Western Catholic Reporter

Written By the Director of St. Anne's Pilgrimage

LAC STE. ANNE, ALBERTA

First Catholic Mission in Alberta, 1844

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The first Catholic mission, west of St. Boniface, Manitoba, was opened at Lac Ste. Anne in 1844. Its origin is linked with the historic Shrine of St. Anne de Beaupre, Quebec, erected by French sailors in 1658 in fulfillment of a vow made of St. Anne for having saved them from shipwreck on the shores of Newfoundland.



From an oil painting by Miss Onesime Dorval. Shows the mission as it appeared around the time of the first pilgrimage. Miss Dorval was the first "certified" teacher in what is now Saskatchewan. The original oil painting is at the Batchoe National Historic Site.

The devotion to St. Anne which had been flourishing in France for almost four centuries, soon spread to New France and was widespread in Eastern Canada in the 1840s. Just as the spread of Christ's religion had been confided to St. Anne in the East, so also God had willed that the "Cradle of Faith" in the Canadian Northwest should be placed under the solicitude of the good St. Anne.

A veteran missionary of the Northwest Territories, Father J. M. Lestanc, O.M.I, wrote on July 27, 1910: *"I was told that a young missionary priest on his departure for the missions of the Red River in 1823 had made a promise at the feet of the statue of St. Anne de Beaupre, Que., that he would dedicate in her honour the first mission and church he would build in Western Canada."* This missionary was Father J. B. Thibault who became the first resident priest in Alberta.

Sent by Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface in 1844 at the request of John Rowand, a Catholic and Chief Factor of the Hudson Bay Fort at Edmonton, to minister to the needs of the Métis and Indians of the territory, he organized a mission on the shore of a lake called Lake of the Great Spirit by the Indians, and falsely called – Father Lacombe tells us – Devil's Lake by the Canadian Scouts.

Fulfilling his promise to St. Anne, Father Thibault built a church – residence and gathered about him since thirty Métis families formerly employed by the Hudson Bay Company and now victims of idleness, poverty and vice.

The old-timers loved to relate the following event. It was the autumn of 1844. Having called together the Métis, Crees, and Assiniboine Indians surrounding the lake, Father Thibault in surplice and stole, with holy water and ritual, led his flock to the shore of the lake. With solemn liturgical tones he spoke thus: *"All ye evil spirits, I command you, in the name of the Blessed Trinity to leave the waters of this lake. Spirit of God, cover this lake with your power. Bless these waters, so that they who he instilled in the hearts of his hearers for good St. Anne, Mother of the Mother of Our Saviour, has increased with the years, thousands of Métis and Indians of many races wash themselves reverently in the waters of Lac Ste. Anne and bring home some of its water, which, because of their confidence in St. Anne has credited with many cures."*

It would seem then, that the good St. Anne has accepted the role of guide and protectoress of the Church in the Canadian West.

(To be continued)

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Lac Ste Anne & Father Lacombe

Originally printed June 14, 1961



**Father albert Lacombe, omi
At Lac Ste. Anne in 1852-1861**

In the spring of 1845, Father J. B. Thibault, now assisted by Father Joseph Bourasa, built the first Catholic Church in Alberta, on a site which was marked with a stone monument and a statue of St. Anne, in 1959.

During the nine years that followed, these valiant missionaries spread the light of the Gospel and the blessings of Christianity far and wide; to Lac La Biche and Slave Lake to the north, to Edson and Jasper to the west, to the Blackfoot tribes to the south, to Fort Edmonton, and to the roaming bands of Crees and Chipeweyan Indians to the east.

On July 25, 1852, Father Joseph Bourasa blessed the church now almost completed, before leaving for the East. Lac Ste. Anne Mission and the surrounding districts were now under the care of a young and intrepid missionary whose marvellous apostolate among the Métis, Crees, and Blackfoot Indians won him a well deserved fame – Father Albert Lacombe.

His was the first attempt to organize a farming colony for the Métis; a race who, until then, knew and esteemed nothing but hunting, fishing, and trapping. Farm implements were brought in, cattle were secured, and a grist mill was set up at the mouth of the Sturgeon River so they could grind their grain into flour. But the implements were soon broken, the crops froze or did not ripen, the cattle were slaughtered and the Métis lived on in much the same way as they had always done.

The first secular priests from Quebec Diocese, who had laid the foundation of the church in the Canadian West, had come on a temporary assignment and had returned to the east, one by one. Father Lacombe, who was one of them, decided to stay with *"his poor children of the prairies,"* as he called them. For seven years he had been in contact with priests of a religious order called Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Sorely in need of priests, the aging and infirm Bishop Provendier had only to tell their holy founder, Bishop Eugene de Mezenod, Bishop of Marseilles, France, that his Indians were *"the poorest of the poor"*, to obtain the first contingent of Oblates in 1845. These were to be followed each year, by others – amongst them the Bishops and Vicars Apostolic who built the Catholic Churches from Ontario to the Hudson Bay, and as far west as Victoria.

Apostles and Saints, like Bishop Taché, Grandin, Farand and Grouard, by their selfless zeal and boundless

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Yesterday and Today

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The mission of St. Anne as a farming colony was a failure. But Father Lacombe, O.M.I., had found a much more favourable site.

In January 1861, he led Bishop Taché, O.M.I., to a spot nine miles north of Edmonton. The Bishop approved the spot and the new land settlement plan, and named the mission *"St. Albert"*. About half the Métis families of Lac Ste. Anne followed him to the new mission that summer; even the Grey Nuns were transferred there in 1863.

During the 18 years when Lac Ste Anne Mission was the *"heart"* of the apostolic activities in the Northwest, its missionaries had administered to 3266 natives and had blessed 133 marriages. For 75 more years, the Lac Ste. Anne Mission radiated the teachings of the Faith and the blessings of the Sacraments to hundreds of Métis and Indians to the south and to the west.

But, more than anything, what has brought the good Saint Anne in contact with *"her children"* was its annual pilgrimage in her honour, and it started in 1889. Since that year, her loving clients have come even more numerous and fervent to beg; and to obtain priceless favours from their beloved Patroness.

A small band of Assiniboine Indians on the west shore of Lac Ste. Anne has always received the benefits of religion from Lac Ste. Anne Mission and they are all Catholics. A church was erected for them in 1943 and a



1928 - The church & rectory - fire destroyed the church later that year.

modern three class school built in 1952 where over one hundred children learn the ways of Christianity and Civilization.

Alberta Beach, a popular summer resort, on the east shore of the lake, was provided with a chapel in 1947, and three Masses will be said there Sundays this summer; for their convenience.

The missionaries who continued the work of Father A. Lacombe, O.M.I., and of his predecessors, were Fathers V. Fourmond, V. Vegreville, Z. Lizee, Patrick Beaudry, Alphonse Watelle, Victor Le Calvez, Ed Rheaume, Georges Chevrier, Georges Roussel, and, since October 1958, Alexis Tetreault, all Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

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Pilgrimage - Its Meaning & Origin

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A pilgrimage is a journey made to some spot considered holy, generally chosen by God, Mary, or some Saint, or chosen for some special reason to honour God, to make a public profession of faith, to show confidence in some saint, or to obtain spiritual and temporal blessings of which we are in need.

From the earliest years of the church, Christians travelled to Jerusalem, or Bethlehem, or Rome, as an act of piety and penance. It is only for such reasons that a pilgrimage is approved by the Church – as an act of religion; first to God, then homage of veneration and love to Mary, or some other saint, for our own spiritual good and for the spiritual and temporal advantage of others.

Thus it is that a pilgrimage to Lac. Ste. Anne is a pious journey to a shrine erected in honour of the Good St. Anne, on a site chosen by Divine Providence to be *"the cradle"* of Catholic Church in the Canadian Northwest, and the *"heart"* from which the good tidings of the Gospel have spread over a territory now comprising five organized discoeses and three vicariates. Since 1889, Lac Ste. Anne is a hallowed spot chosen by God to show forth the great power of intercession of the dear mother of *"His Mother, Mary"*, and a place where countless favours and blessings, both spiritual and temporal, have been obtained by thousands upon thousands of devout pilgrims of St. Anne.

ITS ORIGIN



1928 - The church & rectory - fire destroyed the church later that year.

After forty-three years, Lac Ste. Anne Mission served only a small group of Métis and Assiniboine Indians. Its church, built in 1845, was falling into ruins. The missionaries were too few and needed more important stations. In 1887, Bishop Grandin, O.M.I., and his councillors, had decided to send Father Z. Lizee, O.M.I., elsewhere. But St. Anne was watching over her "cradle".

Father J. Lestanc, O.M.I., one of the Bishop's councillors, visited his native Brittany (France) in the summer of 1887. He hastened to the feet of his beloved St. Anne at her world – famous shrine at Auray, to pray for himself and for those who ere confided to his care. But, as he himself related, *"My prayers seemed to fall unheard from my lips. St. Anne seemed to turn away from me and then I heard, as it were, "words of reproach", coming from the miraculous statue, "What have you done for me in your Missions? Why do you want to close down my mission?" I sincerely believe this to have been a heavenly inspiration and I then promised St. Anne that I would make her better known and loved and would organize a pilgrimage in her honour."*

On his return to St. Albert, where he was a pastor, he begged the saintly Bishop Grandin, O.M.I, to build a shrine to St. Anne, at Lac Ste. Anne, and to grant him the permission to start pilgrimages there. Bishop Grandin sought God's enlightenment and approved the projects. A larger church was built in 1888 and on June 6, 1889, with Bishop Grandin's blessing, 40 fervent pilgrims left St. Albert with buggies, wagons, on horseback, and on foot, singing and praying as they journeyed to the shrine where they were met by 30 others, and all sang together: *"To kneel at Thine altar, in faith we draw near: Led onward by Mary, They Daughter, so dear; O good St. Anne, we call on Thy name; Thy praises loud, Thy children proclaim."*

Father Lestanc told them: *"We will pray for two favours – that we may have rain to end the terrible drought which threatens our crops and cattle, and we will pay that God will give long life to St. Anne's Mission."* As the priest went through the ceremonies of the Mass, the nut-brown faces looked on intently as they sat on their heels and wondered whether the great spirit of the paleface, would answer the prayers of the good *"grandmother"* to whom they prayed. Father had told them of is visit to St. Anne's Shrine in France, and of his confidence in her power and love, rain came; a sweet – smelling, relieving avalanche from the prairie skies. The Métis watched in wonder. Whereas the Indian rainmakers remained helpless, the great Spirit could work miracles and St. Anne's

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Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage - Its Development

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The blessing of the Servant of God, Bishop Vital Grandin, O.M.I., to the first pilgrimage in 1889, like the blessings of the patriarchs, was manifestly fruitful. The number of pilgrims increased year by year and with this case, came an increase in confidence and love for St. Anne.

It was not long till the blackened moccasins of the Blackfoot and Blood Indians from the south trod silently alongside the lighter coloured ones of their former enemies, the Crees.

Over the years, every type of conveyance brought the happy pilgrims to St. Anne's Shrine; canoes, horses, wagons, buckboards, Model T's, and tired moccasin-clad feet. In 1913, a pleasure-boat, the Theresa, sailed up the Sturgeon River from St. Albert with its load of pilgrims.

In 1918, Father P. Beaudry, O.M.I., obtained a special CNR train from Edmonton and other points. "There were fifteen hundred pilgrims on that occasion," he commented. Confessions were heard in Cree, Chipweyan, Blackfoot, French, English, Polish, and German, far into the night.



1939 - Outdoor Mass

Hundreds of tents covered the spacious pilgrimage grounds and the sunburned faces smiled as they sat beside the campfires at the door or each tent sipping tea and eating their bannock and baloney.

Through the years the maimed and the sick came in increasing numbers, asking St. Anne to heal their bodies as well as their souls. Until the destruction of the first shrine by fire in 1928, crutches and tamarack canes hanging on the sanctuary walls, or clustered in the corners, gave mute testimony that their owners had walked home healthy and strong.

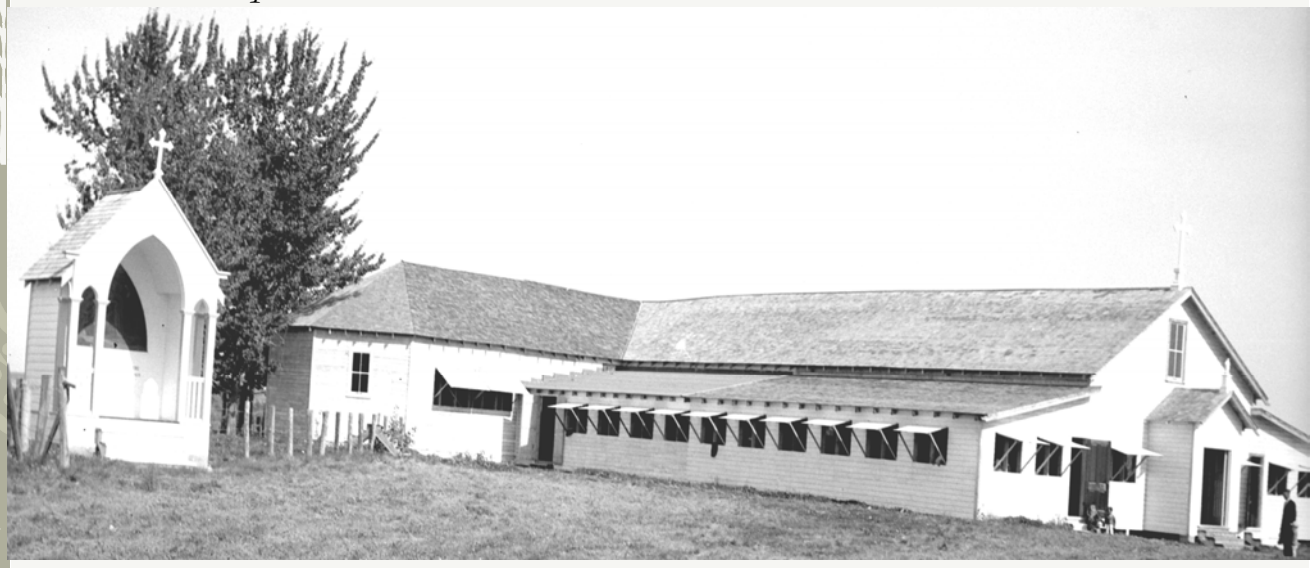
Although the church authorities have not vouched for these cures, the pilgrims of many races and languages were impressed by the power of the intercession of St. Anne and had the utmost faith in her, whom many generations of faithful throughout the world have called: *"Refuge of sinners, health of the sick, light of the blind, tongue of the dumb, ear of the deaf, comforter of the afflicted, and help of all those who call upon her."*

1924 was a *"Golden Age"* in the history of the pilgrimages o St. Anne. Father Pierre LeBre, O.M.I., St. Anne's greatest apostle and builder, was then its director. Because of the bad state of the roads, I decided to organize *"special CNR trains"* to leave St. Paul, Mundare, Legal, with special cars at Morinville, St. Albert, and Edmonton. The recitation of the Rosary and the singing of hymns to St. Anne, in many languages, alternated from car to ear, until the pilgrims reached Lac Ste. Anne station, about one mile from the pilgrimage grounds.

Then, the Holy Father Sylla, O.M.I., with his brave Poles, led the way with the bands playing the banners and flags fluttering in the wind, while hymns and prayers filled the air. Father Boniface, O.F.M., led his stalwart German pilgrims; Father Guertin sang at the head of his caravan from Legal; Father Ethier headed his long contingent from Morinville; Father Okysen led his group from Riviere Qui Barre; Father Tessier, O.M.I., his band, including Indians, from St. Paul; Father Larose, O.M.I., his pilgrims from St. Albert; and Father Hetu, O.M.I., led those pilgrims from Edmonton.

Its Material Expansion

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JUNE 1938 - SECOND SHRINE AND A STATION OF THE CROSS

On December 2, 1928, St. Anne's Shrine was completely destroyed by fire with all its contents, including the Altar, Statues, Bells – even the crutches and canes left by pilgrims, following their miraculous cure.

Plans for a large stone shrine were made, but had to be abandoned for lack of funds. The pilgrimage of 1929 was held under God's huge heaven but, for the pilgrimage in 1930, a large sanctuary had been erected with a long adjoining roof, under which long rows of seats, covered the surface. One November 22 of the same year, a tornado levelled the Shrine to the ground. The following spring, a larger sanctuary was built, and plans for a large edifice were completed by St. Anne's good apostle, Father P. LeBre, O.M.I.

Donations began to pour in. St. Anne's number less friends would not let her down. In 1932, a choir, 60 ft, was erected and a large wing on the right hand side, just as the front of the Shrine is today. The same year, the Redemptorist Fathers of Ste. Anne de Beaupre donated a part of a bone of the arm of St. Anne. For the next four years, most of the pilgrims sat on open air benched, but nothing dampened their ardour.

During this period, individuals and parishes vied with each other for the privilege of paying for the erection of one of the Stations of the Cross. But Father LeBre reserved the twelfth Station for himself. In 1934, at considerable expense, he obtained two bronze statues; one of Mary and St. John; and bronze Corpus of Christ and a large cross made from oak, for the first Calvary scene.

In 1936, a generous gift of a thousand dollars from Mr. O'Conner, a former school teacher at Lac Ste. Anne, and many other smaller gifts, permitted the completion of Lac Ste. Anne Shrine as we see it today. It is

Western Catholic Reporter

Its Spiritual Expansion

July 12, 1961 continued

When the Canadian National Railway discontinued its services to Lac Ste. Anne in 1936, the number of pilgrims of European stock diminished, while the number of Métis and Indian pilgrims increase.

Rain and impassable road often made access to St. Anne's Shrine very difficult but the fervor of the hearts was greater. In 1938, the director of the pilgrimage notes there were over a thousand Communions for the white population, while 4,500 Indians crowded the grounds.

As many as three hundred horses were kept in one corral.

In 1946, two wonderful cures occurred and other minor favours were obtained through the pious happenings at Lac Ste Anne. There were many other marvellous happenings at Lac Ste Anne and elsewhere during these years. These, unfortunately, have never been reported nor scientifically examined and certified. Recently, the details of a wonderful cure which happened July 13, 1898, were revealed. Another cure in Edmonton in 1959 is being closely ascertained. Reports of a grievous sickness happily ended, following a novena of prayers to St. Anne; of a property sold, or a job secured though intercession to ST. Anne; these are of common occurrence.

But wonderful as these temporary blessings may be, they are in no way to be compared with the miracles performed in the souls of the pilgrims, and these are innumerable! There is not one pilgrim who comes to the Shrine with a holy intention, and prays for his spiritual needs, or for those of others, who do not receive, through St. Anne's powerful intercession, favours above all price.

For how many thousands of pilgrims has their pilgrimage been the occasion of a *"return to religion and to the sacraments; resignation to the burdens of life; consolation I their affliction; courage to embrace one's duty; light in doubt; courage to embrace one's cross; strength to resist temptations or fidelity in one's state of life?"*

It is not without cause that St. Anne has been called *"the protectress of Christians, the consolation of the married, the mother of widows, and the directress of virgins and the sure guide of travelers."*

In order to bring more pilgrims to the blessing arms of St. Anne, it was decided in 1959, to change the date of the pilgrimage for the while population from a Thursday to a Sunday afternoon.

Although some pilgrims still attend the parochial Mass at 10:30 a.m., the pilgrimage now opens officially, with the afternoon Mass at 4 p.m.

Over three thousand white pilgrims flocked to St. Anne's Shrine in 1959 and we are confident more and more clients of Good St. Anne will come to her with their intentions and their needs. In 1960, close to seven thousand Métis and Indians from as far as Isle a la Crosse and South Dakota, brought their miseries to St. Anne and returned home loaded with her blessings.