

THE HISTORY

OF

St. John's Mission

ESTABLISHED 1832

The history of St. John's Church, Garden River, takes us back to the year 1830. On October the 29th of that year a meeting was held at the Court House at York (now Toronto) which was presided over by the Rt. Rev. Charles James Stewart, the Bishop of Quebec, who was then visiting that part of the vast Diocese. At this meeting there was formed a society known as "The Society for Converting and Civilizing the Indians of Upper Canada," but later the name was expanded by the addition of "and Propagating the Gospel among the Destitute Settlers." The first attempt to found a mission among the Ojibways was made by sending a young man by the name of Cameron to establish a school for the Indians at Sault Ste. Marie. In 1832 William McMurray was chosen to start a mission among the Indians. Lodgings were provided for Mr. McMurray at the Hudson's Bay Company House, Sault Ste. Marie. Plans were soon made to build a school which was to be used as a temporary church and also twenty houses for the Indians close to what is now the Great Northern Road and Borron Avenue. Lumber was cut and a beginning was made on this project but owing to sudden change in governmental policy and the withholding of supplies, William McMurray was not able to keep his promise with the Indians and subsequently resigned his mission. McMurray was succeeded by the Rev. F. A. O'Meara who came for two years. Then for some time there were only periodical visits from a visiting missionary.

With the withdrawing of the resident missionary at the "Sault" the Indians felt no longer under obligation to settle there and withdrew to Garden River which they had preferred even before the attempts to found an Indian village at the "Sault."

Prominent among McMurray's converts at the "Sault" were Chief Shingwauk who was the leader of the Ojibways, an eloquent orator, famous conjurer and notable warrior and his two sons,

Augustine Shingwauk and Buhkwujjene. In the new Indian village at Garden River we find the old chief still the leader of his people continuing faithful to the teachings of the Church. He delighted to hear the "blackcoat" read from the "Great Spirit's Book" the story of God's love for man.

In 1848 the Rev. G. A. Anderson came to live at Garden River as resident missionary. He was succeeded by the Rev. and Mrs. James Chance in 1851. During nearly twenty year's ministry a solid work was done by these faithful servants. A church and mission house were built and history informs us that much of the lumber came from Detroit for these buildings as there were no lumber mills in the district in those days. The Rev. James Chance introduced a grist mill at Garden River and ground the first wheat in Algoma. He was instrumental in getting a dock built at Garden River making it possible for the freight boats to dock. The mail came about every ten days and Mr. Chance was the first Postmaster of Garden River. Shortly after Mr. Chance's arrival the old chief died and later over his resting place the present church was built.

We see the mantle of Chieftanship falling upon the chief's two sons Augustus and Buhkwujjene. Both were to the time of their death the unfailing friends of the "blackcoats" who from time to time ministered to their people. When Mr. Chance and his family left for a mission in southern Ontario in 1870 the Rev. Edward F. Wilson came to stay with the Indians for a short time, intending to return to his mission in Sarnia. When the time came for him to leave and it was uncertain when another missionary would be appointed, Augustus suddenly made up his mind to go down and interview the "Great Blackcoat" (the Bishop of Toronto) himself and plead the cause of his people. Though he had only four dollars in his pocket, he stepped on board the "fire-ship" which took Mr. Wilson and his wife away. After a short stay in London he proceeded in the "fire-wagons" to Toronto, arriving there "on the sixth day of the week when the raspberry moon was twenty-one days old." As a result of Augustus' interview with the Bishop, Mr. Wilson was appointed missionary to Garden River.

One of the desires of Chief Augustus was that "a teaching wigwam" should be erected at Garden River where the children of his people might be taught the Christian faith and also trained to take their place in the world. Under Mr. Wilson's leadership the first Shingwauk Home was built at Garden River and opened in September 1873, with sixteen pupils and named the Shingwauk Industrial Home in honour of Chief Augustine Shingwauk. Within a week this home was completely destroyed by fire and Sault Ste. Marie became the site for the future Shingwauk Homes.

It is believed that the first Garden River Church was also burnt but we have this interesting record of the opening of the present St. John's Church A. M. N., October 28th, 1883.

"The new church at Garden River was opened for Divine Service on Sunday, the 28th, October, the anniversary of Bishop Fauquier's consecration. There was a large gathering of Indians, a child was baptised and the Holy Communion administered. The church, though plain, is a remarkably pretty, comfortable little building \$1,100 was raised by the Bishop towards its erection and the Indians contributed a considerable amount of free labour.

Historical records inform us that the land on which St. John's church now stands was surrendered by the Indians to the Crown on the 20th of May 1883, for the use and benefit of the Church of England missions.

The Church was consecrated by Bishop Sullivan on the 6th of July 1884.

During Mr. Wilson's time at Garden River, a few more white settlers began to settle at Sault Ste. Marie. History informs us that Mr. Wilson undertook to drive up to the "Sault" for an afternoon service but that he didn't neglect his morning and evening services at Garden River.

Shortly after Mr. Wilson's leaving to take up the work of building a new Shingwauk School in the "Sault" a young man was ordained in the old Garden River Church by the name of Peter Trimble Rowe. With the opening up of the new settlements in the surrounding district, young Rowe found himself in charge of a vast area and so we have the beginnings of the Sylvan Valley mission, Echo Bay, etc. in 1878. This same young man later became the Bishop of Alaska.

Among other faithful men are such names as Gallaher, French Atkinson, Robt. Renison (former Metropolitan of Ontario) Williams, who carried on the work. Then we come to Canon F. Frost who spent thirty-five years amongst the Indians, ten at Garden River. The Ojibway Hymn Book which he so ably compiled is still being used today at Garden River and other Indian missions. During the ministry of Canon Frost, the beautiful chancel window was placed in St. John's Church by Miss Alice Longfellow and family, relatives of the famous poet, in memory of the first Chief Shingwauk, thus fulfilling a wish often expressed by Buhkwujjene. And so the work at St. John's has been carried on down through the years until the present day, but space does not permit the listing of all that has been accomplished in the last half century.

The present parsonage was built in 1897. In 1946 it was wired for electricity and a water pressure system was installed. St. John's Church tower has been repaired and can be seen for miles up the river.

In August of 1950, the Parsonage was lifted from the old site and moved to a new site in the village on the North side of highway 17, opposite the big Indian Council Hall. A complete concrete basement was built and a furnace installed to heat the parsonage.

On Ascension Day, 1951, Bishop Wright assisted by Canon F. W. Colloton and Rev. A. L. Privett, officiated at the beautiful service of "The Turning of the Sod" for the new Parish Hall and Chapel in the village. This was erected during the summer and the first service was held on All Saints Day, being a service of Holy Communion and at which the Rev. Charles B. Noble, of Christ Church, Korah, was the assistant.

This building is used for the church services during winter months when it is not possible to get down to the church. A regular Sunday School has been organized for the boys and girls and any week day activities are also held in this new building.

As we look back over the years, we remember all the way God hath brought us, we humbly lift our hearts in prayer, praise and thanksgiving to God, praying that God may guide us in the future and that the present generation may be faithful to their church and follow the noble example set by their Ojibway forefathers.

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

"Memoirs" by Mrs. James Chance. "Missionary Work Among the Ojibways" by Rev. Edward F. Wilson, "The Man of Alaska", by Thomas Jenkins, and historical records from the Algoma Synod office. With grateful thanks for the assistance of Canon Colloton.

Rev. W. B. King Edwards,
Garden River.