

The French in Minnesota

—A Shot in the Dark

By William C. Rogers

These days adult educators are falling all over themselves to tap the ethnic education movement. It seems people everywhere want to know who they are and where they came from. Programs abound on such subjects as "America's Polish Heritage," "The Italian Contribution to Our Bicentennial," and "The Norwegian Emigration Sesquicentennial." The traffic is indeed so heavy that it is hard to find a white ethnic minority whose background has not been overexposed. This vignette is about a program for a little known, and perhaps even submerged, nationality group, i.e. the French in Minnesota.

Many adult education programs emerge from an educator's own curiosity and desire to learn, but these private urges must be clothed in a fig leaf of pedagogical respectability, usually referred to as "meeting felt-needs," or "identifying special audiences." To be perfectly truthful, I confess to a personal interest in the Gallic flavor of this Teutonic region which I have had since I immigrated to this state, whose motto is "L'Etoile du Nord," and whose biggest city's main streets are named after the explorers Hennepin and Nicollet. I was also struck by the large number of other less famous French names found here and there around the state. The oldest church in Minneapolis is French and has a beautiful fleur-de-lis decorated dome. Still, I always got very vague answers from people with French names when I asked rather bluntly, "Where did your ancestors come from?" Finally, when the great white ethnic revolution came, I decided to get some answers.

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At any rate, the Women's Lounge of the University of Minnesota's Coffman Memorial Union was very comfortably filled with over 70 people. Our very appropriate (French) R.S.V.P. told us there would be only 50 and the first response was so small we feared we would have to resort to the old dodge of calling our meeting a seminar.

It turned out that only a fourth of the group had learned French in their home and we never did find out how many learned this beautiful language elsewhere. Nevertheless, there was a warm family-like glow exuding from the audience. This was explained by a librarian participant who turned out to be a veritable mine of genealogical information. He believed that almost all of the French who came to Minnesota from Quebec (and most did) were related at the second or third cousin level. It seems only a very small number of families came to Quebec from France

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Our program on "The French in Minnesota" needed the usual two main ingredients—a speaker and an audience. Finally I found a professor of French who offered to help. His subject was 16th and 17th century French language, and he made it quite clear that he was no genealogist, historian, or demographer. He had, however, found pleasure in some amateur sleuthing about where the ancestors of our fellow Minnesotans with French names were from, and he would speak informally about his findings. The next problem was how to get an audience.

It was fairly clear that many, if not most, of the forebears of our French were from La Belle Province, Quebec. Hence we ordered the Quebec City telephone book and took a "shot in the dark." Market research specialists would be shocked at our procedure. We took the names which appeared most frequently (four pages or more) in the Quebec phone book, and matched them with the same names in the Minneapolis and St. Paul phone books. We came up with over 1,000 addressed envelopes, courtesy of volunteers from the Alliance Française of the Twin Cities. The Alliance's president, also a French professor, had the wide humanity to realize that one could be of French descent and not be able to speak even fractured French, and thus was willing to break the Alliance tradition of having programs only in French. Her group co-sponsored the meeting with the World Affairs Center and supplied cider and a delicate pastry. ("I'm sick and tired of that awful coffee and cookies," said Madame President.)

There is no association of French descendants in Minnesota, although almost every other conceivable ethnic group has a society including the Japanese, Latvians, Croats, and Icelanders. Only a quarter of the Alliance Française's small membership are of French descent. We did, however, find a small branch (twig?) of a genealogical society which was interested in "the French connection" and also asked Catholic churches which once may have had French parishioners to mention our meeting. In all honesty, the last two sources were probably the best since after the speech most of the discussion turned to church related activities and pretty sophisticated genealogical talk. (CONTINUED. NEXT PAGE)

The following names are typical of those we discovered: Bedard, Beaulieu, Beausoleil, Belanger, Blanchard, Bouchard, Giroux, LaLiberte, Lefebvre, Mercier, Sampson. Since almost everyone was in the phone book a scientific check of lists was not possible. Therefore we can freely speculate that our first program which used the telephone book for a mailing list actually worked.

and they intermarried for generation after generation.

At the conclusion of our meeting, the perceptive Alliance president said to me, "They are one big family in search of a home," and it is true. As mentioned above, there is no association for the French in Minnesota. The French government apparently does not recognize that anyone would leave France voluntarily and the Canadians must be bi-national. There was some sense from the meeting that since I had planned the affair and had for the first time brought the French in Minnesota together that I should be responsible for them henceforth. Since I am not French and lack strong motherly instincts, I know not what to do. Can adult educators from other French ethnic areas such as Louisiana or Maine and Vermont help me out? I knew not where that arrow would land when I shot it into the dark. I must admit, however, that it rather touched my heart.

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