

## **The little house-school: log-cabin convent standing on the grounds of the Provincial Museum.**

As soon as he could, Bishop Demers introduced the Sisters to their 'résidence', a 'house' he had just purchased from Leon Morel for the price of 500\$. Measuring thirty by twenty-five feet, constructed in the French manner, 'poteau sur sole' with neither ceiling nor finished walls, a dirt floor, filthy, vermin infested..., and furnished with a rusty stove, a table of rough lumber and a rickety chair. (Réf. **French Presence in Victoria 1843 – 1991**, Green J., Lapprand M., Moreau G., Ricard G., publication L'Association Historique Francophone de Victoria, C.-B., 1991 p. 51)

The log cabin convent was a cedar structure thirty feet by eighteen feet. The back and front had doors with windows on each side of them and a window in each of the gable ends. A double chimney and rough partition divided the house into two rooms. The flooring was good but there was no ceiling. The outside walls were clabboarded but inside the squared timbers were bare. Even up to November 1, 1858, the Sisters spread their mattresses on the floor and piled them in a corner in the day-time. They taught on one side of the chimney while the cooking proceeded on the other side. (Ref. **A Century of Service, a history of the Sisters of Saint Ann and their contribution to education in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska**, Edith E. Brown, S.S.A., PH.D. second printing 1999 by The Sisters of Saint Ann. p.35)

1858: After a short time thanks to a little funding from Bishop Demers and the skills of the Clercs St. Viateur, the living area of the 'convent' was doubled. (Ref. **French Presence in Victoria 1843-1991....** p. 51)

An addition doubling the size of the Log Cabin Convent. (Ref. **Pioneer Nuns of British Columbia, Sisters of St. Ann, Sister Mary Theodore, 1931.** p.144)

The eleventh of November 1858, however, should stand out as one of the important dates in the history of the Sisters on the north Pacific shores. By this time, a chapel was erected in the residence, a new addition to the convent was completed and a new bell was placed in the 12-foot belfry. (Ref. **A Century of Service....** p. 37)

The addition to the new convent, which made it possible to increase the enrollment and to set up proper classroom facilities was the work of Brothers F.Gédéon Thibodeau and Joseph Michaud..... The furniture, including chairs, desks, tables, beds and washstands, was the result of their beaverlike handiwork. (Ref. idem p. 37)

## **TEACHING**

First course: Sunday, Sister Marie-Luména (Virginie Brassard), sitting on the stove taught the first 'class' of religious education, the women and children who had been drawn to the 'convent' by their curiosity. (Ref. **French Presence...** p. 51)

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It was announced in church on Sunday, June 6, 1858, that classes would open on Monday. A crowd of whites, Métis and aborigines came to see the Sisters. Some of these clallers expressed themselves in good English, some in passable French and some in a jargon of French and Indian. They also represented various levels of social and racial standing. There was no distinction of class or rank, of rich or poor in this little convent school. (Ref.idem p.35)

In a letter dated December 8, 1858, Sister Marie-Luména writes to her parents:

... Regular classes began on November 15. Our boarders are English, American and German. The day scholars, with the exception of three who are sisters, are half-breeds and coloured children. The conduct of these various castes is most satisfactory.... As they are mostly beginners in school our teaching is elementary. The children know nothing of their prayers and religious doctrine. (Ref. idem p.37)

On Monday the Sisters had the classroom quite fitted out – some rough boards set on packing boxex alog the room fifteen by ten. Some slates, a few readers, and all was ready for the foundation of Catholic education in British Columbia. At first the number of pupils corresponded to the size of the room; but it grew...(Ref.**Pioneer Nuns in B.-C.** p.5-6)

Twelve students in all registered on the first day. From June 1858, to June 1859, fifty-six names appeared on the enrollment list. Although the cabin was small it was difficult to refuse the children who presented themselves. (Ref.**A Century of Service....** p. 36)

The school is launched, the register shows on date of June 22, 1858 the following pupils: Hélène Lavoie, followed shortly by Emma et Henriette Yates, Emélie Morel, Emélia Desmarais, Elizabeth Dodd, Elizabeth Anderson, Virginia Gurta, Elizabeth Effy and Lucy Angèle, the latter originally from Calcutta. The principal room serves as classroom, parlor, community room and dormitory, while the other becomes kitchen and refectory. (Ref. **French Presence....** p.51)

From 1858 to 1876 the Sisters of St. Ann conducted an orphanage side by side with their Victoria girls' boarding school. The word "orphanage" connotes orphans, but the class of children which went under ths appealing name was not such in the real sense of the word; they were wose off. They were castaways, cast away by their own parents. These selfish parents – the beautiful word is used here reluctantly – often made use of stratedy to rid themselves of the care and responsibility of their offspring and at the same time assure their comfortaable bringing up. The father, usually, would bring his young child to the convent and pay for a month, sometimes for a longer period, and then consider his obligations filled for ten, fifteen years. Many, not all, of these children were half-breeds, that is, the offspring of a white man and an Indian woman.(Ref.**Pioneer Nuns of B.-C.** p.54)