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## **Beaumont history – settlement to hamlet**

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The first article in this series on the history of Beaumont dealt with the very early settlement of the Beaumont area.

From the arrival of the first homesteaders in the early 1890's until the turn of the century, the settlement grew to include 45 French Canadian families and 30 English speaking families. The hamlet of Beaumont included, by 1900, a church, rectory and store with post office and blacksmith. Resident families included the Gagnons, Lavignes, Chartiers and Vallees. Fouquette School, named after a local resident, was located just south of the hill. By 1900, a new Catholic public school district had been created south of the hamlet with a new school named "Plante School".

Bishop Emile Legal visited the parish in 1899 to confirm 19 children. It was such an honor to be confirmed by Monsigneur Legal that 15 were re-confirmed a second time.

Little by little the parishioners raised money to adorn their church. A lottery and supper in January 1900 brought in the sum of \$300. New statues and pictures were installed but the major article missing was an organ. One was purchased for \$100 only for the church to find that no one could play it. Mrs. Zenaide Lavigne agreed to learn and in a few short months the people were enjoying the accompaniment of their own church organ.

In 1899, inquiries were initiated to obtain a telephone line between South Edmonton and Beaumont. The necessary supplies were obtained from the government and permission given by CPR to use their telegraph poles to erect the telephone line. Posts were cut and hauled to cover the twelve miles between the hamlet and the railroad. Construction of the line was to begin in the spring of 1899. Over the winter however, the CPR withdrew its permission to use the telegraph poles, informing the people that telephone and telegraph lines could not be erected on the same posts.

Thirty determined men from the area would not accept defeat. They supplied posts to cover the distance to Strathcona and each donated \$2 to cover the cost of constructing the lines. Others then followed suit. A contract for construction of the line was awarded for \$95.

Unfortunately, after considerable delay, the contract was forfeited and then given to two parishioners to start immediately. Due to an exceptionally cold winter and wet summer, they could not make headway on the project. When the first fall frosts came, the contractors refused to finish the job.

In fear that the government might take back the equipment it had already supplied, the settlers awarded a building contract to Mr. Pierre Bérubé. He completed the line by January 1901. Beaumont could finally communicate by phone with Strathcona, Edmonton, St. Albert and Morinville. But the cost of the line had risen to \$130.25 from the original estimate of \$95 and of course, the unexpected two-year delay.

In spite of a summer wet enough to halt the telephone line construction to Edmonton, crops the fall of 1900 were abundant. August 1 saw a violent hailstorm suddenly destroy most of the crops

north of the village. With more rain following, the crops appeared lost. A quick change to sunny weather and the remaining grain ripened.

The morning of August 25th dawned with a ground cover of five to six inches of snow which had fallen during the night. Amazingly, after the snow melted, the fields dried and a crop yield of up to 80 bushels per acre, far surpassing expectations, was harvested. Wheat was not grown at this time, as fast maturing strains had not been developed for use in northern Alberta yet. Grains such as oats and barley were most commonly grown in the Beaumont area.

By September 25th of the same year, snow again covered the ground, but this time all crops were harvested and sheltered.

In 1902, the Fouquette school district was replaced by two districts, Clearwater and Beaumont. A new school was built in the village as many new families arrived in Beaumont from Wisconsin.

Father Ethier left the parish and Reverend S. Bouchard was sent as parish priest. It was he who first marked out the cemetery behind the church. He retired the following year and was replaced by Father Quebillon. This priest's work in the ministry took the form of directing the school.

In 1905, he was succeeded by Father M. Ouellette who administered a great deal of improvement to the church and rectory. A steeple was built for the church bell which had, until then, stood on a turret between the church and rectory. Trees were planted in the church area, and still stand today\*. A porch was added to the rectory as well.

The parish of Beaumont had grown to about 100 families.

Father M. Ouellette left the parish after two years to take an appointment as colonization agent. Reverend L. Simon, Reverend Daguy, Reverend A. Desrocher and Reverend A. Gauthier, from Dakota, enlarged and renovated the rectory by adding an office.

Upon his return to St. Vital Parish in 1912, Father Ouellette took charge again until 1919. The old rectory was demolished in 1917 and replaced with a new building in 1919. This rectory stood until 1958. Renovations were made to the church as well during this period.

During the night of February 10, 1918, the church was totally destroyed by fire. All the beautiful statues, chandeliers and vestments that the people had worked so hard to obtain were burned as the parishioners slept unaware of the disaster. In the morning ashes were all that remained. Today\*, the twisted metal remains of the bell are in the possession of Mr. Leon Lavigne, a local resident who lives 1 ½ miles west of Beaumont.

The school was used for services until a simple hall was built in 1919. Then construction of a new church was given top priority.

A site had been chosen in the fall of 1918 before Father Ouellette left. However, that site was not popular with all the residents once the builders found that the foundation for the church extended into the old cemetery. Father Normandeau, upon his arrival April 1919, suggested they start again, this time moving the foundation slightly to the west of the original site.

Work commenced in earnest in the spring of 1919. Eight thousand dollars were raised through banquets, card parties, collections, donations and the sale of simple benches constructed by

local parishioners. Many thousands of dollars were saved by the donation of labor and materials.

Wood and bricks were brought from Leduc and stone, sand and gravel from distances up to six miles from Beaumont. All hauling was done by horse and wagon. No machinery was available for construction and horses pulling scrapers were used to hollow out the church's basement.

The following story is told by Mr. Arthur Morin of Beaumont:

With one final load of sand necessary to complete work on the church, all the farmers hurried off the construction site to their fields. Frost was forecast for that night and unless their crops were harvested, all would be lost. Father Normandeau followed the farmers to their fields and pleaded for someone to return to haul the last load of sand.

None would risk a year's crop for the sake of one load of sand for the church. Finally Father Normandeau told Arthur Morin that, if he would assist with the load, his crop would be safe. Mr. Morin was so astounded by this promise that he took his horses to get that load of sand.

His return to the church about 10 p.m. was welcomed by men ready to unload and spread the sand. There was no frost that night after all. Not only was the church finished, but Mr. Morin's crops were harvested and safe as well.

Life was generally very hard for farm families. Crops consisted mostly of potatoes, hay and grains such as oats and barley. Farming was done with the simplest of tools

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and horsepower. Land was cleared of trees and simple ploughs tilled the soil. Local residents remember abundant rabbit populations providing the basis of their winter meat diet.

Produce taken to Strathcona for sale was hauled under hay in cold weather to prevent freezing. Potatoes and perhaps eggs were taken to market, sold, the hay sold and supplies returned to the farm under a carefully –retained reserve of hay. Farmers set off for market at 4 a.m. to arrive at the city block that is now 83 Avenue and 104 Street of Edmonton by noon. Many French-speaking families lived in that Strathcona area, so there was little difficulty conducting business affairs in either English or French.

The women might make the trip into town once a year. The catalogues and travelling stores were available for most necessities not homemade or grown.

Children seldom went to school beyond grade 8 in the early 1900's in and around Beaumont. And the year was sure to be broken up when all were recruited to help with harvest or potato picking. Anywhere up to 40 children at one time would attend the one room school in Beaumont. The teacher boarded with local families in the area. Life was often as hard for her as for most of her students.

Children used slates to economize on the paper in five cent scribblers. The school itself was heated by a central wood stove. In winter it was not at all unusual for the ink wells to be frozen solid each morning. One story is told of a more positive aspect of this type of heating system. Children on one occasion nailed the strap to a board and tossed it into the wood stove – temporary reprieve at least.

School taxes of \$18 per year are remembered for this time. The \$16 a year round tax could be worked off in two days with a horse and scraper.

Most farm families were large. Babies in the area were delivered by local self-taught midwives such as Mrs. Lambert and Mrs. Morin. Residents remember, as children, being told that the [First Nations people] brought new babies. Before each birth, everyone was taken to a neighbour's until the baby was born. By about 1918, a doctor from Leduc was available to come out on calls to Beaumont and area. He was often paid in produce, for example half a spring pig for delivering a baby. Surprisingly, few infant deaths took place and most children grew up on their parent's farm and stayed on to work until they married themselves.

Entertainment took the form of house party dances with accordion, violin and mouth organ music.

Moonshine, often colored with caramelized sugar and tested for strength with a lit match put to a teaspoonful, was the "spirit" of the day. The mash left after distilling provided the basis for some of the lighter moments of farm life. It was used for feed. The children not careful to limit the amount fed to chickens and pigs were entertained by the antics of their otherwise dull animals.

World War I saw the exodus of many good men from the village and parish. Conscription did not affect the farmers directly. They were more valuable working the land. However, volunteers left, some never to return. It was a period of uncertainty and mourning as names of those killed in action were relayed back to families in the area.

July 4, 1920, exactly 25 years after the first mass in the first chapel in Beaumont said by Father Morin in 1895, mass was celebrated in the new church. On November 14, 1920, the church was inaugurated and the new 2,000 pound bell "Marie Vitaline" was blessed. The bell was a gift from the parishioners. Sixteen hundred dollars were raised that day in contributions for the privilege of ringing the new bell.

The work that continued on the church was not without tragedy. A foreman, Mr. M. Dupas, lost his footing on a scaffold and fell to his death.

In total, the church cost about \$30,000 to build.

The Beaumont 1921 census listed 110 French Canadian families and 15 English-speaking families in the area, compared with 45 French and 35 English in 1898. The reason for the relatively slow growth from 100 families in 1912 lay in the fact that some families were leaving to settle north around St. Paul des Metis and Moose Lake. About 20 houses had been built around the church in the hamlet.

Services included two general stores (the Moreau store and the Lavigne store), post office, Banque d'Hochelega, the Charbonneau blacksmith and the school.

In 1922 Father Bernier was named parish priest until replaced by Father Gaborit in 1924. By 1927, the debt on the church had been reduced to \$13,700.

For social activity, the Beaumont Band organized in 1925. Eighteen men with second-hand instruments were taught to play by Father Gaborit. They travelled to other communities to play often.

In the 1920's baseball, races and tug-of-war were very popular sports. As a matter of interest, Beaumont's seven man tug-of-war team, with training two to three times a week, remained totally undefeated by rivals. Their silver trophy has since disappeared from the KC Hall in Beaumont. These contests, far from milk farms of exercise, were hard fought battles lasting up to 45 minutes against stiff competition such as the Leduc team.

The majority of the population still lived on farms in log houses covered with shingles such as that of Mrs. Régina Bilodeau in 1927.

Mrs. Bilodeau raised 12 children in this house and today\* at the age of 94, is the most elderly resident of the village.

The next major influence on Beaumont and area was the Depression.

(To be continued)

***TIDBIT:*** *One day, Régina was interrupted by two First Nations people who opened her door and stepped in. Fearing the worst, her children flocked around her. But all that the two wanted was her fresh berry pie and some tea. They left as quietly as they had come. (See page 244 of the **Beaumont History Book**).*