

St. Albert, Cradle of the Catholic Church in Alberta

Sister M. M. CÔTÉ, S.G.M.
Foyer Youville, St. Albert, Alta.

On the northern border of Edmonton in the valley of the Sturgeon River lies the modern town of St. Albert. Its hills, now overspread with mossy green lawns, are dotted with comfortable homes of variegated hues. But a hundred and five years ago, these same hills were covered with deciduous and evergreen forests, the haunt of fur-bearing animals. Not a single human being, as far as anybody knows, had ever settled in the tranquil valley. Yet, it was this very spot that was to become the centre of Catholicism in that section of our country now known as Alberta. Before we unfold our story, however, we must, like the *coureurs de bois* of old, like the buffalo hunters of the time, wander over the prairies in quest of a setting.

The great western tract of land from the Hudson Bay to the Pacific, from the United States to the Arctic, known to the French voyageurs as *les pays d'en haut*, was the property of the Hudson Bay Company. Its inhabitants were 15,000 Métis eking out a day-to-day existence by hunting and fishing.¹ Some had acted as rowers for the great fur company, but, with the introduction of the river steamer in the early nineteenth century, they had been left without employment. Except for a few who had settled on farms in the neighborhood of Red River (St. Boniface), they continued to lead a nomadic life.²

In 1838 about forty Métis families pitched their tents in the vicinity of Fort Edmonton. Continually in search of food and not finding it in sufficient quantities, they fell a prey to the evils of gambling and drinking and created a problem for Mr. Rowand, the chief factor. It was he, who, in 1840, wrote to Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface to request the aid of a Catholic priest, who, he thought, would establish order in the carefree settlement.³ A second request for a similar favor followed in 1841 when a Métis by the name of Piché went to interview Bishop Provencher about the possibility of obtaining

¹ Tétrault, Alexis, o.m.i., "Historic St. Albert," *Alberta Historical Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, p. 11.

² Tétrault, Alexis, o.m.i., "Historic St. Albert," *Alberta Historical Review*: Vol. II, No. 2, p. 12.

³ Ibid.

a resident priest for the Fort Edmonton district.⁴ The choice fell upon Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault who had been at Red River since 1833. After two reconnoitering expeditions; one in 1842, the other in 1843, he came to stay in 1844, and with Father Bourassa to share his labors, he took with him forty Cree and Métis families and founded a settlement at Devil's Lake, which he rechristened Lake St. Anne, about fifty miles north-west of Fort Edmonton.⁵

1844 thus saw the solution of Factor Rowand's dilemma. But, in another way, 1844 was a momentous year for the Church in Western Canada, marking as it did the creation of independent diocese at St. Boniface.⁶ No longer could the West count on Quebec for spiritual aid, except in the case of volunteers. One of these volunteers, a missionary who was to become one of the great figures of the Canadian West, Father Albert Lacombe, who, after his ordination in 1849 had worked among the Métis of the Red River region at Pembina, came to Lake St. Anne in 1852 to replace Fathers Thibault and Bourassa.⁷ For a whole winter he was the only priest west of the Red River. The loneliness which he experienced made him wish to join a religious congregation – a step which would give both help and companionship. In 1849, while at Pembina, Father Lacombe had been edified by the spirit of self-sacrifice of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate⁸ who had been in St. Boniface since 1845, the two first missionaries being Father Aubert and Brother Taché, none other than the future Bishop Taché of St. Boniface. Father Lacombe was inspired to request to join their ranks. But his wish was not to be granted until 1854, when, still a rover of the plains among his beloved Métis, he became a novice under the guidance of Father Rémas. On September 28, 1856, he pronounced his vows⁹ and was at last an Oblate of Mary Immaculate.

The Oblate Fathers could well carry on the work of converting the natives, but what was to assure a future to their efforts? It was evident that teachers were needed, teaching Sisters who might set up establishments in various centres to educate the youth, and thus complete in a way, the work of the priests. But which Sisters would venture out to such a desolate wilderness? Bishop Taché found the answer – the Grey Nuns, the Sisters of Charity of Montreal who, according to His Excellency, Bishop Bourget of Montreal, “never refused anything.”¹⁰ Bishop Provencher had been successful

⁴ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs*, McLeod, N. W. T., March 10, 1890.

⁵ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs*, McLeod, N. W. T., March 17, 1890.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs*, McLeod, N. W. T., May 26, 1890.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Fauteux, Albina, s.g.m., *The General Hospital of Montreal*, Grey Nuns' Mother House, 1190 Guy Street, Montreal: Vol. II, p. 205.

in 1844 in persuading the Grey Nuns to come out to St. Boniface. In 1858 Bishop Taché obtained three recruits for the new mission post of Lake St. Anne: Sisters Emery, Lamy, and Alphonse. After spending six months in St. Boniface to become attuned to the rigors of mission life, they set out in a springless Red River ox-cart on a nine-hundred-mile-fifty-one-day trek across the prairies, reaching Lake St. Anne on September 24, 1859.¹¹ Their first convent was the log cabin previously built by Fathers Thibault and Bourassa.¹² They spent their evenings learning Cree from Father Lacombe, so that, during the day, they might converse with the colonists and instruct them in their religious duties.¹³ Within two weeks they had opened a school with an attendance of twenty pupils.¹⁴

As time went on, everybody realized that Lake St. Anne was not the paradise that had been anticipated. In 1860 the rocky soil gave a poor crop, and it was only the autumn catch of fish that saved the little colony from starvation.¹⁵

Then came about an event which was to change the whole course of the lives of the missionaries. In the latter part of 1860, Bishop Taché, while visiting the scattered mission posts of the vast diocese (it included the whole Canadian Northwest), spent the Christmas season at Lake St. Anne. Since the previous autumn Father Lacombe's mind had been working. Why not move to a place nearer to the mission of St. Joachim at Fort Edmonton? What about the possibility of establishing an agricultural settlement at Lake St. Anne? It had been tried and had been found wanting. Yet, with the disappearance of the buffalo, such a settlement was a necessity if the colonists were to survive. So, on a cold January morning, Father Lacombe led the bishop to a hill overlooking the valley of the Sturgeon. While they were partaking of a meagre meal of pemmican, Father Lacombe extolled the benefits of the locality. He was aware of the value of establishing here a mission post; for had he not rested on the top of this same knoll on his journeys between Lake St. Anne and Fort Edmonton? The rich virgin soil, the green grassy hills, the wooded growth, the river running through the valley, the lake in the distance – all these had not escaped his discerning eye. And Fort Edmonton was only nine miles away! Finally, Bishop Taché exclaimed, "What a magnificent site! It is indeed suitable for a mission post. When you establish it, we shall call it St. Albert in honor of your patron saint." And planting in the snow a sapling bough, Bishop Taché continued,

¹¹ Drouin, Clémentine, s.g.m., *The General Hospital of Montreal* Vol. III, p. 62.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert, Alberta.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert, Alberta.

“on this spot you will build the church.”¹⁶ Father Lacombe’s hopes soared. As he went back alone to Lake St. Anne, he revolved in his mind his future, plans.

In the spring of 1861 Father Lacombe left the Sisters and the greater part of the population at Lake St. Anne, and, accompanied by a few Métis families, he set out for St. Albert, taking with him four oxen, a few horses, a plough, tools, and a large buffalo skin tent. The later was to be both residence and church until such time as suitable buildings might be erected. The contingent reached St. Albert on a Saturday in April. Sunday after Mass, Father Lacombe put up a wooden cross to mark the spot where the bishop had planted the sapling bough. He spent the remainder of the day thinking and planning.¹⁷

On Monday morning the men crossed the Sturgeon River on a raft and began to cut down the trees that covered the hill to the south. For ten days the staccato of the axe accompanied the hum of the saw. The building materials thus prepared were loaded into carts which were drawn by oxen to the river’s edge and drifted across on a crude ferry constructed by Father Lacombe. Meanwhile the women had not been idle, for it was they who had prepared the meals for the men so busy in the woods.¹⁸

After ten days the work so well begun had to be interrupted to attend to another urgent matter – the land was dry enough to be ploughed. With only one implement, Father Lacombe, anxious to finish the ploughing and seeding so that the work of construction might begin, devised a means of accelerating the tasks. He had the men work in relays; one group during the day, the other during the night. In a short time the first grain had been sown in St. Albert and the first garden seeds planted.¹⁹

While his people were thus occupied, the ubiquitous Father Lacombe managed to travel from St. Albert to Fort Edmonton and from there to Lake St. Anne, advising and encouraging wherever he went. The Métis continued to emigrate from Lake St. Anne until there were twenty families in St. Albert. Then, Father Lacombe, like a feudal lord, apportioned the land on either side of the Sturgeon, allowing each family a river lot. All used the tent as a temporary dwelling and sowed their acres to various grains and seeds. That fall St. Albert was blessed with a bountiful harvest. On the river banks could be seen twenty log huts, and at the top of the hill stood a log church, a residence for the priest, storehouses for vegetables, a barn, and a stable. Father Lacombe’s dream had come true – to establish on the banks of the Sturgeon a capital from which might emanate other stations to help further

¹⁶ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs*, Vol. II, p. 121, McLeod, N. W. T., 1890.

¹⁷ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs* (1861), McLeod, N. W. T., 1890.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs* (1861), McLeod, N. W. T., 1890.

the work of colonization, of civilization, of christianizing.

With the thaw in the spring of 1862, the work of building began anew. The river was spanned by a wooden bridge, and a convent for the Sisters, whom Father Lacombe intended to recall from Lake St. Anne, was begun.²⁰ April of 1863 found the three Grey Nuns in St. Albert. They were followed by twenty Métis families who eventually occupied farms along the river.²¹ In 1868 the diocese of St. Albert was created with Bishop Vital Grandin as its first titular bishop.²²

The years after 1870 saw an influx of settlers from eastern Canada, and St. Albert slowly changed its status: hamlet to village (1899), village to town (1902). By 1888 the population had reached the 1000-figure: 840 Métis, 126 French, and 30 English.²³ With changes in the nature of the population, this figure was to remain fairly constant until the middle of the twentieth century when a great town-planning programme brought the town to the verge of city status. The school population testifies to this. In 1863 the school enrolment was twenty. By 1898 it had increased to 150,²⁴ and this was to remain constant until 1950. At the present time three school districts educate nearly 3,000 students.

Nobody had questioned the qualifications of the first four teachers in St. Albert: Sister Alphonse, Sister Blanchette, Sister St. Genevieve, and Sister Paquette; but after 1885, when, at the request of the citizens of St. Albert, the Board of Education in Regina created the St. Albert Roman Catholic Public School District No. 3, all aspirants to the teaching profession in the North West Territories were obliged to write examinations set by this same Board of Education before being granted a teacher's certificate.²⁵ Sister Dillon and Sister Marie of the Angels were the first Grey Nuns to obtain a First Class Certificate after passing these examinations.²⁶ Both taught in St. Albert until the turn of the century. After 1890, however, all future teachers were required to attend normal school. Sister Savard and Sister Surprenant were the first Grey Nuns to obtain teachers' certificates after attending the Calgary Normal School in 1907. In 1909 both were teaching in St. Albert. Sister Savard was destined to train many young Sisters to become teachers. Of the 120 teachers now in the St. Albert Schools, only five are Sisters. Our one hope is that we are still continuing the work so well begun by our first

²⁰ Lacombe, Albert, o.m.i., *Memoirs* (1862), McLeod, N. W. T., 1890.

²¹ *Ibid.* (1863).

²² *Ibid.* (1868).

²³ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

²⁴ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

²⁵ *N.W.T. Gazette*, Provincial Archives, Legislative Building, Regina, Sas. katchewan.

²⁶ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

teacher, Sister Alphonse.

The first missionary Sisters had established a hospital in St. Albert. It cared for the sick and infirm until 1895 when the General Hospital in Edmonton took over its functions.²⁷ The idea of maintaining a hospital in St. Albert, however, did not die out. Although education seemed to be the main work for many years, and all the additions to Youville Convent were directed toward the education of orphans and Indian children, 1941 brought a change. In that year the Indian School was closed and an old folks' home set up.²⁸ At the present time, to conform to recent government regulations, a new modern old folks' nursing home is under construction. Next fall, the buildings now standing, that have seen so much of the history of St. Albert, will be demolished. It is the general feeling that a landmark will vanish with them.

Since 1863 Youville Home has had twenty superiors, and, since 1898, when an ecclesiastical province was formed, fifteen provincial superiors.²⁹

In 1900 the old log cathedral built by the first Métis families under the direction of Father Lacombe, was replaced by a frame structure. But since 1922 a huge church of Romanesque style overlooks the valley of the Sturgeon. The first three priests, Father Lacombe, Father Leduc, and Father Mérier are known by the title of "resident missionaries" for it was not until 1902 that St. Albert was made a parish. Father Mérier became the first pastor and has had twelve successors.³⁰

While St. Albert was the episcopal see for the diocese, two bishops resided here: Bishop Vital Grandin (1868-1902), and Bishop Emile Legal (1902-1912). In 1912 the see was transferred to Edmonton, and Bishop Legal became the first archbishop of Edmonton.³¹

The letters of the first missionaries picture St. Albert as lonely and secluded. Even the short trip to Edmonton required courage. In 1879, however, with the building of a telegraph line came the beginning of better days. 1892 saw a branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway connect Calgary (where the Grey Nuns had set up a hospital in 1890) with Edmonton. When, in 1908, a branch line of the Canadian Northern Railway from Edmonton to Athabaska Landing passed through St. Albert, the inhabitants at last felt that they were part of Canada.³² Now they could travel by rail almost wherever they wished. With the passing of time came paved roads, and bus and taxi services. Travelling became a joy.

²⁷ *N.W.T. Gazette*, Provincial Archives, Legislative Building, Regina, Saskatchewan.

²⁸ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

²⁹ *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Codex Historicus*, Oblate Archives, 9916 -110 Street, Edmonton, Alberta.

³² *Archives*, Youville Home, 9 St. Vital Avenue, St. Albert.

Charles Dickens entitles one of his chapters in *A Tale of Two Cities*, “Back to the Lodestone Rock.” That statement could well apply to the seminary in Alberta. Blessed in 1899 by Bishop Grandin, it remained in St. Albert until after the transfer of the episcopal see to Edmonton, located as it was on the corner of 110 Street and 100 Avenue. In 1956, however, the seminary came back to St. Albert in a new up-to-date structure located just on the boundary between St. Albert and Edmonton.

Now, let us visit the hill where in 1861 Bishop Taché had planted the sapling bough in the snow. On that very spot stands a beautiful bronze statue of Father Lacombe, erected in 1929. Directly north is our beautiful spacious parish church in the crypt of which are the tombs of the first missionaries: Father Lacombe, Bishop Grandin, and Father Leduc. To the west of the church is the Lacombe Museum – none other than that first log cathedral housed in a brick jacket and containing a collection of souvenirs of the early missionaries. Still farther north is the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, where each year, on the Sunday nearest the fifteenth of August, we have a pilgrimage. To the east are the Star of the North Retreat House and the rectory. In the background, in a quiet corner is the cemetery. Near the insignia of the Oblate Fathers rest the mortal remains of Bishop Legal, and several rows of crosses on either side of a well-kept walk mark the graves of all the Oblate Fathers who have lived and died in the bounds of St. Albert ecclesiastical province. A few steps farther south, in the Sisters’ plot, shaded by a huge spruce tree, are two graves, that of the first teacher, Sister Alphonse who died on October 7, 1879; and that of Sister Emery, the first Superior who died on August 5, 1885. The former had never once, after coming to the West, returned to her beloved Motherhouse in Montreal.

Is it not a tribute to the people of St. Albert, that in naming streets and buildings, they remembered the work so well performed by the early missionaries? So, facing the church, we have St. Vital Avenue, and elsewhere in the town, Emery Street. Even our schools stand as a witness to the labors of those who founded our town: Vital Grandin School, St. Albert High School, Albert Lacombe School, and Father Jan School. Youville Nursing Home west of the church has been named in honor of the Blessed Marguerite d’Youville, the foundress of the congregation of the Grey Nuns. A glance farther afield, at the map of Alberta this time, shows the respect the people had for the missionaries. Lacombe, Leduc, Grouard, Jousard, Vegreville all call to mind the sacrifices of those who left kinsfolk and country that the Church might thrive. The early missionaries have indeed left a remarkable heritage.