



A MAN OF MANY TALENTS



From the Red River to North Dakota.



THE LINGUIST

Father Belcourt really enjoyed studying languages. During his years at the Séminaire de Nicolet, he learned Latin and Greek. When he was named pastor of Sainte-Martine a few years after his ordination, he learned English to serve his Irish parishioners better.

Before leaving for the Red River, he studied Algonquin to help him learn the Sauteux* language, which is part of the Algonquian language family. The Sauteux are also known as Chippewa and Ojibwe.

When he arrived at the Red River, he spent time becoming acquainted with the language of the Sauteux before opening a mission to instruct them and convert them to the Catholic religion. As he states, he managed to master the language:

However, having been exercising the holy ministry among the Sauteux for seven years of mission, seeing only Sauteux, hearing and speaking no other language than that of the Sauteux, I started by gradually learning everything in their language that would put me in a position of making my ministry more useful, and then by grasping the idioms of their language in as correct a manner as it was possible for me to do. (Translation)

◀ Father Belcourt (Farmers' Bank Museum of Rustico)

Father Belcourt was the first missionary to instruct the First Nations in the West using their own language. Before him, missionaries had to use interpreters to communicate with them. He was so successful in learning the Sauteux language that he developed a grammar book for this unwritten language. He explains the purpose of his book in the introduction:

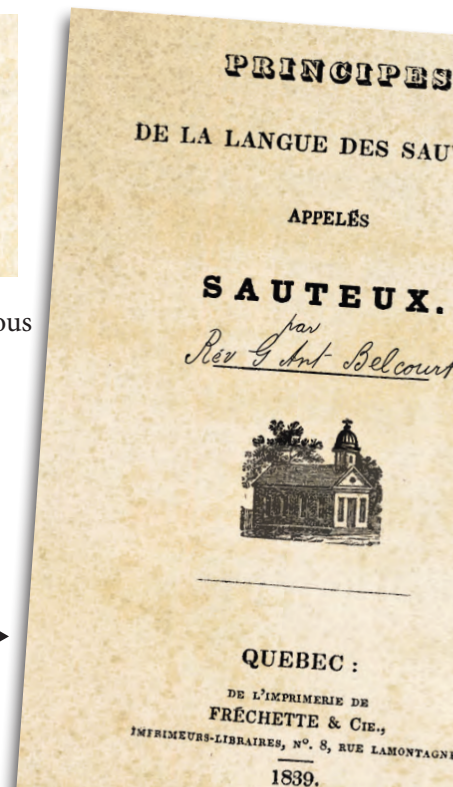
Moreover, the goal I set for myself was not to give the public a grammar book free of errors, but just to provide young clergymen who feel inclined to dedicate themselves to the service of the missions, with a grammar book, however imperfect, that will enable them to learn the principles of the Sauteux language well enough to preach and catechize in this language. (Translation)

In addition to writing the grammar book, he translated the catechism and religious songs into Sauteux. He eventually compiled a 950-page French-Sauteux dictionary that unfortunately he was unable to have published. However, a published extract is available on line: <https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.92901/3>.

THE EDUCATOR

Father Belcourt was an educator. He became a specialist of the Sauteux language and taught it to several missionaries, two of whom became bishops.

A page from his grammar ▶



He opened the first school for First Nations children in 1834 in Baie Saint Paul. He hired Angélique and Marguerite Nolin as teachers. These two sisters spoke four languages: Sauteux, Cree, French and English. Their knowledge of Sauteux enabled them to be of great help to Father Belcourt while he was learning the language and when he wrote his grammar book and his dictionary.

Wherever he went, missionary Belcourt gave religious instruction to Indigenous children and adults. In 1845, for example, he accompanied a Métis* community of 309 men, women and children on a six-week buffalo hunting expedition in North Dakota. Every day at the camp, he said mass and taught catechism to 68 children.

THE FARMER

Father Belcourt placed great importance on agriculture. He was concerned about the Aboriginal people who lead a wandering life. They depended almost entirely on the buffalo hunt and the fur trade for their livelihood. He showed them how to cultivate the land and provided them wheat, barley, corn, cabbage and pumpkin seeds.

THE CARPENTER

Father Belcourt was an industrious and skilled worker. He was an expert carpenter, joiner and blacksmith. He not only provided for his own needs, but he built churches, houses, boats, farm implements, a flour mill and a sawmill.

Some of his work includes making 150 oak balusters and 100 candlesticks for the St. Boniface Cathedral in the winter of 1840. He also built furniture for the bishop's residence. He made door frames and cart wheels. All this work provided him with an income to support himself and to help cover the costs of his projects for Indigenous Peoples.

***Sauteux:** The word Sauteux or Saulteux is a French translation of “people of the rapids” which describes this First Nation's original settlement located near a waterway.

***Métis:** The term Métis refers to a group of cultures and ethnic identities that resulted from unions between Indigenous and European people in what is now Canada.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. If you had to learn another language today, how would you do it? With what learning aids? Would it be the same method as Father Belcourt or a different one?
2. How do you think the Aboriginal people reacted when Father Belcourt suggested that they farm the land instead of relying entirely on hunting for a living?
3. Father Belcourt was very talented and able to build many things. Choose from the list of things he built and explain why these things were important at the time.

