
Correspondence 1970-1973

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4-22-1971

Letter from Doris Isaacson and article by Charlotte Michaud: Franco-Americans in Lewiston, Maine

Doris Isaacson

Charlotte Michaud

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From The Desk of

Mrs. Peter A. Isaacson

4/22/71

Charlotte —

I can use your first draft to begin series, set up as attached — no doubt you'll be revising & tightening for your brochure, but that's not necessary now. I like to keep the style & flavor — but let me know of any factual changes.

Sorry about poor carbon —
have transferred my supplies to
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Doris Isaacson

Franco-Americans In

LEWISTON



Miss Charlotte Michaud of
The Lewiston Historic Commission

One word ~~can~~^{s/} suffice to explain why French-Canadians settled in Lewiston-Auburn, Maine, as well as elsewhere in ~~the State~~, that word is: economics. They came to better their way of life.

They were called French-Canadians because they originally came from France when that country began colonization of Canada in the 17th century. When Great Britain took possession of Canada in 1763, many of the early French settlers remained despite unhappiness under the rule of folks whose language they didn't speak and didn't care to learn. They closed ranks and tried to continue to live in the ways of their forebears.

The French had been in Canada more than 150 years before Great Britain took over. While governed by their own people, the French-Canadians could endure their hardships, always hoping that from generation to generation life would become easier, and it did, for many.

Some of their daughters married military men of the occupation forces, so that one finds many French-Canadian families with English and Scottish surnames. But their children were brought up as French in language and tradition, rarely the other way. Not for several generations did those of French descent begin to adopt other speech and customs through marriage into other nationalities.

Life was ~~hard~~ in Canada in early times. The French-Canadians ~~had~~ lived there under pioneer conditions, breaking new ground to establish homes, engaging in farming or small business enterprises. Into the 19th century there were no industries to provide employment. Everyone had to subsist through his personal labor.

Small farming, just enough to supply the family larder, was the main occupation of ~~all~~ males. The women folk frequently helped out in the fields besides attending to household duties that ~~included~~ weaving of material to be made into clothing for the family. Like all pioneers ~~in whatever land~~, these people lived without ever handling much money. Needs were fulfilled through barter.

"Farmland" frequently was a wilderness grant on condition it be developed. This meant felling trees and clearing land before farming operations could begin. Once a rough dwelling was built, the family moved in and all worked, mainly just to keep alive and warm in a country of long winters. Some prospered; some fared only moderately; and some gave up the struggle.

In that era of large families, French-Canadian families averaged at least a dozen children. ~~[They didn't all live, but they were born.]~~ Men usually married twice. At the death of the first wife, it was accepted as necessary that the man re-marry, if only to bring up the children of the first marriage. A widowed mother re-married for the same reason. Children of both marriages were brought up together as one family.

[However, not all lived to maturity.]

When children married,

they were given a corner of the family land-holdings. They built their homes thereon or remained in the family homestead and tilled their corner of the land until they were able to build their own home where they, too, raised large families.

family farms
thence grow smaller
and smaller with
each generation making
it increasingly difficult
to earn a living

While life in Canadian cities was easier than in rural or pioneer areas, even the cities offered little remunerative employment, especially for women. A family having more daughters than sons generated its own hardships, of a sort. And French-Canadians, clinging to Old World mores, considered it improper for their womenfolk to be employed outside the home.

for men

It was these people who generally migrated to the United States, most often coming to the area that bordered Canada. At first the migration was gradual. The menfolk came seeking work during the winter months to provide for their families. They came to Maine through Beauce County, Quebec, which has good farming land, but little to occupy men during the long winters. In Maine, there were lumbering operations and other sources of employment.

and seasonal

Quebec religious records reveal that missionaries were sent into Maine to minister to these men early in the 19th century. French-Canadians were among the builders of Maine's State Capitol at Augusta after the State was separated from Massachusetts in 1820. From those early transitory migrations, French-Canadians learned about life in "the States"; learned it was easier the year 'round than in Canada, and they began to think about settling Stateside.

The decision to leave land and homes won through many hardships was not made hastily. Those who lived in areas that had grown into sizeable villages and towns had fairly comfortable homes, but frequently there was a mortgage, with little or no source of income. For these people, the decision to move to the States most often was intended as a temporary measure. The family would all pitch in and work to earn enough money to "clear" the home property, then return to Canada to enjoy their own way of life.

If the family moved to the States, who would know back home that the women of the household would be earning money outside. It didn't matter who in the States knew because they would be doing likewise. Once the needed money was accumulated, they would return and resume their genteel ways of life in Canada where women would do without many things before resorting to "demeaning" employment outside the home.

The father customarily came first to study the situation — what employment was available, where his family could be lodged, what were the educational and religious facilities. There were centers in Maine where, by the early 1800s, quite a few French-Canadians had settled. This appealed to their compatriots. It meant companionship among their own people, those who spoke the same language and had the same background. Therefore, except for the hardier souls, they settled where some of their people already were established and where they could earn a livelihood. The result is that

Certain family names are special to one location and not to another, so that older residents frequently can identify a person's place of residence in Maine solely by the stranger's surname.

For instance, one doesn't find in Lewiston-Auburn so-called French Baptists, as there are in Waterville; neither does one find French names with altered spelling, as one finds in Waterville and in Rumford.

- one or two examples?

Once the father had located a place in the

States he felt suitable for his family, the mother was notified. The home in Canada would be closed and family belongings packed. In those days, the Grand Trunk Railway was the means of transportation from the Province of Quebec, the starting point for many who settled in Lewiston-Auburn, attracted by employment offered in the textile mills.

SS. Peter and Paul parish records, covering 100 years of this mother-church for both Lewiston and Auburn, show a great influx of these migrants during the latter part of the 19th century. * Families arrived at the Grand Trunk station (a freight office in recent years until it was closed in 1971) on Lincoln Street. This wide street was the center of residential and business life. Four and five-storied tenement houses lined both sides of it; upper floors were dwelling places while the ground floors were occupied by stores supplying the needs of the residents.

[By 1880,] [By 1880] [Some 20 years later] new arrivals had difficulty finding rents in this area that now included not only Lincoln Street, but also, farther south nearer the Androscoggin River, Cedar, Oxford and River Streets. Reluctantly at first, the migrants turned to the open lands of Auburn on the opposite river bank, south of that community's center near the river falls that furnished the Twin Cities' industrial power. Thus the French-Canadian settlement spread across the Androscoggin, populating the area they named New Auburn.

There were plenty of folks around who spoke their language, who came from the same areas where they had lived in Canada. There were schools for their children and churches where the services were conducted in their native tongue.

The Lewiston textile mills and New Auburn's Barker mill could absorb all the workers who applied, and the immigrants were willing to work. Salaries were low and hours were long, but as one became more skilled, it was possible to earn one dollar a day. In those days, one could manage to live on such wages and even put something aside "to finish paying for the home in Canada."

These people were used to long hours; they were healthy and strong, and work was a challenge they were proud to meet.

In the first migration days, ~~however~~ many of the newcomers intended their stay in the States to be temporary. All worked toward the goal of earning sufficient money as quickly as possible, to return to the old home in Canada. Money earned by all members of the family went to the father. From these accumulated funds he supplied all needs and saved the surplus.

1860
* By 1880, Lewiston's population was 19,083
- about one-quarter of which was French-Canadian

repetition

save

repetition

IN 1880's ?

[By 1880,] [By 1880]

listening wide-eyed to the oft-repeated stories.

After the children had gone to bed, in winter snug under heavy blankets in the unheated rooms, it was time for adults to socialize with talk and card games. They came from across the hall, upstairs and down, all from within the same "block", as the tenement houses were called. Card-games were spirited affairs, marked with running commentary and good-humored banter; much laughter, and considerable slapping of cards on the table when there was an especially clever play.

Children slept through all this, even those left alone in the care of the eldest who often wasn't much more than 10 years old. Children matured early in those days.

When tragedy struck a home, neighbors were quick to bring aid and comfort, not waiting to be asked. One frequently hears of a child who "grew-up" in this home or that after his parents died. Even bachelors have "brought up" several children of deceased parents.

No greater tragedy was foreseen than that of having to place children in an orphanage, even though these institutions were reputed to be under the kindly and charitable direction of dedicated nuns.

The Sisters of Charity, known as the Gray Nuns, were the first religious order brought to Lewiston from Canada to teach school and to maintain an orphanage and hospital. These last two functions were the specialty of the order, but they took on the teaching until they could be replaced, within a few years.

Children were admitted to parochial school at six years of age, usually, so some parents sent five-year olds to public school, but only for that one year. In parochial school, all instruction was in French, except English grammar and American history.

One too frequently hears that early French-Canadians cared little for education. Facts disprove this. These people contributed to the cost of local public schools from the time they arrived here, but they derived no benefit from them — through choice. They went to extra expense to provide schools, where in addition to subjects taught in public schools, their children would receive instruction in religion, as well as in French language and allied subjects.

To be true, they didn't go on to advance studies after elementary grades as soon as did their English-speaking peers, but the reason was economic, solely. Their families were going through the period of immigration and settlement as had earlier generations.

But as French-Canadians and Franco-Americans became more financially secure, they, too, sent their children to higher educational institutions, as a matter of course. It took some years for this to become generally apparent, because parents usually sent their children to convents and colleges in Canada. These were boarding schools where instruction was given from elementary grades to preparation for the professions.

Even before families became affluent, many families suffered untold sacrifices to educate one of their own for the priesthood, and deprived themselves of the earning power of a daughter who chose to enter religious life.

Intense migration over a short period of time brought the need for more schools and churches. The new residents recognized these needs and contributed of their precious savings as a matter of course.

Sketch
St. Joseph's School 1881
2nd parochial school - 1882 in
Dominican block
St. Patrick's School - 1905
etc -
Here include a list of the
Catholic churches & parishes
replaced by St. Peter's - 1873-1906
St. Patrick's 1890-
St. Mary's - 1907
etc -

8
Early French-Canadians lived a life apart from the community, an unconscious segregation.

Entertainment in those days was confined mostly to the home. It was long a source of annoyance to mill-owners having to accept that no French-Canadian would work on New Year's Day. the old-time custom of obtaining the blessing of the eldest male during New Year's Day festivities was generally honored. This custom kept families together and also served to end any family quarrel that might have arisen during the year. Friends, like relatives, were expected to make home-calls at least within the 30 days after New Year's. Failure to do so was recognized as a termination of the friendship, or the continuation of a quarrel.

Finally, established, the State Legislature declared New Year's Day a holiday. Franco-Americans have adopted Christmas as both a religious and social holiday, but 'way back, New Year's Day was the social feast, and industrious though they were the year 'round, that did NOT include New Year's Day.

Family gatherings were frequent, Relatives congregated regularly, especially on Sundays. Families were large, relatives multiplied with marriages and births. Talented members provided entertainment by singing or "declaiming," and evenings were short because work began early the next morning.

As the population increased, gatherings became larger. Various groups were organized and entertainments were provided to round out the business program at meetings. Invariably these were conducted in French, and by talented members. From variety programs, entertainments gravitated to plays and musicals.

Clergymen intervened when this involved grouping men and women for prolonged periods of rehearsals. Girls who were members of church sodalities were forbidden to participate in theatrical productions with men, on penalty of being banished from the sodality. Dancing was prohibited and involved similar punishment.

This was still the Victorian era. Girls and boys of marriageable age had to be chaperoned, or risk being "talked about." One heard of sales girls being dismissed from employment in local stores because "ladies" of the community would not be "waited upon" by those regarded as "shady ladies."

the men had more freedom, but they too got "talked about" for certain female company they "kept." If they married these girls, it meant social ostracism. If he married a more acceptable one instead, the old association was still held against the man, and he was not likely to be elected to lodge or club office.

In those early days, French-Canadians married mostly among their own people. ~~Weddings were~~

Prior to the establishment of a five-day work-week, weddings invariably took place on a Monday morning, with a prenuptial reception the night before. The wedding usually took place in early morning, because even into the 1930s the wedding trip was to Canada, often to the home of some relative, and departure had to fit the schedule of the Grand Trunk railway.

young people were not allowed to marry during periods of mourning, nor during Lent, nor during Advent. Widowers and widows who remarried had such ceremonies performed at hours when younger folks didn't — say, like at 5 p.m.

The early days of French-Canadian immigration to Lewiston-Auburn — during the last 30 years of the 19th century — was in the era of large families. A family of twelve children was frequent; eight was common, and one or two, a rarity. If a woman wasn't pregnant after her first year of marriage, she was considered sickly.

At childbirth, a woman was usually attended at home by a midwife. Her pregnancies were at 18-month intervals at most; frequently less, until she reached infertile years. One local family numbered 22 children, and report was current how bashful the mother was to be pregnant at the party given to observe her 25th wedding anniversary.

Women invariably married without previous knowledge of marital life. At most, young couples received some instruction from their parents, but no earlier than the night before marriage. Girls were considered forward if they sought information beforehand. They would be shushed by their mothers, or simply told: "You'll find out, as I did."

Sex was not something one talked about, and women invariably professed disinterest, to say the least. It was referred to as a "duty," and one heard married women complaining that "marriage wasn't easy — serving a man 24 hours a day." At wedding

receptions, older women observing the bride gaily joining in the day's festivities, would comment: "Poor little girl, she doesn't know what awaits her," and all adults would agree.

Although some families did return to Canada, as planned, most remained in the United States.

plus men too?
~~Some first planned to make only a temporary stay in the United States, but, invariably they remained. They visited relatives who continued to live in Canada, but French-Canadians who settled in the States adopted some American ways of life, gradually becoming less French-Canadian and more Franco-American, as they are now identified, after four and five generations of life in this country.~~

Gradually they learned to speak and read English, but mostly for essential needs only. Many things and places were identified by their physical attributes. For instance, a child might be directed to go to the store with "golden arms," (this probably being E. S. Paul's on Lisbon Street, now Benoit's). The store then had brass rails (golden arms) to protect its display windows.

When a purchase had to be made in a store without a French clerk, the child was told the English word for the desired article. Since forgetting the word would mean a return home and back to the store again, the child learned to repeat the word until he was sure of it. That fixed the word in mind for quite some time.

English was learned more painfully by some than by others, and the more proficient would serve as interpreters. There were those who never bothered to make the effort to learn English, so long as others in the family could speak for them. For others, it was a matter of pride. Unless they could speak the language perfectly, they wouldn't risk it for fear of being laughed at.

What they learned about their English-speaking contemporaries, was acquired through acquaintances made at a mutual place of employment.

For instance, an English-speaking resident may have pointed to a church where he regularly attended "meetings." The French-speaking resident who guessed at what he couldn't understand, associated the church building with "meeting," which he mispronounced to sound like the French "mitaine." For years, there-

after, our French-speaking residents referred to any other church but their own as a "mitaine."

The English-speaking residents did as badly with French. What they couldn't pronounce easily, they either deformed or changed. They couldn't even recognize the letters and numerals these French folk wrote, because the latter had been taught the florid European style. Capital "C's" as the French wrote looked like a "G" to them; the "x" the French wrote was "sc", closely joined together, but the American read it literally.

Accents on letters were either disregarded or read as dots. Unfamiliarity with given names made it impossible for them to distinguish sexes in such names as Irene and Irenee.

Numerals were written with long-since discarded loops, and the sevens were invariably crossed, as is still done in Europe. But children sent to public school, even as late as some 50 years ago, soon learned to stop the practice when their 7's were read as 4's by the teacher.

As early as 1880, the French-speaking residents had a newspaper published in their own language, and, from its columns, they learned about the cities wherein they lived. They learned about their municipal government, political activities, and were exhorted to obtain American citizenship. They were told of night schools taught by their own French- and English-speaking residents, where instruction could be obtained that would make them eligible to vote.

Attendance at these night schools was large and constant over many years. The children were getting instruction at day-school, but children who worked and the adults crowded these night school sessions which were financed by local municipalities for many years, until they were no longer needed. In later years such instruction could always be obtained from private tutors.

Once "Americanized" at the county court in Auburn, these people took active part in elective campaigns. Pushing the election of this or that candidate might lead to appointment to the police force, or later, to employment in the municipal public works.

In time, Franco-Americans overcame the Irish domination of local politics, and now there are more French names in local government, especially in Lewiston, than that of any other ethnic group.

However, they remained French in their home-life until about 30-40 years ago. Prior to then, French was the common language among them all. Currently, those in the 30-age bracket and lower, seldom speak French, though the 30-year olds had parents who did. The younger ones will tell you they "understand French," but that they don't speak it.

Within the past 10 years, it has become necessary to teach Franco-American children in English, even in parochial schools, because they are not taught French at home. Gradually, this has led to the necessity of conducting church services in English, even in parishes created primarily to assure that services would be in French, and to building schools, and importing teachers to assure a French education for the children.

change to
Rene and Renee

working (no)
First Franco-American
Mayor was Dr Robert J.
Wiseman (Pradhamma) in 1914,
Next was Charles P. Lemaire
1919-1920. From 1933 on,
there has been no non-
Franco-American mayor
with exception of the
present incumbent
make it positive

after the immigrants had been long
there were exceptions, of course among these
generally good people

Their priests came from Canada at first. Few in number, these soon were followed by others from France. The same was true of the teaching nuns and brothers. As the religious increased in Canada and in Maine, replacements increased.

Deaths meant long periods of mourning — two years for a parent; one-year for other relatives — during which time children and adults wore black and abstained from all diversions. Among the generally large families this frequently meant several years of consecutive mourning. Needless to add,

Christenings took place at church, at most three days after birth. The child was dressed in long, starched dresses; the godparents in their Sunday best; an elderly female member of the family carried the child ("la porteuse," she was called), and the father wore a Prince-Albert and silk hat.

Schools were non-existent. Parents taught their children what they knew. Missionary priests visited to administer the religious functions of the Roman Catholic Church, the traditional religion, and to instruct the children in the tenets of their faith.

Meanwhile, some families did return to Canada, but they were few. In some instances the parents returned, but the children, long since considered adults, remained in Maine.

As early as the Spanish-American War, residents of French descent were among those who left these cities to bear arms for their adopted country. Their number increased through all successive wars in which this country engaged.

Loyalty to the United States is unquestioned among these people. It is still fresh in the minds of these descendants that this country received their forebears and gave them freedom to live according to their own wishes, freedom to speak the language they knew best at the time, freedom to attend church of their choice, and opportunity to share a better life.

MHN/JANUARY 1972

These are the "left-overs" from the 4 original
articles that went to make up the above: