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Grand Forks



As part of the 100th anniversary celebration of St. Peter's Catholic Church on Sunday in Gentilly, Minn., Virgil Benoit portrayed Father Eli Theillon who, as its pastor, raised funds to build the church in 1914. Fr. Theillon also organized and became president of Gentilly Dairy Association, which became known for quality cheese products. (Photo by Pamela Knudson/Grand Forks Herald)

## Volunteers portray early residents, clergy as part of church's 100-year anniversary

By [Pamela Knudson](#) on Aug 18, 2014 at 6:45 a.m.

**G**ENTILLY, Minn. – History came alive on Sunday afternoon as volunteers, dressed in period costume, gave first-person accounts of the lives of several key figures in the early history of Gentilly, Minn.

The event was part of a 100-year celebration of the anniversary of St. Peter's

Catholic Church in Gentilly, located 7 miles east of Crookston, Minn.

After a special Mass, small groups were led to each grave where an enactor spoke briefly of that person's life, revealing their personalities through anecdotes that were uplifting and tragic.

Each of their stories are based on interviews with descendants, historical newspaper accounts, and study of the census and early church records, said Jean Vigness, Nielsville, Minn., a lifelong member of St. Peter's Catholic Church.

The entire family of the town's blacksmith, Peter Martell, including his wife, Jane, and three children, died in a house fire in 1905, said Josie Proulx, Mentor, Minn., as she sat near the stone obelisk that bears their names.

Elizabeth Little, played by Charlene Dufault Schlueter, served as Gentilly's postmaster. Schlueter grew up in Gentilly and now lives in Hutchinson, Minn.

"In his first year in Gentilly, Fr. Theillon officiated at 67 funerals for young people and infants," she said. Little lost three of her seven children.

Henri T. Gendron, who started a general store in Gentilly, and his wife lost a son to the flu epidemic, said Ervin Vigness of Nielsville.

"I helped start the Gentilly cheese factory," said Vigness, speaking as Gendron.

Jane Lanctot, of Minneapolis, spoke at the grave of her great-grandmother, Caroline Dufault Brule, who lived nearly 106 years.

"I kept most of my marbles until the end," she said.

Roxanne Dufault Stordahl, McIntosh, Minn., played Delia Huot, the rectory housekeeper of Father Elie Theillon, who invited her, as a widow and mother of

four children, to take the job.

“I never had to learn English,” she said.

Dressed in a priest's robe, Virgil Benoit, Red Lake Falls, Minn., played Fr. Theillon who began raising money to build the St. Peter's Catholic Church in 1913, he said. “I knew pretty much what (each family) had and what they could give.

“I knew the French-Canadians would cut everything they were asked to do in half. I asked for twice what he expected. I asked for \$400 and got \$200.”

In 1914, the church was built at a cost of \$35,000, he said.

Fr. Theillon was also a successful businessman who organized the Gentilly cheese factory, Benoit said.

He talked about how farmers, frustrated and impoverished by poor conditions, were leaving the area in the late 1880s.

Fr. Theillon set about studying agricultural practices, including “everything I could find on chickens and pigs and rabbits – none of that interested me,” he said, “until he stumbled on dairy... I loved the Holstein cow.”

He was granted a dispensation from Rome to head up the Gentilly Dairy Association, he said. Under his leadership, the cheese factory became “very successful,” in part because of his friendship with James Hill, the railroad magnate.

Jeanne Brekken, Crookston, reminded “Fr. Theillon” that her mother, Mamie Fournier, worked as his housekeeper until she married Phillip Dufault.

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