

George Anthony Belcourt Pioneer Missionary of the Northwest

by
THE RT. REV. JAMES M. REARDON, P.A.

The Call is Answered

George Antoine Belcourt was born April 22, 1803, at La Baie du Febvre, Yamaska County, in the Province of Quebec, Canada, of a family that came to that locality in March, 1738. He was the eldest child of Antoine Belcourt and Joseph Lemire, married February 23, 1802.

His parents lived in moderate circumstances cultivating the farm bought by the paternal grandfather in 1738. Little is known of his boyhood. His home training was undoubtedly similar to that given in the ordinary family circle among the French Canadians where love of God, loyalty to the Catholic Church and obedience to lawful authority were inculcated as fundamental principles of everyday life and conduct. He received his first Communion in 1814 and was confirmed by the Bishop of Quebec.

From the local school he passed to the Petit Séminaire at Nicolet, then in the Diocese of Quebec, but an episcopal see since July 10, 1885. He entered it at the age of thirteen and, at the end of his philosophical course in 1823, was enrolled in the theological department where he completed his studies for the priesthood and was ordained March 10, 1827, by Archbishop Panet of Quebec, in the seminary chapel.

After several assignments as assistant in different parishes he was appointed pastor of Ste. Martine, Chateauguay County, in the baptismal register of which he made his first entry on October 2, 1830, and his last on February 21 of the following year. His knowledge of English enabled him to be of service to the Irish Catholics in the neighbourhood.

While he was pastor of this parish an event occurred which changed the whole current of his life, and precipitated him from the comparative ease and security of a pastoral charge in the Province of Quebec, into the hardship and hazard of a missionary adventure which was to endure for almost three decades of unremitting labor among the Indians of the western plains of Canada and the United States. As a young levite he had dreamed of such a career, and, shortly after ordination, offered himself for missionary work in the Red River colony in what is now the Province of Manitoba, but for a long time there seemed to be little prospect that his offer would be accepted.

The call came three years after his ordination when Archbishop Panet bade him be ready to accompany Bishop Provencher, his Coadjutor for the

Northwest, on his return to the Red River Valley. After an interview with the Bishop on February 18, 1831, he spent two months at Lac des Deux Montagnes studying the Algonquin language, which has an affinity with the Chippewa of the West. On April 27 he and the Bishop embarked on a master canoe of the Hudson's Bay Company for a voyage over the classic trail of the Ottawa River and the Great Lakes to St. Boniface, which they reached on June 17, after a journey of over two thousand miles, much of it over difficult and dangerous water courses.

In the Red River Valley

When Father Belcourt arrived in St. Boniface he was the third priest in the mission, the others being Fathers Harper and Boucher. He was immediately assigned to the Cathedral to assist the Bishop, with the understanding that he devote every spare moment of his time to the study of the Chippewa language as a prerequisite to the work of christianizing them. It was a difficult language to learn as there was neither text book nor dictionary. He was the first to dedicate himself to the laborious ministry of instructing the savages of the Red River and in that capacity he rendered eminent service to religion.

He possessed unusual linguistic ability and made such rapid progress in his studies that in a year he was prepared to instruct the Indians. As early as August 2, 1832, he wrote to a friend in Quebec, 'Already my tongue begins to bend like that of a Chippewa and to gabble a little Cree,' and, less than two years later, he "would rather write in Chippewa than in French." One who knew him well declared that he "understood the language of the savage better than the savages understood it themselves."

In 1832 he established the first mission exclusively for the savages at Prairie Fournier (Baker's Prairie) sixty miles west of St. Boniface but, owing to the raids of the 'Gros Ventres' had to abandon it the next year. He transferred the mission to Baie St. Paul, thirty miles nearer St. Boniface and twelve miles west of White Horse Prairie in 1834, where he began the arduous task of teaching the Indians how to farm and cultivate the arts of civilized life while instructing them in religion. On a tract of land given by Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company he erected a log chapel, twenty feet square, with living quarters for himself, and several small cabins for the Indians surrounded by diminutive farms to be cultivated by them. Baie St. Paul became his official residence during all his years in the Red River Valley, and for a long time it was the only parish with a resident pastor.

This method of dealing with the savages was a radical departure from the one in vogue prior to his time when the Indians were first christianized and then domesticated, and ultimately it did not prove a success. Although

the Bishop did not approve the plan because the Indians were of a roving disposition, he permitted Father Belcourt to have his own way for the sake of peace and harmony, procured from the H.B.C. hoes and plows, and supplied a yoke of oxen to aid the savages in cultivating the soil and planting potatoes and maize.

During the first year Father Belcourt estimated that he had one hundred and fifty Indians attending religious instruction, of whom he baptized seventy-five. He had to be very prudent in admitting the neophytes to baptism. Their sincerity had to be tested. Moreover, the women and children who would embrace the faith had to defer to the decision of their elders, many of whom were polygamists. Another obstacle to conversion was the scandalous lives of many Catholics and the diversity of doctrine characteristic of Protestant denominations working among the Indians.

Father Belcourt thought there was no way to teach the savages outside of a church while the Bishop, who contended that he was placing too much emphasis on improving the material condition of the savages while waiting for their spiritual transformation, wanted him to preach to them wherever he could get them together. Moreover, Father Belcourt maintained that not only was a chapel necessary but a school as well and, despite the Bishop's wishes, he started a school in 1834, although he had neither text books nor scholars capable of reading them. He secured for teacher Miss Angelique Nolan who spoke the Indian dialect fluently and was of considerable help to him in preparing text books as well as the grammar and dictionary on which he was working. The Bishop thought the opening of the school premature but allowed Father Belcourt to have his way. Before 1838 the mission cost the Bishop three thousand dollars, a large sum for an experiment.

It was not until 1836 that Father Belcourt had the consolation of admitting to First Communion five neophytes who had been under instruction for three years – the first fruits – of the Chippewa nation in the middle West. The social degradation of the savages had an effect on his work. The tendency of the converts was to revert to the level of the tribe. Many of the baptized returned to their former modes of life and were christians only in name. This was a source of great discouragement to him.

In the meantime he had acquired an ascendancy over the minds and hearts of the half-breeds that increased with the years. They had fullest confidence in him and were convinced that he had their welfare at heart. As early as 1834 he was called upon by Governor Simpson to use his influence to disperse a mob bent on attacking Fort Garry to avenge an injury inflicted on one of their number by a clerk in the Company's employ. He persuaded them to return peacefully to their homes and secured a monetary indemnity for the injured man.

At the suggestion of Bishop Provencher Father Belcourt went to Rainy Lake in 1838 to investigate the possibility of opening a mission among the

Indians of that locality, but he decided against it because the H.B.C. persisted in supplying the Indians with rum of which they were so inordinately fond that they were unwilling to exchange it for the gospel. Later on, however, he was to sow the seed of faith in that stony soil despite the competition of the Wesleyan ministers who were entrenched there.

In August of that year he went to Quebec to arrange for the publication of his grammar and dictionary of the Chippewa language and, on December 4, Archbishop Signay confided to him the pastoral care of St. Joseph's, Point Levis, which he administered "with a zeal that produced the most happy results." The Society for the Propagation of the Faith agreed to underwrite the cost of printing his catechism in the Chippewa language; and his grammar was published with the aid of a subscription from the clergy. He also issued a pamphlet of one hundred and forty-six pages in French on "The Principles of the Sauteaux Idiom" for the convenience and instruction of prospective students. In answer to the appeal of the savages to whom he had ministered, and despite the opposition of his relatives and the plea of his parishioners, he went back to Baie St. Paul the next spring and was welcomed by the Bishop who desired him to finish his dictionary as soon as possible and prepare some one to succeed himself on the mission.

In the autumn he visited Rainy Lake and Duck Bay but it was too late in the season to start a mission and he retired to Baie St. Paul for the winter months and employed his mechanical skill in carving one hundred and thirty oak balusters for the sanctuary of the Cathedral and one hundred and fifty candlesticks for the chapels and side altars.

In the year 1840 he founded a mission at Wabassimong (White Dog) on the Winnipeg river, three hundred miles east of the colony, where he built a log chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, and houses for the savages with the usual small fields around them, and supplied them with cattle from St. Boniface – a duplication of the plan followed at Baie St. Paul. The colony disappeared in less than ten years either for lack of a christian foundation or because of the apathy of the Oblates to whom he confided it in 1848 and who maintained that it furnished few christians and no farmers. In a letter to the secretary of the Archbishop of Quebec, Father Belcourt said that he had seventy-four catechumens at Wabassimong when he turned it over to the Oblates and an excellent farm well stocked with animals and farm implements of all kinds; that indifference and laziness had plunged that unhappy tribe into a worse state than the first and made the neighboring people more difficult to convert; that the chapel had been sold and nothing left but the ruins. He added that his mission at Baie St. Paul and that at White Horse had not seen a priest for a year. "It will suffer the fate of Wabassimong."

In the autumn of 1845 Father Belcourt "went to the prairies" for six weeks as chaplain to the half-breeds on their semi-annual buffalo hunt and,

in a letter published two years later at Quebec in connection with the Northwest missions, gave a vivid pen-picture of the excitement and spirit of adventure connected with it. He amplified the description in a letter to Bishop Loras of Dubuque in 1850 which was printed in the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* for July, 1851. During the hunt 1776 buffaloes were killed by 55 hunters in six weeks and the choice meat, valued at 1700 pounds sterling, dried, ground to powder and mixed with fat and berries, made into pemmican for winter use in the settlement. He was back at Baie St. Paul on October 24, and spent the winter teaching the Oblate Fathers who had recently arrived the Chippewa language: Among his pupils was the youthful Father Taché destined to succeed Bishop Provencher and to be the first Archbishop of St. Boniface..

In the spring there was an epidemic of dysentery and measles and he was kept so busy ministering to the stricken that he had to forego the annual visitation of his missions and stations. At the earnest solicitation of the half-breeds he went with them on their summer hunt and his services as a physician were in such constant demand that he exhausted his supply of medicine and had to replenish his stock at the trading-post of the federal agent in the Fort Berthold village of the Mandans and Gros Ventres on the Missouri, where he was given an opportunity to preach to these tribes, through an interpreter, and had the happiness of baptizing fourteen children and instructing two hundred adults before returning to the hunters' camp to evade the warlike Sioux. These excursions did not interfere with his spiritual work. He spent the summer travelling throughout the West, founding missions, building chapels and saying Mass in different localities from Rainy Lake to the Saskatchewan river, returning each winter to Baie St. Paul.

He came into conflict with the H.B.C. on the question of its alleged monopoly of the fur trade as it became increasingly arbitrary in its dealings with the half-breeds especially. The upshot of it was that, on February 17, 1847, he prepared, at their request, a petition to the Queen of England seeking a redress of their grievances. It bore the signatures of nine hundred and seventy-seven half-breeds and was taken to England by James Sinclair and presented to Her Majesty's Government through the Society of St. Thomas of Canterbury whose zeal in defending the rights of Catholics merited the highest praise. A similar petition was sent by the English speaking members of the colony. These petitions caused quite a stir in England. Earl Grey, the Colonial Secretary, asked that the charges be made more specific, consulted officials who were not in sympathy with the demands of the petitioners and finally decided to drop the matter. The influence of the Company was a determining factor.

The indignation of the H.B.C. fell on Father Belcourt who was blamed for stirring up the half-breeds, and Governor Simpson and the Factors of the Company decided that he should be driven out of the country. He was

arrested on trumped-up charges and had to submit to “a course of questions as insolent as they were unfounded.” His effects were searched for furs which they did not contain and thus his innocence was proved and the gross injustice of his persecutors made manifest to all.

In the meantime the Archbishop of Quebec, at the request of Governor Simpson, recalled him from the Red River. When he arrived in Montreal he immediately took up the gauntlet, wrote the Governor who was in the East, demanding a full retraction of the charges and notifying him that, if it were not made in formal and acceptable terms, he would be summoned to justify his action before the Society of St. Thomas of Canterbury. The Governor was alarmed and tried to make out that it was a misunderstanding for which the Factors were to blame. He expressed regret for the injustice done Father Belcourt and asked the Archbishop to send him back to the Red River to resume his missionary work. Father Belcourt declined to return except to Pembina, maintaining that he had been forced to leave the Red River and the Indians to whom he was so tenderly attached and who were in despair at his departure. He wrote Bishop Loras of Dubuque and received a cordial invitation to take charge of Pembina which he did in June, 1848.

During this visit to his native land Father Belcourt sought aid for the missions of the West. He preached to crowded congregations and spoke eloquently of “the splendid struggle for human souls in a primitive land.” He gained a recruit in the person of Albert Lacombe, a seminarian, who, after his ordination on June 13, 1849, came to Pembina by way of Buffalo and Dubuque, where he received faculties from Bishop Loras in whose diocese Pembina was located. After a month in St. Paul waiting for a Red River caravan he reached his destination in November.

In the Land of the Dakotas

On June 1, 1848, Father Belcourt arrived in Pembina, via Detroit, Galena and St. Paul, to resume the work of evangelization relinquished by Father Dumoulin in 1823, and was welcomed by pagans and christians. He was the second resident pastor in what is now North Dakota, a position he occupied till 1859 when his sojourn in the West came to an end.

Before the end of the year he erected on the west bank of the Red River a log chapel, 20 by 30 feet, the sacristy of a larger church to be built later on. It was even then too small for the congregation, affording standing-room only, with the consequent forfeiture of pew rent, an important item for an impoverished pastor. The furnishings were most meager. There was no bell, no censor, no ostensorium and only a very small ciborium borrowed from Bishop Provencher. He had one first Communion class, and ninety-two catechumens – half-breeds and savages – under instruction. They were diligent and docile. His first baptism, that of Francis Cline, was on August

14. He bought grain for seeding and had a few cows and oxen. His daily Mass was attended by one or more members of each family even in the coldest weather. He also built a presbytery, 16 by 20, with two small rooms and a community room and bought lumber for other buildings to be erected the next summer.

Shortly after his arrival Father Belcourt realized the poverty of the mission and wrote the Secretary of the Archbishop of Quebec that he would starve were he not able to sell his handiwork as a joiner and carpenter. The people were too poor to offer anything for his support. For two years he was forced to exist on two hundred dollars sent him by the Bishop of Montreal, and out of that he had to pay for building materials brought from St. Paul, six hundred miles away. He had fifty children in school and all the instruction was in Chippewa. His greatest need was for a Canadian priest who could speak that language to assist him.

As if in answer to his prayer Father Lacombe came from Montreal in the autumn of 1849, and soon was so proficient in the Chippewa language that he was able to teach in the school. They lived in a log house built for their accommodation while the original presbytery was occupied by Miss Lefebvre, the school teacher, Isabelle Gladu, the housekeeper, a half-breed cook and other servants – a rather costly household for a missionary who had to have recourse to manual labor for his daily bread.

The village of Pembina, with a population of 1026 exclusive of Indians, was on marshy ground subject to inundation from the river, and Father Belcourt decided to establish another colony about thirty miles to the West, in the vicinity of the Pembina, now the Turtle, Mountains, under the patronage of St. Joseph, to serve as a center for missionary work among the Indians of the western plains as far as the Rockies.

In the meantime he was not forgotten by his friends north of the line, who appealed to him in their difficulties. When a half-breed named William Sayer, and three others, were arrested in March, 1849, for the illicit purchase of furs from the Indians, action was taken by their friends to prevent their conviction. An appeal was made to Father Belcourt who counselled them to fight, if necessary, for their rights. When the accused were brought to trial three hundred armed half-breeds, under the leadership of Louis Riel, surrounded the Court House and intimidated the Judge. The accused were acquitted and the half-breeds jubilantly declared that thereafter trade was free. Public opinion forced an end to the monopoly of the H.B.C.

Some time in 1853 Father Belcourt took up his official residence in St. Joseph, now Walhalla, built a church, school and presbytery and the first flour mill in North Dakota, thus taking an active part in the industrial as well as the religious development of the country. He visualized it as “the greatest center of the West,” the metropolis of the future, the capital of the state that was to be. It was laid out for a big city with large squares and wide streets

crossing each other at right angles, on a plateau two hundred feet above the river which ran through it and provided water power adequate for all purposes. The soil was fertile and there were indications of iron ore and coal in the vicinity. All it needed to fulfil its destiny was a garrison and a few public buildings to prove that the United States Government would protect its citizenry; but these requisites of a modern city were slow in coming, notwithstanding the efforts made by Father Belcourt to convince the government of their necessity.

From St. Joseph he travelled in all directions over the state and evangelized the whole of the Turtle Mountain region. To his teaching is mainly due the present civilization of the Chippewa Indians in North Dakota and across the border; and it was largely because of his influence that they did not join the Sioux in the uprising of 1862. Bishop Shanley of Fargo declared that "If any Catholic priest more than another had done meritorious and lasting work for the benefit of the state, George Anthony Joseph Belcourt was the man." Of all the priests of pioneer days in North Dakota he was the most worthy of honor.

He reminded Bishop Cretin, soon after his arrival in St. Paul, that the Assiniboines and other Indians under his jurisdiction were his children "whose sacred interests Providence has deposited in your hands," and he begged the Bishop to obtain from the Propagation of the Faith funds to enable him to convert them from paganism, the glory and merit of which would belong to the Society, but there was no response to his plea.

The winter excursions were hazardous in the extreme. That of 1850 almost ended disastrously for him, his guides and dog teams. They were caught in a blizzard, floundered through the drifting snow till they came to the ridge of the mountains which they followed to the shelter of the loftiest peak in the range which rose to a height of 580 feet above the plain. They burrowed into the snow and waited for the storm to abate. He offered a Mass of thanksgiving for their delivery on January 25, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, blessed a great wooden cross, planted it on the summit of the hill, which he named Butte St. Paul, and dedicated it to the conversion of the Indians of the vicinity. In the course of time the cross disappeared; but eighty years afterwards its well-preserved butt, eighteen inches long and as large as an average telephone pole, was discovered and a cairn twelve feet high erected to mark the spot, a commemorative bronze plaque set into it, and ten acres surrounding it designated a state park. A few years later the surviving relatives of Father Belcourt granted permission for the removal of his remains from Memramcook, New Brunswick, to the foot of Butte St. Paul for interment in the soil blessed by his apostolic labors. The second world war prevented the carrying out of the project which has been in abeyance ever since.

Father Lacombe withdrew from the mission in 1851, joined the Oblates

of Mary Immaculate, and became the famous “Blackrobe” of western Canada. He was succeeded by Father Fayolle for about a year and after an interval Father Goiffon was sent from St. Paul to become the successor of Father Belcourt in the Pembina area. In November, 1860, this good priest was caught in a blizzard for five days and had to have his right limb amputated at the knee and his left at the ankle. Despite this handicap he was a pastor in the Diocese of St. Paul for over forty years.

The Catholic Almanacs from 1854 to 1859 enable us to visualize some of the more important undertakings of Father Belcourt. St. Joseph was a prosperous mission of 1500 half-breeds with a school directed by the Sisters of the Propagation of the Faith, a religious community of half-breeds founded by him to teach the children in English, French and Chippewa. They had one hundred pupils under their care in the academy presided over by Mother Francis Xavier, the Superior, and two of them were in charge of a school in Pembina. The community did not number more than seven and went out of existence shortly after Father Belcourt left for the East in March, 1859.

The oldest extant record of baptisms, marriages and deaths in North Dakota is that kept by Father Belcourt from August 14, 1848, to March 15, 1859, during which 617 baptisms were administered and 78 marriages performed. Father Belcourt officiated on 552 occasions, Father Lacombe on 79 and Father Fayolle on 64. According to Bishop Shanley, “These records are accurately and neatly written, showing that the good priest was very attentive to the minor details of his sacred calling.”

In November, 1854, he made a trip to Washington and was asked to submit in writing the grievances and demands of the people of Pembina. He asked that the Government make a treaty with the Indians for the purchase of their lands and give the half-breeds a feudal right to their holdings; prohibit the hunting of the buffalo on the western plains by half-breeds from Canada; put a stop to the traffic in intoxicants fostered by the H.B.C. among the Indians south of the line; station in Pembina a permanent garrison to protect the citizens in their constitutional rights and defend them against the incursions of the Sioux who terrify them, steal their horses, prevent the cultivation of the fields and even murder them with impunity. To do that effectively the officer in charge of the troops should be authorized to arm the half-breeds, if necessary, to aid in putting an end to these depredations. With the guarantee of such protection thousands of half-breeds would migrate from the Selkirk Settlement to the Pembina area because they dislike the H.B.C. and its dealings.

He also asked for assistance in maintaining the school established six years previously for the teaching of English, French and Indian in which nearly one hundred children follow courses in reading, writing, arithmetic, mathematics, astronomy, domestic science and music. In addition to that he had nearly as many studying christian doctrine two hours every day.

After the recall of Father Fayolle in 1855 Father Belcourt was without an assistant in St. Joseph and Pembina. In 1857 he was anxious to visit Quebec but could not leave the mission unattended. His only companion was Brother Timothy of the Brothers of the Holy Family from St. Paul, a young man of zeal and energy, who wore the soutane and made himself useful about the place. Father Belcourt also attended Pembina and in November of that year was host to Bishop Taché and two priests in the little presbytery of the Assumption. The Bishop had a narrow escape from drowning while crossing the Red River. The ferry boat, overloaded with horses and carriages, began to ship water as soon as it left the wharf and the Bishop had to jump into the river up to his waist in cold water to escape being drawn into the channel, and to remain an hour in it before reaching the bank.

In the same year Father Belcourt sent a petition to Congress to hasten the organization of the Territory, requesting that St. Joseph be made the seat of government. Influential Senators had asked his help. He complained again that intoxicating liquor was more plentiful than usual and asked the Department of Indian Affairs to repress the traffic and enforce the law. He had always been an advocate of total abstinence. When he was at Baie St. Paul he banished liquor from the mission.

After the publication of his grammar in Quebec in 1839 he made several efforts to find a publisher for his dictionary of the Chippewa language. Finally the Smithsonian Institution in Washington agreed to do so provided he would supervise the work and correct the proofs. He was unable to accept the offer because he could not afford to live in Washington while the book was coming from the press. For years the manuscript was preserved in the episcopal residence at St. Boniface. It was ultimately published under the direction of Father Lacombe and was invaluable to all who wished to learn the language. It is in French and Chippewa and 'gives the etymology of each word, and the complete particles which throw much light upon the knowledge of this language and enables one to seize the genius of it.' The author tells us that the language is richer than it is commonly thought to be and bears a great resemblance to the ancient languages, especially the Greek, with which it has much in common in the manner of forming words by the use of radicals. This makes the learning of it difficult at first, nearly equal to the learning of two languages, but it gives great facility in expressing one's thoughts accurately and forcefully.

A Decade on "The Island"

When Father Belcourt left Dakota in March, 1859, he, undoubtedly had the intention of re-entering the ministry in his native province and spending the remainder of his days in the peace and quiet of a pastoral life far removed from the stirring scenes and strenuous activity of the western plains where

he had passed nearly thirty years as a missionary among the Indians and half-breeds. But it was not to be. His active career was not to end until death summoned him to lay aside the burden of parochial administration and seek the reward exceeding great.

Shortly after his return from the West, the Right Reverend Bernard D. McDonald, Bishop of Charlottetown, P.E.I. wrote Archbishop Turgeon of Quebec requesting the services of a French-speaking priest to take charge of the parish of Rustico with the mission of Hope River, and Father Belcourt was selected for that purpose.

He arrived in Rustico November 1, 1859, a few weeks before Bishop McDonald, who had resided in that parish since his consecration in 1837, transferred his residence to Charlottetown where he died on December 30. Father Belcourt was deacon at the Bishop's funeral on January 4, 1860.

The Church of St. Augustine, built under the direction of the Bishop, served as the Cathedral of the diocese for more than twenty years. It was a frame structure of generous proportions, with a three-storey square campanile, surmounted by a cross, with side doors opening into the vestibule. The interior was unfinished until 1845. It was the largest and most beautiful church in the diocese. In it Father Belcourt performed his first official act—the baptism of Modeste Doucet on December 11, 1859—the beginning of a pastorate extending over a decade of years, during which he built the stone structure which still serves as the parish hall, and established the Farmers' Bank which was in active operation from 1864 to 1892.

He opened a high school in the parish house and taught it himself until he secured the services of Israel J. D. Landry at Montreal, an experienced teacher and an excellent musician, who had charge of it for two years. The curriculum comprised Latin, Greek, French, Mathematics, Plain Chant and Music. The school was attended by fourteen young men chosen from among the most intelligent graduates of the grade schools. Ten of these became teachers in the Acadian parishes; one a judge; another, a doctor; and another, a railroad official. The school was an innovation in those days. That it was a success is evidenced by the fact that it is today the only high school among the Acadians of the Island.

To complement and enhance its work the pastor organized a study club, known as the Institute, whose members met twice a month to receive instructions from him. All had to be total abstainers from intoxicants. Furthermore, to encourage the reading of good books he established a parish library and for several years received from Emperor Napoleon III a gift of one thousand francs through the good offices of his friend, the historian, Rameau de Saint-Père, who kept up a friendly correspondence with him for fourteen years and aided him in his colonization projects on the mainland. At each meeting one of the members had to give a summary of the book he had read since the previous meeting.

He installed a carillon of three bells in the church tower and, with the aid of Professor Landry, organized a band which was for many years the pride and glory of the parish.

To meet the difficulty resulting from an inadequate supply of land, he encouraged the younger members of the parish to migrate to neighboring regions where good land was available.

In May, 1860, the first group of five families left Rustico by schooner for Matapedia, and a few months later thirteen others joined them. The next year twenty-two additional families followed and within a few years several others went to the colony. They had to endure many hardships in the beginning but the descendants of these early settlers now constitute the populous parishes of St. Alexis and St. François and are happy and prosperous. Later on a number of families left Rustico to form a new parish at Bloomfield on the Island.

Not long after he came to the parish he cruised a tract of land in Kent County, New Brunswick, which Bishop Sweeney of St. John had secured from the government for colonization purposes. He was accompanied by Joseph Arsenault and Felix Poirier of Egmont Bay, P.E.I., and guided by Jean Louis Girouard of St. Mary's in Kent County. The survey was made in 1860 and, four years later, the first settlers – from Egmont Bay and Rustico – took possession of their holdings on what was known as “the Bishop's land” now part of the parish of St. Paul in Kent County, New Brunswick.

In October, 1865, Father Belcourt resigned the parish of St. Augustine and, on return to Quebec, was appointed pastor of St. Claire in Dorchester County, where he remained only a few weeks before asking to be allowed to resume charge of his Acadian flock at Rustico. He was back on the Island before the end of November.

The story of his closing years can be briefly told. He continued his parochial duties in Rustico until the autumn of 1869, when he retired to a farm in Shediac, N.B., where he planned to spend the remainder of his life in the agricultural pursuits that were traditional in his family. For two years he had leisure to pursue his hobbies; but in August, 1871, he was summoned again to his priestly duties by Bishop McIntyre of Charlottetown, who appointed him pastor of Havre-aux-Maisons in the Magdalen Islands. His ministry there during three years of labour among the fishermen and their families might well serve as the subject of another paper. It is a simple story, not without an element of heroism, the story of an ageing man, whose strength had for years been expended in the service of God and his fellow men, struggling against almost insuperable difficulties to bring some measure of comfort, material as well as spiritual, to the families to whom he ministered. It ended only when failing health forced his retirement. He was brought, already a dying man, to his farm in Shediac in May, 1874, and at the end of that month his death closed a career of sacrifice and service that

had brought him from his native Quebec to the plains of Manitoba and Dakota, and thence to the bleak, storm-bound islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Father Beleourt's claim to remembrance lies not only in what he accomplished in establishing parishes and laying the foundations of the Church, but even more perhaps in his training of other missionaries in the Chippewa language. His dictionary and grammar of this language have been indispensable aids to others who have followed him in this field. He was a linguist of more than ordinary ability, who spoke and wrote English, French and Chippewa with ease and fluency. He grasped the genius of the Chippewa language with rare perspicacity, and he was an authority without peer on the history, traditions, customs and character of the Indians and half-breeds of the West. He wrote text-books, catechism and prayerbooks, as well as his grammar and dictionary, and throughout his missionary career he kept up a voluminous correspondence, much of which is preserved in the diocesan archives of Quebec and Montreal. One article on the Hudson Bay Company fills thirty pages in the first volume of the Minnesota Historical Collections, 1850 to 1856.

His letters reveal the character of the man. He possessed a forceful personality, a high degree of intelligence, a keen mind and indomitable courage. He was a man of action and vision, somewhat fickle and self-willed, not to say obstinate, easily discouraged and extremely sensitive, but withal, devoted and generous in the service of God and his fellowmen. He possessed mechanical ability of a high order, was a skilled carpenter, an expert joiner and blacksmith, a designer and builder of houses, schools, boats, carts, farm implements and a grist-mill. He was a willing and tireless worker, but a poor team-mate, because he wanted his own way, regardless even of the wishes of his superiors. He was always a man of the people, ready to support them in every way, a splendid type of missionary priest, who gave himself unreservedly to the service of those among whom he labored. His life story should be of interest to all who appreciate heroic endeavour, to all who would recall the labour and the suffering that were endured to bring the faith to the aborigines and to minister to the spiritual needs of the early colonists on the western plains and on the sea-girt islands of the Atlantic.

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