

Language, Religion, Schools and Politics among German-American Catholic Settlers in St. Peter's Colony, Saskatchewan, 1903-1916.

by Clinton O. WHITE
*History Department
Campion College
University of Regina*

In January, 1916 Abbot Bruno Doerfler of St. Peter's Abbey stated in a circular entitled *German Schools in the Humboldt District*:

Thirteen years ago, a considerable number of German-speaking people immigrated from the United States into the Humboldt district ...
These people had an ideal. It was, that their children should become true Canadians without losing that precious treasure, the language of their forefathers. Their aspiration was that their children should become true bilingualists in the best sense of the word. The public schools of the then Northwest Territories did not seem adapted to the purpose. Hence they founded several private schools to apply their principles. These schools stood the test. In them everything was taught which is taught in the rural government schools. Furthermore, the pupils learnt an additional language ...¹

Abbot Bruno was responding to an attack on private schools in St. Peter's Colony by Reverend E. H. Oliver, President of the Presbyterian Theological College of Saskatoon and Vice-President of the Saskatchewan Public Education League, a body seeking educational reform. Oliver called for elimination of all languages except English in primary schools and departmental inspection of private schools. He also described a visit to four private schools north of Humboldt. Instruction in three, he stated, was half in English and half in German. Of the pupils in one he claimed that "their language and outlook are German." The fourth, he said, was

¹ Bruno DOERFLER, *German Schools in the Huntboldt District*, Muenster, January 15, 1916, St. Peter's Abbey Archives (hereafter cited SPAA), Parochial School Folder.

run by “German speaking teachers, and [had] recently added one that could speak English.” He then dealt more generally with other private schools. Of an area where a public school had just opened, he stated: there was “a private school up to the end of 1914. Last year they had a young girl with grade 8 for teacher – the best teacher they ever had.” And finally, he implied that Germans had conspired to avoid organizing school districts “in order to evade the law.”²

One need not read Oliver’s speech carefully to determine that his study was cursory and that his subject affected him emotionally. Nor was Abbot Bruno cool and collected when he responded. He was probably moved to speak as he did as much by the effects of Oliver’s statements as by the statements themselves. As he put it: “A hue and cry was raised ... in the press, on the pulpit, on the rostrum. Dr. Oliver’s words were repeated, exaggerated, misconstrued. The wildest stories were believed about these schools, and if one asked on what authority, the answer invariably was: ‘Dr. Oliver has said so’.”³

While Oliver was not the sole inspiration, his speeches were followed by other attacks on primary schools in non-Anglo-Saxon districts. Resolutions and letters poured in on the government. Delegations such as one from the Orange Lodge appeared. This group wanted abolition of separate schools, “English only” in primary schools, and action regarding private schools. But what the government was to do about the latter was not clear. As one delegate stated: “I don’t know, we have not gone into the situation”⁴

Unfortunately, parties commenting upon private schools, or indeed primary schools in general around Humboldt, often did so on the basis of incomplete or faulty information. In a letter to Premier W. M. Martin, Dr. O. D. Skelton of Queen’s University made this point ably:

² Rev. Edmund H. OLIVER, *The Country School in Non-English Speaking Communities in Saskatchewan*, Sask. Public Education League, 1915, pp. 10-12. Oliver Papers, Univ. of Sask. Archives.

³ DOERFLER, *German Schools*.

⁴ Meeting with L.O.L., January 20, 1916, Calder Papers, p. 2673, Archives of Saskatchewan (hereafter cited AS).

I note from the daily press that the school question in general and the language issue in particular are receiving a good deal of attention of a rather unfortunate kind in Saskatchewan at present. It does seem strange that questions of education should have a faculty of stirring up more prejudice and misinformation than almost any other issue in politics. But I suppose that its connection with racial and religious prejudices is what gives the agitator his opportunity.⁵

Had Abbot Bruno read the letter, he would have generally agreed with Skelton's views. After the School Act was amended in 1918 to restrict the use of languages other than English in public and separate schools, he wrote:

Of course, the attacks of the Orangemen are directed only ostensibly against the languages. The real object of the attack is the Catholic Church. . . . The foreign languages had to fall first, . . . and the attack on the private schools is made so that Catholics may not be able to get a Catholic education after the separate schools are abolished The spirit of the "Kulturkampf" is abroad in this country indeed.⁶

Rather interestingly, while expressing concern for Catholic schools, this letter refers to only English and French. Abbot Bruno's failure to mention German raises the question, whether he was less concerned about it than he had been three years earlier? The answer is no. When in 1916 he spoke in defense of "German schools" he was championing only a few schools, and he probably did so as much because they were Catholic as because they taught German. No doubt he had concluded much earlier that teaching German to all children of German ancestry in the colony was out of the question. When speaking of education in Bruno in 1906, one of his colleagues, Father Chrysostom Hoffman, noted "how difficult and almost impossible it would be to get German Catholic teachers for" public schools.⁷ Nor would it be easy to obtain good ones for private schools. In such circumstances, the Benedictines may have concluded that in the colony's schools German should run second to religious instructions. In any case, in 1909 when St. Peter's

⁵ Skelton to Martin, May 19, 1917, Martin Papers, p. 17629, AS.

⁶ Doerfler to Engel, January 26, 1919, Doerfler-Engel Correspondence, SPAA.

⁷ Father Chrysostom's Day Books, June 24, 1906, SPAA.

Chapter passed resolutions dealing with parish schools, the one discussing German came last in a list of nine and contained the qualification, "instruction in the English language and in the other branches usually taught in primary schools shall by no means be neglected." Even more revealing are the "Rules and Regulations" for "St. Peter's Parochial School" for 1914-16, one of which read "In our parochial schools the language of instruction is the English language. However, one hour's instruction is to be given to every class in the German language daily from which no pupil can be excused."⁸ While the regulation cannot be viewed as descriptive of all parochial schools, it is indicative of the direction in which they were moving even before the 1916 controversy.

The point of the foregoing discussion is that one must guard against being misled by even knowledgeable people when studying schools in St. Peter's Colony during the early years of the century. And one must be doubly wary of wartime statements. Both Abbot Bruno and Dr. Oliver were intelligent men. Yet neither presents an accurate picture of existing conditions.

The most important point to make about schools in the colony in 1916 is that most were indistinguishable from others in Saskatchewan, particularly where Catholics had congregated. The colony was huge, covering about 1,500 square miles. By 1916 it fell considerably short of being populated solely by German Catholics. Within it were roughly seventy public, two Catholic separate, and about fourteen private schools of the type Oliver criticized. In order to obtain a meaningful picture of primary schools in the area, an examination of all three classes must therefore be undertaken.

The first conclusion reached in such a study is that German Catholics never intended to set up many private schools. The first clues concerning their plans are found in remarks of Father Bruno shortly after his arrival from the United States in 1902. Soon after his tour of the Territories, which led to the founding of the colony, he wrote:

The Catholics at Regina have a Catholic Separate School... This school, like all Catholic Separate Schools in Canada, is supported by taxation, thus being on an equal footing with the government Public Schools,

⁸ See Parochial School folder, SPAA.

which system is certainly far more just than the much vaunted school system of our country, where Catholics are obliged by the state to help support godless public schools and, by their consciences, to support religious schools.⁹

His words show approval of separate schools. Yet, one cannot help thinking, in view of what followed that he was complementing the entire system. He, like a lot of the settlers, may have been favorably impressed by the half hour of religious instructions permitted in public schools.

The first type of school to arise was the *Catholic private school*. Soon after the first German-Americans arrived they established a small community, Leofeld. It would be the centre of their first parish and the site of their first private school, both named St. Boniface. Heavy immigration into the area began early in 1903. Late that year school began in a new church. In less than a year a second parish school opened, St. Peter's, at what became Muenster, the site chosen by Benedictines as the religious centre of the colony. Yet another appeared in 1905 – St. Henry's. It operated for a few months at Dead Moose Lake. Within a short time, however, a public school was erected. But it too functioned only briefly. In 1908 all pupils again attended a private school, and St. Henry's school house soon ceased to be used except for social events.

In contrast to earlier years, 1906 ushered in a three-year period in which about half of the private schools ever to exist in the colony began operating – in 1906 St. Bruno's, St. Joseph's and St. John's; in 1907 St. Bernard's and a school at Dana; and in 1908 St. Leo's, St. Paul's, St. Gregory's, and, as noted above, the Dead Moose Lake school again became a parish school. Only another seven were added in the colony at a later date, and four of these may actually have operated already in 1908. During the same period one of the colony's two *Catholic separate schools* also

⁹ “Father Bruno's Narrative, ‘Across the Boundary,’” *Sask. History*, X, 1, 1957, 13. This is an edited version, the original being published in 1903-04. Unlike public and separate schools, private schools received no government grants or money raised by taxation, nor were they subject to regulation by public authorities. Private schools were often referred to as parochial or parish schools.

appeared.

If only private and separate schools were examined, it might be concluded, as has been done, that German-American Catholics set up parochial schools because of previous experience with them. It might also be argued that the passage of three years before many schools appeared was to be expected, because people settling a wilderness have more pressing problems to deal with upon arrival. And if one suffered from an anti-Catholic bias, it might be claimed that the number of Catholic schools established in 1906-1908 were the result of the clergy pushing strongly for them then. Each reason contains an element of truth, but they fall short of explaining the burst of activity in 1906 or what might be called the Dead Moose Lake "flip-flop."

By examining efforts of German Catholics to set up *public schools* while creating their first private ones, a far better understanding of events of 1906 through 1908 is obtained. At once apparent is a strong desire among the newcomers for educational facilities. One acquires also a partial picture of what they wanted in the way of primary education. One also learns why Abbot Bruno suggested that the school laws had been tested and found wanting. Nor is that all. Many highly capable individuals are discovered among the settlers, people fluent in at least two languages, German and English, and well versed in the operation of politics and government. The average settler had probably spent twenty or more years in the U.S.

In the interval between the opening of St. Boniface and 1906, no less than seventeen groups of people in the colony took steps to establish public school districts. With one possible exception, all or at least a majority were of German origin. In nine of sixteen instances all taxpayers were Roman Catholic, and in six of the other seven, they formed an overwhelming majority.¹⁰

Certain conclusions can be drawn from such evidence. Upon arrival numerous German Catholics were prepared to establish public schools supervised by the government. Seventeen public schools as opposed to three private ones also suggest a preference for the

¹⁰ Dept. of Education (hereafter cited D. of E.), Public Schools, 935, 1046, 1055, 1069, 1086, 1102, 1150, 1299, 1353, 1415, 1433, 1434, 1466, 1473, 1747, 1872, 2145, AS.

former. Lastly, the number of Catholic taxpayers and school age children involved and the fact that the districts were scattered from one end of the colony to the other mean that people were probably acting with the blessing of most, if not all, of the Benedictines.

Efforts to get some of these schools operating are very interesting. They show people learning what was or was not permitted under the school laws. They make it easy to see why some might throw up their hands and say “perish the public school, let them be private.” And, among other things, one quickly concludes that many may have viewed the private school as a short-term arrangement.

Letters flowing between Joseph Hanacek, a trustee of the first district established, and the department are particularly intriguing. In 1904, trustees, having built their school house, advertized in vain for a teacher. They therefore sought to hire a bilingual settler in the area, who had taught in the U.S. and at what Hanacek referred to as “*the temporary school*” at Leofeld.¹¹ Hanacek lived within about ten miles of Leofeld, would have been there often, and would likely have known people’s intentions when they set up St. Boniface. That their plan was to phase it out in favor of a public school is suggested not only by his phrase but by other evidence.

Hanacek was one of the first twenty-six homesteaders to arrive in the area from the U.S. Of those twenty-six, four and possibly five others helped to create public schools between 1903 and 1906. So also did an uncle of Father Bruno. Indeed, even Rev. Alfred Mayer, Prior of the Benedictine community, signed a document relating to one of the districts. The absence of references to private schools prior to the opening of St. Boniface and the almost total absence between then and the latter part of 1905 also suggest that if settlers upon arrival planned to establish private schools, their number would have been small, certainly less than one near each church. The one at Dead Moose Lake, replaced for a time by a public school, was located in a church.

Hanacek's request brought a call from James Calder, Deputy Commissioner (later Commissioner) of Education, for the proposed teacher's certificates, experience, and so forth. No action was taken by the board to respond, the reason evidently being the arrival of

¹¹ Hanacek to Dep. Commr., July 19, 1904, *ibid.*, 935, emphasis mine.

a departmentally approved teacher. But parents were probably not altogether happy with their acquisition; perhaps the teacher was Protestant. In any case, the following year they requested “a German Catholic teacher.”¹²

A much more heart-rending plea concerning teachers came to the department from the St. Benedict district in February, 1905:

Ever since late last summer our school house has been ready and our children waiting In our effort [*sic.*] to . . . secure a teacher, we have spent dollars [*sic.*] in stamps . . . but all our letters are of no avail

Had we only been aware of the fact that there are no teachers to be had in Canada for public schools, we should then have put up private schools as we have plenty among our people that could teach our children, as none of our little ones are higher than the VI Grade. But as our case stands now, we can not put up private schools as well as public schools Do you blame us now for getting [*sic.*] out of passion and feeling as if we should like to shake Canada’s dust of [*sic.*] our feet and go back to U.S.A. where our children at least have good schooling.

Why we tell you this is that we want you to help us secure a teacher or permit us to choose one among our people, and pay her or him the salary out of the taxes . . . just the same as a government teacher Surely you will help us and grant our request, for something has got to be done, we can not go on like this much longer, it is past two years now, that our children had any school, for there [*sic.*] sake we went into debt to the government, very soon there will be a half years interest due, and see how much good our children had in that time, for all the pain we have taken, None: it is very discouraging to all of us.¹³

Only after passage of another ten weeks would they obtain a qualified teacher.

One could discuss problems arising elsewhere regarding teachers. Epsen, for example, could not obtain one at all because it was sixty miles from a railway. One could also relate how districts shared teachers. However, the point that the new settlers had serious difficulties in obtaining teachers, let alone German Catholic teachers, while having in their midst a substantial number of people whom they regarded as well qualified to teach, has been made.

Let us return now to the colony’s first public school district, St. Aloisius. Joseph Hanacek made more requests of the department

¹² H. A. McEwen to Calder, February 17, 1905, *ibid.*

¹³ Petition, February 20, 1905, *ibid.*, 1102.

touching upon a religious teacher than that concerning a German teacher. In one instance, he pointed out that parents wanted their children taught "as far as possible in the Roman Catholic Religion" and posed a number of questions relating to text books, holidays, and so forth.¹⁴ He would learn that his board could within limits designate religious holidays as school holidays. However, it could not use readers approved for Catholic separate schools for Catholic students. Nor could it hang a cross or image of the Lord in the school if parents of Protestant pupils objected.

Hanacek's findings no doubt spread or were soon discovered by others in the colony. The desire for a more Catholic education may thus have resulted in a fair number of German-American settlers coming to view the public school as one with disadvantages. That it did contain disadvantages would often be stated when people began working for private schools. Such opposition to public schools would be reinforced by the idealism mentioned by Abbot Bruno. Also, a substantial body of people wished the German language to have a larger place in the primary school than the School Act allowed. Then, too, the fact that private schools were considered cheaper to operate than public schools would not lack appeal to some of the settlers.

When German Catholics turned with energy to the creation of private schools, certain observations may be made. First, they demonstrated practicality in handling problems of their own making, that is, in establishing private schools where they had set up public school districts. Secondly, both clergy and laymen took part in the work. Thirdly, they showed themselves adept at applying pressure to politicians to attain their ends. And finally, since these activities usually took place while settlement was still going on, some confusion resulted in rural areas where people had difficulty deciding whether to set up a public or private school.

The first matter taken up was what to do in Epsen, Monastery and St. Henry school districts where churches had been built. During 1905 both Father Chrysostom Hoffman and Prior Alfred Mayer spoke to parishioners of Epsen on the subject of schools. Soon thereafter, a number of ratepayers petitioned for a vote on a by-law to raise money for building a school. When the poll was held, the

¹⁴ Hanacek to Calder, April 3, 1905, *ibid.*, 935.

by-law was unanimously rejected. In Monastery, a somewhat similar procedure was followed. Without money for a building, there could be no public school, and the field was clear for a private one. Thereafter when the department raised questions concerning a public school, trustees could respond that ratepayers had rejected their proposal to raise money for the necessary building.¹⁵

In St. Henry the problem was more difficult to solve since a school already had been constructed. A letter from Robert B. Blume, a resident of the area, to Calder indicates that the move from public to private took a good deal of effort by the clergy and others over a two-year period and involved schemes to obtain public funds for a Catholic school. Blume claims that at a meeting of the Dead Moose Lake congregation in March, 1906, it was agreed to hold a "Catholic school" in the school house that year. Prior Alfred, he said, promised to obtain a permit for the person who would conduct it and stated that at the end of the year the teacher would sign an affidavit that the school had been conducted according to the law. The scheme was never put into practice, nor was another one said to have been hatched six months later by Father Peter Windschiegel, the local pastor, and Prior Bruno, after the latter had replaced Father Alfred as Prior.

At the 1908 annual meeting, Prior Bruno and Father Windschiegel were again on hand; and after a speech by the former, the trustees agreed to rent the school building to the parish for fifty cents a month and to hold an eight-month "Catholic" school. Blume went on to say that at a later meeting of the whole congregation during which "many objections" were raised and "some very hot disputes" occurred, but at which "Rev. Bruno ... had the whole say," the rent was paid and it was announced that as of April 1 the whole parish would use the school,¹⁶ which it appears to have done for a period of time.

How much stock can be put in Blume's allegations is open to debate. Yet they cannot be simply dismissed. The truth of some of his statements can be established. It is also apparent that certain Benedictines and local Catholics concluded that they had gotten

¹⁵ Dept. Memo, circa 1909, *ibid.*, 1055.

¹⁶ Blume to Calder, March 13, 1908, M3 Turgeon Papers, 10a Inter-departmental Memoranda, Educ. Matters, 1906-1908, AS.

themselves into an inconvenient situation. It is not surprising that they should seek to benefit from the money they had invested in the school house.

In other localities where private schools arose the process was simpler. They were set up where settlers were almost exclusively Catholic and with the odd exception almost totally German. Generally, no action had been taken toward establishing public schools. Their promoters varied, at times being Benedictines and on other occasions, laymen.

A very active Benedictine in the creation of private schools was Father Chrysostom. Upon learning that some of his parishioners at Bruno were seeking a public school, he took steps to see that a private one was set up instead. Before long he announced an opening date and promised to run the school himself if a suitable teacher could not be found in time. As things turned out, he had to do just that for about six weeks. Scarcely had he gotten St. Bruno's functioning then he turned his attention to Dana where he also served as priest. There, too, discussion had commenced concerning a public school. However, here he did not succeed in getting a private school standing for over a year.¹⁷ And his efforts to forestall establishment of a public one also met with less success. His school operated for only a single term, Dana public opening in 1908. That he was less effective in Dana than in Bruno is not surprising. Unlike the population of the Bruno district, the Dana area contained only a minority of German Catholics.

Of the creation of other parish schools little is known beyond the fact that both clergy and laymen worked to found them. For an example of laymen actively establishing a Catholic school, one should look to Humboldt and the birth of the colony's first separate school. The study of this school merits discussion for other reasons as well. It bears out the author's contention that the types of primary educational facilities appearing in the colony were more the product of evolving circumstances than preconceived plans. Indeed, creation of a separate school at Humboldt in 1907 was probably as much the result of Protestant as of Catholic actions. Moreover, here we also witness for the first time the German Catholics' mastery of political pressure and we are provided with

¹⁷ Chrysostom's Day Books, 1906-1907.

certain insights into government policy.

When German settlers first moved to establish a public school at Humboldt in 1905 Catholics and Protestants cooperated in a fashion which even Dr. J. T. M. Anderson would have loudly applauded. Together they held meetings, drafted petitions and called upon the department to act promptly on a school for their children. The only division among participants was a rural-urban one. Farmers wanted a rural school, fearing the higher taxes of a village or town school. When it came time to vote on formation of the district sixty ballots were cast in favor and only eight against, the opposing votes apparently being those of rural people. Then in a flash, the community split.

After the ratepayers had formed the district they had to elect trustees. Three Protestants and four Catholics were nominated. One gathers there was an understanding that both Catholics and Protestants would be elected, but voting closely followed religious lines resulting in an all Protestant board.¹⁸ Four days later some of the same people who had helped create the public school district petitioned for a separate school. The request of Humboldt Catholics met all legal requirements. However, before the separate school opened just about everything that could go wrong went wrong.

Catholics, and rightly so in some instances, saw Protestants behind their problems. Among the unfortunate results were rising tension between the two groups and delay in providing some of the community's children with educational facilities. Of the situation as it developed, Fred Heidgerken, a Catholic spokesman, said "Under the existing conditions and in view of the difficulties our Catholics have had with the other party they feel that they cannot conscientiously send their children to the Public school."¹⁹ Consequently, the parish priest ran a German language, private school for about ten weeks during the winter of 1906-07.²⁰ This was the only occasion when German was a language of instruction rather than merely a subject for study in a school in Humboldt.

¹⁸ See D. of E., Public Schools, 1587, for 1905-06.

¹⁹ Heidgerken to Calder, November 3, 1906, D. of E., R. C. Separate Schools, 15, AS.

²⁰ Interviews Geo. Heidgerken and Mrs. Agnes Bauer, Humboldt, April 29, 1978.

Delay in getting the separate school established also caused Catholics to feel unjustly treated by the Government. The result was a flurry of letters designed to exert pressure on political figures, the most thought provoking for a politician being one from Heidgerken to Calder:

The writer ... wishes to call your attention to the political situation of this *Colony*. All the German Catholics are or will be belonging to the Liberal party within a year or two unless something is done by the party now in power to check the tide. (At the last election most of our German Catholics could not vote as they were no [*sic.*] citizens.) ... The people and the Clergy stand *united to a man* and if the separate school matter here in Humboldt is turned down by you it will be considered a blow at them by the present party in power and a breach will be created that can never be healed. The crisis is now at hand and the decision as to the Separate School .. will cast the die as far as the political situation is concerned. Our opposition ... have the majority in the Village but that is as far as their influence reaches and if turned down will not be able to do any harm ... If you will look into the matter you will find that I have told you the facts, and if you have the good of your party at heart you will act.²¹

The erection of the above mentioned Catholic schools created confusion among settlers in certain other areas. Just how widespread the confusion was is uncertain, but its existence is unquestionable. In the summer of 1905, St. James Public School District was set up by Catholic ratepayers. Before a school house was built, two new trustees were elected who throughout 1906 sought to disorganize the district. As late as 1908 they remained unwilling to build a school, despite the fact that "some thirty children" were without one. Ultimately the department was advised regarding the delay as follows: "some wanted a private, others a separate and then again Public. Now we are all agreed for a Public school."²²

A clearer picture of the views of both Benedictines and German Catholic lay people concerning primary schools is also gained from the deliberations at St. Peter's Abbey in 1909.

²¹ Heidgerken to Calder, July 7, 1906, Calder Papers, pp. 3195-3 196. Emphasis in original.

²² L. Kienlen to Dept., February 12, 1908, D. of E., Public Schools, 1433.

Since it is of prime importance that the young generation of the entire St. Peter's Colony receive as far as possible a thorough education, penetrated by a religious spirit, and as the German mother tongue should be cultivated as far as circumstances permit, be it hereby resolved.

Thus began the resolutions approved by the Benedictine priests assembled in Chapter on May 13, 1909. The resolutions provided for a Parish-School Commission which would include the Superior of the monastery and which would regulate parish schools, carry out inspections, examine teachers, certify them for teaching Christian doctrine, and supervise parish school expenditures. The Commission was also to ensure that existing parish schools were maintained; it was instructed to attempt to establish at least one school in each parish near the church as soon as possible. Furthermore, the resolutions provided for local parish school committees which would be subordinate to the Parish-School Commission. Finally, the resolutions dealt with the teaching of German.²³

Why the Benedictines waited until 1909 to pass such resolutions can only be speculated upon. Perhaps it was simply a matter of sensing no urgency to act until a fair number of parish schools were functioning. Whatever the reason, what followed can be explained with greater certainty. The resolutions provided for strong central control over parish schools. Had such control been exerted there would have been greater uniformity among them than existed four or five years later. Rather than being instructed on such matters as curriculum, local school committees appear to have been quite free to do as they saw fit. Two reasons for this situation have been isolated. First, uniformity was difficult to achieve and new schools were not easily established because of differing opinions among German Catholics. The second reason, and probably the more important one, related to manpower. As early as 1905 the Benedictines hoped to be joined in the colony by an order of nuns, perhaps with the idea that the sisters would take over the schools. In any case, soon after the formation of the majority of private schools, they actively sought a teaching order. Not until 1913 with the arrival of the first Ursulines would their efforts be rewarded.

²³ Chapter of St. Peter's Abbey : Chapter Resolutions, May 13, 1909, SPAA.

Until then the Benedictines may well have felt in view of their numbers that they could do little more than hold the line.²⁴ And by then the days for establishing any number of new private schools were probably drawing to a close.

Just what part the Parish-School Commission played in creating the Catholic schools which appeared between 1909 and 1915 remains to be determined. But it probably had a role since Sacred Heart Separate in Watson and the private school in Carmel were both set up in their respective parishes shortly following the resolutions. At the same time, it is not unreasonable to believe that in Watson, for example, action in 1909 may have been produced purely by local developments. There Orangemen established a lodge during the summer and it became common knowledge that the public school teacher would marry one of its founding members. Watson Catholics may simply have decided to assure their children of a more acceptable teacher.²⁵ Be that as it may, the petition to establish the separate school was drawn up within two weeks of the founding of the Orange Lodge.

Again, the role of the Parish-School Commission is also unknown in the struggle to maintain St. Bruno's as the sole school in Bruno. This struggle had its roots in the days the private school was set up in 1906 by Father Chrysostom. The opening of St. Bruno's did not end activities among German Catholics to establish a public school district. On the contrary, a district was, in fact, created and an all Catholic board elected. Then activity stopped.

Before long Bruno Protestants and perhaps others protested the lack of a public school. Departmental investigators concluded that the number of children was sufficient for payment of a provincial grant. They, together with other provincial officials, urged trustees to build a school house but to no avail. Finally in April, 1909 the department appointed an official trustee. The move precipitated a battle running to the end of the year.

Before the struggle ended numerous letters and no less than ten petitions had been drafted by persons almost exclusively of German

²⁴ These reasons were discussed with Father Matthew, one of the eldest of the Benedictines, May 23, 1978. He believed them to be accurate and could think of no others.

²⁵ *The Watson Witness*, April 9, December 3, 1909, April 1, 1910, AS.

Catholic background. They were sent to such parties as the local Liberal M.L.A. and Premier Walter Scott. Practically without exception all requests would be denied. Nevertheless, these documents reveal more about the school situation in St. Peter's Colony before World War One than do any others.

First of all, they confirm that German Catholics were not unanimous as to the type of school to be adopted. Having visited Bruno, Special Inspector P. R. McDonald stated: "I believe the majority of the ratepayers are favorable to a public school, but some of them do not feel at liberty to express their desire publicly."²⁶ McDonald's words are in part confirmed by Father Chrysostom "Three years ago in Sept., against the wishes of the majority in this district, but with the approval of the majority in the parish, I opened the parochial school here. . . ."²⁷ Just what proportion of people preferred a public school is unknown, but that it included German businessmen is certain. And about the fact that feelings ran deep there is also no question. After meeting one of his parishioners Father Chrysostom wrote: "Mr. Leisen told me that not so very long ago some of my (?) friends were trying hard to get up a petition to have me removed."²⁸

The reasons for differences among German Catholics at Bruno and no doubt elsewhere are easily explained. Nowhere are they more clearly stated than by Father Chrysostom:

Many parents do not understand that if the child's religious instruction should amount to anything, it must enter into the child's flesh and blood. It can do that only when all the text books are Catholic and the teacher is Catholic and the children are taught to pray.

Now the public school in Sask. is just a little bit better than in the States. Here where the majority of the rate payers demand it, catechism may be taught from half past three till four.

The child is already tired and wishes to get home. You haven't time to ask all the questions, leave alone explaining and making it interesting. The school books are the public school books, even if all children are Catholic. At least four months every year the school must be open and if you cannot obtain a Catholic teacher you must engage

²⁶ McDonald to McColl, May 30, 1908, D. of E., Public Schools, 1587.

²⁷ Chrysostom to Bertha, October 9, 1909, Chrysostom-Sister Letters, SPAA.

²⁸ Chrysostom's Day Books, November 2, 1909.

another. The school may open with the Lord's Prayer – no sign of the cross, no Hail Mary etc. It's this halfhour religion that causes many to favor the public school and makes it difficult to maintain parochial schools.²⁹

With these few words, Father Chrysostom came nearer than anyone else to explaining early developments relating to schools in the colony.

As already suggested, during the dispute, private school supporters attempted to pressure numerous political figures to maintain their school as the only one in Bruno. And they did so with more fire than the Humboldt Catholics, perhaps because they were now full-fledged voters. But their efforts were unproductive. Premier Scott spoke frankly to this group of people about his government's school policy. Having stated that the petitioners were ill-informed and having detailed the department's reasons for appointing an official trustee, he declared:

You say that your people do not wish to be regarded as uneducated Galicians but I beg to point out to you that the result of their refusal to set up a public school is that a number of children of parents who are British subjects by birth are growing up uneducated. No doubt, as you say, the ratepayers feel competent, and I believe they are competent, to manage their own affairs but it will be just as well for them to understand first as last, that, until they are willing to manage these affairs in accordance with the laws of the Government to see that they are managed in accordance with these laws.

I observed that you are a Liberal and a supporter of this Government but I feel that our action must alter your position. I would point out to you that if we should consent to stand back and permit non-compliance with the law on the part of a community with result that a dozen or a score of children are reared without education, we should not be worthy to be called a Liberal Government.³⁰

Thus did German Catholics at Bruno learn the same lesson as the Humboldt Protestants: when it came to maintaining certain basic principles, Scott, Calder and company played no favorites.

Scott's letter failed to end the battle. But even before it was written, Father Chrysostom admitted defeat. It is surprising, in view

²⁹ Chrysostom to Bertha, October 9, 1909, Chrysostom-Sister Letters.

³⁰ Scott to Joseph Ehrmantrant, October 19, 1909, Ehrmantrant file, SPAA.

of how hard he had fought, how philosophically he accepted it: “As regards the school question, I think we have partly won and partly lost. Won in as far as it is too late for them to build this year; lost – in as far as they intend to open a public school within two weeks in a rented building.”³¹ But meanwhile, as the struggle was shaping up, he had set out to transform his own school radically. Time devoted to religion instruction was reduced; German was cut to one hour per day; the school was placed under departmental inspection; and a new, probably fully qualified, teacher was hired.³²

As with the establishment of Watson’s Sacred Heart Separate and Carmel’s Catholic Private schools, the Parish-School Commission probably played a role in the demise of St. Gregory’s and St. Paul’s in 1913-14. The closure of St. Gregory’s meant the loss of the only Catholic school in the parish. Of the two, it closed its doors first. In a letter to the department a Mr. A. J. Ries stated: “After conducting a private school for five years and finding that we were unable to finance the same in a proper way, it was decided to organize a public school.”³³ That the Commission was interviewed concerning the change and gave its approval there can be little doubt in the light of what is known about both Ries and the financial position of St. Gregory’s parish. St. Paul’s, meanwhile, situated alone out in the country and serving families belonging to parishes with better private schools, was probably simply allowed to collapse.

Having examined developments regarding primary schools in St. Peter’s Colony from 1903 to 1915, it is now possible to take up Dr. Oliver’s criticisms. Just how valid were they? A number of conclusions can be drawn. When Oliver stated that certain schools north of Humboldt taught a substantial amount of German, he was correct. When he claimed that some teachers left a good deal to be desired, he was also correct. But when he charged that children around St. Gregor had been “crippled for life” by attending a private school he was beginning to tread on slippery ground. And when he implied that the private school in St. Henry’s district had employed

³¹ Chrysostom to Annie, October 18, 1909, Chrysostom-Sister Letters.

³² D. of E., Public Schools, 1587, 1908-09; Chrysostom’s Day Books, 1909; Ehrmantrant file.

³³ A. J. Ries to Minister, July 7, 1913, D. of E., Public Schools, 3196.

only German speaking teachers, he ceased to be telling the truth. Had he remained in the area for even one day he would have had a very different story to tell.

Another weakness in Oliver's criticism arose from his failure to visit all private schools. Had he done so, he might well have complemented St. Peter's and St. Boniface. But he would have had his eyes opened even more by St. Bruno's. Not very long after he made his thoughts public, Father Chrysostom wrote:

Recently I've had the public school inspector visit the parochial school and he expressed himself well satisfied. He thought our children very good in English, in fact real bright. He also visited the public school, and made a most outrageous report of that school. He was a bigotted Methodist at that.³⁴

St. Bruno's private school had, by then, been taught by Ursulines for over two years.

Lastly, had Oliver visited all schools within or bordering upon the colony, he would have found other reasons to temper his conclusions. Criticism could justly have been leveled at Anglo-Saxon or Irish settlers for just about everything German-Americans were accused of except over-emphasis on the German language; but the latter occurred only in a limited number of cases. In view of what has been said, it is no wonder that Premier Scott answered Orangemen concerning German Catholic private schools as follows:

At Muenster where most of these schools are, English is as well taught as in the public schools. The children going to these schools are children of American-German parentage. The parents speak English very well and their children are taught it. There are no serious problems with them.³⁵

Few people had a better grasp of the overall school situation in Saskatchewan, but even Scott failed to note certain exceptions around Humboldt.

³⁴ Chrysostom to Sister, December 14, 1916, Chrysostom-Sister Letters

³⁵ Meeting with L.O.L., January 20, 1916, Calder Papers, p. 2678.