

Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage Draws Thousands For prayer, play and socializing

Source: <http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/Fall%202006/CulPilgrammage.htm>

By Clint Buehler

LAC STE ANNE, AB - They came by the thousands from across western Canada and the northwestern United States. They camped under tarps and in tents, trailers and motor homes, jammed together in crowded campgrounds.

The 2006 Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage drew an estimated 40,000 mostly Aboriginal pilgrims together for a week, some in search of spiritual and physical healing in the mythical waters of the lake, at the many Masses held in the shrine on the site, and at the Stations of the Cross on the grounds.



The Masses are offered three times a day throughout the Pilgrimage, in Cree, Chipewyan, Blackfoot, Dene and English. This year there was even a special Mass in Dogrib for a group of pilgrims who had traveled all the way from Rae-Edzo in the Northwest Territories.

A highlight of the Pilgrimage is the Holy Eucharist Blessing of Lac Ste Anne each year in which the waters of the lake are blessed, recalling new life, received in baptism, the waters becoming a source of blessing for all believers. The pilgrims then wade into the water, the faithful believing the waters will cleanse their souls and heal them spiritually and physically.

For everyone involved it was a time for gathering in peace and harmony, as it has been for centuries-even before the arrival of the Oblate missionaries who renamed the lake and established the Catholic imprint on the pilgrimage in honour of the Mother of Mary, the patron saint of the Oblates-a time and place for renewing old friendships and making new ones.

According to Charles Wood, chair of the Lac Ste Anne Trust that holds title to the site, before the arrival of the Oblates the Aboriginal people called the lake Manio Sakahigan (God's Lake or Spirit Lake) and believed it was blessed and offered spiritual and physical healing.

Even people from tribes otherwise in conflict would set aside their differences when they gathered at the lake, usually during buffalo hunting season, including Cree, Dene, Stoney, Blackfoot and Metis.

Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault, an Oblate missionary, arrived in the area in 1843 and set about converting the Native people gathered there. It was he who changed the name of

the lake. A small log church was built, but when it was destroyed by fire, Fr. Thibault returned to nearby St. Albert, then the most populated centre in the area, and with a large Metis and First Nations population. He expected his congregation to follow him, but they did not.

The Oblates attempted to establish a Pilgrimage with its Aboriginal converts in 1880, with little success. It was not until 1889 that the Pilgrimage became an annual event, with the number of pilgrims increasing over the years until they regularly numbered in the tens of thousands in the last half of the 20th century, and into this century.

And as the years passed, the means of travel and camping became more advanced, horses and wagons giving way to cars and trucks, and blankets and teepees giving way to tents, trailers and motor homes.

But as the last century came to an end, there was a new concern. The furor over residential school abuses and the potential for lawsuits as a result were of concern because the Lac Ste. Anne site was owned by the Oblates who were among those being accused of residential school abuse.

This was of particular concern to Aboriginal leaders who felt the Pilgrimage was a vital part of the life of their people. They feared that if successful lawsuits were launched against the Oblates, the prime lakeside property on the shore of Lac Ste. Anne could be seized and sold to developers.

Charles Wood and other concerned Native leaders were able to negotiate with the Oblates, who were fully cooperative, to transfer the title for the land to a newly-created Lac Ste. Anne Trust, which Wood now co-chairs with Oblate Fr. Camille Piche. Other trustees are John Zoe, Rse-Edzo, Northwest Territories; Harry Lafond, Muskeg Lake, Saskatchewan; Bernadette Fox, Blood Reserve in southern Alberta; Edna Woodward, Fort Smith, Northwest Territories and Roman Catholic Archbishop Thomas Collins.

The actual management of the Pilgrimage and the site is handled by the Lac Ste. Anne Management Board chaired by local long-time resident Murleen Crossen, and including Merv Kootenay, a member of the nearby Alexis First Nation now living at Enoch, outside of Edmonton; Father Garry Laboucane (Metis), who is the pastor at Slave Lake and responsible for Pilgrimage's Shrine Program; Robert Beaulieu, Yukon Territory; Louise Breland, St. Albert, and Trevor Gladue, Provincial Vice-President, Metis Nation of Alberta.

The transfer from the Oblates has brought a sense of security, underscored by the site being designated a National Historic Site, which does not ensure any funding, but further ensures that the site will be protected.

What the changes in ownership have done is create a number of challenges.

As Murleen Crossen notes, "the Pilgrimage has been part of our lives for over a hundred

years. In the past, our Oblate Priests and Brothers were abundant and there were many volunteers. Now with our aging Oblate Priests and Brothers, along with our aging volunteers, the need for hired-out and contracted services is increasing.

"The Pilgrimage has been forced to rent out concessions, restaurants and the gift shop. These have been very good partnerships, but this also means less money for the Pilgrimage."

She says that revenues have not increased over the past five years, but expenses have increased at an alarming rate, including full-time wages for an administrator, plus increased costs for utilities, taxes and insurance.

"We do not recover the full costs to operate the annual Pilgrimage. We therefore have no money to repair the shrine, which needs a new roof, or to replace the aging washrooms and volunteer centre."

For each of the past three years, the Pilgrimage has incurred an operating deficit of more than \$20,000, \$22,475 in 2003, \$43,220 in 2004 and \$18,782 in 2005. This has reduced cash reserves to "a very low level" and was expected to put the Pilgrimage in financial crisis after this year's event if there was no significant increase in revenues.