

# Franch-Canadian Communities in the American Upper Midwest during the Nineteenth Century

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## Résumé de l'article

La distribution des établissements canadiens-français dans l'Ouest américain au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle n'avait aucune relation avec la distribution des postes de traite de fourrures du siècle précédent. Les Canadiens français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle furent attirés par les opportunités d'emploi le long des frontières agricole, minière et forestière. Détroit, Chicago et Minneapolis-St-Paul ont vu naître des paroisses canadiennes-françaises qui entretenaient des liens avec les communautés rurales. Le maintien de la langue française, l'héritage culturel et l'affiliation à l'église catholique variaient à travers la région. L'américanisation des Canadiens français fut directement reliée à leur réussite économique. Une identité canadienne-française a été maintenue dans les régions rurales les plus pauvres et marginales du nord des états du Michigan, du Wisconsin et du Minnesota.

## FRENCH-CANADIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE AMERICAN UPPER MIDWEST DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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The pattern of nineteenth-century French-Canadian settlements in the American Midwest bore no relation to the pattern of fur-trading posts of the eighteenth century. French-Canadians of the nineteenth century were attracted by employment opportunities along the farming, lumbering, and mining frontiers. Detroit, Chicago, and Minneapolis-St. Paul developed French-Canadian parishes which maintained links with rural communities. Survival of the French language, cultural heritage, and affiliation with the Catholic Church varied throughout the region. Americanization of French-Canadians went hand in hand with their commercial success. A French-Canadian identity survived in the poorest, marginal, rural areas of northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

**KEY WORDS:** French-Canadian assimilation, Farming frontier, Lumbering frontier, Mining frontier, American Upper Midwest.

### RÉSUMÉ

#### LES ÉTABLISSEMENTS CANADIENS-FRANÇAIS DANS LE HAUT MIDWEST AMÉRICAIN AU XIX<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE

La distribution des établissements canadiens-français dans l'Ouest américain au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle n'avait aucune relation avec la distribution des postes de traite de fourrures du siècle précédent. Les Canadiens français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle furent attirés par les opportunités d'emploi le long des frontières agricole, minière et forestière. Détroit, Chicago et Minneapolis-St-Paul ont vu naître des paroisses canadiennes-françaises qui entretenaient des liens avec les communautés rurales. Le maintien de la langue française, l'héritage culturel et l'affiliation à l'église catholique variaient à travers la région. L'américanisation des Canadiens français fut directement reliée à leur réussite économique. Une identité canadienne-française a été maintenue dans les régions rurales les plus pauvres et marginales du nord des états du Michigan, du Wisconsin et du Minnesota.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** Assimilation canadienne-française, frontière agricole, frontière forestière, frontière minière, haut Midwest américain.

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« La survivance ! » Concern for the survival of the French-Canadian identity was uppermost in the minds of French-Canadian leaders, both clerical and lay, with the mass migrations from the St. Lawrence valley in the mid-nineteenth century. Although New England attracted the majority of migrating *Québécois*, a large number migrated westward along the upper St. Lawrence-Great Lakes system into the American Midwest. This essay traces the creation of French-Canadian communities along the prairie, forest, and mining frontiers, and in the major cities of the upper Midwest. It also attempts to unravel those factors which facilitated the survival of a French-Canadian identity and to suggest areas in which historical geographers might undertake new research in order to shed additional light on this little known but sizeable element of the French-Canadian diaspora.\*

The first French-Canadian settlements in the American Midwest were fur-trading posts established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Figure 1). The only posts which developed a large resident agricultural population were Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, located in the Central Mississippi lowlands. These agricultural communities quickly lost their distinctive French character after the fall of New France in 1760. As French-Canadians sold their allotments to incoming British and American settlers, all that survived from the French period was the cadastral pattern — the survey lines demarcating river lots and fields (Gentilcore, 1957, p. 296). The old agricultural settlements along the Wabash and Mississippi rivers did not develop into major magnets attracting land-hungry French-Canadian farmers in the nineteenth century (Figure 2).

Although the legacy of the fur trade period had not been completely obliterated when French-Canadians began to migrate into Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota in the 1830s and 1840s, the geography of fur-trading posts had only the slightest impact on the development of new French-Canadian settlements. While it is true that Detroit, Chicago and St. Paul had their beginnings as fur trade posts, the emergence of these cities as major centers in the diffusion of French-Canadians throughout the upper Midwest had little to do with the infrastructure of the fur-trade. Through time each city had become an important center for the economic development of the farming, lumbering, and mining frontiers. The cities were not only labor markets but were also points of contact where a migrant population obtained directions in finding employment opportunities on the various resource frontiers.

## THE FARMING FRONTIER

### Michigan

Detroit was an important transportation center in the fur-trade during the eighteenth century, although the resident agricultural population was smaller than that of Kaskaskia or Vincennes. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the number of French-Canadians living in Essex County, Ontario and on the Detroit side of the St. Clair River had swollen as more and more *coureurs-de-bois* retired from the trade. The numbers also increased with a small stream of migration from the lower St. Lawrence valley. From this nucleus French-Canadians spread outward across southern Michigan after the War of 1812, founding such towns as Grand Rapids, Bay City, Midland and Grand Haven in the 1820s. The economy of these migrants was not solely agricultural; they also engaged in fishing and some fur-trading. The communities in which agriculture was most important were located around Detroit, particularly Monroe County, in extreme southeastern Michigan, which developed a large French-Canadian population by the early 1820s.

\* The author wishes to thank Ralph D. Vicero for his help and encouragement in undertaking this research. Professors Wayne Moodie and Jock Galloway gave helpful comments on an early draft of the paper.

The decades which followed were difficult years for the preservation of French-Canadian communities. Immigration from Québec came to a halt and large numbers of Americans invaded the areas of southern Michigan which had been dominated by the French-Canadian population. By midcentury French-Canadians accounted for only five per cent of the state's total population. Of the twenty thousand who were considered French-Canadian, some fourteen thousand had been born in Canada, many of them in Essex County, Upper Canada. The largest concentrations were in Monroe County where seven to eight thousand lived in agricultural communities. The next largest rural concentration was in Macomb and St. Clair Counties, immediately north of Detroit, where four to five thousand French-Canadians lived. Wayne County contained a further eight thousand, but almost all of them lived within the city of Detroit. Another two thousand French-Canadians lived in small groups scattered throughout the western and northern areas of the state.

The influx of Americans and the cessation of immigration from Québec during the 1820s and 1830s were major problems for the survival of a French-Canadian identity. The historian, Saint-Pierre, observed that: « Cette période est la plus sombre dans l'histoire des colonies canadiennes du Michigan. Abandonnées à elles-mêmes, battues en brèche par l'intolérance des *Know-nothings*, sans chefs et sans organisation, elles semblaient devoir inévitablement disparaître comme élément distinct et influent... Les relations avec la province de Québec avaient presque cessé. L'esprit national disparaissait rapidement du coeur de la jeunesse, qui préférait penser et parler en anglais » — (Saint-Pierre, 1895, p. 218). Only in the rural areas of Monroe, St. Clair, and Macomb counties, where the farming population was isolated from contact with Americans, did the distinctive French-Canadian character of the population survive.

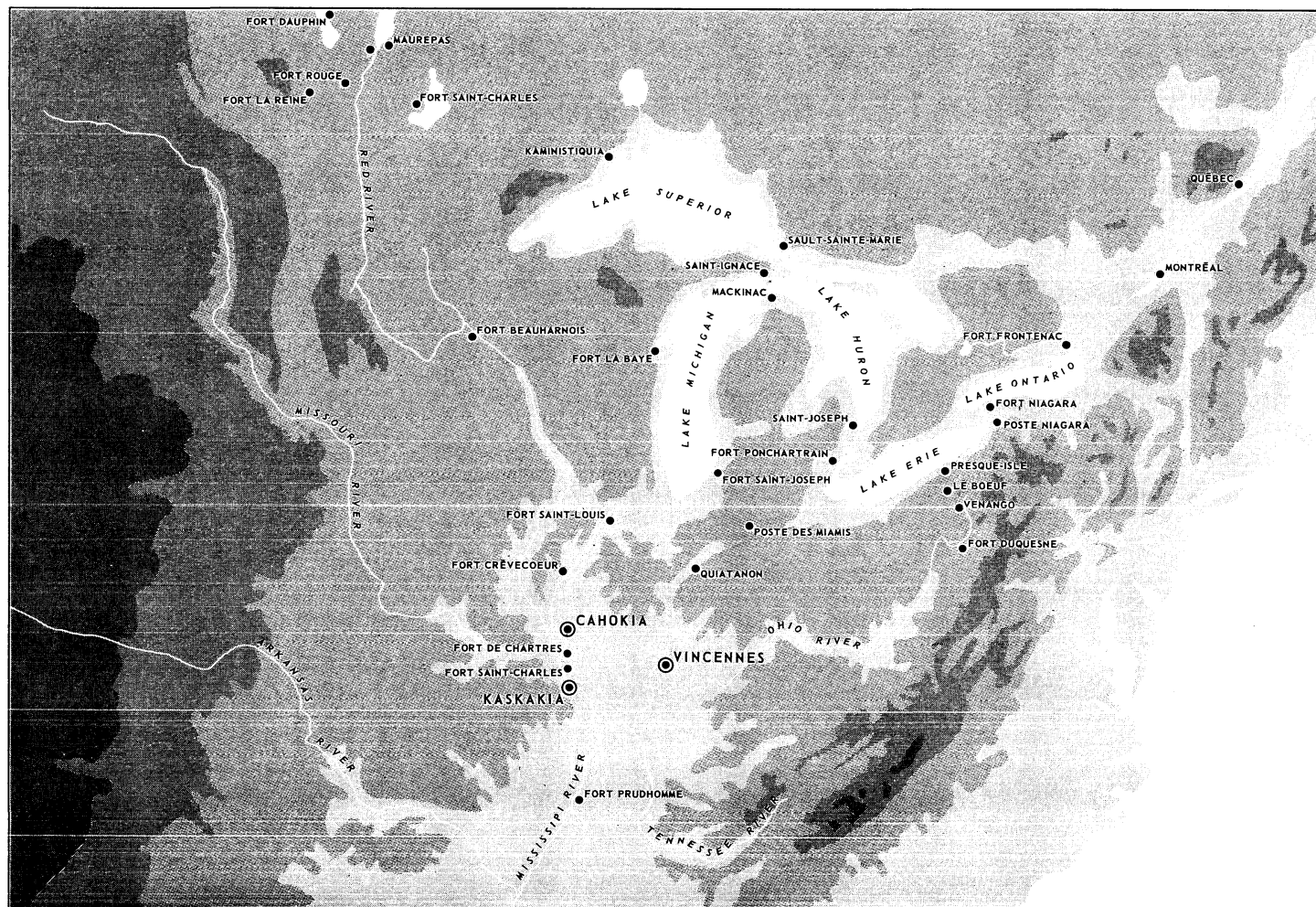
The agricultural settlements in Michigan were augmented with a new migration from Québec in the 1850s and another wave of migration in the 1890s. But the increase in the farming population was very small indeed. The majority of French-Canadian immigrants to Michigan during the former period were attracted by employment opportunities on the lumbering frontier. Migrants who were looking for farmland, rather than employment in lumbering, in the early 1850s, flocked to the agricultural frontier in Illinois, to Bourbonnais and other settlements in Kankakee and Iroquois Counties.

## Illinois

The heart of the French-Canadian settlements in Illinois was Bourbonnais in Kankakee County. A family named Bourbonnais had operated a small trading post close to the Kankakee River just after the turn of the century and had given the locale their name. (Little is known of this family because they migrated elsewhere). The founder of the agricultural colony which developed in the late 1830s was Noël Le Vasseur. Le Vasseur was born in Yamaska, Québec, in 1799 and worked for years in the fur-trade in the Wisconsin-Great Lakes region before settling in Bourbonnais Grove in 1832 (Campbell, 1906, p. 70). Other French-Canadians arrived during the late 1830s and the community was served by a number of missionary priests. Eventually a small log chapel was built in 1841 (Richard, 1975, p. 8). The trickle of new immigrants was small and Noël Le Vasseur returned to Québec in 1840 to encourage his old friends and neighbours to join him on the Illinois prairies. By 1844 the first of two migration waves was under way and in 1848 the community was large enough to support a permanent *curé*, Fr. Courjault. The American historian, Hansen, informs us that: « During the last half of the decade of the forties approximately a thousand French families had located in the vicinity and were engaged in constructing a flourishing replica of the society from which they had come » (Hansen, 1940,

Figure 1

# FRENCH FUR-TRADING POSTS IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES



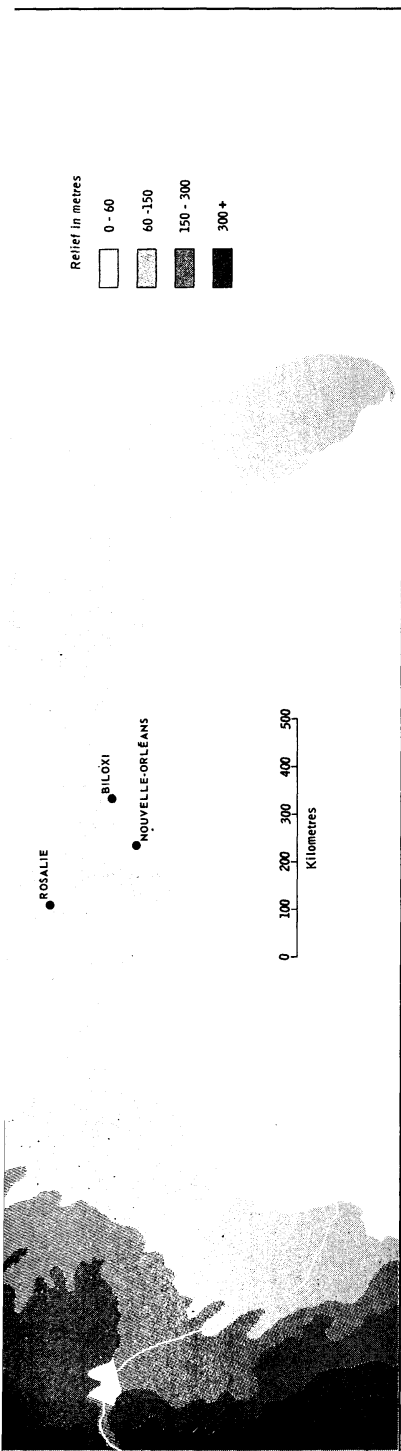
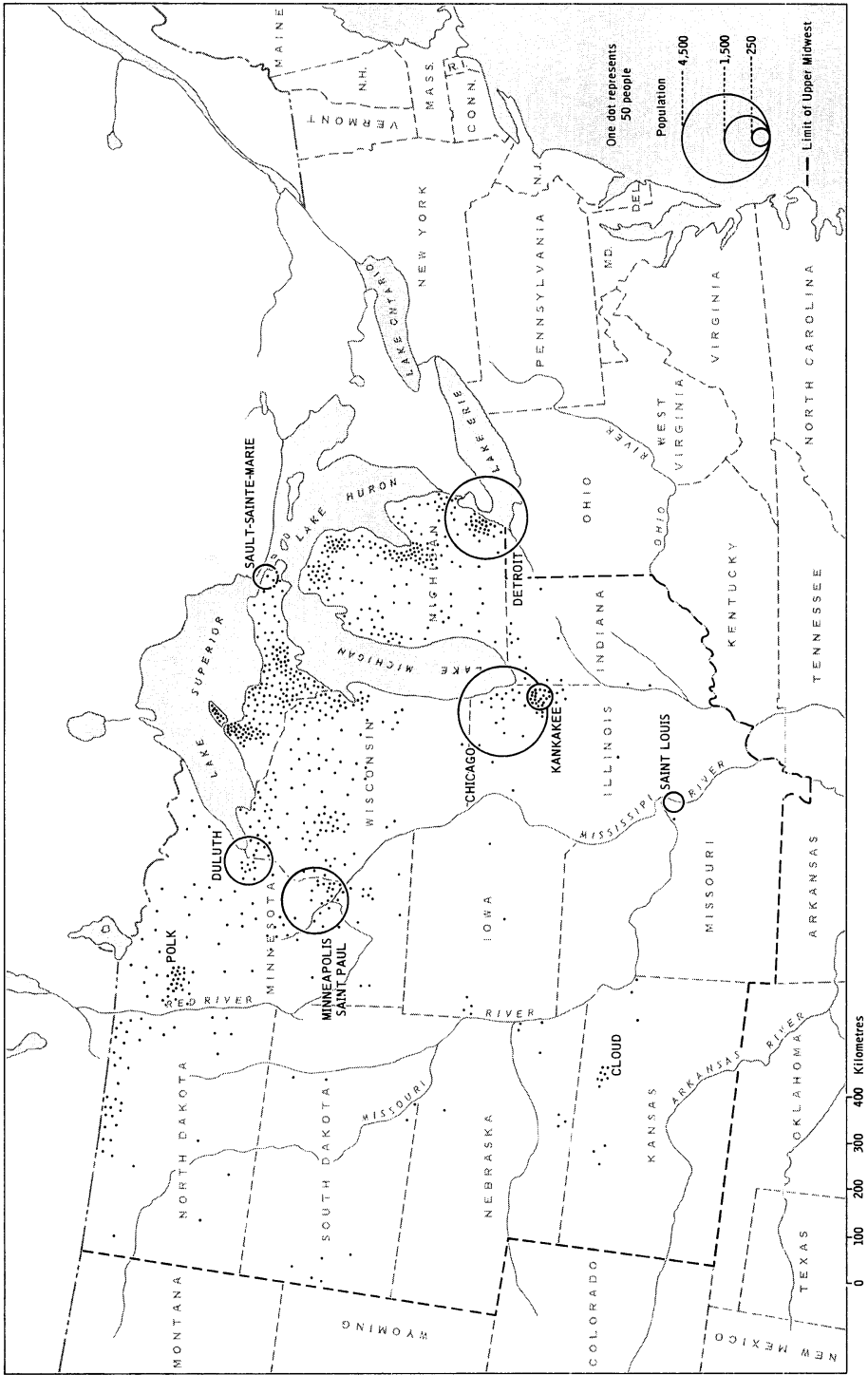


Figure 2

**CANADIAN - BORN FRENCH IN THE UPPER MIDWEST, 1910**



p. 129). The years 1850 and 1851 were quiet and witnessed no immigration at all; 1852 and 1853 were tumultuous years for the agricultural colony.

In 1852 Fr. Charles Chiniquy, « the apostle of temperance » and gifted orator, arrived at the head of a second wave of immigration from Québec. Chiniquy had an abrasive and independent streak which landed him in trouble with his bishop, first in Québec and later in Chicago. His views led to a split within the Bourbonnais colony. Divisions deepened when the new frame church was burned to the ground in September 1853 for Chiniquy was suspected of arson and he moved with a number of his followers to the neighboring village of St. Anne's. He was also involved in a real estate dispute with a local land developer. This resulted in two trials and two hung juries, notwithstanding an eloquent defense of the troubled priest by the lawyer, Abraham Lincoln. The Bishop of Chicago eventually excommunicated Chiniquy in 1856 for his unorthodox views. The rebel priest and several hundred supporters then joined the Presbyterian church and created their own congregation in St. Anne. The apostasy of Chiniquy and his followers jolted the Canadian hierarchy and concern for the welfare of emigrating souls resulted in new efforts to supply the fledgling communities in the Midwest with priests and educational facilities.

The second major event of this period was the arrival of the Illinois Central Railroad in 1853. The railroad was built through the village of Kankakee which quickly replaced Bourbonnais as the commercial center of the French-Canadian communities in northeastern Illinois. Bourbonnais, nevertheless, continued to be the cultural and religious center of the French-Canadian colony. Parishioners built a new stone church and dedicated it to Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1858. The architectural style was strongly reminiscent of the old parish church in Cap St. Ignace, Québec, whence many of the Bourbonnais settlers had come. In 1861 nuns of the Congregation of Notre Dame opened a convent school for young children and in 1865 a secondary school patterned after the *collèges classiques* was opened by several clerics of the Congregation of Clercs de Saint Viateur, from Joliette, Québec. Saint Viateur's College became a key institution in the survival of the French-Canadian identity, not only in Illinois, but throughout the American Midwest. The Illinois Legislature granted the school a university charter in 1874 and from this college priests, lawyers, doctors, journalists and other professionals went out with a keen sense of purpose in preserving the French-Canadian language, faith, and national identity. The college was staffed with priests from Québec, but by the end of the nineteenth century, alumni who had been born in the Kankakee settlements, joined the faculty of the college.

The development of educational facilities was critical not only in providing French-Canadians with a sense of community in Illinois, but also in perpetuating the ideals of national awareness and religious fervor which were strong elements in the French-Canadian identity. The role which the schools and college played in preserving the French language, however, is not clear and there is some indication that the use of French was declining as early as the 1860s (Richard, 1975, p. 11).

Notwithstanding Hansen's comment that French-Canadians in Illinois were « constructing a flourishing replica » of Québec society, the settlements in Kankakee did not seem to be inward-looking, stable close-knit communities. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest a high degree of mobility. No sooner had some farmers obtained land and established their families on a small farm than they took off for the gold fields of California. Joseph Legris and Georges Létourneau were two who returned from California after several years with small fortunes which they used to expand their farming and business activities in Kankakee (Lake City Publishing Company, 1893, p. 606, p. 217). The degree to which French-Canadian society was close-knit is difficult to assess. On the one



hand, the Chiniquy affair had created a division in the community because apostasy was a very serious matter. The division along religious lines seems to have continued into politics; the Catholics were Democrats, and the Protestants were usually Republican in political affiliation. Nevertheless, most French-Canadians rallied around Georges Létourneau, a Republican, when he was elected state senator for the Sixteenth Illinois Senatorial District in 1892 (Lake City Publishing Company, 1893, p. 217).

The population in the Kankakee settlements continued to grow during the 1860s, although land for establishing new farms was no longer readily available. The agricultural frontier had passed through north-eastern Illinois; public land was taken-up by farmers, speculators and railroad companies. Vacant land was no longer available for young pioneer farmers. With the end of the Civil War and the resumption of railroad construction those in search of new farmland looked farther west to the agricultural frontier in central Kansas.

### **Kansas**

French-Canadians had operated on the plains west of the Mississippi River during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as fur traders and guides. There was no connection between the traders and the beginnings of French-Canadian agricultural settlement in Kansas in the late 1860s. The location of the new farming communities was a function of the location of the railhead at Waterville in eastern Kansas and the availability of homesteads in the Republican River valley when the first French-Canadians came west from Kankakee in 1868 (McQuillan, 1975, p. 142). These pioneer farmers found that most of the alluvial bottom lands along the Republican River valley were already homesteaded, and so they selected homesteads a short distance south of the river in eastern Cloud and western Clay counties. Many of them had been born in Québec but almost all of them had lived in Illinois before coming to Kansas. There was practically no direct migration from Québec to Kansas. The new arrivals from Kankakee took up homesteads which had been abandoned by American farmers and, during the 1870s, managed to develop a fairly solidly French-Canadian settlement (McQuillan, 1978b, p. 146).

The Kansas frontier represented a new challenge to the French-Canadian farmers. The problems of drought and unpredictable moisture supply were of a different magnitude from those which they had experienced in Illinois. Despite environmental hazards and the severe test of an acute economic depression from 1893 to 1896, the majority of French-Canadians not only survived but eventually prospered. By 1915 they had built up good-sized farms and were producing large quantities of wheat for a booming wartime market. They had become successful commercial farmers and, in matters of farming, they were indistinguishable from their American neighbors (McQuillan, 1978a, p. 72-76).

The French-Canadian communities were not assimilated rapidly in Kansas. Although the Kansas communities were small, they managed to preserve a distinctive French-Canadian flavor. Indeed, Concordia became a minor cultural center although it never achieved the stature that Kankakee did for the French-Canadian communities in Illinois. The sisters of St. Joseph established a parochial school and taught 150 children of both sexes; most of the children came from the one hundred, or so, French-Canadian families living in Concordia. Elsewhere there were small villages such as Aurora, Clyde, and St. Joseph, which served the rural French-Canadian population. They built parish churches in Aurora and St. Joseph and there were almost always a few French-Canadian priests to minister in them. French-Canadian doctors had their own medical facilities in Concordia, in Clyde and in St. Joseph, while French-Canadian lawyers were prominent in county administrative positions in Concordia, the county seat. Concordia, Clyde and

St. Joseph also had their own branches of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society which sent delegates to the national conventions on the east coast, over 2000 miles away. Because of these supportive institutional structures and the leadership provided by French-Canadian priests, a French-Canadian identity survived in these small Kansas enclaves well into the twentieth century. Despite the fact that there was almost no direct migration from Québec, it is impressive that French did not give way to English as the dominant language in the Kansas communities until the 1920s (Carman, n.d., p. 214).

## Minnesota

*Québécois* migrating to the American prairie frontier in the 1870s and 1880s selected the Red River Valley of Minnesota and North Dakota rather than Kansas. The largest and most important of the settlements in the Red River valley was the colony in Polk County, Minnesota. The first settlers in the colony were Pierre Bottineau, his son John B. Bottineau and Isaiah Gervais. The elder Bottineau was from St. Paul, Minnesota, and had worked throughout the North-West as a government guide during his youth. « Avec sa connaissance profonde du Nord-Ouest, il déclare que le pays où se sont établis les Canadiens français est le meilleur sous tous les rapports » (Comité de Canadiens français, 1883, p. 5). Gervais was born at Fort Garry, Manitoba, and had also been a guide in the North-West before he moved his family south of the border to Polk County. Although Bottineau and Gervais founded the colony, the man who directed migration to the settlement was Louis Fontaine. Fontaine was born in 1839, came to St. Paul in 1858, and soon became a successful merchant. In 1878 he moved to Crookston, formed a business partnership with Rémi Fortier, and the two men began writing home to St. Paul inducing others to join them.

The first settlers to Polk County came from the environs of St. Paul, long a center in the fur trade and now an important center of commerce along the agricultural frontier. Additional settlers came from New England. During the 1870s Canadian authorities launched a new program of repatriation among the French-Canadians in New England and large numbers headed west, intent on taking up homesteads in the newly-created province of Manitoba. The Dominion agents appointed to assist the westward migration complained that American agents (who were paid so much per head) sidetracked the French-Canadians as they broke their journey in Duluth, and lured them to homesteads on the American side of the border (Hansen, 1940, p. 179). Finally, leaders in the Polk County colony attracted farmers from Québec to come and join them. They published a pamphlet in 1883 which put to rest rumors that the area was not ideally suited to agriculture. The abundance of rivers and streams and the fertility of the soils were extolled. « C'est une terre noir [sic] qui contient les principes végétaux pour produire 30 minots du blé à l'arpent, en moyenne » (Comité de Canadiens français, 1883, p. 4). Many farmers received more than 30 minots in 1882 and that without much tree-clearing labor since most of the land was open prairie. The authors of the pamphlet insisted that potatoes yielded from 400 to 600 minots per arpent.

A new wave of migration surged into the colony in the early 1880s and by 1885 estimates of the French-Canadian population on the agricultural frontier between Crookston and Red Lake Falls varied from five to eight thousand souls (Watts, 1909, p. 872. Hansen, 1940, p. 216). Crookston was the largest town in this section of the valley; it contained the county courthouse, the land office, and a railroad station — the point of debarkation for those arriving by railroad. Although French-Canadians were not in the majority of population in Crookston, their numbers were sufficient to support a Catholic Church and French-Canadian priest. They were well represented among the aldermen of

the town. The local doctor and police chief were also French-Canadians. Crookston was important in organizing and directing the migrant *Québécois* toward the new settlements in the valley.

The heart of the colony was the township and village of Gentilly which, by 1883, was solidly French-Canadian and boasted two schools, one general store and two hotels in addition to the Catholic Church administered by Fr. M.A. Bouchard. Nearby villages and towns included Rouxville, Red Lake Falls, St. Hilaire, Beaudry and la Petite Prairie or Terrebonne. Each center had its own church and/or school directed by French-speaking clergy. The colony flourished during the 1880s and its leaders fearlessly exhorted their fellow countrymen to come west to join them. « Comme on a pu le voir par ce qui précède, l'émigrant canadien, quittant sa patrie pour chercher ailleurs des moyens d'existence, trouvera dans le Comté de Polk tout ce qu'il aura abandonné dans son pays — ses compatriotes, sa langue, ses coutumes, son clocher et son pasteur, et avec cela des riches terres dont la fertilité rivalise avec celles des contrées les plus fortunées du monde » (Comité de Canadiens français, 1883, p. 11).

## THE LUMBERING AND MINING FRONTIERS

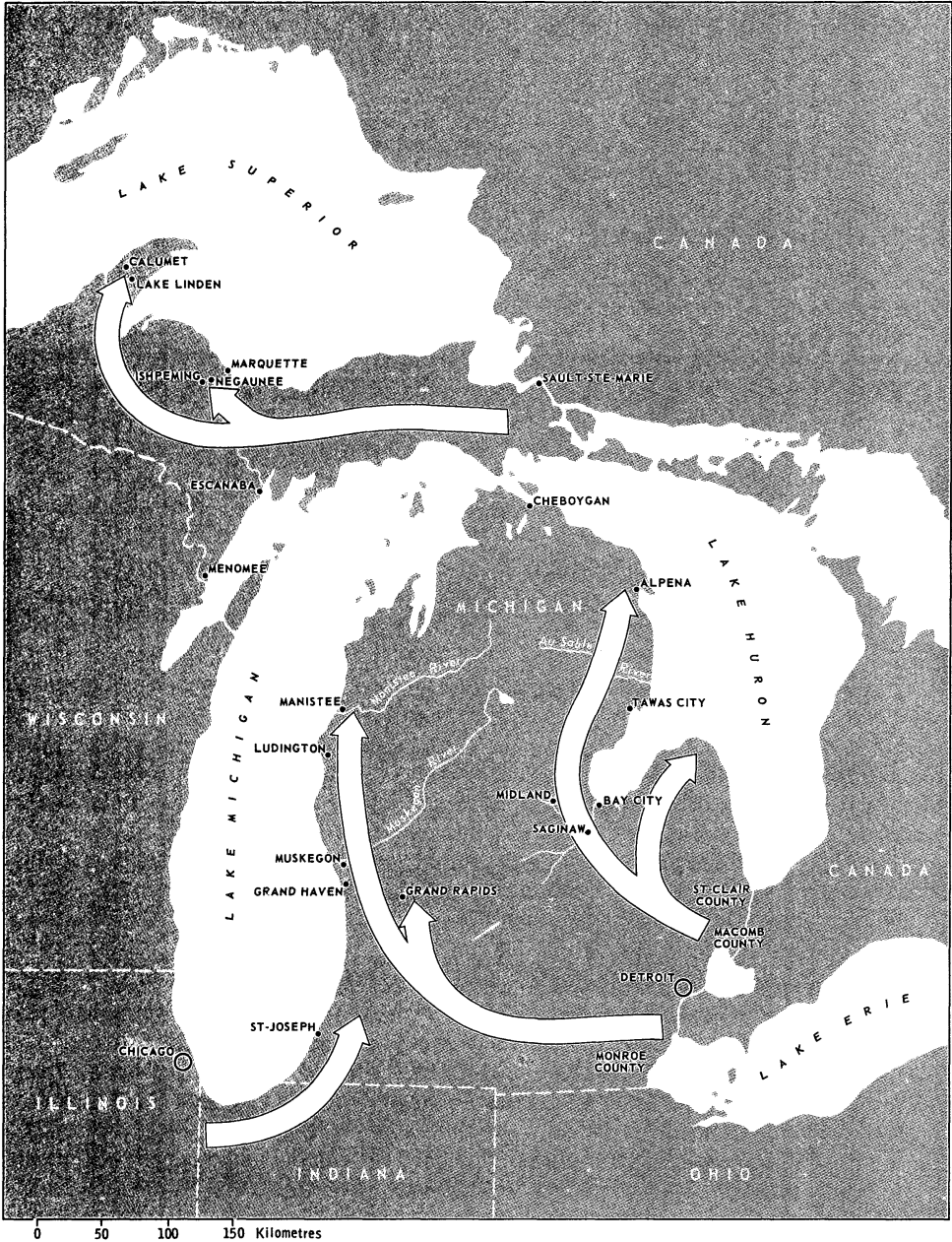
French-Canadians had been involved in lumbering activities in parts of southern Michigan since the 1820s. But the economic expansion of the early 1850s brought a renewal of immigration and a redirection of French-Canadians throughout the state (Figure 3). The most important area of new immigration was along the Lake Huron shore of eastern Michigan. The Saginaw valley became a major center for lumbering, and Bay City, the most important of the lumbering towns, became a magnet for French-Canadian immigrants. « Les neuf-dixièmes de ces compatriotes gagnaient leur vie dans les chantiers en hiver, et dans les scieries en été » (Saint-Pierre, 1895, P. 222). In the peninsula formed by Tuscola, Huron, and Sanilac counties there were 5000 French-Canadians dispersed through the woods, living in small hamlets. As the lumbering industry expanded northward new communities were established in which French-Canadians predominated — Au Sable, Alpena and Tawas.

Although Bay City was the first major lumbering center in which French-Canadians concentrated, the opening of a new lumbering frontier in the west also attracted many new arrivals. Lumber ports appeared along the Lake Michigan shoreline which attracted French-Canadians from Detroit and from Chicago. "Canadians coming to Chicago in search of work learned of the opportunities in the woods and mills for which their earlier life had provided a training. Many of the proprietors of timberlands were Canadian capitalists who had forseen the coming market and had shifted, along with their resources, the skilled woodsmen already in their employ" (Hansen, 1940, p. 131). In the years between 1855 and 1860 towns such as St. Joseph, Grand Haven, Muskegon, Ludington and Manistee were important reception areas for French-Canadian immigrants. The largest center, however, was Grand Rapids and the nearby villages, which were located inland from Lake Michigan (Figure 3).

The third major drive in the expansion of the French-Canadian diaspora during the 1850s was towards the Upper Peninsula of northern Michigan where mining rather than lumbering was the chief attraction. The discovery of copper ore in the Keweenaw Peninsula during the 1840s created a copper rush to northern Michigan; the opening of iron mines in the Marquette Range in 1844 added to the employment opportunities in mining. The completion of the Sault Ste. Marie canal in 1855 not only facilitated the expansion of mining but also dealt a death blow to the carrying trade of the *voyageurs* and their *bateaux*. Thus, the first French-Canadians to work in the mining centers were survivors from

Figure 3

**DIFFUSION OF FRENCH CANADIANS  
IN MICHIGAN, 1840-1860**



the fur-trade who had remained in northern Michigan during the 1830s after the fur-trade dwindled. Their numbers were augmented by new immigrants to the Midwest who had come to Chicago in search of work and had been directed northward into Upper Michigan. The major mining centers in which French-Canadians could be found were Marquette, Negaunee and Ishpeming.

Employment in the mines and lumber camps of northern Michigan, and later in northern Wisconsin, was at once uncertain and highly mobile. Fluctuations in the market price of iron and copper resulted in mine closings. The economic recession of 1857 and the early years of the Civil War brought a drop in the price of metals and unemployment to the French-Canadians in the north country. The result was an out-migration of them from northern Wisconsin in 1861-62. A rise in the market price of metals during the summer of 1862 created a new demand and French-Canadians were called back to the mines and offered work (Hansen, 1940, p. 154). In a similar fashion the opening up of new cutting areas on the lumbering frontier produced short-term migration and temporary boom towns. The mining and lumbering frontiers, unlike the agricultural frontier, probably were not conducive to the development of stable homogeneous communities.

Despite the uncertainties of employment in the north country, French-Canadians resumed their migration into the valleys of northern Michigan and Wisconsin during the 1880s and 1890s. Throughout the 1880s the important lumbering areas were in the Saginaw, Sable, Muskegon and Manistee valleys of southern Michigan. In the 1890s the valleys of the Cheboygan and Menominee in northern Michigan came into their own as the lumber frontier pushed westward into northern Wisconsin. This development coincided with a new wave of emigration from Québec to New England and to the Midwest. From 1890 until 1892 the wave of emigration seemed unprecedented in size. It is difficult to estimate the extent to which these migrations were permanent because the phenomenon of seasonal migrations from the lower St. Lawrence valley appeared in the Michigan lumber camps just as it had appeared in the mill towns of New England.

The extent to which French-Canadians were able to retain their distinctive identity in the lumbering and mining centers cannot be readily ascertained, for little is known about the creation of French-Canadian parishes, the introduction of national societies such as the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society or the distribution of French-Canadian newspapers, which might give cues to the survival of a distinctive identity. On the one hand, the environment and the economy (lumbering combined with a little marginal farming) of these relatively isolated communities in northern Michigan and Wisconsin, were more akin to conditions in Québec than was the case in Kankakee, Cloud, or Polk Counties on the prairie frontier. On the other hand, the mobility of the population and the uncertainty of employment worked against the creation of stable communities, the preservation of language, and the nurture of national ideals among the young. In this latter respect conditions for the survival of a French-Canadian identity may have been as difficult as in the major urban centers of the Midwest.

## URBAN CENTERS

The history of French-Canadians in the large urban centers of the Midwest — Detroit, Chicago, and St. Paul — is most often and most easily told in the histories of their parishes. To be sure, the history of French-Canadian parishes reveals only one side of the story of survival. The parish histories relate the struggles of French-Canadians to create a community and to preserve their faith, language, and national identity, but they do not record the story of those who drifted away from their faith, who became americanized rapidly and who wished no longer to be identified as expatriate *Québécois*. Nevertheless,

the parish histories do reveal the difficulties which French-Canadians encountered and the conflicts which developed as they tried to preserve their identity. The histories are also revealing of the ambiguous role played by the Church in the United States in the assimilation of Catholic immigrants.

The Catholic bishops in the United States faced a major dilemma during the nineteenth century in dealing with new immigrants. The bishops were sensitive to charges made by the Nativist and Know-Nothing movements that members of their church owed allegiance to an alien power — Rome. Some bishops were anxious to prove that immigrants could become good American citizens and remain good Catholics. The pressures to americanize were so great that members of the hierarchy encouraged their charges to learn English and to become naturalized citizens. At the same time, other members of the hierarchy resisted these pressures. There was much to be said for the formation of parishes according to national groups. Such parishes were communities in which the virtues of charity and mutual assistance, submission to authority, and acceptance of economic hardship as God's Will, would prevail. Priests from the old country could attend to the spiritual welfare of parishioners in their own language. Old world values of spirituality and devotion would be handed on to the new generation growing up in America. In sum, the national-origin parish would become a highly-knit community with strong values which acted as a bulwark against the attractions of materialism and individualism so characteristic of the host society.

The success of many French-Canadian communities in the large urban centers depended on their having a French-Canadian priest to serve them. Saint-Pierre believed that the Canadian *curé* in the United States was called upon to play the same role as the clergy in Québec after the Conquest. It was not simply a matter of being able to speak French—Belgian, French, and Alsatian priests were sometimes appointed to French-Canadian parishes. The French-Canadian priest appreciated that the spiritual needs of his flock amounted to much more than receiving the sacraments in their own language. « Au sein de ces colonies pauvres, désorientées où les hommes instruits sont rares et sans moyens d'action sérieux, le curé est le seul chef accepté qui puisse avoir une influence assez considérable sur le peuple pour lui faire faire les sacrifices nécessaires pour perpétuer l'idée nationale. » He can talk to them of the glories past and to come, the benefits of a good education in both languages, and it is he who can raise the money to maintain a church and a Canadian school, « les seuls remparts efficaces de notre nationalité » (Saint-Pierre, 1895, p. 261).

## Detroit

The first parish in Detroit was organized in 1808 by French-Canadians employed in the fur trade. Several members of the community formed a group of *vergers*, became incorporated as a legally constituted corporation, and obtained a tract of land on which St. Anne's parish church was soon built. (This was an unusual situation because ownership of the church and adjacent lands was vested in the corporation and not with the local Catholic bishop, which was the usual practice). The history of this parish and its properties reveals the difficulties which French-Canadians encountered in the later decades of the century particularly when they were numerically outnumbered by immigrants arriving from Europe.

The first signs of difficulty came in the 1830s when the local bishop, Mgr. Rézé, apparently took possession of Ste. Anne's and used the adjacent properties to underwrite the financing of new churches and schools for recently arrived European immigrants. The

succeeding bishop. Mgr. Lefebvre, a Belgian with little sympathy for the French-Canadians, sold some land belonging to Ste. Anne's and used the money to build his cathedral. (The legality of these unilateral episcopal moves seems clouded). Meanwhile, the parishioners of Ste. Anne's were required to pay for improvements and repairs to the church without any financial help from the bishop. In 1868, Bishop Lefebvre was succeeded by Mgr. Borgess, a German who was « un partisan avancé de l'idée américaine ». The new bishop claimed that the parish was in debt to the amount of \$50 000 and took over the remaining property attached to Ste. Anne's. After long negotiations with the vergers some of the land was returned and the bishop kept the remainder as indemnity against the parish debt. The bishop sold the lands which he acquired at this time for a sum of \$165 000.

New troubles appeared in the mid-1870s for the long-suffering parishioners of Ste. Anne's when Bishop Borgess proposed closing down the old parish and creating two new ones elsewhere. The vergers opposed closing the old church; they wished to preserve it as an historic site. Eventually the local *curé* Fr. Theophile Anciaux persuaded a majority of the vergers to sell part of the property at Ste. Anne's for \$100 000 and to loan the money to the diocese for twenty years at 3 per cent interest. (The current rate at the time was between six and seven per cent). Soon afterwards the vergers were persuaded to sell the remainder of old Ste. Anne's for \$198 000 and part of the money was to be used for the creation of two new parishes. The bishop's argument for closing the old church was not altogether unreasonable. The church occupied a valuable site in the center of a rapidly growing metropolis and many parishioners had drifted away to new parts of the city.

One area of the city in which French-Canadians had begun to concentrate was in the east end. During the 1870s and early 1880s new French-Canadian immigration flooded into this quarter and it was here that one of the new parishes to replace Ste. Anne's was located. Fr. Maxime Laporte had come to Detroit from Montréal in 1874 to help and minister to the new immigrants. The priest desperately needed \$5 000 to begin building a school when he first arrived, but he had great difficulty getting any money from Bishop Borgess. Eventually the parish of St. Joachim was granted \$40 000 from the sale proceeds of old Ste. Anne's. The other parish, a new Ste. Anne's (to be built in the west end of the city where there were very few French-Canadians) was granted \$100 000 from the sale proceeds.

The French-Canadians in the east end were outraged at the bishop's decision and in the midst of great agitation Fr. Laporte was ordered to return to his home diocese in Montréal. Before his departure, he appealed to Rome for a just settlement to his parishioners. Agitation continued when Fr. Laporte's replacement, Fr. Dangelzer, arrived. « Ce prêtre alsacien d'origine, parlait le français avec un fort accent allemand, et n'était rien moins que diplomate » (Saint-Pierre, 1895, p. 265). The uproar reached a crescendo when several masked men entered the presbytery and threatened the new pastor, Dangelzer, at gunpoint. The majority of the parishioners felt that events had gone too far and they quickly fell in line with the ecclesiastical authorities. Although Rome gave a judgement against Fr. Laporte, Mgr. Borgess was also required to modify his position and, years later, in 1888, he made further concessions to the French-Canadian parish.

The sad story of Ste. Anne's parish had an ending which was somewhat similar to the Chiniquy affair in Kankakee. Saint-Pierre, in concluding the story noted: « Durant les difficultés, beaucoup de Canadiens ont pris l'habitude d'aller aux autres églises, où on ne parle pas français. De leur côté les Protestants ont profité du mécontentement pour faire des prosélytes, les Baptistes ont formé une congrégation canadienne qui peut compter une centaine de familles » (Saint-Pierre, 1895, p. 266).

The spectre of defections from the church had haunted Québec bishops throughout the nineteenth century as they watched emigrations from the St. Lawrence lowlands. The developments in Michigan must have confirmed their worst fears. Although relations between French-Canadians and bishop were not always as strained as in the story of Ste. Anne's, there were other defections in Michigan. Fr. Samson reported that almost 300 French-Canadian families had embraced Protestantism in Grand Rapids by the early 1880s. When the diocese of Grand Rapids was created in 1882, Bishop Richter called for French-Canadian priests to come and rally their compatriots to bring them to the church. His efforts were largely successful and were copied in other parts of the state. Within twelve years French-Canadian parishes were established at Muskegon, Alpena, Manistee, East Saginaw, West Bay City, and Bay City. In the Marquette diocese, the bishop adopted a similar drive and assisted in the creation of parishes at Marquette, Ishpeming, Lake Linden, Calumet, Menominee, and Escanaba. The survival of the French-Canadians' faith, an important element in their identity, was happily ensured in the lumbering and mining towns of northern Michigan.

### Chicago

The story of French-Canadian parishes in Chicago is a happier one than that of Detroit. The growth and survival of the communities, however, were not without problems — problems associated with the initial French-Canadian community being swamped by an influx of European immigrants and Americans. Throughout the nineteenth century, as Chicago expanded in area and population, the location of French-Canadians within the city changed as new employment opportunities and new residential areas opened up. When French-Canadian communities relocated and regrouped in new sections of the city they expressed a desire to have their own parish, their own church, and their own *curé*. In achieving these goals they often received assistance from the local bishop — a key factor in the peaceful development of French-Canadian parishes in Chicago.

The city of Chicago began as a small fur-trading post on the Chicago River, which was operated by a French-Canadian in the years after the Pottawatomie attack of 1812. By 1825 the settlement had grown to approximately 100, most of whom were associated with the fur-trade. There was also a small military post and a French-Canadian priest, Fr. Gabriel Richard, had come as a missionary to work among the Indians in 1821. The small French-Canadian population did not have a resident priest until 1833 when they petitioned the Archbishop of St. Louis for permission to establish a church. In response to their request a French priest, Fr. Saint-Cyr, arrived and built St. Mary's Church at the corner of Lake and State streets. At first the congregation was almost entirely French-Canadian but with the rapid increase in immigration during the 1830s and 1840s, the French-Canadians were quickly outnumbered: « Après quelques années la congrégation devint beaucoup plus nombreuse et les Canadiens s'y trouvèrent en minorité. Animés de l'esprit canadien-français, attachés à leur langue, pleins de patriotisme, et incapables à cause de leur fierté nationale de marcher à la remorque des autres races venues après eux sur un sol qui avait été pour la première fois arrosé des sueurs apostoliques des Marquettes et autres missionnaires de leur sang, ces braves compatriotes demandèrent de se séparer : ce qui leur fut accordé » (Paquin, 1893, p. 13). Consequently, the French-Canadians built a new church on Wabash Street, a church which was to become the cathedral of the first bishop of Chicago.

The only difficult period for bishop and French-Canadians in Chicago came in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The locus of the problem was St. Louis parish, erected in 1848 at the corner of Clark and Quincy streets as the first national parish for the *Canadiens*. The



first nine years were happy ones when the parish was led by a Canadian priest, Fr. Lebel. In 1857 a French priest, Fr. LeMeistre, succeeded Fr. Lebel at St. Louis. The new priest became embroiled in a personal dispute with his ecclesiastical superiors which resulted in his return to New Orleans. Fr. Waldran, an Irishman, who spoke not a word of French, took over the administration of St. Louis and his period of tenure was an unhappy one. (Irish priests enjoyed a poor reputation in French-Canadian communities because of the vehement unilingual viewpoint which the Irishmen held). Little by little the *Canadien* parishioners of St. Louis drifted away to other churches for they could not understand a word of what Fr. Waldran had to say.

In 1863 a number of French-Canadians regrouped an dorganised *ad hoc* parish meetings in the basement of St. Patrick's Church. They decided to try and create a new parish. The bishop acceded to their request for help and gave them a plot of land at the intersection of Congress and Halsted where a new church for the *Canadiens* was built. Notre-Dame was administered briefly by a Fr. Montobrig in 1863, and then by Fr. Jacques Côté from 1864 until 1884. During the twenty years of Fr. Côté's pastoral leadership, Notre-Dame was a haven for new French-Canadians arriving in Chicago. It was a period of parish expansion in the early years and dwindling membership in the later years. By the mid-1880s the French-Canadian population in the city has dispersed towards the new suburbs, and the decade from 1884 to 1894 saw the creation of several new parishes in the southern suburbs where French-Canadians were numerous.

The first adjustment to the changing distribution of French-Canadians in Chicago was the relocation of Notre-Dame parish. When Fr. Achille Bergeron succeeded Fr. Côté in 1884 he sold the old parish site and bought a new plot at Sibley and Vernon Park Place in the southern suburbs. In 1885 he built a new school for the four hundred children in the parish and placed it under the direction of the Sisters of the Congregation of Montréal. In 1886 he built a new presbytery and in 1887 completed the new church of Notre-Dame. It was described as the most beautiful church in Chicago, octagonal in shape, built of white pressed brick, and topped with a 155 foot cupola. (The contractor and many sub-contractors were French-Canadian). The church with its fine organ and renowned choir became a primary focus French-Canadians in Chicago. The pastor, Fr. Bergeron, had two assistants, Frs. Thérien and Granger, to help administer to the spiritual needs of over 2 000 families in the area in 1891.

A second parish was created in the southern suburbs in 1887. French-Canadians in Pullman, Gano and Roseland were sufficiently numerous to rent a local hall in which Fr. Goulet said Mass. A little later Fr. Trefflé Ouimet was appointed *curé* but ill-health forced his resignation. Fr. J.B.L. Bourrassa succeeded as pastor of the new parish in 1890 and organized his parishioners to contribute their time and labor in the construction of a small red-brick church. He added a school, staffed with three nuns of the Congregation of Notre-Dame, in 1891 for the children of the parish. With only 150 families, the Pullman parish was much smaller than Notre-Dame parish.

In 1889 yet another French-Canadian parish was organized, this time in the western suburb of Brighton Park. Fr. J. Lesage was appointed *curé* of the new St. Joseph parish. His duties were not only to administer to the needs of French-Canadians congregating in this western suburb but also to co-ordinate the activities of French-Canadian organizations in the Archdiocese of Chicago. By 1893 there were 250 families in the parish, many of them having come from the old parish of Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Bridgeport. Within a few years Fr. Lesage had built a two-story structure which housed a parochial school and presbytery on the top floor and a church on the ground floor. In September 1891, five sisters of the Congregation of Saint-Joseph came from Concordia, Kansas, to teach the

two hundred children enrolled in the parish school. Paquin noted: « S'il existe au milieu de nos compatriotes de Brighton Park tant d'esprit d'union et de progrès, c'est dû à leur Club Jacques-Cartier qui marche sous la direction éclairée du pasteur de la paroisse » (Paquin, 1893, p. 35).

The parish of Saint-Jean-Baptiste had a very modest beginning on the corner of Halsted and 31st Street in the Bridgeport district. The parish was never strong because there were few French-Canadians in the area and they were widely scattered. In 1889 the parish property was sold and many parishioners flocked to the parish of Saint-Joseph's in Brighton Park. Some French-Canadians remained in the Bridgeport area and in 1892 Fr. A. Bélanger reorganized Saint-Jean-Baptiste parish less than three miles south of the old parish location. It was an ambitious undertaking for a priest, recently arrived from Montréal on recuperation leave. But Fr. Bélanger was concerned about the assimilation of the French-Canadians scattered through the area, even though they were well served by no less than seven local churches. « Naturellement nos compatriotes, connaissant plus ou moins l'anglais, et disséminés dans ce nouveau quartier de plusieurs milles carrés, étaient portés à fréquenter ces églises » (Paquin, 1893, p. 24). The Montréal priest bought an old Protestant church, transported it to the corner of Peoria and 50th Court and successfully drew French-Canadians back to the newly reorganized Saint-Jean-Baptiste parish.

The French-Canadian parishes in Chicago seem to have been more successful than those in Detroit. There were numerous national organizations attached to the parishes in both cities — Saint-Jean-Baptiste societies, Jacques-Cartier clubs, and branches of the Forestiers Catholiques — which reminded French-Canadians of their national heritage and kept alive the French-Canadian identity. But in Chicago there were other elements which account for the vigor of French-Canadian communities. The Archbishops of Chicago were usually sympathetic to French-Canadians' wishes for national parishes; the parishes were administered by Québec priests and the schools staffed with Québec nuns. By the late 1880s the number of American-born French-Canadian priests and nuns had increased. Chicago parishes maintained ties with rural communities not only in Illinois but also in Kansas. Nuns from Concordia and priests from Bourbonnais filled important leadership positions in the French-Canadian communities. Paquin, the historian of French-Canadians in Chicago, affirmed the loyalty of the second-generation Franco-Americans to the French-Canadian identity: « Bien que nés et élevés aux États-Unis, les prêtres d'origine canadienne-française qui viennent de Bourbonnais se montrent toujours au premier rang pour sauvegarder notre foi et notre langue et faire revivre au milieu de nous nos institutions nationales » (Paquin, 1893, p. 36).

### Minneapolis-St. Paul

The French-Canadian communities in St. Paul and Minneapolis do not seem to have been as vigorous as those in Chicago, and the prospects of preserving a distinctive identity at the close of the nineteenth century in the Twin Cities was not promising. St. Paul had been established as a small fur-trading post by a Métis trader (« Pig-eye » Parent) in the late 1830s. The French-Canadian element in the population of St. Paul expanded, as it had in Detroit, when the fur trade declined and the old *voyageurs*' families retired to one of the principal centers. When the mining and lumbering activities opened up in northeastern Minnesota, additional French-Canadians arrived in St. Paul, but in small numbers. The coming of the railroads, the opening up of the Canadian West, and the repatriation of *Canadiens* from New England, inevitably brought French-Canadians through St. Paul and some of them remained. By the 1890s there were three French-Canadian parishes in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

The French-Canadian parish in St. Paul was organized by the Marist Fathers. They were priests who had been actively involved in the French-Canadian parishes of New England and Boston and were familiar with the problems faced by French-Canadians adjusting to urban life in the United States. In St. Paul, however, French-Canadians seemed to have been less concerned with preserving their language and national identity than with making financial progress. Many indeed had become financially successful, but by the same token they had lost their cultural heritage. « St-Paul est une belle et prospère cité, une ville de progrès, d'affaires où nous trouvons une population canadienne de 8 000 âmes. Les professions libérales, la finance, le commerce, les industries sont très bien représentés par nos compatriotes, quelques-uns occupent même les plus hautes sphères commerciales. Ils forment une très belle société canadienne comme elle existe au pays, mais l'école paroissiale n'est pas assez fréquentée par les enfants canadiens » (La Société de Publications Françaises des États-Unis, 1891, p. 866).

In Minneapolis there were approximately 10 000 French-Canadians in 1891, grouped in two parishes — Notre-Dame and Ste. Clothilde. Despite the best efforts of the priests, Frs. P. Daignault and E. Martin, the parochial schools were not well attended. As in St. Paul, many of the French-Canadians in Minneapolis were successful in the professions, in business, and in industry. Notwithstanding the material success within the French-Canadian community, there was concern for the general apathy of French-Canadians toward the French language in the parochial schools and what that apathy might portend for the future. The report from Minneapolis in the *Guide Français* for 1891 comments: « Espérons que les autorités religieuses si empressées à sauvegarder les intérêts des écoles paroissiales de langue anglaise comprendront qu'il est aussi essentiel pour le Canadien d'avoir son école paroissiale canadienne-française que son église, son pasteur, car celui qui perd sa langue, perd généralement sa foi, ou gardiennes de la foi catholique, les autorités religieuses doivent prendre les moyens de la conserver chez nous comme chez les autres nationalités » (La Société de Publications Françaises des États-Unis, 1891, p. 868).

## CONCLUSION

The survival of an ethnic community is clearly related to its size, its stability, the degree to which immigration from the homeland continues, and the contacts which develop between that community and other communities of the same immigrant group scattered throughout the Midwest. It is not surprising that the Illinois settlements were among the most successful of the French-Canadian communities in the Midwest. The Kankakee communities together were large and they were at the center of a network of contacts which existed among French-Canadians throughout the Midwest. Although there was no substantial immigration from Québec to Kankakee after the 1850s, there was a sustained migration of priests and nuns who established schools and built Saint-Viateur's College. These contacts were vital to the survival of a French-Canadian identity in Illinois. The College had a major impact on the training of young French-Canadians in the professions and on the awareness of these young men of their cultural heritage. The College also contributed to the training of American-born priests who continued to keep the national ideal alive in their pastoral work. The supply of French-Canadian priests and nuns, either Québec-born or American-born, was important for the survival of the French-Canadian national identity.

The Church could play a positive role in the survival of national identity depending upon the attitudes of local bishops. The history of French-Canadian parishes in the archdiocese of Chicago seems to have been free of discord. In Detroit, the story is a sad one;

some French-Canadians abandoned their church and adopted Protestant faiths because of friction with the bishop. The malaise among French-Canadians in Minneapolis and St. Paul cannot be attributed to the lack of French-Canadian priests and parochial schools, or friction with clerical leaders. Other factors were also at work: the financial success of French-Canadians in Minneapolis-St. Paul went hand-in-hand with their rapid americanization.

This preliminary review of French-Canadians in the upper Midwest during the nineteenth century has identified only a few of the factors which explain the survival of the French-Canadian identity. Other factors remain to be examined. For example, several attempts were made to publish newspapers for French-Canadian communities in the Midwestern states. An investigation of the circulation of French-Canadian newspapers and their eventual decline will indicate the strength of national sentiment and concern for language survival in these communities. Little is known, at present, of language instruction in parochial schools, or when French disappeared as the language of domestic communication. Similarly, the role of national societies, which were so important in the urban centers, has not yet been adequately investigated.

A good deal of work remains for historical and cultural geographers to accomplish, and although documentary evidence is scattered, there is an abundance of written records to be sifted and researched. In addition to the state and federal censuses of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan, there are a large number of city directories and county atlases which will shed new light on the stability, growth, or decline of French-Canadian communities. In addition, the directories of French-Canadians in the United States contain a wealth of information on the branches and membership of national associations such as the Saint-Jean-Baptiste societies, on the distribution of French-Canadian parishes, priests, schools, and teachers. The information in these directories is not always uniform, but it can be combined with other sources to develop a composite image of the success or failure of each community. Finally, field-work will reveal the condition of these communities today. In the last few years I have visited the farmlands of Cloud County, Kansas and Polk County, Minnesota where the preponderance of French-Canadian names on mailboxes along country roads attest to the persistence of families which arrived a century ago. In the local cemeteries, grave-marker inscriptions indicate that the French language was important as late as the 1920s. Additional fieldwork must be undertaken especially in the small towns along the northern fringes of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota to determine the awareness of the French-Canadian heritage in those communities. Already there is some evidence to suggest that the assimilation of French-Canadians was most rapid in the cities and prosperous farming areas of the American Midwest where financial success was possible. It may yet be demonstrated that in the relatively fringe areas where lumbering is combined with marginal agriculture the survival of the French-Canadian identity has been the most successful of all.

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