60 to 70 students in Fort Liard met the needs for Grades I to VI. For higher grades, children usually went to larger centres.

Correspondence between Father Raymond Danto, the Oblate parish priest, and Sister Marie Lemire, Provincial Superior, dates back to early 1974. On February 13, 1974, Father Danto wrote extending thanks for the time Sister Alice Rivard at Fort Liard spent teaching children and meeting the people in the summer of 1973. In the same breath, he asked for a repeat in the coming summer, unless one or two sisters could come to teach at the school, as vacancies were expected for the fall. After discussing this request with Bishop Paul Piché of the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, Sister Lemire answered Father Danto that his request was accepted 'for a one-year trial'.

Sister Aurise Normandeau generously agreed to face the challenge of isolation and a new mission. With her Baccalaureate

degree in Education, her years of teaching experience and her special preparation in teaching catechetics, she was hired to teach Grades V and VI, and catechetics. Her companion, Sister Catherine Sabourin, was to be a presence in the community, visiting families, taking care of the church and homemaking for the sisters' residence.

The new missionaries flew from Fort Smith on August 20, 1974, arriving the same day at Snowdrift. Father Danto had already left for his vacation in France, his home country, but had made arrangements for people from the settlement to welcome the sisters. Their first note in the **Chroniques** was to indicate that they had placed their ministries in the hands of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Their home was a former garage which Brother Maurice Larocque was busy repairing and embellishing to make an attractive residence. Since it was not completed, and Father Danto was absent for several months, the sisters used the priest's residence temporarily. Father Danto returned from France on October 26 and helped with the completion of the house. On November 24, the two Grey Nuns had their first meal in their home and, on December 8, they had it blessed by Father Danto.

Classes had begun at the end of August, and Sister Normandeau quickly got acquainted with her students. At home, Sister Sabourin gave of herself as much as her health allowed in her work of hospitality. Her presence was precious to her companion and to the people she visited or welcomed into the sisters' home. Yet, this bliss was of short duration as she was recalled for another field of mission, in June 1975. Sister Olga Vigoureux was named to replace her and arrived at Snowdrift on August 22 of that year.

Until 1976, Snowdrift had no long distance telephone service. The installation of this essential service, on September 23, was received with a great deal of enthusiastic gratitude. The missionaries, however, still had to wait a week or more for mail to arrive, and this, of course, was in the absence of any mail strike, or frequent bad weather which made air travel hazardous and spring and fall touch downs dangerous.



In 1976, Sister Aurise Normandeau was replaced by Sister Thérèse Béliveau, who came as a teacher of catechesis. She was also frequently asked to be a substitute teacher at the school. Her teaching background and her Masters in Religious studies had prepared her well for these challenges.

Because of difficulty in finding replacements for missions in the late 1970s, a decision was reached to discontinue the sisters' ministries in Snowdrift at the end of 1977-78 school year. In her letter to Sister Denise Lefebvre, Superior General on June 30, 1978, Sister Germaine Héту wrote,

*We were happy to have been able to serve the Church at Snowdrift. However, it is impossible to continue. Our prayers for vocations are fervent, trusting that the Lord will send us workers for God's harvest.<sup>2</sup>*

Sister Julia Lauzon, who had been at Snowdrift only one year, left the mission on May 23, 1978, while Sister Thérèse Béliveau was the last Grey Nun to leave on June 16 of that year. Five sisters had ministered at Snowdrift over a period of four years, totaling eight cumulated years. Their ministry was deeply rooted in faith, and steadfastly lived in charity, hope and joy.

## 1977 - Yellowknife

Could the Grey Nuns' ministry at Yellowknife that began in 1977 and is still present in the year 2000, be classified as a *short-term ministry*? Yes, if seen in perspective of the 133 years of Grey Nuns presence in the Far North. Yes, also, if one looks at the six-year period of the Grey Nuns' absence, from 1981 to 1987 and their return for a different type of ministry in Yellowknife.

Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories (NWT) since January 1, 1967, is situated north of the Great Slave Lake, and a short distance south of Fort Rae. In 1967, it was populated with some 1,500 members of the Dene nation. The remainder of



the 9,000 to 10,000 people were Métis and Whites of a number of nationalities. Yellowknife became the episcopal seat, when Bishop Denis Croteau moved from Fort Smith in 1986.

The white population is very transient, having a 20% turnover each year. In 1967, Saint Patrick Catholic parish served 350 to 400 families and two Separate Schools. The two gold mines, along with government and teaching positions, provided employment for most of the Métis and white people. Among the Natives, many lived on the land, some did manual work and many were on Welfare.

The Grey Nuns heard God's call to Yellowknife, in 1976, when Sisters Aurore Larkin and Anita Pelletier became interested in a project of Father René Fumoleau to build a community of life and work focusing on the needs of the autochthonous community. After prayerful reflection, both sisters prepared a proposal which they presented to Sister Marie Lemire, Provincial Superior, explaining their intentions and their hopes to dedicate their apostolate to the Natives of Yellowknife and surrounding areas. The proposal was approved and the designated foundresses: Sisters Aurore Larkin and Anita Pelletier, continued their university studies until June 1977. By that time, Sister Larkin had obtained a Baccalaureate in Theology at Newman Theological College in Edmonton and Sister Pelletier, a Baccalaureate in Nursing Sciences at the University of Ottawa. Prayer being the essential ingredient in the new venture, both foundresses were assured of this sisterly support as they left Edmonton by car on July 29, went to Fort Smith, and arrived in Yellowknife the evening of Sunday, July 31, 1977.

At Yellowknife, they were welcomed by Fathers Gabriel Duchaussois, parish priest, and Ovila Lapointe, visiting from Coppermine. The Sisters of Saint Joseph of London (C.S.J.), absent for a few weeks, had left their house at the disposal of the new arrivals until a permanent abode could be found. After searching for an appropriate, simple dwelling, they opted for a trailer that was purchased by the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese. They entered their home on August 5. Within a year, they had an

extension built to accommodate a chapel, a meeting room and space for the many traveling missionaries who stopped overnight. Father Gabriel Duchaussois celebrated a first Mass on August 3, 1978 and placed the consecrated hosts in the tabernacle. This was a great source of strength and consolation to the missionaries.

Sister Aurore Larkin began her pastoral work on August 9 with a visit to Latham Island where she prayed with a grieving family and participated in the funeral of their baby. With time, other aspects of her apostolate included serving at the mission of Dettah village for Sunday liturgy, pastoral visits and occasional educational sessions on liturgy; animating prayer weekends with the youth; facilitating Pastoral Team meetings with Father Duchaussois as coordinator; co-leading group retreats with the priests; and, in addition, being a member of the Saint Albert Province Vocations Committee which met in Edmonton frequently. Working closely with Fathers René Fumoleau and Camille Piché and Sister Mary-Jo Fox, c.s.j., her ministry often took her to distant places for weekend sessions or liturgical events.

As for Sister Anita Pelletier, her work as Public Health nurse began on August 11. As part of her full-time employment with the Federal Government, she was frequently scheduled to accompany patients to Edmonton for more specialized medical attention. Outside working hours, she offered pre-natal classes, volunteered for the Helpline and Distress Centre, became involved in the Native Family Life Counseling Program, offered sessions on topics like communications and counseling, Parent Effectiveness Training, and facilitated Moms and Tots Workshop. She also participated in Marriage Encounter planning and sat on the Saint Patrick Parish Council.

When Sister Anita Pelletier left in June 1979 to study in Ottawa, she was replaced by a new profess, Sister Marcia Kugler. Sister Kugler arrived in Yellowknife in September to work as a parish worker. As such, she animated a Bible study group, joined Marriage Encounter sessions, directed the choir for Masses, served on Parish Council and quickly became acquainted with



the multifaceted dimensions of her position.

On February 8, 1980, as the two sisters were returning from Mass, they noted a great commotion around their trailer. Neighbors had called the Fire Department as a fire was raging in their home. It was a total loss. Being mid-winter, there was urgency to find shelter by the evening. Providence was there with a relief on this tragic occasion. Neighbors, were to be absent for the next five days, and Sister Kugler, who had agreed to babysit their children, was able to arrange for Sister Larkin to also stay there. For the next seven months, the sisters moved 10 times from friends to friends, who, while going for a trip or on a vacation, invited them to use their house. In some places, the welcoming friends were able to accommodate them for a few days, a few weeks, a few months until, on September 13 a permanent dwelling became available. Throughout the ordeal, they did not miss recognizing Divine Providence watching over them every minute. Their awe and thanksgiving was spontaneous and their **Chroniques** were filled with words of gratitude.

After four years of selfless display of Christian actions and remarkable contributions to the Church and the lives of the people in Yellowknife, the sisters were called to other services. Unfortunately, no other Grey Nuns were available to pick up the torch. On March 18, 1981, Sister Germaine Hétu, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province, wrote to Father Gabriel Duchaussois,

*After considering our priorities, the Grey Nuns believe that we must concentrate our resources towards the Natives and the poor who were confided to us [...] Yellowknife, for us being a 'young mission' it is easier to leave it, our roots being not as deep as in other places.<sup>3</sup>*

Father Duchaussois' expression of regret at this news was unequivocal. He commented on the fact that time is not a major factor in the depth of the roots, and time does not count for ties that are spiritual. His sincere sense of loss, knowing the void that would follow the sisters' departure, strongly echoed the sorrow



voiced by others in Yellowknife including many organizations who had benefitted from the presence of the Grey Nuns. The Sisters of Saint Joseph, and the Oblates were also grieving the departure of their friends in ministry.

On May 18, 1981, both Sisters Marcia Kugler and Aurore Larkin were on their way to Edmonton, after having tearfully closed the door of their residence for the last time. Sister Kugler was registered at the University of Alberta to complete her Education degree and Sister Larkin was called to Rae-Edzo to dedicate her services to the Natives of that area. Up to 1981, three Grey Nuns had ministered over four years at Yellowknife, giving a cumulated total of eight years to the Church and the people of this northern city. Upon leaving, Sister Larkin, the chronicler, wrote,

*The experience of closing a mission is a sad one, but the memories are happy ones.<sup>4</sup>*

But 1981 was not to be the end. A further call for Grey Nuns for Yellowknife came from the new Bishop, Denis Croteau, in the spring of 1987. It was approved by Sister Faye Wylie, Provincial Superior, on March 9, 1987 and final authorization was granted by the Superior General in Council, Sister Marguerite Létourneau, on March 17.

The foundresses arrived on August 15, 1987. They were Sisters Dora Durand, superior and hostess, and Thérèse Chaput, secretary to the Bishop. Entering their house at 0045 hours, they, nonetheless, reverently stopped to offer their new project to their 'heavenly Mother' and to their beloved Foundress, Marguerite d'Youville. One year later, Sister Antoinette Cyre joined the group as catechist on a project designed to provide a better understanding of the sacrament of Confirmation. In this capacity, she visited several other missions of the diocese over the years. Sister Chaput left Yellowknife in 1989. Only two Grey Nuns remained at the mission in 2000.

Their first place of residence, in 1987, was the former Sisters of Saint Joseph convent which had been refreshed for the new

occupants. This was a large building. It would later become a welcome home for diocesan teams working on various projects and a peaceful stop-over for traveling missionaries. The chapel was ready on September 8 when a first Mass was celebrated by Father Jean Porte.

The Bishop's residence was also being constructed. Yellowknife was a very young episcopal city. The Bishop not yet moved there. This occurred in October 1987. It seemed that all missionaries were in a transient state. A new residence for the Oblates was built ready for occupancy on November 8.

After several moves, the sisters finally entered a two-storey house on Burwash Street, on September 2, 1991, where they were to reside for the next three years. Wandering throughout these four years, the Grey Nuns often found shelter and friendship with the Sisters of Saint Joseph of London, the Sisters of Saint Ann, and the Felician Sister living in Yellowknife, sharing community life and mutually enriching their ministries. In 1994, the Ebner Residence, an Oblate house in Yellowknife became available to them. At that time, Sister Dora Durand began residing in an apartment at Trapper's Lake Spirituality Centre, where she still is the manager and hostess.

This Trapper's Lake Spirituality Centre became a reality in September 10, 1992 when Sister Durand welcomed her first group for a weekend session. The realization of one of Bishop Denis Croteau's dream, the Trapper's Lake Spirituality Centre was a diocesan facility available for study groups, retreats, workshops, or other diocesan activities. It was blessed and officially opened on September 13 in the presence of 300 guests from Yellowknife, Fort Providence, Rae-Edzo, Lutsel'Ke and Ndilon who had flocked to Trapper's Lake for the occasion.

Sister Dora Durand had the distinct privilege and joy of being delegated by the Diocese to attend the canonization of Marguerite d'Youville in Rome on December 9, 1990. Then, in April 1994, she took time for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. These special opportunities were received with gratitude and deeply appreciated by the happy recipient.

In the early 1990s, Sister Antoinette Cyre, having fulfilled her mandate in Catechesis, began devoting more of her time to the Chancery office, doing secretarial work for Bishop Denis Croteau and editing the diocesan newsletter. In 1998, she moved to Saint Patrick Parish as parish assistant.

With the opening of the Spirituality Centre and the move of Sister Durand to Trapper's Lake, the two sisters now get together on rare occasions. These times together are highly valued and constitute moments of communion and deeper sharing.

During the two periods of Grey Nuns' presence in Yellowknife, 16 years from 1977 to 1981 and 1988 to 2000, six sisters, fully dedicated to their ministry, gave a cumulated total of 35 years. This short summary of their service is also a wish for their continued joy in the service of God in Yellowknife.

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NOTES: Part 2, Chapter 10

- 1 Piché, Bishop Paul, in **Santa Barbara Parish Bulletin**, March 31, 1968.
- 2 **Historique**, Doc. #10, GNRC Arch.
- 3 **Historique**, Doc. # 21.
- 4 **Chroniques**, p. 35.





Aerial view of Hay River



The 1963 flood at Hay River



Uranium City, Santa Barbara parish church



The Northern Lights in Yellowknife



PART 3

*The Grey Nuns in Africa*





1973 -

## DUNGU, ZAÏRE, AFRICA

Several of the Grey Nuns' Provinces in Canada and the United States have sponsored missions in developing countries, such as in Latin America: Brazil, Columbia and Argentina; and in Africa: Tunisia, Cameroon and Nigeria. In September 1971, the Grey Nuns General Administration in Montréal agreed to open another mission in Africa, specifically in Dungu, Zaïre. Sponsorship of this mission was transferred to the Grey Nuns Saint Albert Province in December 1974, the year following its opening.

Zaïre, a central African country, was formerly the Belgian Congo from 1960 to 1971, when it became the Republic of Zaïre. In the early 1970s, its total population was over 35,000,000 people. They spoke over 90 different dialects and four major languages: Azande, Bangala, ki-swahili and ki-congo, while the official language was French.<sup>1</sup> The climate is equatorial, with a rainy season from March to May. Tropical vegetation, which north Americans would call exotic, is typical of the African soil. Situated in northeast Zaïre, Dungu is mostly jungle space. The native people of Dungu live a poor and simple life; they are a happy and amiable people.

Beginning in 1970, there were visits and correspondence between Bishop Théo-W. Van den Elzen, Bishop of Dunggu-Doruma and the Grey Nuns congregation in order to obtain sisters for a project in Dunggu. There was a need to assist the people develop a school to prepare health care providers. In this part of the country such facilities were non-existent. The level of practice envisioned for the future graduates and the development of the

program underwent several revisions and adaptations until an appropriate design was accepted by all parties.

During the years of planning, Bishop Van den Elzen was actively involved in obtaining approval and/or financial backing, in addition to health care expertise, from various sources: the Zaïre civil authorities; Sister Suzanne Leurs, from the Bureau de l'Enseignement Catholique (BEC),<sup>2</sup> Health section, in Zaïre; Jacques Ouellet, Agence Canadienne de Développement International (ACDI) Section Afrique;<sup>3</sup> Sister Georgette Leduc, Grey Nuns Superior General, Sister Denise Lefebvre, Grey Nuns Assistant General and Sister Colette Tardif, the Grey Nun project developer.

In June 1971, Sister Denise Lefebvre, Assistant General, visited Zaïre with Sister Jeannette Gagnon, General Councillor. They met with Bishop Van den Elzen in Dungen and consulted with Sister Marie Bonin in Kinshasa, Zaïre, where she was working as a consultant in another project on behalf of ACDI. Her input in the planning stages of the future Grey Nuns mission at Dungen was most valuable and provided much reassurance to the neophytes missionaries.

Almost all of these approvals, assurance of cooperation and financial support were cleared by May 1973. At the same time some sisters were busy preparing for their future mission in Africa. They were immunized, obtained Certificates in Tropical Diseases, and ensured they met all the necessary health pre-requisites. Refining and adjusting the actual project kept Sister Colette Tardif busy traveling to Africa, communicating with various agencies and presenting reports. Those reports consistently earned her a high degree of praise from the Bishop for thoroughness and clarity of presentations.

### *The foundresses*

Sisters Colette Tardif, Marcelle Tétrault and Desanges Gionet were named foundresses of the new mission. Sister Tardif arrived at Kinshasa, the capital of Zaïre, on October 11, 1972 where she



continued dealing with the government of Zaïre and fine-tuning the project. Following a six-hour flight from Anvers, Belgium, Sisters Tétrault and Gionet joined Sister Tardif in Kinshasa in early December for the remainder of the trip to Dungu. They arrived in December 1972, after experiencing several delays and other inconveniences which became daily occurrences for sisters traveling through Zaïre. Typically, arrival at Kinshasa was usually followed by days of waiting for the next connection to Kisangani, and then to Isiro, both being short 90-minute flights. Fortunately, there were precious hospitality points along the way where religious communities specialized in providing comfort to weary travelers. The last leg of the trip from Isiro to Dungu, was a 280 kilometer ride by jeep over bumpy roads, which became very muddy in the rainy season. With hundreds of jerks, hazardous bridge crossings and a few flat tires, the trip could take four to six hours.

Throughout their months of preparation for the trip and for their work in Zaïre, the Grey Nuns were graciously assisted by the Christian Instruction Brothers (f.i.c.) who taught at a College in Dungu and had become experts in handling travel inconveniences. They also provided reassurance and hints in dealing with adjustment to culture, politics, climate and other novelties of concern to newcomers. For almost all travel to and from Zaïre, the Grey Nuns, missionaries or visitors, were privileged to have the companionship of these experienced travelers. They would not hesitate to alter their personal travel plans in order to be available to personally accompany these neophyte travelers. Likewise, Bishop Van den Elzen also attentively adjusted his busy schedule in order to accompany women travelers. It was not infrequent that luggage went missing, passports were lost or misplaced, or bookings were cancelled without proper notification. These often happened when women traveled alone.

Upon arrival at Dungu, the sisters were welcomed at the Franciscan Sisters' convent as their own residence was not yet ready for occupancy. They enjoyed this warm hospitality until a small section of their residence was completed and they could

move into their home, in the spring of 1973. Months later, a formal blessing ceremony, presided by Bishop Théo W. Van den Elzen was the occasion of a joyful reunion of missionaries, neighbors and friends. Three years later, on February 22, 1976, Bishop Van den Elzen came to celebrate the first Mass in the sisters' residence.

### *The school*

On September 30, 1973, almost four years before a school building was complete, the Ecole Technique Médicale (ETM)<sup>4</sup> opened with 28 students, including five young women. This marked progress toward the promotion of women and accessibility of education for this often neglected half of humanity in various parts of the world. The school prepared a level of nursing personnel much different than the North American systems. Graduates of the two-year program would be practical nurses, but their learning included minor medical or dental procedures often required in the bush clinics where they would be hired: suturing wounds, applying casts, treating digestive tract ailments or extracting teeth. Midwifery and Public Health were added later as options in response to the demands of employers. The program was then extended to three years.

Since the school building was not completed on time for the opening of classes, space was made available in the Dungu Hospital and the Wando College of Dungu. A new building finally became a reality in February, 1977. In thanksgiving, a Eucharistic celebration was offered with some 50 students and teachers present.

Classes given by the Grey Nuns covered all Nursing techniques appropriate to the needs of the future graduates to be employed in bush clinics: Anatomy and Physiology, Microbiology, Parasitology, Pathology, Pharmacology, General Hygiene, Nursing Techniques, First Aid and Ethics. In addition, there was 720 hours of practice in the 220-bed hospital and in bush clinics. Professors from The Collège Notre-Dame de Dungu



- Wando College - under the direction of the Christian Instruction Brothers (f.i.c.) were responsible for the general education part of the program: French, Mathematics, Religion and Physical Education.

## *Political situation*

Mobutu Sésé Séko, one of the richest men in the world, became President of Zaïre following a military coup in 1965. He achieved independence from Belgium in 1971 and remained President. Consequently, the margin between the extreme despair of the poor and the lavish lifestyle observed in high circles had done nothing to unify the country and reassure the people. In addition, drastic changes occurred in the lives of the people of this country.

Almost concomitant with the mission's transfer of sponsorship from the Grey Nuns general administration to the Saint Albert Province administration, President Mobutu ordered all crucifixes, images and statues in schools and public places throughout Zaïre be removed on the day of the proclamation of the law, November 25, 1974. It was also announced that all schools and colleges would become government property as of January 1, 1975 and that Religion classes were henceforth forbidden. At that time, the EMT was to become Institut Médical Technique (ITM). One more change was that the Bureau d'Enseignement Catholique (BEC) would be replaced by the National Education Office.<sup>5</sup> One of the consequences of this edict was that religious Feast Days, such as Christmas and Good Friday were no longer holidays. They became work days!

In that first year of interdiction, the Church of Zaïre suffered another terrible blow at the news of the murder of Father Luc Viane, O.S.A. on December 30, 1974. A missionary in Zaïre for 23 years, multilingual, endowed with remarkable administrative and pastoral skills, Father Viane was loved by all. He was one everyone looked up to. The whole population of Dungen deeply grieved feared for the safety of the rest of the population.



Later, three men and one women were convicted of the crime. One of these men was the Medical Director of Dungu Hospital and the Institut Technique Médical with whom the Grey Nuns had been working closely on a professional level. He was also a protégé of Bishop Van den Elzen while completing his medical education. This senseless murder did not seem related to the general unrest in the country, as initially feared. The killers' main purpose was to rob Father Luc Viane of the large amount of money, placed by the Government under his care, to pay all the professors in his area of responsibility. The killers did not succeed in acquiring any of that money, as the guardian's arrival made them flee.

During the funeral, on December 31, 1974, the expression of grief and disbelief was indescribable and rendered more mournful by the continuous sound of the tam-tam. Women and children were constantly around the open coffin sobbing, crying aloud and chasing the flies, already at work on the decomposing remains, in the intense heat. Men were stunned with fear and anger at this incomprehensible tragedy. Father Viane's colleagues in ministry were deeply saddened at the loss of a confrere so precious and irreplaceable. All missionaries became closer in prayer, solidarity and support.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout these unsettling events, the sisters asked themselves: what does God want in all of this? of each one of us? of the Congregation? of the local Church in Zaïre? As faithful followers of Marguerite d'Youville, the sisters resolutely placed all their hope in Divine Providence, knowing that God is always present in difficult, even hopeless times as well as in joyful times. And, with God on their side, they knew they: *shall want nothing* (Ps. 23).

In February 1975, the sisters had the immense joy of welcoming Sister Florence Keegan, Provincial Superior of Saint Albert Province along with a new missionary for Dungu, Sister Jeanne Hébert. The latter was named superior for the little Grey Nuns community at Dungu; she was most welcomed by all.

On the occasion of the Twelfth General Meeting of the Bishops of Zaïre, on March 2, 1975, a major document was pub-

lished stating the urgent problems faced by the Church in Zaïre. The document mainly questioned the status of the Church in Zaïre, its freedom of action and its future under this new regime. The document affirmed the position of the Church of Zaïre, its faith and the continuation of its particular Church in communion with the universal Church; it exposed how the Zaïre Church saw its contribution to national development within the new socioeconomic context; and it proposed the orientations and new pastoral means needed after they had no temporal works.<sup>7</sup> The year 1975 also happened to be the 75th anniversary of the Dungen-Doruma Diocese: a young organization to be part of such serious threats.

June 30, 1975 was the day when Sister Juliette Thévenot's position as Director of the Institut Technique Médical was officially relinquished. According to a decision of the Mobutu Government, replacement by a Zaïrois was to be announced before September. Several months of September came and went with no replacement announced. In June 1984, Sister Thévenot was still fulfilling the responsibility of Director of the program.

July 1, 1975 was the first graduation from ITM of 11 new practical nurses. It was found that the high attrition rate of the first group called for further revision in several areas, including entrance requirements and study habits of the students in general.

Interestingly, while in North America the education of nurses began under the auspices of Health in the late 1800s and moved under Education in the 1960s, the ITM, which was originally under the control of National Education, moved into the medical domain on March 27, 1976.

While religious restrictions were being implemented throughout Zaïre, Bishop Van den Elzen was not ready to forfeit his missionaries, nor the educational institutions of his diocese. His persistence paid off since in March 1977, when there was a reversal in earlier government orders. Former diocesan schools were permitted to resume teaching Religion. This teaching was to be controlled by a diocesan office directed by Bishop Van den Elzen.



## *Toward the future*

When the Grey Nuns agreed to found a school for practical nurses in Dungu, it was with the clear understanding, of all parties concerned, that one of the goals was to prepare a succession who could replace the Grey Nuns within a short period of time. A minimum of five years was quoted as a possibility when, earlier in the planning, a course for graduate nurses was still envisioned. As plans were finally approved for a school for practical nurses, it became evident that the Dungu-Doruma Diocese would have to look outside the ITM graduates to take charge of the program. At times, there were flickers of hope that local nurses returning from university would eventually accept the challenge. In a report of her visit in 1979, Sister Marguerite Létourneau, Assistant General, wrote,

*...Our sisters have succeeded in including on the teaching staff competent local persons and people from other countries. There is even a beginning of participation from Autochthons [...] our sisters could now assist those who are interested toward auto-determination in the near future.<sup>8</sup>*

This did not materialize as the people were reluctant to embrace the extent of the responsibility for such a major endeavor. As a second possibility, Bishop Van den Elzen, and his successor, Bishop Emile Aiti, the first African Native to head the diocese of Dungu-Doruma,<sup>9</sup> contacted various religious communities in the hope of finding successors to the Grey Nuns. In 1984, a German-based community with missionaries in Zaïre showed interest and was happily welcomed.

Sister Gertraud Zimmerman, Soeur Missionnaire Auxiliatrice<sup>10</sup> arrived on September 23, 1985. To the great relief of Sister Gertraud, the General Council allowed Sister Gemma Côté to remain in Dungu one more year in order to assist with the orientation of the new program director.

On March 12, 1985, Sister Marguerite Laforce, Provincial Superior advised Bishop Emile Aiti that the Grey Nuns would be



leaving Dungu, indicating that the sisters would do all they could to facilitate the adaptation of their successors. They would even remain longer than their anticipated departure date in the summer of 1985. In fact, Sister Gemma Côté, the last missionary in Zaïre, remained alone in 1985-1986 to contribute to the orientation of Sister Gertraud Zimmerman.

Sister Laforce added that the Grey Nuns were happy to have given these years to the diocese of Dungu, but the shortage of sisters necessitated this decision. Bishop Aiti's regrets were clear, but filled with gratitude, in his response,

*The nicest compliment to give you at this moment of separation, is to tell you that each one of your sisters will leave the beloved silhouette of your Blessed Foundress, Marguerite d'Youville at the ITM as a sure protection for the continuity of her work.<sup>11</sup>*

July 1, 1986 was a bittersweet day at the ITM when Bishop Théo W. Van den Elzen presided at a Thanksgiving Mass and described, with emotion, the graces of the last 13 years. This Mass was followed by an evening of celebration in which Bishop Emile Aiti, the physicians, students and professors expressed their appreciation to Sister Côté and the Grey Nuns for their ministry in Dungu and at the ITM during these 13 years. In response, Sister Côté thanked the civil and religious authorities for their support and expressed words of encouragement to the Autochthon professors to continue this work of education, wishing them success and fulfilment. The following evening, a smaller gathering at Bishop Emile Aiti's residence was the occasion of more expression of gratitude and wishes of success to Sister Gertraud Zimmerman as she accepted the challenge begun by the Grey Nuns in 1973.<sup>12</sup>

Mission accomplished! Sister Côté returned to Canada on July 3, 1986. It had been 13 years since the Grey Nuns arrived for a five-year project. Ten sisters took part in this mission for a cumulated total of 41 years wholly dedicated to the Church in Zaïre and the education of practical nurses in Dungu. One Grey

Nun, Sister Juliette Thévenot spent 10 years at the helm of l'Institut Technique Médical, ensuring the education of the young people of Zaïre. Two others: Sisters Jeanne Hébert and Lise Chaloux were there for seven years and the last Grey Nun to leave Dingu was Sister Gemma Côté whose tenure of mission was five years. One other missionary, Sister Céline Campeau, remained four years, from 1974 to 1978. Shortly after her return to Canada, she achieved her long-term dream of becoming a Clares (o.s.c.) in Mission, British Columbia. At the time of writing, she is the Abbess of the monastery.

Throughout these years, the Grey Nun missionaries lived by faith, always assured that God was walking with them, always experiencing the comforting presence of Divine Providence at their side. After her 1979 visit, Sister Marguerite Létourneau, Assistant General wrote,

*[...]remains to be said again the admiration that I have for these missionaries who treasure the opportunity to announce Jesus Christ to the poor, in a situation that is not always easy. [...] How not be imbued with awe in seeing a project of such scope and in very difficult circumstances. Our sisters deserve to be congratulated.<sup>13</sup>*

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NOTES: Part 3

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- 1 Thévenot, Juliette, s.g.m., e-mail information, November 22, 2000.
- 2 Office of Catholic Education in Zaire, part of the Bishop's organization.
- 3 Canadian Agency for International Development.
- 4 Medical Technical School.
- 5 *Catholic Teaching Office replaced by the National Education Office.*
- 6 **Chroniques**, p.p. 8, 9, GNRC Arch..
- 7 **Documentation Catholique**, No. 1671, March 2, 1975, Mmy Arch..
- 8 **Document** G1,2, Mmy Arch.
- 9 Replaced Bishop Théo W. Van den Elzen on May 7, 1983.
- 10 Missionary Auxiliatrix Sisters.
- 11 Aiti, Bishop Emile, **Letter** to Sister Marguerite Laforce, March 15, 1985.
- 12 **Chroniques**, p. 203.
- 13 Létourneau, Marguerite, s.g.m., **Report of visit**, 1979.



# Photographs from Zaïre



A hospital kitchen



Building a tent



A dance group



Gardening



Nursing care

## EPILOGUE



**W**e have now concluded an incredible retrospective. Together we journeyed with the Grey Nuns, beginning with the birth of their Foundress, Saint Marguerite d'Youville in 1701 until the great Jubilee Year 2000. For those involved in researching, writing and editing this extraordinary sequence of events, it has been a powerful experience of the triumph of Marguerite d'Youville's spirituality against formidable forces over the last 140 years.

We hope these two volumes will add immeasurably to the understanding of the lives and work of the Grey Nuns - historic and contemporary.

**A Leap in Faith**, literally demonstrated time and again in Volumes I and II, brings together landmarks in the history of the Sisters of Charity of Montréal, Grey Nuns. Highlighting their multifaceted ministries in Alberta, Northern Saskatchewan, the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese and Dungeness, Zaire acquaints the reader with the role of Grey Nuns in the Church of Western and Northern Canada and Zaire, and their role in the early promotion of women in these countries.

*The presence of the Sisters of Charity raises the status of women in this country; she is called woman of prayer; she is respected and honored; it is already a big step in favor of women.<sup>1</sup>*

In over 50 mission posts, a contemporary gospel of hundreds of Grey Nuns was written : their contribution to extending God's Kingdom 'to the ends of the world'. This abbreviated history is written in gratitude to the pioneers in each of these missions, and



for the edification of this generation and those into the future.

One could question: how can there be so much heroism in the lives of ordinary women? How can one explain such relentless apostolic strains day after day under circumstances sometimes so cruel? This is astonishing! This history must have been somewhat beautified for the records!

On the contrary, browsing through other sources, one finds reinforcement to the already quite flattering list of compliments found in documents consulted. One example, among many, was Father Auguste Lecorre, as Grey Nuns' chaplain for many years in the Far North, writing in 1895,

*We Missionaries have seen Indian and Eskimo children in the wigwams of the Northern forests and steppes, and on the shore of the frozen sea; [...] we bless God daily for the marvelous transformation wrought, at the cost of many sacrifices, by the persevering care, the greater than motherly care, of our wonderful Grey Nuns. Surely the Sisters of Charity are the special creation of Him who imposed hands upon the little children, saying, Suffer them to come unto me.*<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Emile Grouard, during his visit to Pope Leo XIII in 1898, said,

*Holy Father, we have Nuns also: they teach and train the children [...] they come from Montréal and belong to the Congregation of the Grey Nuns [...] How are they able to live in such a country? the Pope inquired; and how are they affected by the climate? The Missionary Bishop had to declare that indeed their sufferings were great, and their privations such as would be incredible in a civilized country [...] The Pope, after listening earnestly, lifted up his hands and eyes, as if appealing to heaven, and said: They are really sacrificing their lives for God and His Church.*<sup>3</sup>

Former missionaries, on the other hand, are quite unanimous in returning to God the praises they receive and whatever successes achieved in God's name; they hardly ever complain. Said



one 86 year old sister,

*I thank God the Father and Providence every day for having chosen me as a missionary in order to help people come closer to God and offer thanksgiving. God is so great, so benevolent, so magnanimous.<sup>4</sup>*

At the end of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, it is sobering to note the sharp decrease of missions where Grey Nuns are still visible. In Alberta, Grey Nuns serve in six houses compared to 21 at an earlier time in the past 141 years; in Northern Saskatchewan, there are now two missions out of the 11 previously served by Grey Nuns over 140 years; in the Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese, there are only two missions out of the 22 in richer years of the past 133 years; and Grey Nuns are no longer in Zaïre after 13 years of dedicated service.

Other religious congregations, including the Oblates of Mary Immaculate are experiencing a similar diminishment in their missions and personnel. Yet, Bishop Denis Croteau's sister was able to write for the Catholic Missions in Canada,

*The shortage of priests [and other missionaries] experienced in the last few years was only the spark that set the people on fire. It helped them to realize that they owned the Church of the North, that it was their Church. With the Synod [of 1998] they came to realize that one of the realities of their Baptism was to 'evangelize', to be 'missionaries' in their own right.<sup>5</sup>*

The Grey Nuns remain steadfast in hope and knowledge that God will always be present for the Church. With Jesus we say: *Whoever is not against us is for us* (Mk 9:40). We are certain that apostles will continue to appear in the Church to go on building the Kingdom,

*We hear concern in our Church today about the lack of traditional vocations. Too great a burden is falling on too few shoulders. Few people are choosing to be priests and religious. Yet new voices continue to arise in unexpected places.*

*Think of the lay people who are caring for and nurturing the life of your parish. Who in your broader community is responding in other ways to the gospel call? Like Moses and Jesus, we should recognize and celebrate the ways that the Spirit touches those around us. Let us open our hearts and circles to new voices proclaiming the Good News.<sup>6</sup>*

The Church of North America has unsparingly contributed to the mission of making God known and served throughout the world with the help of her missionaries. This has been done without counting the cost, 'really sacrificing their lives for God and the Church', as Pope Leo XIII exclaimed. In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life, Pope John Paul II noted,

*You have not only a glorious story to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to accomplish. Look into the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.<sup>7</sup>*

The Grey Nuns continue to eagerly follow where the Spirit leads. It is our legacy and it is our future.

The Grey Nuns' contribution for over 140 years to the calling of evangelization in Western and Northern Canada and in Zaïre is herewith proudly presented. In paraphrasing Saint John, one is tempted to write: *There are also many other things that [the Grey Nuns] did; if everyone of them were written down, I suppose that [your home] could not contain the books that would be written* (adapted from: Jn 21:25)

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NOTES: Epilogue

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- 1 A friend of the establishment, in **Lettres de Saint Albert 1858-1877**, March 23, 1863, p. 94, Mmy Arch..
- 2 Duchaussois, Pierre, OMI, **Femmes Héroïques**, Parie, Editions Spes, 1927, pp. 221, 222.
- 3 **Ibid.**, p. 239.
- 4 Marchand, Jeanne, s.g.m., **Interview**, May 2000.
- 5 Croteau, Micheline, *The Mackenzie-Fort Smith Diocese: The First Hundred Years in 1999 Calendar*, Catholic Missions in Canada.
- 6 Dougherty, Michael, in **Living with Christ**, Ottawa, Novalis, October 2000, p. 31.
- 7 Pope John Paul II in *The Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life*, # 110, March 25, 1996.





# APPENDICES







## APPENDIX I

SAINT ALBERT PROVINCE - PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP  
1897-2000

1897-1902	Mother Eugénie Letellier (Vicar) no councillor
1902-1907	Mother Léa Dandurand (Vicar) Sister Malvina Diquière, assistant
1907-1911	Mother Agnes Carroll (Vicar) (died August 24, 1911) Sister Malvina Diquière, assistant
1911-1912	Mother Alphonsine Archambault, pro. temp. (Vicar) Sister Malvina Diquière, assistant
1913-1915	Mother Eloïse Pagé (Vicar) Sister Cordélia Schetté, assistant
1915-1921	Mother Saint-Augustin (Ada Leduc) (Provincial) Sister Cordélia Schetté, assistant Sister Grandin (Marie Hurtebise), councillor and secretary
1921-1922	Mother Mary Deegan, pro. temp. Sister Cordélia Schetté, assistant Sister Grandin (Marie Hurtebise), councillor and secretary
1922-1926	Mother Saint Grégoire (Marie-Louisa Béliveau) Sister Ludovica Ritchot, assistant Sister Grandin (Marie Hurtebise), councillor and secretary
1926-1930	Mother Evangéline Gallant Sister Robichaud (Emma Paquette), assistant Sister Grandin (Marie Hurtebise), councillor and secretary
1930-1935	Mother Rose-Anna Laberge Sister Robichaud (Emma Paquette), assistant Sister Grandin (Marie Hurtebise), councillor and secretary
1935-1936	Mother Sainte Emilienne (Aurore Cadieux) Sister Gosselin (Arthémise Bergeron), assistant Sister Anna Beaupré, councillor

- 1937-1943      Mother Mary-Ann Casey  
                    Sister Gosselin (Arthémise Bergeron), assistant  
                    Sister Anna Beaupré, councillor
- 1943-1949      Mother Marguerite Mann  
                    Sister Marie-Louise Turenne, assistant  
                    Sister Valérie Métivier, secretary  
                    Sister Anna Beaupré, treasurer
- 1949-1955      Mother Rose Vincent  
                    Sister Louisa Dupuis, assistant  
                    Sister Angéline Letarte, councillor  
                    Sister Alice Lagarde, secretary and treasurer
- 1955-1957      Mother Marie-Berthe Dorais  
                    Sister Eva Morissette, assistant  
                    Sister Angéline Letarte, councillor  
                    Sister Léonie Ferland, secretary  
                    Sister Annette Désilets, treasurer
- 1957-1961      Mother Marie Laforce  
                    Sister Eva Morissette, assistant  
                    Sister Angéline Letarte, councillor  
                    Sister Marie-Ange Burque, councillor  
                    Sister Léonie Ferland, secretary  
                    Sister Jeanne Laporte, treasurer
- 1961-1964      Mother Marie Laforce  
                    Sister Marie Laramée, assistant  
                    Sister Anna Trottier, assistant  
                    Sister Marie-Ange Burque, councillor  
                    Sister Maria Schmidt, secretary  
                    Sister Jeanne Laporte, treasurer
- 1964-1968      Mother Yvonne Prévost  
                    Sister Anna Trottier, assistant  
                    Sister Marie St-Pierre, secretary  
                    Sister Thérèse Chaloux, councillor  
                    Sister Jeanne Laporte, treasurer
- 1968-1969      Mother Thérèse Chaloux  
                    Sister Fernande Dussault, assistant  
                    Sister Marguerite-Marie Côté, councillor  
                    Sister Aline Bohémier, councillor  
                    Sister Yvette Poissant, treasurer  
                    Sister Antoinette Laramée, secretary

- 
- 1969-1971      **Sister** Fernande Dussault, pro. temp.  
                    Sister Aline Bohémier, assistant  
                    Sister Marguerite-Marie Côté, councillor  
                    Sister Marguerite Létourneau, councillor  
                    Sister Marie-Paule Rheault, secretary  
                    Sister Yvette Poissant, treasurer
- 1971-1974      Sister Florence Keegan  
                    Sister Marguerite-Marie Côté, assistant and  
                    local superior  
                    Sister Marie-Paule Rheault, councillor  
                    and secretary  
                    Sister Cécile Leclerc, councillor  
                    Sister Yvette Poissant, councillor and treasurer
- 1974-1977      Sister Florence Keegan  
                    Sister Cécile Leclerc, assistant  
                    Sister Germaine Héту, councillor and secretary  
                    Sister Madeleine Rho, councillor and treasurer  
                    Sister Denise Piché, councillor
- 1977-1980      Sister Germaine Héту  
                    Sister Thérèse Castonguay, assistant and  
                    local superior  
                    Sister Marguerite Laforce, councillor  
                    and secretary  
                    Sister Fernande Michaud, councillor  
                    and treasurer  
                    Sister Rose-Anna Gauvin, councillor
- 1980-1983      Sister Germaine Héту  
                    Sister Thérèse Castonguay, assistant  
                    Sister Marguerite Laforce, councillor  
                    and secretary  
                    Sister Fernande Michaud, councillor  
                    and treasurer  
                    Sister Thérèse Pelletier, councillor
- 1983-1986      Sister Marguerite Laforce  
                    Sister Eveline Gagnon, assistant  
                    Sister Cléopée Beaudoin, councillor  
                    and secretary  
                    Sister Aline Bohémier, councillor and treasurer  
                    Sister Faye Wylie, councillor



- 1986-1986      Sister Marguerite Laforce (March to November)  
                     Sister Eveline Gagnon, assistant  
                     Sister Cléophrée Beaudoin, councillor  
                     and secretary  
                     Sister Cécile Gauthier, councillor and treasurer  
                     Sister Faye Wylie, councillor
- 1986-1989      Sister Faye Wylie (to complete term)  
                     Sister Rita Coulombe, assistant  
                     Sister Eveline Gagnon, councillor  
                     Sister Cléophrée Beaudoin, councillor  
                     and secretary  
                     Sister Cécile Gauthier, councillor and treasurer
- 1989-1992      Sister Faye Wylie  
                     Sister Rita Coulombe, assistant  
                     Sister Thérèse Pelletier, councillor and secretary  
                     Sister Juliette Thévenot, councillor and treasurer
- 1992-1995      Sister Faye Wylie  
                     Sister Thérèse Pelletier, assistant and secretary  
                     Sister Juliette Thévenot, councillor and treasurer  
                     Sister Aurore Larkin, councillor
- 1995-1996      Sister Aurore Larkin  
                     Sister Marguerite Laforce, assistant and secretary  
                     Sister Cécile Gauthier, councillor  
                     Sister Marcia Wiley, councillor and treasurer
- 1996-1998      Sister Marcia Wiley (to complete term)  
                     Sister Marguerite Laforce, assistant and secretary  
                     Sister Cécile Gauthier, councillor and treasurer  
                     Sister Lucille Damphousse, councillor
- 1998-            Sister Marcia Wiley  
                     Sister Marguerite Laforce, assistant and secretary  
                     Sister Bernadette Poirier, councillor  
                     Sister Lucille Damphousse, councillor  
                     and treasurer

**N.B.** On July 1, 2001, Saint Albert Province and Saint Boniface Province will be amalgamated as: **Grey Nun Western Province.**

**DIVINE PROVIDENCE PROVINCE - PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP  
1914-1980**

1914-1917	Mother Marie-Louise Lèveillé (Vicar) No councillor
1917-1920	Mother Marie-Louise Lèveillé (Vicar) Sister Céline Fortin, assistant Sister St-Cyr (Elvire Rivard), councillor
1920-1927	Mother Girouard (Zoé Chartier) (Provincial Superior) Sister Céline Fortin, assistant Sister Pinsonnault (Delphine Giroux), councillor Sister Sainte-Eugénie (Elisabeth Girard), councillor
1927-1930	Mother Eloïse Lachance Sister Céline Fortin, assistant Sister Pinsonnault (Delphine Giroux), councillor
1930-1933	Mother Eloïse Lachance Sister Céline Fortin, assistant Sister Pinsonnault (Delphine Giroux), councillor
1933-1935	Mother Anna Lusignan Sister Eloïse Lachance, assistant Sister Céline Fortin, councillor
1935-1937	Mother Anna Lusignan Sister St-Omer (Anna Montpetit), assistant Sister Emérentienne Martin, councillor
1937-1939	Mother Anna Lusignan Sister St-Omer (Anna Montpetit), assistant Sister Emérentienne Martin, councillor
1939-1942	Mother Emérentienne Martin Sister St-Omer (Anna Montpetit), assistant Sister Marcelline Vermette, councillor
1942-1946	Mother Emérentienne Martin Sister St-Omer (Anna Montpetit), assistant Sister Marcelline Vermette, councillor
1946-1949	Mother Elizabeth Kristoff Sister Flore Gaudette, assistant Sister Marcelline Vermette, councillor
1949-1952	Mother Adrienne Gadbois Sister Flore Gaudette, assistant Sister Thérèse Chaloux, councillor

1952-1955	Mother Marguerite Lachambre Sister Euphémie Boisvert, assistant Sister Alice Bonin, councillor
1955-1958	Mother Thérèse Chaloux Sister Euphémie Boisvert, assistant Sister Olive Sarrasin, councillor
1958-1961	Mother Thérèse Chaloux Sister Berthe Hébert, assistant Sister Anne-Marie Brodeur, councillor
1961-1965	Mother Alice Gauthier Sister Euphémie Boisvert, assistant Sister Anne-Marie Brodeur, councillor
1965-1968	Mother Alice Gauthier Sister Euphémie Boisvert, assistant Sister Paulette Fortier, councillor
1968-1971	Mother Yvette Lapointe Sister Marie Lemire, assistant Sister Joséphine Kergoat, councillor and treasurer Sister Claire Cardinal, councillor Sister Réjeanne Lamarche, councillor and secretary
1971-1972	Sister Yvette Lapointe (died suddenly on June 25, 1972) Sister Marie Lemire, assistant Sister Joséphine Kergoat, councillor and treasurer Sister Claire Cardinal, councillor Sister Réjeanne Lamarche, councillor and secretary
1972-1974	Sister Marie Lemire Sister Joséphine Kergoat, assistant and treasurer Sister Claire Cardinal, councillor Sister Réjeanne Lamarche, councillor and secretary
1974-1977	Sister Marie Lemire Sister Germaine Ménard, assistant Sister Cécile Jeannotte, councillor, secretary and treasurer
1977-1980	Province Divine Providence becomes a Region Sister Thérèse Pelletier, Regional Superior No council
1980	Divine Providence Region becomes amalgamated with Saint Albert Province



## APPENDIX II

TABLE OF MISSIONS IN SAINT ALBERT PROVINCE  
LOCATED IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

MISSION	year opened	year closed	transfer to	# of years	still open
Ile-à-la-Crosse	1860		SCHC*	140	**
Saskatoon: Saint Paul's Hosptial	1907	1999	SCHC*	92	**
Beauval: Reserve and Village	1910	1988		78	
Biggar: Hospital and Welcome Home	1923	2000	private	77	
Rosthern - Hospital	1927	1935		8	
Portage La Loche	1943	1981	SCHC*	38	
Prince Albert	1955	1960		5	
Albertville	1960	1963		3	
Buffalo Narrows	1968	1982		14	
Zenon Park	1972	1973		1	
Saskatoon - Elmwood Residence	1975	1985		10	

\* Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation

\*\* Sisters remaining

TABLE OF MISSIONS IN SAINT ALBERT PROVINCE  
LOCATED IN MACKENZIE-FORT SMITH DIOCESE

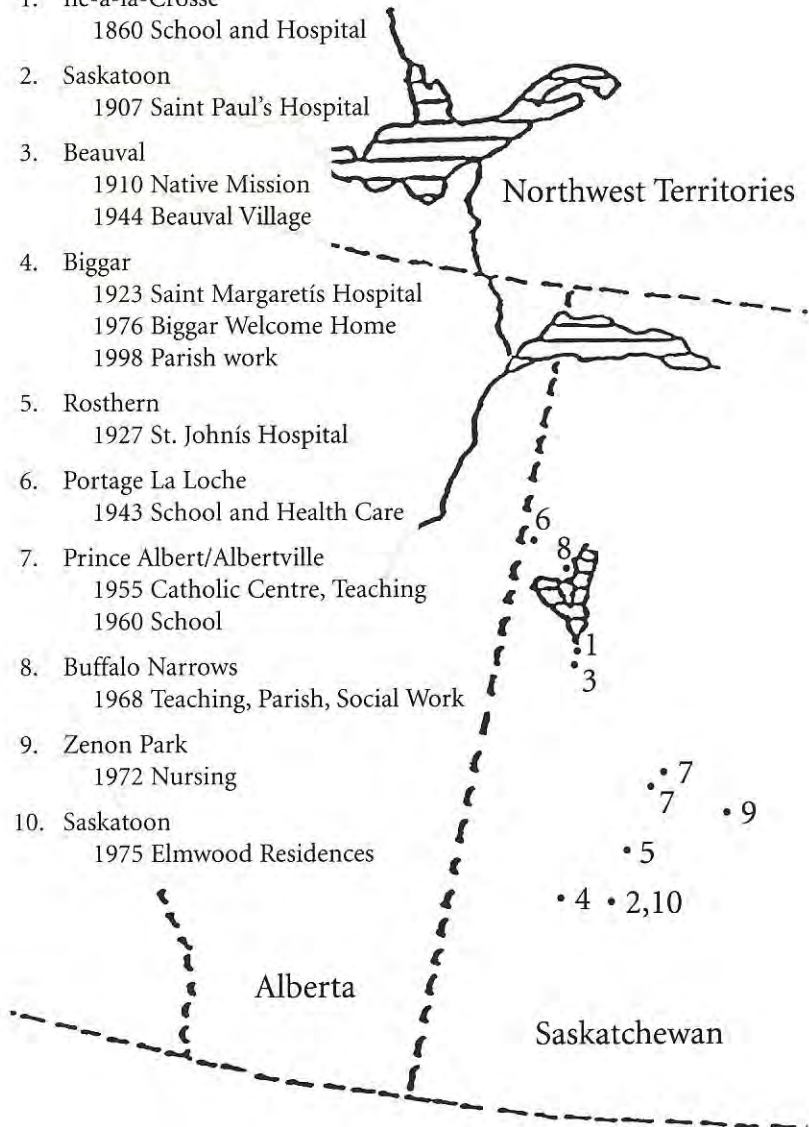
MISSION	year opened	year closed	transfer to	# of years	still open
Fort Providence	1867	1997		130	
Fort Chipewyan	1874	1993		119	
Fort Resolution	1903	1967		64	
Fort Smith	1914			86	yes
Fort Simpson	1916	1990		74	
Aklavik	1925	1976		41	
Fort McMurray	1938	1971		33	
Rae-Edzo	1940	1995		55	
Inuvik	1959	1996		37	
Hay River	1962	1989		27	
Uranium City	1968	1977		9	
Yellowknife	1977			16	yes

## APPENDIX III

## MAP OF GREY NUNS MISSIONS IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

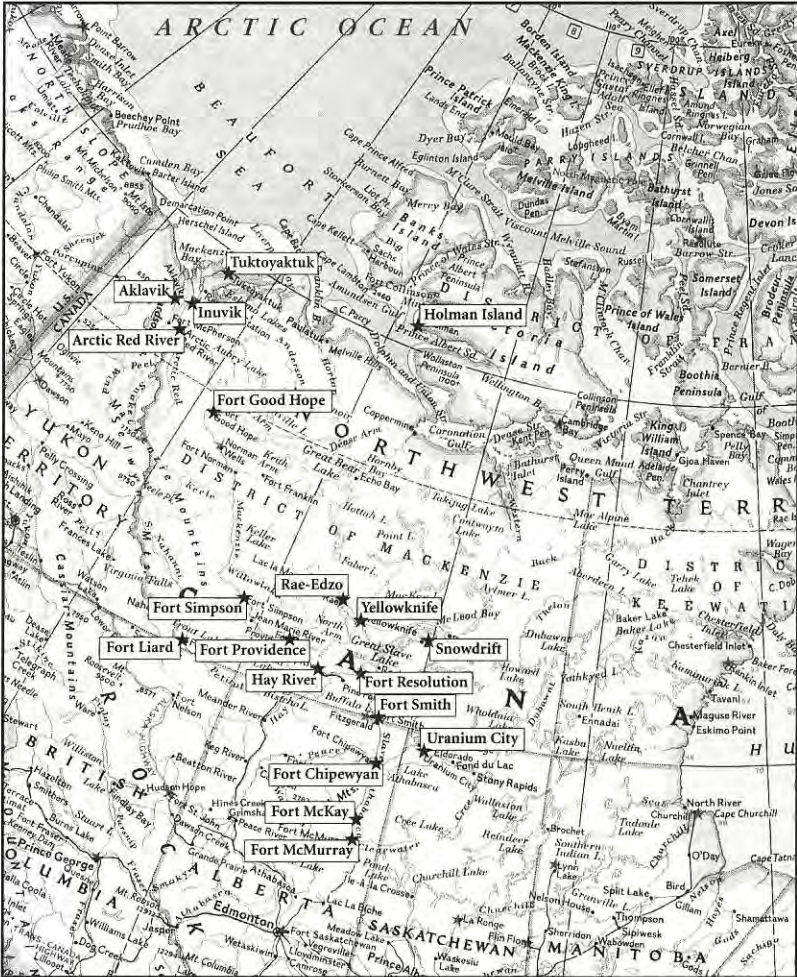
## Identification of missions:

1. Ile-à-la-Crosse  
1860 School and Hospital
2. Saskatoon  
1907 Saint Paul's Hospital
3. Beauval  
1910 Native Mission  
1944 Beauval Village
4. Biggar  
1923 Saint Margaretis Hospital  
1976 Biggar Welcome Home  
1998 Parish work
5. Rosthern  
1927 St. Johnis Hospital
6. Portage La Loche  
1943 School and Health Care
7. Prince Albert/Albertville  
1955 Catholic Centre, Teaching  
1960 School
8. Buffalo Narrows  
1968 Teaching, Parish, Social Work
9. Zenon Park  
1972 Nursing
10. Saskatoon  
1975 Elmwood Residences



### APPENDIX IV

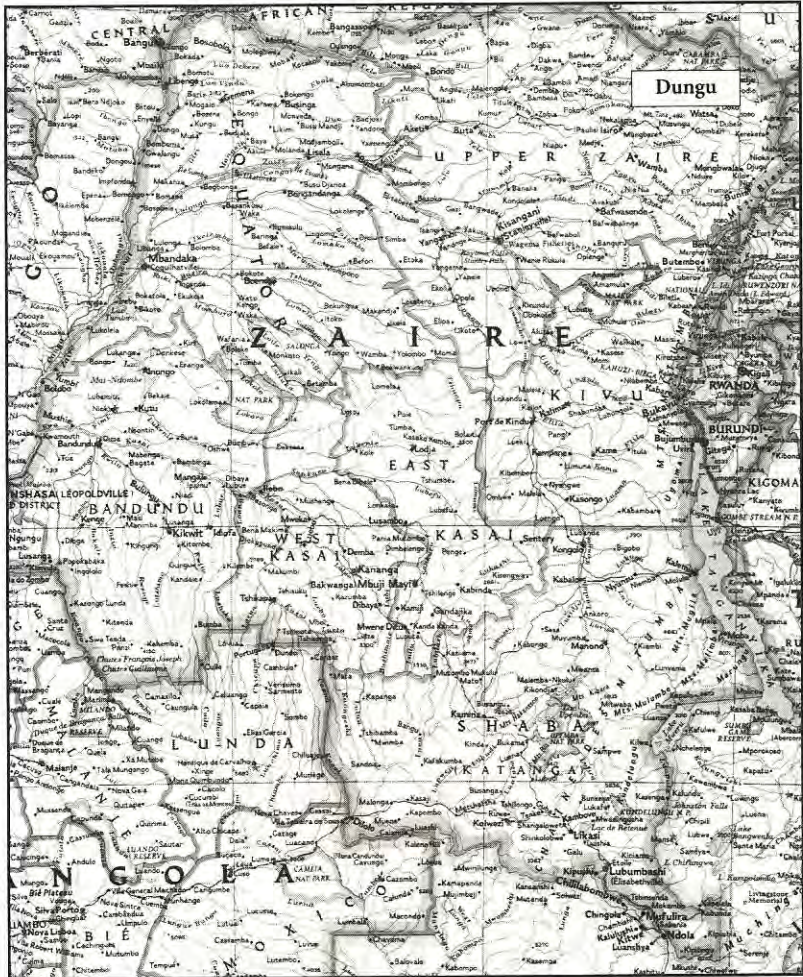
MAP OF GREY NUNS' MISSIONS IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES





APPENDIX V

MAP OF ZAÏRE, AFRICA



## APPENDIX VI

LIST OF FOUNDRESSES FOR MISSIONS IN NORTHERN  
SASKATCHEWAN

MISSION & YEAR	FOUNDRESSES
Ile-à-la-Crosse, 1860	Sisters Agnès (Rose Caron), sup., Philomène Boucher and Marie-Anne Pépin
1917	Sisters Saint-Nazaire (Philomène Nadeau), sup., Elise Martel, Cécile Nadeau and Séphora Fouquette
Saskatoon, 1907	1906 Precursors: Sisters Phaneuf (Alma Peltier) and Julie Guay 1907: Sisters Sainte-Dosithée (Marie-Déliima Arsenault), sup. and Julia Blakely
Beauval School, 1910	Sisters Saint-Nazaire (Philomène Nadeau), sup., Denise Beaudin, Saint-Elisée (Alzire Diquière), Saint-Adélin (Parmélia Grégoire), Yvonne (Jeanne Cadoret) and Alice (Aurore Huet-Dulude)
Village, 1944	Sister Catherine Boily
Biggar, Hospital, 1923	Sisters Alphonsine Normand, sup., l'Ange Gardien (Honorine Proulx), Amélia Lamontagne and Evéline Boudreault
Rosthern, Hospital, 1927	Sisters l'Ange Gardien (Honorina Proulx), sup., Félicité Héroux, Anna Beulac, Evéline Boudreault, Hébert (Emma Bergeron) and Claire Richard
Portage La Loche, 1943	Sisters Marie-Anne Fréchette, sup., Thérèse Arcand, Marie-Claire Gervais and Beatrice Webber.
Prince Albert, 1955	Sisters Marie-Louise Grégoire, sup., Aurore Blanchette, Irène Gauthier and Anna Laforce
Albertville, 1960	Sisters Léonie Beaulieu, sup., Aurore Blanchette, Cléopée Beaudoin, Marguerite Etcheverry and Alice Toullelan
Buffalo Narrows, 1968	Sisters Alice Houle and Blandine Roussel-Galle
Zenon Park, 1972	Sisters Marguerite Bourgeois and Yvonne Daigle
Saskatoon - Elmwood Residence 1975	Sisters Aurore Marien and Laurence Savidan



## APPENDIX VII

LIST OF FOUNDRESSES FOR MISSIONS IN  
THE MACKENZIE-FORT SMITH DIOCESE

MISSION & YEAR	FOUNDRESSES
Fort Providence 1867	Sisters Adéline Lapointe, sup., St-Michel-des-Saints (Marie-Louise Blanchet), Elizabeth Ward, and volunteers Domitille Letendre and Domitille Lortie
Fort Chipewyan 1874	1874 - Sisters Adéline Lapointe, sup. and St-Michel-des-Saints (M.-L. Blanchet) 1875 - Sisters St-Michel-des-Saints, sup., Valentine Brochu and Alphonsine Fournier and volunteer Virginie Bernier
Fort Resolution 1903	Sisters Virginie Boisvert, sup., Généreux (Délia Magnan) and Alice McQuillan and Auxiliary Sisters Ernestine (Lemay) and Honorine (Caron)
Fort Smith 1914	Sisters Marie-Louise Léveillé, sup., Céline Fortin, Adrienne Gadbois and Jobin (Zoëlla Turcotte)
Fort Simpson 1916	Sisters Girouard (Zoé Chartier), sup., Antoinette Latrémouille, Albina Bourcier and Marie (Kahppaxconne), Auxiliary
Aklavik 1925	Sisters Alice McQuillan, sup., Saint-Adélard (Rose-Anna Chartier) and Firmin (Obéline Pothier)
Fort McMurray 1938	Sisters Marie Nadeau, sup., Saint-Adjutor (Anna Henri) and Aldéa Roberge
Rae-Edzo 1940	Sisters Alida Gamache, sup., Berthe Gaudette, Félixina Lamoureux and Gertrude Lemire
Inuvik 1959	Sisters Joséphine Dussault, sup., Thérèse Béliveau, Marcelle Chauvette, Annie Cooper, Laurence Côté, Pauline Drolet, Berthe Gaudette, Irène Gallant, Rosanna Hébert, Béatrice Leduc and Anna Neumier
Hay River 1962	Sisters Blandine Lévesque, sup., Irène Gallant, Lucie Arsenault, Alice Decoine, Isabelle Hamelin, Germaine Lapointe, Aurise Normandeau and Florence Nolin
Uranium City 1968	Sisters Annette Potvin and Thérèse Pelletier
Holman Island 1969	Sister Thérèse Béliveau
Fort Good Hope 1971	Sisters Blanche Matte and Gabrielle Létourneau
Fort McKay 1971	Sisters Gertrude Villeneuve and Eva Bouchard
Fort Liard 1972	Sisters Aurise Normandeau and Gabrielle Létourneau
Snowdrift 1974	Sister Aurise Normandeau
Yellowknife 1977	Sisters Aurore Larkin and Anita Pelletier
Arctic Red River 1977	Sister Blanche Matte
Tuktoyaktuk 1987	Sisters Denise Emond and Françoise Tremblay



## APPENDIX VIII

NUMBER OF YEARS AND SISTERS IN EACH MISSION  
AND TOTAL - DURING 140 YEARS IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

NAME OF MISSIONS	# OF SISTERS	# OF YEARS MISSION WAS OPENED	CUMULATED TOTAL OF YEARS
Ile-à-la-Crosse	159	140	910
Saskatoon - Saint Paul's Hospital	276	92	1,375
Beauval: Reserve and Village	106	105	388
Biggar: Hospital and Welcome Home	129	77	583
Rosthern - Hospital	22	8	79
Portage La Roche	58	38	304
Prince Albert / Albertville	17	8	37
Buffalo Narrows	4	14	33
Zenon Park	2	1	2
Saskatoon - Elmwood Residence	11	10	44
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>784</b>	<b>493</b>	<b>3,755</b>

NUMBER OF YEARS AND SISTERS IN EACH MISSION  
AND TOTAL - DURING 140 YEARS IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

Fort Providence	151	130	1,024
Fort Chipewyan	168	119	1,214
Fort Resolution	136	64	750
Fort Smith	206	87	1,130
Fort Simpson	161	74	563
Aklavik	72	42	395
Fort McMurray	92	33	324
Rae-Edzo	66	55	268
Inuvik	51	37	199
Hay River	35	27	123
Uranium City	4	9	18
Yellowknife	6	16	35
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,148</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>6,043</b>

The same sister may have served in several missions consecutively.

## APPENDIX IX

**BISHOPS IN DIOCESES WHERE GREY NUNS  
WORKED IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN,  
THE MACKENZIE-FORT SMITH DIOCESE AND ZAIRE**

**Vicariate Apostolic of Hudson's Bay and James Bay - Diocese of Saint Boniface in 1820**

Bishop Alexandre Taché, OMI, 1851-1872  
Archbishop Alexandre Taché, OMI, 1872-1894

**Vicariate Apostolic of Prince-Albert and Saskatoon - 1891 - Diocese in 1907**

Bishop Albert Pascal, OMI, 1891-1921  
Bishop Joseph Henri Prud'homme, 1921-1937

**Diocese of Prince Albert - 1933**

Bishop Henri Prud'homme, 1933-1937  
Bishop Réginald Duprat, O.P., 1938-1952  
Bishop Léo Blais, 1952-1959  
Bishop Laurent Morin, 1959-1983  
Bishop Blaise Morand, 1983-

**Diocese of Saskatoon - 1933**

Bishop Gerald C. Murray, C.Ss.R., 1933-1944  
Bishop Philip F. Pocock, 1944-1951  
Bishop Francis J. Klein, 1951-1967  
Bishop James P. Mahoney, 1967-1995  
Bishop V. James Weisgerber, 1996-2000

**Vicariate Apostolic of Keewatin, 1910 - Archdiocese, 1967**

Bishop Ovide Charlebois, OMI, 1910-1933  
Bishop Martin Lajeunesse, OMI, 1933-1954  
Bishop Paul Dumouchel, OMI, 1955-1967  
Archbishop Paul Dumouchel, OMI, 1967-1986  
Archbishop Peter Sutton, OMI, 1986-

**Apostolic Vicariate of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, 1859 - Diocese, 1967**

Bishop Vital Grandin, OMI, Coadjutor to Bishop Taché, 1859-1902  
Bishop Henri Faraud, OMI, Coadjutor to Bishop Vital Grandin, 1859-1862  
First Vicar Apostolic of Athabasca-Mackenzie, 1862-1889  
Bishop Isidore Clut, OMI, Auxiliary to Bishop Faraud, 1867-1903  
Bishop Emile Grouard, OMI, 1890-1902 (Athabasca)  
Bishop Gabriel Breynat, OMI, 1902-1943 (Mackenzie)  
named Archbishop by Pius XII in 1939  
Bishop Pierre Fallaize, OMI, 1931-1940 (Eskimo Missions)  
Bishop Joseph-Marie Trocellier, OMI, 1943-1958 (Mackenzie)  
Bishop Paul Piché, OMI, 1959-1986 (Mackenzie-Fort Smith)  
Bishop Denis Croteau, OMI, 1986-

**Diocese of Dungen-Doruma, Zaire, Africa**

Bishop Théo W. Van den Elzen, 1965-1983  
Bishop Emile Aiti, 1983-

## APPENDIX X

GREY NUNS' FIRST TRIPS TO WESTERN AND  
NORTHERN MISSIONS  
1844-1867

**Montréal to Saint Boniface**

Leave Montréal:	April 24, 1844		
Arrive Saint Boniface	June 21, 1844	59 days	<b>TOTAL: 59 days</b>

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**Montréal to Lac Sainte Anne**

Leave Montréal	September 17, 1858		
Arrive Saint Boniface	October 29, 1858	42 days	
Leave Saint Boniface	August 3, 1859		
Arrive Lac Sainte Anne	September 24, 1859	52 days	<b>TOTAL: 94 days</b>

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**Montréal to Ile-à-la-Crosse**

Leave Montréal	June 4, 1860		
Arrive Saint Boniface	July 10, 1860	36 days	
Leave Saint Boniface	July 30, 1860		
Arrive Ile-à-la-Crosse	October 4, 1860	67 days	<b>TOTAL: 103 days</b>

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**Montréal to Lac LaBiche**

Leave Montréal	May 22, 1862		
Arrive Saint Boniface	June 7, 1862	16 days	
Leave Saint Boniface	July 8, 1862		
Arrive Lac LaBiche	August 26, 1862	49 days	<b>TOTAL: 65 days</b>

---

**Montréal to Fort Providence**

Leave Montréal	September 17, 1866		
Arrive Saint Boniface	October 13, 1866	26 days	
Leave Saint Boniface	June 8, 1867		
Arrive Fort Providence	August 28, 1867	81 days	<b>TOTAL: 107 days</b>

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- documents of foundation of several Grey Nuns western missions
- Historique of missions closed at the time of writing - a Summary

#### **Grey Nuns of Nicolet** 55, rue Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Nicolet

- documents concerning western missions founded by the Sisters of Nicolet, an autonomous Grey Nuns Branch from 1886 to 1941

#### **Grey Nuns of Saint-Boniface** 151, rue Despins, Saint-Boniface

- documentation on the founding of western and northern missions before the Saint-Albert Vicariate was established in 1898. The Grey Nuns Vicariate became Saint Albert Province in 1914
- documentation on the first Grey Nun western mission in 1844

#### **Grey Nuns of Saint-Albert** 9810 165 Street, Edmonton

- all detailed primary sources for each mission covered: Chronicles, correspondence, reports

#### **Alberta Provincial Archives, Edmonton**

- perusal of an abundance of information in the Oblates Archives located at the Alberta Provincial Archives

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## GLOSSARY/DEFINITIONS



**Auxiliary Sisters:** A category of women who wished to serve in the Grey Nuns works of charity without assuming leadership positions or permanent status in the Congregation. This group combined with the Vocal Sisters in 1942.

**Constitutions:** Rule of conduct of a religious institution; its plural form is used by the Grey Nuns

**Foundation:** In this context, it is used as *origini*, the starting point of a mission. In financial terms, it is also used in regard as endowment, capital that produces income

**Monsignor:** An ecclesiastical title of honor bestowed on some priests

**Province:** Geographical province versus Grey Nuns region - The Grey Nuns Congregation is divided into regions, called Province

**Suffragan:** An assistant or subordinate bishop of a diocese

**Vicar:** An administrative deputy in a Roman Catholic parish or diocese

**Vicariate:** A religious institution, region, diocese under the authority of a Vicar





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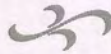
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Provincial Leader



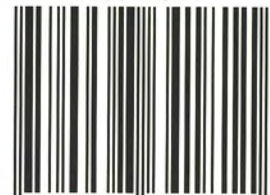
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*Ed Lysyk*  
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