

St. Laurent, Manitoba:

(By Audreen Hourie)

St. Laurent is located on the south-eastern curve of Lake Manitoba, forty-seven miles northwest of Winnipeg. The population of St. Laurent is approximately 1,100, about three-quarters of whom are Metis. In 1824, a group of Metis, forced to leave Pembina as it had become American territory, settled at what is now St. Laurent. Other Metis families driven out (of Winnipeg) by the Red River flood of 1826 also chose to settle in this area. By 1850, twelve Metis families resided in the vicinity; among them were Charles Lambert, Norbert Larance from North Dakota, a Chartrand from Duck Bay, and the Lavallées and the Ducharmes. Many Metis settlers were attracted by the abundance of fish and the wooded land nearby that abounded in game and wild fruit.

In 1826, a priest from St. Boniface, Father Destroismaisons, went to the settlement to celebrate Christmas. St. Laurent had no resident priest, but St. François Xavier, thirty miles south had a resident priest since 1823, so it was possible for the St. Laurent people to go to that church. In 1861, St. Laurent received a resident priest, Father Simonet, who became the first pastor. The first church or chapel was a small thatch-covered structure which served as a church and rectory. There was already a small cemetery, but generally the dead were taken to St. François Xavier for burial. In 1895, a new church was built and the following year a convent for the Sisters from the Order of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary who were to arrive in 1897. Traditionally the Metis of St. Laurent have been very religiously oriented. Although the community is Roman Catholic, a few families attend the Evangelical Mennonite church. On May 30, 1961, a thunderbolt struck the old Catholic church and in six hours it was reduced to ashes, all that was left were four stone walls. By 1964, a new church was built on the same site.

As early as 1862, Father Simonet had begun a small school, but the first real school was opened in 1870 by Brother Mulvihill who came to St. Laurent from Ireland to join Father Camper who had arrived from France, and Father Simonet, the vicar. The school operated under Brother Mulvihill's direction until the arrival of six nuns in 1897, who were to take charge of the school. This school served until 1902 when another building was erected to serve as a school and convent for the nuns. In 1907 or 1908, a large school was built and attached to the existing building, which was given over entirely to the nuns. This building served its purpose for 62 years.

In 1902, Father Peron became Pastor of St. Laurent. On a trip to France he brought back several Breton families. In 1907, a Mr. François Calvez returned to Brittany to bring out his wife and five sons. Family names such as Leost, Abgrall, Legoff, Combot, Calvez and Ollivier were added to the village. Prior to 1902, St. Laurent was populated by Metis and some Indian families. The spoken languages were Michif French and Saulteaux. Upon the arrival of the "Bretons", the French language was introduced and greatly affected the community. St. Laurent continues to maintain its Metis identity and French Michif survived the pressures from the church, the nuns,

and the “Bretons” who attempted to replace Michif French with the new French language. The Saulteaux language did not survive as few people now speak it.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute