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FOUNDATION OF THE PARISH OF COUTTS

( A few historical notes compiled from personal notes left by F. VAN TIGHEN OMI )

Father Van Tighen OMI was sent by his superiors to Lethbridge in August 1888. He was put in charge, not only of the catholics of Lethbridge, but also of those in the neighboring district. A small church had been built in Lethbridge in 1887. Hence Father Van Tighen took all the catholics of this part of the province under his spiritual care. He resided in Lethbridge. And from there he would visit the catholics as far East as Bow-Island and south to the American border. On this vast territory there was only one church, the one at Lethbridge. While visiting the missions, Father Van Tighen would say mass in the homes of his catholic people.

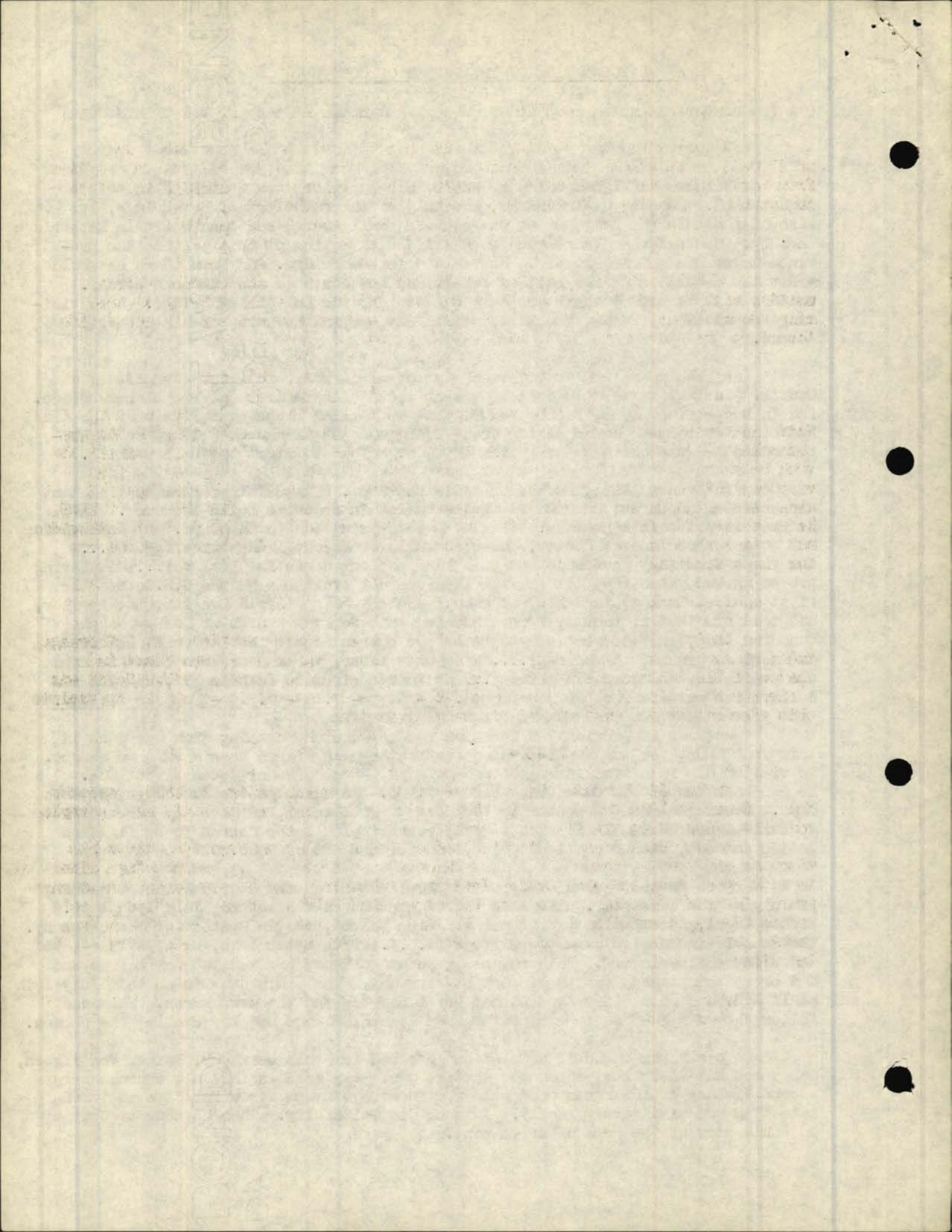
As the years went by, quite a number of catholic families were living at Coutts. In fact it was the most important group of catholics outside of Lethbridge. And in December of 1903, Father Van Tighen was telling these catholics that the time had come for them to do something about building a small church and not to be surprised to learn about a subscription being organised to start the bell rolling.

In January 1904, Father wrote to the Dept. of the Interior requesting that a piece of land be surrendered to the catholics in order to build a church. This is what he writes in his diary: "Having made application to the Dept. of the Interior for 40 acres of land at Coutts, there to build a church, I was twice refused... the first time they answered that this land was on quarantine Reserve;...this having proved untrue, then they told me the land was not available as the P.R.Co had the first choice. On learning this, at once I wrote to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the Premier, and told him that if the Government refused land for the church at Coutts on the Canadian side, we were resolved to build the church across the International line on American ground, in Montana;...A few days later, the answer came that the land was available, and we could get it;...The Entree was made accordingly, and the ten dollars fee was paid for the legal Subj. 1 - S. 5 - T. 1 - R. 15 - West of 4th Mer."

Outside of providing a location for the church, nothing much was done in this year 1904, for the simple reason that Father Van Tighen made a trip to Europe. He visited his relatives in France and Belgium, whom he hadn't seen since 1874. He was back in Western Canada in February 1905. In March he was in Coutts for a few days. Meeting a good carpenter by the name of Paul Audet, he gave him the contract to build a church (40 X 25) with a small porch ( 6X6 ), the church to be finished inside and out, with 2 coats of paint, and for the sum of \$600.00

Work on the church was practically finished on the church by the beginning of July of the same year. The blessing of the church was set for July 15th 1905. Bishop Legal, accompanied by two priests from McLeod, was in Coutts for the ceremony. The same train carried also two Sisters (F.C.J.) from Lethbridge, with 3 altar-boys and a few choir-singers. Father Van Tighen had already arrived the day before and had every thing ready for the important ceremony. The train came in on this July 15th at 11 A.M. and soon afterwards Bishop Legal had blessed the new church. This was followed by a High-Mass sung by Father Van Tighen, Bishop Legal preaching the sermon.

To all the catholic population gathered for this ceremony, Father Van Tighen, happy and all in smiles, announced that he would say mass in this new church every second tuesday of the month and would remain amongst them for a few days to teach catechism and visit every family. This he did faithfully. When he came to Coutts he would stay at the home of Mr Tennant.



-- 1906 --

A year after the building of the church, there still remained a debt of \$150.00 to be paid. The Catholic Women of Coutts, with the help of some ladies from Lethbridge, organised a social party to help raise some funds. This social party held during the year 1906 brought in the sum of \$100.00.

-- 1907 --

On June 12th 1907, Father Van Tighen made a visit to Coutts. During a meeting with an important group of Catholics, he made a resolution and it was adopted unanimously that an addition should be made to the church. It was decided therefore that two rooms to be used by the priest should be build.

-- 1908 --

For some time now, Father Van Tighen had been thinking about retiring from the ministry. He was advancing in years and his health had not been too good these last years. He suffered from rheumatism and this kept him from doing all the work he wanted to do. Lethbridge with its 1500 Catholics and the neighboring missions with new families arriving every year, needed younger and more capable men. Father Van Tighen, more than any one else, realized it. By the end of 1908, he requested from his Superiors to be relieved from the strenuous work at Lethbridge, and that four priests take over the work, two for the city of Lethbridge and two for the neighboring missions.

-- 1909 --

On June 15th 1909, a new pastor and assistant were appointed at Lethbridge, and also two priests for the neighboring missions. Father Meyer was placed in charge of the Catholics along the line from Lethbridge to Coutts. Father Meyer was a visitor at Coutts and all the Catholics had the opportunity to meet and appreciate this missionary on every one of his regular visits.

-- 1915 --

Father J. Bidault, who had been appointed at Lethbridge in 1910, replaced Father Meyer in 1915 and worked in this district for many years, until he was replaced by a priest from the Calgary diocese.

Father Bidault wrote the following to his religious superiors about his missions and Coutts specially: " This Mission on account of its geographical situation, is made up of American and Canadian families. The Americans are by far the more numerous. We have 20 American families and about 8 or 9 Canadians. Holy Mass is said on the first Sunday of each month at 11 A.M., in the church built in 1905 by Rev. Father Van Tighen. All the Catholics still remember their first missionary, Father Van Tighen."

