

The Oblate Mission of Lac-Ste Anne, Alberta

(Resumé of part of Fr. Drouin's paper "The Oblates of Mary Immaculate, their work and missions in Western Canada," delivered at the CCHA meeting in Edmonton June 4, 1975.)

It was in the course of his more-than-nine-hundred-mile overland trip on horseback from St. Boniface to Fort Edmonton in 1842 that Fr. Jean-Baptiste Thibault first made the acquaintance of the Métis and Cree Indians dwelling near Manito Skahigan, later Lac-Ste Anne, and baptized a number of children. (See *Lac-Ste Anne Skahigan and Hobbema, Ongoing Indian Mission of Central Alberta* by P.E. Breton, O.M.I. and E.O. Drouin, O.M.I.) Although he returned to St. Boniface in June, 1844, a 27-year old priest companion, Joseph Bourassa, took his place at the Manito Skahigan mission, aided by four dedicated laymen. Pierre Thibert and wife Julie, Michel Norman and wife Rose.

Word reached Fr. Thibault at Fort Pitt, northeast of Lake Winnipeg, that the mission construction was progressing slowly and painfully, so he returned on horseback to Skahigan a few months after leaving it, to roll up his sleeves with the five others and set to work. They moved into their first mission building September 8, 1844, and on the same day Fr. Thibault in cassock, surplice and stole blessed the lake nearby, renaming it Lac-Ste Anne. Here he felt free from the pressures and influence of the nearest Hudson Bay fort, 50 miles away, to devote his time and energy to the spread of the Gospel, far enough too from the stamping grounds of the Blackfoot to guarantee peace and safety for the neophytes. Besides, it was a land of plenty, rich in fish, furs and lumber, with great herds of buffalo about. Foreseeing the eventual disappearance of the buffalo, the Black Robes encouraged the local Métis and Indians to change from the nomadic hunter's life to that of the settled farmer. Their efforts were largely in vain.

The founding of the Mission at Lac-Ste Anne was the first successful step undertaken for the establishment of Catholicism west of St. Boniface. It would grow rapidly spreading far and wide once the Oblates arrived in the 1850's.

Due to ill health, Thibault was forced to return to St. Boniface for good in 1852. Bourassa did likewise a year later, but only after initiating Fr. Albert Lacombe, another secular priest, to the care of the Mission. Fr. Lacombe met the first Oblate to come to Alberta, Fr. René Rémas, in 1854, at Lac-la-Biche, and begged to be admitted to the missionary congregation. He

made his first profession of vows as an Oblate in September, 1856. He and Fr. Rémas manned the mission at Lac-Ste Anne until 1861, and from that time until 1975 over 40 Oblate priests and 20 Oblate brothers have worked there.

With the arrival of the Grey Nuns on September 24, 1859, the first school was opened in Alberta, a girls' school, at the LacSte Anne Mission. Besides their teaching duties and learning the Cree language, the Nuns looked after the mission church, the priests' house, and served as local "doctors" in the people's homes.

Fr. Lacombe strove in vain to establish an agricultural community at Lac-Ste Anne; both land and people proved hostile to the idea. When he moved on in 1861 to found a new mission at St. Albert, some twenty-six families followed him, leaving LacSte Anne seriously depopulated. The Oblate authorities might have closed the mission there, in fact closing was threatened in the 1880's, but a pilgrimage in honour of Ste Anne was held in 1889, an event which became increasingly popular over the years and served to save Lac-Ste Anne as a mission centre.

At the turn of the century the Canadian Northern Railway, a rival of the Grand Trunk, pushed its tracks west and passed through Lac-Ste Anne, bringing white adventurers and businessmen to the area. The village began to boom: two stores opened, two hotels, two pool halls, a post office, a livery barn, a dance hall, a blacksmith shop, a confectionery. Then the railroad company went bankrupt in 1917, and the white population began to dwindle. Today only six white families remain. On the Assiniboine Reservation at the Narrows, some six miles away, the 530 Indians are still served from Lac-Ste Anne Mission.