

French Canadians in the Copper Country

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Thank You

- I would like to thank Luanne Hamel for making the arrangements for me to speak to you today
- And I would like to thank Chassell Heritage Center for inviting me to speak today
- I deeply regret that I will not be in Chassell for your French-Canadian festival in August, I am sure it will be a grand event

Notes and PowerPoint Slides

A summary of this talk and the PowerPoint slides can be found by pointing your Internet browser to:

[http://habitant.org/presentations
/French Canadians Copper
Country.htm](http://habitant.org/presentations/French%20Canadians%20Copper%20Country.htm)

Mission

- The mission today is to put the French Canadians of the Copper Country into a historical perspective
- The Copper Country French Canadians were an important part of the second wave of immigration to Michigan from Québec

Waves of French Canadian Immigration to Michigan

- There was actually two separate and distinct waves of immigration to Michigan
- Little interaction between the two waves except in the Detroit area
- Many people of French Canadian ancestry in the state descend from the second wave of immigrants
- This is especially the case in the Copper Country

Comparison of First and Second Waves of French Canadians

- 1660-1796
- Colonial period
- Fur trade
- Voyageurs and coureurs des bois
- Close ties to Indians
- Single men, taking native brides
- Numbered in hundreds
- 1840-1930
- Industrial age
- Lumberjacks and saw mill workers
- Surface mine workers
- Came with wives and children
- Came over in thousands

Comparing Settlements

- Sault Ste. Marie, 1668
- St. Ignace, 1671;
Michilimackinac, 1712; and
Mackinac Island, 1780
- St-Joseph (Niles), 1688
- Detroit, 1701
- Frenchtown (Monroe), 1785
- LP: Grand Rapids, Grand Haven, Muskegon, Ludington, Manistee, Cheboygan, Alpena, Tawas City, Midland, Bay City, and Saginaw
- UP: Menominee, Escanaba, Ishpeming, Negaunee, Marquette, Houghton, Lake Linden, and Calumet

Michigan's Copper Country

- On the Keweenaw Peninsula, on the far north western end of the Upper Peninsula
- Consists of Keweenaw, Houghton, and Ontonagon Counties (Baraga County is sometimes included)
- A copper mining district from the 1840s to the 1960s
- Heyday from 1865 to 1913

A Land of Immigrants

- Immigrants were needed to labor in the mines and surface facilities
- French Canadians were just one of the many ethnic groups
- They were neighbors with Cornish, German, Irish, Finnish, and many other ethnic groups
- The immigrants outnumbered the Yankees

Unfair Advantage

- With the exception of the Finns and other Scandinavians, we French Canadians had a competitive advantage
- The winters of Québec prepared us for the Copper Country winters

Origins in Québec of Nineteenth Century Immigrants

- Tended to come from western Québec, near Montréal and along the Ottawa River
- These are also the same areas that were most heavily involved in the fur trade
- Often involved in lumbering trade in Canada or eastern United States before immigrating to Michigan

Stops Along the Way

- Many French Canadians did not come directly from Québec to Canada
- Many went to work in the textile mills of New England
- They would come either from New England to Michigan or go back to Québec and then come to Michigan
- Some went to Illinois or Wisconsin first

Civil War Interruption

- Although some French Canadians came over to Michigan after the failed 1838 Patriot's Rebellion
- Most did not come until after 1840
- But the Civil War put a temporary hold on immigration
- Some French Canadians served the Union during the Civil War, but more went back to Québec during the war
- Immigration to the Copper Country from Québec did not start in earnest until after the Civil War

Work in the Copper Country

- French Canadian men were attracted to the area to work as lumberjacks, carpenters, surface workers at the mines, stamp mill workers, and smelter workers
- Few worked inside the mines
- There were few work opportunities for French Canadian woman except running boarding houses

Routes to Michigan

- Before 1855, some still took canoes and small boats
- After 1855 and the opening of the St. Mary's Falls Ship Canal, they were more likely to take sailing and steam ships
- By the 1870s they would have used railroads to reach most points
- However, Houghton was not connected to Marquette by rail until 14 November 1883!
- The railroads and ships also permitted visits back home to Québec

Push and Pull

- Pushed out by few industrial opportunities and less agricultural land opening up in Québec
- Pulled to work in the lumber and mining industries
- Immigration slowed with the stricter laws of the 1920s and nearly stopped with the Great Depression of the 1930s

Role of Joseph Grégoire

- Joseph Grégoire was from St. Valentine, Québec
- Immigrated to the Copper Country in the mid-1850s
- In 1867 he established on the shores of Torch Lake the hamlet of Gregoryville, a “suburb” of the village of Lake Linden
- From this location he operated a sawmill, which made lumber, doors, sashes, and blinds
- He was the premier French-Canadian businessman in the region
- According to a plaque at St. Joseph's church, he was known as the “Father of the French Canadians of Lake Superior”
- He earned this title because he offered jobs to immigrants from Québec
- Grégoire never married and died childless in 1895; he is buried in Mount Calvary Cemetery outside of Lake Linden

Little Canada

- Although some villages were almost entirely French Canadian, in most towns they lived in districts
- Semi-rural / small towns
- Called Little Canada or Frenchtown
- Lake Linden or Hubbell (Frog Pond),
- They had their own general stores, livery stables, barber shops, and saloons (lots of these)

Communities with a French Canadian Presence

- Beacon Hill
- Calumet
- Chassell
- Dollar Bay
- Edgemere
- Freda
- Frenchtown
- Hancock
- Houghton
- Hubbell
- Hurontown
- Lake Linden
- Laurium
- Mason
- Osceola
- Redridge
- Tamarack Mills

1900 Census: Number

- 1900 census, Michigan, 32,483 foreign-born French Canadians, and 55,314 children
- Approximately 3.6 percent of population
- A dramatic demographic turnover from the 1820's when they were the majority

1900 Census: Rank

- Still the foreign-born French Canadians were the fourth largest ethnic group in Michigan
- Outnumbered by Canadians, Germans, and English
- Followed by the Dutch, Irish, Swedes, and Poles

1900 Census: Counties

- The 1900 census shows that 59 percent of the foreign-born French Canadians were living in just eight counties
- Wayne (4,426), Houghton (3,144), Bay (2,664), Delta (2,637), Menominee (1,892), Marquette (1,765), Saginaw (1,288), and Alpena (1,197)

1900 Census: New England and New York

- Michigan (32,483) was behind Massachusetts (134,416) and New Hampshire (44,420) in the number of foreign born French Canadians
- But Michigan was ahead of Rhode Island (31,533), Maine (30,908), New York (27,199), and Connecticut (19,174)

1900 Census: Midwest

- Michigan (32,483) had the largest settlement of French Canadians in the Midwest
- Compared to Minnesota (12,063), Wisconsin (10,091), and Illinois (9,129)

1950 Census

- By the 1950 census there was a large numbers of Poles, Italians, and Russians
- They pushed the foreign-born French Canadians from the fourth to the ninth largest ethnic group in the state

Second Wave Challenges

- Other immigrants and being lost in the shuffle
- Poverty and discrimination as Catholics
- Tense labor relations
- Naturalization and voting
- *Survivance* and assimilation

Other Immigrants

- The first wave had to contend with Indians, French, English, American, Irish, and Scottish neighbors
- The second wave had a much more diverse ethnic environment, this was especially true in the Copper Country
- They had to compete with these other ethnic groups for jobs and housing

Other Immigrants

- However, the competition here in Michigan was not as intense as in New England
- The French Canadians tended to intermarry with Irish, Germans, and Walloons
- Later they would intermarry with Italians, Poles, and other Eastern Europeans
- The common thread was Catholicism

Other Immigrants: The Irish

- Love / hate relationship with the Irish
- Both Catholic, but competed over church politics
- The Irish were for a centralized church, the French Canadians wanted decentralized “national” parishes and schools
- Nevertheless, there was much mixed marriage between them

Poverty

- According to the 1950 census, French Canadians in comparison to other white ethnic groups, had the lowest income
- However, they were better off in Michigan than in New England (perhaps due to the automobile industry which attracted a lot of Copper Country migrants during the 1950s)
- In general, education and the professions were not encouraged initially

Discrimination

- French Canadians in Michigan did not face as much discrimination as other ethnic groups in America
- Any they did feel was more likely because they were Catholic or because spoke French
- They were seen as clannish and self-isolating because of their retention of French

Tense Labor Relations

- In New England, the French Canadians were known as the “Chinese of the Eastern states”
- They were often used as strike breakers, though not so much here in the Midwest
- Nevertheless, in Michigan they were generally viewed as docile workers and hard to organize
- Although some French Canadians participated in labor activities in the Copper Country, many others were neutral or hostile to the labor movement

Naturalization

- The French Canadians in Michigan were slow to naturalize and few went through the process to become a citizen
- There was even a repatriation movement that was not very successful
- Most of the first generation and a significant portion of the second generation seemed satisfied with being a resident only

Survivance

- The French Canadian elite were concerned with the preservation of their language, culture, and faith
- They believed that it was better for the French Canadians to immigrate to the west than to heathen New England
- They relied on parishes, schools, newspapers, and societies

Ethnic Organizations

- Parishes: By 1912 Michigan had approximately ten parishes identified as totally French and 23 as partially French
- Many parishes also had schools
- Newspapers: Between 1809 and 1919, the French Canadian communities of Michigan published thirty-three French language newspapers

Parishes with a Concentration of French Canadians

- Church of the Resurrection, Hancock
- Holy Trinity, Beacon Hill
- Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Franklin Mine
- Sacred Heart, Calumet
- St. Anne, Calumet
- St. Anne, Chassell
- St. Anne, Redridge
- St. Cecilia, Hubbell St. Francis of Assisi, Dollar Bay
- St. Joseph, Hancock
- St. Joseph, Lake Linden
- St. Louis, Calumet

Ethnic Organizations

- Social groups and mutual benefit societies provided life, accident, and burial insurance
- Société de Lafayette, the Union des Canadiens-Français Catholique, the Institut Jacques Cartier, and the Association Canado-Américaine.
- Many French Canadians were also in the International Order of Foresters.

Société de St-Jean-Baptiste

- The Société de St-Jean-Baptiste was the largest and most popular
- Came to Michigan in 1864
- Chapters in Alpena, Calumet, Champion, Detroit, Hancock, Houghton, Lake Linden, Manistee, Marquette, Menominee, Muskegon, and Negaunee

Société de St-Jean-Baptiste

- Now there is only one Société de St-Jean-Baptiste group left in the Detroit area
- Most of its members are from Québec

Ethnic Celebration

- *Fête de St-Jean-Baptiste* on 24 June.
- The French Canadians marked their national holiday with parades, picnics, speeches, and bonfires

Failure to Organize Politically

- The first wave did get Fr. Richard elected to Congress
- But both the first and second wave failed to organize politically and become a force on the local scene like the Irish did
- The organizations of the second wave were split by controversies

Annexation Controversy

- The annexation controversy, erupted at the 1869 joint conference of French Canadian groups in Detroit, damaged the effectiveness of the Société St-Jean-Baptiste
- Médéric Lanctot, a journalist, spoke at this meeting and argued that Québec should break away from the Canada and become part of the United States.

Naturalization Controversy

- The French Canadian elite was hesitant to endorse naturalization because of its feared impact on *survivance*
- Not until the 1886 national St-Jean-Baptiste convention in Plattsburgh, New York, did they endorse a platform of "naturalization without assimilation"

Ironic Turn

- Against all predictions, the French Canadians in New England have done a better job preserving their culture and language
- They could easily travel home to Québec
- More often refreshed with new immigrants

Assimilation

- French Canadians tended to hold on to their language and culture longer than most other ethnic groups
- However, in another irony, once they assimilated it was almost total
- Very few French Canadians speak French any more, nor do they listen to their music, only the food ways are left

Separatism

- As an example of the distance between French Canadians in Michigan and Québec, few in Michigan support separatism in Québec
- This is true of first and second wave descendants
- They identify Québec with the land of their deceased ancestors than their living cousins

Lost in the Census

- The French Canadians in Michigan have become so assimilated that they do not even identify themselves in the census
- In the 1980 and 1990 census most French Canadians simply identified themselves as being of French ancestry
- Because of this phenomena, it is getting harder to trace them as a group

Reclaiming our French Canadian Heritage

- Many of the current generation of French Canadians are reclaiming their heritage through two ways:
 - Historical Reenacting
 - Genealogy
- Nevertheless, few reclaim the language of their ancestors or the political aspirations of their Québec cousins

Conclusion: Symbolic Ethnicity

- Symbolic ethnicity is a term the sociologist Herbert Gans came up with
- It means to identify with an ethnic group and its symbols in such a way that there are no real demands on your American way of life
- It is claiming a heritage selectively

Genealogy and French Canadians

- Genealogy is the harmless but vigorous exercise of symbolic ethnicity
- It lets us lay claim to our ancestors and an ethnic identity without changing our American way of life
- There is no need to change cultural ways or to become fluent in French
- My guide to doing French-Canadian genealogy in Houghton County can be found online at <http://habitant.org/houghton/fcgenealogy.htm>

First Wave and Second Wave Genealogy

- Genealogy brings French Canadians together to use resources back Québec
- However, here in Michigan they tend to use different resources
 - The first wave descendants can rely on published works
 - The second wave descendants use more unpublished records

Genealogy and Québec

- Genealogy is also very popular in Québec
- The finest, most complete, and best preserved records in the world for any ethnic group
- One of the few points of contact between Michigan's French Canadians and their Québec cousins

New Books

- *French Canadians in Michigan*
- Covers both waves of immigrants
- Part of the Discovering the People of Michigan series published by Michigan State University Press
- Also recommend Jean Lamarre's *The French Canadians of Michigan: Their Contribution to the Development of the Saginaw Valley and the Keweenaw Peninsula, 1840-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2003).

First Wave Challenges

- The British conquest of Canada
- The British take over of the fur trade
- Pontiac's Uprising
- The American Revolution
- The War of 1812
- The Yankee invasion and becoming a minority by about 1830

Métis

- *Métis* are the mixed offspring usually of a French Canadian man and a Native American woman
- In Michigan, they tended to eventually join their mother's tribe or to blend in with their father's people

Acadians

- Unlike the first wave of French Canadians to Michigan, some of the second wave were part Acadian
- Acadians had lived in the Canadian Maritimes and were exiled in 1755
- Many made it to Québec and blended in with the French Canadians

Franco-ontariennes

- An interesting mix of first and second wave immigrants are the *Franco-ontariennes*
- They are descendents of the first wave settlers of Detroit who moved to the Windsor, Ontario, area
- They came back to Michigan in the industrial period attracted by the same jobs the second wave French Canadians sought