

Museum Musings: St. Patrick's Orphanage

Being confined to barracks, so to speak, has allowed me time to shuffle through my collection of vintage Prince Albert post cards. One card I came across was one to which I do not recall having paid close attention in the past. The front of the card is a picture of the original St. Patrick's orphanage.

Experience has taught me that determining the start date of a project such as an orphanage can be very difficult. It is likely that plans were discussed as early as 1899 for the establishment of a facility to house children who were without parents. Some of the information which I have uncovered suggests that St. Patrick's orphanage was opened in 1900, while other information points to an opening date between 1901 and 1903.

What we do know is that the original orphanage was located in a house which Lawrence Clarke of the Hudson's Bay Company had sold for \$1.00 to the Faithful Companions of Jesus in 1887. Either this house, or the building in which the Sisters had previously resided was intended for use as a school of higher education for all girls of Prince Albert regardless of their denomination. Although it functioned in this manner for several years, enrolment had not been as high as had been anticipated and, as a result, the Sisters closed the school and relocated to Duck Lake to run an industrial school.

The departure of the Sisters left vacant the former home of Lawrence Clarke, and members of the Roman Catholic clergy recognised that it would readily meet the needs for housing the orphans of the area.

Much has been written previously of the work of St. Patrick's orphanage, and of the assistance provided to local youth. Most local residents are familiar with the tragic tale of the fire on February 1st, 1947, during which seven persons perished. The construction of the new facility, and the resultant closing of the orphanage in 1973, when government programmes were more capable of providing the care needed by children is known to many.

What was brought to my attention when I found my vintage post card was the manner in which Clarke's house was renovated to add additional beds. The east wing of the facility is easy to see when you look at the picture. This wing, as well as a previously added west wing, was paid for as a result of a grant totalling \$11,000 which the orphanage received for accepting 70 orphans, members of the English Catholic Rescue Society in the early 1900s.



I had previously heard stories about a farm project which was run by the orphanage in the White Star district, but I also discovered that there was another project south of Prince Albert which was something of a summer camp for the residents.

Two men, Father Brueck and Brother Courbis, were responsible for these two projects. Brother Courbis felt that a farming operation would help to finance the operation of the orphanage. He is said to have bought a section of land in the White Star district, and leased another 1,000 acres from the federal government. He lived on this land and, with the support of some of the older boys, managed to farm it. Unfortunately, although this operation helped many of the boys to develop the ability to run their own farming operations, it was not the financial panacea which had been anticipated. By 1911, the work had to be aborted.

Father Brueck, meanwhile, being a man of vision, wanted a place for "his children" to spend their summer holidays. He purchased land four miles south of Prince Albert in 1917, and built St. Mary's Home there.

This property apparently consisted of six different buildings, including dormitories, dining areas, a chapel, a laundry, and a building which housed a printing press. From this printing press, fund raising letters were prepared and forwarded, seeking financial assistance for the orphanage. Meanwhile, the boys participated in farming activities and gathered firewood, while the girls learned sewing and mending techniques, and picked hazelnuts and berries.

Unfortunately, there was not a very good water source on the property, so the home was closed down in the mid-1920s. It continued to be used for picnics for the children during clement weather and the Sisters of Charity used the property for their summer retreats and holidays.

By 1965, the buildings were subjected to such serious vandalism that they had to be demolished, after which time children from the facility would be taken in shifts to Christopher Lake for their summer breaks.

Father Brueck served as chaplain and director of St. Patrick's orphanage from its founding until his death in January, 1947, not quite a month before the tragic fire. Brother Courbis left the orphanage after the abandonment of the White Star farm, and did not return until 1926, remaining in it employ until he eventually died in 1942.

If you look at the reverse of my orphanage post card, you will note that Father Brueck wrote it exactly 112 years ago yesterday!

