

Festival celebrates French roots

ST. ALBANS

By Dan McLean • Free Press Staff Writer • June 21, 2009



John Fisher, now 69, became interested in his genealogy in his late 30s. He ultimately traced his family back 12 generations to 1634 in Quebec City and proudly wears a button that reads: "My ancestors walked with Champlain." It's possible. Samuel de Champlain, who founded Quebec on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River in 1608, died in 1635.

A three-day celebration of French heritage, particularly ties to Quebec, concluded in St. Albans on Saturday. The Franco-American Heritage Festival is part of the wider effort to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Champlain's

exploration of Lake Champlain.

Tracing his finger along a chart, Fisher said his family changed its name from Poissant to Fisher in 1937 for practical reasons. (It's a close translation, he says, poisson means fish.) Fisher's father was a general manager of a bakery in Burlington. "In business," he said, "it was better if you were English." That may have been true decades ago in the Queen City. But Saturday in St. Albans, it was better if you had French roots -- or, better yet, if you could trace your ancestry back to the estimated 42 couples that lived in Quebec City before Champlain died. Fisher, who helped found the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society in Colchester, says he can.

The organization, which provided the estimate of the number of couples who might have crossed paths with the founder of New France, is designed to "assist people in tracing their French-Canadian genealogy," Fisher said. The Genealogical Society's microfiche records chronicle marriages dating back to the early 1600s, he said. The organization's booth in Taylor Park, which was adorned with a Quebec flag and well stocked with books about Champlain, wasn't far from where a fiddler in a bandstand entertained a few dozen spectators who attended the festival.

The bulk of people living in St. Albans City, 57 percent, have French-Canadian and French ancestry, according to a listing provided by the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society. Winooski had the highest percentage in Chittenden County, 55 percent. That's likely because French-Canadians moved to Winooski to work in the mills, said Rae Laitres, who is a member of the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society.

The cloudy day didn't keep Laitres, who is from St. Albans, away from Taylor Park. French heritage is an important part of her life. "They were here for generations, but French was basically their first language," she said of her ancestors. Laitres' maternal grandmother was born in the province of Quebec, she noted. Other relatives have been in Vermont longer. The festival is important, Laitres said, because it "puts us in touch with our roots."