1884.

A cavalcade of 39 horsemen greeted Bishop James McCollruck of Duluth as he and Father E. Fayolle of Crookston were driving to Gentilly for the confirmation ceremony, June 16, 1890. When the procession arrived in the village, decorated with green branches and flowers, some 600 faithful knelt down for the episcopal blessing, and then acclaimed the bishop with cheers, the explosion of giant firecrackers and the peals of the church bell. 115 children were confirmed that morning.

The cavalcade again formed ranks in the afternoon to conduct the bishop and the clergy to the mission of Louisville where they were met by another escort of 30 horsemen.

**FATHER ELIE THEILLON**

On a chilly, dark day in November, 1888, a young priest ordained six years before in southern France, arrived in poverty-stricken Gentilly.

Dejected people, mortgaged farms and the exodus of families to Yakima, Washington or back to Canada — these dishheartening conditions faced Father Elie Theillon.

Realizing the possible crumbling of the parish within a few years, the undaunted pastor studied the problems affecting the farm population.

Elie Theillon had been reared in a dairying sector in France. He knew the benefits of mixed farming, and like most Frenchmen, he was a connoisseur of cheese.

The young pastor, after months of study of the local agricultural methods, launched a campaign of diversified farming. He explained the necessity of rotating small grain seeding with corn planting or other herbs, because of the light soil. He then induced the farmers to devote more of their acreage to milking cows and the construction of suitable shelters for the animals. In 1890 the smiling priest proposed to the destitute farmers the setting up of a cheese factory in Gentilly.

Undaunted by the doubtful attitude of many of his parishioners, Father Theillon, with the assistance of the village storekeeper, H. T. Gendron, initiated the cooperative enterprise which in the course of years became a remarkable example of community solidarity and prosperity.

The parish priest and the storekeeper toured the countryside by horse and buggy over rough and muddy trails, discussing the venture of a cheese factory with the farmers. Taking a census of the milking cows in the community, the farsighted pastor lent some of his savings to help his people purchase more cows.

On April 29, 1895 plans for a cheese factory were discussed at the first meeting of a group to be known as the “Gentilly Dairy Association.” Later in the summer a bank loan in the amount of $1,000.00 was taken out for the construction of a modest structure for cheese production.

Organized on a cooperative basis, this rural association soon proved to be a very successful and competitive enterprise. Of the five cheese factories in Polk County when it first began production in the fall of 1895, the Gentilly cheese factory was the only one operating in the County by 1915.

The cooperative from its very beginning was fortunate in employing excellent cheese-makers. Gentilly’s “First Premium Cheese” won the annual Minnesota Dairy and Food Commission award for the best cheese produced in the state for many years, and also the top prize at the Minnesota State Fair and other smaller expositions. Gabriel Bernou, whose brilliant career was interrupted by an untimely death in 1924, gained a wide reputation for the excellence of his cheese.

Before accepting the role of the manager of the Gentilly cooperative, Father Theillon, through the request of his bishop, obtained a dispensation from Rome authorizing him to engage in business. One of his best known activities as manager of this rural cooperative was the nationwide promotion of the “Gentilly Premium Cheese”.

Traveling extensively by train he conducted a business that spread from Chicago to Montana and points south. A personal friend of the railroad magnate, James J. Hill, and of other influential people, he marketed his cheese through reputable firms.

A guest at city hotels, he demanded “apple pie and a piece of Gentilly cheese.” “What no Gentilly cheese? It is the best in the world. Bring me the manager”, in his unmistakable French accent.

Thus he sold the product of the factory to large hotels and to the dining car service of railroads. And the cheese proved all that he claimed for it. In the year 1930 the product of the small cooperative brought a higher average price at 19.6 cents a pound than in any other county of the state. The 44 co-op