

NOUVELLE VILLES JUMELLES
NOV 1989

Les Racines

Our French Canadian ancestors were among the first whites to settle in Minnesota. At one time in our state's history, French was spoken more often than English in St. Paul.

The flood of immigration after 1850 ended the French Canadian predominance. Although Quebecois continued to come to Minnesota, their numbers did not keep up with the Europeans. In 1900, the state's census counted 12,063 people born in Canada that spoke French. Many of these French Canadians were in the Twin Cities. There was also a large concentration of them in Red Lake and Polk counties in northwestern Minnesota. Yet the numbers of French Canadian born immigrants pale when compared with the state's other immigrants in 1900: over 117,000 Germans, 107,000 Norwegians, and over 120,000 Swedes.

Missing the influence that French Canadians once had before the immigration flood, it is pleasing to recall stories, like the one below by Charles E. Flandreau, about how it was in the 1840s-1850s. Flandreau's story about two yankee lawyers ("Major" Jacob Noah and John Brisbin) in territorial Minnesota is recorded in the Minnesota Historical Society Collections, 1895-1898, Vol. 8.

"I recall a very good anecdote in which the Major, as we called Mr. Noah, figured. He lived at Mendota and practiced law there. About the year 1855 Mr. John Brisbin arrived in St. Paul and commenced practice. A great deal of the business was done in courts of justices of the peace, and Mr. Brisbin was called to Mendota to defend a client who was charged with trespassing on another's land, or, as we then called it, 'jumping his claim.' Major Noah appeared for the plaintiff and filed his complaint. Mr. Brisbin demurred to it, and made a very eloquent and exhaustive argument in support of his position. The Justice was a very venerable looking old Frenchman (the greater part of the population

being French at that time). He listened very attentively and occasionally bowed when Mr. Brisbin became most impressive, leaving the impression upon the speaker that he comprehended his reasoning and acquiesced in his conclusions. When Mr. Brisbin closed his argument, Major Noah commenced to address the court in French. Mr. Brisbin objected: he did not understand French, and judicial proceedings must be conducted in English. The Major replied that he was interpreting to the court what Mr. Brisbin had been saying. 'I desire no interpretation; I made myself clear,' said Mr. Brisbin. 'Certainly,' said the Major. 'Your argument was excellent, but the court don't understand any English, which was literally true. Tradition adds that when the court adjourned, the judge was heard to ask the Major, 'Est ce qu'il y a une femme dans cette cause la?' Whether the judge decided the case on the theory of there being a woman in it or not, history has failed to record."

-Charles E. Flandreau

"But then my town—remember that high bench,
With cabins scattered over it, of French,
Below Fort Snelling, seven miles or so,
And three above the village of Old Crow?
Pig's Eye? Yes, Pig's Eye. That's the spot.
A very funny name, is't not?
Pig's Eye's the spot to plant my city on,
To be remembered by when I am gone.
Pig's Eye, converted thou shalt be like Saul:
Thy name henceforth shall be St. Paul."

FROM "EARLY CANDLELIGHT"
BY MAUDE HART LOVELACE

Novelles Villes Jumelles is published monthly by LA SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE FRANÇAIS DU MINNESOTA. Correspondence may be submitted to PO Box 10913, Mpls., MN 55458. For subscription information contact Jim Chouanard, editor, (612) 455-2117.