



The Catholic
Archdiocese
of Edmonton

Joy in Christ
100 Jubilee
1912-2012

Jubilee 100 Biography Project

Biography of the Cunningham Family

Submitted by St. Albert Parish, St. Albert

As the Archdiocese of Edmonton celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2012, the Parish of St. Albert is still reflecting on 2011 when the Parish commemorated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the mission by Bishop Alexandre Tache and Oblate Father Albert Lacombe. In its early days the Mission, the Parish and the community were one entity and then, like today, the strength of the Parish was derived from its family. One such family is the Cunninghams.

John Cunningham, whose family had immigrated from Ireland, was born in Ile-a-la-Cross in about 1817. He became a scout and hunter for the Hudson's Bay Company and travelled widely through what is now Western Canada. He arrived in St. Albert in the early 1800s where he operated the St. Albert Post of the HBC near Big Lake. When he left the employ of the HBC he began farming on a river lot near Sturgeon River. In 1964 he married Rosalie L'Hirondelle and they had 11 children. So began a very respected Metis family in the district. John died while on a traditional buffalo hunt in 1868.

One of the early objectives of the Church in the missions of Western Canada was to recruit vocations among the young people of the area. The first Oblate priest to be ordained in St. Albert was Edouard Cunningham, son of John and Rosalie. This was a great honour for the family because their faith was very important to them. Mary Cunningham Callihoo, granddaughter of John and daughter of James Cunningham, recalled in the Black Robe's Vision that her parents were devout Catholics and that the family's religious upbringing was very strict. They attended Mass each Sunday and Sunday was definitely a day of worship, prayer and rest. The family travelled to St. Albert Parish using horses and a democrat, but when that was not possible they walked the five miles to church. Each summer in July they travelled to Lac. Ste. Anne for the annual pilgrimage where they prayed and were reunited with family and friends. That tradition remains today for many family members.

Mary also remembers attending New Year's Day Mass celebrated by Bishop Grandin, after which he would bless the children and then give each of them a scoop of hard candy. The eldest of John's children, Samuel, was a leader among the Metis population. The term "Church Social Teachings" was not in common usage, but the principles of those teachings were certainly lived out in the community. The attainment of "script" for the Metis people was a land claims issue of real importance. Land speculators at the time attempted to purchase the script from Metis landowners for much less than the value of the land. Bishop Grandin and citizens like Samuel Cunningham urged the people to retain the land and establish farms along the rivers. Samuel Cunningham was one of the champions of settlers' rights and he represented the community on the Northwest Territorial Council in Regina from 1889-1893.

The Riel Rebellion of 1885 was a time of great concern in the community. A home guard named the St. Albert Mounted Rifles was formed by both new settlers from Eastern Canada and the local Metis nation to protect the district from attack. It was supported and encouraged by Bishop Grandin. Samuel Cunningham was a Captain of the Riflemen and his brother Albert was also a member.

In 1862, a year after the founding of the St. Albert Mission, the need for a bridge over the Sturgeon River became apparent. At Mass on Sunday Father Lacombe announced that the next day construction would begin on the bridge and all parishioners were expected to help with the building. Any family that did not participate in the construction would be forced to pay a toll to cross the bridge. When completed the bridge was the first built west of the Great Lakes, and it remained in use for many decades.

By 1885 religion and politics again banded together as the mission wanted to rid itself of the burden of maintaining the bridge. It was proposed that the dominion government purchase the bridge but they agreed to do so only if it was confirmed by “three competent persons” that the bridge was in good repair. On September 2, 1885, the bridge was sold by Bishop Grandin on behalf of the Mission to the dominion government for \$1,500.00 The document accompanying the transaction declared that the bridge was in good repair was signed by Samuel Cunningham and two other “competent” residents. Over the years the Cunningham family has expanded and people with names such as L’Hirondelle, Callihoo, Hodgson, Cairdner and Loyer trace kinship to this family.

The theme for the 150th Anniversary for St. Albert Parish was Rooted in Faith, Growing in Love, Living in Hope. That could also be the theme followed by family in the parish since 1861, when the Cunningham’s and other families were forming the parish, to today’s modern young families, who are continuing to build the parish on a very solid foundation.

In November of each year St. Albert Parish holds a memorial celebration in the St. Albert Cemetery on Mission Hill to remember and show gratitude to those buried there who came before them and whose dedication left a vibrant parish on the hill. The Cunningham family represents all those families who made St. Albert their home and who have served God and their neighbours for 150 years.