

Métis Road Allowance Communities: The Hamlet South of Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan

Co-op farm solves Métis' problem

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Fr. Blanchard's idea started with nickels and dimes

THE LEADER-POST, REGINA

October 3, 1951

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WILLOW BUNCH, Sask.

Just outside this south Saskatchewan village in a shallow valley where once the great Indian chief Sitting Bull had his camp-site is located Saskatchewan's newest, smallest and most unique co-operative farm.

Incorporated as a co-operative on Sept. 13 this year the 25-acre project, which is known as Lacerte Co-operative farm, has a brief but interesting story behind it.

The story began back in 1947 when young Father F.M. Blanchard came to Willow Bunch as assistant parish priest.

Dire Need

He had been there only a short time when he realized that the more than 100 Métis who were numbered among his parishioners were in dire need not only of spiritual but material help.

The majority of them lived in a squalid shack settlement south of Willow Bunch known as "the hamlet." Others lived in equally miserable hovels scattered throughout the rough and barren district.

The young priest was appalled by the living conditions he found in these homes. The Métis were without employment or regular income and depended entirely on municipal and government relief. And they lacked the incentive to do anything but exist in their miserable little homes, many of which were without floors or proper windows.

In the fall of 1949 Fr. Blanchard began his campaign to improve the lot of the Métis.

Credit Union

That fall he met with them and explained his first plan. The outcome of this gathering was the organization of a credit union known as La Caisse Métisse. It started in a pretty small way, Father Blanchard recalls. The first deposits were made in nickels and dimes, but now La Caisse Métisse, which is a branch of the larger Willow Bunch Credit Union, has capital of more than \$400.

This was a start in the right direction but the young priest knew that he had to give these people something to do, something that would arouse and hold their interest. In the spring of 1950 he organized a community garden project.

Eleven families joined in the plan and out of their meager resources raised \$55 with which they rented a small tract of land. The rural municipality got behind the

scheme and donated \$175 with which to buy garden seeds and the citizens of the district turned out to help with the planting and many gave cash donations.

The results of this project surprised even Fr. Blanchard. That fall the garden yielded 600 bushels of potatoes, 3,000 pounds of carrots, 12,000 ears of corn and quantities of peas and beans.

Root Cellar

To solve the problem of storage the resourceful priest came up with the idea of building a root cellar. Assisted by the willing Métis he soon had one built. Dug into the side of a hill, the cellar is 37 feet long and 15 feet wide. The walls have been lined with old railway ties and out of scrap lumber they built vegetable bins. Total cost of this project is \$212.

During the winter months this supply of vegetables was distributed to the Métis. Each family received a share according to the amount of work it had contributed to the garden.

The project proved to be a success in more ways than one. It provided useful employment for the Métis, improved their diet and cut relief costs by several hundred dollars.

In the spring of 1951 the municipality bought the land and gave it to the Métis and at no cost to them a \$4,000 P.F.R.A.¹ dam was constructed on the property to insure a water supply for the garden.

Recently a new project got under way. The social welfare department is going to lend the farm six milk cows and three brood sows. In addition they supplied a barn to house the animals. The Métis, however, paid for moving the building and will also foot the bill for needed repairs.

In addition to this a co-operative hay project has been carried out to ensure a feed supply for the livestock and a wood project will ensure the Métis have plenty of firewood for the winter months.

When the farm was incorporated as a co-operative recently the administration of it was given to the Métis. In the future a six-man Métis committee will run the farm with advisory assistance from a citizens committee, composed of six men of the Willow Bunch area...²



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¹ Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act.

² A farm production cooperative, the Blanchard Co-op (Lestock) was created in addition to the Lacerte Co-op at Willow Bunch. Thus co-ops became CCF policy for rehabilitation of Metis "road allowance communities" along with the development of Metis Colonies at Crooked Lakes, Lestock, Crescent Lake, Baljennie, Willow Bunch, Duck Lake, Green Lake, Lebret and Glen Mary. Some 2,500 Metis were placed on colonies.

