

L'amour de la CULTURE FRANÇAIS

French-Canadians were once the object of discrimination in Vermont, but today their art, music and food are celebrated.

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The students of the Waldorf School in Shelburne performed traditional French dances led by their teacher Carol Reed, during The French Heritage Day Celebration at St. Peter's Parish Hall on Saturday, March 26, 2011. (BEN SARLE, for the Free Press)

As I wandered back to my hotel in the dusk, I heard repeatedly, as the home-faring laborers passed me in couples, the sound of a tongue of other than Yankee inflections,” novelist Henry James wrote in a published letter about his 1870 visit to Burlington. “It was Canadian French.”

Mais oui!

Some 140 years after James’ observation, interest is being renewed in the francophone influence on Vermont culture, thanks in part to its present-day economic impact in trade and tourism. Burlington hosted a French Friendship Day on March 24 in which representatives of both France and Quebec participated.

The French language is not heard so often today, but it had become commonplace in many parts

of New England by 1870 due to a southward migration after massive crop failures and unemployment in Quebec. According to the 1860 U.S. Census, 44.3 percent of Vermont's residents were then French-Canadian. By 2000, that figure was 23.3 percent, and the preferred term had become Franco-American.

In the early days of the 20th century, these blue-collar newcomers worked in Winooski textile mills, Queen City lumberyards and Rutland marble quarries while facing significant amounts of discrimination. But they also brought with them rich cultural traditions, primarily acoustic music and dance, that survive to this day.

La Famille Beaudoin began playing professionally in the Burlington area four decades ago. Michele Choiniere of St. Albans is an acclaimed, prolific singer in the same genre. Barre's Martha Pellerin, who died in 1998, was a musician and scholar dedicated to preserving her French-Canadian roots. With help from a Grammy Foundation grant, the Vermont Folklife Center in Middelbury has collaborated with the University of Vermont's Center for Digital Initiatives to archive her repertoire online.

At a recent *veillée* (evening) in Vergennes, billed as a fundraiser for July's annual French Heritage Day, the local Good Companion Bakery provided bread. The bakers, Erik and Erica Andrus, also entertained as a duo on accordion and fiddle.

Pea soup, onion soup and a dessert called *parte au sucre* (sugar pie) were prepared by volunteers. A dozen costumed students, grades 4 through 8, from the Lake Champlain Waldorf School in Shelburne demonstrated Quebecois *quadrilles* (square dances).

Since 2001, their French teacher, Carol Reed of Leicester, has been a guitarist and vocalist in the trio Va-et-Vient, which translates as "going and coming." Although already a francophone, she was introduced to the ethnic art form in the mid-1990s by Martha Pellerin.

The *veillée* drew about 60 people to the L'Eglise de Saint Pierre (St. Peter's Church), which has a notable history of its own. The original wooden chapel was built in 1845 and today's brick structure in 1874. But back in April 1776, the first Mass held by French-Canadian worshippers within the parish expressed support for the American Revolution.

By the early 1800s, about 300 people from Quebec had landed in Vergennes, mostly attracted by jobs at the village's Monkton Iron Works. A neighborhood on the west side of Otter Creek was dubbed "French Village."

At the *veillée*, Tom Hughes of Middlebury and his mother, Jeanette LeFrancois Hughes, were enjoying the festivities. He manages the Crown Point State Historic Site and was involved in organizing 2009's Quadricentennial to mark the 400th anniversary of Champlain's expedition.

"French-Canadian storytelling is very dark," Hughes said. "It's all about devils."

But happiness pervaded daily life, especially when it came to soirees, he added. "Everyone gathered in farmhouse kitchens for the music, the dancing and the food."

And the food was most often meat pies, or *tourtières*, a beloved Quebec fare with ground pork, potatoes and onions. Alma Fabiola Hooker, a 98-year-old Rutland resident, baked as many as 35 of these dishes for her relatives and friends each New Year's Day — when fathers blessed their children during a ritual called la *benediction du pere*.

“The kids would come into the parlor on their knees,” explained Gregory Sharrow, director of education at the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury. He is not of French-Canadian stock himself but his husband[mki:CQ], Bob Hooker, is Alma's son.

Hooker's ancestors faced great tragedy. Ama's maternal grandfather, Felix St. Jean dit Belair, was crushed to death in 1893 by a falling slab of marble at a West Rutland quarry. His wife, Sarah, had died in 1885 nine days after giving birth to a baby.

It's a familiar immigrant story, in which poor people from foreign lands find themselves on the lowest rung of American society. Moreover, anti-Catholic attitudes often plagued the French Canadians in Vermont.

“There was a lot of discrimination,” said Andy Kolovos, archivist at the Folklife Center. “They were stigmatized for having a different language, eating different foods and practicing a different religion.”

This bigotry was intensified by the Ku Klux Klan, which took hold in Vermont during the 1920s. Members of the extremist organization burned crosses at Montpelier's St. Augustine Church in July 1924 and November 1925.

Two men put on trial for the crime were freed thanks to a hung jury that was evenly divided between Catholics and Protestants. Deane C. Davis, who would go on to become the state's Republican governor from 1969 to 1973, was one of the defense attorneys.

“The French were a despised minority,” Sharrow noted.

Elizabeth Fenton, a University of Vermont assistant English professor, wrote “Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture.” The book, due out Friday, examines politically-driven prejudice that extended back to the Founding Fathers.

“The Continental Congress deemed French-Canadian Catholicism ‘dangerous in an extreme degree to the Protestant religion’ and to ‘the civil rights and liberties of all America,’” Fenton pointed out in a recent email.

Such intolerance may be particularly absurd in a place called Vermont, an Anglicized version of *vert mont*, which means Green Mountain. In 1609, French explorer Samuel de Champlain discovered the lake that bears his name. Settlers from New France, now Quebec, began to establish trading posts and garrisons here in 1741. Industrial growth in the Champlain Valley and beyond would not have been possible without hard-working immigrant populations.

In the mid-20th century, eight-term Winooski Mayor Armand Rathe was known to conduct bilingual city council discussions. “I wouldn’t put it past him. Whenever he spoke, one word would be in French and the next in English,” said Rita Martel, current president of the Winooski Historical Society.

Rathe’s granddaughter, Gail Dion, said she’s heard that her “pepere” only switched to a foreign language at the end of a meeting “to confound newspaper reporters.”

“As children, we spoke French at home until we started school,” recalled Marguerite Senecal, the Addison County Chamber of Commerce information specialist who was a key organizer of the Vergennes *veillée*. “In class, other kids would laugh at us for pronouncing the word ‘three’ as ‘tree.’”

Her Ontario kin relocated to Vermont in 1927. Senecal’s father, one of 11 children, experienced a dramatic lake voyage. “He traveled here on a raft manned by Native Americans,” she said. “My mother was 16 and one of 14 children who came here with their parents by train from Ontario.”

Ever since, the size of this brood has meant get-togethers are well-attended. Senecal invited 100 first cousins to her 1963 wedding.

Although her family did not practice *la benediction du pere* at New Year’s celebrations, they ate meat pies on all holidays. Senecal now makes them for the festivities she coordinates every July on French Heritage Day, timed to coincide with Bastille Day in France.

Lisa Beaudoin Therrien of Colchester grew up on Batchelder Street in Burlington’s Lakeside neighborhood, then “a little community of French people who worked at the factories in the South End.” She remembers that her family always began the New Year by attending midnight Mass at St. Anthony Parish, before assembling at the Lyman Avenue home of an uncle and aunt to eat meat pies and make music.

Therrien has played piano and step-danced with La Famille Beaudoin, as well as its various incarnations over the years. “I have ‘staccato taps’ on the toes and heels of leather shoes,” she said, describing what it takes to create the requisite terpsichorean sounds.

Members of the Beaudoin clan recorded several albums, performed at the 1977 inauguration of President Jimmy Carter and, during the same period, appeared on an NBC “Andy Williams Christmas Special.”

Their artistic legacy endured after the deaths of Therrien’s parents, fiddler Louis and vocalist Julie — respectively, the La Famille patriarch and matriarch — thanks to the talents of Beaudoin children and grandchildren.

“It’s a different generation, but we’re still carrying on the music,” Therrien said.

That sense of continuum became clear to Marguerite Senecal last year during French Heritage

Day, when she met Max Mayone of Middlebury. The seventh-grader plays fiddle and spoons; he did both at the Vergennes *veillee*.

“We made musical instruments out of nothing,” Senecal said, when asked why French-Canadians began using spoons for percussion in the olden days.

“That’s what we do when we wash dishes,” explained Denise Berube Mayone, Max’s mother and a retired French teacher.

Although his classical violin lessons began at age five, he now thinks that “the fiddle has more energy, more feeling.” At 12, Max also is the bassist in a rock band, One Eyed Jacks. But music isn’t necessarily a career choice.

“I have so many dreams,” he said, enumerating photography, architecture and nursing as other potential occupations in his future.

At the *veillee*, however, the adolescent boy seemed to epitomize the exuberant French-Canadian spirit. That pleases Senecal: “Max told me, ‘We have to keep our culture going.’”

Mais oui!