

The First Pioneers & The History of Chelmsford

The men who worked on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway were the first people to come to this part of the country. At about the same time, in the year 1882, the Fraser Lumber Company began operating lumber camps here. The men employed by them were kept busy cutting down trees to make telegraph poles and track ties for the C.P.R. These men were hard workers. They were known as lumber-jacks because they were experienced in that trade. Preferring the rough life in the woods, some of them chose to settle on homesteads in this locality. Before any farming could be done, the timber had to be cut and the brush cleared. This meant a lot of work. However they were accustomed to hardships and went to work with courage and perseverance. With logs cut off their land, they built sturdy log cabins. These homes were roughly made but they withstood the cold weather and were comfortable.

In 1883, there were about twenty families settled in this area. Among the newcomers were the Jesuit priests who helped the settlers with spiritual comfort. The people had been accustomed to living in large towns ;so found the going very hard and turned to the good priests .This way they found some measure of strength in prayer. As there was no church in the community, mass had to be said in private dwellings but mostly in the home of Noel Pelletier. Father Caron said the first mass in Chelmsford. The home-made altar was beautifully decorated with embroidered linens & fresh flowers in the summer. In winter these busy women, experts at making paper flowers, made lovely artificial flowers. These were of different designs and hues, they made the altar look very attractive. Mrs. D. Seguin, Mrs. Raphael Groulx and Mrs. Clement Methe' did most of that work then. In those days attending mass was really a sacrifice because of the discomforts involved. Nail barrels

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or kegs with boards over them served as benches on which to sit. The people had to kneel on the rough floors. A blanket hung across one wall served as confessional.

The colony increased during the following years due to rich nickel deposits found nearby. The village of Chelmsford became a municipality in 1890. Elzear Belanger was the first merchant and had the first post office. According to records and the parish register, there were 76 families here by 1891.

Mr. Adolphe Hill was Chelmsford's first station agent and telegraph operator. Mr. Hill took active part in everything in the community. He was liked by everyone for his good nature. His many friends were grieved by his death early in 1950.

The church has always played a vital part in the lives of the people in this parish. It is interesting to note just how much it meant to the early pioneers. Prior to 1891, the government had given a piece of land to the Chelmsford district, on which to build a catholic church. This land did not seem ideal for the purpose but a building was under construction when it was burned down. It was suspected that someone had set fire to it but nothing could be proven.

In 1891 a small church was built in the village of Chelmsford. It measured 46' by 60'. The church bell was installed and blessed in 1894. By 1908 this church became much too small to accommodate the 294 families. A drive was begun to raise funds for a new and bigger building. The people co-operated whole-heartedly. They subscribed the sum of twenty-two thousand and fifteen dollars. Those who did not have money, gave their spare time in hauling stone from the rock deposits to the new site. Approximately five hundred and twenty five cords of stone were hauled and later used in the construction of the new church. The contract was given to Mr. J. Quinlan of North Bay for the amount of

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seventeen thousand,nine hundred and ninety five dollars. The laying of of the corner stone took place on June 23rd.1912. The new church was officially opened to the public on December.2 nd.1913.

During the following years many changes were made towards improving and modernizing the interior and exterior of the church. In 1937,Mr.Alfred Faniel, a renowned Belgian artist from Montreal got the contract to do the interior decorating. He painted the pictures of saints on the walls and ceiling and made the colors harmonize with the beautiful life size pictures on the stained glass windows. The colors of the walls & ceiling blend so well and bring out the beauty of the scenes of Our Lord's Life. Mr. Faniel died in February .1950 but his beautiful work will always be a reminder of his great talent.

1947 marked three important events in the church history. (1) It was fifty years since the parish got its first resident priest, from 1897 to 1947.

(2) The final debts of the church were paid off in full.

(3) On the 31st day of August.1947, a Sunday, the Eucharistic Congress of the Diocese took place in the town of Chelmsford.

There have been two protestant churches in this community at one time,many of the early pioneers were of English origin. The Baptist Church burned down in 1909. The Anglican Church was built on Errington St.South, just where Duval's bakery once stood. When the majority of english-speaking people moved away,the church disbanded.It was later sold and torn down.

Since then there has been only one church in Chelmsford.It is the St.Joseph's Catholic Church. It is one of the nicest churches in the district and we can truly be proud of it.

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Chelmsford became incorporated in 1901. The first mayor of this town was Raphael Groulx. Mr. Groulx was very fond of music and acted as choir master in St. Joseph's Church. He also organized a music band of which his sons were members. They played at many of the community dances and were popular everywhere. One of his sons Louis is choir master in this same church. Another son, Medor or Rolande teaches school in Chelmsford and gives music lessons as well.

The cannon which stands on the front lawn of the priest's residence has quite a history. It had been used in the Papineau War, protecting the Church of St. Eustace in Quebec during its bombardment. It was brought from Quebec City by Doctor Gagne who was the first doctor to set up practice in Chelmsford. He died in 1906 ; so the cannon was donated to the church by a friend of his Mr. William Chouinard.

Mention should be made regarding two well known men who passed away recently. Mr. Hugh Gratton, a resident of Chelmsford, held the position of post master for twenty-five years. He held the office of mayor, town clerk, and merchant at one time. He was one of the most ardent canvassers during the victory war bond campaign. Mr. Gratton was respected & liked by everyone in the community and district. Dr. Rodolphe Tanguay was known to many here. He had established practice in Chelmsford during 1920. He remained here for four years making rapid progress as a general practitioner. He moved to Sudbury in 1924 and became a prominent surgeon with the passing years. He lived in Sudbury at the time of his death.

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There is much to be said of our pioneers and those who have lived in our community. We can all only hope we can do our share of good work and try to live up to the ideals of those same people. By keeping in mind our motto.. " For Home and Country ", we can attain a great deal.

Chelmsford has certainly made rapid progress during the last five years. Since the installation of the electricity and water system, many new families have moved into town. Now there are different nationalities living here. They represent every nation in the world, or nearly so.

Our organization can do much towards bringing those people better understanding and friendship. So it is with hopes that we look for a brighter future and the growth of our little town of Chelmsford. It hardly seems possible that nearly seventy years have elapsed since this place was first inhabited.

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