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## **Beaumont - an historical illustration**

**By Barbara Willis**

The following is the first in a [four] part series on the history of Beaumont.

Resource material has been compiled from La Survivance June 17, 1942 issue, History of the Catholic Church in Central Alberta and most importantly from the memories of the long time residents of Beaumont.

Louise Goudreau contributed valuable notes from her class project on the village and Mrs. Annette Gobeil provided a sensitive translation of French material.

It is essential to understand the powerful and all pervasive influence of the church in the establishment and growth of small communities such as Beaumont. The church was the very reason for the village's existence, for without the church first, the district would perhaps have remained scattered farms with little or no community core. The church provided comfort, reassurance, strength and hope to remain optimistic.

As well as spiritual leadership, the parish priest very often comprised the only village ties with literacy and education. Many people could not read or write and the priest performed a valuable communication link with the outside world.

Beaumont was the church and the church Beaumont for as long as people needed the security and protection offered in an otherwise fierce and hard-fought struggle to create a life in the frontier of western Canada.

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Perhaps it was because the rolling hills and little lakes and park-like nature of the land reminded them of their native provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Whatever the reasons, the first settlers to the Leduc district chose the Beaumont and Clearwater areas first for their new homes in the west.

With the coming of the railroad, families from Quebec, Minnesota and North Dakota settled in what is now the Beaumont area. In the very early 1890's, the Chartier, Dumont and Brunelle families came to the district followed shortly thereafter by the Bolducs, Morins, Juneaus, Dubords, Lachapelles, Lamberts, Fouquettes, Onettes, Gagnons, Charests, Royers, Goudreaus and Bérubés. By the spring of 1893, the new settlement had built up to over 20 families. The district was then known as Sandy Lake.

For many years, life in these small communities revolved around the church. The people relied to a great extent on the priest for his leadership and guidance. The parish of Beaumont, situated 15 miles south east of south Edmonton and ten miles north of Leduc, had none of the advantages of special conditions which attract settlers, such as railroads or coal mines. But rather, the community owes its existence to the fertility of the land and to the church built shortly after the arrival of the first settlers.

Land for homesteading was sold for \$10 in the area. Life was hard with few or no amenities for those early settlers. At first, mass was celebrated by Father Perreault from the Mission of Stony Plain, in private homes, usually in the Louis Chartier residence. In 1894, the community was visited by Father Lacombe who came to console and encourage the newcomers to this land.

By the fall of 1893, the need for a school was felt. The French and English of the district built a public Catholic Elementary school which they named "Fouquette" in the spring of 1894 on Mr. Johnson's land. The first teacher was Mlle. J. Haydon.

That same spring, the community applied to Bishop Grandin of St. Albert to form their own parish. The bishop purchased ten acres of land on a section belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company for \$50. Father Lacombe chose the site on which to build the church. Mr. Chartier made a gift of 20 acres more land for the church grounds. These 30 acres were the foundation of the village of Beaumont.

In the fall of 1894, Father Poitras was sent by Father Grandin as the parish's first pastor. His immediate task was to build the church and rectory.

Construction was completed in the spring of 1895. In gratitude, the parish chose as its patron saint, St. Vital after the venerable bishop St. Albert, Monseigneur Vital Grandin.

However, soon after, difficulties arose. Some of the parishioners wished to change the site of the church while others wanted it to remain as built. The Church decreed that it should remain in its original location. The first High Mass was celebrated in the new church on June 30, 1895.

At this time, the settlement underwent a change of name. A group of English settlers who lived a short distance from the church wanted to retain the name of Sandy Lake and this request was granted. But to commemorate the beautiful location of the Catholic parish on the ridge of a hill, the village was named Beaumont (meaning beautiful hill). The name of Beaumont was suggested it is said, by John Royer, one of the settlers.

Now that the church was built, items for divine worship were installed. A bell weighing 800 pounds was brought from Montreal for \$100. The chalice, cruets, censer and altar linen were furnished by Bishop Grandin. He took up a collection to buy the sacred vestments, stations of the cross, etc. Lastly, many parishioners contributed articles to aid in the decoration of the church sanctuary.

In July 1885, a petition was sent to the government asking for weekly postal service from Edmonton to the Sandy Lake district. Two months later, Mr. Ludger Gagnon was named postmaster. The mail was brought into Ellerslie every Friday and delivered from there to Beaumont.

In the spring of 1886, Reverend Father Beuparlant of Montreal came to Beaumont and took charge of the parish. He lived in the Chartier residence during the construction of a rectory which took most of the summer to complete. The small presbytery was constructed of hewn logs and only 20 feet square.

Beaumont was gradually growing. By June 1897, the people were pleased to learn that their postal service would be established on a bi-weekly basis.

New settlers were moving in but some were also returning to their places of origin. Life was full of hardships. Land has to be broken, crops were sometimes poor and markets for produce were just opening, so money was very scarce. Father Beuparlant was one to succumb to the hard life. He left Beaumont in December 1897.

As Father Beuparlant had been postmaster, the post office was then moved to the Edmond Bonin residence and Mrs. Bonin became postmistress.

In September 1898, Father A. Ethier became rector of the parish. He was to be the first priest to really make his influence felt in the community. The year 1898 was a good year for the settler both in terms of weather and crops, and in terms of the growth of the community spiritually, with the arrival of Father Ethier, and materially, with increases in population and services. The two districts, Sandy Lake and Beaumont, now supported some 45 French families and 30 English speaking families. The French families owned in total about 70 quarter sections of farm land.

The fall of 1899 saw the erection of a few buildings close to the church. This was the start of the village as such. Mr. J.E. Lavigne, who in August 1898 opened a store in his house, built a store on the north east side of

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the church. Prior to this, a small trading post had been maintained by Henry Lampon a mile or so from where the village was finally located. One of Mr. Lavigne's daughters opened a boutique near the store. Mr. Fred Long opened a blacksmith's shop close by. Mr. Francois Vallee, upon retirement, had a house built in the village. These buildings, along with the church, rectory, post office and the store and the Gagnon, Lavigne and Chartier homes, made up the village of Beaumont.

In 1899, a group of farmers formed an incorporated company called Compagnie de Moulins de Beaumont, Limitee (Harvest Company of Beaumont Limited). At the end of September 1899, new machinery was in full use and the co-operative results after five weeks of work was \$600 profit.

Thus, Beaumont moved into the 20th century firmly established as a community with an active commercial base and social and spiritual life revolving around the church.  
(To be continued)