
Franco-American History Projects in the State of Maine

Oral History, Historic Photographs, and Archival Surprises

C. Stewart Doty, professeur
Department of History
University of Maine

It is surely logical that Maine and its land-grant university, the University of Maine, have projects on Franco-American history. Over 30% of Maine's people are of Franco-American descent. A study in 1983 showed that 15% of first-year students at the University of Maine were French-speaking. Even a quick look at surnames in the telephone directory of the University of Maine would show that its clerical and maintenance staff, if not the faculty, is Franco-American. Almost every day I interact with some descendants of the Old Town, Maine subjects of my book, *The First Franco-Americans*.

The University of Maine is rich with resources on French North Americans. Its library has complete or nearly-complete runs of three French newspapers from Québec, two more from New Brunswick, *La Revue franco-américaine*, and Maine's *La Justice de Biddeford* and *Le Messenger* of Lewiston¹. The University of Maine Press is probably the most active American publisher of works on Franco-Americans. Fall 1990 saw the publication of *Immigrant Odyssey: A French Canadian Habitant in New England*. The text, in both English and French, is the autobiography of Lowell, Massachusetts Franco-American, Félix Albert (initially entitled *L'histoire d'un enfant pauvre*). It is introduced by Frances Early. The University-based newspaper, *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum*, is a major force in shaping the Franco-American identity of the future.

This institutional tie to Franco-Americans takes different forms. Three years ago a group of us from the University of Maine visited the widow of Rudy Vallée, the Franco-American singer, bandleader, and entertainer. We did so as preparation for a conference on his work and contribution, which we held in 1988. In walking through his archives, we kept passing a huge photograph of a vaguely familiar face. Canadians would have recognized it immediately, but it took me, an American, several viewings to identify the face of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. To find a four-foot by five-foot photograph of French Canada's great leader in a cellar under Rudy Vallée's Hollywood Hills tennis court was truly an « archival surprise ». Probably Vallée had picked it up as a souvenir during one of his performances at the Canadian Exposition. I would like to believe that his Franco-American heritage caused him to choose it instead of a companion photograph of Sir John Macdonald.

Indeed, « archival surprises » describes better than any other term what I have found in my work on Franco-Americans. They have come so frequently that they seem to be the very stuff of Franco-American history. Often they lead into oral history, or they accompany the discovery of historic photographs of Franco-Americans. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

Certainly the life histories in my book, *The First Franco-Americans*, were « archival surprises ». Collected by the « Federal Writers' Project » in the 1930s, they had remained unused in the Library of Congress for forty years until Ann Banks introduced us to a sample of them. The Franco-American life histories seemed sufficiently representative of life in four typical Franco-American cities that they could offer a glimpse of Franco-Americans which we did not have at that time. It turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Manchester and Woonsocket had such good historians that I wrongly assumed that Barre and Old Town would have them, too. Writing a brief history of those two cities convinced me of how little we knew about the Franco-American past. In just a few years that situation has changed, thanks to the work of Gérard Brault, François Weil, Yves Roby, and Yves Frenette².

In looking for photographs to illustrate *The First Franco-Americans*, I discovered the « archival surprises » that form the basis of my current work. In the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress were many photographs of Franco-Americans. These included Lewis Hines' early 20th century photographs of Franco-American textile workers in Manchester and elsewhere. In the Farm Security Administration (FSA) collection of the 1930s and the early 1940s were Jack Delano's photographs of Barre granite workers and his pictures of Woonsocket's *Petit Canada*. The subjects of the FSA photographs include Franco-American lumbermen and river drivers in western Maine and Franco-American paperworkers in Berlin, New Hampshire.

What interested me most in the Library of Congress collections, however, were the over two hundred photographs of the life and work of Acadians in northern Maine's St. John Valley. The pictures were taken between 1940 and 1943 by Jack Delano and John Collier, Jr., photographers of the Farm Security Administration. The photographic team of which they were a part took the pictures of migrant farmers and the Dust Bowl which have defined for most Americans their image of the Great Depression.

The photographs allow us to re-enter that world of northern Maine as it began to emerge from the Great Depression. They document all aspects of the family economy of Acadian small farmers, living on the edge during those hard times. They show, in rich detail, potato farming and the subsistence crops which accompanied it. They show farmers planting, haying, caring for livestock, and participating in the potato harvest. They show families at mealtime. They show women sewing, weaving, spinning, cooking, and caring for children. They show children at play, helping with farm chores, and in school.

When I first saw those FSA photographs in 1984, I thought that perhaps the people in them or their descendants could be located. After all, the captions on the photographs often gave the names, sometimes misspelled, of the subjects. If all or most of them could be found, we could discover in a concrete way how people's lives were changed by the Great Depression and programs of the Farm Security Administration. Ultimately that happened. The book and museum exhibition which tell their story appeared in 1991³.

The book combines oral history with the photographs and «archival surprises». To do the research, I first put a letter-to-the-editor in the local newspapers read by St. John Valley people. The letter gave the names of the subjects and described the photographs and their importance. Thanks to reader response to that letter, I began identifying the people in the pictures. A follow-up article contained a photograph of a little girl at a pump, a daughter of a family I had been unable to locate. By 8:30 that morning, I got a telephone call from Doris Daigle Paradis who said, «I am the little girl». I later spent hours interviewing her, as she described what was going on in the forty photographs of her family. Shortly after that, the University of Maine at Fort Kent displayed working prints of the photographs, and viewers identified still other subjects. Within a very short time I located one hundred members of fifteen of the twenty Maine Acadian families photographed by the Farm Security Administration. I used the photographs to conduct interviews with members of all fifteen identified families. Franco-Americans have important stories to tell, and they can be located.

Those interviews and archival research revealed that the Great Depression hit Acadian farmers especially hard. In conditions made desperate by farm, farm credit, and town bankruptcies, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) came to the rescue. The FSA was the New Deal's principal agency for attacking rural poverty. The agency not only brought the necessary help to these poor Acadian farmers, it also brought the help in French! In doing that, the FSA farm management and home management agents were probably the first bilingual staffers in the Department of Agriculture. They brought to Acadian farmers better farming techniques, new and more diversified crops, livestock, and machinery, and the money to make them work. They helped families create bigger gardens, home can the produce, home manufacture better clothing, and provide the means to do those things. They financed better health and dental care. They fostered cooperatives.

There was a high correlation between the interviews and archival materials. Naturally, in the papers of the Farm Security Administration in the Suitland, Maryland branch of the National Archives, was the usual correspondence among bureaucrats, quarterly and annual re-

ports at the state and national level, and directives from Washington. Beyond that came the archival surprises. At the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York was a graphic, first-hand report of Great Depression conditions in the St. John Valley, written in 1934 by Lorena Hickok. She reported from all over America for Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins, in order to help him and the President understand the impact of the Depression on people's lives. Although she was not seeking out Franco-Americans, she found them, and her reports are waiting to be used by historians of Franco-Americans.

The greatest archival surprise, however, came in the Waltham, Massachusetts branch of the National Archives. There, among the hundreds of cubic feet of FSA loan case files, were files for two of the families photographed. Each file contained such items as farm visit reports by FSA agents, annual business statements, loan records, and annual canning achievement reports. One file was that of Claude Lévesque, currently living in Grand Falls, New Brunswick. When I interviewed Lévesque I knew only, thanks to correspondence from photographer Delano's supervisor, that he had been an FSA success story. Lévesque was so modest about his accomplishments that I learned of his success only when I read his loan case file. Lévesque, whose 160 acre farm and exclusively horse-drawn equipment were worth \$3,726 in 1937, was helped by the FSA to become a particularly successful grower of seed potatoes. By 1944 he was able to write on his own letterhead stationery that, thanks to FSA help, his now mechanized farm's net worth had risen to \$42,000. His seed potatoes had become the best in Maine by being the most disease and insect free. In those same years annual «canning achievement reports» showed that his wife, Nélide, increased her canning of fruit, vegetables, and meat from 200 quarts per year to 300. There must be similar loan case files and correspondence for Franco-American farmers in northern Vermont and northern New York.

The archives also showed that the FSA spent more money on these Acadian farmers of northern Maine than in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont combined. That happened because the need was great, because the FSA was probably the only bilingual agency offering help, and because of the French and Catholic values of helping one another.

Indeed, those values shed light on my continuing interest in the Franco-American elite and its links with the Québécois elite and with ordinary Franco-Americans. Also in the Roosevelt Library are the responses to a letter sent to clergy throughout America in 1935 by President Roosevelt. Roosevelt's letter asked them to describe the conditions of their flock and to advise the President. Fortunately for my work, a particularly eloquent response came from the Rev. Émile Robitaille of the St. John Valley. The « once very happy people » of his parish, he wrote, was « now sunk into poverty and despair, helpless and uninfluential » thanks to three straight years of low potato prices. The loan companies « control all, meddle with all, supervise all » and half his parish's families « are obliged to give up the entire crop » to the lenders. Their homes, outbuildings, and farm equipment « are all in ruins ». Farm credit had become virtually nonexistent. He was equally critical of exploitation by the railroads. He urged President Roosevelt to emulate the great men of history « who, like the Christ, made themselves the friends and helpers of the poor ». Although the Protestant clergy of northern Maine did not respond in like manner, all the responses are in the Roosevelt Library, filed by state. It should be easy enough to find any responses from the great Franco-American centers in the other New England states.

Robitaille's colleague in the St. John Valley of those days was the Rev. Wilfrid Soucy, today a spry octogenarian. In working with the FSA to found cooperatives, Father Soucy became a celebrity – written about in the national press and interviewed on network radio. He recalled in the interview that he was 55 years old before he preached in English. I also found and interviewed the dairy specialist who operated the dairy cooperative founded by Robitaille and Soucy.

The values of Robitaille and Soucy were in stark contrast with another member of the Franco-American elite on whom I had just been working. Recently I published an article on the career of Henri d'Arles, the New Hampshire Franco-American writer and activist who lived from 1870 to 1930⁴. Much of it was based on a close reading of his unpublished journal, a bound manuscript in the d'Arles papers at the Association canado-américaine in Manchester, New Hampshire. The journal entries make clear that d'Arles did not have the sympathy for ordinary people which Robitaille and Soucy had. Rather, like

many members of the Franco-American elite, he was an ardent supporter of the Paris Action française of Charles Maurras, the Montréal Action française of Lionel Groulx, and the Sentinellisme of Elphège Daignault. Journal entries for 1928-1929 made me suspect that d'Arles turned against them and denounced them in a « History of Sentinellisme in New Hampshire », a work which he wrote for his bishop. Details were sketchy because parts of the manuscript journal had been excised after the death of d'Arles and the « history » had disappeared. The diocesan archives, however, revealed another « archival surprise » – three long letters from d'Arles to his bishop, which can only be described as a prospectus for the history, in which d'Arles denounced in detail and by name three Sentinelliste priests of the Manchester diocese.

The University of Maine's conference on Rudy Vallée convinced me that American popular culture is rich with opportunities to learn about Franco-Americans. Rudy Vallée, for example, was born Hubert Prior Vallée in Westbrook, Maine. He valued his Franco-American heritage, and he always used the *accent aigu* in his name. He is buried in Westbrook's St. Hyacinthe parish cemetery, surrounded by gravestones bearing French surnames. He was also perhaps the first American « pop star », the model of such later versions as Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Michael Jackson. When he was a student at the University of Maine, he practiced his saxophone in Orono's town hall. For years he sent a Christmas present to its janitor, the father of a Franco-American neighbor of mine. Materials for a major biography of Vallée exist. His vast collection of papers, retained from childhood to his death, is available in the Thousand Oaks Public Library in California. I offer that information to anyone looking for an excuse to escape a Québec winter. Other materials exist at the University of Maine, where Vallée went to college and whose *Stein Song* he turned into an international hit. These materials include a fan scrapbook with a long run of the Rudy Vallée fan club newsletter. Between the late 1920s and the 1960s, Vallée wrote three autobiographies⁵.

Vallée is but one Franco-American entertainer about whom we know little. Since the 1920s, for example, New England has abounded with Franco-American singers of country and western music. Harold Brault of Old Town, Maine was a particular success in that style of

music. He performed as country singer-bandleader *Hal Lone Pine* on network radio and recorded with a major record company. His female vocalist, Betty Côté, still performs in Lewiston, Maine, and they were the parents of jazz guitarist Lennie Brault. One could find many such performers, who were not part of « Franco-American » or « Québécois » music per se, but who must have brought that heritage to their art in some fashion.

I offer these stories of Rudy Vallée and other entertainers, Acadian farmers in the Great Depression, and the contrast in values between their priests and Henri d'Arles as indicators of the wonderful topics on the Franco-American past which await their historians. Many topics cry out to be done, and those topics are full of similar surprises. Again, let me suggest some possibilities. Can you imagine what archival surprises must exist in New England diocesan archives? What do you suppose there is in the Providence archives on Sentinellism and the following of Rose Ferron, *la petite rose de Woonsocket*? What awaits the historian on the Corporation Sole controversy in the Portland archives? Think of the connections among the Québécois elite, the Franco-American elite, and ordinary Franco-Americans which could be found in the Wilfrid Beaulieu papers. Think also of the numerous Franco-Americans who have stories to tell.

As I was finishing my book on Maine Acadians, Gary Gerstle's new book on Woonsocket Franco-American textile workers appeared⁶. His book requires us to examine the « American » dimension of the Franco-American identity. It also confirms the uses of oral history as well as the riches and archival surprises which await the historian of Franco-Americans in federal archives. His use of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) archives on union organizing can be applied to other Franco-American textile mill and paper mill cities. In fact, scholars of Franco-Americans should figure out what federal agencies had Franco-Americans as clients. Then, scholars should mine those archives as arduously as they have the United States census data. They will find riches similar to the ones Gerstle found in the NRA archives and that I found in the FSA ones. Doing so should be a top priority for scholars entering the field.

One of the ironies of today is that, thanks to the broadcast of *Les tisserands du pouvoir* on CBC/Radio-Canada television, English Canadians in Vancouver know more about the Franco-American past than do Americans, including even Franco-Americans. In years to come, we need to change that. We need to make Americans of all backgrounds more aware of the contributions of Franco-Americans. More importantly, we need to make Franco-Americans proud of their heritage and appreciative of the courage of their ancestors.

Notes

1. An indication of the resources in Maine on Franco-Americans can be found in Irene M. Simano (Simoneau), *The Franco-Americans of New England: A Union List of Materials in Selected Maine Libraries*, Orono (Me.), The New England-Atlantic Provinces-Quebec Center, 1971, VI-15 p., and Alice R. Stewart, «The Franco-Americans of Maine: A Historiographical Essay», *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, 26, 3 (winter 1987), p. 160-179.
2. C. Stewart Doty, *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project (1938-1939)*, Orono (Me.), University of Maine at Orono Press, 1985; Ann Banks, *First Person America*, New York, Knops, 1980; Gérard J. Brault, *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*, Hanover (N.H.), University Press of New England, 1986; François Weil, *Les Franco-Américains, 1860-1980*, Paris, Belin, 1989; Yves Roby, «Un Québec émigré aux États-Unis: bilan démographique», in Claude Savary (ed.), *Les rapports culturels entre le Québec et les États-Unis*, Québec, Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1984; Yves Roby, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1776-1930*, Sillery, Éditions du Septentrion, 1990; Yves Frenette, «Understanding the Franco-Americans of Lewiston, 1860-1900: An Alternate Framework», *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, 25, 4, (spring 1986), p. 198-229.
3. C. Stewart Doty, *Acadian Hard Times: The Farm Security Administration in Maine's St. John Valley*, Orono (Me.), University of Maine at Orono Press, 1991. The book contains approximately 165 photographs of FSA photographers Jack Delano and John Collier, Jr., and chief photographer of the University of Maine, Jack Walas. Walas' photographs portray the original scenes and people as they look today. The book also serves as a catalog for museum exhibitions held at the University of Maine at Fort Kent and at the University of Maine at Orono.
4. C. Stewart Doty, «The Intellectual of the Quebec Diaspora: The Case of Henri d'Arles», *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 24, 4 (winter 1989-1990), p. 61-71.
5. For a suggestion of the possibilities see C. Stewart Doty, «Fill the Steins to Dear Old Rudy», *Down East*, November 1988, p. 68-71 and 94-95. The article is a popularized version of the paper delivered at the conference on Rudy Vallée, held at the University of Maine in 1988.
6. Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labour in a Textile City, 1914-1960*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.