
Historical Notes

Charlotte Michaud

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Franco-Canadian Mill Workers Book Excerpt

Unknown

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In an era when girls married at 16 and were regarded as old maids if they hadn't married by age 25, employment came early. A child looked forward to leaving school that he or she might be considered adult enough to go to work and contribute to the family finances. There were then no child labor laws and it was not uncommon for pre-teenagers to begin working in the mills.

There are still those who recall such employment as not unpleasant. The work was light and there was much time for play, even within the confines of the mill. Women recall that their childhood work consisted of carting bobbins in wheeled containers from one area to another at certain intervals. Between these tasks, they played in whatever free space was available, singing and dancing to the tunes that have entertained children of all times.

Boys had different tasks, such as oiling various parts of machinery — and played ball daily, oldsters remember. All were punished if the work were poorly done, but only by curtailment of playtime — nothing more.

Although they were paid little more than two or three dollars a week, their satisfaction was great in having attained adult status by holding a job and bringing home a salary to contribute to the family welfare.

Not all French-Canadians worked in the mills. The more affluent worked in the shoe factories where a certain period of unpaid training preceded employment. Girls, whose health precluded the more arduous factory employment, became store clerks; some, with only elementary schooling, became bookkeepers . . . but such employment among the women was only until they married or entered religious life.

There were some for whom factory work had no appeal, yet they had no skill, and no funds to start a business. Maine was a prohibition state, but there were so-called rum sellers in town, and that was a profitable business that required little training.

Some French-Canadians went to work ~~for their predecessors~~ in the city's illicit liquor trade, ~~learned the business, and eventually went into it for themselves~~. It involved devising ways of evading police intervention, and it was done by graft and concealment. One got caught occasionally, but resumed business with added caution.

Sellers became affluent and bought real estate which not only provided added income but also served as a "cover" for the illegal business. The sellers were charitable on occasion, so some residents overlooked the unsavory source of their funds. But generations later, there were those who remembered such revenues.

Naturally, there were residents who impoverished themselves and their families by contributing to the wealth of the sellers, so, quite frequently, parish priests would thunder in Sunday sermons against the sellers. One Sermon, recalled long after its delivery, had the priest exhorting sellers to abstain from selling at least on Sundays, adding: "And, don't think you're gaining indulgences by selling on weekdays."

possibly add here info that when labor laws were passed, the family would work a hardship on the income. Some youngsters continued to work or those of older birth anticipated knowingly employed some of them from time to time or moving the inspectors visited the plant.

why?

how some local residents attained affluence through these means

clearly