

Interview with Father Harold Kost and Stella LeBlanc

June 21, 1978

Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection

St. Cloud State University Archives

Interviewed by Calvin Gower and John LeDoux

Gower: This is an interview conducted by Calvin Gower and John LeDoux for the Central Minnesota Historical Center. Today is July 21, 1978. And we're interviewing Father Harold Kost, K-O-S-T, and Stella LeBlanc. And how do you spell your last name?

LeBlanc: Capital L-e, Capital B-l-a-n-c. It's French for white.

Gower: Sure. Okay. And they are—Father is the priest here at the Belle Prairie--

Kost: Holy Family Parish at Belle Prairie, which is Route 4, Little Falls.

Gower: Okay. And Stella has been a member of this parish all of her life, and her family has been a member of this going back many years. Okay, let's start out with you, Father. Tell us a little bit about your own background, then we'll go over to her, then we'll get over to the history of the church.

Kost: Yeah, very fine. I'm starting my fifth year as pastor at Holy Family Parish at Belle Prairie. But I know the area well because in 1950 I was assigned to the St. James' Parish in Randall. A very close friend of mine, Father Robert Smith, was then pastor here and I go back and forth at that time in the 50's so that I became acquainted and came to know the families at Belle Prairie, which was then only a parish of about 120 to 130 families. Now it is 270 families because it's a suburban parish of Little Falls. But I came to know especially the French families that are here—

the Schillings, the LeBlancs and the Houles and the LeDoux—very well because I would visit with Father Smith in the parish as he did in my parish in Randall. Well, then I was gone to Sauk Centre and then to St. Cloud at Holy Spirit. In 1974, Bishop Speltz assigned me back to this area and I was very happy to come because I was no stranger in the first place and I know the important historical significance of this parish and I have a minor in History from St. John's University so when I came here I was delighted to be in the most important parish in the diocese because it's the mother parish of all the other parishes. And going back to 1852, and the missionary priest that came here, Father Pierz—Father Francis Xavier Pierz came here at the invitation of Bishop Cretin. And if you're familiar in Minneapolis, Cretin High School is named after him. He was the first bishop assigned to this area by the Vatican—by the Holy Father. And his area included Minnesota, North and South Dakota. That was his diocese. And he invited Father Pierz, who was a native from Yugoslavia—from Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. He was already 65 years old when he came here as a missionary. He had served for almost twenty years as a missionary over in northern Michigan. And Bishop Cretin, then, sent out an invitation for missionaries to come to work among the Indians in central Minnesota, which was the Chippewa, the Sioux, and the Winnebago. And this was the culminating area for those Indians, right in this area where they built Fort Ripley in 1848. They put that fort way up there—the northernmost fort in the United States Army—in order to be the buffer between the three tribes of Indians in this area at that time. And Father Pierz came to be their missionary. He came at the invitation of Bishop Cretin and came to St. Paul from Michigan. And that's all written in several books. It's written particularly in a book authored by Father Furian— In Charity Unfeigned—which is the book written when our diocese celebrated its 100th anniversary. And that's the story, chiefly of Father Pierz who then came up into this area, to old Crow Wing which is now a park and that

was a park through the instigation of Bishop Bartholome. He saw the significance of that area which was forgotten-forgotten, actually forgotten. And purchased the land and persuaded the state to make it into a state park. It has now come back into a significance for the history of this area. Well, that's where Father Pierz came. A Frenchman who was a trader of this area met him in St. Paul. He was a businessman. His name was Beauliea.

Gower: How did he spell his name?

Kost: B-yeah, Stella.

LeBlanc: B-E-A-U-L-I-E-A. Beauliea.

Kost: Yeah.

Gower: B-E-A...

LeBlanc: L-I-E-A.

Gower: Okay. Beauliea.

Kost: That's right, he was--

LeBlanc: French.

Kost: Quite a wealthy merchant too, who traded with the Indians at Crow Wing. He had a—he had a store there and-in fact, his trading post-his home is still in this diocese. It's the oldest building in Morrison County. It's just south of the camp entrance and Larry Morant lives there now. That's where the accident this morning occurred—just south of his entrance there.

Gower: Could I interrupt just a minute? Now there had been protestant missionaries in this general area anyways back in the 1820s and '30s or not?

LeBlanc: I know of-the most prominent one was of course, Fredrick Ayer and he came-he came in 1848 but his wife and family didn't come until the following spring, 1849. And he had a mission here with a school and church. And there he started the first school in the county.

Gower: So, as far as the immediate area is concerned, though, there had not been much missionary work before Father Pierz? Is that your impression, or--

LeBlanc: Well, yes. Father Pierz did the most work. Like this when Father LaFleche came here in the late 1830's he just was passing through on his way to western Canada. He was from Three Rivers, Canada you see. He was on his way through and he said-asked where we had our present cemetery.

Gower: See, I'm somewhat familiar with the missionaries, but I don't know about this immediate area. But I know like the Pond Brothers were down--

LeBlanc: South.

Gower: --in Minnesota River Valley and then some --- well, I think Ayer earlier was made up farther north--

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: And a little more east--

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: And so on-then Boutwell and Williamson and so on.

LeBlanc: Right. Yes. He was quite a bit in the northeastern part of the state.

Gower: Yeah, but not very much right here up on the Mississippi then. Sure. Okay.

LeBlanc: Well--

Kost: He had a mission just a half mile north of here.

Gower: That was in 1848, though.

Kost: 1848, yeah.

Gower: I was talking about even earlier than that.

Kost: Earlier than that.

Gower: Sure.

LeBlanc: There wasn't too much, I don't think -- missionary activity here before 1848.

Gower: In this immediate area. Okay. That's what I was wondering about.

LeBlanc: Maybe a little bit if a missionary would come through but wouldn't really stay here very long. You know, he'd come through and--

Gower: Sure.

LeBlanc: --try to work with the Indians a bit, you know, and things like that. But I don't think anyone really stayed here and established a school or anything like that before missionary Fredrick Ayer.

Gower: Now you had the French people living here essentially. People of French descent.

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: Is that right? Would it be almost completely French?

LeBlanc: Well, Belle Prairie Township and Ripley Township, you know, in Morrison County, was just about solid French, just about. Belle Prairie Township was settled first. Ripley Township was part of the Fort Ripley Reservation. Fort Ripley Military Reservation -- and it was open to settlers after the reservation was closed, you know. The soldiers left and things like that in 1877, and it was opened to settlers. But then evidently, these French in Belle Prairie wrote back to Canada. These were French Canadians, by the way. They were not French from France.

Gower: They did not come from France.

LeBlanc: That's very important to me because they were-they had been in the wilderness and in, of course, the larger cities of Canada for 200 years before they came to Minnesota. So they were not Europeans. They were really Americans who just moved farther west. They were from Quebec.

LeDoux: I'm just curious-both my own family background-as to when possibly some of these French families originally came into Minnesota. Do you have any information on that?

LeBlanc: Yes. There were people here-at the time of the Ayer's there were. There were French people here. Because we have a letter in the museum written by Mrs. Ayer and it rather amuses me because she didn't always agree with these French settlers. So there were French settlers here at the time of the Ayers. And the French settlers sent their children to this Ayer's school for education because it wasn't only Christian education you know. It was academic education, too.

Gower: Were there settlers essentially people who been involved in the fur trading before and then they settled here or did they come in as settlers to farm?

LeBlanc: They were mixture. Some of these, like-maybe I shouldn't mention names, but there is one family that I know that is quite prominent still in the county and their ancestor came as a fur trader. And they have no Indian blood, but he was a fur trader and he married another-a-into another family that had come as settlers, you see. They were just-some of them came so early, even before 1852, and the land had not even been surveyed, so you might call these squatters.

Gower: Sure, right.

LeBlanc: But after the land was surveyed, well then, they straightened the papers-everything out and it was all settled. It was legally settled.

Gower: Now, Father, what I was getting at in part was when Father Pierz came here though, he was to be a missionary among the Indians.

LeBlanc: Right.

Kost: That's his purpose for coming, right.

Gower: Not to work with these French people living here.

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: No, that wasn't his first assignment. What happened was-to continue my story, when Beauliea picked him up in St. Paul, he-or picked him up in Sauk Rapids he came to Sauk Rapids which was then the big center in central Minnesota. Not St. Cloud.

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: Sauk Rapids. Sauk Rapids was, then, was wiped out on 1886, April the 14th by a terrible tornado. Maybe, I imagine you have that in your records down there too.

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: We have some pictures.

Kost: My grandfather remembers that my-Grandpa Trace. I'm half Irish and half Dutch and German-but my grandpa remembers that tornado which cut a swath across from St. Cloud to Buckman and just raised havoc. And that was the end of Sauk Rapids. But at the time in the 40's and 50's, Sauk Rapids was the hub of central Minnesota. Big mill. Well, anyway Father Pierz came up by boat. And then Beauliea brought him up here and he stopped at Belle Prairie to visit Bisson who was living here-owned the land that the parish now stands on.

Gower: How did Bisson spell his name?

Kost: B-I-S-S-O-N. Bisson. And he was married to Beauliea's sister. Alright. So Father Pierz stopped there – no doubt to be refreshed on their way to Crow Wing, which is twenty miles north of here – in 1852. And then, there's no doubt, they discussed the fact that they had these Catholic French settlers here who had no permanent pastor. And Father Pierz, a very – was a very zealous man and the concern for the Catholic people, and perhaps to his amazement, to find out there were so many white people here to take care of. And so then he went to Crow Wing and established the parish there because that's why he was called. He was called to serve the Indians and the – and Beauliea, or whoever was in charge of Crow Wing, gave him a couple of acres in the settlement which they kept until 1921. It was a parish until 1921, I believe.

LeBlanc: It's a – I think – church.

Kost: Yes. It's now in the Duluth diocese. And the parish existed. And the church that Father built was there until 1921. And the cemetery is still there although it was – it was pillaged because when Bishop Bartholome wrote in there – unfortunately it wasn't fenced or guarded and then the intact cemetery was vandalized because it wasn't protected. And that's a shame. That's a shame because otherwise, you'd really have a historical connection with the last century and the developments here. Well, anyway, Father Pierz then came back here the same year and founded this parish. It didn't have the name of Holy Family at first. I think it was--

LeBlanc: St. Andrew's.

Kost: St. Andrew's Parish, right, and its first records were kept at Crow Wing. And then it developed and developed and its first pastor that lived here was Father Buh – Monsignor Buh, who was the apostle to the Duluth diocese. And he lived to a ripe old age as did Father Pierz. Father Pierz lived to be in his nineties before he went back to Yugoslavia, where he died.

Gower: Now, what was this – Father Buh?

Kost: B-U-H.

LeBlanc: B-U-H.

Gower: B-U-H.

Kost: He was immortalized in this area by having a township named after him. The neighboring township to the east is Buh Township. B-U-H.

Gower: And he – now -- the parish at Crow Wing was for Indians primarily?

Kost: And white people.

Gower: And the white. And this parish at Belle Prairie was for the whites?

Kost: Yes, it was a white parish.

LeBlanc: Yes, very definitely.

Gower: And it was founded in 1853.

Kost: 1852.

Gower: '52. Same year as the other one. Okay.

Kost: I don't know if you have a copy of In Charity Unfeigned in your library down there for your Historical Center, do you?

Gower: I don't think so.

LeDoux: Not in our center, but there may be one in the library.

Kost: Okay. Now to continue after that phone ringing. Father Pierz did work among the Indians very zealously. But also went about this area founding parishes for the White settlers. He would found them and then he would -- then he would go on and leave the parish in charge of another missionary. Father Pierz was -- it was his influence that brought St. John's Abbey and the University to Minnesota. He wanted settlers to come into this virgin area and he wrote to his own Yugoslavia. He wrote to Germany and his letters are recorded in In Charity Unfeigned in his appeal to bring people here to settle this area. And the German people listened to him. And he wrote for priests to come. He wrote to LaTrobe, Pennsylvania, where St. Vincent's Abbey was established in the -- a well established Benedictine Abbey in the middle of the nineteenth century. Abbott Wimmer, he has people in this area. The Wimmers living now in Buckman and

Pierz. A very close friend of mine, Duke Wimmer, was a barber in St. Cloud -- was a direct descendant of Abbott Wimmer's family. And Abbott sent the Benedictines out here at the request of Father Pierz, and that's how St. John's came to be in Minnesota. And they first settled just south of St. Cloud where the Children's Home is. That's in Holy Spirit Parish now. But they couldn't get clear title to the property from Mr. Wilson or whoever had the property, and then they went west to what was called the bush, which is now St. John's, the beautiful campus of St. John's on Lake -- what did they call it? Lake St. Louis, which is now Lake Sagatagan. And that briefly is how the Benedictines came, but you see influence of a man like Father Pierz. And the German settlers of this area -- when the French wouldn't go further east, then the Germans came to Rich Prairie, which is the beautiful fertile land around Pierz, Minnesota, the town named after Father Pierz. And that's where he retired. He spent his retiring years -- before he went back to the old country -- at Pierz.

Gower: Could Father Pierz speak French?

LeBlanc: Oh, very well.

Kost: Yes.

LeBlanc: I can explain that.

Kost: Go ahead, sure.

LeBlanc: Just a min -- see, at the time when Father Pierz was growing up -- Napoleon you know, the--

Kost: Napoleon Bonaparte.

LeBlanc: Bonaparte, the ruler of France, somehow had control of the area where Father Pierz lived and the French language was required of all the students in schools so Father Pierz spoke very good French. Very good French.

Gower: Sure, yeah.

Kost: And he invited people to come in here to settle and those who listened to him most avidly were the Germans who settled here and settled in Stearns County along the Sauk River. You see, Jacobs Prairie was founded shortly after Belle Prairie. And he seemed to have a great liking for the name Prairie – because you’ve got North Prairie, Long Prairie, Belle Prairie, Jacobs Prairie – out in this open land.

Gower: And did – Belle Prairie name – that came when Father Pierz came here?

Kost: He gave it – there wasn’t--

LeBlanc: I – I’ve never really been able to trace the origin, but I would think it would be.

Kost: Oh, yes.

Gower: Oh, there was no name.

Kost: And he wrote – and he called Pierz Rich Prairie. That’s still Rich Prairie Township. The name that he gave to the – to – to this area. The significance of the man, I don’t think, is really appreciated in Minnesota history.

LeBlanc: No. for a long time it wasn’t.

Kost: Because not only was he important as a missionary, he was important for getting settlers into this area, much like Archbishop Ireland was here for the southwest area of Minnesota who –

he invited the Irish primarily to come over here. That's why you've got the McDonalds and the McDowells and the Traceys and the Caseys all – those big families in southern Minnesota and central Minnesota. Like my own family – my background is the Traceys who came at that time on my mother's side to St. Patrick's Parish, which is ten miles east of St. Cloud, where they had the Irish settlement. And Father Pierz thus settled these, but he worked both among the Indians and the white people.

Gower: Okay. I wonder if--

Kost: And he spoke Chippewa very fluently. He learned--

Gower: He learned Chippewa.

Kost: --the Chippewa language over in the Michigan – in Michigan, you see.

Gower: Oh. Over there, sure.

Kost: That was a factor you see.

LeBlanc: Is it okay if I say a word?

Gower: Sure.

Kost: Go ahead.

LeBlanc: See, he worked his way west, you know. He came first to Detroit, Michigan. Then he worked. I think he worked for Ohio at one point or someplace like that. He worked his way--

Gower: That's all in the book.

LeBlanc: Yes, I--

Gower: I think – I have my – I have the impression that the whole influence of the Germans and probably of the Catholics in general – this would be the German Catholics – has not received as much attention in Minnesota history in part because I think maybe they haven't done as much in promoting it. I don't know. I've talked to people about this and you find, I think, a strong element of the influence on the Scandinavians and so on. In fact, I'm not from Minnesota originally, but then when I lived out in Colorado, I thought Minnesota was almost completely Scandinavian. See, that's the kind of impre – and where – and actually the largest single immigrant was the Germans.

Kost: That's right.

Gower: And see, you don't even realize that.

Kost: A very stable German element. These people are stable, you know, and very industrious. The Polish are also settled in this area. They came a little bit later. They listened also to Father Pierz's plea as also did Yugoslavians and Slovenians. We have a Slovenian parish in this diocese. St. Stephen, just north-west of St. Cloud, came here at the invitation of Father Pierz. And he and Father Buh went back to the old country pleading for young missionaries. And many of the pioneer missionaries were the young men who came at the request. Father Tomazin, Monsignor Buh, Father Joseph Buh was another one. They came here at the request of Father Pierz, from the old country, from Slovenia where Father Pierz came from. And worked in this area, too. Father Lautishar, a young priest who was Father Pierz's assistant, and went on a sick call across Red Lake and froze to death on a missionary – on a sick call to help sick Indians and the Indians were just crest fallen because of that and so was Father Pierz.

LeBlanc: Wasn't Father Pierz staying at Belle Prairie at the time when that happened?

Kost: Then he was staying right here at Belle Prairie when it happened.

LeBlanc: I think so. I think it happened--

Kost: And then they brought Father Lautishar's body and buried it at Crow Wing. His body was buried there until 19—the 20s. And then they moved it up to Cloquet. And now we're trying to get it back to where it belongs. Bishop—the Bishop Speltz is trying to get the diocese of Duluth to let him move his body back to where it was originally. But whether we get that back or not, I don't know—to old Crow Wing cemetery.

Gower: Now what about your background? Was your family here in the 1850s?

LeBlanc: Oh, yes. The reason I'm so interested in local history—because my great-grandmother used to stay—come and spend a week or two at our house and she used to tell about the olden times, you know. And I was always interested in the Indians and the things that happened in those days. And she used to always say how she and her brother were married at a double wedding by Father Pierz. During those days, it didn't mean too much to me. I just remembered it. Well, when I became interested in historical work, well, one of the greatest thrills was looking through Father Pierz's book of baptisms and marriages in the Chancellery in St. Cloud and finding there that it had been right. That Joseph Doucette and Julius Heroux had been married at the same mass as Michel Heroux and Margaret LeDoux. And that proved that that story that my great-grandmother had been telling me was always true.

Gower: Do you know what year that was approximately?

LeBlanc: Oh well, it would take me a little while to find it. I have it in my book, but I don't—it was about, may be 1861 or something like that. It was a little bit before the Indian uprising. Because they were newly married at the time of the Sioux rebellion.

Gower: So your family was here in the 1850s?

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: And they came here to settle to farm?

LeBlanc: Well, the Heroux side of the family--

Gower: How did they spell that?

LeBlanc: Well, there were three different ways to spell it. So the common way now is H-E-R-O-U-X. And the second Michel Heroux, the son, you know—the one that was married the same time as my great-grandmother—he always spelled it A-R-O-U-X. And the western branch of the family spells it E-R-E-O-U-X. But it's all the same family. They're all—it's the father and two sons—they just spell their name differently. That's—now that branch of the family, they were settlers. They were small farmers.

Gower: --came in to farm.

LeBlanc: Small farmers, you know. They had a lot to do with developing the homestead. But my great-grandfather Doucette came in a birch bark canoe. He was out to seek his fortune. He came from—you know, in those days, there were large families in Quebec, very large families. Twelve, fifteen, eighteen children. And the population already was very, very dense. So what were you going to do when you grew up? You had to go out and seek your fortune, which they did. And he—first, this great-grandfather Joseph first went down around Detroit and in

Michigan, working in the woods, you know—lumbering I suppose, and worked his way, I suppose he heard there was a French settlement here. And he came in a birch bark canoe down the Mississippi to old Crow Wing.

Gower: This was in what year, about?

LeBlanc: I wouldn't—well, in the 1850's. I don't--

Gower: And this was D-O-U-C-E-T-T-E.

LeBlanc: Right, although the church records have it D-O-U-C-E-T also.

Gower: Okay.

LeBlanc: The names are that way.

Gower: Sure, that's right. And so they were involved then in the development of this church too, from the beginning.

LeBlanc: Oh, yes.

Gower: They were some of the first members of the church.

LeBlanc: Right, right. For instance, you see, this great-grandfather and great-grandmother were married by Father Pierz.

Gower: Yeah, right. And in this church?

LeBlanc: Well, not in this building. See this building was built in 1877.

Gower: That's right. But I mean—but it was here in this--

LeBlanc: In this area.

Gower: It wasn't down in St. Cloud.

LeBlanc: Oh, no. No, no, no. Very definitely it was at Belle Prairie.

Gower: And was—were—would you say that those people in that parish at the beginning were almost completely French?

LeBlanc: Right at the very beginning I think they were completely French, but by 1900, there were some German people and some Irish perhaps.

Gower: And what about the sermons—they were in French?

LeBlanc: They were in French until Father Peliet came in 1917 or something like that.

Gower: How did he—how was that name spelled?

LeBlanc: P-E-L-L-E-T.

Gower: P-E-L-L-E-T.

LeBlanc: And he was interesting because he was a French person, but he was from France and he had adjusted his French to the French of the area, but his sister later came to be his housekeeper and the people didn't understand her—because she spoke true French.

Gower: Was this French quite a bit different from the French of France?

LeBlanc: A little bit, a little bit. They used local words more, you see and they—there was a little difference, but if you knew the one you could very—and you listened intensely, you could understand it, but they complained that they couldn't understand her, you know.

Gower: Now how did the—now the first minister—the first priest was this Father Buh, did you say, or not?

Kost: The first—the very first priest was Father Pierz.

Gower: Yeah.

Kost: Second pastor was Father Buh.

Gower: And that was B-U-H?

Kost: B-U-H.

Gower: And now he spoke French?

Kost: He must have been able to speak French.

LeBlanc: I imagine, because he had to.

Gower: Even though he was Slovenian.

Kost: He came from the same area as Father Pierz.

Gower: Oh, so maybe he had learned French there.

LeBlanc: He had learned French in the schools because it was required, I think.

Gower: That's right. Sure.

LeBlanc: --same area as Father Pierz.

Kost: He lived in this parish for twenty-five years.

Gower: Twenty-five years.

Kost: Yes. He lived in this house.

LeBlanc: He liked the area. He called it--

Kost: Yes, that's right.

Gower: He called it what?

LeBlanc: He called it beautiful Belle Prairie. Well, of course--

Gower: Beautiful--

LeBlanc: --Belle means beautiful--

Gower: It does mean beautiful.

LeBlanc: --so he just repeated the beautiful.

Gower: Sure. Beautiful Belle Prairie.

LeBlanc: He liked it here. His sister--

Gower: Now what -- oh, pardon me!

LeBlanc: His sister came to keep house for him and she died in 1871 and is buried in our parish cemetery.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: That's a fact that isn't very well known either, and I think it's quite important, because, you know, she -- her name was Catherine Buh.

Kost: She's buried right here in that cemetery.

LeBlanc: Yes, we have -- there's a small stone yet, you know. You can see -- she was buried there.

Gower: Was the -- what was the size of this parish in those earlier years?

LeBlanc: It was surprisingly big, it was surprisingly big. Some place in the Catholic Almanac, I think -- 300 souls I read.

Gower: This is way back in the 1850s?

LeBlanc: No, let's say 1860s or something like that.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: It was surprisingly big because you see, people had large families and there you look and you look and you travel the country now -- you'll see a small grove of trees and some lilac bushes and some rhubarb and no buildings. There had been a home there you see. A small homestead and they've moved away, see.

Gower: And now what was the first church like? Was it just a log building and so on?

LeBlanc: I'm not too familiar, but I think it was located just a little south of this house.

Gower: But you did -- they did meet in a church.

LeBlanc: Oh, very definitely. Oh, yes.

Gower: Beginning in 1852 or '53.

Kost: They built a church for father Pierz almost immediately.

Gower: Yeah.

Kost: A little log church.

LeBlanc: There was a saw mill, you know. Mr. Ayer had a saw mill. I didn't know just exactly where, but I think the census, you know, the United States censuses of 1860, has a record of his saw mill. So, there was a saw mill in the area. So, there would be a chance to get boards for the church.

Gower: Right, sure, uh huh. John?

LeDoux: When was the first -- was there a school here for quite some time now, or was that fairly recent?

LeBlanc: What kind of a school do you mean?

LeDoux: A -- we--

Kost: A boarding school.

LeDoux: A school for children attached to the church here.

LeBlanc: Oh well, the -- before the sisters came I imagine the catechism was taught by the priest.

Kost: That's right.

LeBlanc: And in the home. And it was taught by rote. It was a -- peculiar situation, because the children went to public school, you know, to the area school which was taught in English and they only spoke in French. And they learned their prayers and all their devotions in French so they had to be repeated, you know, and learned by rote. It was that type of an education. The

prayers and the catechism was all -- they didn't have a book because they couldn't read the French. They read the English only. It was a rather unusual situation.

LeDoux: Now, where was the public school, then, they went to? Was it close?

LeBlanc: Well, the public school was the school that was established by Mr. Ayer. And it went to a civil school -- it was not, after while it wasn't a private school anymore. It was the first public school in Morrison County.

Gower: Oh, was--

LeDoux: Was that here in Belle Prairie--

LeBlanc: Right. Just about, I'd say, a half a mile north of here.

Gower: Oh, that was the first public school in Morrison County.

LeBlanc: In the whole county. And it was a public school then, see, and that's where the local people went to school. So they learned in English -- all their knowledge was in English. But their prayers and all their devotions were always in French, and they couldn't read it so they had to learn it by heart. Their parents could have read it to them though.

LeDoux: I'm just curious. As far as -- now the children would be reading in English and learning English, yet it was not until 1917, I believe, you said that the actual changeover started coming to saying the Mass in English.

LeBlanc: Well, the Mass is in Latin.

LeDoux: No, the Mass -- yeah, okay. But as far as speaking French predominantly.

LeBlanc: The sermon and things. Well, Father Pellet was very tactful, or-- I don't know how you would say it, when he first started the changeover. For quite a few years, he would have half of his sermon in French, then he'd translate it into English, you know, so that if you couldn't understand the French, you could get the English and if you couldn't understand the English, you could get French.

Gower: This was after 1917 for quite a few years.

LeBlanc: For many years, for many years.

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: Same thing he would say, you know, back, he is say it in part--

Gower: So you could adjust to this. There was sort of a period of adjustment to shifting over to the English.

LeBlanc: Yes, right. So that -- like -- well, one of my grandfathers was educated in college so he knew English in -- from -- because in Canada, they taught English in college, you know, it was a part. So he and then my mother and me could all understand both sermons, you know. But the people, the older people who didn't know the English could get the sermon and then the young children could get the sermon, see.

LeDoux: Was there any resistance then as far as the sermons being changed to English? Was there some resistance on the part of the older people who spoke French to changing over?

LeBlanc: Well, not to the sermons, I don't think. But I remember my mother saying, "Well, how am I going to go through confession? I can't-- If I learned how to go to confession in French, how am I going to go to confession?" So Father was quite tactful. He said, "Well, you probably

committed your sins in English, so you should be able to go to confession in English.” It worked out all right, you know.

Gower: Now then, your present church building then was... they started constructing that in 187--

LeBlanc: Seven.

Gower: Seven?

Kost: 1877, right?

Gower: Okay.

Kost: It took three years to build it.

Gower: Three years to complete it, then.

Kost: It's in a perfect state of preservation after 103 years.

Gower: Was that built by the local craftsmen here and so on or do you have any idea?

LeBlanc: I—it was under the supervision of Father Buh. I imagine he was quite an architect or something—because he built a very solid and, you know--

Kost: He built this church and he built many, many other churches in our own diocese and in the Duluth diocese. He was a man of many talents, Monsignor Buh. He is honored in the Duluth diocese, as the—like we honor Father Pierz.

Gower: Uh.

Kost: Although he spent much of his time in our diocese, he founded many parishes as far away as Perham. He founded St. Henry's parish in Perham and lived there for a while. And so these were—these men really got around. And in those days getting around was something because transportation was very difficult. Interesting to note that the railroad that goes by here was founded in 1877 after this parish had been in existence for 25 years. And the parish deeds show giving easement to the railroad company to pass through parish property to build the railroad that went to Brainerd. And when they built that railroad to—to Brainerd that spelled the death knoll for Crow Wing because that railroad didn't go into Crow Wing. It—see it isolated the village about three or four miles west on it in the—on that bend of the river which was called—which was called Crow Wing because it looks like the wing of a crow if you see it from the air, which I've seen many times because I'm a flyer. For many years I used to fly over the area and take pictures of it. So Crow Wing was doomed and it passed out of existence and Brainerd then developed. But interesting to note that this is also the mother parish for the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls. They were founded here--

LeBlanc: Yes, right here.

Kost: In 18--

LeBlanc: '72.

Kost: 1872

Gower: This is in Belle Prairie.

Kost: Belle Prairie.

LeBlanc: Right here.

Kost: Right here at Belle Prairie. This is where they were founded, not in Little Falls.

LeBlanc: No.

Gower: And why did they come here?

Kost: Well, interesting to note, Belle Prairie was a prominent place.

LeBlanc: Yes, it was—yes, it was.

Kost: It was prominent and—and this lady who came here was Mother Ignatius Hayes, Sister Ignatius Hayes, a convert from the Episcopal Church, from the Church of England. She was a well-educated Canadian. She came from Canada. I think from the Quebec area, right?

LeBlanc: Wasn't it--

Kost: This is Ignatius Hayes, yeah.

LeBlanc: Well, was she born on one of the islands in the English Channel?

Kost: Yeah, she was born on the Island of Wight.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Gower: Then they had done through Canada on their way--

Kost: She came here from Canada because Belle Prairie was a prominent area, not-not Brainerd.

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: And so there was a debate whether she should found her school or her convent up in Duluth—in Brainerd or here. She came here.

LeBlanc: Uh huh.

Kost: I can shut it off. (Referring to the tape recorder.) So then she came here.

Gower: Ah-could-do you know was there anybody specifically here who asked them to come here-the Franciscan Sisters?

LeBlanc: I never-I never heard.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: I've never heard why she came here.

Gower: Oh, oh.

LeBlanc: Maybe she had-the-the clergy at the-St. Paul or something had sent her.

Kost: Yes and-the history of that, of course, is written in the book that you have there.

LeBlanc: This is- look Sister--

Kost: From-that's the history of the Franciscan order of Little Falls.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: But see they have to come here.

Kost: They have to come here to get that book started because this is where they come from.

LeBlanc: This is where they started.

Kost: And that's-that's another story in itself.

Gower: Uh huh.

Kost: The development of that convent-of that convent and that school. That was a boarding school from-for almost 90 years. And a boarding school for grade school children mind you.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: Boys and girls from the first grade to eighth grade.

Gower: Did someone live here--

Kost: They lived here.

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: And had to get their schooling there.

Kost: That's right.

Gower: Now did they come from a very large area?

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: They came from-all the way from Chicago, and the Twin Cities.

Gower: Oh, uh.

Kost: And they drew from northern Minnesota, from-and from the whole area.

LeBlanc: Duluth, yes.

Kost: Yes.

Gower: Um.

Kost: And they came-they came to school here.

LeBlanc: I--

Kost: Go ahead.

LeBlanc: I also was a boarder here and I lived in the parish because we were too-in those days, there was no travel with cars, you see, and-but we lived five miles from here, which was too far to travel every day with-by foot or with horses, so my parents had me stay here for two years to make my first communion and my confirmation. I stayed just like the others, only I would go home weekends. It was very special type of--

Gower: Oh, I see. You just stayed in the dormitory--

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: Did they call it a dormitory--

LeBlanc: Uh huh.

Gower: And then went to the school then.

LeBlanc: And went to school and had my catechism and they thought I would get a better Catholic education that way. The boys-my brothers also came, but they were-they stayed-their dormitory was across the road in another home, a private home.

Gower: Now how did this-oh, go ahead. Pardon me.

LeBlanc: Well, that's where the boys were lodged and the girls were lodged in the dormitory at the top of, you know, the top story of the academy.

Gower: Now they started their school and the convent in 1872.

LeBlanc: Right.

Kost: That's right.

Gower: And then did it develop pretty rapidly there? Did they get quite a number of students?

LeBlanc: Yes. You'd be surprised at the reports that we-didn't think it was that big. And the building was much bigger and much better than we-than you'd expect. There are places-I don't have it right at the tip of my tongue-but that describes the building and it had quite a few rooms, you know, and a nice chapel. It-you think of-in the 1800's as being rather pioneer and rather, you know, not so nicely developed, but they were nice. The rooms were nice.

Gower: Now, what was the relationship between these sisters and the parish?

LeBlanc: They would--

Gower: How does that--

LeBlanc: I imagine they would teach the children their catechism.

Kost: Oh, yes. The relationship is a very interesting one, because sometimes it wasn't so good. They had two priests here at a time in its history and the cooperation wasn't just the best. And they had conflict. In fact, the conflict became so heated that one segment of the-of the rivalry burned down the school one April morning.

LeBlanc: No. I always-it always kind of bothers me a little bit. It was taken for granted, you know, but there was no-there was not proof, really.

Kost: Evidence or proof.

LeBlanc: It was just a-what you call-because there had been such an ill feeling. There was no real-no one was seen burning it, but it was taken for granted that it happened that way.

LeDoux: Now, that was in 1890s?

LeBlanc: 1889, I believe.

Kost: 1889.

LeDoux: I can remember a legend handed down by my father. There was a legend around that about the person who was suspected of it.

LeBlanc: Well.

LeDoux: It went way back. There was stories about that, I remember.

LeBlanc: Yes, and you know, every time someone would have some bad luck, you know, they said, "Oh, he's getting it. He's the one that burned the convent," you know. And I don't really think that was quite fair.

Gower: No, what was the basis for this conflict?

Kost: Go ahead.

LeBlanc: Well, there were two priests -- Father LeMay and Father--

Kost: Father Payette.

LeBlanc: Father Payette.

Gower: We better get those names spelled, see, or else we have trouble when we're transcribing.

LeDoux: The transcriber isn't French, so--

Gower: No.

LeBlanc: LeMay is L-E-M-A-Y and Payette I think, is P-A-Y-E-T-T-E.

Kost: That's right.

Gower: Okay.

LeBlanc: I imagine they were both French-sounds both French names, but I don't know.

Gower: Sounds French, yeah.

LeBlanc: Anyway, the parish-many of the parish people-not all of them-we can't say all of them.

Gower: No.

LeBlanc: No. But many of them wanted to have Father LeMay as the parish priest because the- and then the parish priest, you see, would say mass for the nuns, you see.

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: There's where the conflict was, you see, because the parish priest would say Mass for the nuns and hear their confessions and, you know, he would be in charge of both places.

Gower: Now why was that a conflict?

LeBlanc: Well, because the nuns-there were two priests that wanted to be here. And--

Gower: Oh, the nuns preferred the other priest?

LeBlanc: They preferred the other priest, you see.

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: And there's where the conflict was.

Gower: Oh, I see. Sure.

Kost: That's all written up in Sister--

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: --in Sister's book, there.

LeBlanc: I don't especially like it. She's pretty bitter about that and being that I'm from the parish, I'm not quite, you know – I have a different – but she has a – a very definitely bitter--

Gower: Well, did this – but eventually, they got over this with different priests and so on – or?

LeBlanc: Well, yes, you see. The nuns – Father, are you prepared for that – to say what the nuns did – the they moved – the place was burned down, so they couldn't be here.

Gower: This is 1889?

LeBlanc: Right. So some of them went to Little Falls and that's the beginning of the –

Kost: Convent in Little Falls.

LeBlanc: Yes, and that--

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: --has become so--

Gower: --it came from there.

LeBlanc: --successful, you see. That's where it became successful.

Gower: Otherwise, maybe you would have a stronger one here and that wouldn't even be going there.

LeBlanc: It might have been.

Kost: If they hadn't had this conflict, this is correct.

LeBlanc: Yes, Uh huh.

Kost: And of course, that's a long story. Mother Ignatius never really came back here after she left.

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: She only was here about a year – not even that long. And she left the sisters high and dry--

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: And they didn't know what to do. And so ultimately, they – they became diocesan sisters. They joined the diocese of St. Cloud. The Bishop accepted them. Then the sisters here under Rome and they – they developed here as separate unit.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Gower: And were--

Kost: Incidentally--

Gower: Were they still called Franciscan Sisters, though?

Kost: Yes. They still are.

LeBlanc: Well, these were missionary--

Kost: Missionary sisters are – of these sisters.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: That's right. And they are very strong in the world, but not here. They have – have schools and convents all over the world – in Africa, in the Philippines.

LeBlanc: Right.

Kost: And there – and Mother Ignatius is buried in Rome and possible will be canonized someday.

Gower: Now this is – let me just clarify this, because I am not Catholic. This was a – the group you're talking about is still the Franciscan Sisters?

LeBlanc: Well--

Kost: Missionary Sisters of St. Francis.

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: Oh – the Missionary Sisters of St. Francis.

Kost: Yes, that's the group that was founded here.

LeBlanc: Here.

Gower: That's a different group than if you said Franciscan Sisters--

Kost: Of Little Falls – right. They are two separate groups.

Gower: Oh, I see. Okay.

LeBlanc: The Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

Kost: That's right. That's the group at Little Falls – that broke off – began – the break began in 1889.

Gower: And that stems from St. Francis – way back there?

Kost: Way back to the 13th Century, sure.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: See, they all basically, follow the order of St. Francis. But they found their own convents. That's--

Gower: I see, okay.

Kost: Like Wisconsin – you've got the Franciscan Sisters of Chardolet, whatever they have, you know – what name. The Franciscan Sisters of Rochester that run the big St. Mary's Hospital – that's another group. But they all, basically, live by the order of St. Francis.

Gower: Okay, okay.

Kost: You see, by the rule that St. Francis composed.

Gower: Your Missionary Sisters, though, that were here, they are – as you said... they're not very strong here, but they are in other parts of the world.

LeBlanc: Very much so.

Kost: They're not here at all anymore.

Gower: Sure.

Kost: Although they have members from this parish in this area that are in their order... that came into the order from families who sent their children here to school. They are now sisters in that order.

Gower: Oh.

Kost: But, they're not serving at all in Minnesota any more.

LeBlanc: There's a large convent in the – in Canada. That's why at the beginning when the – when in 1911, the convent had been burned, you see. For about twenty years then, there was a need for sisters here. So Mother Mary Columba came. And she was a local girl. She had been born here and she might have been – oh, you wouldn't say ordained, but what do you say?

Kost: Well, she'd be the Mother Superior.

LeBlanc: Yes, she was a Mother Superior, but she might have received the habit, I guess – is how you would say it.

Kost: Yeah.

LeBlanc: --here, but there was something – a storm came up and Father Buh didn't come because of it. He was away and he couldn't get here to perform the ceremony. So she wasn't – her habit wasn't – she didn't get her habit here. She had to go back some place, I think, in Rome, to receive the habit. Well, anyway, that's the way it was in 1889, just before the fire. And then in

1911, there was a need for sisters here, and I don't remember what priest it was, but Father Barras I think, was visiting a family in the area and he saw a picture of a nun and the – conversation, you see – and they said, “Well, that's our sister. She was –she was born here and now she's a nun. She's Mother General in Rome.” And so Father Barras said, “We really could have a convent here.” And finally it came about that Sister Mary Columba came and built this convent that's still building – still living--

Kost: --still standing.

LeBlanc: --still standing. I'll get the right word yet.

Kost: That's the word. That's right – 1911, right.

LeBlanc: 1911.

Gower: And from 1889 to 1911, they did not have a convent or a school or anything going on here.

LeBlanc: Well, the Little Falls Sisters came and in the old priest's house they had a place where they could stay and they taught, you know, just before communion, I suppose, or something like that. They instructed the children enough--

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: So they could receive their education.

Gower: But the school itself was closed from--

LeBlanc: There was nothing, you see. It was all burnt.

Kost: It was burnt.

Gower: Oh, the entire--all of that-oh, I see.

LeBlanc: Oh, it was very--there was nothing left except the spot where the Holy Sacrament had been--

Kost: That's right--and that's marked over there with a cross, you know.

LeBlanc: It still is.

Kost: In the inner circle of the building, there's a cross that marks the spot still, but of course, the sacrament burned.

LeBlanc: Local people, you know, when you talk about the convent, the local people--and you say Mother Ignatius, they say, "Who's that?" But if you say Mother Mary Columba-- "Oh, we know her", because, you see, there was more--close to them. She was one of the French settler's daughters, you see, and she came back and she revived the sisters' place here.

Gower: And from 1911 until 1972, did you say?

Kost: 1969.

LeBlanc: '69.

Gower: '69.

Kost: They left permanently in 1969.

Gower: During that period, they had the school again--

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: Boarding school, it was? And convent and so on--

Kost: That's right.

LeBlanc: It was-and they grew quite a bit in that time. They grew, you know--

Gower: It came back real well then.

LeBlanc: Very well.

Gower: --once it got started again.

LeBlanc: She did a good job of erasing all the bitterness, or whatever it was. She did a very good job, I suppose, because she was from one of the old families, you know.

Kost: From here.

LeBlanc: Yes.

LeDoux: Now in 19—excuse me- in 1969, then, did these-this convent just kind of leave the state or did that order just simply-did not exist anymore in Minnesota?

Kost: Right. They left permanently. They sold the buildings which we now-which the parish ultimately purchased. That's another story, but—they pulled, you might say they just pulled up lock, stock, and barrel. They lifted the anchor and will no longer be back in here unless, like they did when Mother Mary Columba came -- that they reestablish themselves, which I don't think they will do. This is really, for them, an outpost. They're strong in the east, along the eastern coast and in that area, but this was the only connection they had in Minnesota in the first place and so it was very difficult to maintain and to support and so on. They just left it, even though it's their founding place. And maybe someday they might do more about it, but-- And the land

now is owned by the parish and the beautiful pines that they had-the Belle Prairie Pines-has been sold-was sold two years ago-will now be Morrison County – Belle Prairie Park, so it will be preserved and will not be cut up into lots and so on but will be kept for the use of the area as a beautiful park. And one of the most beautiful lands-land-parks for lands that we have in the state.

Gower: Had the school declined in numbers quite a bit?

Kost: It did. Following Vatican II, you had the general decline of people sending their children to Catholic school and they were caught in that-in that trauma -- so their enrollment declined. Another thing that didn't help was they built a brand new high school building in 1962 and they just-they put one class through four years and graduated one class from that school and then they closed, you see. And that was-that's a shame.

LeBlanc: A beautiful building.

Kost: And I believe that kind of broke their back financially.

Gower: Oh, I see.

Kost: Although their convent building was also very much now out of date according, according to the building codes of our time. And I think all of these came together along with the fact that they were an outpost really and had a difficult time getting sisters to come out here to serve. All of those just came together and finally they just threw in the towel-although they are a thriving order elsewhere in the United States and in the world.

LeBlanc: There's several of them that are buried in our cemetery.

Kost: Oh, yeah, there's fourteen or fifteen of the sisters that are buried in our cemetery. Sure. And they came back to visit the graves. In fact, Sister---one of the sisters who served here for

many, many years is coming this August for a reunion of the only class that graduated from the high school. Sister Anicetus-Father Smith used to call her Sister Anesthetic. (Laughter)

LeBlanc: That sounds like Father Smith.

Gower: Now, going back there to, say like the early 1900s, or well, late 1800s too-you're getting more Germans and other people coming into this general area, right?

LeBlanc: Right, but--

Gower: Now did they come into this church then?

Kost: Sure.

LeBlanc: The Catholics did.

Kost: Sure.

LeBlanc: Oh, yes, they--

Gower: And even though the sermons were in French, the Germans came in here?

LeBlanc: Well, yes, but you see, there weren't too many-not too many.

Gower: Not too many Germans.

LeBlanc: Not too many. Now there are very few French and mostly German and Polish. But, oh that's just maybe since--

Gower: How did this-when did this change? Sort of gradually after--

LeBlanc: Well, as soon as these first homesteaders died off, you see – then they – sometimes the children didn't care to farm. They worked someplace else and the farm was purchased by either French or Pol—I mean, either German or Polish or other-Swedish, Swedish.

Gower: So it happened just gradually over the years, you would say?

LeBlanc: Right, and it was a gradual thing. There's been a change in the parish too. Along the river—along this old Red River Trail, we have many members of our parish living there now. And years ago, there just a few farms there. So that has changed the parish a lot.

Kost: The parish has become a suburban parish. We have a very strong segment of farming people, of course, but it's also made up of city people who live along the Mississippi River— the four miles between here and Little Falls that used to be undeveloped and now it's— people are moving out along the river and that's where a strong segment of our parish is too. So, there's city people and country people, but it's a beautiful blend.

LeBlanc: They get along.

Kost: They get along beautifully together, cooperate together and it just—it's a— it continues to be a very strong thriving parish, which it should be because it is a very important parish in the history in the development of the area and for the Catholics of this—of our diocese and of the Duluth diocese too, because Father Pierz was also active up there. Going back to Father Pierz and the Indians, another point that's missed in Minnesota history very much is in the Sioux uprising.

LeBlanc: I'm glad you're mentioning that.

Kost: Yes, in the Sioux uprising, Father Pierz had a-had the admiration of the Indians. And especially Hole in the Day-Young Hole in the Day-he knew the Old Hole in the Day, too, who is buried out here on the hill-this big hill that you come over coming here. That's Hole in the Day Hill, that big ridge--

LeBlanc: The Calvary Cemetery.

Kost: The French Cemetery in that area. He's buried up there and the legend says that as long as the body stays there, we'll never be plagued with tornadoes, and we've never had one. Although the other Saturday night, I think we come pretty close.

LeBlanc: We came close.

Kost: But Hole in the Day Number Two was the chief of the Chippewa. And when the Sioux uprising occurred, they wanted the Chippewa to join them. And Hole in the Day said, "No white man shall approach my camp," which was north of old Crow Wing village. He drew a line and said, "Let no white --if any white man crosses that line, he will die." So Father Pierz came to that line -- he had two Indians pick him up, carry him over the line, you see.

LeBlanc: You see, he didn't walk over.

Kost: He didn't walk over it. And he came in and he pleaded with Hole in the Day and Hole in the Day held off his Indians from joining with Chippewa. Now that's not in Minnesota history, but that was a significant influence to save the white man of this area, let me tell you. Because had the Chippewa joined in that, there might have really been a massacre. And that was through the influence of this man, Father Pierz, so the historians of Minnesota have a little ways to go to catch up to know what really the heck happened in that time, you see.

LeBlanc: Yeah, they kind of neglect—it's sad to neglect things like that.

Kost: That's right.

LeBlanc: Because it's very important.

Kost: Had it not been for Father Pierz, Hole in the Day most certainly would have joined the Chippewa in that uprising because they were on the warpath. They were on the warpath. And the Winnebago over at Long Prairie too.

LeDoux: When the outbreak occurred, were any measures ---preliminary measures--- being taken while Father Pierz was negotiating to kind of fortify the place or protect each other?

Kost: Well, they went—the white Settlers – went to Fort Ripley and took refuge there.

LeDoux: So they were all out of the area, pretty much by--

Kost: Pretty much, right. And -- see, that's why Fort Ripley was established where it was, because it was at the focal point of the three tribes: the Chippewa, the Sioux, and the Winnebago, see. Up in that -- right in that -- right in that area. And – to keep peace and to – you see, there wasn't that many people. There were only, at the most I think the largest number of soldiers up there was forty at one time and there weren't even that many most of the time. Is that right?

LeBlanc: I'm not sure. I don't know.

Kost: They weren't a big contingent, but their presence, you know, helped to keep peace and so on. But I want to make that quite clear – that Father Pierz is left out entirely when it comes to talking about the Sioux uprising in the state.

LeBlanc: You see these – the French settlers here, some of your ancestors (referring to John LeDoux), They would be taken either to Fort Ripley or Little Falls and for a long time before things were settled – not – you know, things didn't get settled overnight. They were still afraid at night they would go for safety at the old courthouse at Little Falls and they'd have a sentry that would watch all night, you know. And of course, at Fort Ripley, which was a little farther, well, they had the soldiers always close to them.

Gower: Let's see, I think this must be getting near the end, John. We're continuing with this interview at Belle Prairie. The French people that were living here were engaged, you were saying here just a minuet ago when the tape recorder was off, in lumbering as well as in farming in the late 1800s.

LeBlanc: Yeah. In the – from 1890 until about 1920 when the mill closed down, many of these – the descendants of the settlers, you know, not the settlers themselves, because by that time they had been – they were old, but their children and their grandchildren would work on the river as, you know, driving the logs down and some worked in the mill. They had to go up to the lumber camps in the north in the winter and then, of course, they'd come back home in the spring to help with the farm work and then by next fall, they could go up again to the pineries and work in the lumber camps. It was a big help. The wives of the settlers would shear the sheep and weave – they would spin the wool and then – then they would knit mitten – woolen mittens and woolen socks and there was a good market for that – these people who worked in the woods and also for the ones who worked on the river because wool is good for – you don't get so cold no matter if you fall in the river, you see. There was a good market there so that helped a lot. Going back to the French, I think, perhaps a summary would be that in the very beginning of Belle Prairie we settled just about solid French except the settlement north of – just a little bit north by Reverend

Ayer. And there were a few in his group there. But the French group was, I think, larger, and it spread out farther. Then after 1877, Ripley Township was mostly French too, so that's why the beginning – in the beginning the parish was just about all French until, maybe 1900 – a few Germans and then – ah – after 1900 we had the Swedish settlement in Freedhem but those were mostly Norwegians. They were mostly Lutherans but a few married into the parish so--

Gower: And then gradually the Polish and Germans--

LeBlanc: The Polish – the Polish now – I think maybe now we have more Polish, I don't know, then any...

Gower: What is the – what was – do you know was there a good relationship between all these different groups in those early years as they move in?

LeBlanc: Oh yes, very – see the neighbors and the daughter would marry the son of the – and pretty soon you'd have a very--

Gower: Intermarriage.

LeBlanc: --a very good relationship. They adapted too quite a bit. The culture now – I think the French culture is just about disappeared. Very few people nowadays know how to make tourierre which is a--

LeDoux: French meat pie.

LeBlanc: Yes. Or boudin or ragut or any of those French delicacies. Because they know more about Polish poppyseed cake and Swedish-sweet rolls and things like that.

Kost: Pfannekuchens.

LeBlanc: Right and it seemed that with Christmas, you know, the French never had a Christmas tree – it was not part of their culture.

Gower: That was a German thing.

LeBlanc: That was a German thing. And now in all the French homes if you don't see a Christmas tree something is very wrong, you know.

LeDoux: What was, Christmas like – do you have any records of that around Belle Prairie?

LeBlanc: Well, Christmas was a church thing. But New Year's – that was a time to celebrate, you know, that was the holiday. The Christmas you went to midnight mass, that was the big thing and there was the crecha you know and that. And then next day midnight mass, you see – you were home kind of late, especially if you came in the sled or something with horses, so it was kind of a quiet day. And the children saw what they had in their stockings – had been hung up. They hung their stockings, you know where – on the door knob or wherever it was handy and that was their way of getting gifts – not under the tree, that wasn't the Christmas way in the old days. But the big day was New Year's and on New Year's every family that had children – that were married – were expected, if they didn't come it was just something terrible. The children would go home to the parents and then you'd come in the door you'd get a great big hug and you'd get kissed on both cheeks – a great big cheek – a big kiss. And then the ones who came in had to go shake hands with everyone there and kiss them on both cheeks and give them a good hug. That was – if you didn't do that it was just – it was just not right. And sometimes, you know, these young boys in their bashful stage, they wouldn't especially appreciate it but they'd get it anyway, you know. Now at Easter they had certain beliefs. I don't know, if you – if – if you could reach a place where there was running water, like perhaps a creek or even the

Mississippi here, and dip out, you know, a quart of water or something, they called that D'leau de Pacs which translates to Easter Water. And that wasn't holy water but it was close to it. And they used that – you know, oh, they poured if you has a sore they poured that over you – it was the way. Another thing--

Gower: This was a French custom?

LeBlanc: French custom.

Gower: In regard to Easter – this was only at Easter time though that you dipped the water out.

LeBlanc: Right. Only at Easter time.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: And it was unusual because, you know, ordinary water you let in sit and it gets stagnant and just, you know – but it was true – I've seen it myself – that that water would be just as pure years afterwards – I don't know, there was something about it.

LeDoux: How is that spelled – that custom now?

LeBlanc: D'leau de Pacs.

LeDoux: Yeah.

LeBlanc: D-L-let's see Da is for da and Lu-L-E-A-U-X I think or something like that. It's water – Easter water it translates you see. Another custom was you'd – if you'd get up early enough Easter morning and you looked at the sun, you'd see a dance and of course I've done that too, and I thought it danced but I think my eyes got kind of funny watching it, you know, but we did

that already. Those were some of the things that the French did. Easter was the day when you get ham and eggs, of course.

Gower: Easter you got ham and eggs?

LeBlanc: Oh yes.

Gower: You mean at breakfast or--

LeBlanc: All day – if you got it for breakfast or else you would get it sometime during the day – you had to have ham. That was natural because in those days there was no refrigeration and you butchered in the winter and by Easter time your hams would be smoked, you see, ready to use.

Gower: Oh, I see.

LeBlanc: It was one of the natural things. The same thing is all those pork delicacies at the holidays – at Christmas and New Year's. You see, people during the summer would eat salt pork and chickens, and things of that sort because there was no refrigeration. Sometimes you'd get a nice piece of beef if the neighbor butchered and he'd peddle a piece, you know, to everybody, but otherwise you just couldn't have--

Gower: Now on the different groups – German and French and so on – did the – would you think that because they, many of them anyway, were Catholic, that this would help prevent any kind of ill will between them too.

LeBlanc: Yes, they worked together.

Gower: Like, if they were all of the same religion.

Kost: But the area got along good with the Lutheran segment of Freedmen too.

LeBlanc: Oh, yes.

Kost: They intermingled and exchanged well--

Gower: Oh, so they just generally was--

LeBlanc: They've very-you see the French were used to living very close together along the St. Lawrence. And it was-they had to be friendly and easy to get along with or it would have been a terrible thing, you know. So they were used to getting along with their neighbors-they were used to that because their neighbors along the St. Lawrence were just very, very close. If you know how the St. Lawrence area is settled, you know. The farms are a mile long on each side of the river and the houses are close, close, close together, you know. So they were accustomed to getting along with their neighbors. Of course, there'd be fights I suppose-I don't know over boundary lines and things like that but nothing to--

Gower: Now, let's see, could we get your birthdate please?

LeBlanc: Yes. I was born December 13, 1909.

Gower: 1909. And you were in this parish all of your life?

LeBlanc: Oh, yes.

Gower: Okay.

LeBlanc: And my family goes way back. See-my grandmother was baptized in this parish, my mother's mother, and of course, she-she made-she went to the sister's school. She was the organist for a while. And then she married my grandfather. My grandfather wasn't born here

though-but my grandmother was. And my mother was born here and we all were married here and had all our sacraments here.

Gower: Now do you-have there been any changes-noticeable changes-do you think during the years that you've been in the church?

LeBlanc: What type-what do you mean?

Gower: Well, in the way the church-well, for example you said they shifted from the sermons in French only to French and English and then over to English now, is it right?

LeBlanc: Yes.

Gower: The sermons.

LeBlanc: Well. They do different things to raise money and things, you know.

Gower: Has that changed somewhat you mean?

LeBlanc: There always has been the money problem, I suppose. They used to have great big picnics and they'd raffle off things like that. Now they have drives and this money-you know, it's less work for the ladies, I suppose. They're more considerate now of the ladies.

Gower: Now the mass is not in Latin anymore?

LeBlanc: No.

Gower: Is that right?

LeBlanc: That's right.

Kost: But the universal. It was the churches -- the second Vatican Council.

LeBlanc: Uh huh.

Gower: Right, sure. This had nothing to do -- and there was just -- the people felt no dissatisfaction because of this.

LeBlanc: It was well done I think, gradually.

Kost: Yes. It was well done in this parish especially. The transition was done very nicely.

LeBlanc: The transition was very, very -- there was no, I don't think any--

Kost: The transition was done, I think very acceptably because it didn't alter the church that much from what it originally was, you see. Rather than to take out the old altar, they left that there--

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: That's the part of the architecture of the church. And then they added the small altar facing the people which was -- which is very nicely done too. So the transition was made smoothly.

LeBlanc: Very smoothly.

Kost: The last French pastor they had was Father Pellet.

LeBlanc: Right.

Kost: Father Pellet. And then they got a pastor, Father Robert Smith who was a convert to the Catholic faith and who was half swede and half Englishman-half Yankee. But he could speak Swedish so he really got along with the swedes over at Freedhem. And this parish has many Swedish people who are Catholic with genuine Swedish name like Hilmerson and Winterquist

and Carlson and Anderson. People who you'd think would be dyed in the wool Lutheran but they're converts to the Catholic Faith in the -- two or three generations back and their children are Catholic. So it's an interesting development of the amalgamation of the Swedes and the Polish. The Polish came up primarily from Elmdale-what they call the Polish Corridor in this area-soboeski.

Gower: Polish corridor- I'd never heard of that.

Kost: You never did? Well, now you've heard something else. Holdingford, Elmdale, Bowlus, North Prairie, Royalton, Sobieski, Flensburg-that's the Polish Corridor.

Gower: That's the Polish Corridor.

Kost: That's where the Polish people have settled in the -- 100 years ago. See-North Prairie celebrated its 100th anniversary last year or two years ago. It was founded by Father Buh who lived here 100 years ago. But that's a strong Polish area still is very strong Polish.

LeBlanc: I think they preserve their customs better than we do perhaps.

Kost: Yes. I think they do in the fact that they sing their Polish songs and I haven't heard any French songs since I've been here.

LeBlanc: Well, we used to have something very beautiful at Christmas. They used to sing "Cantique de Noel" which is "O Holy Night" in French. And Father Pellet had a nice-he sang well so--

Kost: Violin.

LeBlanc: Yes.

Kost: Oh, he played the violin, too?

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: Sure. Didn't Pellet?

LeBlanc: No.

Kost: He just sang.

LeBlanc: He just sang. But, you see, just before mass-before the service at midnight-they would have the usual songs, Silent Night and all of that. And then at the very last they would extinguish all the lights except the light over the crèche and then Paul Houle would play a little introduction on his violin and his wife Eve would play on the organ and Father Pellet would sing "Cantique de Noel" in French, and you know you'd just hear a hush over the church. Everybody was just waiting for that-it was so beautiful. He sang it so nicely.

Gower: When did he leave here then -- Father Pellet?

LeBlanc: He passed away -- I don't exactly remember.

Kost: Well, yeah, 19 -- he retired from this parish in 1949 and Father Smith was appointed administrator then-it was his first assignment. Father Pellet retired to Little Falls, ultimately he died, I think, a year or two later.

LeBlanc: Yes, he wasn't well when he--

Kost: No, he wasn't well when he retired.

LeBlanc: He wasn't well at all.

Kost: He was pastor here for over 40 years.

Gower: I was going to say that would go all the way from 1917?

Kost: Right. It's an interesting sidelight in his life how he came here. He was French born you see.

LeBlanc: --in France.

Kost: And so was Monsieur Thiebeaut who is also French born.

LeBlanc: Is that right? Oh.

Kost: He was our vicar General for a long time under Bishop Busch. Bishop Busch was our Bishop -- Bishop Busch was Bishop in Lead, South Dakota which is the gold mine area he was transferred from there to St. Cloud and he heard that Father Barras -- he came into this diocese and Father Barras died -- he needed a French pastor. He had Father Pellet over in his diocese in Lead, South Dakota. And so he invited him to come here to be pastor at Belle Prairie and he accepted the invitation and came here and lived and died as the pastor here for those 40 years of his life. And was a beautiful man-no doubt about that.

LeBlanc: He was very well loved--

Kost: And he did a good job as a pastor in the area. His sister, who was his housekeeper, is buried in our cemetery. Yes, and so is he. He's buried here too.

Gower: And then Father Smith succeeded him and then you succeeded Father Smith.

Kost and LeBlanc: No. No, no.

Kost: No, I should say not.

Gower: Oh.

Kost: Father Smith left here in 1957 to be pastor at Fergus Falls and I left Randall in 1957 to go to Sauk Centre. And then they had a little more permanency-Father Compton stayed four years, and I 'm starting fifth year. And I'll stay here until I retire.

LeBlanc: I hope.

Kost: But no, I love the parish, and I love the area. And so there will be more permanency in the pastor. I'll guarantee that.

LeBlanc: I hope so. It's not good for a parish, I don't think, to have too much changing.

Gower: I wouldn't think so either.

Kost: No there are segments of too much.

Gower: Maybe if someone stays too long that might not be good either, but here -- that's just a very short time.

Kost: Yes.

LeBlanc: It's worse, I think if it's too--

Gower: Yes--

Kost: --if it's too short.

LeBlanc: Yes, too short-changing. Yes.

Kost: Yes. That's right. Well, of course, the way the policy of the diocese is now, you can stay twelve years. You can stay six years with an option of another six years.

LeBlanc: Oh.

Gower: Oh, I see.

Kost: Under normal circumstances, yes. So you have--

LeDoux: I had a question related to that, Father. From the different parishes you've been in—from this other pastors you've known, been in contact with—some of the more—churches in larger town possibly, what do you see as the difference between a rural church, such as Belle Prairie, and a more urbanized church as far as—there seems to be a very definite link to history as far as—a very definite will to preserve it—they're very cognizant of it. Do you think that there's a difference from some urban churches?

Kost: Well, see in my—I'm a priest 33 years, and I've been a pastor in a small parish at Randall where I had 130 families. I was a pastor in a medium-sized parish in Sauk Centre with about 280 families—290. And then I was a pastor of a very large parish in St. Cloud for 10 years with almost 900 families. And then I'm here with this parish now from growing suburban parish. Evolving from being a pure rural parish to a rural suburban parish, and each parish has its own character—there's no doubt about that. And—here I find the people are—in fact, I want them to be proud of their heritage. The old people, the older pioneers like Stella, who know that history are proud of it. But I—I feel that there are too many of the younger families that come into the parish that don't know the significance of the parish and so it's my job and as far as I can, to make them proud of their parish. And so I put in the bulletin, for example, every Sunday, “established in 1852”. Well, anybody with a historical sense knows that that was before the Civil War, you see.

And every chance I get I talk about it. I bring it in my sermons, I bring it in when I speak of the building, you know, to make them proud of this—of this church which is the house of God in this area for that I long a time you see. And this is how you imbue in them, and especially little ones—little children now because aware of the fact that there's history here. And for Americans to do that is really a switch because we are not historically oriented. If a building gets to be 40 years old we want to tear it down, you see.

LeBlanc: I think that's terrible, but it's true.

Kost: That is terrible. That's why I'm even letting this convent building stand even though we can't use it anymore. Because even its standing there is a monument to sisters.

Gower: Sure, right.

Kost: And it makes up the whole panoramic view of the parish, you see. And if you take that big building down in the front there, something is lost to the—to the community set-up of the parish.

LeDoux: Would you find it possibly easier to preserve this type of historical church in a rural setting as opposed to—and the fact that because they're farmers there might be more permanency to the area?

Kost: You're right, you're right, you're right. You know this building will be the parish church as long as I've got anything to say about it. Even though the parish continues to grow we can still take care of our people and, as I said, it's the third parish of Little Falls so the opportunity to go to mass is present in three parishes of the local area. And so people who need masses to fit their schedule can find one either here or at St. Mary's or our Lady of Lourdes on this side of St. Cloud. And so it's a good working arrangement and we are integrated—the three parishes work

together very well. And our children-our children who want to go to the parochial school go to St. Mary's School in Little Falls. We have nearly 40 there. Because our people are parochial minded-they had their children in school here for almost 80 years. So, well, I think-anything else you want to find out yet before we throw the towel in?

LeDoux: I had just one-one question-I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but just briefly if you could describe-we haven't talked about any women's auxiliaries or organizations that have existed. Just briefly have there been women's organizations throughout the years?

LeBlanc: Yes-the auxiliary-the women's group is called St. Ann's Sodality.

LeDoux: St. Ann's--

LeBlanc: Sodality.

LeDoux: How is that spelled-that last word?

LeBlanc: S-O-D-A-L-I-T-Y. That means a group that works and prays together and works for the church. It's a little bit more than a society because it includes prayer.

LeDoux: Right.

LeBlanc: The reason that it was called St. Ann's Sodality because the area that these people came from-around Three Rivers and Montreal and Quebec-there in Canada they have a great devotion to this grandmother of Jesus, you know. And they carried that over into this parish. So instead of saying St. Joseph's Society or St. Mary's Society or something, they called it St. Anna's Sodality.

Gower: I was up there in Quebec when I went up there in Quebec when I went up to that St. Ann's de Beaupre.

LeBlanc: That's the beginning of the devotion there.

Gower: Sure.

LeDoux: And that-so that started in what year now here, roughly?

LeBlanc: Well--

LeDoux: That women's group?

LeBlanc: Let's-at least by 1900.

LeDoux: Right.

LeBlanc: At least by 1900.

LeDoux: And it's-that one group has gone steady then all since then?

LeBlanc: Yes, it has. Now we're called Christian Mothers of St, Mary's because we've kind of-you see, that's a part of the blending of the two cultures you see-in getting along together. If they had called it just St. Ann's well some would have been displeased and if they'd just have called it St. Mary's some of the others would have been displeased so they compromised and called it--

Gower: And does this group act as, like a Ladies Aide group would in a Lutheran church?

LeBlanc: Right.

Gower: Oh.

LeBlanc: Right, you see, if there's any work that the ladies can do like serving lunches, you know at funerals--

Gower: Sure.

LeBlanc: And things like that—they're expected to do things like that. They're the Ladies Auxiliary.

Gower: Sure.

LeBlanc: And we have a president and a secretary and treasurer and we have—the meetings are held every two months. Then on July 26 which is the Feast of St. Ann then everyone is supposed to—and make a special event of it, you see. It's a—I've spoken about St. Ann's Sodality and how it came from Quebec—St. Ann de Beaupre' you know, along the St. Lawrence because the first settlers were from that area and they brought all their devotions and things with them--

Kost: And it's one of--

LeBlanc: --their culture.

Kost: One of the few churches in our diocese that has an altar to St. Ann--

Gower: Oh.

Kost: The mother of the Virgin Mary.

Gower: Okay. John, anything else there?

LeDoux: No, I haven't.

Gower: Okay, okay. Then this concludes this interview.