

Brother Matthew Alfred Deffains, O.Carm.

Editor's Note: Matthew Deffains, O. Carm. prepared his autobiography during the Christmas Season, 1992/1993, with the assistance of John E. Hertel, O. Carm.

I was born on the island of Jersey in the English Channel on 11 September 1905. My parents were farmers. And were farming about 30 acres of land. The land boarded the coast. The commons between the farm and the sea had high cliffs, 350 feet high, with a sharp drop to the sea. I remember very well from the top of the coast watching the fishermen down below in the bay. It was good fishing ground.

My roots are in Brittany, France. My parents, like many other French citizens, came over to Jersey to work on farms as laborers. At the time France was bankrupt from the 1870 war. Jersey was very prosperous then, from the cod fishing on the Newfoundland banks and also ship-building for the cod trade. My father, with the help of my uncle (his brother-in-law), went farming on his own. With hard work he established a good farm business. He grew potatoes for a cash crop and raised a thriving Jersey cattle business. He was a good judge of Jersey cattle. Due to selective breeding his cattle were in demand all over the world. The biggest markets were the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

At the time the Jersey natives were Methodists and Church of England; the only Catholics were the French people. The pastor of my parish told me a story about my father when he got married. He was working for a Calvinist farmer. He told my father that if he married at the Calvinist Church he would give him a farm. It must have been quite a temptation for my father because that was his dream, to own his own farm. According to the pastor, my father said, "Thanks, but no. I am a Catholic. And will remain a Catholic." The Calvinist farmer respected his decision. They remained very good friends.

I went to Saint Matthew's Catholic school from the age of six to fourteen. This was about all the education kids of French descent got. But I believe I had a lot more. My father and mother taught me much more than I learned at school. So long as they had control of the family, they went to Mass every Sunday and everyone followed suit. There were many chores to do on the farm. On Sundays we alternated, three of the boys would go to the first Mass, while the other three did the milking and feeding. When the others came back from Mass, they did the cleaning up, and the rest went to Mass. My mother died when she was thirty-nine. I was thirteen then. Mother was the one who kept the peace in the house (there were eight children in the family). At her funeral the Church was full to the doors with neighbors and friends.

One year after she died our cattle contracted the dreaded foot and mouth disease. The local authorities came to the farm, dug two big holes in the orchard, and the animals were killed by a "human killer." This was a tool in the shape of a pick with a hole at one end, which would pierce through the brains of the animal. The pigs and chickens were also

buried in quick-lime. After that we were not allowed to have animals for six months. We did buy another herd but without mother around it was not the same. My father dispersed the herd. At the time three of my brothers were farming on their own. I had just turned fifteen and was thinking of far-away places. My youth was spent around the Church. Saint Matthew is a farming area. It had a young men's club, a soccer team, a club house (the former school -- all Catholic schools were shut down by the state around 1914) which had two billiard tables, an indoor rifle range of about 22 feet, and table tennis. Liquor and beer were quite cheap and were sometimes abused at the club. There was also a bar next door.

My brother Walter, four years younger than I, decided to go to Canada. I had been working on farms as a hired man until I was twenty-four, and I decided to join him eight months later. He was working on a fruit farm in Saint David's, Ontario. The year was 1929. In Canada, the Tory government of Prime Minister Bennett was in power. They did not want Catholics to come over. They preferred British subjects and Swedes to people from Central Europe as immigrants. The fare was very cheap so Walter took advantage of this. By the time I left I went at a higher rate, tourist fare.

Walter never liked working with cows so I chose to work on a fruit farm. He asked me to join him. And that I did. I also liked the job, but our dream was to buy a farm. We even found one between Saint David's and Queenston. Walter wrote to his girl friend in Jersey to find out if she wanted to come to Canada, but since per parents were against it he returned to Jersey.

I worked on the Larkin fruit farm for one year. The foreman was a Catholic. We attended Mass at either Saint Patrick's or Saint Catherine's every Sunday. He would never miss Mass. I would buy the Sunday Visitor each Sunday. It seems that many religious orders were asking for brothers. It got me thinking. The Alexian Brothers appealed to me, so one Sunday I met Father Fidelis Paulding, then pastor of Saint Pat's, who advised me to go to Mount Carmel College.

Early in June, 1931, I applied to join the Carmelites. The first Carmelites I met were Brother Brocard Haughey and Father Charles Scharf. I was accepted. I entered the Carmelite monastery on 1 July 1931. I was assigned to the farm. Brother Joe Martin and Brother Kevin Osburne were working the farm. Two weeks after I came, Brother Joe went to New Baltimore. Just after I took simple vows, Brother Kevin was transferred to New Jersey, to St. Cecilia. I was alone to take care of the farm. We had five horses and twenty head of cattle. Nine were milkers. I was alone for a few months. Father Richard Haag realized it was too much for one man so I hired a man, Bernard McCauley.

The herd of Holsteins were average, except for two cows. These were exceptionally well bred, and were the foundation of Mount Carmel's famous herd. These cows were acquired by Father Charles and Brother Kevin. At first I just farmed without any idea of improving the herd. Brother Kevin had entered the milkers in what was called R.O.P.,

which means "Record of Performance." That phase of the job I carried on. When I got the report from the government, I realized that we had a good producing herd with a high butter-fat content. I started culling the poor animals, and paid attention to the Holstein pedigree. The county agent was my mentor, and taught me how to read the pedigrees, and well as how to practice line-breeding. We very seldom bought cows, but every four years we bought a well-bred bull-calf that would compensate with the herd's line breeding. Twenty years after we started this line-breeding program we had very good results. For instance, the *Carmel Reflection Rose* is listed as seventh of all time cow in the 365 day class and tenth in the 305 day class. This cow's last record, which was her best and not reported in the issue of the Holstein magazine, would have put her at the very top of the class. Her paternal brother was sold for \$37,000.00.

As for prize winning cattle up to 1954, we won five banners in a row, for the best Holstein cattle in Welland and Lincoln counties, and a trophy for the best of all breeds. The young bull was nominated for "all Canadian" and also won the "all Canadian" junior championship.

One day Brother Xavier MacEachern and I were attending a Holstein sale conducted by Senator Hayes of Alberta, Canada. Brother X overheard the Senator saying that he was shipping a special load of high bred cattle to South America. I told X I wouldn't mind going to South America to take care of these cattle, and afterwards visit our missions there. We knew he was a Catholic, so we spoke to the Senator telling him where our missions were. Of course, the Senator knew me well. A few months before this occasion he had awarded our herd a certificate for life-time production of milk. He told me that I would have to deliver two two-year old bulls to Callao, Peru, and seven heifers to Argentina, and one cow, six heifers, and two dogs to a lady in Uruguay. "Since you would like to see the missions in Santiago, Chile, I will have a Chilean Airlines do the hauling and you will end up at the mission in Chile." He also arranged for me to visit Lima on the way back.

On the way down with the cattle I went in a DC-3 plane. On the way back I flew on a DC-6 plane (the fastest plane in those days). The Fathers were wonderful at both places. At Santiago, Fathers Pierce Gilmartin, Joe Flanagan, George O'Keefe, Gordon Brady, and Dunstan McGuigan welcomed me. In Lima, the Most Reverend Nevin Hayes, Monsignor Alban Quinn, Fathers Jeffrey Fairfield and Leon Battle took me everywhere. Each one would take a turn taking me out for a day.

I forgot to mention that from Toronto to Miami, the cattle were transported by rail, in a Canadian National Freight train, and I accompanied them. I slept on the straw in the freight car with them. It was not a pleasant trip. It took five days to reach Miami, and I was not too sure when I was going to eat.

One day the train stopped for service in Atlanta. I had not eaten for a couple of days. I was looking for a place to eat. Before I could find a restaurant, the train started moving again. The car I had charge of was a long way off; as it was a long train it took a little time to get

up to speed. I doubt if I ever ran faster in my life than I did that two hundred yards of track. But I did it, and I went hungry for the next twelve hours. When I left for Toronto, it was zero degree weather. When I got to Miami, still in my heavy winter clothes, I found the temperature was 85 degrees. The sweat was running all over me. I had to unload the cattle to a quarantine barn. A nice old man was in charge of the quarantine area. He saw my discomfort and offered me the use of a shower. While I was cleaning up, he washed all of my clothes. I was in a mess.

The nicest part of the trip was going south. The plane was not pressurized so we flew at nine thousand feet. We had a good view of the country that we flew over: the Amazon and the wet-lands of Brazil. On the way down we stopped in Kingston, Jamaica for water and hay. While the crew and I had supper at the restaurant the bystanders cleaned me out of my cigarettes (I had enough for my whole trip). In the 50's I thought I couldn't live without cigarettes . . . now I do because I don't smoke anymore. We stayed in Panama overnight, and received the keys of the city. We made a stop in northern Peru for more hay and water.

In Lima, Peru, the Most Reverend Bishop Nevin Hayes was waiting for me at the airport, and so was the Consul General of Canada. After a few pictures taken by the press the bishop took me out for a dinner of filet mignon. From Lima we flew our DC-3 over the Andes, with fourteen Holsteins and two dogs. It was cold as the plane was not pressurized. It seemed to me that we were just skimming over the top of the mountains. We had difficulty breathing. The pilot gave me an oxygen mask.

We landed at Cordoba, Argentina airport. The commander of the airport told me that we had been lucky to have made it over the Andes mountains. One engine had broken down! He told the pilot he would not be allowed to leave before the broken engine had been repaired. It took four days to make the necessary repairs. A Chilean was assigned to help me. We had to carry buckets of water a fairly long distance to water the cows. It was now hot in the plane, and the animals were uneasy. Some would put their nose in the pail and knock it over. Patience finally won the day. We left Cordoba without any sick animals.

We arrived in Buenos Aires without further trouble. There were many farmers at the airport to look at these Canadian Holsteins. It was the same thing in Uruguay. The trip from Uruguay to Chile was a pleasure trip, flying at low altitude gave us something wonderful to see. I stayed in Chile for three weeks to visit the Carmelites. I also visited a few farms with a county agent. On the way back home I stopped in Lima. I did a lot of sightseeing with Monsignor Alban Quinn, Jeffrey Fairfield, and Leon Battle.

The life of the brothers in the 1930's was hard. Many came, most of them left. My work day started at 4:30 AM in the summer with my good dog, Dirk (a gift from a Scotch friend). I would bring in the cattle to milk them. I would milk eight or nine cows by hand and put the milk in the cooler. The hired man arrived at 7:00 AM. He cleaned the barn and took the cows back to pasture. He also cleaned the horses and harnessed them. Mass was

celebrated at 6:30 AM. Breakfast followed at 7:15 AM. From 7:30 - 8:00 AM was my spiritual reading and meditation time. At 8:00 AM, Urban, my good helper (the hired man) had already harnessed the horses. In the Fall we plowed about fifty acres of land. In the Spring we seeded the fields with corn, oats or clover. The wheat was sown in the Fall. In the Winter there was not so much farm work to do, so I would take care of the boilers on weekends. It meant getting up at 3:30 AM and stoking the furnaces. It took about one ton of coal to bring the thermometer up to the 70's by 5:30 AM. Then I would milk the cows. The engineers would come at 7:30 AM.

Another job was to snowplow with the horses. In heavy snow I would use four horses on the home-made triangle plough. Brother Joe Martin from Kansas had shown me how to hitch and drive four horses. It was not that easy.

When I think of it now, we brothers were really second class citizens in the 1930's. There were many things we could have done, but we were stymied. Maybe we were following an old rule when many of the lay-brothers did not know how to read and all they could do was mop the floors, answer the door-bell and cook. I remember one time when I needed a piece of equipment, a harvester. The evening of the house meeting, Fr. Luke Bresnahan, the procurator, told me to stand by as he might need me to explain what the machine does. During the meeting, Fr. Luke came out and told me I could not attend the meeting. "Just tell me what the harvester does." Afterwards he told me that he reported to the meeting that the harvester threshes grain and harvests the corn. Fr. Luke really wanted me to have the machine. I explained to him all it did was chop corn and grass for the silo. No one at the meeting really knew what the machine did. The vote was yes. What I mean to say is that I wonder now why I couldn't attend the meeting.

After an interesting 24 years of dedication, serving God through his Mother, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, maybe not through the ministry, but through the sweat of my brow, I was transferred from Niagara to Mahwah, New Jersey in November 1955. The work was a little easier there. Father Brice was director of Carmel Retreat and had opened the place three months before. Brother Harry Brown was the cook. Carmel Retreat was an ideal place for retreats. However, there was a great deal of work to be done because it had formerly been a family home. Fr. Brice worked hard at the retreat house and had dreams of what he could accomplish. The property had been neglected and it had become more like a deer haven. There was a large house, a garage, and the orchard and lower garden which were kept tidy. Everything else matched with the Ramapo mountains -- just plain trees and bush. Fr. Brice had me cut the woods down and clean out the brush. In addition to that I set the tables, washed the dishes, and cleaned up after the retreatants left. I must have cleaned over 4 acres of brush and reseeded the land. There was a great deal of work to be done on the house, and the garage as well. After much work the garage was transformed into living quarters for the Carmelite community.

When Fr. Brice bought Carmel Retreat, Frank and Jeannette Pelletier had worked seven years previously for the former owners. Fr. Brice hired them to work for us. They were an

asset to Carmel Retreat, good workers. Jeannette was a good cook and buyer. Frank divided four rooms on the south side of the large house so we now had room for 45 retreatants. When Brother Harry was transferred, Frank became the cook, and a good one at that. Frank would tackle anything. He would climb on top of the roof to repair the shingles or repair the pump. There was still an old-fashioned leather pump with a wood shaft, about 350 feet in length, which did not reach the bottom of the well (400 feet deep).

Financially, we were always struggling. Fr. Brice had plans to build the Rosary Way. The mosaics for the Rosary Stations came from Italy, but we had to assemble the monuments and provide the landscaping, since the stations were set on the hillside. Fr. Brice was good to all people. He had room at the inn for the unfortunate: people who had drinking problems; youth in trouble with the law; abused women in hiding from those who had violated them; and those who suffered nervous breakdowns. I remember once a man came in early in the morning. He had problems and wanted to commit suicide. Fr. Brice stayed with him from early morning to late in the day to make sure nothing happened.

I stayed in Mahwah until December 1969. Living with Fr. Brice was peaceful. Brother Stan Reybitz, Brother Don Hedege and Brother Kieran Ritchie also were part of the community. Brother Kieran was always kidding and joking. Everyone liked him as he had a great sense of humor. After Mass we had breakfast in the kitchen. It was like a house meeting every day. We discussed our work: Kieran about the house; Stan about his carpenter work, his charities and missions; Don about the greenhouse and its plants; and I talked about assembling the mysteries of the Rosary Way. Another enterprise Fr. Brice suggested was to operate the old greenhouse, which was a 214 by 14 foot glass house. We also built another two greenhouses -- 200 by 14 foot and 150 by 35 foot.

I had no experience in greenhouse growing of plants and flowers. We started the poinsettia growing by collecting the old poinsettia plants from our Churches in the Valley. We kept the pots in the basement for the Winter. In the Spring we started the plants outside. With advice from amateur growers we brought the plants back in July and August into the greenhouses to force the bract to bloom by Christmas. It worked, but was not the proper way to grow them. The next year, with Fr. Brice's advice, I took a one-year correspondence course on how to grow poinsettias from a California school of flower growing. I was successful in this venture. I got a score of 98 correct responses from 100 possible questions. The last year that Fr. Brice was at Carmel Retreat, between Brother Don and myself, we grew 10,000 poinsettia plants, about 18,000 geraniums, and a few thousand bed plants. For two summers we grew 5,000 indoor mums.

In the summer months we Brothers also assembled the mysteries of the Rosary. We would never have accomplished so much by ourselves without Fr. Brice's mild manner of doing things. Brother Stan, Brother Don, Brother Kieran, the Pelletiers and myself were a happy group, inspired by Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

In November 1969, when I was 64 years old, I was transferred to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Houston, Texas. I was assigned to mowing the ball field and taking care of the landscaping around the house. Fr. Philip Nessinger wanted a rose garden with a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in front of the parish elementary school. The garden has since been moved next to the Church, which has its own marble statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. I took care of both of these projects with help from Joe Gallo and Mr. Stanley, a bricklayer.

These last eight years I've been working around the house. I am deaf and my memory is waning. The only thing I can do well is saying my prayers and rosary. When my father gave me his blessing to join the Carmelites he said, "Please pray for your parents and the family." If I were to live my life over, would I join the Carmelites? The answer is yes. I would not change anything. I have been blessed. The Carmelites have been good to me. I offer my good work to Jesus, through Our Lady of Mount Carmel. As long as I live, I will pray for our Carmelite family.

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