*Josephy Ernest Fortin's design for St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, published in the **Moose Jaw Evening Times**, 4 October 1913, p. 7.*

Joseph Ernest Fortin:
A Francophone Architect in Saskatchewan

by Gordon W. Fulton

When Joseph Ernest Fortin arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan from Montreal in 1907, as "Architect in Charge of Works" for Edward and William S. Maxwell's new Provincial Legislative Buildings, his future looked particularly bright. The province, newly created in 1905, was in the midst of a major building boom. Large amounts of British capital were flowing in as investors overseas looked to the "Last Best West" for quick returns on investment. The immigration floodgates had been opened and the population was ballooning apace with the economy. It was a particularly opportune time for a well-trained professional architect who was willing to give up the physical comforts of the east for rough-and-ready adventure in the New West.

Joseph Fortin took his responsibilities as an architect seriously, and was involved in the establishment of the first province-wide association of architects in Saskatchewan. He signed a petition for a provincial architect's association presented to the Executive Council of the Government of Saskatchewan in 1909. Subsequently, in 1911, he attended a pivotal meeting held by the province's architects to take up the matter of incorporation under the "Saskatchewan Architect's Act."[1] He was a due-paying member of the Saskatchewan Association of Architects from 1913 to 1924.

The fact that Montreal-born Fortin was a francophone made him a rare commodity in Saskatchewan. The french-speaking population there was small, concentrated in the southern part of the province near Gravelbourg and in the older Metis areas around Prince Albert and the Battlefords. Outside the clergy, there were few professional franco-Saskatchewans in the province, and Fortin was likely the only Quebecois architect.[2]

This fact did not escape Fortin. His unique combination of experience in the field of architecture (he began work in Montreal in 1897 at the age of 22, joining the Maxwells' office in 1899)[3] and grasp of french culture was entirely lacking in boomtime Saskatchewan. He saw the opportunity and set up his own office in Regina about 1911, shortly before the Legislative Buildings were completed. In short order he was awarded a number of important commissions by the Catholic Diocese for churches in the province.

In all, Fortin designed at least five churches—two being cathedrals—in Saskatchewan in little more than a decade. The first, built between 1910 and 1911, was St. Paul's Cathedral on 22nd Street East at Spadina Crescent in Saskatoon. One year later, in 1912, construction was started on his design for Holy Rosary Cathedral on 13th Avenue in Regina. In 1913, his plans for St. Joseph's Church on Hall Street West in Moose Jaw were accepted and construction was begun. His landmark church in the province, Notre Dame de l'Assomption in Gravelbourg, was begun in 1918

PAC PA 19116

The landmark Roman Catholic Church in Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan, photographed in 1922 (with the Presbytery in the background).

and dedicated in November 1919. Fortin also designed a substantial church in Ponteix about 1923; it burned in 1929, and was replaced by a new church designed by Larose and Simard of Montreal. St. Paul's, Holy Rosary and Notre Dame were completed as designed,[4] whereas St. Joseph's, left unfinished in 1913, was completed to a different achitect's design in 1924.[5] Fortin's only realized design in Moose Jaw was St. Joseph's Rectory, built in 1913 (and demolished in 1982).

It is unlikely that design of four of the province's major Roman Catholic places of worship fell coincidentally into Fortin's hands. Fortin was undoubtably more familiar with the Catholic liturgy than the vast majority of the architects in the province, who were almost to a man expatriate British nationals, Americans or Ontarians.[6] The church hierarchy was overwhelmingly francophone and in 1914, the diocese had only one english-speaking priest according to Bishop Mathieu.[7] Fortin's background obviously struck a responsive chord in his dealing with the church hierarchy.

Fortin's circumstances—and designs—were in the tradition of Victor Bourgeau and his parish churches. Like Fortin, Bourgeau (1809 - 1888) had been chosen over anglo-architects by Monseigneur Bourget, second Bishop of Montreal, because it was felt that successful architectural symbolism was related "to the builder's personal character and convictions."[8] In short, a franco-Catholic architect was chosen for franco-Catholic commissions.

Even the displeasure of the local congregation in Moose Jaw over Fortin's work did not seem to affect his ability to garner new commissions. In 1917 the congregation, dissatisfied with work undertaken in 1913 on the incomplete St. Joseph's Church, requested their priest telephone Fortin to ask for a copy of the contract with St. Joseph's Church "relative to the money claimed." Fortin submitted a balance of $1900, but apparently settled for $1000 (half due immediately) to recompense the congregation for defective work by the contractors.[9] He then washed his hands of the project.

Yet this did not dampen his appeal to other congregations. In nearby Gravelbourg, where Fortin had moved his office, he was involved in a major building campaign in 1919. In March of that year he announced the commencement of a $100,000 Roman Catholic College—College Mathieu—and a $50,000 hospital to be erected for the Grey Nuns. A $100,000 contract was also let to J.H. Tremblay of Winnipeg to complete Notre Dame, which had been started the previous year.[10]

Fortin remained in Gravelbourg until about 1922, when he returned to Montreal;[11] he died there on 10 February 1945.[12] Though his known Saskatchewan commissions are not numerous, his influence in the province was significant. More particularly, he filled a vacuum in the province by responding to the cultural requirements of a small group of franco-Saskatchewans during their formative years. His buildings remain landmarks to this day.

NOTES

1. E.J. Gilbert, **Up the Years With the SAA** (Regina: Private printing, 1969), p. 9.
2. The only other French-speaking architect in the province noted by Gilbert **(Up the Years)** was Emile Demay, born in France.
3. Robert Hill, research material for **The Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada 1800-1950** (unpublished).
4. St. Paul's, already substantially altered, burned in 1976 and was rebuilt at a cost of $160,000 (see D.F. Robertson, **The Swoard of St. Paul: A History of the Diocese of Saskatoon 1933-1983** (Saskatoon: Episcopal Corporation of Saskatoon, 1982). Information supplied by Jacqueline Bliss, Saskatoon.
5. Henry Hargreaves (1879-1951) and Norman L. Thompson (1882-1965) kept the general lines of Fortin's Moose Jaw design—the plan was governed by the completed foundations of 1913—but simplified the detail, particularly in the facade and towers.
6. For example, 17 of 21 resident architects in Moose Jaw between 1900 and 1940 fell into these three categories.
7. Frank Gerlein, **Outline History of the Archdiocese of Regina** (Regina: Chancery Office, 1961), p. 82, cited by John H. Archer, **Saskatchewan: A History** Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980), p. 126.
8. Alan Gowans, **Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life** (Toronto: Oxford Univesity Press, 1966), p. 109.
9. "Minute book," St. Joseph's Church, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.
10. **Moose Jaw Daily News** 15 March 1919, p. 5. The designs for the proposed college and hospital are uncredited, but may well be Fortin's. (Fortin was also responsible for the design of a private hospital in Saskatoon. **Construction IV**, Oct. 1911, p. 53.)
11. He was listed in the R.A.I.C. membership roll (under "Saskatchewan") in 1922, with an address at 121 Christophe-Colomb, Montreal. R.A.I.C., **Yearbook** 1922.
12. Obituaries in **La Presse** and **The Gazette**, 12 February 1945.

St. Joseph's Church, as completed by Hargreaves and Thompson in 1924.

Stuart Lazear

Stuart Lazear

Fortin's second Cathedral in Saskatchewan, Holy Rosary, built on 13th Avenue in Regina in 1912.