



THE ABBEY OF OUR LADY OF THE PRAIRIES

by Christopher Hosgood

The Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame des Prairies, Our Lady of the Prairies, gutted by fire in 1983, was founded in 1892 by the Abbot of Bellefontaine, France. For 86 years the monastery, located on the wooded bank of the La Salle River near St. Norbert, provided the Trappists with the solitude they required to pursue a life of prayer, contemplation, study and humble manual labour. During this time the monks became popular figures in St. Norbert, and the monastery became an important feature of the village's economic life. Unfortunately, urban encroachment increasingly threatened the tranquility of the monastery, and by 1978 the monks had reluctantly moved to new quarters near Holland, in southern Manitoba.

On 7 November 1983, flames engulfed the empty church and dormitory wing of the monastery. The dramatic ruins were subsequently stabilized and preserved under a joint project of the Canada-Manitoba Agreement for Recreation and Conservation on the Red River (ARC), City of Winnipeg and Province of Manitoba. This, the site of the first monastery in Western Canada, will officially be opened as a provincial heritage park in the summer of 1986.

The Trappists are a branch of the Cistercian order founded in 1098 by three reformist Benedictine monks. Retreating into the Forest of Citeaux, in northern France, these reformers hoped to return to the true observance of the rule of St. Benedict—charity, obedience and humility. Eventually, hundreds of Cistercian monasteries were established throughout Europe. Two distinct types of Cistercians emerged: those of the Common Observance and those of the Strict Observance.

The French Revolution of 1789 brought about the confiscation of monastic properties and the dispersion of monks and nuns from their institutions. When peace returned to France, a Cistercian monastery near the village of La Trappe, in Normandy, was the first to be re-established. The monks, Cistercians of the Strict Observance, came to be known as Trappists.

During the late nineteenth century, France again experienced serious political unrest, and many religious communities threatened with expulsion began to seek refuge abroad. Dom Jean-Marie Chouteau, Abbot of Bellefontaine, a Trappist monastery in the diocese of Angers, turned to Canada. He accepted an offer of land near Oka in the district of Two Mountains, in Quebec, where the monastery of Notre-Dame du Lac was established in 1881.

Nine years later, while visiting the Ika monastery, Dom Chouteau met with two prominent Manitoba clerics, Archbishop Taché of St. Boniface and Father Ritchot, parish priest of St. Norbert, to discuss establishing a Trappist monastery in the west. The French monastery, Bellefontaine, lacked the resources to initiate this project, although Dom Chouteau promised to co-operate as best he could. Consequently, the initiative for the foundation of Notre-Dame des Prairies came chiefly from Taché and Ritchot.

For almost thirty years, Ritchot has hoped that a group of Moins Blancs (White Monks) one day would settle in his parish. Ritchot believed

that a monastery would act as a model farm, educating and encouraging local farmers, thereby benefitting the local community. A quiet, secluded piece of land along the La Salle River had already been set aside for that purpose. Eventually, the Trappists were offered 486 hectares (1,200 acres) of farmland in the Parish of St. Norbert, to which Father Ritchot added 121 hectares (300 acres) from his personal estate. Archbishop Taché donated \$2,000 and Father Ritchot added another \$1,000 to offset the costs of establishing Notre-Dames des Prairies.

The first monastery buildings were situated on a west-bank peninsula of the La Salle River, near its junction with the Red. In 1899 Tache's successor, Archbishop Langevin, donated the land on the east side of the river and portions of neighbouring lots were subsequently purchased as the scale of the Trappists' agricultural activities increased.

Brother Antoine, one of the founders of Notre-Dame du Lac, arrived in St. Norbert in the spring of 1892 to launch the new monastery. The land was cleared and prepared for cultivation, farm animals, supplies and implements were purchased, and shelters were built. At the request of the Abbot of Bellefontaine, Archbishop Tache supervised monastery operations and finances.

The first monastery building—a three-storey wooden structure with a small porch and a bell tower sitting on the roof ridge—was constructed during the summer of 1892. The building featured an eight by five metre (27 by 16 foot), sparsely furnished chapel, enhanced by religious ornaments and statues presented by French benefactors. A donation the following year permitted construction, next to the monastery, of an additional buildings which served as living quarters for the hired workers.

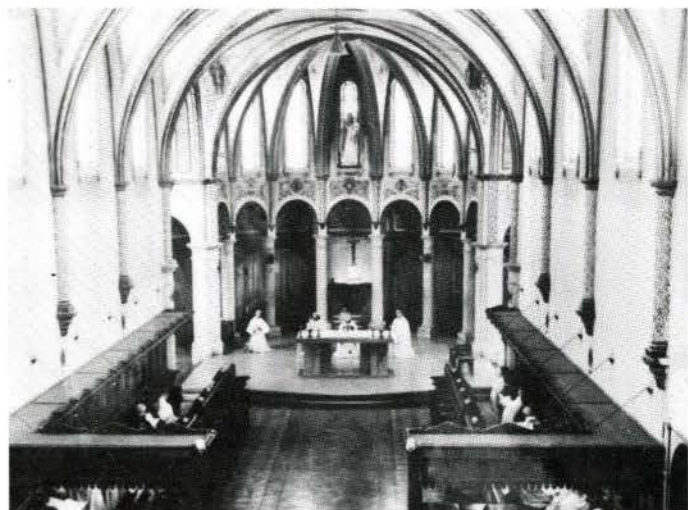
Faithful to the rule of poverty, the Trappist monks lived on what they could grow on their land. Consequently, agriculture and animal husbandry were of prime importance at Notre-Dame des Prairies. Potatoes and grain were sown and reaped during the summer of 1892, and by December the first stable was built. Water was hauled from the river until a well could be sunk. After the first harvest a threshing machine was purchased, and a modern dairy and butter factory were set up during the next few years.

The Trappists gradually diversified their agricultural operations. Although they were vegetarians, they raised beef cattle, pigs and poultry along with horses and a dairy herd. They marketed meat and cheese in order to purchase those few necessities which they could not provide for themselves. After 1906, the Trappists derived further income from sales of the honey produced by their new apiary.

Despite the Trappists' medieval garb and 900 year-old traditions, only the most up-to-date equipment was used for their agricultural activities. To ensure the monastery's self-sufficiency several shops were built including a bakery, a shoemaker's shop, a forge and an outdoor sawmill. Stables, granaries, equipment sheds, greenhouses, and a chicken coop were also erected.

By 1900, this community of about thirty monks had outgrown its original quarters, and plans were sent from France for a new church and monastic wing. Work on the church began in the summer of 1903, but due to a lack of funds, construction was not completed for several years.

Built of brick and Manitoba stone, the new Romanesque Revival church had the round-headed windows and rounded cross-vaulted roof typical of the style. The building was 43 metres (140 feet) long, 18 metres



(60 feet) wide across the transept and 8 metres (25 feet) wide across the nave. The silver-domed bell tower was surmounted by a cross. Many of the religious ornaments and statues were gifts from France, while most of the simple interior furnishings were crafted by the monks in their workshops. Near the front of the church were the stalls reserved for the Fathers and, in the second part, those of the lay Brothers. A rood screen separated the two sections of the nave, and above the large rear entrance was a spacious gallery for visitors. Seven small chapels used for private masses were located in an ambulatory behind the apsidal wall.

Construction of the monastic wing to house monks, novices and visitors, and to provide a kitchen, refectory and pantry, began in 1905. This three-storey structure matched the church in colour, materials and brick detailing. Once the new wing was completed, the old wooden monastery became a guest house and served that purpose until early in 1912 when it was destroyed by fire. Faithful to the monastic tradition of hospitality, the Trappists quietly replaced the gutted building with a new guest house.

In 1914 a house originally owned by the Sisters of Mercy was purchased and moved to the monastery to serve as a gatehouse. It was also destroyed by fire and replaced by the present structure in 1946. A narrow footpath bridge was constructed near the gatehouse, about 7.6 metres (25 feet) above the La Salle River. The bridge provided access to the railroad and to the village of St. Norbert and, until it was swept away by the floods, it proved particularly useful when the dirt roads became muddy and impassable.

Manitoba's Trappists have maintained many of the centuries-old traditions of monastic life which they share with Cistercian brethren the world over, and indeed, with monks of other religious professions as well. The Trappist way of life features work and prayer, unencumbered by the cares and comforts of the non-monastic world; above all, their life is devoted to finding God and achieving salvation. The labour of the monks both renders their community self-sufficient and promotes a healthy life-style which fortifies them against spiritual irresoluteness. Prayer, however, provides the community's focus; through prayer Trappists seek the salvation of all souls—both within and beyond monastery walls.

The daily life of the Cistercian pioneers in St. Norbert was rooted in these monastic traditions. Only in recent years has the strict discipline of earlier times been slightly relaxed. Until well into the twentieth century, Trappists observed their order's renowned rule of silence, and communicated with each other only through the use of rudimentary sign language. During the St. Norbert monastery's earliest years, women were barred from the grounds of Notre-Dame des Prairies. Only following the consecration ceremonies of 1947 were women allowed in when the rule of papal enclosure was lifted for nine days. More recently, women were permitted to enter the monastery's church, and the gatehouse, where they could view a photographic exhibit of Notre-Dame's buildings and farming operations.



The Trappist Fathers (choir monks) were distinguished from the lay Brothers by the colour of their robes: the former wore white and the latter brown; everyone wore black cowls. The monks shared frugal meals and ate no meat, fish, or poultry. They rose early each day, which began with prayer, and before nightfall congregated seven times for the canonical hours; their most august daily rite was the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The remainder of the day included four of five hours of spiritual reading or study, and the fulfilment of chores and farm labour.

During the twentieth century Notre-Dame des Prairies usually housed somewhere between 30 and 45 monks. Many of them were skilled gardeners, carpenters, iron workers and decorative artists. These skills allowed the monastery to remain virtually self-sufficient. Trappists maintained and repaired their buildings and equipment, and preserved the simple beauty of the church, monastery and grounds.

Following the foundation of Notre-Dame des Prairies, few could have suspected that the peace of the secluded monastery would be interrupted by the encroachment of the City of Winnipeg. Yet, by the 1960s, city life was beginning to impinge upon their contemplative ways. After long and sometimes painful discussion and prayer, the monks decided that they would have to relocate to some other part of the diocese. In order to remain faithful to their traditions, the Trappists of Notre-Dame des Prairies selected a site more suitable to their life of solitude.

The new monastery was set up between Holland and Bruxelles, Manitoba, 145 kilometres southwest of Winnipeg. The move to the new site was staggered over the years 1975-1978. On the new 356 hectare (880 acre) farm, about 20 Trappists have continued their dairy, beef and grain operations on a slightly smaller scale. Meanwhile the people of St. Norbert bade a sad farewell to the Trappists at a special celebration held on 18 September 1977. Subsequently the barns and farm buildings were demolished leaving only the church, dormitory wing and guest house.

The piety, hospitality and dedication of the monks had inspired their neighbours for nearly a century and it was widely held that their departure would leave a void in the community. Significantly, as a provincial heritage site, the monastery's grounds continue to act as a haven, although today's beneficiaries are city dwellers rather than Trappist monks. □

