

Colonie St. Jean Baptiste De Falher

By
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The Peace Country was populated and inhabited by the Beaver, Cree, and Sekani Indians. On June 20, 1899 at Lesser Slave Lake, Treaty Number 8, was signed with the local aboriginal populations and the Government of Canada representative, Chief Commissioner, David Laird. Because many settlers were moving South, Bishop Jean Bapiste Marie Grouard commissioned Father Jean Baptiste Henri Giroux O.M.I. from Montreal and Father Constant Falher O.M.I. from Edmonton to entice and lead French Canadian Catholics to the Peace Country. The settlers were promised a quarter section of land for \$10. The Peace Country was the last area of Canadian Frontier to be opened for Homesteads.

The Smoky River Region was surveyed by the Federal government in early nineteen hundred. The area was opened for settlement in 1912. A small contingent of French speaking settlers mainly from Quebec met Father Jean-Baptiste Henri Giroux O.M.I. and Father Constant Falher O.M.I. In the spring of 1912, the group traveled, by train to Athabasca Landing, by steam boat to Lesser Slave River, portaged 15 miles to Norris Landing on the Lesser Slave River, and embarked on another steam boat that followed the North Shore of Lesser Slave Lake to Shaw's Point. They were met by wagons at the St. Bernard Mission in Grouard.

The first group of settlers left Grouard, May, 1912 for the Peavine area. Father Giroux and Father Falher were on horseback and the settlers travelled in wagons pulled by horses. The group was led by an Indian guide, Pailloux, who later abandoned them near Winagami. The group was later reunited with the guide, Pailloux after Father Giroux brought the colonists to visit an Indian Village. The group was led on an Indian trail and ended up near the Peavine Creek where they rested and had lunch. The area had been burned by a forest fire previously and many partially burned trees were still standing but there were large open areas

which would be easily plowed. The settlers walked many miles, to explore the land and pick their homesteads. Each member chose a quarter section and the legal descriptions were jotted on a map.

On June 1, the group met near Peavine Creek again. Each settler had chosen their homestead. Father Falher ended the evening with "My Friends, you are free to go or to stay. But before taking such an important decision, be sure to reflect and pray." After a short prayer, everyone retired to their tents. Before starting back to Grouard on June 2, Father Falher spoke again. "My Friends, we do not yet know who will own this land, but don't you think that to mark, at least, the passing through here of French-Canadian Catholics, we should plant a cross on which we could engrave the names of all here present." A unanimous "yes" greeted that suggestion. A crude cross was quickly constructed, using a poplar tree and a wagon seat board which contained all the names of who were present. At this time a name for the colony was agreed upon by the priests and the colonists. It would be called the St. Jean Baptiste de Falher which was a joining of Father Giroux's first name with Father Falher's family name. On June 3, the group left to return to Grouard. The day following their arrival in Grouard, they went to the Dominion Lands Office to file their homesteads.

The St. Jean Baptiste Mission Church which was built in 1914, is still standing today on its original site, south of Falher. The resident clergy lived on the second floor and the congregation worshipped in the large delightfully decorated room on the first floor. This church was the fanciest church north of Edmonton. The St. Jean Baptiste Society which was originally formed for the preservation of this site has been reinstated to plan the 100th Anniversary of the first colonists in the Smoky River Region. The society consists of members of the Towns of Falher and

McLennan, Villages of Donnelly and Girouxville, the Municipal District of Smoky River and interested community members. This will be a commemoration of our pioneers who endured many hardships in developing all communities in our area. Please plan on attending and by doing so, make this the most memorable event of the century. The event will be held on June 29 to July 1, 2012 with the headquarters situated at the Falher Regional Recreational Complex.

This information has been compiled from many historical books and publications.

St. Jean Baptiste Society

Marc Bremont, Chairman