

## **The Excavations of Old Fort St. Marie**

BY

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### FORT STE. MARIE IN THE PAST

For three hundred years, a neglected piece of stone masonry has lain in oblivion on the banks of the Wye River near Midland, Ont., on the Georgian Bay. It antedates Montreal by three years and Toronto by 155 years and is the oldest stone structure in Canada except for Quebec city. Once the central Mission of the Jesuits among the 30,000 Huron Indians, Fort Ste. Marie has many claims to history. It marked the culmination of a series of sporadic missions in centres which were subject to frequent changes of village sites by Indians. It gave stability and importance as a permanent mother house where the Jesuit Missionaries could profit by their common experiences and find spiritual solace and physical rest after the long treks over ice and snow from Lake Superior to Niagara, along Lake Erie and north into what is now central Ontario. Father Jerome Lalement, Superior of Fort Ste. Marie, wrote in 1639: "The missionaries found thirty-two small hamlets and struggling villages which comprised in all about 700 cabins, two thousand fires and about twelve thousand persons". Already disease and wars had reduced them to half their original numbers.

The building of Fort Ste. Marie marked a new era in their missionary life. No longer would the Jesuit missionaries have to live in isolation and loneliness, no longer would they be obliged to see Indian villages abandoned because of filth, lack of sanitation and poverty of the soil. Instead, while they still visited the pagan tribes, their Christian neophytes could flock to Fort Ste. Marie to bury their dead, to receive instructions, to assist at Mass and receive the Sacraments. Father Ragueneau, the Superior, wrote in 1645: "During the past year we counted over 3000 persons to whom we have given shelter and sometimes within a fortnight, 600 or 700 Christians, which as a rule means three meals to each one. This does not include a larger number who come continuously to pass a whole day and to whom we gave charity". (*Jesuit Relations*, Clev. Edition xxvi, p. 201.) Father Chaumonot, writing from Fort Ste. Marie in 1640, says: "Our manner of living would seem in Europe very strange and full of hardships, but we find it quite easy and agreeable. We have neither salt, oil, fruit, bread or wine, except what we keep for Mass. Our entire nourishment consists of a sort of soup made of Indian

corn, crushed between two stones, or pounded in mortar and seasoned with smoked fish, then served in a wooden dish". (*Relations*, xxiii, p. 11.)

By 1644 Fort Ste. Marie had taken on the proportions of a thriving community. "This house is not only an abode for ourselves", wrote Fr. Vimont in 1644, "but is the continual resort of the neighboring tribes and still more of the Christians who come from all parts. We have therefore been compelled to establish a hospital for the sick, a cemetery for the dead, a church for the public devotions, a retreat for pilgrims, and finally a place apart for the others who are still infidels." (*Relations*, xxvi, p. 201.) It is not surprising that Fr. Ragueneau could write to the General of the Society in Rome: "The state of our house is such that I do not think we could add to the piety, obedience, charity and perfect regularity of all Ours. We have all truly one heart, one soul, one mind. In whatever way God wishes to dispose of us either in life or in death, it will be our consolation to belong to Him forever". It is edifying to read of this isolated community in the Canadian wilderness, leading a regular community life, rising at 4.30, attending to their devotions and domestic duties, even to community reading at table – though they frequently sat on the ground for meals. Fort Ste. Marie had even become a Shrine in 1644, – the first place of pilgrimage north of Mexico. There exists in the archives of St. Mary's College, Montreal, a precious document, kept under lock and key, still as freshly preserved as when it was written 300 years ago. This document is certainly the first Apostolic document ever issued to the Church in Ontario and is a Brief from Pope Urban VIII, dated Feb. 18th, 1644, granting a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions to all pilgrims visiting the Chapel of St. Joseph of the Hurons at Fort Ste. Marie. Pope Pius XI renewed this privilege to pilgrims of this age.

Besides being a centre of religious instruction, Fort Ste. Marie was also a centre of social service. In an age which considers itself a pioneer in social science, it is noteworthy that to-day's clinics, medical centres, catechetical clubs, agricultural schools, sanitation systems, domestic science courses, etc., had their precursors at Fort Ste. Marie. Here religion and social studies went hand in hand.

After a few years, the soil was tilled, calves were brought up by canoe, and Fr. Ragueneau could write in 1649: "We have now large supplies from fishing and hunting; we have not merely fish and eggs, but also pork and milk." We have confirmation of this from *Notes sur les Registres de Notre Dame de Québec*, by the Abbé J. B. Ferland (Quebec: 1863), p. 80. "On August 6th, 1648, 50 or 60 canoes set out from Three Rivers bearing 26 Frenchmen, five Jesuit priests, a Brother, three boys, nine laborers and 8 soldiers, with 4 more from Montreal, and a small cannon and one calf". One may imagine the difficulties of bringing this cannon (now in the museum of Martyrs' Shrine) and a calf 800 miles by canoe with 40 portages en route. From Rev. Arthur E. Jones, in the 5th Report, Bureau of Archives of Ontario,

1908, we learn who were the Fathers accompanying this expedition: "In September, 1648, Fr. Bressani returned from Quebec with four new missionaries, Fathers Gabriel Lalemant, Jacques Bonin, Adrien Greslon, Adrien Daran and a lay Brother, Nicolas Noirclair (Petit Louis), aged 16, afterwards known on the missions as Brother Louis le Boesme, leaving Quebec, July 24th, 1648. The whole flotilla consisting of 50 or 60 canoes finally set out for the West from Three Rivers on Aug. 6th".

When we consider that in 1648, year of Fr. Daniel's Martyrdom, there were 67 persons living at Fort Ste. Marie, – 20 priests, 4 lay brothers, 24 *données*, 11 laymen, 8 soldiers (in 1643 there were 32 soldiers in residence there), it is not hard to see the need of providing for such a community. Father Ragueneau paid a lofty tribute to these laymen, pioneers of our Catholic Action, when he wrote: "They are all chosen persons, most of whom have resolved to live and die with us. They assist us in our labours and industries with courage, and a fidelity and a holiness that are assuredly not of this earth. Consequently they look to God for their reward, deeming themselves only too happy to pour out not only their sweat but their blood if need be, to contribute as much as they can towards the conversion of the barbarians". (*Relations*, xxxiii, p. 75).

It is interesting to read the list of Lay Brothers and devoted laymen who had various employments at Fort Ste. Marie. Brother Dominic Scot, Tailor; Brother Gauber, Iron-Worker; Joseph Molere, Apothecary (Infirmarian); Charles Boivin, Builder; Robt. Lecoq, Foreman; Peter Tourmente, Mason or mortar worker; John Guiet, Carpenter; Christopher Regnaut, Shoemaker. (The latter, with Charles Maiherbe, carried the bodies of Brébeuf and Lalemant from St. Ignace to Fort Ste. Marie for burial).

During its relatively short existence of ten years, Fort Ste. Marie housed six of the eight Jesuit Martyrs, the only canonized saints in North America, who, at the request of the entire episcopate of Canada, were in 1939 declared by Rome, Patrons of Canada along with St. Joseph. From Fort Ste. Marie, St. Isaac Jogues paddled down the Wye River in 1642 on his 800 mile paddle to Quebec, whence he was never to return; he was slain 4 years later at Auriesville, N.Y. From Fort Ste. Marie, St. Anthony Daniel went forth from his annual retreat in 1648 to be consumed in the fiery furnace of his chapel after he had boldly faced the Iroquois at St. Joseph, a Mission 14 miles distant. From Fort Ste. Marie, Fathers Brébeuf and Lalemant had recently returned when they stood for hours at the stake under fiendish tortures at St. Ignace, nine miles distant. To Fort Ste. Marie their charred and mangled remains were reverently carried for burial until removed for safer keeping at Quebec. At Fort Ste. Marie, St. Charles Gamier and St. Noel Chabanel had garnered spiritual strength to face their supreme test later in 1649, when the former was barely able to drag himself on hands and knees to give absolution to a dying Huron before he himself expired at Etharita near Collingwood. St.

Noel Chabanel was tomahawked one day later and his body was thrown into the Nottawasaga River.

By June, 1649, the outlying missions were a blackened ruin. Fort Ste. Marie stood isolated. Their "Home of Peace" had to be abandoned. They followed the scorched-earth policy of to-day. If it was unsafe for them, they would see that it could not become a stronghold of the Iroquois. The Fort was given to the flames and the missionaries took their spiritual progeny and their primitive belongings, on rafts made of huge logs, 20 miles distant to Christian Island, where to-day their Jesuit brethren have an Indian mission. "Following the fleeting flock", wrote the sad-hearted Ragueneau, "we left the residence of Fort Ste. Marie and our fields with their rich harvests. Nay, more, we even applied the torch to the work of our own hands, lest the sacred edifice should shelter the impious enemy; and thus, in a single day, we saw destroyed our work of ten years". But the enemy followed them and cut them off from the mainland. After a year of starvation and death, the remnants of this Huron mission moved down to Quebec and settled near Ste. Foy and Lorette.

#### FORT STE. MARIE IN THE PRESENT

Fort Ste. Marie lay forgotten for nearly two hundred years. Hostile Governments in Europe had used pressure on the Church, and the Society of Jesus disappeared from 1773 to 1814. When hundreds of their establishments disappeared in Europe, Fort Ste. Marie could hardly be remembered in the new world. In 1844, Fr. Chazelle, S. J., visited the ruins of the Fort. The property had passed into the hands of the Crown and through successive hands. The Jesuits were few in numbers, mostly engaged in work in Quebec. There seemed no prospect of according the honours of the sainthood until nearly 1900. In the meantime Fr. Laboureau of Penetanguishene had acquired the property. There is a false impression, believed by many, that the Jesuits refused to buy the Fort when offered by Fr. Laboureau. Registry records show that Fr. Laboureau had sold the property surrounding the Fort in 1900. Though he believed he had reserved the Fort, he was mistaken: his advanced years and illness may easily account for this error. But when he offered it to the Jesuits in 1906, it was discovered that the Fort had already been, without his knowledge, included in the former sale. Successive owners insisted on including a 1500 acre stretch of land with the Fort at a price far beyond the means of the Jesuits, until 1939, when the Fort was finally detached and purchased through the help of kind donors, for Martyrs' Shrine.

In the meantime, a temporary Shrine had been erected, in 1907, near Waubaushene at the supposed site of the martyrdom of Brébeuf and Lalemant, where it drew pilgrims until 1925. On the day of the Beatification of the Martyrs in Rome, a monument was erected and blessed at Fort Ste. Marie. The following year, an imposing stone church was erected by Very Rev. J.

M. Filion, Jesuit Provincial, and blessed by His Eminence Cardinal O'Connell and numerous clergy, en route by boat from the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago. The following day 10,000 pilgrims assembled at Martyrs' Shrine, when His Grace Archbishop McNeill celebrated Mass, Bishop Fallon preached and their Excellencies Archbishop O'Brien, Archbishop McNally, Bishop Kidd and Bishop Scollard were present.

Since then hundreds of thousands have visited Martyrs' Shrine by Canadian National trains which stop at the grounds; by regular American steamers which call twice weekly from the large American cities of Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and Buffalo; by regular Gray Coach from Toronto and other centres; and by motor car. Besides the spiritual graces accorded, visible signs of their powerful intercession are not wanting at their Shrine, where not only Catholics but thousands of other Faiths are drawn to tread reverently on grounds sanctified by men whose names are written in letters of blood across the pages of our history. Martyrs' Shrine has become a Holy Place of Pilgrimage to the sick, the maimed, the spiritually destitute.

#### EXCAVATIONS AT FORT STE. MARIE

Shortly after the acquisition of the property of Fort Ste. Marie by the Jesuits in 1939, the Royal Ontario Museum offered its services, considering Fort Ste. Marie one of the most important historic sites on the North American continent. Mr. Kenneth Kidd, Assistant Keeper of the Ethnological Collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, in charge of excavations, stated in the *Canadian Historical Review* for 1941: "The Jesuit Order was desirous of restoring the ancient settlement to its original condition and invited the cooperation of the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology in the undertaking. As a result it was agreed that the Museum should supply the technical assistance and what equipment it possessed and that the Order should supply the Museum Staff with board and lodging and arrangement for any further equipment that might prove necessary, and supply the labourers. The arrangement seemed advantageous to both parties. The Jesuit Order would obtain the data necessary to reconstruction, such as measurements and ground plans, and all specimens recovered, while the Museum would obtain accurate information on early French trade goods, on precisely dated Huron and Algonquin archaeological material and possibly osteological material as well. Over and above this and most probably what is of greater moment to the people of Canada as a whole, one of their most significant national monuments would be saved from further erosion and vandalism. It is encouraging to know that interest has been awakened in the public to such an extent that the people of the region, once inhabited by Huron Indians (Barrie, Orillia, Midland, Penetanguishene, Port McNicoll, Waubaushene, Stayner, Honey Harbor, Creemore, Collingwood and Owen Sound) have formed an

Association called the Huronia Historic Sites Association, whose purpose is to promote and assist in the excavation and restoration of all important historic sites in Huronia".

"Work began in June, 1941, with a Museum Staff of four and six local labourers. Provision was made for most phases of archaeological work, such as photography. It was deemed wise to have it professionally surveyed and this the Ontario Department of Highways agreed to do; – Each square was excavated by removing three-inch levels at a time until a depth was reached at which no evidence of disturbance was to be found. Most squares were taken down to a depth of about 21.24 inches".

From Mr. Kidd's words one can see the scientific care needed for such an undertaking. Evidence lost now can never be regained as there will be only one excavation, followed, it is hoped, by restoration. Hence all specimens found were carefully tabulated in paper bags and recorded. Not only photography was used but detailed drawings were made at every step of the work and portions of the stone walls and palisaded structures were thus carefully drawn so that Mr. Kidd said once: "If a bomb struck what we have completed, we could reconstruct it within half an inch of the original structure. Specimens were taken to Toronto for study during 1941-42 and maps, level readings, diagrams, photographs all provide abundant evidence. In addition to this, another kind of evidence is found from metal remains, bone, charcoal and stone, iron tomahawks, etc.

In 1941, two of the bastions were completely unearthed, yielding immense quantities of stone and leaving the original masonry standing four feet from the ground, masonry laid by the band of the faithful laymen under direction of the Jesuit missionaries. These two bastions were 15 by 18 feet and 22 by 26 feet, about 32 inches thick and built of limestone and granite boulders. The absence of such quantities of stone in this locality seems to indicate that they transported laboriously on rafts, (they had no horses) these boulders from the present Flat Point at Port McNicoll, which is five miles distant by water. An interesting discovery was a structure of cedar poles well preserved about nine feet square within the Fort. It was presumably a root cellar, as pumpkin, squash and other seeds were found there, as well as the leg of a rooster and pieces of glass. A piece of masonry similar to a chimney, open on one side, was also discovered. It may have been the forge at which Brother Gauber worked. Scraps of metal were found nearby. What resembled brick dust was found but Museum authorities doubted if bricks were used here at that time. However, during the past summer, complete bricks were found well preserved. Great quantities of charred wood were found in every part of the Fort, evidences of the intense heat of the fire when the Fort was burned by the missionaries. One of the great obstacles to speed was the presence of trees which during the past 70 years had grown into the stone foundations. The roots had to be carefully removed by mallet and chisel. In order not to disturb

a single stone, trucks could not be used in the fort, nor dynamite or other speedier solutions, and their many ramifications rendered this work very tedious. What required most time was the careful removal of earth so as not to lose any Indian relics. Much of this work was done not with the shovel but with trowel and a screen to sift the earth. In this way many specimens were found: iron tomahawks, a copper rosette, antique nails, glass, prayer beads, a much valued bronze medal bearing the figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit Order, and St. Francis Xavier. As they were canonized in 1622, just three years before Brébeuf came to Canada, devotion to them would be very popular. Popular interest was also aroused by the discovery of what was positively identified by Museum authorities as a hen's egg, the oldest in Ontario. At the request of the Agricultural Department of the Toronto Exhibition, it was exhibited in Toronto at this Fall event.

In 1942, the work was resumed and gave startling results. The remains of a long building, residence of the missionaries, came to light. Foundation stones, log beams, revealed themselves, showing the outlines of two buildings, one no doubt the residences of the missionaries, the other the residence of the lay help. One building was 54 feet by 20 feet, the other 46 by 20 feet. The presence of three hearths also was revealed, showing the evidence of intense heat in their stone flooring. Two of these hearths were 8 by 9 feet and 9 by 5 feet. It was no doubt beside these two hearths that, in 1646, Fr. Chastelain completed his book of over 400 pages in classical Latin, dedicated to Sodalists in Europe and entitled "Affectus Amantis Christi sen Exercitium Amoris erga Dominum Jesum pro tota Hebdomada". This has been quoted as possibly the first book written in Canada. He says in the introduction: "Members of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, in offering you this book, I bring you an unexpected gift from Canada. In sending my book, a stranger as it were into a strange world, I bade it lodge with you and look to you as its patrons. For my book is bashful; born amid the rudeness of barbarism, it shrank from the light of civilization. Behold then, traversing the boundless sea in safety, it now presents itself to you with the hope of finding in your hearts safe harbor, rest and a kind reception."

Excavators were rewarded this year by finding another structure, deep in the earth, made of cedar poles, still preserved to the length of four feet and in excellent condition, revealing presence of another root cellar.

Beside the hearth was a deposit of stone indicating it had fallen from a height of 25 feet, being probably the chimney of the fireplace. Around it was a large section of flooring well preserved but burned and charred. There seemed to be an opening in the flooring and when this was removed, there was discovered 20 inches below a kind of box hewn out of two logs and joined together to a width of 26 inches and about three feet in length. The sides appeared to be worn with grooves and a cruciform design was on the base.

The Fort is oblong in shape with four bastions, one at each corner. The last two bastions were unearthed in 1942, yielding immense quantities of the original stone which had fallen both within and without the walls, and lay covered with earth like a mound for 200 years. According to Mr. Kidd, stone collected from the bastion walls will likely be sufficient to rebuild them to a height of ten or twelve feet. One bastion was 27 by 21 feet with a 6 foot door space and the other 16 by 19 feet.

Two stone walls about two feet in height join the eastern and northern bastions and the evidence of a moat for protection reveals itself on the western side near the river Wye. The well used by the Fathers has been discovered and excavated to a depth of ten or twelve feet, the sides being well preserved in spite of the absence of cribbing to protect them. Further excavations will be carried out on them next summer. The numerous springs of fresh water used by the missionaries form the sole supply of water to Martyrs' Shrine to-day.

An abundant source of specimens was revealed this summer. Almost daily the staff and workers unearthed some object of interest. These specimens, often in a state of decay, had to be carefully treated with acids to harden them before removal. While over one thousand specimens were discovered last year, the number this year seems just as great. The list of them is long and varied for 1942: an iron spike, a shovel, a mason's trowel, iron table-knife, iron axe, iron drill, copper hinge, iron staples, large iron wedge, an axe containing half-burnt wooden handle, an iron arrow-point, iron cloak-fasteners, Indian stone gaming piece, green glass pottery, holy water font, parts of prayer beads, locket, bell clapper, narrow metal finger rings (probably used for marriage ceremonies). Other objects were an antique iron spade, an iron file bearing the initials J. L. (which might be those of Fr. Jerome Lalemant or those of the layman James Levrier, the Shoemaker at Fort Ste. Marie), an iron trowel, an auger, an iron adze for making boards, a spectacle lens. More recently an interesting discovery was an old pair of scissors, a pair of tweezers, and a long needle in a silver case, evidently part of the Brother Infirmarian's set. The depth at which these were all found made it clear to the excavators that they were of the 17th century.

The excavations are not yet complete. Museum authorities feel they must spend another summer on this spot, which the President of the University of Toronto recently declared to be the most important site on the continent of North America. Only the interior of the stone part of the Fort has been excavated. There still remains the Indian section where was located the chapel, the hospital, the residence for the Indians, all of which was separated by a moat still visible, whence they paddled directly into the Fort from the Wye River.

Some day, let us hope, Fort Ste. Marie will rise from its ruins. The vast quantities of stone salvaged from its ruins will make it not only a facsimile

but a real restoration. It will rise amid modern surroundings, for no longer do the cries of the Iroquois ring out over the night air; no longer do peaceful Hurons build their cabins on these hallowed grounds; the unbroken forest has yielded to the axe. Little patches of Indian corn have yielded to great fields of luxuriant crops. Where Indian trails, distinguishable only to the trained eye of the Indian, pierced the mighty forest, paved highways spread a network over the land and the Indians would have recoiled, as from a mighty Oki, or bad spirit, from the huge locomotive which now rolls by within a few feet of their Old Fort while hovering aeroplanes would have sent them scampering in flight to their cabins.

But these changes serve only to accentuate the heroism of men who left the sunny fields of France to follow the red men through trackless forests in the new world. Fort Ste. Marie is fragrant with the sacred memories of the past and even to-day, when the red demon of war is stalking through the world, leaving a path of smoking ruins and blood-stained corpses, people come to Martyrs' Shrine at Fort Ste. Marie for peace and meditation on the lives of these saints who still seem to stride again over these hallowed grounds dispensing inspiration and courage to all.