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Beaumont fortunate in dustbowl depression

By Barbara and Bob Willis

[The year] 1929 saw the economic collapse of most of the world's countries.

Canada was no exception, although the prairie provinces in general took a much longer period of time to recuperate from the effects of the depression than did the rest of the country.

Beaumont was fortunate in that the area did not experience the concurrent, tragic dustbowl that destroyed the livelihood of thousands of prairie farm families.

As a consequence of good crops, it would appear that local farmers took matters in hand during the depression and produced goods for their own use. Butter was homemade and wheat ground into flour at mills in Leduc or Edmonton. Due to depressed commodity prices, farmers found it worth more to keep their own produce than to try to sell it.

Wheat in the early 30's sold for 19 cents a bushel, hogs for \$1.90 per hundred weight, eggs for six cents a dozen and beef cattle for so little it wasn't worth trucking them to the city.

Lumber, cut locally for mine-shaft props, was exchanged for coal to fuel stoves and furnaces. The coal was hauled from three miles west of Ellerslie.

Many homes had Delco power plants, small generators capable of producing 32 volts, in their basements.

Produce, such as potatoes, was stored in dugout cellars, usually under the farm house. A burning lantern would be left to give off enough heat to prevent freezing in the winter and the underground coolness preserved food stuffs in the summer heat.

Hired hands, paid \$5 a month by local farmers, were subsidized an additional \$5 by the government to keep the men off welfare and out of the city soup lines.

Horses rather than gasoline, powered equipment and were used for hauling, travel and farm work. Tractors were left in sheds or barns for use in the future when fuel could be afforded. A few farmers such as Pierre Bérubé and Paul Magnan operated vehicles to pick up milk, cream, grain, and eggs for those who had no transportation.

On occasions when farm families could sell produce, for example eggs, at the local stores, they weren't paid cash. Rather, goods were taken in exchange or credit extended for future purchases.

The stores in Beaumont stocked non-perishables in bulk. Molasses cans, brought by customers from home, were filled for 25 cents from the store's large barrel. Vinegar and coal oil for lamps were sold the same way. There was no such thing as the brown paper bag – containers were taken to the store empty and returned home filled. Cigarettes on Sunday at six for five, were a luxury.

People of the time remember taking eggs into town to sell packed in grain. Once the eggs were sold, the horses would be fed the grain before returning home.

In times such as these, ingenuity was necessary for survival. This ingenuity took many forms. The story is told by Mr. Leo Roberge of hauling hay into north Edmonton during the winter months:

Snow was often scarce on the high level bridge in Edmonton, so Mr. Roberge and companions would head their team and sleigh to the low level bridge.

Upon arrival at the threshold of the then one-lane bridge, they would wait patiently for the first clang of the street car bell. Immediately, the team would be positioned right in the middle of the track crossing the bridge. Inevitably, the quickly moving street car, coming downhill, would ram the "stalled" sleigh. After harsh words, the conductor would calm down and ask that the hay covering his lights be removed. Pleading that the horses were exhausted and couldn't move, the wily Frenchmen would convince the street car conductor to push the sleigh the length of the bridge and up the hill. The end results were rested horses and good-humored drivers, satisfied at a "job" well done.

Farmers established on their land before the depression managed fairly well.

Mr. Arthur LeBlanc, whose family has been in the Beaumont area since 1894, bought his 160 acre farm just southeast of Beaumont in 1921 for \$4,500. He did mixed farming and raised cattle, chickens and hogs.

In 1928, he built a large, five-bedroom house on the farm for about \$5,000, lumber being sold at \$25 per thousand board feet at the time. By 1937, the price of lumber dropped to \$13 per thousand board feet, delivered.

Between 1930 and 1970, Beaumont had five priests serve the parish. Each brought his own unique abilities and all

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have left their mark on Beaumont's history.

Father Gaborit served the parish for 16 years, from 1924 until his death in 1940. It was Father Gaborit who saw to the building of the grotto in front of the church in 1935. He was buried at the foot of the cross in the middle of the Beaumont cemetery.

Father Chartrand took over the ministry of St Vital parish after Father Gaborit's death. In 1942, with the help of the almost 200 families in the Beaumont area, he organized festivities to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the parish.

The celebration included a banquet in the church basement, a procession through the village, songs at the school and prayers by the grotto in front of the church.

Father Chartand was replaced by Father J.E. Lapointe in 1945. He devoted himself to the church and community for 11 years before his retirement in 1956.

Father Lapointe organized and personally took part in the construction of the community hall, now known as Club Beaumont. He was instrumental in the opening of the Caisse Populaire (Credit Union) in Beaumont in 1945. Father Lapointe retired to Bonnyville until his death a few years later.

Oblats from College St. Jean in Edmonton conducted religious services in Beaumont until Father Robert became the new parish priest in November, 1957.

Father Robert immediately organized renovations to the church. The final work was so thorough and the renovations so complete that the parish felt the church looked brand new. The finishing touch was the addition of the cross with lights put up by Maurice Gobeil.

That same year, 1958, a new rectory was also built. During its construction, Father Robert lived in a suite of rooms in the church basement.

Father Robert, now [1978] in Edmonton, is remembered as a mild-mannered man whose organization accomplished a lot in a short period of time.

Father René Jacob arrived in the village after Father Robert, in 1963, from a parish in Jasper Place in Edmonton. He has served in St. Vital parish for 15 years and remains [1978] active today.

For 40 years, from 1932 to 1972, Les Filles de Jésus (Daughters of Jesus) provided religious and academic education for the children of Beaumont. They took charge of the school in the village upon their arrival. Mrs. Lachappelle's house was purchased as a temporary residence until 1936 when a new convent was constructed. This building, located across 50th Avenue from the school was sold in 1972 to Mr. and Mrs. Gerry Patsula, who reside there now* with their family. The nuns left Beaumont after the sale of the convent.

Ecole Bellevue was built in 1949 when the old school was dismantled and the wood used to build several small houses. In 1956, an addition to the south side of the school was built, in 1959 the administration and gym areas added and in 1963 the lab, library and classroom areas built on.

The history of commerce and business in Beaumont is vital and dynamic. That local area people used the village businesses for exchange, sales, purchases and recreation is of little doubt. The long trip into Edmonton was reserved for large sales of produce or hay. Transactions on every scale were carried out in the many stores that once flourished in Beaumont.

From time to time, until 1970, commerce within the village has included general stores, a bank, blacksmiths, garages, pool halls, cafes, a butcher, egg-grading stations, a barber shop, shoemaker and the credit union.

The northwest corner of 50th Street and 50th Avenue has been the centre of continuing commerce in the village. The first store on that corner was built by Wilfrid Magnan. In the late 1940's the store was sold to Maurice Magnan who operated the business until 1968 when it was sold to Mr. Fraser.

Another busy location has been the site of the old credit union on 50th Avenue. In the early 1920's, Pat Demers had a store on the site. Paul Magnan took over the store and had pool

tables for public use. The legal age to play pool then was 18 and the law was very likely to be enforced by proprietors protecting their licenses.

In the early 1940's, Mr. Baril ran the store until Joe LeBlanc bought the building in about 1946 for an egg grading station. In the early 1950's, with the Charest family renting living quarters upstairs and egg-grading station still downstairs, the building burned to the ground.

Another egg-grading station was opened during the depression on the south end of 51st street.

Alcide Magnan, in the 1930's, purchased a store from Mr. LeBlanc. The store was originally constructed west of the church by Alcide Bérubé almost 30 years before. The store changed ownership several times until finally going to Mr. Magnan.

Every manner of goods were sold, including a supply of coffins stored over the main store.

A gas pump near the store provided fuel for a fire which broke out from a burning coal oil lantern in the late 1930's and demolished the building.

Mr. Magnan built a new store where the "Chateau on the Hill" now* stands. He operated the business until his sons, Charlie and Gerry returned from the war in '45 and '46. The brothers then went into partnership for a few years. Gerry took over until 1970 when, for family health reasons, he was forced to close the business.

As well as places for business, these general stores served as social gathering places. Men regularly congregated to talk and play cards. Women kept in touch with village news through meetings in and around the general stores.

In 1927, the Vaugois family took over a pool hall previously owned by Alex Gobeil. The business, located immediately south of the "Magnan" store was owned and operated by Mrs. Marie Vaugeois for almost 15 years.

Mr. Chatel owned a store near the Goudreau Dairy at the same time that Mr. Leblanc's store was in operations, about 1935. The Chatel store looked like a barn and, in fact, was half of a long barn originally built west of the village. The building was too big to move, so it was cut in half and one of the halves, when moved, served as the store.

OI Royer operate a store a block west of the church on 50th Avenue in the early 20's. He sold to Mr. Cauette who moved the building down the west hill about 1943. Maurice Goudreau then bought the business.

Several blacksmiths operated in the village from time to time – Long, Charbonneau and Gravel to name a few.

A small restaurant was opened by Maurice Leblanc in the village. Mr. Henri Gobeil bought the garage in 1933 and it has remained a family business to this* day.

In 1927, Mrs. Charbonneau became village postmistress and remained so, with the post office in her home, for 30 years. After her retirement, Mrs. L. Magnan took over in her home for the next 14 years of postal service. The Credit Union handled the post office, after Mrs. Magnan, for one year under its manager Mr. G. Goudreau. On January 15, 1972, Beaumont's present*

postmistress, Mrs. F. Gobeil, took charge of the post office, working from an addition built onto her home on 50th Street.

World War II is remembered as a sad and prayerful time by those left in Beaumont. Reports of injuries or deaths in combat filtered through the community and school constantly. The use of ration coupons for sugar, tea, coffee, meat, gas, tires, etc. was an accepted wartime practice.

Farmers still remained self-sufficient. When the economy began to pick up again, they began to expand their farms and seed in wheat.

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Economic prosperity for the farmers was slow in coming. Local residents remember a farmer's strike in Beaumont just after the war. Prices for produce were still so low that they felt they had nothing to lose in striking, and perhaps everything to gain by publicizing their plight. The strike didn't last long and apparently nothing was gained. Life returned to normal.

Concerts, plays, banquets and basket socials were all activities enjoyed by the community in the church basement. Horse races and baseball games in summer, and long bobsleds whizzing down the south side of the village winter evenings, were familiar sights when leisure time was available.

That same hill while providing such fun and enjoyment to young people, was a nemesis for anyone trying to get a team of horses up in the winter. Cars were retired for winter months as roads were not cleared for their use.

Modernization of the village, in terms of utilities, was slow in coming. The one exception was the telephone service, installed at the turn of the century.

In 1947, Calgary Power signed a franchise agreement with the County of Leduc to supply electrical power to Beaumont. At that time, Calgary Power purchased the distribution system from the Beaumont Electrical Co-op. For two years previous to this transaction, Beaumont was supplied with 110 volt electrical power generated by two engines and two generators located behind the Gobeil garage.

Water was still being drawn from wells or cisterns until 1961, when a water pipe line from Edmonton was started.

As the 1970's approached, change and growth loomed on Beaumont's horizon.

The hamlet becoming a village, with its own municipal government, signalled a landmark in Beaumont's history.

Beaumont in the '70's – to be continued.