

Pardon me, after 35 years, my English is still not the best. I'm Sister Marie St Paul. I came from France in 1898. And now, tragically, our work in Grande Clairiere is done.

The St. Jean Catholic Church in 1890, pictured here along with its congregation. CREDIT: Grande Clairiere Historical Committee "Settlers, Sand and Steeple

Dear Father Gaire started this. As a Catholic priest in France, God called him to establish a mission in Manitoba. Finding his way to Oak Lake by train and then to the sand hills west of Hartney, he felt the sheltering of these hills and trees.

Father had heard that a French speaking Metis community had settled here after Fort Grant closed. Perhaps, he thought, these families would welcome him.

Well, within days he celebrated mass. Please remember, the Northwest Rebellion had just been silenced and Riel hanged. Metis families everywhere appreciated the support and public affirmation our church offered.

A year later, Fr Gaire went on an immigration quest. His charm convinced four of us Sisters and 80 French families to follow him to Manitoba. 40 settled in Grande Clairiere.

After a grueling journey, we arrived to what we felt was utter destitution. But with new families came new vigor. Soon we had a school, convent and beautiful church for 300 parishioners. Shops sprang up, a thriving community emerged.

And, then?

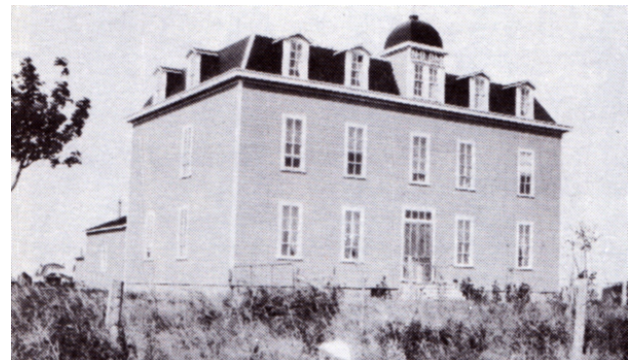
Our grand clearing attracted the wrath of men and God. Soon after our school opened the Province refused funding to private schools. For wealthier Protestants, this was an inconvenience. For our people it meant great hardship.

We persevered. Even though our land is sandy

and not so productive, the community kept us going.

But the weather can be cruel. In 1907 a tornado collapsed our beautiful church. I was awed by its raw power and saddened for the blow to our town. We grieved, we rebuilt – even more beautifully. And we thrived for a time, until, in 1923, a fire took our convent.

We stood and watched the angry flames, knowing dear Sister St Pierre - elderly, ill and sleeping - was trapped on the second floor. Two neighbors arrived with a ladder. We watched in horror as they risked their lives to wrap our Sister in sheets and bring her down one very shaky ladder.



The three-story convent in Grande Clairiere burned to the ground on December 24th - Photo Manitoba Heritage Society

In the midst of tragedy, God does offer mercy. But our blessed work here ended that day.

School continued for a time in the billiard hall – and eventually a school was built. But the funds were not found to rebuild our convent.

I, and the Sisters, will retreat now to Winnipeg. I trust the church here will carry on as there remain dedicated farm families. Grande Clairiere, we've loved you and bid you adieu, au'revoir.

David Neufeld adapted "Sisters of Grande Clairiere" from a story written for Vantage Points 3.