

Film celebrates Minnesota's French connection

- Article by: [GAIL ROSENBLUM](#) , Star Tribune
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News that our fair state's Nordic identity is shrinking shouldn't cause unnecessary panic or a rush on smoked salmon.

As my colleague David Peterson reported in mid-September, the number of Twin Citians identifying as German-, Norwegian- or Swedish-American has dropped by nearly 100,000 in five years. Still, these three ethnic groups claim more than 50 percent of the state's population.

Such news, though, can serve to reawaken an interest in one's roots, and that brings me to croissants, something to which I'm always happy to be brought.

As David sheds light on the largest branches of our family tree, Christine Loys has been zeroing in on one of the smallest, yet most important, groups of settlers to arrive in Minnesota, though most of us know little about them.

Long live the small but mighty French, about 5 percent of the metro area's population, whose legacy will soon be featured in an hourlong documentary directed by Loys, who hails from Paris.

"How do you say that? 'I'm over the moon,'" said Loys, a veteran journalist who has spent much of the past two years traveling throughout Minnesota to answer the question: "Are the roots of French heritage still alive in Minnesota?"

She coyly wouldn't answer — she said I needed to see the film — but it's likely a hearty "Oui." Loys, whose production team includes co-producer Mark Steele and director of photography Jim Brandenburg, has traveled to Duluth, Beaulieu on the White Earth Reservation, lakes Lac qui Parle and Mille Lacs, forts including Grand Portage and La Riviere du Serpent, as well as Nicollet Mall and Radisson Road.

She's explored French architecture and the French imprint on food, law and medicine. She's learned about fur trapping during the Voyageur period and the French settlers' abiding friendship with the state's Native Americans.

She's tapped into the expertise of historical societies and has three advisers on her team "for accuracy." Along the way, the affable Loys has collected an impressive group of friends and supporters, including Minnesota explorer Will Steger, mayors R.T. Rybak and Chris Coleman, leaders of the state's film and French communities, and Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly, who has offered financial support and said he's excited to see the finished product.

Thomas Holter, TPT's executive director of programming, has expressed interest in airing the documentary.

"What's exciting isn't just recapturing and remembering our important French heritage," said Secretary of State Mark Ritchie, keeper of the Great Seal of Minnesota, which bears the French words L'Etoile du Nord (The Star of the North). "It's the reminder that many different people have come here and have made really important contributions." The seal above his head in his office, he

added, “is a defining part of the brand and reputation of Minnesota and something I’m really proud of.”

Minneapolis City Councilwoman Barbara Rainville Johnson can’t wait to see “En Avant.” The film’s title is a nod to French wording in the seal of Minneapolis, which means “Keep moving forward.”

Johnson traveled to France last year, where Loys helped her track down a cousin in the Normandy region.

“These connections are really important,” said Johnson, whose family left France in 1640 and headed to Quebec, thence to Minnesota, as merchants.

“Whenever you think about how people left their families and their lives to make this huge trip and change their fortunes ... what was it that made them do it? Are things so bad, or is it more of a sense of adventure?”

Loys never intended to have this kind of adventure. More than a quarter-century ago, she was doing promotional work for a French doctor who was heading to the North Pole for several months. Upon his return, he told Loys he’d met “someone who is even more crazy than I am.”

Steger.

Loys made her first trip to Minnesota in 1986 to learn more about Steger’s work, returning again many times. Four years ago, with a car and great curiosity, she began pursuing the French connection, driving around the Ely area and marveling, “Oh! This looks French! Oh! This looks French! Something must be done!”

She’s raised half of the film’s \$400,000 budget and has a website, www.enavantfilm.com. She’ll host a thank-you party/fundraiser at the Ritz Theater in northeast Minneapolis on Oct. 11. Then she returns to France to reconnect with the French production team.

Loys envisions distribution of the film in both countries, as well as more student exchanges. She’s trying to not feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of what she’s trying to do.

“One time I was talking about all of this and, suddenly, I had this impression that it was much too big and I can’t do it,” said Loys, the mother of two sons and four grandchildren.

“Then someone told me that, in America, you have to think big. I felt much better.”

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