



Just Folks

FATHER CHAUVE

By Dolly Adams Berthelot

In the 1880s, when he was 9 or 10, a talented altar boy made new poor boxes for his church in Lyon, France. He wasn't satisfied with the old ones.

"Men used to take a stick and put adhesive on it and put it in the *tronc* and pull out a dollar or two," chuckles Father Constantin Chauve. So young Chauve built boxes designed to discourage thievery. He's been applying that creative ingenuity to church endeavors ever since.

At 105, Father Chauve may be the oldest living Catholic priest in the United States. He was ordained in 1902 and since has worked all around the country. But the Frenchman has been particularly at home with the Cajuns of Louisiana. He has served for decades, at various times, in the eastern portion of St. James Parish, which straddles the Mississippi River.

By 1918, when he first was sent to the French-speaking community of Paulina on the River Road, Father Chauve already had served as a college professor and football manager in Utah, founded a mission in Maine and returned to his homeland to become a decorated hero in World War I.

Once settled as assistant pastor in the church parish of St. Joseph's in Paulina, he helped build eastern St. James Parish. Literally. By then he was a master carpenter and carver as well as a seasoned supervisor and administrator.

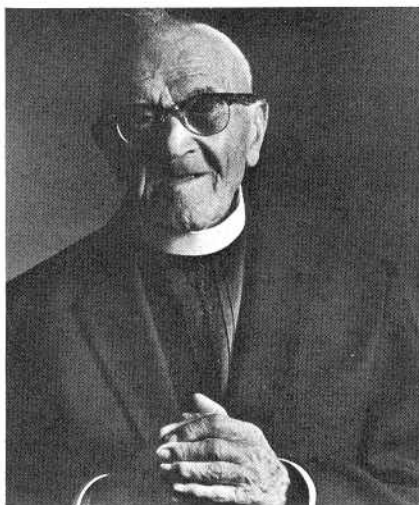
He traveled by horse and buggy in those days, and his old mare was a thoroughbred ex-racehorse who tended to quicken its pace when a younger horse tried to pass. Father Chauve was blessed with similar gusto and incentive, and those qualities stood him in good stead when St. Joseph's burned in 1920.

As the fire raged, Father Chauve urged parishioners to carry out everything that was movable. Whole drawers of vestments and religious statues lined the levee. Soon thereafter, Father Chauve became pastor and rebuilding began.

The greatest obstacle, of course, was money. Enter the now-famous St. Joseph's Fairs, the first of which raised \$7,372.

Now retired, Father Chauve takes pleasure in the fact that those fairs earned him the nickname "Chicken Thief" among parishioners. "You couldn't tell Father Chauve

no," remembers St. Joseph's caretaker, Albert Bourgeois. "Chickens were needed for the gumbo at the fairs, you know. He would carry corn to make the chickens come to him. People might say, 'Oh, Father, I only have five chickens,' and he'd say, 'Well, there's one for me in there!'" Albert, now 69, speaks fondly of the priest who taught him catechism so long ago.



LEE CHUM

"He was a 'hustler.' No doubt about that," says Aimee Brady, principal of Paulina Elementary and volunteer worker at St. Joseph's. "From St. Mary's to Gramercy, he did something for everyone." Aimee walks over the inlaid mahogany floor Father Chauve designed and places flowers on two side altars he built. The 84 cypress pews also reflect his craftsmanship. On the side of each is his favorite motif, a hand-carved cross that seems to be made of thorns. A 14-foot cross of the same design towers over the graveyard in back, and other Chauve creations—such as an altar at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans and a cross in the lobby of Mercy Hospital in the same city—

are scattered across the nation.

Father Chauve still attends Mass most Sundays, sitting in the front row of St. Michael's in the town of Convent—another of the churches he has pastored in St. James Parish—or at Sacred Heart Church in nearby Norco, where he now resides with a family.

Father Chauve said his last Mass in public in his 80s, when the liturgy changed from Latin to English. He knew the prayers "practically by heart in Latin" but not in English, and cataracts prevented his reading the words.

Originally, of course, he gave his sermons in French to meet the needs of his Cajun congregation. "They were crazy about their French then," he recalls, "but now the children are raised like true Americans, in English. If today you spoke French at Mass, few would understand."

Just last year Father Chauve traveled 1,000 miles by van to cheer up an ailing friend, but he is "mainly a sitting man now," he says. He watches sports and game shows on television and reads news magazines with a lighted magnifying glass.

"I'm waiting for the Big Up or Down," he says with a smile, "and wondering how purgatory will look. I hope I won't go farther than that. A man is a man, after all. We can only do our best." □