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Beginings of Centre d'Héritage Article

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St. Dominic High School Has
Unique French Heritage Course - ~~3-credit~~ ^{with credit}
for College Credit

After years of being considered at least somnolent if nothing worse, French 4 is alive and well at St. Dominic High School in Lewiston.

Only six seniors out of a student body of 380 elected last year to enroll in this additional year of a language native to most of them. General consensus: they had had it in the past three years and wanted no more French literature.

But due to the ingenuity and enthusiasm of their instructor, Mrs. Jo Anne LaPointe, these six students found themselves no longer just a French literature class, but a French-Canadian Institute, bent on indepth study of their Canadian antecedents. No longer was their reading confined to the French classicists. Now, they were delving into early records of their ancestors in Canada. They were busy talking with their grandparents and other older residents of the Twin Cities who remembered the early days of the Canadian migration to Maine...and could tell fascinating tales of their own memories of life in Canada, or recall stories they had heard from their parents or grandparents.

St. Francis College at Biddeford took an active interest in the new project and guaranteed a college credit for this first "heritage component." A later project in French-Canadian literature was also accepted for college credit.

Envious of their schoolmates, other students at St. Dominic begged to join the project, "just for fun" and before long boys and girls in other classes were researching their families' backgrounds, reading old copies of the city's now defunct French newspaper, Le Messager, and learning with pride of the contributions their forefathers had made to the business and cultural life of Lewiston. Another group made a study of folk music and came up with a repertoire of tunes that had been common in the "old days" but were in danger of disappearing entirely. Sometimes grandparents would sing the songs and the students would record

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the music and words. At other times, the words might be found written in an old copy book and someone would be able to fit a tune to them.

Finally, the group presented two concerts which were actually "sing alongs" and invited community participation. Some 300 persons attended the first affair and were delighted with the presentation. They spread the word and when the second concert was held attendance nearly doubled and it was necessary to turn people away. Not only was there a fine local audience, but members of French-speaking communities in other Maine cities heard of the affair and journeyed to Lewiston especially to attend. In fact, there were several residents of Manchester, N.H., in the audience.

As the project has grown, adult interest and participation have been evident. Recognizing a need, Mrs. LaPointe encouraged the establishment of a Franco-American Heritage Center, where parents and children join in pursuing their common interest.

"There is no generation gap here," says Mrs. LaPointe. "Everyone is completely interested and age is not a factor."

It is Mrs. LaPointe's dream to enlarge the Center, move it out of the school and open it to interested students in neighboring high schools. The Quebec Province government has interested itself in the project and the minister of cultural affairs was instrumental in presenting some 2,000 books to the Center. In addition, Le Conseil de la Vie Francaise en Amerique, a Quebec-based organization, entertained the six seniors in the Institute on a five-day heritage tour of Quebec last spring. They were able to visit sections of the country outside Quebec City where most of their families originated and in addition were guests at a French language version of "The Death of a Salesman."

French 4 at St. Dominic may not have been crowded in the past, but there is a possibility in the years ahead that Mrs. Lapointe may have to stand at the door to hold back students eager to work with the teacher who manages to make learning fun.

Each year more and more French classes in Maine's secondary schools are taking advantage of the excellent opportunities for language and cultural experiences available in the Province of Quebec. The French program at Katahdin High School at Sherman is focused on "le francais de Quebec". Pittsfield's short-lived Warsaw High School sent two girls to a Quebec school for a month, also, and this year several students at George Stevens Academy, Blue Hill, spent several weeks in the schools of our neighboring Province. The latter two projects were part of the independent studies programs at the two schools.

With this emphasis on a practical use of French there is every reason to believe that interest in this second language will develop rapidly throughout the state.

Charlotte Michod's file