



100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE
TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

January 31, 1980

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE

TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY

Near the junction of the LaSalle river with the Red river in St. Norbert there is an elbow of the LaSalle which contained an immensely private pocket of activity, the monastery of the Trappist monks. Heavy woods of oak and elm line both sides of the riverbank and totally envelope the main monastery buildings, while the barns and fields stretch out west away from the river.

The Trappists belong to the Cistercien order, an ancient monastic order founded in 1098 by Robert de Molesmes.¹ He led a splinter group of monks which sought to adhere more closely to the Rule of St. Benedict, a strict code of moral and spiritual behaviour that would enable a monk to “live the Gospel and become transformed in Christ.”² The Cistercien life of austerity had immediate and widespread appeal and less than a century later there were more than 300 houses all over Europe. The mother house of all has always been in the abbey in Citeaux, France. It is to there that Archbishop Taché wrote in 1890 to encourage the founding of a Trappiste monastery in the Canadian north-west.³

The Cistercien order had recently opened a monastery near Oka, Quebec, which acted as a base for the extension into the northwest. Father Noel Joseph Richot was the curé of St. Norbert parish. Years ago he set aside land in the hopes of establishing a monastery, and in 1892 the advance party of monks came from France to begin construction on the first monastery west of Québec.

St. Norbert was a bustling town at this point, connected to Winnipeg by the CPR line, but far removed from city life to the north. It was on the trail between Winnipeg and Pembina which was a gathering place for the annual buffalo hunt. Métis who turned from the hunt to farming settled in St. Norbert and were eventually joined by settlers from Québec. The town had its own church, convent, founding hospital run by the Grey Nuns as well as harness maker, stores, bank, etc. The municipality was named Ritchot, after the priest who had also been influential in the rebellion of 1870. The Métis had erected a barrier in St. Norbert to prevent Governor

McDougall from entering Red River,⁴ Ritchot was also a member of the group who went to Ottawa to negotiate Manitoba's entry into Confederation. The monastery became a sort of symbol of the town, and the inhabitants were protective of the monks' privacy. For Father Ritchot, this was his greatest ambition fulfilled and when he died in 1905, he was buried in the graveyard beside the church at the monastery. On a small plaque over his grave are the words, "Il vivra dans ses oeuvres."⁵

The first four monks arrived in September 1892, via Oka, and began construction immediately on the first building. The plans were drawn up in France and Father Antoine supervised the project. This first house was a wooden structure, 66 by 36 feet, with a mansard roof⁶ and a bell tower. Following the order's traditional dedication to the Virgin Mary, the monastery was called Notre Dame des Prairies. In 1896, Father Antoine returned to France and the monastery accepted its first novices. By this time, there were already 17 men living in the house.

Barns and chicken coops were started almost immediately for the Trappists are self-sufficient to a large extent. In the tradition of Europe, dairy cattle were raised and the extra milk was made into the famous Trappist cheese. By selling farm produce, the monastery was able to purchase those items which they could not make. Each order, by their charter, is financially independent (except for initial assistance from the mother house) and is not permitted to beg or to receive more than minimal alms. These early farm buildings were hastily erected and temporary in nature. In c. 1904, a sawmill was erected on the property and it was from that date forward that the permanent wooden buildings were constructed and finished. All the labour on these structures was performed by the monks themselves, with the addition of two or three paid workmen.⁷

Although there was a chapel in the early monastery, a real church was top priority for the community and in 1902, construction commenced of a stone and brick church. The materials were gathered and purchased. The wood was hauled from St. Norbert by sleigh, the stone, brick and cement by the wagonload from St. Boniface.⁸ The base was dug and in the spring of 1903, the mortar was mixed and the foundation laid by hand. By August, the foundation walls were finished and Monseigneur Langevin of St. Boniface laid the cornerstone.

The church walls were made of brick, laid by the monks and the labourers according to the plans which had been drawn up in Citeaux, France, by Fathers Joseph and Louis. The cost of construction was met in part by an endowment, from a pious benefactor in France with the sanction of the mother house. The finished structure measured 140 by 160 feet to an exterior height of 43 feet. The apse is a two-tiered semi-circular structure that runs behind the transept. The nave, or main longitudinal projection of the church is 25 feet wide. There is a domed bell-tower on the west elevation which contained two magnificently embellished cast iron bells.

The interior walls of the apse are supported by eight columns of Ohio stone and it is from the central area in the sanctuary that the seven chapel altars lead. The main altar was in the middle and this was used for commercial services, with the surrounding altars used for private masses by the monks. The walls and ceiling have been painted to accentuate the vault effect. This was done in the 1940s⁹ by one of the artistic monks. Elaborate patterns in remarkable detail embellish the piers and arches while the open spaces feature pictures of the saints and holy images in warm colours. High rounded windows keep the interior very light, but apparently drafty as well. As the monks spent many hours in the church, their stalls on either side of the nave were protected by a baldichino.¹⁰ There is a gallery or tribune over the rear of the church, and regular pews for visitors on the main floor.

Many of the interior decorations were sent from France but the rest of the finishing was done by the monks who lived there.

In 1974, the basement was remodeled to include a large reception room, parlour and dining room for guests and facilities for the workmen.¹¹

The style of the church is essentially Roman with innumerable adaptations of accent and detail. The windows have rounded heads and are long and narrow as in early church buildings with structural limitations on open areas. There is some beautiful patterning of bricks in corbeling above the main entrance, and around the belltower and beneath the roof line on the sides and rear. Two beautiful rose windows have been removed because they required too much

maintenance, and the lower windows in the apse were bricked over in the 1940s.¹² The dome is painted the traditional silver and features some beautiful scale patterns. But the grouping of the transept, apse and belltower on the west and north façades is the most striking aspect of the building's style.

With the church complete, the Trappists turned their attention to a new house. Seven times during the day and once during the night, the monks were obliged to pray in the church, and the 300 foot walk from the old house to the church was more than enough on cold winter nights.¹³ So a wing of residences was constructed off the east side of the church and connected to it by a passageway.

This building is also brick on a stone foundation. The windows of a reading room on the main floor on the north-east façade repeat the arched windows of the church, but the rest have a squared head. Colour, materials and brick detailing over the windows and below the roof line tie the monastic wing to the church. This wing has a mansard roof with dormer windows that each provide light into two of the monks' cells. The cells are very small rooms, long and narrow, which serve as sleeping quarters for the monks. On the main and second floors were located the lecture halls, cloister, chapels, library, vestry, and reception rooms. In the basement were the refectory, kitchens, laboratory, furnace and cheese storage rooms. Although the structure was completed in 1905, such features as the infirmary and the pharmacy were not moved in until 1908. The final work was completed in 1910.¹⁴

Most of the labour was performed by the monks, but materials and outside assistance brought the cost to more than \$20,000. Part of this amount was covered by the benefactors in France but the bulk came from a loan through the Abbé Général in France. The house is 136 feet long. Near the south-east corner of the wing (furthest away from the church), the roof changes abruptly from a mansard to a complete gambrel (see photos 1 and 8). It may be that this was designed to facilitate another wing to the south with the possible thought of eventually forming a quadrangle with the cloister in the centre.¹⁵ This would be a logical way of expanding the monastery as the need demanded.¹⁶ In 1910, there were 36 men living in the monastery.¹⁷

The former residence became a guest house, which is to be found in every Cistercien monastery. The archbishop of St. Boniface made a retreat there but it was not until 1913 that the guest house became a regular retreat house for the Catholic clergy and laymen of Manitoba. This original monastery burnt down in January 1912 and was replaced in that year by the present guest house, built on the foundations of the first structure. This is a three storey wood frame structure that was designed by one of the resident fathers. It was built entirely by the monks from revenues from the excellent harvest of 1912.¹⁸ It measures 37 by 100 feet to a height of 47 feet. It has the mansard roof of traditional French Catholic architecture. There were private rooms, a chapel, library and parlour on the upper floors and a root cellar and potato bin in the basement. Together with the church and monastic wing, these form the nucleus of Notre Dame des Prairies.

The sawmill had been put to work with the regular cash flow from the sale of farm products to produce a number of permanent outbuildings. A wood barn was erected in 1905 and in 1907 an apiary and a forge were built. By 1910, there were over 100 hives of bees and there was honey enough to sell. The forge produced tools, furniture, the beautiful iron gate at the main entrance, cheese molds, a water sprinkling system for the gardens and machinery for the barns.

After the fire in 1912, the apiary had to be rebuilt, and two new large barns were built. At this time there were 75 milk cows, 30 horses and many pigs, as well as 600 acres of cereal crops.¹⁹ A green house was also added, with hot beds to provide fresh produce for almost six months of the year. A cannery preserved many fruits and vegetables for use through the winter.

In 1915, electric power was run into the monastery and electric motors were introduced in stoves in the bakery, sawmill and forge. The war had substantially advanced farm technology and it was at this point that the monastery acquired its first mechanized farm equipment. It was probably during these ten years that Notre Dame des Prairies became fully productive.

In 1921, a beautiful stud barn with a granary was erected. The building was designed by an outside architect and for the first time, the construction was given to a private contractor, but Brother Joseph did most of the interior work of fittings and troughs. The building was 100 by 40 feet, three storeys high on a cement foundation. It had large windows on the main floor where

the stables were. On the second floor were the poultry room and grain storage and the upper part was used to store hay. The monks were proud of this massive barn, and were positively elated when, during a visit to St. Norbert, the federal Minister of Agriculture stated that it was “la plus belle étable qui se trouve dans cette partie de ce continent.”²⁰

In 1922, a new cheese house was added, although the monks would only make cheese with that milk that was left over from their needs; they would not produce to the demand. In 1928, a new chicken coop and two new greenhouses were erected, and there is still a small greenhouse immediately south of the guest house.

During the 1930s, the monastery came upon hard times as depression swept the country. They were unable to meet the taxes on the farm and the St. Norbert municipality took over title to some of the land.²¹ The Trappists bought more cattle and stepped up production of all their farm products until 1937 when they improved their position. They sold some of their land to a nearby farmer and cleared more of their own until they were finally able to buy back the land taken for taxes.

Expenses were kept to a minimum during these years, and the buildings were in need of renovation and repair after the depression. The monastery was fixed up and the church received a new floor in 1936 and modern lighting and a new pulpit in 1940. The south wall of the monastic wing had to be raised in 1939.

The granary doubled its capacity and in 1941, a new work building was erected to accommodate the forge, the carpenter shop, the tinsmith, etc. The guest house was given a veranda in 1941 and clad with new siding. In 1946, the old gatehouse by the main entrance was replaced by the present three-storey house which served as a reception area as well as facilities for the workmen. The beautiful statues on the grounds, and in the secluded grottos, were added at this time. A corrugated metal barn was erected in 1958 as well as assorted machinery sheds and garages. The production of cheese for sale ended in 1955.

MONASTIC LIFE

Monasticism is simply an intense pursuit of God within an institution, and is found in all religions of the world, and particularly in the Hindu and Buddhist cultures. Christian monasteries date from early times in Europe and are still a potent, if subtle, influence in the present-day churches.

The Cistercien order seeks to remove men from the distractions of material life so that they have adequate time for contemplation. This is why the monks need privacy and a rural settling. They live a simple and austere life, sharing their poverty and labour in a contemplative atmosphere to dispose the soul for union with God.²²

Manual labour rounds out the monk's life and provides the means by which the community survives. Each monk spends several hours in the fields or in the trade shops, or working on maintenance of the buildings, according to needs and abilities. There is a certain creative element to this, and Notre Dame des Prairies has contained many talented artisans over the years.²³ But the bulk of the labour is to support the farming operations and this is the life-blood of a Trappist monastery. The Trappists are vegetarians and their diet depends upon grains, fruit and vegetables, as well as the by-products of milk. The eggs, chickens, pigs and beef cattle that they raise are only for sale, although the St. Norbert Trappists were given a dispensation to eat the fish they caught from the LaSalle River.

In addition, the monks weave their own simple robes, bake their own bread, fix their own machines and generally minimize dependence (and contact) on outside suppliers.

Many hours each day are structured for group or individual prayer, with particular emphasis given to the devotion to Mary. In addition to the hours of prayer, the monks attend lectures and study groups, which were held in the chapter room in the north-east corner of the monastery.

Mass is concelebrated daily, and although the vernacular (French and English now) is used for the readings, the Trappists still use the prayer books and chants that date centuries back. By and

large, silence is maintained outside of communal prayer, except for necessary communication in their labours. This quiet atmosphere is essential for continued contemplation.

There are two classes of monks in the Cistercien order: choir monks, who are ordained priests and who wore white robes and brothers, who wear brown and do the heavier labour duties. Recent moves in the order have equalized these classes,²⁴ but previously the brothers attended mass from the gallery.

Trade and commerce is generally channeled through the Father Abbot, but since the years of Vatican II, the monks take a greater role in the spiritual life of their society. Women are now permitted into several of the areas in the monastery, and can attend Sunday mass in the church. The monks are committed to ecumenical services with other parishes, schools and religion classes, and they continue to give retreat services to priests and laymen.

A papal decree on monastic life was given in 1965:

Members of those communities which are totally dedicated to contemplation give themselves to God alone in solitude and silence through constant prayer and ready penance. No matter how urgent may be the needs of the active apostolate, such communities will always have a distinguished part to play in Christ's Mystical Body, where "all members do not have the same function." Rom. 12,4.²⁵

The monks are excellent farmers who have become renowned for their dairy herd and for their animal husbandry, as well as the famous cheese and honey. They also kept over 600 acres in cereal crops, some produce of which they kept and some sold. The monks tended to large vegetable gardens which produced an abundance of standard summer vegetables, winter supplies of root crops and some exotic vegetables that they had learned to cultivate in France.²⁶ Canning and preserving of produce was essential to self-sufficiency of a vegetarian diet.

The dairy and beef cattle and horses were of exceptional breeding and an important source of income in the early years. The Trappists have won awards for their Holstein herd and have attended agricultural conferences to share their methods and learn from others.

Great Dane dogs were also bred for sale and their presence on the property was a source of protection against chicken thieves and unwelcome intruders in the 1930s.

The farm products were often sold through agents who lived in St. Norbert. The monastery supplied eggs, milk, cheese and honey regularly to Winnipeg outlets, especially to hotels which provided a steady demand. They now concentrate on cattle and grain crops for public sale.

For the first two decades of Notre Dame des Prairies, almost all of the monks came from France and there are still some men of French origin. Most of the monks are now from Canada and both English and French are the working languages. During the revolution in China in 1950, the monasteries there were disbanded and the buildings taken by the Communists. Seven of these displaced Trappists came to St. Norbert until they reunited to establish a new monastery in Hong Kong.²⁷

There are presently four Cistercien monasteries in Canada and 83 throughout the world. There are 30 monks in Notre Dame des Prairies at the present time, of whom half are ordained priests.²⁸

The City of Winnipeg has crept continuously closer to the monastery until St. Norbert has become a suburb. For the most part, this influx of people has been English-speaking and the original character of the small French town has been altered to the consternation of the older inhabitants.²⁹ Many of the former Catholic institutions which shaped the town have had their buildings adapted to lay purposes and the schools have come under the public school system.

The Trappists, feeling the impracticality of preserving a large estate within a city's limits, sold their property in 1975 to BACM and the 1,200 acres are managed by Genstar Corporation. They now have a new monastery and farm six miles south of Holland in southern Manitoba.³⁰ The St. Norbert buildings have been vacant since 1978. Many of the outbuildings were taken down or moved, others burned down so that there are only three substantial buildings remaining: the church and monastic wing (1903-04), the guest house (1912) and the gate house (1946). The gate house serves as a residence for a hired man who keeps people off the property to prevent vandalism. The other two buildings are without heat and have not been boarded up.

The citizens of St. Norbert view these buildings as a symbol of their distinctive character, separate from Winnipeg in makeup and development. Heritage St. Norbert was founded in an attempt to identify and preserve that which they consider distinctive and to help keep future development compatible with the community.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Une Trappe dans un Pays de Missions, published by Notre Dame Des Prairies, St. Norbert, c. 1943, p. 147.
- 2 Thomas Merton, The Silent Life, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, New York, 1957, p. 96.
- 3 Une Trappe, op. cit., p. 11.
- 4 Lionel Dorge, Essai Historique de St.-Norbert, 1971, p. 4. See also W.L. Morton, Manitoba: A History, University of Toronto Press, 1957, pp 119 and 134.
- 5 Une Trappe, op. cit., p. 70.
- 6 The roof line is actually a gambrel shape, but the number and positioning of the dormers gave a mansard effect. The monks themselves considered the roof to be mansard.
- 7 Une Trappe, op. cit., p. 83.
- 8 Ibid., p. 60. There were 32 wagons full of brick (100,000 bricks cost \$1,000.), and 28 wagons full of stone.
- 9 Date not confirmed. The artist was Father Germain Phaneuf.
- 10 From a report by Neil Einarson for the Historic Resources Branch of the Manitoba Government.
- 11 Loc. cit.
- 12 Interview with Jane Fudge, Heritage St. Norbert member, January 13, 1980.
- 13 La Trappe, op. cit., p. 66.
- 14 Ibid., p. 69.
- 15 Merton, op. cit., pp. 82-83. An open courtyard or cloister was common in the old monasteries in Europe and many of the Cistercien, Carthusian and Camadoli orders adopt that style as a matter of course.
- 16 Suggested by Neil Einarson, Historic Resources Branch. The Bishop's Palace in St. Boniface also shows this combination of construction.
- 17 "Monastic Atmosphere Pervades Village of St. Norbert". Free Press, August 25, 1910.
- 18 La Trappe, op. cit., p. 92.
- 19 Free Press, August 1910, op. cit.

20 La Trappe, op. cit., p. 115.

21 Since 1912, St. Norbert had been associated with Fort Garry in one municipality and this had resulted in an imbalance of “city” people controlling the affairs of St. Norbert. By and large, these Fort Garry councillors were Protestant and had little empathy with the church institutions in the Catholic community. The Père Trappiste hints that this land seizure was the product of a Protestant council. La Trappe, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

22 Merton, op. cit., p. 97.

23 One of the monks, before entering the monastery, cast the two huge bisons that grace the main staircase of the Manitoba legislature. Another carved the beautiful angel statues that formerly occupied niches on the exterior of the church. The carver is said to have patterned the cherubic faces after women modeling in the Eaton’s catalogue. Still another crafted harpsichords in the basement of the monastery.

24 Meet the Monks, print-out of the Trappist Fathers, St. Norbert, 1978, p. 4.

25 Ibid., p. 1.

26 “Monks of St. Norbert Obey Stern Rule of Silence”, The Winnipeg Tribune, October 18, 1930.

27 Loc. cit.

28 Free Press, November 13, 1955.

29 Meet the Monks, op. cit., p. 2.

30 Dorge, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE – TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY



Plate 1 – An early view of the monastic wing and guest house, ca.1910. This is taken from the riverbank looking north and east. The river winds back behind the guest house on the right. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – The main entrance, ca.1916. To the left of the iron gate is the cheese factory, to the right the gatehouse and the roof of a barn. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE – TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY



Plate 3 – The church and monastic wing not long after completion. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – This shot of the church and monastic wing is a later date. Electricity was brought into the monastery in 1915. The planted trees are beginning to grow and the garden on the left is large and productive. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE – TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY



Plate 5 – The front entrance of the church, ca.1908. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE – TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY



Plate 6 – The gate house in 1921. This building was used until 1946, at which time it was hauled away. The lean-to addition was the shoemaking and repair room. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 7 – The church interior ca. 1925. Seven side altars can be seen in the apse, each one dedicated to a different cause. The blur in the centre foreground is a chandelier crafted by one of the monks. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

100 RUINES DU MONASTÈRE – TRAPPIST MONK GUEST HOUSE & MONASTERY



Plate 8 – Notre Dame des Prairies in the 1950s. The angel and centre statue are now in place. The beauty of the grounds and horticultural skills of the monks can be clearly seen. In more recent years, much of this fussy vegetation was removed but there were always beautiful walkways and beds of flowers. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)