

FRENCH SETTLEMENT ON THE ST. LAWRENCE

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FRENCH survival in Canada is nowhere more complete than on Ile d'Orleans, an island twenty miles long and five wide, close to Quebec City. The insularity of the colonial nucleus there has been its preserver for over 250 years. For there are only a few traces, and these are modern, of outside influence or admixture in its five ancient rural settlements—St. Pierre, Ste. Famille, on the north side; St. François, to the east; St. Jean and St. Laurent, to the south. Like Ile-aux-Coudres, a smaller island farther east, it has developed its individuality through long isolation and the necessity of being self-supporting. Its psychology, while differentiated within itself, is insular and cohesive. I shall describe its growth and features.

A road—or the “King’s highway”—girdles the island. It follows the shore only between St. Laurent and St. Jean, on the south side. Elsewhere it travels near the edge of the high bluff of reddish and grey slate which the river has eroded. Across the south arm of the Saint Lawrence the parishes of Beaumont, Saint-Vallier and Montmagny can be seen dimly in the distance. Cap Tourmente rises in a steep curve 2,000 feet high out of the river, a few miles to the northeast; and the rolling Laurentian hills, at the foot of which are the old parishes of the Beaupré coast, form a majestic panorama to the north. Evenly apart like beads along the circular road, the island parishes and farm houses stand exposed to view on all sides, and have their eyes open on the opposite shore. But they remained isolated and somehow remote from the mainland, and until recent years. Ste. Petronille alone is a modern summer resort at the western end and is linked to Quebec by a ferry, the only connection between the island and the mainland.

These island parishes are charmingly old-fashioned. The idle country road that connects their narrow ribbon-like farms—these run in depth across the island to the height of land in the centre, which is the dividing line—passes at regular intervals between stone houses surrounded by orchards, gardens, and cultivated fields. Ox carts and dog carts in the morning are on their way to the creameries. During the fruit season, the farmers proceed with

full loads at dawn to the Ste. Petronille ferry for the Quebec market, and come back asleep in their empty carts at night. The women in the gardens wear wide-brimmed hats made of wheat straws and skirts of colourful homespun. Fine old churches and walled-in graveyards stand in the centre of the villages that sleep the whole week and awaken to the sound of bells on Sunday. Not a word of English is spoken on the island, except at Ste. Petronille and St. Laurent, by casual residents in the summer.

Cartier, its discoverer in 1535, named it *Isle de Bacchus*. In his second voyage, he says, "We found it covered with fine trees, like oaks, elms, pines, cedars and others, and also plentiful wild grapes which we saw wherever we set foot. For this reason we named it *Island of Bacchus*. It is about twelve leagues long, and consists of very fine level lands, mostly wooded, without ploughed fields. We found there small huts occupied by Indians while they fished". But he called it *Isle d'Orleans*, after the duke of that name, in the spring of 1536. Another description of the island was given by Champlain, the founder of New France, in 1608, in which he wrote: "The island. . . is rich with woods of all kinds, such as we know in France; it is very fine (*très belle*), edged with natural prairies on the north side that are flooded twice a day. There are streams and springs, and plenty of wild grapes in many places. . . The coast has a number of brooks that abound with fish. Game of various kinds is also found there in incredible abundance, as on the prairies of Cap Tourmente (opposite), a splendid place and a pleasure to the eye. . . ."

The island, called alternately Ile Saint-Laurent or Ile d'Orleans till after the Conquest, was the refuge of the Hurons for a few years after the destruction of their Ontario villages by the Iroquois in 1660. A few white settlers since 1648 had established their homes there. The first chapel was built by Gabriel Gosselin for his family. It was also used by the other settlers. The first marriage on record there, in 1652, is that of Jacques Gourdeau de Beaulieu and Eleanor de Grandmaison.

Several *seigneurs* in turn owned the island and subdivided it into *arrière-fiefs*. Settlers were brought from France by two of the earliest for their estate—Berthelot, of the French court, and Gaillard, his representative, then successor. Soon after 1660, it was peopled on its whole length. Its settlement then was nearly complete in so far as heads of families are concerned. Compared with other centres in New France, its population, in 1667, was among the largest—529 out of a total of 4,312. That of Quebec was 448; of the Beupré coast, 656; Trois-Rivières and neighbour-

hood, 666; and Montreal, 766. It reached 1,080 in 1681, when that of Quebec was 880; and 1,149 in 1683. The map made by Robert de Villeneuve, in 1689, shows that the parishes, their divisions, the road and the farms (they are indicated by numbers referring to a list of occupants) were already much the same as to-day, over two hundred and forty years ago.

The population of the island in 1739 was 2,318, and in 1861 it was 4837; but many of the islanders at those dates had begun to emigrate and open new settlements elsewhere. The surplus of its population has since moved out to other parts, mostly to the towns. A few craftsmen among them were *emplacitaires*, as they are to-day, living on village lots. They were carpenters, joiners and blacksmiths. Gosselin, Leblond, Nadaud, Guérard, for instance, were joiners, many of them from father to son to the present generation; and the Asselins were blacksmiths. Furniture, tools and utensils from their hands are still in evidence everywhere. Wood carvings for the churches, wrought iron crosses, and epitaphs for the graveyards, show their skill and fine craftsmanship.

The French as spoken there may not be exactly that of any of the provinces of the ancestors. It is pure, yet with a rustic colour. It has arisen out of several slightly different idioms of *oïl* in Northwestern France. Purely local characteristics among the immigrants were soon lost, or they entered bodily into the new aggregate. School education, besides, seems to have left its mark there, for the folklore lacks some of the rural features in evidence in the more remote districts, like Charlevoix or Gaspé. The convent at Ste. Famille is one of the earliest; it was founded in 1685. And the island from the beginning was good recruiting ground for priests.

The first settlers were from Northwestern France and the Loire river—not from Brittany, as is often believed by outsiders. Their place of origin is stated in the parish records which have been preserved at the churches since the beginning. Out of a hundred families studied by Turcotte, their historian, 36 came from Normandie, Anjou (21), Poitou (25), and Perche (10). The ancestors of the present families named Asselin, Godbout, Côté, Lheureux, Prémont, Labrecque, were from Normandie; of those named Gagnon, Dion, Loignon, Landry, Houde, from Perche; Morency, Bernier, Nolin, from Ile de France; Audet, Blouin, Allaire, Chabot, Deblois, Marceau, Noel and Roger, from Poitou; Baillargeon, Létourneau and Martineau, from Saintonge.

Four of the six churches on the island, those of St. Pierre, St. François, Ste. Famille and St. Jean, are among the oldest and

finest in French Canada. Their architecture is of the Renaissance as introduced here by the masters of the School of Arts and Handicrafts established at Cap Tourmente for the needs of the colony, in 1672-75, by the first Bishop, Mgr. de Laval. Their thick stone walls and hipped roofs with bell-cast, their high front gables, their transept and their arched windows make them serene and aristocratic. They are of the period when churches and palaces in France were built in the classic style rather than the earlier Gothic. Their woodwork consisted of wooden statues in niches on the front gable, of ornate reredos (*retables*) mostly in the Corinthian order. Floral panels decorate the choirs and naves. The altars are mostly in the Louis XV style with floral, fruit, and cockscombe designs. The finer woodwork was from the hands of professionals, artists of the old Quebec school, and belongs to various dates from 1730 to 1870. The churches themselves are not the first that were built, but the second or the third. The first were only provisional chapels of rough timbers (*colombage*) and thatched roofs. The churches were begun at St. Pierre, in 1717; at St. Francois, in 1735; at Ste. Famille, in 1742; and during the same period at St. Laurent and St. Jean.

The invasion of the island by the British troops in 1759, immediately before the siege of Quebec, brought suffering and ruin to the islanders, at a time when they were prosperous. Ordered to vacate their homes by their own authorities, they abandoned all they had, among other things 20,000 bushels of wheat, which they hid in the woods, hurriedly crossed the north arm of the river to Charlesbourg, and for several months, from spring to autumn, sojourned in the Laurentian forests. The troops under General Wolfe plundered the houses in their absence, and burned many of them. But the churches were spared, though they were damaged by the soldiers occupying them. When the *habitants* reentered their home in the autumn, after the fall of Quebec, the only wheat they could find lay on the ground in their fields. It is still remembered how they brushed it up with pigeon wings and gathered it, to stave off famine.

Perhaps they still resented those spoliations when fifteen years later, in 1775, the American troops besieged Quebec and the Congress sent an appeal to Canadians. The islanders, like most people elsewhere, sided with the Americans, whom they welcomed and to whom they sold victuals rather than to the defenders of Quebec. Several of them accepted commissions as captains in the American army—among them one of my ancestors, Beaucher dit Morency, of Ste. Famille. But the clergy resisted the American

invasion, as it had negotiated successfully with the Crown for the rights of the Church. In spite of this, an uprising took place on the island when the Governor sent three emissaries to enlist support. Lacompte Dupré, the *seigneur* of the western end of the island, wrote: "The Judge (escorted by ten well-armed men from the frigate) wanted to insist. But there were 250 *habitants* armed with sticks, who would have killed him had B. . . not been there. Thus it became clear that they were firm in their will. It is now too late to try and use authority over them".

The psychology of the islanders for the most part is that of a rural people whose sedentary habits are deep-rooted. As their ancestors were fairly prosperous as tillers of the soil, it is probable that very few of them ever became *coureurs des bois* or were tempted by the fur trade. They were among the first wheat exporters—if not the first—on this continent. The *seigneur* Drapeau is still remembered as being fabulously rich from the proceeds of his trade as wheat exporter and builder of sailing ships. A majority of the island farms are still under the same owner's family name, after nine or ten generations, though most of them in the course of time were subdivided between heirs into narrower ones.

The parishes on the south side—St. Jean and St. Laurent, also a part of St. Francois—furnished a heavy quota from the early days to the navigation of the Saint Lawrence. Sea or river pilots there are still many; and smuggling, particularly from Miquelon, long was a custom. A result of these outside activities and nomadism is noticeable to the eye, as one travels eastward from the church of St. Jean to St. Francois, on the hillside. There are not many orchards and gardens around the houses. The farms there are bare of trees, and some of them rather neglected. Their occupants were more interested in the sea than in the land or the Quebec market. Some of them in recent years have sold out and migrated to towns. At St. Laurent there is still a shipyard where sailing ships were built and repaired. It was established by a Port Glasgow (Scotland) company in 1823—John and Charles Wood, after the plan formulated by de Lery, a French engineer in Canada, as early as 1744. The *Columbus* and *Baron Renfrew*, the largest ships on the Saint Lawrence at the time, were built and equipped there.

The *habitants* are peculiarly sedentary in their habits. They go nowhere but to Quebec for the market, and to Ste. Anne de Beaupré once a summer on a pilgrimage. Old men or women at Ste. Famille in 1925 never had visited St. Francois, nine miles away. One of them whom I brought with me to St. Jean, across the island five miles south, felt rather lost. He was anxious to go back home before the evening.

If they were almost invariably friendly with each other, they were sometimes hostile to the parish priests, outsiders, who opposed their wishes. They were stubborn and unyielding "like Normans". In some instances they appealed to the Bishop, as the Ste. Famille parishioners did in 1812, against their *curé* who objected to their choice of an architect for the decoration of their church. And they won their point. In another, the Feud of the Relics, the parish of St. Laurent came near breaking away from the church authorities.

The Feud of the Relics between the parishes of St. Laurent and St. Jean began in 1703 and lasted till 1731. A silver reliquary containing "a fragment of the arm bone of Saint Paul" had been given to St. Laurent by Bishop St. Vallier, in 1698. But the parish priest three years later exchanged it without consulting them, for another relic in the keeping of the *curé* of St. Pierre. Their resentment kept on growing for nearly thirty years. One night a raid was made, in which the earlier owners recovered their treasure. The Bishop through a delegate ordered them to fetch it back. Unanimously they protested that they were the owners and intended to defend their rights, should their neighbours resort to violence. But they yielded to authority in the end—months later, rather than become heretics. Like true Normans, they couched the formal protest on their church records, "without prejudice to our rights". Then they agreed to surrender the reliquary in a solemn procession along the road across the island to the limits of the parish. This road has since been known under the name of the Priests' Road (*Route des Prêtres*). And a wooden cross still stands in the sugar bush at the point where the priests and the people met and concluded their feud.

Among the oldest island traditions are those of making home-spuns and refined cheese. The women in the past two centuries have woven all the linen, *droguets* and flannels needed for their family. And the industry nowhere in Canada is better preserved than at St. Pierre and Ste. Famille, where the spinning wheels, the flax beaters and the looms are still busy in the winter. The making of refined cheese is a survival of a special type. It is restricted to about 14 families on the north side of the island, at St. Pierre and Ste. Famille. The technique, even to the implements used to make it and their names, are the same as in Normandie—at Pont Lévêque or other places near Caen. It seems to go back to early colonial days and to be derivative. The cheese is excellent and is sought by the "gourmets" in eastern Canadian cities. Yet its smell is so objectionable that it is proverbial.

An automobile tour of the Ile d'Orleans is now becoming the fashion among tourists, and this already mars its insular peacefulness on summer Sundays. A lengthened sojourn in some remote part of the island is more likely to satisfy thoughtful inquisitiveness. For the people still remain unspoilt. In spite of their farm labours, they are leisurely and interested in strangers. Their unobtrusive curiosity comes from their prolonged isolation; it is coloured with courtesy and kindness.

Wild geese hunters from town own cabins on the wooded cliffs of Ste. Famille, and they come back every autumn. Their seasonal return is always eagerly awaited. For geese hunting there is still what it used to be when the country was first discovered. Immense flocks of geese and ducks annually break their journey at Cap Tourmente in October, and for days feed on the mud flats and in the marsh reeds, and drift back and forth with the tides between the island and the Beaupré coast. The water turns black with them, and the air at night is filled with their wild clamour. Hunters, whose devices are limited by the law, bury themselves in mud holes on the shore and use decoys. This sport has many devotees, and heavy strings of game are their reward.

In my prolonged sojourn on the island, in 1925, I spent much time visiting farmhouses, collecting folk songs and studying the ancient manual arts that are still conserved there. From morning to night I proceeded from place to place on my bicycle, seeing more people every day, inspecting houses, barns, workshops and the garrets. The garrets usually are like museums.

Many of the houses still are, at least in part, those that were built one or two hundred years ago, sometime before the Conquest. They are of stone or heavy wooden frames, and always whitewashed. The barns almost inevitably are new. The reverse is true at Ile-aux-Coudres farther down the Saint Lawrence. This is due to the chief difference between them in their economic life. The Ile d'Orleans people have grown well-to-do through the sale of their garden and farm products on the Quebec market. Their barns had to be enlarged to fit new requirements, whereas their old stone houses still were large enough, the surplus population migrating to town. Ile-aux-Coudres for its income depended upon its potato harvest and the seasonal catch of porpoise for oil, which the people convey to town in their sale boats; they buy new furniture, goods, and build new houses in modern style. Unlike the Ile d'Orleans people, they are poor, but they are creatures of fashion.

The quest for old furniture, utensils and artifacts finds more scope on the island of Orleans than anywhere else. Generations

of skilled and industrious workers have lived there, and ancestral traditions were firmly implanted. The people were more prosperous than elsewhere. They fashioned their own tools and instruments, made dug-out canoes and sailing ships. By tradition and necessity they mastered all the useful crafts. When they required outside help, they often paid in kind—wheat, fruit and vegetables. When prosperous, they bought luxuries, which an observer is glad to discover, as they belong to a vanished age; faiences from Rouen or Delft, deep pie dishes presumably from New England, pewter vessels, brass snuffers and candle holders, stamped and painted images from Epinal or Metz, some fine fabrics, silk scarfs with old political cartoons of the time of Napoleon, and other valuable relics—rustic chests, cupboards, incense boxes, old crucifixes and wood carvings.

All these features have come down from the past; they are gradually disappearing. Modernity there as elsewhere spells changes and usually a loss. The islanders in time of elections have been promised a bridge that would annex their land to the north shore. There are signs that the long-standing promise may come to fruition. When this happens, they will no longer be islanders. The dust of automobiles will cover their gardens by the roads and soil the fine homespuns and rugs in their houses. They will lose the sense of rural self-reliance and will succumb to the impulse to move, to spend and to waste themselves. And this may be soon.