



## **RAIL HEROES: 2006**

### **Father Albert Lacombe**

Father Albert Lacombe was a French-speaking Canadian Roman Catholic missionary who lived among the Cree and Blackfoot First Nations of western Canada. Born in Saint-Sulpice, Quebec on February 28, 1827, Father Lacombe spent his early life on the family farm before being ordained into the Oblate order in 1849. In 1852 Father Lacombe headed west to Fort Edmonton and spent the winter with Cree and Metis peoples, which led to a translation of the New Testament into Cree, as well as a dictionary of the Cree language. In 1861 he was instrumental in the development of a new mission settlement along the Sturgeon River at what is now St. Albert.

In 1880, Father Lacombe moved to Calgary where he is perhaps best remembered for his brokering of peace between the Cree and Blackfoot nations in western Canada. It was in 1883 when the Blackfoot threatened to blockade the fledgling Canadian Pacific Railway's route across their reserve east of Calgary that Father Lacombe would become a legend in Canadian railway history. Being a trusted friend and able to communicate with the First Nation leaders, Father Lacombe was able to negotiate with Chief Crowfoot of the Blackfoot to bring an end to the dispute, allowing the construction of the CPR to continue. For this, Father Lacombe was given a lifetime pass on the CPR by President William Cornelius Van Horne, and was made President of the CPR for one hour! The community of Lacombe, Alberta was named in his honour. Chief Crowfoot is also honoured with a name of a siding on the CPR main line east of Calgary, which remains an important passing siding for main line railway operations to this day.

Enlisted by Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, Father Lacombe's friendship with the First Nations was strong enough to help maintain peace on the prairies during the North West Rebellion of 1885. In his later years, he continued his ministry to the First Nations, and established a senior citizens home at Midnapore in 1909.

An influential spiritual leader, Father Lacombe passed away on December 12, 1916. The friendship between Father Lacombe and the Cree and Blackfoot respectively was forever enshrined in his death despite the ancient rivalry between these two Nations. In poignant respect for Father Lacombe, his body was buried in the crypt at the St. Albert Parish Church in Cree territory, and his heart interred in Blackfoot territory at Midnapore, south of Calgary.