

Six decades of devotion to Kahnawake's liturgical choir

JESSICA DEER
THE EASTERN DOOR

Bernardin Houle has been the organist at the St. Francis Xavier Mission for 65 years. This week's Blast from the Past features the 93-year-old during his early days accompanying the well-known Iroquois Mixed Choir.

"He served the community for 65 years. He came on a bus every Sunday, every funeral Mr. Houle was here for us," said present-day choir member Vera Goodleaf of Mr. Houle.

The photo was taken during the summer of 1969 by the Jesuits and was featured in the September issue of the Kateri Bulletin that year. It is now kept in the Kateri Centre's archives, with many photos, audio recordings and original hymn notes from the choir.

"I was about 27 years old at the time. It was not my first year," said Houle of the photo.

Houle started playing the organ during his studies at the age of 17 years old.

"I replaced other organists before coming here. I played at other parishes, but I like it better here," he said, "except, it is early in the morning."

He recalled not knowing anything about the St. Francis Xavier mission or much about Kahnawake when he first arrived, but has loved his experience.

"It is much more beautiful music that we play here compared to other churches. It's very, very beautiful here," said Houle.

Prior to his work in Kahnawake, Houle was a parishioner in Montreal at a parish run by the Jesuits.

"One of the fathers, (Henri)



COURTESY KATERI CENTRE

Organist Bernardin Houle during his early days, accompanying the popular Iroquois Mixed Choir.

Lalonde, from there was working here. I knew him and he brought me here. Before that I played some times for funerals and practices Wednesday evenings, but, I officially started in 1950," he said.

Reverend Lalonde is also pictured in the photo. He was one of the Iroquois Mixed Choir's many directors over the years.

The choir was officially founded in 1927 by Fr. Conrad Hauser, but the history of Kahnawa'kehró:n singing at mass in Kanien'kéha dates back to the 1800s.

"In the late 1800s, there was

lady named Louise Jocks who got a group of people together to sing in Kanien'kéha. She led them as a choir and after that she was succeeded by Josephine Douglas," said Goodleaf.

In 1930, Hauser's successor was father Alfred Bernier, who held a doctorate in sacred music. The choir flourished under Bernier's direction.

In 1939, they were invited to the Church of the Gesù in downtown Montreal to sing at the Solemn Mass on Mission Sunday.

Longtime choir member Stephen 'Skippy' Lafleur said over the years, Houle has taken

on more responsibilities than just accompanying the choir on organ.

"Not only is he our organist, he's also our director," said Lafleur. "When he's playing, his hand goes up, he tells us when to come in."

During the choir's heyday, he also traveled with them all over Canada and the United States to different pilgrimage sites, such as Auriesville, New York, which was once thought to be the birthplace of Kateri Tekakwitha, but Ossernenon, nine miles away, has since gained that title.

"The choir would always

travel to Auriesville every year on Labor Day weekend. But, we've since stopped because our choir is so small now. It's so little compared to the way they were back then," said Goodleaf.

Lafleur recounted many of the trips the choir went on at Sunday's unveiling of the Seven Last Words (see story page 16).

"I think my best memory was in 1976. We went to sing at the ecumenical council in Philadelphia. Our choir was invited, we sang at the old St. George's Church, the oldest church in Philadelphia," said he said.

At the time Houle's mother was ill, so he couldn't accompany the choir.

"We had father Louis Cyr come and played for us. We rehearsed and rehearsed this mass by Charles Pinot. It was a concert mass. We got into the church, everybody was nervous, but we sang it," said Lafleur.

Lafleur has been a member of the choir for the past 55 years.

"Thinking back, it is hard to believe how it started. At 15 years old, my dear friend Brenda Rice convinced me to join. I loved it," he said on Sunday.

According to the Kateri Bulletin, Rice is pictured in the photo, along with other choir members including Eileen Lefebvre, June Skye, Geraldine Cross, Cathy Rice, Mae Montour with her granddaughter Dawn, Ester Phillips, Edward Cross.

In the third row pictured are Annie Skye, Josie Diabo, Agathe Foote, Annie Lahache, Theresa Brisebois, Gladys Delisle, Sandra Beauvais, Mary Deer, Wanda Deer, Melvin Diabo, Water Deer and Paul Rice.