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
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 northwestern 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 out numbered 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 women 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)
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 they 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.
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.
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.
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 anymore, 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.
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
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.