

[Noted French Canadian Personalities]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in New England

(Maine)

TITLE Noted French Canadians of Old Town

WRITER Robert Grady

DATE WDS. PP. 13

CHECKER DATE

SOURCE GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

1

Maine

Living Lore

Old Town - 1 1938-9

NOTED FRENCH CANADIAN PERSONALITIES OF OLD TOWN

(As Remembered By Robert F. Grady)

My parents, although not French, were born in Canada and lived under conditions much similar to those under which the French Canadians of that period lived. Having been

Library of Congress

brought up in a town that had - and has today - a large French population; and having gone to school with French children; worked with French people in the woods, on the boom; and in factories; I think I understand them well enough to write something about them. Of the many French Canadians I have known, a number stand out from the others in my memory.

Father Trudel, one of the early priests of the parish, saw the new St. Josephs brick church erected just before he died. He was a shrewd, kindly man who had a habit of looking over his glasses at people when he talked to them. He was short, stout, gray haired, and pink cheeked. He was always complaining about how poor he was, but he could never refuse a request for aid - financial or otherwise.

There used to be a popular superstition here among Canadians that a priest could cure any disease if he wished to. There was also a story of how a fellow who attempted to hit a priest found that his arm had become paralysed. Whether or not a priest possesses miraculous [powers?] might be a subject for debate, but in the case of Sandy Savoy (French Canadian) there seemed no doubt about it.

Sandy, a picturesque character, had developed tuberculosis and had been compelled to give up his work as a woodsman. People who saw him on the street wondered just how long he would live.

2

One evening Father Trudel answered a ring at his door and found Sandy lying on the porch and suffering from a hemorrhage of the lungs. Sandy, after he had been taken into the living room and some how revived, begged the priest to cure him of the disease which was threatening his life. Father Trudel knew something of medicine, but as Sandy's case had been pronounced hopeless by the doctors, there didn't seem much that could be done. Father Trudel promised to help the unfortunate man and from that time Sandy commenced to improve. He went to work a little later in a local ground wood mill where he

Library of Congress

worked until his death at a ripe old age. Sandy was never without a cigar. He told me once that he smoked a box (50) a week.

Whether the following story is true or not is hard to say. A lot of people, including Sandy's nephew, Eddie, swear it is. If it is true - and anybody who knew Sandy would see no reason to doubt it - then truth is stranger indeed than fiction.

It was about the time of the world war when there was an epidemic of influenza raging in Old Town. Strict precautions were being taken to prevent a spread of the disease. An old man had died and Sandy and a friend had volunteered to sit up all night at the dead man's home. A harassed doctor who looked into the room when he called to see a patient at the house, saw Sandy and his friend sitting there smoking cigars.

"Boys," said the doctor, "we want to stop this epidemic, and every one should help. Germs are everywhere. If you people are going to stay here you should wear masks. Please get them."

"Masks protect from de germs, eh doc?" asked Sandy.

"Absolutely," said the physician. "With masks you are safe."

3

"Hokay, doc," said Sandy. "Doan worry. We get 'em.

They did, too. A priest who looked in a little later was horror stricken to see two men sitting in the room, smoking cigars and wearing Fourth of July masks!

Another French Canadian, Bill Chamberlain, used to give his particular friends a cherished recipe for a stimulating drink.

"You take wan hunnert percent alcohol, an' add 50 percent prune juice to it - she make de bes' peach brandy you ever taste."

Library of Congress

Bill could never understand the difference between 100 per cent and 100 proof.

The Busheys, Gene and Albert, used to live in a new house they built on Elm Street. They were married and lived alone except for a relative who kept house for them. Both were regarded as "good catches." hey They were well educated but Albert spoke English with a noticeable accent. It was said their folks in Canada were wealthy, and that the boys, who came here from Montreal, would some day inherit quite a bit of money. They followed woods work, but not as laborers. Gene was a scaler and Albert was a timekeeper. Neither of them worked much in the summer time.

Albert was a typical bon vivant or man about town. He was a good story teller and very popular. He was fleshy, pink cheeked, and always well dressed. I can remember him going by the house wearing a colored band about his panama hat, a freshly pressed light gray suit, [patant?] [patent?] leather shoes, and a flower in his button hole. He was asked once why he never went to church.

"The heducate man," he replied loftily, "doan go to church."

Gene was slim, dark, and romantic looking. Shortly after his brother Albert died in middle life of pneumonia, Gene built the fine, new Strand Theater on Main Street. It was - and is now - most 4 modern in equipment. The town wasn't big enough for two theaters, and after the skirmish which followed, Gene was glad to sell his theater to rival interests.

He returned to woods work, this time as an independent operator. He was losing money steadily in his wood cutting operations when he fell in love. Ill luck continued to follow him, however, for the lady refused to become interested. One day in a fit of despondency Gene fired a bullet from a revolver into his head. The attempt at suicide was just another failure, but although the bullet missed his brain, it severed some nerves back of his eyes and so destroyed his sight. I used to see him on the street sometimes, still slim and dapper, but

Library of Congress

wearing blue glasses over his sightless eyes. Sometimes a friend would guide him by holding his arm, and sometimes he would get around by feeling his way with a cane.

“Humpy” Michaud, another French Canadian, used to work as a clerk in Fred Allen's clothing store on Main Street. In the winter Humpy would go up into the lumber woods to measure the lumber jacks and take orders so that when the woodsmen came down in the spring new suits would await them.

Humpy, who was a hunch back, was below middle height. He had long arms, large hands, and immense good nature.

Old timers will remember that getting a fit in a ready made suit of clothes in the 90 's was something of a problem. A coat that didn't pinch across the shoulders was apt to be voluminous about the waist, a pair of pants that was long enough was usually large enough for a circus fat man. To even things up the vest was generally made from four to six inches too short. It was an education to watch Humpy dispose of one these nightmares. He would measure the customer and assure him that the pants were practically made to order. The vest and coat were tried on next and while the customer was inspecting the fit in a [mirror?], Humpy would gather in the folds of the coat at the back. When the customer turned around to see how it looked in the back Humpy would hold the garment out in front and assure the man that it was almost moulded to his figure. If the customer complained that the vest was too short, Humpy would deliver some ribald flattery, and double his victim up with a resounding slap on the back as he pulled the vest down to cover an expanse of shirt front. When the customer got [home?] and got a chance to see how the suit really looked, he was apt to come charging back with murder in his heart, but he would generally go out of the store wearing a topcoat to hide the suit. People always expected to be victimized when they traded with Humpy, but he was such an engaging fellow that nobody ever complained - very much. [18/?]

Library of Congress

When the French Canadians first came to Old Town they made their homes either on an island close to the island of Old Town, or in a farming section that later came to be known as French Settlement. The island on which they settled (Treat and Webster Island) came to be popularly known as "French Island." As the tide of immigration continued French Island came to be very thickly settled. The early homes were hardly more than shacks, and a few of these still survive. A great many of the homes today are stall and set close together. Any vacant land - and there isn't much of it - is utilized for a flower or a vegetable garden. A number of Frenchmen have told me that they would rather live in shacks that they owned than in much better homes that some one else owned.

6

There is a public school on the island, but a great many of the children - even little ones - walk nearly a mile to attend the convent in Old Town. These children used to imperil their lives by running all over the road on their way home from school, but last fall the sisters equipped some of the older boys and girls with white sashes and instructed them to lead the children in an orderly manner along the sidewalks and home by the safest route. These older pupils are doing the job very [well?].

When the French first came here industry was represented in the town only by saw mills. The French who didn't settle in French Settlement to take up farming, generally lived on French Island and worked in the saw mills, in the woods, and on the drives. There were few exceptions, one of which (the Morin Family) has already been mentioned. As the French population increased it became the custom for owners of stores to employ at least one French clerk to attract the important French trade. This custom is still observed.

The town gradually developed in an industrial way. The saw mills disappeared as the lumber gave out, but in their stead there appeared two woolen mills, two pulp mills, two box mills, and a number of smaller industries. A large proportion of the workers in these factories are French Canadians or their descendents. Practically all of the French here now can speak English, but the inability of the early comers to use the language was never

Library of Congress

a bar to their employment, for as Mr. Ovide Morin said, "You see there were [so?] many French." In the weave shop of the Old Town Woolen plant about 50 percent of the weavers were French.

The [question?] of unionism was never raised among the early French Canadians here. Several attempts were made to unionize 7 local industries in recent years, and during such attempts the idea was always opposed by the older inhabitants. Their descendents however - the younger Frenchmen - showed no hesitation about joining.

There were fights occasionally between Frenchmen and those of other nationalities, but these fights were the result of some personal difference and had no connection with race or creed. I've seen trouble arise between two Frenchmen who exchanged such epithets as "Canuck," "Pea soup eater," or "frog." As a rule Frenchmen were - and are - well liked. They are good natured and ready to laugh even if the joke is on them.

It was the custom in Canada among French Catholics to use the steps or the space in front of the church for a meeting place where various matters might be discussed.* The French Catholics who came here followed this custom for a time. Before every mass on Sunday numbers of them would gather on the walk or in the yard in front of the church to talk things over[.?] The custom has died out in recent years.

The early immigrants were generally poor and not well educated. They worked, with few exceptions, as common laborers or woodsmen. A sense of inferiority, due perhaps to their lack of education and their inability to speak English well, prevented them from mixing to any extent with those of other nationalities in a social way, or of taking any part in politics. The picture is much different today.

* French Canadians in New England, Smyth E. C.; page 17; Hamilton Press; 1892.

Library of Congress

About two thirds of the approximately 150 WPA workers in the city are French. So are all of the foreman and most of the sub-foremen. A high percentage of the workers in the stores and factories are of French descent, while there are many of this nationality occupying much higher positions. Alec Latno, now the proprietor of a large retail shoe company, was mayor of the town for several terms just before the present mayor was elected. George Desjardin, owner of a local harness repair shop, was for a long time collector of taxes: he is now postmaster. Three of his four sons and both of his daughters attended the University of Maine. One of the boys works in the harness shop, one is a school teacher, and one is an extra mail carrier. Two of the full time mail carriers, one of the clerks, and both the porter and the janitor at the building are French. The latter, a fellow named Paradis, has a small farm and sells eggs. One of the four permanent firemen, half the call men, two of the three regular policeman and many of the special officers, several school teachers, the overseer of the poor, and three members of the city council are also French. In the city proper French people operate 3 large grocery stores (and four or five small ones), 2 wholesale and retail fruit and confectionery stores, 2 restaurants, 6 [barber?] shops, 4 beauty parlors, 1 undertaking establishment, 3 cobbler shops, 1 drug store, and 1 monument works. There are 4 insurance salesmen, 2 garage owners, 2 saloon keepers, and 1 French doctor. I don't think there was ever a French lawyer here, and the one French dentist remained but a short time.

9

The French who live on French Island are apt to resent any disparaging remark concerning the place, but many of those who have moved to other sections of the town sometimes feel superior to those living across the bridge. A French woman who lived in this part of the town was telling a friend and me about what a nice home some newly married couple had acquired. She described the place in glowing terms but added, "Of course, you know, it is on da hieland."

Library of Congress

Up until ten years ago there was only one Catholic church (St. Josephs) here. To satisfy the church goers who understood no French, the assistant to the pastor was usually Irish. The pastor was always French and often people who couldn't understand that language had to sit through a sermon delivered in a foreign tongue. Dissatisfaction increased among these people after one of the Irish priest priests who was transferred was replaced by a Frenchman, and the proposal to create a new parish and erect a new church, found high favor. St Marys, an attractive brick church, was built on Main Street but a few minutes walk from the city square. Shortly after it was completed many of the French who objected to what they referred to as the grasping tactics of the pastor of St. Josephs, deserted that parish and joined St. Marys. The Irish of the latter church offered no objections: they were satisfied so long as they had an Irish parish priest and sermons in English.

“Coffee Parties,” held in the local town hall and staged for the benefit of the Sisters of Mercy, used to be a feature in the life of the town. They were held once a year and usually lasted three or four evenings. There were booths of various kinds about the hall, and on long tables at one side suppers were provided for 10 the hungry. The stage program was different every night. One night there might be a musical program; the next, vaudeville acts, featuring local actors; the third, a three act comedy or a minstrel show, during the progress of which prominent local characters were lampooned. For many weeks before the entertainment chances were sold on various articles. Lucky persons had their number drawn from a box on the stage at the end of the final evenings performance. Five and ten dollar gold pieces were sometimes used as prizes. The practice of selling chances and holding lotteries came under the fire of reform elements a number of years ago and the objectionable custom was abandoned. In late years it has been the practice to hold lawn parties, carnivals, and bridge parties to help defray parish expenses. The French are ardent workers in these causes.

The French people are not always blindly devoted to their pastors in Old Town, and when they are not, it is because of some real or fancied fault in the character of the priest. Father

Library of Congress

Clary, an Irish priest who was an assistant at St. Josephs about forty years ago, was so well liked by the French as well as the Irish, that members of both races requested the bishop to appoint him pastor after the death of Father Trudel from diabetes.

Father Clary was so dark complexioned that some people thought he had negro blood in his veins. He had dark brown (almost black) eyes, black wavy hair, and an extremely vital and likable personality. He made many converts among Protestants and many of that faith used to go to hear him speak on Sundays.

11

On the other hand Father Legennec, a French Canadian who preceeded the present pastor of St. Josephs, Father Willett, was unpopular with the French. Some of them complained that he lived in a very fine house and wore the best clothes while they had nothing. They said he thought of nothing but money - and still more money. Priests with more engaging personalities were never criticized in this manner. His unpopularity was increased by an incident that gave him no choice but to act as he did. It happened in this way:

Clarence Mushrall was a very likable young fellow who worked as a plumber. He married an attractive and popular French girl named Florence La Bell, who worked in one of the woolen mills. The couple had only one child who grew up to resemble her mother. For a time everything went well with the young married pair, but after they had been married several years Florence contracted pneumonia and died. After the death of his wife, Clarence, who grieved very much because of his loss, took up drinking. He also stopped going to church. One night after he had been drinking heavily he started home across the railroad bridge. It was a perilous trip for a drunken man. Whether he jumped off the bridge or fell off nobody knew, but his body was recovered a week later at the end of the island. He was buried in the family lot in Forest Hills Cemetery and it seemed as though fate had written finis at the and of the Chapter.

Library of Congress

To understand what followed it is necessary to know [something?] of the regulations governing the Catholic portion of the burying ground at Forest Hills. A Catholic cemetery is “consecrated ground,” and any one not a Catholic or a Catholic who has died 12 “Outside the fold” may not be buried there.

About a year after young Mushrall had been laid to rest some persons brought to the attention of Father Legennac the fact that a man who had forsaken the church, who had died in his cups, and who had very likely committed suicide was buried in consecrated soil. In justice to the priest it must be said that in spite of an overwhelming feeling that the body of poor Mushrall should be allowed to rest where it was, church laws left him no choice in the matter: he was compelled to order the removal of it. Much bitterness was felt and the old accusation was raked up that while lots in the Catholic cemetery were expensive, the land itself had been bought by the priest “for a song.” Relatives of Mushrall refused to comply with the order and the case was brought to the courts. Lawyers for the defendants contended that the lot in question had been purchased by relatives of the dead man, that the dead was in their possession, that the lot had been fully paid for, and that in consequence their clients were free to use the land in any way they [see?] [saw?] fit. Opposing lawyers brought out the fact that while the Mushralls did indeed hold the title to the land it had been sold with certain binding restrictions that would prevent the interment of persons not in good standing with the authorities of the church. Judgement was rendered against the Mushralls* and they had to remove the body. Friends of Father Legennec claimed that persons who wished to injure the priest had brought the matter up. Much sympathy was felt for the Mushralls, and the priest acted the part of the unwilling scapegoat.

*Proof of citation is available, but the facts are common Knowledge in Old Town.

13

Father Marquis, a French Canadian priest who was an assistant here just before Father Clary, was also well liked by the French - and indeed by every one - but the bushop bishop

Library of Congress

felt it necessary to remove him from the parish because of alleged irregularities in his conduct. He was young, florid, and a good "mixer." He wasn't bad in any sense of the word, but he liked to drink, smoke cigars, attend prize fights, and mix with the boys in a pool room. It was thought that his actions constituted a bad influence among the youth of the parish.