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Charlotte Michaud

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Art and Literature Club Talk

Charlotte Michaud

Yvette Couture Hasham

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unable to do so - Yvette Couture Haslam read it for me - answered questions and was well-liked
Talk to be given before the Art and Literature Club - March 1 - 1976
-- by C. Michaud note attached news reports

For those who have already read about local Franco-American Origins in the booklet published by the Lewiston Historical Commission, I would first explain the idea of the publication originated with Prof. James S. Leamon, history professor at Bates College, who was appointed chairman of the Lewiston Historical Commission when that body was formed in 1969 by Mayor John B. Beliveau of Lewiston.

Franco-Americans are aware of their own history, was Prof. Leamon's belief. What I want is some thing that will explain what kind of folks these ^{are} to those who do not know them. Newly-arrived students at Bates, annually express surprise at the French character of this community. They wonder why so much French is spoken on the streets, and they are surprised to note the many French names on store fronts and professional offices.

To the Franco-American members of the commission, themselves lifelong residents here, it was surprising to hear that this French emphasis is noted by newcomers. They had thought it was diminishing, but they also knew that Franco-Americans still form the majority of the local population.

To those who have not read the Historical Commission booklet, I would tell you it is obtainable for the reading at both public libraries, and is also on sale at a moderate price. Proceeds of such sales are to be used by the Commission to finance the publication of other historical phases of the city.

However, to set the scene, let me first review the essentials of the booklet. It begins by telling that Franco-Americans are descendants of early French pioneers who settled in Canada, fretted under later British dominion, and came here in the hope of finding better living conditions.

Their big handicap was that they were unable to speak English. Perforce, they found employment wherever the language offered no ~~an~~ barrier. Usually, that meant manual labor.

Families that came were usually large, and everyone that could be employed sought work--even children aged 9,10 and 11. The essential thing for these families was to be financially self-sufficient. That is the first thing this country requires of its immigrants.

Others among the newcomers had trades, professions, businesses. Their lot was a bit easier, except they had financial troubles due to the fact most laborers, especially in the mills which furnished the main source of employment, were paid only once a month, then twice a month, and, only after a long period of time, on a weekly basis. That meant much credit had to be extended, and folks generally squared their obligations, but if tragedy befell them, frequently the debt was written off by the creditor.

Urged by their leaders and their own newspaper, these new residents applied themselves to study the language that was so necessary. The local cities supplied night schools and teachers, and their major effort was to get students to read, write and understand English so they might become American citizens. After a number of years of residence, this also meant they could vote and participate in the civic life of the community.

The father of today's speaker is one who came here alone, ~~and only~~ in his late 'teens. He was a skilled typesetter badly needed at the time by early owners of Le Messenger. Before he came, they had had to depend on typesetters who knew only English and that slowed the process and led to errors. Within comparatively few years, Mr. Couture became owner of the paper and continued it to his death.

He soon established himself as a leader in the community, sponsoring many cultural activities, staged plays, concerts, lectures and was a co-founder of the Musical-Literary club still active here. These activities filled a great need for the French community where every thing else of that nature was in English--with which language they were still too unfamiliar.

Such activities also served to preserve the language and culture of these people. They appreciated them and always provided capacity audiences. It became difficult in time to provide enough plays and musicals to fill the demand. Fortunately, a Belgian, who owned a book store here for many years, ~~was~~ used to go to Europe occasionally to replenish his stock, and he was always commissioned by Mr. Couture to bring back scripts of plays, even operettas and operas that could be presented here.

When finally so many productions of the same plays had been presented, Mr. Couture took upon himself the task of translating into the French the popular Gilbert and Sullivan production of Pinafore. This was presented by several local casts over the years.

One of the oft-repeated misinformations about these early immigrants was that they cared little for education. Nothing could be more contrary to the truth. From the moment of their arrival, early residents provided schools for their children. The first were held in private homes and young women among the newcomers served as teachers. Classes were taught in French mostly, but surely there must have been some basic English, too, the need was so great and so well recognized.

Soon, parish schools were established and teachers imported mostly from Europe. Again, French was the uppermost language. One learned every thing in French except English grammar. For this last, American-born ^{lay} teachers were added to the staff. All these schools were privately financed by the new residents, in addition to the support they paid for public schools through taxation, but seldom used. For several years also, some parents continued to prefer private schools maintained by lay residents, one for girls, one for boys, and highly favored because of the limited number of pupils they served.

For years, these schools provided only elementary education, but parents, familiar with educational facilities maintained by several religious orders in Canada, were wont to send boys and girls to those institutions for advanced studies. They had the further advantage of being bilingual which was important for those returning here to engage in ~~business~~^{commercial or} professional work.

It is this custom which undoubtedly led to the false report, since so few attended the local ~~the~~ high schools or college. A current glance at local newspapers will reveal how this situation has changed with the years.

Nothing serves like examples, however, and now let me cite a few. A man and woman who came here from Canada in the late 1880's were both single, met here, and married. They had two boys: the eldest became a doctor, the youngest, a storekeeper.

Another teenager ~~like~~ like Mr. Couture came here alone, took what manual employment he could find while he prepared himself to become a postman, a position in which he continued until ~~his~~ his death. His sole daughter was the first local girl to join the Dominican nuns and became a teacher. Of his three sons, one became a postal clerk; the other, a clerk in a municipal office; and the other, a physician. A granddaughter is ~~was~~ currently a member of the University of Maine faculty.

Another case is one ^{that was} related to the author of this talk by the subject himself. He became employed in a local mill at the age of nine. As he became older, he aspired to be a store clerk. He found employ with a merchant who needed someone to transport merchandise from cellar to counters for his store clerks. By reading the inscriptions on the boxes and examining the contents, the young man added to his knowledge of English by sight and examination.

Such industry and his good repute soon made it unnecessary for this young man to seek employment. Opportunities came to him, and he progressed from store clerk to insurance salesman, to co-partner in a retail store, and, finally, to head a small loan association opened here under federal auspices. Not long afterward, headquarters of the firm were moved to a better location, outfitted to resemble a bank, and our man was installed in a private office as its president. For years, the place was identified by Franco-American residents as "Joe's bank", that being his first name.

However, that man felt inadequate educationally, so he took private lessons until he had obtained the equivalent of an high school education. He always continued to study, and he was still president of that so-called bank until he died. Before that, he had opportunity to refuse the offer of a banking position in Boston...

Similar stories can be obtained from many local families. Always, however, one learns that while parents may have worked in the mills, their children were given educational and cultural opportunities, and these children--even from the first generation born here,--were soon employed in every type of ^{work}~~employment~~ obtainable here in civic, business and professional endeavors.

It is a record of which Franco-Americans are justifiably proud.

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