

## Monsignor Joseph E. Le Fort & the Canmar Bridge Club

Joseph E. Le Fort (born in Medicine Hat, January 8, 1920) was one of the many visionaries and builders in post WWII Calgary. He came to Calgary in 1945 where he was ordained May 13<sup>th</sup>. Initially he served as Secretary to Bishop Carroll for 7 years, and then became Chancellor of the Diocese for another 7 years – during which he was elevated to ‘Monsignor’. In 1959 he became Pastor at St. Ann’s Church (916 - 21 Ave. SE) and was there until 1967. That year he moved to Canadian Martyrs Catholic Parish (835 Northmount Drive NW) where he established the Parish and built the church. In 1982 Father Le Fort moved to Sacred Heart Church (1307 - 14 St. SW) where he served until 1990 – the year of his retirement.

Msgr. Le Fort has a longstanding interest in bridge, going back to his teenage years in Medicine Hat. (Carl Forner, a longtime and frequent bridge partner of Le Fort, also grew up in Medicine Hat, although the two did not meet until living in Calgary). While at Canadian Martyrs with the encouragement of Jack Murphy Msgr. combined his interest in bridge with the availability of space and an opportunity for fund raising by creating the Canmar (derivative of ‘Canadian Martyrs’) Bridge Club on May 7, 1973. Starting with 1 afternoon game weekly, Canmar quickly expanded to evening (Monday and Thursday) games and eventually grew to games of up to 3 sections. The inaugural Committee behind Canmar included bridge enthusiasts Lil Murphy, Rita Allen, Anne Romanzin and Noemi Chiess. When Msgr. Le Fort became Pastor at Sacred Heart Church, Canmar relocated with him and the games were held in the basement there until about 1993. Sacred Heart eventually needed the space for other purposes and Canmar relocated to the South Calgary Community Association (3130 - 16th Street SW) for about 2 years, and (following a few months when the club held no games) in 1996 Msgr. Relocated Canmar to St. Joseph’s Church (640 – 19 Ave. NW) for a few months. Neither of these last two spaces was totally satisfactory and Canmar was disbanded in September of 1996, with players gravitating to Martinique and other clubs. As a matter of interest, Father Le Fort played a key role in the Martinique’s relocation to its current location, the Knights of Columbus Hall – Martinique was looking for new space and Le Fort became aware of the availability of the KoC facility, linking the two parties.

In 1981, Le Fort enjoyed a 1-year sabbatical in Rome and played a lot of bridge while there – in one game against Benito Garozzo and his partner. However intimidating world class players such as Garozzo, and the somewhat disorienting bidding system of the Italians, Le Fort recalls the most intimidating part as the late (9:30 pm and later) start of games and the inevitable long walk home well after midnight.

Central to the success of any bridge club is a strong cadre of Directors and Canmar had its share of Director talent. Marguerite (Swanson) Perry was the inaugural Director, followed by Stan Matheson., Steve Bates, Vaughn Johnson, Doris Fishman, and Carl Lawless. In addition to directing, Steve managed the club for several years (1982 to 1986/7).

Those who played at Canmar describe Msgr. as follows: very keen about bridge (whether duplicate, rubber bridge, or bridge cruises); a gentleman; competitive; affable; very well liked; dedicated to the community. Monsignor had a most persuasive way about him --- he was a master of energizing volunteers. Carefully selected words such as “will you be bringing a turkey for the December game” and “I’m suggesting you as Treasurer



because we really need a second signature” were very hard invitations to say ‘no’ to. He also had a wonderful way of sensing friction and finding the right words to defuse it. Many a couple would move for the next round in hot discussion of previous bidding or play only to have the sparks neutralized with Monsignor’s gentle ‘welcome to our table!’ More than a man, more than a priest, more than a friend, more than a community leader: Monsignor Le Fort was all of these and more.

Msgr. Le Fort achieved Silver Life Master in 2005 and continues to play bridge, sometimes at Bob’s Bridge Club Sunday game, and mostly at a social game in his retirement home at Lake Bonavista Village. His view is that “duplicate bridge is a world of its own, and through it one makes many very good friends”. Several Unit 390 members were present at the diamond jubilarium of Msgr. Le Fort’s ordination in September 2005.

On June 30, 2007, the old Father Lacombe building on the campus at 14500 Bannister Road SE re-opened after its \$1.5 M to \$2.0 M refurbishing including renovations and expansion of the bookstore, cafeteria and addition of a new classroom. It was renamed the ‘Monsignor Joseph Le Fort Centre’ and a bronze bust of Msgr. Le Fort is at the entrance. Congratulations Msgr. Le Fort, and thank you for the many opportunities you provided for the Calgary bridge community

Msgr. Joseph E. Le Fort at the opening of Le Fort Centre, June 30, 2007.  
Courtesy of St. Mary’s University College.

Who would have thought that a key catalyst for the expansion of duplicate bridge in Calgary was a Roman Catholic Priest?

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Ken Scott

Note: Monsignor LeFort passed away on December 18, 2012