

Grande Clairiere – History Book

To our Creator, a century is but one hundred years; to man it is greater than a lifetime.

In July 1888, Father Jean Gaire, a young priest from France, led the way for the pioneers of the Grande Clairiere district. They came to a land full of promise and hope: a land to build on. They found abundant grass growing and trees shading the sandy banks of the Souris River. But soon, these settlers, who brought with them more enthusiasm than experience, found the land could be savage and unyielding. Brutal winter blizzards, disease that took their children, clouds of mosquitoes and black flies, drought, raging prairie fires, and utter, overwhelming loneliness all had to be reckoned with. Still, many survived and against all odds, they tamed the land and prospered, making do with what they had.

One cannot describe the molding of a community without recounting the story of its early beginnings.

Thousands of years ago, southwestern Manitoba was covered by an immense glacier called the Wisconsin Ice Sheet. This massive bed of ice retreated to the northeast and in its advances and retreats, reshaped the landscape. In its retreat, many lakes and rivers were created. Thus was formed the Souris River with its sandy beaches and surrounding hills. Today, part of this forested, hilly area is known to us as the Grande Clairiere Sandhills. Directly to the north of these hills is a clearing appropriately christened by our founding father as "Grande Clairiere."

Stone artifacts indicate that man first arrived along the Souris River about 4000 years ago. These primitive tribes were nomadic and followed the immense herds of buffalo that roamed the prairies. From these early men evolved more stable Indian tribes known as the Sioux, Assiniboine, Cree, Gros Ventres and Chippewa.

From 1820 to 1865, buffalo hunts were conducted the area and tremendous numbers of buffalo were herded off the cliffs of the Souris River. One group of white traders working along the river were stopped for as a herd of buffalo rumbled by. After such a passage the soil would be barren of vegetation for a width of several miles. The magnitude of these earlier buffalo hunts was evident during World War I, when trainloads of bones were shipped from Grande Clairiere to Eastern Canadian chemical plants.

It is believed that during the 1600's, few white men visited the Souris River. Most likely, any visitors were French and English fur traders.

In the 1700's, the pace quickened and history books unfold the adventures of explorers who ventured along the Souris River. Among these explorers were LaVerendrye in 1738, and his son in 1742.

In the last half of this century, forts were established along the historic river. Three major fur companies, along with many independents, were rivals for region's furs.

Two trading posts instrumental in the history of Grande Clairiere were Fort Grant and Fort Desjarlais.

In 1824, Cuthbert Grant, a youthful Metis leader, built Fort Grant on the Souris River, about two miles southwest of Hartney. He was encouraged by Governor Simpson who expected Grant to keep Americans and other independent fur traders out of the Souris Valley.

Maria, daughter of Cuthbert Grant, was born in 1820. She married Armand Breland who played an important part in the trading posts on the Souris River, and whose son, Thomas, would be one of the first homesteaders in Grande Clairiere.

Fort Grant operated from 1824-1861, part of this time as a winter fort only.

In 1836, another fort appeared on the north bank of the Souris River on 31-5-24. Fort Desjarlais was built by Joseph Desjarlais, a man the Indians called "Hairy Legs" and who seemed to have a special status with the Indians. Most of this information was given to historians by a Madame LaFontaine. Her father, Francois Jeannot worked in both forts Grant and Desjarlais. Madame LaFontaine married one of the workers at Fort Desjarlais and gave birth to Philomene (Vodon) and a son, Pierre, who together were invaluable sources of information.

Fort Desjarlais operated for about twenty years until it burned in 1856, probably from a forest fire, but possibly by rivals or Indians. This fort remains a real mystery, as it was very large for this area, and it operated steadily for twenty years - few forts or posts Western Canada operated for such a long time.

A contingent of about 75 men occupied Desjarlais - perhaps so many were needed as protection from Cuthbert Grant. Grant's job was to remove the independent traders from the plains and stop trading with the Americans. Desjarlais had strong connections with the American Indians, so perhaps the post was an organized attempt by the Metis to continue this illegal trade.

Canadian fur traders used rum and wine extensively in their trade with the Indian' The volume of liquor was increased by mixing it with chewing tobacco, red pepper, red ink and water. This mixture was called "firewater". Joseph Desjarlais was charged on amny occasions, by the Fort Carry authorities for his practice of using liquor to deal with the Indians. There also exists the possibility that Desjarlais was smuggling American corn liquor into Canada and Canadian furs into the United States.

It is believed that Desjarlais and his men were also buffalo hunters - trading buffalo robes and selling pemmican to the Hudson Bay Company.

In 1837, a group of about sixty Metis families began regular trips to the sandhills to hunt buffalo. Some of these families were Francois Jeannoi, Jean La Fontaine and Armand Breland.

Uprisings between these Metis and the Sioux occurred in the years between 1849 and 1851. One Metis survivor was James Whiteford, who eventually settled in the area. One story told by oldtimers is that Whiteford started a ranch in the sandhills in 1875. This ranch had no boundaries and allegedly extended to the Saskatchewan border. This ranch probably didn't exist beyond 1895. James Whiteford was the first Metis to die after the arrival of Father Gaire in 1888. His was the first recorded burial in the new parish.

In 1854, Cuthbert Grant died and his fort was operated by relatives until 1861. One of these relatives was his grandson, Thomas Breland. By this time, business for the two remaining forts was greatly reduced and the Metis operating Fort Grant were now making an attempt to raise livestock and a few small crops. These were the first homesteaders in the area and included:

J. LEVEILLE - 34-6-24
A. BRELAND - 30-6-24
A. COUTEAN - 5-6-24
A CAUPHINAIS - 6-7-24

A deadly smallpox epidemic in 1855, intense warfare with the powerful Sioux, and starvation greatly reduced the Assiniboine Indian nation. By 1865, the Assiniboine were reduced to about one-tenth their original number. They migrated west and were eventually placed on a reservation west of Calgary. Only a few hundred remain today and are known by their original name - "Stoney's".

In 1862, the Yorkton Sioux massacred more than 600 Minnesota settlers. Chased northward by the United States Army, many arrived in Manitoba, along with their white captives. Some of these Indians settled along the Souris River. These Indian villages lasted until about 1870 when the Sioux were restricted to an area about 6 miles west of Grande Clairiere and south to the Souris River. Later, when the white settlers began to arrive, this reservation was shifted to the North along the Pipestone Creek - thus the establishment of the present Oak Lake Sioux Reservation.

In 1869, some of the Metis from the "Red River Rebellion" arrived in the Oak Lake - Grande Clairiere sandhills area. Along with the Metis living there, the Metis population was increased to about 20 families.

By 1888, homesteaders from Eastern Canada, Great Britain and Europe had laid claim to much of the land along the river. To the north, a young French priest, Father Jean Gaire, arrived at Oak Lake Parish on July 10, 1888. The parish was located seven miles south of the Canadian Pacific mainline and it was from that point that Father Gaire set off in a southwesterly direction, in search of a suitable location to start a new community.

These are the events that are believed to have led to the formation of the village of Grande Clairiere and St. Jean's Roman Catholic parish.

THE HISTORY OF ST. JEAN'S PARISH

In 1885, a 30 year old priest by the name of Jean Gaire was serving the parish of Loisy and Bezaumont in France. One summer morning, upon returning home from saying Mass, he found a brochure in the mail entitled "Guide du colon francais au Canada," written by a French Canadian priest and inviting Frenchmen to immigrate to Canada. The idea of serving the Lord in the New World appealed to the young priest and he felt God was calling him to help populate Canada with colonists.

For two long years Father Gaire deliberated over the idea of going to Canada. The French government, at this time, was **unsupportive** of religion; a fact that only served to confirm his decision. His Bishop in France denied him permission to leave several times. He finally told his Bishop, "It is neither gold nor glory that attracts me; it is therefore God that is calling me." Forty-eight hours later he was granted his leave for Canada.

Father Gaire sailed from Le Havre on April 25, 1888 - leaving his beloved France and embarking on a journey that would influence the rest of his life. He arrived in Montreal on May 16 and boarded a train to the mysterious "Great West". On May 21, he arrived in Winnipeg where he was made welcome by Archbishop Tache of St. Boniface.

The next few weeks Father Gaire visited many well established parishes around Winnipeg and was heartened by the number of French-speaking Catholics. Wishing to establish a French colony in the western part of the province, he boarded a train on July 10, 1888 to the farthest Catholic parish west at Oak Lake.

He was made welcome in the rectory built on the beautiful shores of "Lac du Chenes" (Oak Lake). The priest there had a team of horses and a buggy so together they set off in a southwesterly direction in search of a suitable location to establish a new community. On the map they located an area called "Lac des Erables" (Maple Lake). The idea of settling on the shores of a lake was most appealing, however upon exploring the area found mainly marshland. They set off in an easterly direction where they found a large clearing that pleased the young priest. A few Metis families lived nearby, so he decided to settle and called the chosen place "Grande Clairiere."

Father Gaire applied for a homestead near the only house that was there at that time - a log cabin belonging to Thomas Breland on 30-6-24, which is the location of the present day **Rey** farm. His claim consisted of 65 hectares of land at a cost of 50 francs and is thought to have been on the site where the present day church stands.

The **Breland** family welcomed the enthusiastic young priest but were slightly nervous in his presence. They insisted the priest enjoy the privacy of their log cabin while they moved outdoors into a tent.

So, it was here, in a log cabin, a simple table transformed into an altar that Father Gaire celebrated his first Mass in Grande Clairiere. The date was Sunday, July 22, 1888. Father Gaire wrote in his memoirs: "At 9 o'clock my three Metis families were there - 6 adults and 10 children. I have neither choir nor children to serve Mass; I say a low Mass, all the time admiring the simple, open piety of these brave people." These three families were the Thomas Brelands, the Napoleon Whitefords, and the James Whitefords.

The next day, two carpenters arrived to begin construction of his first house - a 4 x 5 meter, one-room building that had neither door nor windows and a dirt floor. His money now spent, he returned to Oak Lake with the carpenters to find a letter for him announcing money had arrived from France and was to be claimed in St. Boniface. He returned to Winnipeg where, for two weeks, he rested, spent time in retreat, and nursed the mass of boils that had spread over his neck and face.

On August 9, two Alsaciens who had recently landed in Canada, returned to Grande Clairiere with the priest. These men were Xavier Aime, a cousin of Father Gaire, and Konrad Flick, a friend from a neighbouring French village. These men remained in Grande Clairiere and were among the first settlers to file land claims. The priest hired them to help him complete his house, cut and stack 30 small loads of hay, start plowing his homestead and dig a well. They also built a sod barn for the few cows, pigs, chickens and team of horses he had recently purchased. Father Gaire wrote of his small, one-room house, "It is very small for all the purposes it must serve. "It is at times - kitchen, dining-room, parlor, bed-room and church."

Father Gaire's first months in Canada were times of joy and sadness, of enthusiasm and depression. He sometimes felt so alone and wondered if his goals would ever be reached, but faith and courage sustained him.

Desperately requiring more space. Father Gaire and his Metis followers began an addition to his house that would serve as a church. On November 25, the priest celebrated his first high Mass in Grande Clairiere. His parishioners now consisted of 8 Metis and 2 French-Canadian families - the Barbot and Thievin families from Loire in France. Still a modest number, but the population had tripled in three months!! Father Gaire wrote in his diary, "I was as pleased with our tiny chapel as a bishop is with his beautiful cathedral".

With winter fast approaching, the young priest worried about the cold and searched the faces of the people to see if he could find traces of the suffering they must endure. He had spent much time and energy preparing for the worst and when the first snow fell, the end of November, the priest was ready. During that first winter in Canada, the Metis entertained the priest with stories of their battles with the Sioux and their buffalo hunts. The Sioux, through starvation had been reduced to stealing and begging and often visited Father Gaire. They regarded all "black robes" as Manitou and held the priest in reverence.

Tragedy struck the parish in December, when James Whiteford died. The parish registers record his was the first Christian burial in Grande Clairiere on December 21, 1888 and the site was chosen for the church cemetery at this time. Two first communions

were also registered in December - that of Marie Whiteford and Jean Gerle. The first marriage performed in the new parish did not take place until October 30, 1890 when vows were exchanged between Louis Lafontaine and Sara Gladu. The first baptism was that of Marie Virginie Leveille infant daughter of Jean and Elisa Leveille (Breland).

Although primarily devoted to the spiritual care of his flock. Father Gaire was also concerned with the secular education of the children. On January 27, 1889 he started a school - the chapel serving as a church on Sundays and as a classroom during the week.

In April 1889, new settlers began to arrive from Redu, Luxembourg. Among these were the Delaite, Stringer and Copet families. On July 29, 1889, Father Gaire wrote the French Counsellate that, in three months, the population of Grande Clairiere had doubled. There were now 43 homes and close to 150 people!!

During the winter of 1889-1890, Father Gaire returned to France for a month as "Immigration Agent" for the Canadian government. He attended conferences, advertising for immigrants in France and Belgium. The response was overwhelming and on March 23, 1890, eighty French and Belgian immigrants sailed from Liverpool with the priest. They arrived in Winnipeg on April 9, where half of the people remained, the rest went on to Grande Clairiere. Well known names among these early settlers were Joseph Charles, Francois Vodon, Boulanger, Rey, Sylvestre, Martine, Quenelle, Davreux, Isabey, Marcq. Bauche, Carbotte and Gatin families. Many of these early settlers later moved further west; however, many descendants of these pioneers are still found in the area today.

The first little chapel soon proved inadequate for the rapidly growing congregation, so in 1890 Father Gaire began construction of the first church in Grande Clairiere. His main benefactors thus far had been, his aging mother, an anonymous benefactor in France, and Bishop Tache. They built a church measuring 5 by 10 meters long and about 5 meters high. Soon this building proved to be too small to meet the needs of his flock and by the end of 1890, the parishoners began making generous donations to the parish fund. In 1891 the church was enlarged to a magnificent 10 x 26 meters and 9 meters high and easily seated 300 people. A beautiful altar and many statues and church ornaments were sent to the parish by ardent supporters from France and Belgium. All that was missing was a bell tower and a bell to ring out over the proud new Community. Father Gaire wrote: "It is now, with the majesty of our church and the beauty of our traditions that we are set apart from others."

New colonists continued to arrive, the harvest of 1891 was bountiful and the settlers were enthusiastic about their new home. A new wave of settlers arrived in the spring of 1892 raising the population of Grande Clairiere to 400 souls. The good land in the area had all been claimed and future immigrants would have to settle elsewhere.

Parish registers record the first Sacrement of Confirmation was solemnized on July 27, 1891 by Monseigneur Grandin, Bishop of St. Albert, North West Territories as delegated by Monseigneur Tache. Forty-one people were confirmed and in 1895 seventy-one

more people were confirmed!! On June 12, 1899 thirty- seven more children and adults received the sacrament by Monseigneur Adelard Langevin of St. Boniface.

By 1893, Grande Clairiere had a church and a rectory; now to begin construction of a school for the children. Up to this time, school had been taught in the sacristy of the church or in the rectory - wherever space could be found. So, in 1893 a new rectory was built and the old one was transformed into a school.

The "Manitoba Constitution of 1870" declared French-Catholics in the province had the right to secular schools. Father Gaire's dream was to have more than an ordinary school; he wanted a boarding school where children from distant missions that had no educational facilities, could be accommodated. Without hesitation, Father Gaire again returned to France and received financial assistance from generous benefactors. He also appealed to a congregation of nuns, "The Sister of Our Lady of the Missions" who were eager to accept the challenge of establishing a bilingual mission in Canada.

In the spring of 1898, construction began on the first convent. The sisters arrived in Grande Clairiere on August 11 and school opened on August 18 with 20 pupils registered. By October, the convent was ready for occupancy. This convent had been meant as a temporary shelter and the first winter provided the proof!! A second convent was built and blessed on August 14, 1899. It, too, proved inadequate so in 1904 the Mother Superior decided the sisters would have to leave Grande Clairiere. The parishoners, priest and bishop pleaded with them to stay and promised to help. The sisters were persuaded to remain and in 1905, under the guidance of Father D. Beaugard, a two- story convent was built.

The harvest of 1892 was even more abundant and immigration continued. The population of the parish rose to 600 and Father Gaire realized he would have to establish colonies elsewhere. It was at this time he began settlements to the west - in Bellegarde and Cantal, Saskatchewan. During the years from 1894 - 1898, there were no resident priests in his new missions, so from time to time he would go on foot to visit the settlers.

During these early years, many immigrants had settled to the north-east of Grande Clairiere near the present day Deleau. In 1899 Ste. Anne's Church was built in Deleau under the guidance of Father Gaire. A small cemetery adjoins the church property where many of the first inhabitants of the village and area are buried.

Ste. Anne's Parish was served by the Grande Clairiere priests and devout worshippers for many years. By 1960, interest had weakened and many parishioners had chosen to attend the larger parishes of Grande Clairiere and Souris. Father Paulhus celebrated Mass in Ste. Anne's until the late 1960's when the church doors closed for the last time.

Father Gaire also visited a settlement near the present day community of Belleview. Father Hella and Father Beaugard continued this practise and when the annual tithes were collected, generous donations were made towards the building of a church. It is uncertain exactly what year the immaculate Conception church in Belleview was built.

The church steps are inscribed with the year 1911, but it is thought the church was built earlier than this date. The mission was served by the priests from Grande Clairiere for many years. At the time of writing, it is a mission of the Sacred Heart Parish in **Virden**.

In 1903, his dreams in Grande Clairiere fulfilled, Father Gaire requested a transfer to a new mission in **Wauchope**, Saskatchewan. He was succeeded by Father J. Hella on June 11.

On August 2, 1903, Archbishop Langevin solemnly blessed a bell for the church in Grande Clairiere. The bell, weighing 500 lbs. was purchased by the parishoners and blessed with the name of "Jeanne", in honor of Father Jean Gaire. St. Jean was also named patron saint of the parish at this time - thus "Paroisse St. Jean".

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