

Grande Clairière

One of southwest Manitoba's only French communities finds its beginning in the Lauder Sandhills

One spring day in France, 1885, 30 year old Father Gaire came home from Mass to find a brochure in his mailbox. It had been written by a French-Canadian priest, inviting Frenchmen to immigrate to Canada. Gaire felt called by God to help populate western Canada with colonists and eventually he was granted permission from his bishop to go.

He arrived in Winnipeg on May 21st 1888 and boarded a train to take him to Oak Lake, the most westerly parish accessible by train. Once there, he struck out to the southwest to find a suitable location to establish a new community. A little to the north of the Lauder Sandhills he found a large clearing that pleased him. He decided to establish his community here and name it "Grande Clairière."

Gaire applied for a homestead nearby the only other house that was in the area: that of the family of Thomas Breland. The Métis family welcomed the enthusiastic young priest. Using the simple table in Breland's home as an altar, Gaire held his first Mass on July 22, 1888. In attendance were the three Métis families who lived close by.

Gaire soon realised that the 4 by 5 meter house he built originally was too small for the variety of functions it was being asked to perform: that of kitchen, dining room, parlour, bedroom and chapel. With help from some of his parishioners, Gaire began an addition to his house to serve as a chapel. The space celebrated its first Mass on Nov. 25th and was attended by 8 Métis families, two French-Canadian families and two families from France. It was still a modest number, but Gaire was pleased that attendance at his services had tripled over a period of only three months.

Grande Clairière's ample congregation, photographed here in front of their second church, built in 1890.



1888—Present

In the spring of that year new settlers began arriving from France and by July there were 43 homes and almost 150 people in Grande Clairière. During the winter of 1889-1890 Gaire travelled to France for a month to act as an "Immigration Agent" for the Canadian Government. He was overwhelmingly successful: 80 French and Belgian families accompanied him back to Winnipeg, 40 of which settled in Grande Clairière.

In 1890 Father Gaire began building the community's first proper church. It began by measuring 10 by 5 metres. Very soon it was realised that the growing congregation would need much more space and it was enlarged to a magnificent 10 by 26 metres, with seating for 300. A wave of settlers in 1892 swelled Grande Clairière's numbers further to 400 people.

The church was badly damaged after a tornado in 1907 and a new church was built to replace it. The new church was a 12 by 18 metre structure with a vaulted ceiling 8 metres high. In 1923 a bell, front entrance and sacristy completed the St. Jean Catholic Church. Services are still held in this building today.

The population of Grande Clairière continued to increase. When it rose to 600 Father Gaire realised that he would have to establish colonies elsewhere. He began settlements to the west in Saskatchewan: Bellegarde and Cantal. Gaire visited these communities on foot until 1898 when they attracted resident priests of their own.

School up until this time had been taught by Father Gaire himself and held in whatever space was available, usually in the

church or rectory. In 1898 a small group of sisters from The Order of Our Lady of the Missions appeared in Grande Clairière. They taught boarding school from 1898 until December of 1923 when their convent burned down. After

they were forced to leave, a public school was established.

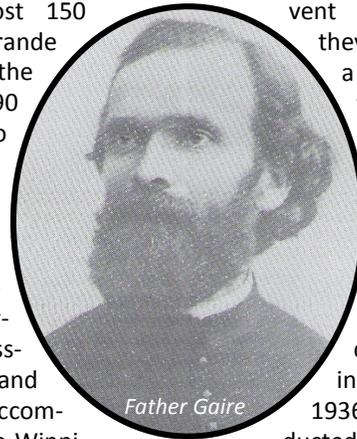
Grande Clairière was served for almost twenty years by another order of Sisters based out of Forget, Saskatchewan: the Sisters of Notre Dame de la Croix. They lived in Grande Clairière from 1936 to 1955 and conducted public school lessons

out of the two-room school house and their home. Public school continued to be held in Grande Clairière until 1966 when the small school was closed and children were bussed to Hartney.

In 1903 Father Gaire left Grande Clairière, his dreams upon founding it having been met. He was transferred to a new mission in Saskatchewan. Since Father Gaire, 13 priests have taken up duties in the St. Jean Parish. Grande Clairière continued to grow, though its numbers fell somewhat in 1905: this was due in part to the colonies that Gaire established to the west and also in part to individual families picking up to move further west to take advantage of the rich land available there. Still, there remained a good 60 established families. The community gained shops and services such as a post office, general store and community hall, in addition to railway access.

Today Grande Clairière consists of the church and cemetery surrounded by a few houses, only several of which are occupied. Grande Clairière followed the pattern of other small prairie communities: after the railway stopped running (1961) and the school closed, the town's population declined.

Sources:
Grande Clairière Centennial Committee. *Settlers, Sand and Steeple*. Grande Clairière: 1988.
Hartney and District Historical Committee. *A Century of Living*. Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1982.
Photos: Grande Clairière Centennial Committee.



Services are still held in the church today