

Grande Clairière Convent

Location: Grande Clairière
RM of Cameron
1898 – 1923

IN 1861, THE ORDER OF THE SISTERS OF OUR LADY of the Missions was founded by Sister Adele Euphrasie Barbier in France. The Sisters worked in many countries, devoting themselves to working with the poor, specifically in education.

The beginning of the Grande Clairière Convent was marked in 1898 when Father J. Gaire, the parish priest from Grande Clairière, was visiting the family of one of his parishioners in France. He happened to mention he was looking for nuns for his parish. He was told that there was in fact a congregation of Sisters living just down the road from where he was visiting. Gaire visited the convent and arranged for four Sisters to accompany him back to Grande Clairière in Canada. After being housed in several draughty buildings, a convent was built for them in 1905. The building eventually grew into a three-storey building. They called their convent “Our Lady of the Snow.”

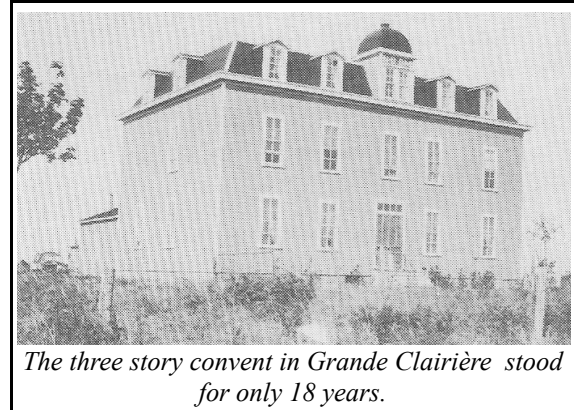
The First of Many

Grande Clairière was the first community in Canada that the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions called home. The Sisters built eight more convents in Manitoba between 1899 to 1909, plus others in various provinces.

The convent in Grande Clairière housed two classrooms, one instructing children in grades one to four, the other teaching grades four to eight. There were approximately 20 children in each of these classes. The classrooms shared the bottom floor with the kitchen, dining room, parlour, music room and laundry. The second floor was taken up by the Sisters' living quarters and the Chapel. On the third floor were separate living quarters for resident girls and boys. A library and winter playroom took up the basement.

The daily routine at the convent began at 6:00 a.m., with washing up and making of beds before Mass at the Chapel. Breakfast followed at 7:30, after which playtime was allowed until 9:00 when classes started. Aside from one hour for lunch and two fifteen-minute breaks school continued until 4:00 p.m. An afternoon snack of plain syrup sandwiches was served as the children formed a circle in the dining room. Free time lasted until supper at 6:00, which usually consisted of meat, potatoes and vegetables of some sort. At 7:00 students were expected to be in their rooms, saying night prayers and preparing for bed at 8:00.

The boys and girls took turns cleaning up the yard every Saturday. On Sundays the Sisters often took the children



The three story convent in Grande Clairière stood for only 18 years.

to the Lauder Sandhills. Whether working or playing, studying or relaxing, the girls and boys, though living close together, were to have nothing to do with one another. They could not so much as talk to each other, and were firmly reprimanded with the strap if they were caught breaking this rule.

On the last day of the year in 1923, a fire started in the basement of the convent and spread to the rest of the building. It began in the early morning while an elderly nun, Sister St. Pierre, lay ill in bed on the second story. Pete Hardy brought an old ladder from his nearby homestead and with the help of neighbour Marcel Martine ascended to the second floor. Breaking the window, they reached Sister St. Pierre and wrapped her in the bedsheets before carrying her to safety – the ladder quite miraculously holding the weight of all three people. That evening the Hardy family hosted the Sisters from the convent, giving up their own beds and sleeping on the floor.

The convent, which burned to the ground that morning, was never rebuilt. Though the Sisters would have loved to stay, they were not able to build another convent and had to leave. Classes were temporarily held in the Grande Clairière billiard room until a new two-classroom school was built and opened in the fall of 1923. The school was downsized in 1955 to one room with classes only for grades one to eight. It remained open 11 more years. In 1966 when consolidation of rural Manitoba schools reached its peak, the school closed.

References:
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Photo: Grande Clairière Historical Committee