



The *Great* Canadian
Catholic Hospital History Project

Documenting the legacy and contribution of the
Congregations of Religious Women in Canada,
their mission in health care, and the founding and operation of Catholic hospitals.



Projet de la *Grande* Histoire
des hôpitaux catholiques au Canada

Retracer l'héritage et la contribution des
congrégations de religieuses au Canada,
leur mission en matière de soins de santé ainsi que la fondation et l'exploitation des hôpitaux catholiques.

**The Grey Sisters in the Red River
Settlement, 1844-1870**

by

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The Grey Sisters in the Red River Settlement, 1844-1870

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In response to a request by Bishop Joseph Norbert Provencher, Mother McMullen, Superior General of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, chose four nuns to go to the Red River and help him in ministering to the people who were in his care.

Chosen as Mother Superior of the new mission, Sister Marie-Louise Valade had already some experience in administering a religious house. Sister Marie-Eulalie Lagrave was chosen as assistant to Mother Valade. She was trained in nursing and in addition was in charge of the music and choir in Montreal. At thirty-eight, she was the oldest of the group and could be counted on to make light of difficulties and greet the new life on the Red River with reasonable good humour. Her assigned task was to visit the parents of the school children as well as the sick in their homes.

To head the school and teach the children was Sister Anastasie-Gertrude Coutlee, also known as Sister St. Joseph. The fourth member was chosen by the nuns themselves. They selected Sister Marie-Edwidge Lafrance, an individual full of energy and ready to lend a hand with any kind of work.

Mother McMullen told the Sisters gathered in the chapel of the Grey Sisters' Motherhouse in Montreal that out of thirty-eight nuns, no fewer than seventeen had volunteered to go West. Therefore, she said, instead of the three nuns that the Bishop had asked for, the Council had decided to send four.

These decisions were made late in the season of 1843. It was further decided that the nuns would not depart until the spring of 1844, when the first of the brigades of the Hudson's Bay Company would be leaving for the West.

Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, agreed to look after their transportation and decided the nuns would travel by the old fur-trade route, while their heavy luggage went by the sea, first to England and then back through Hudson Bay and up the rivers and lakes to St. Boniface.

On Wednesday, 24 April, 1844, after Mass in the Motherhouse Chapel, Mother McMullen, the nuns and relatives in several carriages drove to

Lachine where Sir George Simpson, Chief Trader Murdock McPherson and his family were waiting. In charge of the whole expedition was Captain Dore, an experienced voyageur, who felt it necessary to give his crews a stern lecture on behaviour and language before they started.¹

An hour after leaving the turbulent waters of the Carillon, the two canoes pulled to a wooded cove on a sandy shore for the night. Here a fire was built and the small tent pitched for the nuns. It didn't take long for the nuns to learn how to erect their own tent on the best grounds, find the right kind of wood that made the quickest fire to boil a kettle and make tea for themselves and the boatmen. This procedure became routine, even in rain, and it rained often in those early summer days. Sister Valade was an excellent cook and could make even the food the voyageurs carried taste delicious. Once the meal was over, the nuns went straight to their tent, for they were exhausted after their long day.

Conversation for the nuns centered around the portages and “decharges” whose names became commonplace: the Portage of Plein Champ, the Decharge of the Rose – the Decharge of Campion – the Portage of the Grosse Rock – of Paresseux – of Prairie – of La Cave – of Talon, which for its length was the worst. The portage with the deceptively poetic name of Pin de Musique, was known to have taken the lives of many men by crushing them to death by the canoes.²

As the expedition left the Ottawa and turned west into the Mattawa River, Sister Valade wrote in her diary:

The passengers were singing in order not to be sad. I could not help admiring the courage of Sister Lagrave, who sang the hymn, “Bénissons à jamais le Seigneur pour ses bienfaits.” For my part, it was only with my tears that I could bless the Lord.³

On May 2, Sister Lagrave described their experiences in a letter to Mother McMullen in Montreal, noting:

Sister Valade and I have hardly slept since we set out. The two younger Sisters are getting on much better. When we land to camp out, we are soaking with rain, or shivering with cold. We make a good fire but we burn on one side, and freeze on the other. When the tent is up, we spread an oilcloth on the ground, and a blanket upon that, and so the bed is made.⁴

¹ Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns of Montreal, 1844.

² *The Beaver* (Magazine of the North), Winter, 1966.

³ Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns of Montreal, 1844.

⁴ *Ibid*

The journey for the nuns was not without personal mishap. On one of the many portages Sister Lagrave fell heavily and sprained her ankle. Sister Valade described the accident and the problems it caused for the group.

Sister Lagrave has sprained her ankle by slipping on a rock. She had to be carried in the canoe by two men. I fear she will not be able to walk for a long time, and there are portages still before us. God Almighty sends us plenty of crosses: blessed be His Holy Name.⁵

At Sault Ste. Marie Captain Dore was replaced by another guide, and here the brigade was joined by Fathers Bourassa and Laflèche, who were on their way to St. Boniface. They had separated from Governor Simpson's party to visit Indians at the Sault. The two priests helped to carry Sister Lagrave over the long portage of Lake Superior; at one point the rain and the crashing waves almost swamped their canoes.

On May 29, thirty-six days after leaving Lachine, the party reached Fort William, now Thunder Bay. Here the heavy canoes were replaced by smaller North Canoes more suitable for the balance of the journey. The four nuns were now to travel in twos in the smaller canoes.

When the journey resumed Sister Lagrave was in her canoe, though her presence added to the labours of the crew on one of the most difficult parts of the journey. Writing later to Montreal, she says:

Father Lafleche built for me a sort of litter with leather handles at each side and a rope in front, which I could hold on to, to prevent me from falling out –

Our Indians kept me in the canoe by myself, and I had the pleasure of running a large number of rapids, more or less dangerous. You would no doubt have cried aloud if, placed in the middle of the canoe without being able to move, you had seen as I did, great waves pass overhead.⁶

A stop was scheduled at Fort Frances at the head waters of Rainy River, 155 miles east of Kenora and 230 miles west of Fort William. This fort, so named after the wife of Sir George Simpson, was established as a Hudson's Bay post in 1821.

At Fort Frances the nuns got their first taste of pemmican, the staple food of the West. Acquiring a taste for pemmican was not easy. Along the way the nuns also learned the skills to supplement their diet with wild rice and berries and with fish caught by the use of woven traps or circular fish fences.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid.*

It was only at the worst places that the canoes were emptied and carried over the obstacles, and there was a cheer from the crews when, after Pine Falls, the tumplines were coiled for the last time and stowed at the bottom of the canoes. At Fort Alexander they came to the end of the river and entered the broad expanse of Lake Winnipeg, continuing up the Red River, muddy at this time of year.

It was the afternoon of Thursday, June 20, when they reached Lower Fort Garry. On that June afternoon, fifty-nine days after the nuns left Montreal, the familiar boatmen's songs were heard. The tunes were familiar but when the words could be distinguished they were not the old well-known ones but new ones, written by Sister Lagrave and sung with gusto by both the voyageurs and the Sisters. When Governor Simpson heard the boisterous boatmen singing the hymns that Sister Lagrave had taught them, he could hardly believe his ears!

At one o'clock in the morning the end of the journey was reached as the canoes were beached at St. Boniface. They were taken to Bishop Provencher's house where, for the first time in nearly two months, they slept in beds. Next morning the Grey Nuns were officially welcomed by a crowded service in the Cathedral.

Teaching and Nursing

From his arrival in 1818 until the coming of the Grey Nuns in 1844, Bishop Provencher never lessened his educational efforts. The first class was started in 1818 in his own house. A more practical curriculum, aside from the three R's, was introduced in 1826 when Provencher arranged for a French-Canadian to teach weaving, using flax and, in the absence of sheep, buffalo wool. The daughters of the trader Nolin, educated at a Montreal convent, taught in St. Boniface from 1829 to 1834. Family circumstances were such that they had the advantage of a fluent command of the Indian speech of the area.

The Grey Nuns set up schools for all segments of the population. Within a fortnight of their arrival in 1844 an elementary class for girls was in operation under the direction of Sister Edwidge Lafrance, and a few days later a class for boys, whose instruction Mother Superior Valade entrusted to Sister St. Joseph. Sister Lagrave, for her part, soon began to give musical instruction. She taught plainsong, and formed an excellent choir which was soon able to add much grace and beauty to the offices of the church.⁷

The Nuns had at the beginning fifty-four pupils, mostly Saulteaux or Métis, some Sioux. A smaller group of young boys were schooled in the

⁷ Anne M. Loutit, "Tomorrow's Past," *A Century of Manitoba Teachers* (Manitoba Chapter, 1973).

Bishop's quarters close by. The two younger nuns taught these classes, thus freeing time for Mother Valade to organize an industrial school where older girls and women could learn to spin and weave. The parents were delighted with the schools and the Indians in particular would crowd around the windows watching the "priest-women," as they called the nuns. Fees were very reasonable, 20 cents each month and a cord of wood for heating classrooms in the winter.⁸

Except for the brief time between 1854 and 1860 when "les Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes" and later "les Oblats" conducted the boys' school, it was the Grey Nuns who carried out this work, with up to 100 boys in charge, until the turn of the century.

Sister Valade, in a letter dated July, 1844, writes:

Nous avons commencé l'école le onze courant suivant la methode des frères et cela va tres bien, les enfants s'y accoutument plus nous attendions, je vous assure que c'est une grande charité que d'instruire les enfants de ce pays –

Les parents sont très contents de nos écoles, ils montrent beaucoup de zèle pour l'instruction de leurs enfants et ils me disent de les corriger, de ne pas les épargner, que nous ne leur ferons pas d'injustice. – Nous sommes vraiment encouragées –⁹

The record of the next twenty years is one of growth and expansion. A new building was completed in 1848, 100' by 50', the largest in that part of the country. This accommodated a great number of "pensionnaires," among whom was the first novice, Margaret Connolly.

As the work of education expanded, Provencher kept up a steady correspondence with Bishop Bourget of Montreal. He requested recruits, emphasizing that all those who come *must* be competent to undertake instruction. He asked especially for nuns trained in music, drawing and English. There were new arrivals from time to time. Sisters Pépin, Curran and Dunn, as talented and devoted a trio as Provencher could wish for, came West in 1853. This party travelled by boat and stage to St. Paul, Minnesota and then by Red River cart to St. Boniface, a journey which took three months.

There was a certain status in the 1850's to having one's daughters entrusted to the careful, competent instruction of the Grey Nuns. One notes in class lists such pioneer names as Connolly, Sinclair, D'Eschambault, Kittson and Bannatyne. As Bishop Provencher had hoped, the daughters of the Hudson's Bay Company families were considerably attracted to the

⁸ Dennis King, *Joseph Norbert Provencher*, Manitobans in Profile Series, Keith Wilson, ed. (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1982).

⁹ Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns of Montreal, 1844

Sisters' school in spite of the river crossing. Although ladies' colleges made their appearance from time to time on the west side, their appearance was often brief and uncertain. Teachers were hard to find and maintenance of staff and buildings was comparatively expensive.

In 1859, at la Prairie du Cheval Blanc, the convent of St. Francis Xavier was opened, the first to be established by the Grey Nuns of St. Boniface; Sisters Lagrave and Lafrance were in charge. Mr. S. J. Dawson, head of a party of civil engineers from Upper Canada, visited this school the same year. He expressed deep approval for the quality and level of instruction provided by the Grey Nuns and the popularity and the usefulness of the school in the community, commenting:

The Grey Nuns have a large establishment opposite to the mouth of the Assiniboine and another at White Horse Plains. These ladies devote themselves to the instruction of children of mixed origin, and the effects of their zeal, piety and unfailing industry are manifest in the social improvement of the race for whose benefit they are content to lead a life of toil and privation.¹⁰

Shortly after the arrival of the Grey Nuns, Bishop Provencher spoke to them of his concern for the welfare of a small community along the river Sale. Sister Lagrave visited this community of St. Norbert every Monday and Thursday. Accompanied by a young girl, she drove there in a cart or sleigh, drawn by ox or horse. Her pupils were charmed, for she added to the more prosaic instruction the delights of music.

For three consecutive winters, Sister Lagrave continued her work until the arrival of Father Jean-Marie Lestang, O.M.I. In 1858, Archbishop Taché himself accompanied Sisters Laurent and Dandurand to St. Norbert. Their first house was a rude building covered with straw and earth. There were sixty boys and girls to be taught, the church to be cared for and the sick to be visited.

By 1860 accommodations had once again become crowded with a total of 133, including Sisters, boarders, student boarders, orphans, and indigent aged. Buildings were added in 1868 which were eventually to house the Normal School opened by the government for the training of teachers. Also in 1860, Sisters Connolly and Esperance became peripatetic teachers. In their little cart they drove six miles each day from St. Boniface to hold classes in St. Vital, a half-way point on the way to St. Norbert. Sister Goulet, daughter of a Red River family, later joined this work which was carried on for another two dozen years.

¹⁰ Cosmas Krumpelmann, *In This Sign They Conquered* (Muenster, Sask.: St. Peter's Press, 1944), pamphlet.

Soon after the beginning of the St. Vital work, classes were opened at St. Charles, west along the Assiniboine. Here about forty pupils were taught, not by the Sisters but by two former pupils of the Grey Nuns, Mademoiselle Adeline Dauphinas and Mademoiselle Marie Riel, sister of Louis Riel.¹¹

As early as 1862, Father Ritchot, one of the local clergy, describes how proud everyone was of the work of the nuns and their pupils:

As to the pupils of the boarding school, I dare say their examination results could honour our fine convents in Lower Canada. The program of studies is exactly the same: French, English, history, mathematics, drawing and music –

Here they also teach spinning, weaving and knitting, besides sewing in old and new material –

Along with these great benefits that the Sisters are rendering to this country, there is another very special one that I would like to mention here: It is the orphans. The Sisters are harbouring about fifty boys and girls who come from every part of the diocese. They are Metis of every possible origin: Irish, Cree, Saulteaux, Montagnais and even Sioux.¹²

In 1853 Bishop Provencher died. But there was no relaxation of development and progress, for his successor, Bishop Taché, was young, active and just as completely involved in the work of education.

As soon as he was consecrated, Bishop Taché, walking in the footsteps of his predecessor, was a great friend of Catholic education. Schools were established on the east side of the Red River and along the Assiniboine, but there was none for the Catholics on the Fort Garry side of the Red River. In 1869 the Bishop appointed two Grey Nuns, Sisters Ste. Thérèse and McDougall to teach the young of what was soon to be the town of Winnipeg. In 1869, its population was less than a hundred; a decade later, it was over five thousand.

Governor McTavish and his wife gave support and material assistance in obtaining a building and setting it in order for classes, and on May 1, 1869, Ecole Sainte-Marie was opened, not far from Fort Garry. Ecole Sainte-Marie, established by the Grey Nuns, evolved into the present St. Mary's Academy.

The year 1870 ends the pioneer era, the time of foundation and expansion of the work done by the Grey Nuns specifically in the field of education.

Health Care

¹¹ Loutit, *op. cit.*

¹² Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns' Provincial House, St. Boniface, Man.

Although the nuns' first concern was teaching, they soon became involved in all areas of health care. When Sister Lagrave put her crutches aside in October, 1844, she began visiting the sick in their homes, going in a Red River cart to those living distant from St. Boniface. In a report of the first decade (1844-1854) it is stated the Sisters had made 6,000 visits to the sick in their homes since their arrival in St. Boniface.¹³

In 1846, one disease seemed to follow another in intensity and severity. The nuns closed the schools so they could give all their attention to nursing the sick. In one three-week period there were 96 deaths in the settlement. The Sheriff of the District of Assiniboia (Red River) describes that time:

In January the influenza raged, and in May the measles broke out – At length in June, a bloody flu began its ravages, first among the Indians, and others, and among the whites –

From June 2nd to August 2nd, the deaths averaged seven a day, or three hundred and twenty-one in all, being one out of every sixteen of our population. Of these one-sixth were Indians, two-thirds Metis, and the remainder white. On one occasion, thirteen burials were proceeding at once.¹⁴

During the home visits the nuns introduced health hygiene by teaching the Indians how to keep themselves and their homes clean and make their patients comfortable. Poultices, ointments, remedies of every description were made from plants that grew in the district – wild mint, goldenrod, bloodroot, pumpkin, wild strawberries, corn tassels, rhubarb, black currants, milkweed, cherry bark, and spruce sap. A host of other herbs from 'nature's Cupboard' could be made into tasty concoctions each for a specific ailment.

Tuberculosis was the cause of many deaths among the Indians and Métis; they were frequently attacked by fevers and pains in their hearts and joints. Universal relief from these ills came from the sweat bath.¹⁵ Although the nuns were usually left to their own devices in tending the sick, there were occasions when the help and advice of the Hudson's Bay doctor at Fort Garry was needed. For surgery he came across the river by canoe.

With an increase in the white population, the Grey Nuns found it necessary to set a house aside exclusively for the care of the sick. It accommodated four patients only, but the small building was the nucleus for the General Hospital of St. Boniface, as it is known today. Opened in 1847, it had been under construction almost from the day of their arrival. Setbacks

¹³ Sister Mary Murphy, *St Boniface's Heroines of Mercy: 1844-1944* (Muenster, Sask.: St. Peter's Press, 1944), pamphlet.

¹⁴ Grey Nuns' Provincial Archives, St. Boniface.

¹⁵ John Murray Gibbon, *Three Centuries of Canadian Nursing* (Toronto: MacMillan Co., 1947).

occurred in the form of floods and fires and once their lumber was stolen by some unscrupulous settlers. Like the Motherhouse in Montreal, it was always open to the sick and poor and orphaned.

In the 1847 register of the Hospital there are recorded the varied diagnoses of the sick: sore eyes, cancer, ulcers, paralysis, rheumatism and inflammation of the lungs. There is likewise mention of epidemics in 1854 and 1856 of whooping cough, scarlatina and influenza. Other epidemics listed were dysentery, measles, and fevers, these latter being vaguely described as slow fever, bilious fever, malarial fever, and trembling fever. There was an epidemic of small pox “up north” in 1870 and it is on record that the Sisters vaccinated 3,232 persons.

In 1870, the country passed out of the hands of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and became a part of the Dominion of Canada, receiving the name Manitoba.

The Grey Nuns as Pioneers

The nuns were called upon immediately to engage in every kind of activity. There was gardening to be done, poultry to be looked after, cows to milk. The water they used had to be carried from the river. There was sewing to be done, repairing of clothes, washing and the care of altar linen. To make their Sisters’ habits, they sheared the sheep, combed the wool, spun and wove it, and finally coloured it with a coffee and milk colour.

On top of it all, there was the apostolate for the sake of which they left their Motherhouse in Montreal. Throughout the first couple of decades in St. Boniface, life in the Convent was more or less routine. The nuns rose at four thirty in the morning; there was Mass and breakfast. After that some would visit the houses of the people, others would teach the classes in the convent and still others would sew and do the washing. There was an abundance of work for all.

Sometimes nature intervened and the work load took a different twist. The recurring floods in spring could never be forgotten. In 1852 terror was depicted on every countenance, so rapid was the rise of the water. One of them writes:

Our community had just begun to feel very much at home in our new house – which was finished last year – when, on April 27, the sudden flood struck terror into all hearts. For several days the waters kept rising, reaching even fourteen or fifteen feet. The inhabitants abandoned their homes to the fury of the flood, which continued until May 19 to sweep away all sorts of constructions, and even solid houses. Of course, we had to leave the ground floor. Our Chapel, too, was full of water, and Mass was said in the gallery. In the night of May 12-13 there was a great wind which made the whole

house rock. On the 18th our doors were at last thrown down. It was only on June 6 that we were able to set foot outside the house.¹⁶

In 1861, St. Boniface was again flooded and it was then, on May 13, that Sister Valade died. There was not a foot of dry ground to receive her remains. The body of Sister Valade was temporarily laid to rest near that of Bishop Provencher, in the ruins of the Cathedral, which had been burned to the ground five months before. Bishop Taché, his assistants, and those who carried the coffin, had to walk and stand in the water knee-deep.

Yet another of nature's chastisements that the nuns as well as the other Red River colonists endured was a plague of grasshoppers. As early as the last week in June they came; in some places, especially near water, they could be in masses four inches deep. The water was poisoned with them. Along the river they were found in heaps, like sea-weed and could be shovelled with a spade. Every vegetable substance was either eaten or stripped to the bare stalk; the leaves of the bushes and bark of the trees shared the same fate; and the grain vanished as fast as it appeared above the ground. The decomposition of their bodies when dead, was still more offensive than their presence when alive.

Sister Laurent left Montreal in June, 1850 and three months later arrived in St. Boniface. Like those who came before her she did not like the pemmican at first, but other aspects of the Western lifestyle had great appeal for her. At first she visited all the houses and saw all the people. Then she and the newcomers started work – washing, teaching and whatever else had to be done. When harvest time came round the nuns were out cutting the wheat by hand, working like the other women in the settlement who helped in the harvest. The nuns had homemade rakes on which they carried the hay to the stacks on poles, and after the stacks were up, they laid branches of trees over it so the wind would not blow the hay away before it settled down.

Not all work involved the great outdoors. In June, 1851, Bishop Provencher had his cathedral finished, but it needed decoration. With scaffolding still in place, Sister Lagrave, who sat on a chair high on the boards, painted the walls of the first cathedral. Sometimes she would have two or three nuns up there helping her, but most of the nuns trembled when they saw her go up so high.

Over the columns and pillars urns filled with flowers appeared; garlands of flowers trailed from one cornice to the other. Not only the Bishop was delighted; the Métis women who watched the artist from below incorporated the designs into their beading and embroidery.

According to the diaries of 1845, the nuns offered Mother Superior Valade as a birthday present a little Infant Jesus, which they had moulded of

¹⁶ Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns of Montreal, 1844-1861.

wax, together with some artificial flowers for the chapel. In 1848, the nuns decided to make another gift for the chapel. Sister Gosselin had learned the art of papier-mâché statuary and, together with Sister Lagrave, fashioned a five-foot statue of the Virgin Mary. The figure, standing on a globe, was majestic; the face radiated an expression of kindness and sweetness; the dress of the Madonna was white, her mantle, sky blue.

In September, 1853, Sister Lagrave made two other statues of papier-mâché, one for the chapel of St. Francis Xavier, the other for the mission at Île à la Crosse. This second statue was so well received that when, years later, a French missionary received a new statue from France, and put the old one away, the Indians sent a deputation to him, pleading, "Give us back our old mother." The priest granted their request.

This artistry was appreciated by all who visited the church until one cold day in December, 1860, when the famous cathedral with its twin towers burned. Sara Riel, who saw the fire, writes about it to her brother, Louis, who was studying in Montreal:

This is how it happened. The girls were busy melting tallow for candles to beautify the altar for Christmas – The girls had put too much tallow into the vessel when it boiled over and caught fire. They passed water on it but the flames spread more and more and in a second the kitchen floor was ablaze -

It is hard to put into words what happened to me when I saw the bells crashing through the floor and falling to the ground –¹⁷

Soldiers from the Royal Canadian Rifles stationed across the river in Fort Garry rushed to help. They saved the organ, the altar, the pictures; but the three bells lay melted at the foot of their tower.

Buffalo Hunt

About the time of the Battle of Seven Oaks, 1816, the buffalo hunt began to emerge in its larger, better-organized form. Instead of the small hunting parties of previous years, the Métis began to organize huge expeditions. Twice a year, men and women assembled and set out in long trains of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Red River carts in search of the nearest buffalo herd. One June hunt in the 1840's involved as many as 1210 carts and 1630 men, women and children. The discipline and co-operation required by the expanded buffalo hunt strengthened the Métis' sense of community and intensified their awareness of themselves as a "nation."

¹⁷ Dennis King, *The Grey Nuns and the Red River Settlement* (Agincourt, Ont.: Book Society of Canada, 1980), pp. 46-47.

The Red River buffalo hunt very early became a great annual outing. It is not recorded if the nuns from Montreal went on these hunts, but certainly the girls from the Métis families who later became Grey Nuns at St. Boniface must have partaken in these great events. Father Lacombe, O.M.I., accompanied the hunt in 1850 and related that over a thousand men, women and children, hundreds of ponies and cart horses, innumerable dogs, and nearly a thousand carts made the trip. About 800 buffaloes were taken on the occasion.¹⁸ All members of the camp turned out to help skin and dress the slaughtered animals. Then, while the men recounted their triumphs, the women turned without ceremony to the less glamorous work of drying meat, processing fat and curing hides.

Clothing for the Métis was made from skins and this changed only with the introduction of cloth. Leather for shoes was stitched with buffalo sinew, which was better than sinew from cattle. Records of 1858 tell about a young widow with five children who asked for shelter. They had come a great distance and the door of the convent was opened to receive them. The little widow proved to be a great help as she was a good hand at making moccasins. In those days everyone wore them, including the nuns.

Bishop Provencher had always longed for a native clergy in his diocese, vast as a kingdom, and, in 1844, consisting of 6,000, Métis and white. His successor, Bishop Taché, also wanted to draw his priests from the ranks of the native people. Both prelates were happy to witness young women of the settlement offer themselves as novices to the Grey Nuns. The first of these was Margaret Connolly, a girl of mixed French, Cree and Irish ancestry. Other Métis families who would provide Grey Nuns to serve as missionaries were the Goulets, McDougalls, St. Laurents and Riels.

Following the death of Bishop Provencher, the Montreal Motherhouse sent four more Grey Nuns. There was much work for them. The Sisters found themselves not only teaching in the convent, but often out and away as missionaries to serve wherever Bishop Taché felt they were needed. Negotiations for this recruitment of Grey Nuns required much travelling between St. Boniface and Montreal.

Travel

In the fourteen years after the nuns first arrived in St. Boniface, travelling by land changed greatly. Within the settled areas the rivers at first served as the main highways. But the glory of Red River travel was the cart, which was responsible for well-defined trails, long before there were roads. First introduced to the areas as early as 1801, the Red River cart soon came

¹⁸ Grant MacEwan, *Between the Red and the Rockies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), pp. 60-61.

into popular use. Made entirely of wood, and drawn by oxen or horses, they could carry as much as 1200 pounds of freight. They could be easily mended with the use of simple tools, and could be taken apart and rowed across rivers when necessary. As their axles were not greased, their loud creaking could be heard for miles across the dusty plains. In addition to their use in the buffalo hunts and in taking settlers westward, they were also used to open an overland trade route to St. Paul, Minnesota.

In 1844 only six carts reached St. Paul from the Red River settlement, but the number had risen to 102 in 1851, 600 in 1858 and 2,500 in 1869. Mother Valade entertained her Montreal acquaintances with many descriptions of this mode of travel.

As the train approached, the outlines of the other carts, filing in long procession, could be defined; and soon the foremost came up. There were some hundred and fifty carts in all, each drawn by a single ox, harnessed in shafts with gearing of strips of rawhide. The appearance of the drivers was quite unique, – their costume, all the same, was of coarse blue cloth, richly ornate with brass buttons, showy belts of red flannel, and small jaunty hats – each driver had the charge of five or six carts, the animals being led by a strap tied to the next in front, so that while he flourished his whip over the back of the leader, the rest were compelled to follow – ¹⁹

Political Involvement

When the eastern provinces of Canada united in 1867 under Confederation, this opened the way for annexation of the West into the union. Negotiations were carried out to transfer land owned by Hudson's Bay Company in Rupert's Land to the new Canadian government.

This situation led to the uprisings by the Métis. Led by Louis Riel, they took over Fort Garry and created a provisional government on December 29, 1869. Then Riel negotiated with the federal government for certain promises to be granted after Manitoba entered Confederation.

Throughout these trying times Sister Sara Riel and Sister McDougall remained at St. Norbert, nine miles south of Fort Garry. "LaBarriere" was erected by the Métis where the road entered a narrow cut between two patches of timber and two rivers. Sara kept a constant vigil through the long days and longer nights, wondering what was happening out there where Métis troops paced back and forth or rode on horseback up and down the road.

The official announcement of the formation of the provisional government came on December 8, 1869. Louis Riel was granted power by Ottawa to head the government until the Bill of Rights and the Manitoba Act were

¹⁹ Letters in Archives of Grey Nuns of Montreal, 1844-1861.

proclaimed. Sister Riel, together with her Métis people, heard her brother become “Mon Président.” All the while the Métis guard kept watch at LaBarriere.

On March 4, 1870, Thomas Scott, a garrulous, ill-tempered prisoner, was executed in front of a Métis firing squad. Many in the Red River community were shocked; reaction in the East was even stronger. Whether this execution was justified or not, the act would haunt Riel.

Lieutenant-Governor Archibald’s autumn arrival promised peace for Manitoba. However, on September 13 Elzear Goulet was stoned to death near his home where his mother and his brother, Constable Goulet, lived. Sister Goulet was nearby in the St. Boniface Convent. Goulet, a Métis, had been part of the firing squad that shot Thomas Scott. He was also a member of the Assiniboia Council.

The whole northwest American continent was upset about the persecutions and bloodshed. Throughout the remainder of 1870, Sister Sara Riel (then at the St. Boniface Convent because Mother Clapin was afraid something might happen to her) maintained a steady correspondence with Louis.

She writes about the tragedy of Elzear Goulet.

I met my Sister Goulet at St. Vital School. I cried with her when she told me how they judged you, my brother. She wept while reading your letter. All that you said was contrary to what she had heard – I was sorry that I did not know sooner how she had felt because I could have told her the truth.²⁰

In September, Sara told Louis about the family attending Mass at St. Norbert. “Mamma, Marie, Octavie, and Henriette came to Holy Mass; all were well. Mamma, though not sick, looked ill and a little dejected – ”

October letters contain messages and prayers from the Sisters. She talks of those who were going to the convent at St. Norbert and to White Horse Plains. She speaks of what she was doing and prays that he might be spared suffering and depression.

In a November letter to Louis, Sister Sara Riel remarks on the visit to the Grey Nuns’ Convent in St. Boniface by His Excellency, Lieutenant-Governor Archibald, his wife and daughter, Mr. Hill, his Private Secretary, Mr. Smith and Judge John Johnson.

Mother Superior Clapin and two Sisters welcomed them at the door and took them to the common room where twenty-two of the Sisters were assembled to greet the party – We talked in English and French –

²⁰ Mary Jordon, *To Louis from your sister who loves you, Sara Riel* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1974), pp. 24-28.

A tour of the building followed by all the orphan girls in their Sunday best, welcoming the Governor and his escort – Louise Rivet made her teachers proud of her when she read the address to His Excellency – Our good Mother was at the right of His Excellency; Sister Curran next to Madame, and your poor little Sara beside Miss Archibald who spoke to me all the time without embarrassment and with simplicity. Then His Excellency was invited to visit the convent school. An inscription above the door, saying “Welcome” made him smile.²¹

Sister Thérèse

In dealing with the early work of the Sisters and the Métis, it is difficult to overlook an incident referred to as the kidnapping of Sister Thérèse. This happening has been chronicled, played on stage and sung about; it is surely worthy of mention once again.²²

Early in the 1840's, Margaret MacDonald's widowed father put her in a convent in Bytown for an education, while he hunted and trapped in the backwoods of Ontario. Margaret had been born in St. Andrew's Parish in old Glengarry.

Margaret MacDonald became a Sister, known as Sister Ste. Thérèse, and was sent on loan from Bytown to Red River Settlement in 1855. Sister Lagrave's health was failing when Sister Ste. Thérèse took over the work of visiting the sick. Like Sister Lagrave, she was called the “Sister Doctor” by the people.

Sister Thérèse had been “loaned for five years” by the Grey Nuns of Ottawa to the Red River Settlement. The Grey Nuns of Ottawa was a branch of the Grey Nuns established in 1845 by Mother Elizabeth Bruyère and three other Grey Nuns of Montreal. When she arrived at St. Boniface in 1855, because of her skill in making and prescribing medicines, Mother Valade sent Sister Thérèse out to Grantown, the village at White Horse Plain. The Métis loved Sister Ste. Thérèse because she was always patient, kind and gentle. She, in turn, loved the proud Métis people and was glad that she could help them.

Time moved quickly and Sister Ste. Thérèse and the other Sister were recalled by the Mother Superior at Bytown. As Sister Lagrave had died in 1859, the St. Boniface Superiors asked for an extension on Sister Ste. Thérèse's time. The request was refused. The people of Grantown were full of dismay when they learned that Sisters Ste. Thérèse and St. Marie were to leave them. When Sister Ste. Thérèse left St. Francis Xavier for the trip to St. Boniface, almost half the population of Grantown went with her.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² King, *op. cit.*, *Grey Nuns and the Settlement*, pp. 56-60.

Sister Ste. Thérèse stayed at St. Boniface for a few weeks preparing for the journey to Bytown which was to start on April 29, 1859. After Mass at the Cathedral on that day, the Sisters went outside to the line of Red River carts that were waiting there. Mother Valade planned to go a few days' journey with the travellers, together with Bishop Taché, who intended to travel with them all the way, for he was going to France. They began their way to Pembina where they would join a caravan going east. The water route had been abandoned after 1845.

Here, the Métis took a hand in the affair. First they requested the Superior to have Sister Ste. Thérèse stay; then they interviewed the bishop for the same purpose. The answer in both instances was the same, "No." As the journey progressed, they were overtaken by fifteen of the most important Métis in the settlement. They encircled the travelling party, dismounted, took Sister Ste. Thérèse and the chair she was sitting on, transferred her to another Red River cart and rode off with their quarry.

Shouts of joy and triumph met the kidnapers and their captive at St. Boniface. Crowds ran beside the cart, cheering and waving, while the townspeople brought out their own carts and horses to make a grand procession. As the parade passed the Cathedral, the bells began to peel; they were, in fact, ringing for a christening, but the Métis thought it was in honour of their procession.

The Mother Superior at Bytown bowed to the wishes of the Métis of the Red River and Sister Ste. Thérèse stayed at St. Boniface until she died in 1917.

Conclusion

The first four Grey Nuns lived to see their efforts blessed, while many other nuns came to meet the needs of the foundation. Sister Valade, who founded the convent, died in 1861 of cancer, in her fifty-third year. Two years earlier, Sister Lagrave had died of cardiac arrest; she was fifty-four. Sister St. Joseph and Sister Lafrance both lived to a ripe old age. With memories intact to the end, they handed down to the younger generation the treasured stories of the past. They are all buried in St. Boniface.

Names of other pioneer nuns prior to 1861 are: Connolly, Cusson, Withman, Gosselin, Fiset, L'Espérance, Curran, Mary Xavier (Dunn), Dussault, Royal, Ethier, Clapin, Sobiensky, and Meilleur. Sister Mary Xavier, a woman of great courage and resourcefulness, lost her left arm many years before her death, but she continued to sew and knit and perform her regular duties. They all lived to a great age.

The Grey Nuns from Montreal were the pioneer religious in all three provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, having arrived at St. Boniface in 1844, at La Crosse in Northern Saskatchewan in 1860, and

at St. Albert, Alberta in 1863. By August, 1867, they were as far as Fort Providence on the Mackenzie River, north of the sixtieth parallel.

Working with more than one culture was not new to the Grey Nuns of Montreal and St. Boniface. Since the days of their foundress – Blessed Marguerite d’Youville, 1701-1771 – who saw the country cede from France to England, the Grey Nuns have accepted changes with adaptation and education. Their western work begun in 1844, not without trial, continues and, with hope and prayer, will be continued by those who follow the course set by Mother Valade and the three nuns who accompanied her.