

## **The Influence of the French-Canadians on the US Midwest**

Lac qui Parle, Marquette, Nicollet, Eau Claire, Prairie du Chien, LaSalle, Little Canada, Faribault, Bottineau Blvd., Centreville, Lac Courte Oreilles, Duluth, Radisson, Roseau, Baudette; and the list goes on and on. Such is the legacy left by the French and subsequently the descendants of the Canadians of French ancestry.

One has to travel only short distances around the Midwest section of the United States to encounter the influence of French-Canadians. There are cities and towns and rivers and prairies too numerous to mention with names given to them by the early French explorers, voyageurs and immigrants from eastern Canada. Like all immigrants they settled together in areas and gave those locations names in their native language. They established institutions like schools and churches; Ste Genevieve, St Louis King of France. Our Lady of Lourdes, Notre Dame du Chutes. French was spoken at Mass and taught in the schools until the State established English as the language to be used in the schools. To counter the change, French continued to be the language spoken in the home. Business in the smaller towns was frequently conducted in French and societies such as St Jean Baptiste allowed members the comfort of continuing to speak their French.

The first Europeans to enter the Midwest states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, the Dakotas and Michigan were all from "New France" in Canada. Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin was founded by Jean Brunet, St Paul Minnesota by Pierre Parrent, often called "Pig's Eye Parrent" and Pierre Bottineau was one of the founders of Minneapolis and several smaller towns all the way to the Red River Valley. Thus the State of Minnesota is the only state to have its motto in French: "L'etoile du Nord" and the City of Minneapolis has as its motto "En Avant".

In the beginning it was the voyageurs and the missionary priests that were traveling about the land. Then there began the influx of settlers to the land. They came down mainly from the Quebec area of Canada. There were farmers, loggers and tradesmen of all types. They began to establish farming towns all over

the Midwest and many resided in the cities. They brought with them their language, their culture and their religion. Unlike many of the emigrants from Quebec to New England, these people were here to stay. They raised large families, continued to cook soupe aux pois, bake tourtiere, speak French and practice their Catholic faith. Large beautiful churches were built with schools attached. Quebec customs continued and life went on. As generation after generation was born the influence of the Quebec heritage waned. For several years Quebec seemed a faraway land that grandpa and grandma came from. Newer generations spoke less French. But still the names of the towns, rivers, churches and prairies surrounded us and reminded us from whence we came.

Now a new age is upon us. Canada is the United States' biggest trading partner. Quebec is Minnesota's biggest trading partner. Technology has brought us all closer together. Family groups are forming in Quebec and now we can once again be a part of our family in Canada. Travel to Quebec is no longer an issue. Interest in our heritage is rising. Understanding our heritage brings appreciation to who we are and how we got here.

Many of us in the U.S. were raised with the customs of our Quebec immigrants. Tourtiere, soupe aux pois, Easter water, patriarchal New Year's blessing, Reveillon and "Prendre un p'tit coup c'est agreable" are all great memories for so many of us. In the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St Paul there has been a renewed interest in our heritage. Two new "French" groups have formed in the last two years. One is an "all things French" group that seeks to encourage all the local French groups to celebrate their heritage. That group, French-American Heritage Foundation, works with the Alliance Francais, Les Survivants, local African-American cultures from French speaking countries and French speaking Caribbean cultures. We also want to involve the French restaurants in our area, of which there are many in celebrating the culture. Les Survivants is strictly a Quebec Canadian-French group. That group strives to reconnect Minnesota French-Canadians to their Quebec culture both past and present.

Recently a journalist from France came to Minneapolis to produce a documentary on what is left of the French influence in the Midwestern section of the U.S. She

has found that so much of the culture of the Canadian-French exists in this area that she has had to limit her program to just Minnesota. Over 400,000 Minnesotans claim to have French-Canadian heritage. Many of us are still alive who had parents that spoke French before they entered school. We heard our older relatives speaking French at family gatherings and singing the old Quebec songs.

For many of us "Je me souviens".....is still a reality.

Pierre Girard

Minneapolis, Minnesota

There is one thing I forgot to put in the document. It is something I noticed while visiting cemeteries in the towns along the Chemin du Roi.

“Standing in the graveyards and observing the grave stones reminded me of visiting the cemeteries in Chippewa Falls, Faribault, Minneapolis Pioneer Cemetery, Centreville, MN and Little Canada, MN (a St Paul suburb). All the names in the Quebec cemeteries are also in our cemeteries! It is a feeling of “home”.