

Christina Selander Bouzouina: Minnesota, an exclusive product of Scandinavia? Au contraire



Bon anniversaire Minnesota! Joyeux 350 ans!

This year marks the 350th anniversary of the French presence in Minnesota, so it's the perfect time to reflect on the state's French roots and the continuing appreciation of all things French. The subtle reminders of this heritage echo throughout the state as French place names like Duluth, Faribault, Hennepin and Nicollet. Even our state motto is French: *Étoile du Nord* -- Star of the North.

So why is it that everybody has the impression that Minnesota is a Scandinavian state? Philip Brunelle of VocalEssence, who is of French-Canadian descent, suggests the Norwegians and Swedes are just better at public relations, not to mention their larger numbers. And it is true that Scandinavians have contributed a few words to the local lexicon, colorful words such as *uff da*, *lefse* and *lutefisk*. We should not forget that.

Yet they are relative newcomers. About 200 years before Scandinavian immigrants started coming here, French voyageurs, explorers and missionaries entered Minnesota.

Painter and amateur historian Robert Perrizo, who specializes in the voyageurs, sides with those who pinpoint 1660 as the year of a "First Meeting of Nations" at Isle Pele (Bald Island), now known as Prairie Island. The Mdewakanton Dakota hosted representatives of the Huron, Ottawa and Cree Nations, as well as two quite unofficial delegates from France, Pierre Radisson and his brother-in-law, Medard Chouart Des Groseilliers.

Radisson and Groselliers were known as "Coureurs des bois" or "runners of the woods." They were running because they were conducting a fur trade on the frontiers of New France without permission. So when they returned to Montreal, the authorities confiscated their stockpile of furs. That didn't stop them. Radisson and Groselliers defected to England and helped found the Hudson Bay Company.

Radisson's exploits (and more) were chronicled in a diary published in 1669, which may be called a work of "creative" nonfiction. While scholars scratch their heads as to the factual accuracy of his book, there is no doubt that it popularized the upper Mississippi Valley as a prime attraction for fur trappers and traders. By 1685 Robert Cavalier, Sieur de LaSalle, claimed the entire area west of the Mississippi for King Louis XIV, the Sun King. In his honor they named it Louisiana. It became U.S. property in 1803 when President Thomas Jefferson bought it from Napoleon, and before too long the Norwegians and Swedes entered the picture.

But the French influence in the state never disappeared, and if anything is growing stronger. Part of my job as executive director of the Alliance Française is to keep an eye on all things French, and we know the Twin Cities are thriving as a place to savor French food and wine. Interest in learning the French language has never been stronger.

We have seen a steady growth of French immersion schools. L'étoile du Nord French Immersion School in St. Paul has outgrown two buildings in less than 10 years, the relatively new French Academy of Minnesota in [St. Louis Park](#) is accredited by the French Ministry of Education, and the Normandale French Immersion School in [Edina](#) is still going strong. Plus the Pierre Bottineau French Immersion School plans to open this fall in north [Minneapolis](#).

Another factor contributing to Minnesota's French connections is the state's continuing reputation as a home for new immigrants, many from Francophone countries, former colonies of France and Belgium, such as Senegal, Congo, Haiti, Vietnam and Lebanon.

We invite everyone to celebrate French language and culture, and to learn more about Minnesota's French history during this anniversary year. If nothing else you can admire the athletic skills of a recent French-Canadian import -- Justin Morneau of the Minnesota Twins.

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