



THE CHURCH of St. Peter in Gentilly is the center of the community's religious and social life. In the foreground is a statue of Christ erected in 1933 to commemorate the Reverend Elie Theillon's fiftieth anniversary in the priesthood.

GENTILLY

A French-Canadian Community in the Minnesota Red River Valley

Virgil Benoit

GENTILLY, a township and small community in Polk County in the Red River Valley of northwestern Minnesota, is made up mainly of the descendants of the French Canadians who settled there in large numbers during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The history of this settlement, whose earliest beginnings were initiated over 300 years ago, reflects the character and social make-up of several similar communities in Minnesota and, in particular, the Red River Valley.

In the mid-seventeenth century the French explorers Pierre d'Esprit, sieur de Radisson and Médard Chouart, sieur de Groseilliers traveled in Wisconsin and possibly as far as Minnesota in search of furs for trade in Montreal markets. In 1679, the French trader, Daniel Greysolon, sieur du Luth, went to northern Minnesota, and in 1680 the Belgian Franciscan, Father Louis Hennepin, and a

group of followers from Canada explored central Minnesota. Later, numerous travelers from Canada arrived in the area in search of adventure and trade. One of the most important was Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de la Vérendrye, who established trading posts in northern Minnesota during the 1730s. Some written descriptions of Minnesota were made during this early period. One of these, which deals with the Red River Valley where Gentilly is located, was written by a French-Chippewa mixed-blood named Joseph La France who traveled in northern Minnesota from 1740 to 1742.¹

After the loss of Canada to the British in 1760, English travelers visited portions of Minnesota, and one of them, David Thompson, recounts how he met the French-Chippewa trader Jean Baptiste Cadotte in 1798 at the present site of East Grand Forks, some thirty miles northwest of Gentilly in Polk County.² A few years later other French Canadians appeared in the area near and around Winnipeg, Canada, in a newly established colony called the Selkirk or Red River Settlement. The settlers in this community, of various national origins, encountered many difficulties from the time of their arrival in 1812, so that by the 1840s a sizable number of them had moved south and established themselves in the St. Paul area as well as at various points along the way. Settlers of this group who are known to have spent some time in the Red River Valley were mainly traders cultivating corn, potatoes, and turnips only for their immediate needs.³

Meanwhile a venture of a commercial nature was

¹[Return] I. Holcombe and William H. Bingham, eds., *Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County, Minnesota*, 30-33 (Minneapolis, 1916).

²Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 36-37; David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, Richard Glover, ed., 190-93 (Toronto, 1962).

³Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 42-43.

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drawing northwestern Minnesota into the orbit of the growing trade center at St. Paul. In 1844 Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company of St. Louis, through its Minnesota agent Henry H. Sibley, sent Norman W. Kittson to open a fur trading post at the border station of Pembina. To bring in supplies and carry out pelts, the enterprising Kittson organized brigades of two-wheeled ox carts which traveled each summer between Pembina and St. Paul, using one of several routes as the weather and local conditions demanded. These routes soon came to be known as the Pembina or Red River trails. Cart traffic over them continued until the late 1860s, much of it conducted by Kittson's well-known master of the trail, Joseph Rolette. One of the routes followed the east side of the Red River, crossed the Red Lake River at Louisville, and headed across Gentilly Township in a southeasterly direction to bring the carts to St. Paul some four to six weeks later.⁴

Although this daring commercial enterprise was penetrating the vast northwestern region of Minnesota, few settlers were as yet attracted to the area. In 1849, when Minnesota Territory was created by President James K. Polk (for whom Polk County was named), the population of whites in the area was only about 146, for this territory still belonged to the Red Lake and Pembina bands of Chippewa Indians. In 1863 the United States government began to negotiate a treaty with these bands at the Old Crossing of the Red Lake River. A treaty was at last forced upon the reluctant Indians, and after Congress had made some changes, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed it on May 5, 1864. Some three million acres of land were thus opened to eventual settlement.⁵

It was not until the 1870s, however, that real settlement began in the area of northwestern Minnesota known as Polk County, for although the county had been created by the Minnesota legislature at the time of statehood in 1858, it did not become organized until 1873. Thus it was no earlier than October of that year that a petition was presented to organize the township of Gentilly in Polk County.⁶ Land in this area, however, was not surveyed until 1874, thus further delaying the arrival of settlers. Moreover, a disputed land grant to the St. Paul & Pacific (later the St. Paul, Minneapolis, & Manitoba) Railway, covering every odd section for twenty miles east of the Red River between the Marsh River and the Canadian line kept many acres off the market for a number of years.⁷

By 1880, however, the railroad reached Grand Forks, and settlers of several nationalities began pouring into Polk County. Already many French Canadians had moved into northwestern Minnesota, become well established, and set about to encourage others of their own nationality to settle in the area. In 1883 a group of French Canadians wrote and published at Crookston a twenty-two-page pamphlet entitled *Description de la Colonie Canadienne du Comté de Polk, par un comité de*

Canadiens-français. It listed twenty Canadians who were prepared to furnish information to their compatriots wishing to settle in Polk County. The areas represented included Crookston, Carmen, Fisher (originally Fisher's Landing), Gentilly, Red Lake Falls, Terrebonne, Emarville, Lambert, Lafontaine, Rivière Voleuse (Thief River), Louisville, Rivière Noire (Black River), and Lac aux Erables (Maple Lake).⁸

Many responded to these appeals, and thus it was that communities such as Gentilly, Terrebonne, Louisville, and others were settled predominantly by French Canadians. One of them was Louis Fontaine, who had been in business in St. Paul and arrived in Crookston in 1878. At about the same time another influential migrant arrived. He was a well-known guide, hunter, and land speculator of French-Chippewa ancestry named Pierre Bottineau. An early Polk County settler recalled: "Pierre Bottineau and his son, John B., brought in a large number of French Canadians from Ramsey and Hennepin Counties, Minnesota, and also quite a number from the East, locating them along Red Lake River from Louisville to Red Lake Falls, and along Clearwater River from Red Lake Falls to Lambert."⁹

BY THE MID-NINETEENTH century French Canadians had begun emigrating in very large numbers from the province of Quebec to the south. The parish had been the socioecclesiastical structure that had provided for the temporal and spiritual needs of these people for more than 200 years in North America. Thus it was only natural that as they emigrated, they not only tended to settle in national parishes, but most frequently joined others they already knew in unfamiliar localities. As land became available in western parts of the United States and more French Canadians traveled farther, the principle of security in the unity of the national parish continued to be demonstrated.¹⁰

From the census of the Catholic parish of St. Peter,

⁴ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 46-49; Clarence W. Rife, "Norman W. Kittson: A Fur-Trader at Pembina," in *Minnesota History*, 6:246-48 (September, 1925); Grace Lee Nute, "Red River Trails," in *Minnesota History*, 6:278-82 (September, 1925).

⁵ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 57; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:476; United States, *Statutes at Large*, 13:667-71.

⁶ Polk County, Commissioners, Notes of Meetings, 1873, in Polk County Courthouse, Crookston; Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 62.

⁷ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 65.

⁸ Richard S. Prosser, *Rails to the North Star*, 188 (Minneapolis, 1966).

⁹ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 72.

¹⁰ E. Hamon, *Les Canadiens-français de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 183-87*, 456 (Quebec, 1891). *United States Census, 1910, Population*, 1:875. Other population figures are drawn

Gentilly, which lists the places of origin for nearly all the parishioners who were there in 1889, it is clear that hardly anyone had come as a total stranger to the community. Of the 142 French-Canadian families listed in the 1889 parish census, at least 125 had ties to one or more families in the parish through either kinship or common place of origin. For example, no fewer than eighteen families were from St. Isidore, twelve from Joliette, ten from St. Urbain, seven from Longueuil, six from St. Hyacinthe, and two from Gentilly, all in the province of Quebec.¹¹

By the 1880s heavy emigrations from Quebec were becoming a matter of deep concern to those who remained behind. In 1886 the newspaper *L'Impartial* of Longueuil announced that so many were leaving for the United States from that area that factory workers were becoming scarce.¹² In 1882, during the first days of its forty-seven years of publishing and commenting on the news for its French readers of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa, Montana, and Wisconsin, the French newspaper of Minneapolis, *Echo de l'Ouest*, published an article on agriculture and immigration. The general reasons given for leaving Quebec to emigrate to the United States were for adventure and the easy acquisition of luxuries, according to the article. The more particular causes, it continued, were that the younger generation was not being given sufficient freedom in the patriarchal society of their homeland, where farming habits were noted to be the privilege of the father, who in such matters considered himself infallible.¹³ The concern over this exces-

sive human "drainage" to the south, whatever the reasons may have been, continued, as did the emigrations, well into the 1890s. While some individuals questioned the outcome of this mass movement, still others praised the "paradises" that remained to be claimed — if only immigrants would come.

Not long after the first French-Canadian settlements had been established in northern Minnesota, a missionary, the Reverend Pierre Beaugrand Champagne, arrived. Born in 1839 at St. Ambroise de Kildore, county of Joliette, Quebec, Father Champagne was ordained in 1867 by Monsignor Louis-François Laffèche, bishop of Three Rivers, who had himself been a missionary in the area of the original Selkirk Settlement from 1844 to 1856. On All Saints' Day (November 1) in 1878, Father Champagne arrived at Red Lake Falls, and during the ensuing four years not only founded a parish in this newly established French-Canadian community, but also walked to twelve other missions he served. They extended over a 150-mile radius from the Red Lake Indian Reservation to St. Vincent's on the Manitoba border. From 1878 to 1880 Father Champagne occasionally offered mass at Gentilly in the village schoolhouse.¹⁴

In June, 1881, the Reverend Alexandre Bouchard was appointed the first resident pastor of St. Peter's Parish, Gentilly. At that time the parish consisted of 118 French-Canadian families and two Irish families — a total of 769 parishioners. In the report for the year 1882, the distressed Father Bouchard wrote of personal and financial difficulties he was encountering in his attempts to organize his new parish. The solution he envisaged was to establish the structure of the Catholic parish as he had known it in French Canada. He thus proposed the imposition of the *dime* (church tax) and the organization of a *syndic* (parish council) to watch over the *fabrique* (material possessions of the parish). In this way his own role as well as that of his parishioners was determined in relation to the parish and all those who lived in it.¹⁵

It was undoubtedly an unwieldy task to organize a community such as Gentilly in its early days, for the difficulties of pioneer life created a very unstable atmosphere. The realities of famine, poverty, hard work, sickness, and death caused many to turn homeward or to move on to other unknown areas. Some moved back to Quebec only to return to the Gentilly area two or three years later.¹⁶ The names of the parishioners listed in the 1882 parish census, when compared to those of the 1889 census, reveal that as many as forty-nine families had come and gone from the Gentilly parish this seven-year period. Such figures are, moreover, conservative since in no way can they take into account those who moved in and out of the parish during the period between the two censuses. In spite of the difficulties, Father Bouchard saw to the erection of the first rectory and church at a cost of \$1,200.¹⁷

from the works of P. Wurtz, *La Question de l'Immigration aux E.U.* (Paris, 1925); and A. Bélanger, *Guide officiel des Franco-Américains* (Fall River, Massachusetts, 1929). A more recent work on the French-Canadian parish in the East is that of Mason Wade, "The French Parish and *Survivance* in Nineteenth-Century New England," in the *Catholic Historical Review*, 36:163-89 (July, 1950). Horace Miner has written: "A religious, civil, territorial, and economic unit, the parish is the first point of reference to everyone in it." See Horace Miner, *St. Denis: A French-Canadian Parish*, 63 (Chicago, 1939).

¹¹ Census of the parish of Gentilly taken in the beginning of the year 1889 by Elie Theillon, pastor, owned by the parish.

¹² Article published in *L'Impartial* mentioned in *Echo de l'Ouest*, May 20, 1886, p. 2.

¹³ *Echo de l'Ouest*, February 9, 1882, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Fêtes jubilaires célébrées aux Trois-Rivières les 24 et 25 février 1892* (Three Rivers, n.d.); *Esquisses — La Ville de Duluth: L'Eglise Catholique et la Colonie Franco-Américaine à Duluth*, 58 (Duluth, n.d.); Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 80 (quote).

¹⁵ Census of the Parish of Gentilly made in 1882 by Alexandre Bouchard, pastor; Records of the Parish of St. Peter, Gentilly, Minnesota, both owned by the parish.

¹⁶ Such was the case of Edmond Lanse who came about 1882 to the Wylie area, Red Lake County — left about 1884, and returned to settle in Gentilly Township in 1890. Virgil Benoit interview with Grace Lanse, July, 1973.

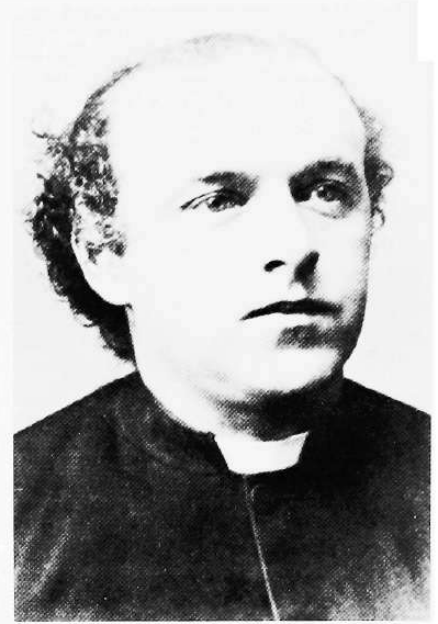
¹⁷ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 80.



FATHER CHAMPAGNE



FATHER BOUCHARD



FATHER GAMACHE

Under the guidance of the Reverend Clément V. Gamache (1884–88), the parish continued to progress. In the spring of 1885, the *Echo de l'Ouest* published a letter in which it was asserted that Father Gamache was a very industrious pastor who had undertaken the previous fall to hold a bazaar which cleared \$700 at a time when wheat was as low as fifty cents a bushel. With the amount so collected, eighty acres of land were purchased on which the priest intended to erect a convent. Work on a cemetery had also begun and a new addition to the church was being completed. The letter, published in 1885, which was meant to denounce rumors of a serious disloyalty in the parish, was signed "Un Vrai Canadian" (A Loyal Canadian).¹⁸

THE LAND that the pioneers settled in Gentilly Township in the 1870s and 1880s lies on the periphery of the ancient bed of glacial Lake Agassiz and is therefore composed of varying types of soils. Lake Agassiz, which at one time was larger in size than all five Great Lakes combined today, washed fine parts of soil towards its center bed as it receded. This movement by the waters of the ancient lake " . . . was the origin of the heavy clay soils which made the Red River Valley one of the greatest grain growing regions in the world." Other types of soil found in the township contain sand and gravel deposits made by glacial streams that first created Lake Agassiz as well as amounts of sandy loam deposited along the shorelines during the very last stages of the lake's history. Before the arrival of the settlers, this area appeared "A farstretching prairie, flat and monotonous

like the sea, covered by tall grasses in summer and by a dazzling snow in winter. . . ." ¹⁹

The first pioneers in the area constructed log houses along the banks of the Red Lake River. This same wooded area in Gentilly Township was later divided into narrow strips as farmers purchased lots that furnished them with lumber and fuel. The sandy ridges of the township produced berries which nearly every family picked, while on the fertile soil cattle grazed and crops were seeded. As early as 1871 the soils of this area are known to have produced 12.28 bushels of wheat per acre. Wheat production continued to rise over the next ten years, so that the railroad which arrived in 1880 witnessed and contributed to an agricultural boom.²⁰

But although the riches of the valley seemed to stretch innocently before them, the first pioneers encountered endless struggles in their efforts to possess the land. Frequently a quarter section of land was claimed and then suddenly abandoned or sold to a relative. Such was the case of Isaïe Normandin who arrived in the township of Gentilly in 1882 to purchase the claim of his older brother-in-law, Moïse Ricard. One of Isaïe's nine chil-

¹⁸*Echo de l'Ouest*, May 6, 1885, p. 2, Parish Records.

¹⁹George M. Schwartz and George A. Thiel, *Minnesota's Rocks and Waters: A Geological Story*, 15, 30–33 (Minneapolis, revised edition 1963); Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 116 (first quote); C. C. Nikiforoff et al., *Soil Survey (Reconnaissance): The Red River Valley Area, Minnesota*, 13 (second quote) (Washington, D.C., 1939).

²⁰Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 119.

dren, Alfred, baptized in 1884 by Father Gamache, tells that the elder Normandin had absolutely nothing when he arrived in the area. Asked to describe those early days, Alfred answered: "Quand vous n'avez rien et vous essayez à se faire de quoi avec rien, c'est malaisé." ("When you have nothing and you try to make something from it, it isn't easy.")²¹

Alfred Normandin's father, like his neighbors, broke his land with a plow pulled by a team of oxen, then sowed his crop by scattering handfuls of grain from a sack he carried on his back. In the fall he cut the grain with a flail, knocked the seeds off the heads, and separated the grain from the chaff in the open wind. A similar arduous process was followed for peas and beans from which the cherished French-Canadian dishes of pea soup and baked beans were made. Besides the work in the fields during the summer months, cows, pigs, and chickens required attention the year round. During the winter, logs were cut along the Red Lake River for a wage of \$1.00 for a ten- to twelve-hour day. As the seasons changed the early settlers rose with the sun, nourishing themselves with canned beef, salt pork, and thick molasses cakes they made and covered with "lard pour graisser un petit brin pour qu'ils descendent un peu mieux" ("pork fat to grease them a little so that they go down a little better.")²²

Evolution in farm ownership and fluctuation in the prices of land reflect the human and economic character of Gentilly during its 100-year history. In 1902, out of the approximately 20,880 acres in the township of Gentilly, French-Canadian families owned 12,280 acres, others owned 7,477 acres, and the railroad held 1,123. In 1930, the French-Canadian population owned 12,630 acres, others possessed approximately 8,250 acres, while the railroad no longer had any acreage. And in 1964, the descendants of the first French Canadians claimed 17,337 acres, while others held 3,543.²³

While property ownership reflects patterns in ethnic

²¹Virgil Benoit interview with Alfred Normandin, July, 1973.

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²³These figures, which are approximate, are based on land distribution as recorded in *Plat Book of Polk County, Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 1902), *Standard Atlas of Polk County, Minnesota*, (Fergus Falls, Minnesota, 1964).

²⁴All figures on the sale price of the quarter section of land taken as an example here, and considered average in all respects for this township, are from the Records of Deed, Polk County Courthouse, Crookston.

²⁵Alfred Brunelle, *Généalogie Brunelle*, 75 (Sherbrooke, Quebec, [1965?]).

²⁶Much of the information on the Brunelle family comes from visits with Joseph Brunelle, son of Arthur. Joseph, of the third generation of Minnesota French Canadians, still lives on his grandfather's homestead and has visited his relatives in Quebec, many of whom have visited his family in Minnesota.

settlement, the changing prices of land reveal a great deal about local economic standards. On April 25, 1875, a claim which had been made for \$4.00 on an average quarter section of land in Gentilly Township was changed to a deed upon payment of the sum of \$200 to the State of Minnesota. In 1887 the same quarter section was sold for \$600, and in 1902 it again changed hands for the sum of \$2,460. In 1908 this land was sold for \$5,000, in 1916 for \$5,500, in 1921 for \$16,000, and in 1929 it was announced that said property would be sold to the highest bidder in order to pay an unpaid balance of \$6,000, plus interest of \$430, and \$100 attorney's fees. In 1944 this same quarter section was sold for \$9,000, and since that time it has been rising in estimated value.²⁴

As the early French-Canadian families of the Gentilly area established themselves on newly acquired land, they continued to instill in their children the more permanent ethnic values and securities embraced within the structure of the French-Canadian family. Each family, while aware of the community in general, expressed strong feelings of preference for associations, first of all, with members of its own immediate family and, secondly, with those of its ethnic group. Individuals demonstrated a strong loyalty to their family heritage and not infrequently sought out relatives even when an element of risk was involved in new situations to be encountered. A case in point is that of the family of Joseph Brunelle, which settled in Crookston Township northwest of Gentilly in 1880. Joseph's first Canadian ancestor had been married six generations earlier in 1671 in the oldest parish of Canada, Notre-Dame of Quebec City. Joseph was married in 1858 and had ten children, nine of whom were born in Gentilly, Quebec. When two of his sons were old enough to work, Joseph sold his farm in Canada for \$4,000 and immigrated to the United States.²⁵ His son Arthur cleared his own land near his father's farm on the north bank of the Red Lake River and then returned to Gentilly, Quebec, in 1894 to marry his cousin Céline Verville, sister to the girl his younger brother had married the year before. All of the ten children of this family settled within ten miles of the original homestead.²⁶

The importance attributed to the family is shown not only in the way relatives sought each other out and tended to remain close together, but also in the role assumed by the woman and in the size of the family itself. The woman acted as the spiritual backbone of her family. It was felt that if she were stable and provided a source of Christian virtue, which was best exemplified in the parish by her participation in the League of St. Ann — a church-sponsored organization which fostered the ideals of motherhood — her family would thrive spiritually and temporally. Any mother who was negligent or wasteful, however, was expected to cause the ruin of her family. Frequently articles appeared in the French

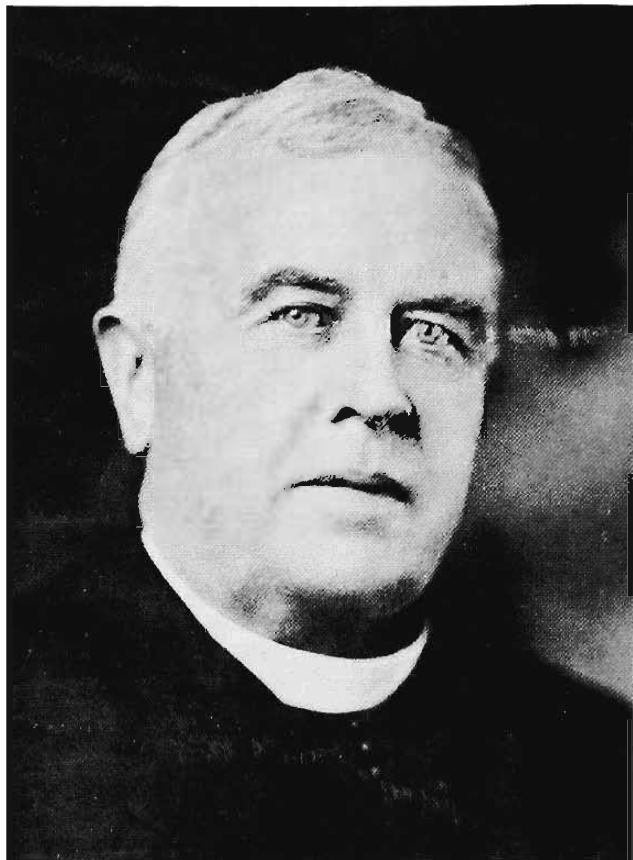
newspapers of the time which dealt with the topic of the mother and her family.²⁷ It is further shown in the parish of St. Peter that the size of the average family changed very little from 1889 to 1960. In 1889 there was an average of 6.4 members per family; in 1902, 6.1; and in 1960, 5. In 1960 there were, however, fewer larger families than during the earlier periods. For example, in 1889, out of 141 families, 24 had 10 members or more, while 70 had from 5 to 10. On the other hand, in 1960, out of 145 families, only 10 had 10 or more members, while 72 had from 5 to 10.²⁸

IN THE Gentilly community the one individual who most clearly contributed to the well-being of the immediate family and that of the ethnic group in general was the Reverend Elie Theillon, who served the parish of St. Peter from 1888 to 1935. During his forty-seven years as pastor, Father Theillon manifested great foresight and energy in guiding his people in both their temporal and spiritual affairs. In 1916, having been asked to do a brief history of the community, he wrote:

"At his advent into the parish, Father Theillon found the population, chiefly farmers, somewhat discouraged because of the partial failure of crops caused by their farming methods; but knowing that the material progress would promote, in no small measure, the spiritual advancement of the members of the congregation, who were already leaving in large numbers, he advised and exhorted them to adopt diversified farming and was mainly instrumental in laying the foundation of the now famous cheese factory of Gentilly, which has been and is today the main source of the present remarkable prosperity of Gentilly.

Amid this new prosperity the Gentilly parish has, under the able supervision of Father Theillon, built the present large presbytery, known as 'the White House of Gentilly,' and erected during the past year (1915) the beautiful brick church of gothic architecture, with artistic stained glass windows and furnishings, to the value of \$35,000, practically free from all indebtedness. This indicates the good financial condition of the Gentilly people, due mainly to their loyalty to their old pastor and church. It is well known that the spiritual condition of the parish has far exceeded its material progress."²⁹

Elie Theillon was born March 15, 1858, in a country parish in Limousin, France. Ordained in 1883, he soon departed for Canada where he served as assistant pastor in Valleyfield, Quebec. But before many years had passed, he concluded that personal aspirations regarding his future could not be satisfied in Canada, and he set out for the United States. A letter of introduction which he carried with him from Quebec to Worcester, Mas-



FATHER THEILLON

sachusetts, to St. Paul, then to Terrebonne, Red Lake County, and finally to Gentilly, reveals that the Reverend Theillon " . . . left Canada for the United States, in the hope of establishing himself more quickly and in a more definite and permanent manner. Every diocese of French Canada, having an excess of priests which it is directing elsewhere, especially toward the United States, Mr. Theillon, in insisting on staying here would have spent nearly all his life waiting for his opportunity. He would prefer, naturally, to be able to look forward to something other than a continually precarious future."³⁰

Once he arrived in Gentilly, Father Theillon began to organize the parish and the community in order to improve the spiritual and temporal affairs of his people.

²⁷Examples of such articles are "La Vie d'une Mère de Famille" ("A Mother and Her Family"), in *Echo de l'Ouest*, July 23, 1897, p. 1, and "La Femme en Agriculture" ("Women in Rural Life"), in *Echo de l'Ouest*, September 16, 1898, p. 1.

²⁸Figures are based on the censuses taken at the Catholic Parish of St. Peter, Gentilly, for the years 1889, 1902, and 1960, owned by the parish.

²⁹Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 80-81.

³⁰Letter from the Reverend Alexis Pelletier, to whom it may concern, March 16, 1887, in the Reverend Elie Theillon Papers, "Chronicle of the life of Elie Theillon," both owned by the chancellor of the Diocese of Crookston.

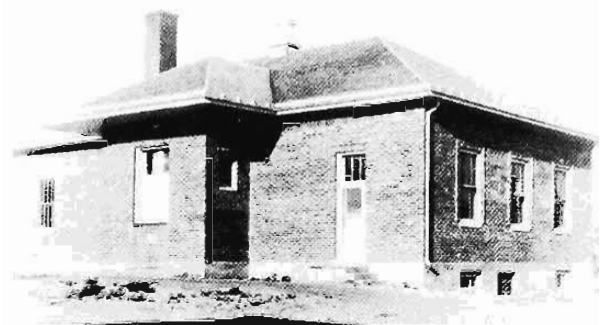
One of the first steps he took was to group the mothers of the parish into the League of the Ladies of St. Ann. Religious leaders and laymen felt that if the mother of every household collaborated with the pastor in the religious instruction of her children, the spiritual well-being of every family and, consequently, of the entire parish, would be guaranteed in future generations. It is an attitude still held today and expressed through the elaborate ceremonies surrounding the feast of St. Ann.³¹

While Father Theillon carried out his tasks as religious leader, he also began to study farming methods, joined agrarian groups, and sought to inform his people of new developments in agriculture. A letter from the superintendent of the Minnesota State Farmers Institutes attests to the priest's interests: "I congratulate you as being one of those pastors in our state who in connection with their special calling interest themselves so much in all advancement of a better agricultural work for Minnesota." This same letter confirms a meeting which the pastor had arranged between Gentilly farmers and officials of the State Farmers Institutes.³²

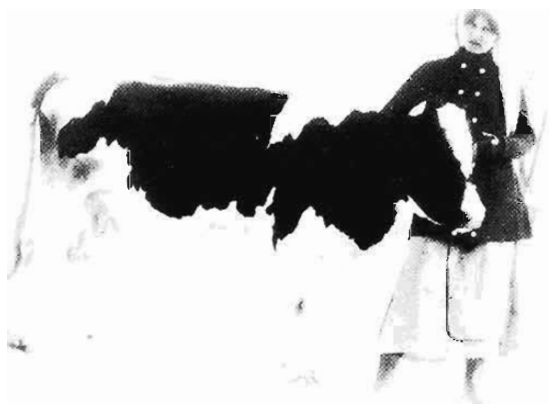
It was, however, in relation to the Gentilly dairy cooperative that the priest most effectively contributed to the prosperity of this rural community. Shortly after his arrival Father Theillon, along with H. T. Gendron, a store owner in the village of Gentilly, began to plan for a cheese factory, and on April 29, 1895, a group later to be named the Gentilly Dairy Association held its first meeting. Concerning members and nonmembers of this newly organized association, it was determined that "the object of said association shall be the manufacture of cheese, butter or both at actual cost from whole milk.

Milk shall be received and some manufactured into cheese from individuals not belonging to the Association at a cost of 2 cents for each pound of cheese made from said milk." In the summer of 1895, a building loan was taken out for which Father Theillon agreed to pay one-third of the interest to be accrued. That summer, as individuals worked to construct the cheese factory, each was paid in cash. Siméon Vaudrin received \$3.00 for one day of hauling stones with his team of horses. Rémi Fortier was given 35 cents for travel costs while on business in Red Lake Falls, and the Great Northern Railway Company was paid 75 cents for freight on scales to be used in the factory. Numerous bills of this type brought the total cost of constructing the cheese factory to \$784.35.³³

From the very outset the Gentilly cheese factory



THE GENTILLY cheese factory as it looked in 1924



MARIE BERNOU (above) poses with one of the top-grade cows whose milk was used to produce cheese.

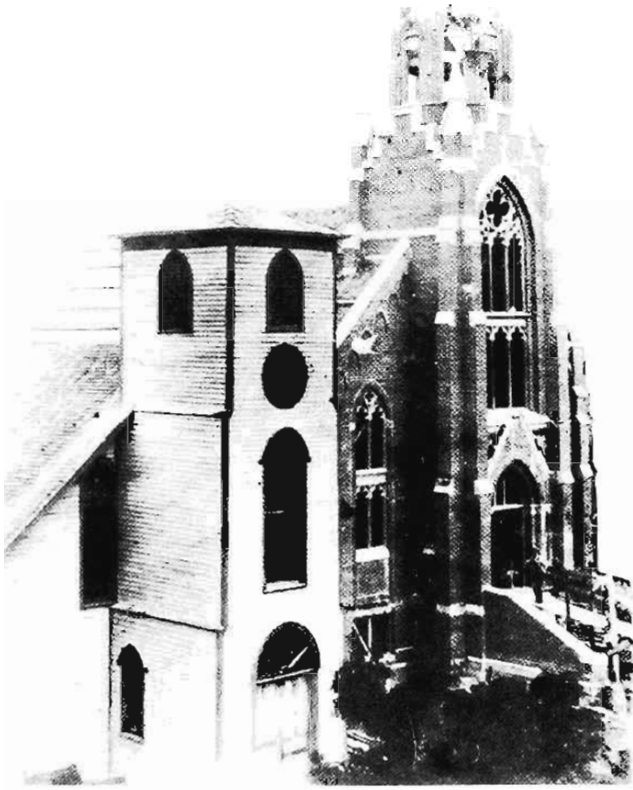
GABRIEL BERNOU separates the curds from the whey in the cheese factory.



³¹ Records of the Parish of St. Peter, Gentilly, Minnesota, 1889, owned by the parish.

³² O. C. Gregg to Theillon, June 14, 1902, in the Theillon Papers.

³³ Gentilly Dairy Association, Minutes, April 29, 1895, owned by the town of Gentilly.



THE FRAME CHURCH in the foreground was built in 1882. The newer brick church was completed in 1915. Three workmen can be seen on top of the uncompleted brick structure.

proved to be an extremely successful and competitive enterprise. In the fall of 1895 when it first began production, it was one of five such factories in Polk County. By 1915, however, it was the only one still operating. Much of this early success has to be attributed to the first cheese maker, W. H. Verity, who brought to Gentilly the experience of many years of cheesemaking in Wisconsin. His product received first prize at the Minnesota State Fair in 1895 and second prize in 1896, to the surprise and discomfiture of the state's older cheese producing firms.³⁴

From 1906 to the early 1920s, Gabriel Bernou, the son of an immigrant from France, worked as the Gentilly cheese maker. During this period the factory continued to prosper, and its successes were recognized by the state of Minnesota as well as the community. Several trophies were won by Bernou, while Father Theillon, who had succeeded in obtaining permission from Rome to become manager of a commercial enterprise, was conducting a business that spread from Chicago to Montana and points south. The Gentilly cheese factory was an esteemed operation which the dairy and food depart-

ment of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture set forth as exemplary to the readers of its publication, the *Dairy Record*. In a letter to Father Theillon, A. W. Parkin, state cheese inspector, wrote regarding the Gentilly Dairy Association's annual report for 1912:

"It is the most complete and business like report gotten of [sic] in our state. You are to be most highly congratulated in your fine system and work. Your good people cannot over estimate your value to them financially as well as otherwise."³⁵

In the affairs of his church as well as those of the cheese factory, Father Theillon appears to have been an industrious and resolute individual. While visiting his parishioners to solicit the money needed to build the church which was completed in 1915, he often asked for \$150 when he expected only half that amount. The result was that he obtained the \$75 he needed and the parishioner got what he called a "very fair shake." While traveling outside of his parish, the pastor's policy was to stop at a restaurant and order his favorite *entremets*. When he was told it was not available or unknown, he promptly set about in securing an order for his famous "first premium" cheese. Apostle, businessman, and friend of his people, Father Elie Theillon attended to the needs of his parish until 1935 when he died and his life and deeds entered into the realms of history and legend.³⁶

By then the business of the Gentilly cheese factory had begun to change. In 1933 cheese was no longer marketed from Gentilly but sold exclusively to Land O'Lakes Creamery, a large co-operative dairy food processor headquartered in Minneapolis. Under this new arrangement, the Gentilly farmers continued to make a profitable dividend of up to twelve cents more per pound of milk fat than farmers selling individually. Just before World War II, Land O'Lakes offered to sell a blue cheese under the Gentilly label if the factory would manufacture it. But new equipment necessary for this type of operation was unavailable, and in 1948 the Gentilly Dairy Association stopped making cheese. In subsequent years milk was hauled in bulk to creameries located in either Grand Forks or Thief River Falls. On January 2, 1968, the eighty-two-year-old Gentilly Dairy

³⁴Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 122; *Red Lake Falls Gazette*, March 27, 1897, p. 8.

³⁵A. W. Parkin to Theillon, January 29, 1913, in the Theillon Papers. Spelling has been reproduced here as in the original letter.

³⁶Virgil Benoit interview with Mr. and Mrs. Francis Amiot, July, 1973; interview with Maise Brault, July, 1973. Shortly after the death of this country priest, Evelyn Voss Wise published a novel entitled *The Long Tomorrow* (New York, 1938), in which the central figure is based on the character of the Reverend Theillon.

Association held its last meeting during which the property was sold and final dividends were paid.³⁷

THE FIRST SCHOOL in the Gentilly community was organized in the village itself on February 4, 1880, and it continued to operate until July 1, 1970. This school lasted longer than any of the other five located in the township. Records are nearly nonexistent for these schools before 1913. It is, however, known that until about 1910 such schools were very much controlled by the community since "Apportionment and other financial aids from the State were almost nil. . . ." Various subjects, especially English, were taught to the children of the first and second generations born in this community. Attendance was hampered in the fall and spring by work at home and in the winter by cold, even though no school was over two miles from any resident of the township. No fewer than three members of the French-speaking population of Gentilly became lay teachers in the area, one of these receiving a master's degree in French in 1963.³⁸

Figures available on attendance for school district 1609 located in the village of Gentilly reveal that an average of forty-two pupils attended this school each year from 1901 to 1969. The other schools had a lower attendance and therefore consolidated, first among themselves and, eventually, with the Crookston public school system. The average number of pupils who attended a private school from Gentilly Township during the period extending from 1939 to 1968 was slightly over thirteen per year. Nearly all of these went to St. Joseph's Academy, which was founded in 1905 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Bourg, France. The years when most pupils attended a private school from the Gentilly parish were from 1946 to 1952, when there was an average of 27.8 per year, and from 1964 to 1968, when there was an average of 14 per year. During the total period for which such information is available the average number of girls and boys who attended a private school was 8.5 and 4.8 respectively. This high attendance in parochial schools reveals a spirit in the community which partially explains why the parish of Gentilly gave some twenty-five girls to religious orders and produced one priest.³⁹

³⁷Gentilly Dairy Association, Annual Report, 1937; Gentilly Dairy Association, Minutes, January 2, 1968, Virgil Benoit interview with Judge Harry Sylvestre, July, 1973.

³⁸Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 80, 97 (quote); records for school districts 1609, 1617, 153, 191, 1665, Polk County Courthouse, Crookston; Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Francis Amiot, July, 1973.

³⁹Records of attendance for school districts 1609, 1617, 153, 191, 1665, Polk County Courthouse, Crookston; *Our Northland Diocese* (Crookston), September, 1960, p. 9.

⁴⁰All figures regarding births, deaths, and marriages have been tabulated from the records of the parish of St. Peter.



VIEW OF GENTILLY as it looked from the top of the church steeple

Vital statistics regarding deaths, marriages, and births in the parish of St. Peter reflect the evolution of certain patterns and standards of daily life from the time of the community's beginning in the 1880s to the present.⁴⁰

In the first thirty-year period extending from 1882 to 1912, there were 121 infants who died before the age of six. Premature birth, stillbirth, diphtheria, and measles were among the most frequent causes of such deaths. Hardly a family was spared this common misfortune in the early days of the parish, but by the 1940s infant deaths had become very uncommon. Diseases taking the lives of older children and adults were asthma, intestinal disorders, heart failure, paralysis, rheumatism, typhoid fever, pneumonia, cholera, and tuberculosis. Diphtheria was rampant in the 1880s and in 1884 took the lives of three children of one family. In 1909 and 1910 typhoid fever threatened, and in less than two months' time three children of one family died of this disease. Influenza reached epidemic proportions in 1918 — in Gentilly as elsewhere in the country. From November 25 to December 3 of that year, it claimed the lives of four children from one family. From 1909 to 1925 tuberculosis caused numerous deaths.

Concerning adult mortality during the period from 1882 to 1943, far fewer men died between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-one than did women of the same age group. In the first sixty years of the parish, forty-four men died between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-one, while sixty-six women of this age group died during this same period. Tabulations made regarding deaths during the ages of fifty to ninety-five reveal that 110 males lived to be fifty or more during the sixty-year-period extending from 1882 to 1943. In comparison, only seventy-two females lived to be fifty or more during the same sixty-year period. As living conditions changed, more and

Nashua, New Hampshire, in June of that year, went to Gentilly, where he was welcomed by his classmate, Father Gamache, and 500 Canadians. Terrebonne elected Father Theillon delegate to the Nashua convention. The *Echo de l'Ouest* seized the occasion to encourage other centers such as Duluth, Red Lake Falls, Stillwater, Little Canada, Centerville, Osseo, and Faribault to meet the challenge "car un million de compatriotes ont les yeux sur vous!" ("for a million compatriots have their eyes on you!") Spurred on, French Canadians of Minnesota quickly followed Terrebonne's example, as subsequent reports to the *Echo de l'Ouest* revealed.⁴¹

The convention was accompanied by a wave of French-Canadian nationalism which manifested itself in Minnesota the following year when the "Union Française" of St. Paul announced its convention. At this same time articles in the French newspapers intensified, affirming strong positions in favor of the strict preservation of French-Canadian values surrounding religion, language, and customs. Entire delegations from St. Paul and Minneapolis were organized to travel to Montreal and Quebec City for national celebrations in Quebec in 1889.⁴²

The decision of the Catholic Congress, which convened in Baltimore in 1888, to adopt the resolution that



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⁴¹Louis Riel (1844–1885) became the leader of the Métis in the settler conflict of 1870 in Manitoba. Later, in 1884, Riel led the Métis of Saskatchewan in an uprising. For his actions, Riel was later accused of treason and hanged. His death led to much racial violence between French and English Canadians. *Echo de l'Ouest*, December 30, 1885, February 16, May 31 (quote), June 14, 21, July 5, 1888, all on p. 2.

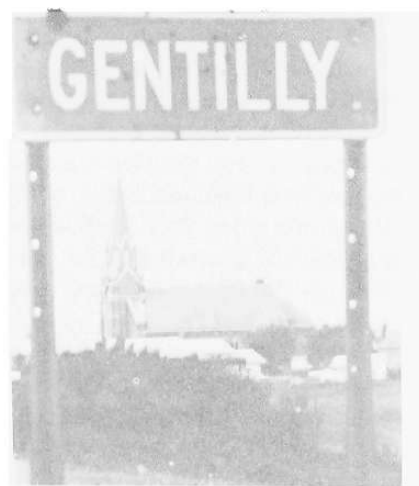
⁴²*Echo de l'Ouest*, May 16, p. 2, June 13, 1889, p. 3.

⁴³*Echo de l'Ouest*, May 9, 1902, p. 1; Robert Rumilly, *Historie des Franco-Américains*, 291–95 (Montreal, 1958).

THE PHOTOGRAPH on page 278 is by Drew Larsen. All others are published through the courtesy of the parish of St. Peter.

national societies were incompatible with the spirit of the Catholic church, caused a great deal of agitation among many French Canadians in the United States. This resolution was vehemently opposed by French Canadians, who viewed it as a dangerous attack upon the fibers of their national life which were so closely related to the parish. Now, seemingly, the parish would be forced to adopt English. But tempers calmed, and, in the years that followed, French Canadians took a closer look at their political influence in the United States. They quickly realized that they were generally weak as a group even where they were in the majority mainly because, as individuals, they had been extraordinarily lax in becoming naturalized citizens. Of those who indicated a Canadian place of birth in the United States census of 1900, an average of 40 per cent had done nothing to obtain the rights of citizens, while at the same time it was revealed that the percentage of Irish and Swedes who had not applied for naturalization was as low as 10 and 12 per cent respectively.⁴³

One can find in the individual and national character of the French Canadians an explanation of their apparent indifference toward the political and social institutions in the United States. For the most part, French-Canadian immigrants remained culturally and spiritually faithful to a socioecclesiastical structure and that not only gave them individual independence by being basically rural, but assured them of their survival as a group by virtue of its village-like character. Thus those who emigrated from French Canada in the nineteenth century and established such communities as Gentilly satisfied, like their earlier ancestors, the voyageurs, an individual desire for conquest and adventure while at the same time they did not need suddenly and completely to rupture the security they found in the national community. Such individual and national self-sufficiency, it now seems, was at one and the same time a help and a hindrance to the survival of French-Canadian values.



more women lived to an older age. A tabulation of the numbers of women living to be seventy years of age or more reveals that in the first thirty-year period (1882–1912), there were eleven, in the second (1912–43), twenty-six, and in the third (1943–73), forty-five.

Death was a common occurrence in the early days of this community, but it was always treated with religious respect. In the first twenty years of Father Theillon's pastorship (1888–1908), 129 persons six years of age or older died. The priest administered the last rites of the Catholic church to no less than eighty-eight of them. At least twenty-three of the other deaths happened suddenly or away from the parish boundaries so that the priest was unable to assist.

The rate of births and the times at which they have occurred during the year suggest definite patterns in the life cycle of the Gentilly community. If we once again divide the past ninety years into three equal periods (1882–1912, 1912–43, 1943–73), we note that during the first period there was a total of 1,014 births to an approximate 120 families, or an average of 8.4 births per family over the thirty-year period. In the second period, there were 651 births in the parish, or 5.4 per family. The turning point in the rate of births per year occurred around 1924, for in the eleven previous years there had been an average of 27 births per year, while this figure fell to 18 for the period extending from 1924 to 1942. In the final thirty-year period, there were 480 births to an approximate 145 families, or an average of 3.3 births per family. During the ninety-year period considered here the average birth rate per family in the parish has dropped from 8.4 to 3.3, while the size of the average family has gone from 6.4 members to 5.

From 1882 to 1973, 25 per cent of the births in the parish of St. Peter took place in the months of March and May. Consequently, the highest rate of conceptions was during the periods June–July and September–October, which follow the more intense seasons of work in the rural life cycle. On the other hand, the lowest rate of conceptions occurred during March, which corresponds to the period of general Lenten abstinence. Moreover, a pattern similar to the one which emerges for conceptions appears in regard to marriages, which have taken place by far the most frequently in the months of October and November, after harvest and before Advent, and rarely during March, which falls during the Lenten season. It is thus apparent that although the rate of births and marriages has changed greatly over the ninety-year period, birth and marriage patterns have remained basically the same, and seemingly quite consistent with a Catholic agrarian life style.

FROM 1873 to 1973, Gentilly appears to have fostered a continuation of its early cultural and spiritual values. The heritage shared by nearly everyone and the rural isola-

tion of the community have fostered — whether intentionally or not — an atmosphere of reserved conservatism, of preservation of the past. The homogeneity of the group which gathered within the parish structure enabled the creation of certain economic and social institutions and organizations which in turn mutually assisted the preservation of the group's cultural and spiritual values. Culturally, the heritage of the past was most evident in the language spoken, but it was also

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clear in the attitudes that were expressed regarding contemporary issues, which both identified and unified the group. In spiritual matters, the Catholic church has not only been most cautious in regard to sudden change in general, but the administration of the affairs of the parish of St. Peter have never been in the hands of a priest outside of the French community. After the death of Father Theillon, the Reverend John J. T. Philippe was appointed. He was born in Nouvelle, Quebec, and served the parish from 1935 to 1958. He was followed by the present pastor, Monsignor Victor Cardin, who, born of Montreal parents, serves his people by speaking both English and French.

Like other French-Canadian parishes of Minnesota, Gentilly participated in national movements focused on what were felt to be critical issues of the day. On December 19, 1885, the Gentilly community assembled to render homage to Louis Riel who had just been hanged. He was considered a martyr to the French-Canadian cause in Manitoba and elsewhere in Canada. On this occasion a speech was made after mass, and it was resolved that a national party was the only way of supporting the French-Canadian movement. It was also agreed upon to take up a collection for Riel's family. Other supporters of Riel visited sister parishes such as those located among French Canadians in Duluth and Red Lake Falls. In February, 1888, Emile-H. Tardivel, delegate of the National Franco-American Convention to be held at



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