

# Mission district predated building of NWMP fort

By Cinda Chavich  
Calgary Herald

It may surprise many Calgarians to learn that one of the first white settlers here was a French-Canadian, and that one of the first settlements along the Elbow River actually was a French one.

Three years before the first troop of North West Mounted Police rode across the prairie to build Fort Calgary on the Bow River, a young priest of the Oblate Fathers had arrived to establish a mission.

That mission – first named Notre Dame de la Paix – was the centre of a French settlement called Rouleauville, a once-thriving community in the area we now know as Calgary's Mission district. Founded in 1884 on two sections of land set aside for the French by the federal government, Rouleauville grew up around St. Mary's Cathedral.

The original grand sandstone church with its two domed spires was erected in 1889 but demolished in 1955 – reportedly because it was in danger of collapse. It was replaced by the cathedral that dominates the skyline at the end of 1st Street S.W. today.

Next door, the original St. Mary's Parish Hall now houses the Alberta Ballet. It first served as a community centre, then railway station.

Walk around to the east side of the sandstone building (circa 1905) and you'll see the typical covered platform where trains pulled up from 1913 until 1971. Behind the building, an old railway bridge, now a walkway, crosses the Elbow River into Lindsay Park.

In the original Rouleauville, priests such as Leduc, Lestanc, Fournier and the famous Pere Lacombe were at the hub of their

## Walkabout



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French-speaking parish. Their flock consisted of Metis ranch hands and French-Canadian laborers who came west to work on the CPR line.

But one of the most influential men in the new community was Judge Charles Borromee Rouleau, a French-Canadian magistrate who came west from North Battleford, Sask., in 1886 as the Riel Rebellion erupted.

"The judge had an Indian maid in his home in North Battleford and she warned them to pack the wagon and get out of town the night before," Delores Woolrich (nee Rouleau), the judge's great-granddaughter, says during a tour of her namesake neighborhood.

If you head down 19th Avenue, east of 4th Street, you'll see where Rouleau's impressive sandstone home, dubbed Castel aux Pres, once stood. Woolrich lived on that street, too, but by the 1940s her great-grandfather's home had been replaced by the then-swish Athlone Apartments, its dark brick wings now named Lean Manor.

"I lived at 309 and I could hear the school bell and be out the door," Woolrich says, pointing to

the red brick St. Mary's School around the corner on 2nd Street S.W. Built in 1909, it soon outgrew enrolment and became a girls' school, where Sisters of the Faithful Companions of Jesus taught Grades 1 to 12 to Woolrich and her Catholic friends from all ethnic backgrounds in Calgary.

The first sisters of this cloistered order devoted to teaching arrived in Rouleauville in 1885. By 1893, the Sacred Heart Convent was built to house both the nuns and the city's first Catholic school.

The convent, a beautiful sandstone building that sits across 19th Avenue behind the cathedral, has a Mansard roof dotted with dormers, and looks like it was imported from the French countryside.

"Some of the old nuns still live there – they were teachers who really cared about you," recalls Woolrich.

The Holy Cross Hospital, also a living remnant of Rouleauville, was started in 1891 by four nursing sisters of the Grey Nuns order.

As more English settlers flocked to Calgary and this French settlement on the south edge of the city, Rouleauville was completely anglicized. By 1907, the city annexed Rouleauville and the old French street names were changed to numbered streets and avenues.

Today, this once working-class neighborhood has become a trendy part of town, with renovated homes, funky shops and popular restaurants.

This year, the Parks Foundation of Calgary will resurrect a little of the area's French history, with a new park called Rouleauville Square. It will straddle 1st Street in front of the cathedral and remind us of Calgary's French Catholic roots.



Photos by Dave Olecko, Calgary Herald

### NEWEST INCARNATION: Delores Woolrich stands by the original St. Mary's Parish Hall

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**ROUTE:** Start at St. Mary's Cathedral at 219 18th Ave. S.W., where you'll also see St. Mary's Parish Hall (now the Alberta Ballet) next door. Head behind the church and west on 19th Avenue past the Sacred Heart Convent at 219 19th Ave. S.W. Turn south on 2nd St. S.W. and past the original St. Mary's School at 1912 2nd St. S.W. At the corner of 21st Avenue you'll see Flexford House, a pretty brick apartment building that dates to 1912. Turn left on Holy Cross Lane and head behind the hospital along the river. Circle the Holy Cross Hospital and turn up 24th Avenue to 4th Street. There you'll see some of the original commercial buildings (circa 1912) on Broadway Avenue (now 4th Street). Continue north on 4th Street past neat shops and galleries. The Flower Cottage was the Little Gem Confectionery in the 1940s (built about 1913) where you could stop for candy before heading to a Saturday afternoon matinee at the Tivoli Theatre. Look west as you pass 19th Street to Lean Manor, the site of Judge Rouleau's original sandstone mansion, and continue north to 17th Avenue.

**MUST SEES:** The European-style Sacred Heart Convent is a spectacular building, and St. Mary's Parish Hall is equally historic.

**HIDDEN TREASURES:** Don't miss the neat galleries on 4th Street. Step inside the Flower Cottage and imagine you're in the Little Gem Confectionery.

**PIT STOPS:** 4th Street is restaurant heaven so you won't have trouble finding a place to relax.

