

**A PERSONAL MUSING ON FRENCH-CANADIANS OF THE MIDWEST**  
**France, Quebec, French-Canadian/Franco-American, Voyageurs, the French**  
**Language, the Catholic Church....**  
**Dick Bernard (brief bio on last page)**  
**September 15, 2012**

**Preface:**

This "Personal Musing" began as some extemporaneous thoughts in February, 2012, and with the exception of this Preface remain essentially unchanged since that time, though they've run the gauntlet through a fairly large group of other descendants of "French-Canadians" in the Midwest, none of whom have significantly disagreed with the general observations.

The author (more on page 11) is 72 years old, and had no interest in his roots until circumstances in 1980, at age 40, led to an interest and a 30-year journey of discovery. I became immersed in the topic of ancestry and things French-Canadian which included four trips to Quebec. After compiling a family history published for family members in 2010, I put my research materials in an archive at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks and went on to other things.  
<http://und.edu/orgs/initiatives-in-french-midwest/>

The Twin Cities Franco-Fete, Sep 28-30, 2012, reignited my interest and resulted, except for this Preface, in all of the pages which follow, as well as the title page.

This Preface specifically flows from a single animated conversation on September 12, 2012, involving myself, another Twin Cities French-Canadian, Bill Horn, and a filmmaker, Christine Loys, from France.

On September 12, at table, I began to wonder why I called myself - and ourselves - "French-Canadian".

Back home, I looked back at the earliest writings of my father, 100% of French descent from Quebec, and my own diary from the time period ca 1980. This brought back memories.

I have nothing to suggest that Dad ever referred to himself or his roots as French-Canadian. And he would have been my only family source as we never lived in a French-Canadian community.

Dad would identify his ancestry as coming from "lower Canada" (now called Quebec), and he would say that he spoke French as his primary language until beginning school in Grafton ND about 1914.

Dad's father, my grandfather, was born and grew to manhood in Quebec, but would have come to the United States identified as "Canadian"; as were his mothers

parents, both born in Quebec. Grandpa Henry (christened Honore) migrated to Grafton ND at about age 22. He likely spent some time as a lumberjack in the area of Berlin Falls NH. He may have simply moved west from New Hampshire. His obituary card says he was born in Quebec.

Grandma Bernard's parents roots were similarly Canadian from Quebec.

So, why have I called myself "French-Canadian", and titled this piece as being about French-Canadians rather than some other term, like Franco-American?

The singular reason I can ascertain is that, coincident in interest in my roots, I became aware of a group called La Societe Canadienne-Francaise du Minnesota in late 1981, and they were comprised of people like me - people whose ancestry was French, who came to the Midwest from roots in Quebec.

The founding document for La Societe C-F, from founder John Rivard, March 12, 1979, begins "CALLING FRENCHPERSONS AND OTHERS INTERESTED" and later in its single page talks about "organizing a French Club in Minnesota"; and talks about "our French heritage" and "Frenchpersons". There is not a word about French-Canadian.

All of my French ancestry learnings came as a result of my father, and my association with La Societe Canadienne-Francaise du Minnesota.

Quite likely, I identify myself as French-Canadian simply and solely because a group I joined had decided to call themselves that!

Others may have similar or different stories.

This is mine!

Dick Bernard  
September 15, 2012

### **Generalizations**

1. The French and French-Canadians (FC) have a long and very deep history in N. America \* and the Midwest. The Midwest is a mosaic of French names reflecting the past and present influence of the French-Canadian and French and Francophone culture. In the 1980 census\*\*, the last to include such data, nearly 8% of Minnesotans (10% of Michigan, over 7% Wisconsin) considered themselves to be at least partially of French descent. Only 8 states had a greater percentage than Minnesota, all of these but Louisiana are in the northeastern U.S.

\* - <http://genealogie.umontreal.ca/en/lesPionniers.htm>

\*\* - [http://www.johnfishersr.net/french\\_in\\_america\\_calendar.html](http://www.johnfishersr.net/french_in_america_calendar.html)

Click on supplementary information year 1989. There are two lines. The figures are from the 1980 census.

2. Immigrants from Quebec and first generation in U.S. were very French in ethnicity. (There were many variations, of course.)
3. The separation/isolation of Quebec from France after 1759, return of most of the elite to France, and English domination and accompanying isolation of common French-Canadians in the next several generations, at minimum until the industrial revolution and advent of railroads in the 19th century, is very important when considering how the French-Canadians evolved in Quebec. (See timeline pp 12-14)
4. The role of the Catholic Church in the life of French-Canadians is probably even more important than the role of any church in most ethnic groups. The Church became the de facto leader of the French-Canadians.
5. FC immigrants to the U.S. were mostly considered of the worker class and tended to quietly blend in ("L'Heritage Tranquille").
6. Voyageurs may have been a relatively minor part of the French-Canadian population but nonetheless are a source of great pride.
7. The French language endured through the generations up until the early 1900s, then assimilation diminished its impact especially in the U.S.

Here are some 'distilled' and extemporaneous personal observations and opinion about the collective "French-Canadian" who in our U.S. case became Franco-American:

**1. Frenchness of French-Canadians:** My Dad, born in Grafton, North Dakota, Dec 22, 1907, was almost 100% French descent, and his parents, one who grew up in Quebec, the other born in then-Dakota Territory of parents born in Quebec, grew up in a very heavily French influenced heritage. (If you're interested in some generalizations about 'heritage', see: <http://www.outsidethewalls.org/blog/?m=20111005>)

Dad's ancestors could as easily have been in France, though at his birth in 1907 his many roots were as much as 300 years removed from Europe, and there was likely little or no contact France to Quebec or vice versa. In a sense, his French-Canadian ancestors were common people marooned in a land far distant from their ancestral home in an age before it was easy to communicate over distance.

But there is no doubt in my mind that they were French, through and through.

As best as I can gather, Dad had a single native (Nipissing) ancestor, a single German ancestor, and a single Portugese ancestor, all from the 1600s. The remaining roots

were French. Similarly, for just a single example, his cousin and best man at his wedding was Marvin Campbell, who was as French as Dad, but whose surname came from a Scotch member of the Carignan-Salieres Regiment - the ancestor who gave Marvin his surname.

Of course, all of this is not so simple: one of my four root families, (Cote), came from Normandy, whose name refers to early Viking dominance; another (Collet) came from the very end of Brittany, which had strong Celtic influence. Natives of other countries also came to early Quebec such as German, Irish.... But French lineage was very predominant and French practices and traditions dominated.

Being Catholic was universal and was reflected in Civil Law (matrimony).

Later, of course, Dad, and Marvin, and their contemporaries, were all born into the melting pot that was the U.S. of the early 1900s.

Nonetheless, my Dad's ancestors were absolutely immersed in their French background, including the rural French language passed down from person to person, generation to generation. This became obvious to me when I became interested in roots questions in about 1980.

2. **French Language.** The language of our ancestors would primarily have been spoken French, probably fairly undiluted by English et al until migration to the Midwest United States began. French seems to have prevailed through the 1st generation born in the U.S., then gradually disappeared from use.

Like all transmitted language, our ancestors French would gradually change - pronunciation, etc. Native and English and other language words and phrases would creep in, but the basics were likely French as brought from France in 1600s-mid 1700s.

I haven't heard of much emphasis on book-learning (school education) by these early common French-Canadians. It would seem literacy was reserved for those of higher status.

This fact reminds me of the peasants of present-day Haiti whose Kreyol is still largely a verbal language, sounding in many ways very much like French, but difficult to understand even by French speakers because it is heavily influenced by African dialects.

(When our ancestors came to the United States, change happened pretty quickly if their circumstances required daily business in the English-speaking world. Dad was always fond of recalling when his father, then in his mid-50s, made a single trip back to visit Quebec in 1925, 30 years after moving to North Dakota. Grandpa and Grandma got off the train to be welcomed by his brother, who Grandpa greeted in

what he recalled of his French. The brother supposedly said in response, "***this man is not my brother, he does not speak French***". )

Thirty years of assimilation in the U.S. had that effect.

In the May 22, 1903, edition of the Minneapolis French-language newspaper Echo de l'Ouest the editor "***pointed out three reasons for the decline of the French language: workers seeking jobs must speak English. English was the language of U.S. politics, and educated francophones stayed in Quebec and did not migrate to the United States.***" (J. Chouard in Nouvelle Villes Jumelles Dec, 1989)

**3. France and Quebec:** As I understand, Quebec from 1608 to 1759 (at times Dad called it Lower Canada) was a mirror of France of the times, governed under French law, with French power hierarchies in government, business, land ownership, the Church, etc. It is probably no accident that the "estates" (nobility, the church, commoners (subdivided further into bourgeoisie)) is commonly most identified with ancient France [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estates\\_of\\_the\\_realm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estates_of_the_realm).

The status quo in Quebec changed dramatically and permanently when the English defeated the French at the Plains of Abraham in 1759. But the English had major dilemmas: Quebec already had a large French-speaking population, 150 years of French history and elements of French legal, social and other structures were not to be pulled out by the roots.

After the conquest, those in temporal power positions in French Quebec by and large went back to France, or at minimum relinquished their power positions, becoming subordinate to an English power structure.

The important exception seems to have been the Catholic Church.

During the American revolutionary war, when the Americans had designs on Quebec as part of the forming United States, the English apparently made a deal with the Catholic Power Structure in Quebec, essentially offering not to interfere with the Catholic Church, if the French peasants would not get involved with the Americans against the English. The English 'preemptive strike', the Quebec Act of 1774 bought sufficient loyalty of French-Canadians to England to prevent the fledgling United States from gaining even more territory.

The Catholic Church, as a result, became a very powerful influence in our ancestors lives. It did much good, but may have been too dominant for its own good, and I'm told that the present day Catholic Church in Quebec is all but non-existent, at least as compared to the days of old.

**4. The first seventy-five years or so of the post-France period in Quebec was a time of transition.** This was between about 1760 and roughly 1850 and was the time between the cut-off of Quebec from France and when the industrial

revolution and railroads and such enabled mass migration to the U.S., largely as labor in places like textile mills of New England. In this time period there were assorted serious problems in Quebec as well, such as running out of land for often very large farm families, serious political and economic troubles, etc.

**In my opinion this 90 or so years is probably the time period when the L'Heritage Tranquille - fit in to the rest of society, but quietly - kind of attitude became an ingrown part of the Midwest French-Canadian psyche. I have heard it talked about in many ways by many people, including life long Quebecers. It was a way of survival, a way of surviving.**

For years our ancestors had been "second-class citizens" in English Canada, probably more than just in a feeling sense. **(See quotation on page .)**

The most dramatic description, and probably pretty accurate, was the separatist French-Canadian epithet back in the 1960s or so, when they referred to themselves as nothing more than "white niggers", connoting a subservient class to the dominant English-speakers. Such resentment cannot be totally eradicated.

People do indeed learn their "place", through their parents and community, and our ancestors place was, it would seem, to not be in charge, to just do their job, well, but quietly.

While some rose above this 'script', the leadership and noble class in French Canada had largely gone back to France after the 1759 defeat. Likely there have been psychological studies about this. If not, I think it would be a good topic.

Our Midwest family trees lived in this subordinate society for several generations. They wouldn't be technically like slaves, in the American Negro context, but they weren't treated much better in places like the company towns of New England, etc.

I think this is more than an idle comment. It reflects what seems to be a certain amount of our inheritance: to accept a subservient status in society and to not strive beyond a certain level. Some might call it laziness or lack of initiative; I'd think of it more like accepting a somewhat hostile reality, and passing this down generation to generation.

(This is not a simple matter, easy to generalize. As Martin Luther King learned early and often in the Civil Rights era, certain Negroes had reached a certain degree of success in the prevailing racist culture, and were reluctant, at best, to support a movement with uncertain outcomes which would likely interfere with their own more comfortable status quo.)

My friend, Sr. Ann Thomasine Sampson CSJ, a well known historian for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and herself of French-Canadian and German lineage growing up in Minneapolis, quietly wrestled with this question for years. In 1995

she wrote me a note, in part saying "***outside of our early French explorers and a very few FC [French-Canadians] like Louis Robert who came here, I still think that from the extensive FC relationships I had, these people were farmers, carpenters, etc., who did not have the drive that I found in my German relationships.***" (Appendix 3 400 Years book by Dick Bernard, 2010, page 5\*). Sr. Ann grew up in Minneapolis in what was called the Bottineau subdivision. She died in 2008.

The 1903 quotation in L'Echo de l'Ouest (see last paragraph of #2, above, seems to speak to Sr. Ann Thomasine's observation.

As I was looking through old Chez Nous's to try to give Christine Loys (a filmmaker from France) some sense of who we midwest French-Canadians were, I came across a long newspaper article from the Minneapolis paper somewhere around 1907, 105 years ago. The article was about the French in America. (Chez Nous Jui-Aou 1994)

What fascinated me about this article was the seeming emphasis it gave to American Huguenot Protestant French power people, and the really short-shrift it gave to the simple French-Canadian peasants who were by then settling our area by the thousands, and were farmers and workers in towns and cities. The peasants (settlers) by and large were almost an afterthought in the article, at least in my reading of it. Our ancestors in other articles of the time were similarly treated as simple, but charming, country bumpkins.

While he did not come onto the scene until years later, Wilbur Foshay, American of French descent, and the entrepreneur from New York who almost succeeded with his Foshay Tower in Minneapolis, might be the example of the perceived and promoted American French Power Structure of the 1800s. (Chez Nous Aou-Sep 1992)

Had Foshay been around in 1907, he would likely have been included in the "important people" part of the above article.

My point is that it is hard for commoners to rise above the life description they inherit. Most of us struggle with this most of our lives. It was called the "glass ceiling" for women - who were supposed to know their place, until they rebelled. You learn to know your 'place'. It is easy to retreat there....

French-Canadians learned to be quiet, to fit in.

Maybe the fascination with the Voyageur (below) is a logical consequence of our perceived lack of status. We could point to something with pride, even if that something was essentially an artificial construct by the dominant power structure of the times.

5. **The Voyageur:** This topic is very interesting to me. Voyageurs were a diverse lot in nationality, but the French-Canadian narrative seems to have become dominant over the years: voyageurs are French-Canadian.

Only one of my four root French-Canadian families, Blondeau, is heavily rooted in the fur trade. The great uncle of my Minnesota Blondeau ancestor was one of the original founders of the prestigious Beaver Club which still exists in Montreal. Maurice Blondeau was apparently one of the first of the fur trade entrepreneurs.

A Blondeau was apparently the first white woman in what is now St. Louis MO. Her father was a prominent trader in the Illinois-Wisconsin area.

My direct Voyageur ancestor, Simon Blondeau, born 1803 Ste Claire Quebec, was born post hey-day of the Voyageur, but probably "learned the ropes" through family ties and stories, and may have spent some time in the inland sea area. I don't know this for certain. But I did find in some Metis directory a native woman in Pembina ND area who had said the father of at least one of her children was one Simon Blondeau ca 1827, and the dates fit. He easily could have been father of the child. Who knows? All these questions.

There is no question in my mind that even if the Voyageurs (and Coureur des bois) were a small part of the French-Canadian settlers, they were adopted by our ancestors as the romantic and carefree symbols of our own culture of French-Canadians.

Ironically, it seems to me that this image of us was established by others, rather than by ourselves, and we adopted the image as representing who we were as a people.

So, **John Rivard**, founder of LaSociete Canadienne-Francaise du Minnesota, was very proud of being Minnesota's Official Voyageur, and played the role with gusto even though his roots may not have been Voyageur at all, or only partly Voyageur. And we were proud as well.

In my closet I still have the get-up of a Voyageur, including moccasins. When I had a seamstress sew this garb from an ancient pattern I really didn't know what the Voyageur connection meant, or any distinctions about it, but being Voyageur was how I was taught to be French, by La Societe C-F.

It is not an easy task to modify this image, which we ourselves carry with pride: that we are descendants of the Voyageurs.

In reality, Voyageurs were, by and large, laborers in a very difficult and dangerous job. We likely wouldn't seek out their job. In a sense, I'd guess, later Oxcart Drivers were similar and their job was a similar and difficult and probably dismal one, but they too are the romantic images of the early connections between Red River and St. Paul. But theirs was not a romantic job either.



Of course, there were and are many hard jobs. Others include railroad workers building the railroads. Mining and agriculture were no picnics. The people who work in the dismal environment of the North Dakota oil fields are a more current example.

There are other similar examples in all our families. My Grandpa Bernard was a lumberjack in New Hampshire for a time - he loved to tell tales of the woods. He was also a farm kid, lumber mill worker, asbestos miner at Thetford Mines and perhaps other difficult jobs in Quebec. before he came to North Dakota as a carpenter. But his favorite stories as I recall them were of the woods.

Perhaps the best thing we can do, and perhaps the only thing, is to try to keep this all in perspective, and to help to modify the perspective of others. Enjoy the romantic notion, but appreciate the reality of a hard life of our ancestors.

**6. Additional thoughts on the business of Language.** Everyone who knows me knows I don't speak French, and the odds are very slim that at my age I ever will. I never had the opportunity to learn French or any other language in my ND high school or college years. I may not have been interested then, even if the opportunity was available.

Across the border, Canada has been a bilingual country since French and English were enshrined in the constitution of the country in 1867, 145 years ago. The French-Canadians had more than a little to do with this.

Canada is bilingual and is as unlikely to change as is the United States obsession with English-only. At the same time the U.S. is rapidly becoming a country in which the near dominant first language is becoming Spanish. This may be politically stressful, but it is real, and probably impossible to change. We are a multi-language society, regardless of our official language.

As for we American French-Canadians (Franco-Americans), a couple of years ago I observed to Virgil Benoit that if Quebec folks wanted us to carry forth the heritage and to have an American market for some of their excellent books in French, they'd have to be translated into English. I can keep hoping.

I'm definitely not a student of this topic of language, but I doubt that there exists anywhere a "pure" language.

I was fascinated, at a committee meeting of the group planning Franco-Fete, to hear Fr. Jules (African Catholic Priest from Congo) and teacher-of-French (of Norwegian and German ancestry) Mary Ellen's brief conversation in French, and then hear their English comments to each other and to the rest of us about subtle differences they noted in their speech.

Similarly, it was fascinating to observe Virgil Benoit and Jacqueline Regis converse in French (Jacquie is Haitian, an American Judge, and learned Kreyol as the street language in Haiti, and French as the formal language of government and education in her country; Virgil is life-long French-Canadian of northwest Minnesota.) For me, their French sounded alike; for them, they probably noted differences.

In a way, I would propose that many of our ancestors shared an element of the Haitian experience. Haitians were literate in verbal Kreyol (which to an untrained ear like mine sounds very much like French, but is heavily laced with assorted African and other languages, including English). "Mesi" equals "Merci", for instance. **Written** Kreyol might be like written Native American language - a later rendition of a verbal language. Even today few Haitians have the opportunity to get a formal education and learn the written French of books.

The Haiti experience with verbal and written language was largely the fate of my ancestors pre-1900 United States.

My French-Canadian Grandpa referred to earlier in this musing was likely a brilliant man and in today's world would likely have become an accomplished engineer, but Grandpa was a farm kid, and to my knowledge never had more than a first grade education and in that sense was barely literate. He was youngest of a dozen and tall and strong and he likely was early put to work. Formal education was for others.

Language is not a simple matter. Education is crucial.

**What does this all mean? What do you think? I'm willing to collect and share responses: [dick\\_bernard@me.com](mailto:dick_bernard@me.com)**

**POSTNOTE:** If I were to express a preference for what to focus on, regarding our French-Canadian culture, I would be inclined to revisit those 80 or 90 or so years between 1760 and 1850, between conquest of Quebec by England, and the acceleration of immigration to the U.S. Those years were, I contend, the formative years of our L'Heritage Tranquille.

And I'd look especially closely at how the Catholic Church worked with the peasants and with the English power structure of the time.

Doubtless, there are other factors, but this is where I'd look.

In 1994 it was my great good fortune to get to know French-Canadian genealogist Jean-Marc Charron. Jean-Marc lived in Montreal, and had retired from a career as an RCMP (Mountie, Mounted Policeman). He had joined RCMP in the late 1950s, and served a full career in the service. We talked about many things in our letters back and forth.

In one letter I recounted Sr. Ann Thomasine Sampsons comments (reprinted earlier pp 6-7), and some others, and got Jean-Marc "on a roll", including this comment which is on page 4 of Appendix 3 in my 400 Years\* book about my own family history:

Jean-Marc: "*Would you believe that for most of my service, when we had a meeting and we were 25 French-Canadians and two or even one English-Canadian was present, the meeting was held in English. In Quebec? In a bilingual country. And for almost the first 20 years of my service, when the complainants, the witnesses, the suspects the accused, the lawyers, the judges, the jury, the jailers were 99% French-Canadian, EVERYTHING had to be reported in English. I mean I even had to translate the STATEMENTS into English so a little Corporal in Ottawa could do his job. Do you believe it? It is just a few years ago (it seems) that the Commissioner of the R.C.M.P. had to be paraded on Parliament Hill because the Force had been dragging their feet long enough to even approach the 25% French 75% English balance at least a few others had reached. And the Force was in the 12 to 13% range!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

**ABOUT DICK BERNARD:** I do not pretend to have academic expertise in this topic. But I do have a great deal of direct and indirect experience, including French-Canadian cousins who are lifetime Manitobans and to this day speak French as their first and preferred language. Another cousin, native of Saskatchewan, teaches in a college in Montreal and is multi-lingual.

The intention of this musing is to encourage dialogue. among those of us who consider ourselves descendants of French-Canadians in the Midwest. This is intended to be an expression of opinions of descendants of French-Canadians, rather than empirical research.

My learning comes from 32 years of delving into my own family history, and 17 years (1985-2002) assembling the newsletter Chez Nous for the Minnesota organization La Societe Canadienne-Francaise du Minnesota.

I've done the family history of my French-Canadian 'side'. I completed it in 2010, and it is over 500 pages; much of it is story of my family, and others. I decided to concentrate on the paternal roots of my father's parents, my grandparents: the families of **Bernard, Blondeau, Collette and Cote**. I did this to get beyond the usual single root family of many family histories. At the same time, to go beyond those four, to eight, sixteen or more, would have been a killer. But I have a lot of information spanning a lot of years.

\* - 400 Years, a Family History of Henry Bernard's root families: Bernard, Blondeau, Collette, Cote. Table of Contents at <http://chez-nous.net/fc.html> "NEW BOOK".