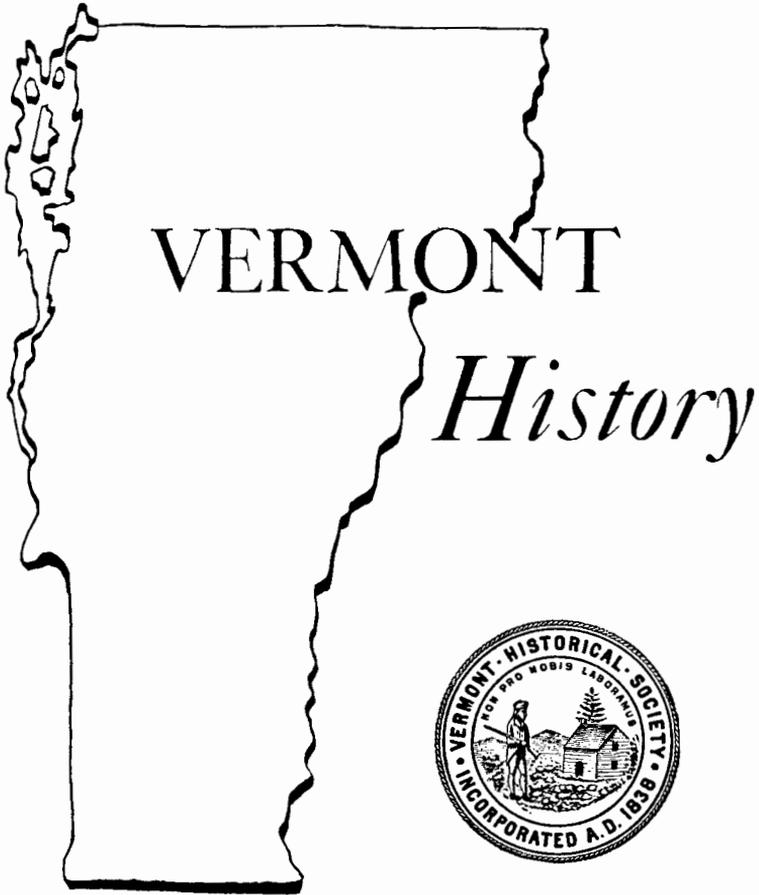
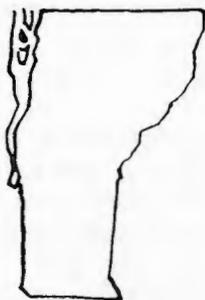


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“ . . . the rural Franco-Vermonters have a sense of their identity as French people.”

The Rural Franco-American in Vermont

By PETER WOOLFSON*

Prior to 1870 Vermont experienced more French-Canadian immigration in response to its industrial growth than any other New England state. The Canadians poured across the American border in overcrowded wagons and jam-packed freight cars to fill the cotton, woolen, and textile factories of Winooski and Burlington. After 1870 the flow shifted abruptly, bypassing Vermont for the beckoning mills of southern New England. In 1860 more than forty-four percent of all French-Canadians in New England resided in Vermont; by 1900, the state contained less than ten percent.¹ Vermont never recovered its industrial push, and only in a few locations, such as Burlington and Winooski, did Vermont resemble the large mill towns of southern New England. Thus, many of the French-Canadians who immigrated to Vermont came to make their way in a distinctly rural setting.

The French-Canadians from small rural parishes in the Province of Quebec who came to rural areas of northern New England found a

*As an anthropologist, I became interested in the French of northern Vermont as early as 1970 when I did some workshops for the bilingual program in Derby, Vermont. I began studying the values of French and English dominant children in the public schools of Derby, Holland, and Island Pond, Vermont. Over the years my studies, and those of my students, have branched out to encompass many aspects of the French-Canadian experience in northern Vermont. One of my students, Leslie Elton, and I did extensive interviewing of French Vermonters in Canaan, Vermont. Many of my students have been of French-Canadian heritage and have chosen to explore their own roots in northern Vermont from many different vantage points: family ties, language maintenance, ethnic identity, and French-Canadian traditions. Their research has been invaluable for this study. In assessing the affect of acculturation on the French-Canadians of Vermont, I found two works to be of great use: Horace Miner, *St. Denis: A French-Canadian Parish* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1939) and Mildred Huntley, "The Canadian French of Franklin County," MA thesis, University of Vermont, 1940. The former describes French-Canadian rural life in Quebec just as it was beginning to change in the 1930's, while the latter describes the French-Canadian culture as it was imported to Vermont around the same period.

physical environment quite similar to that which they left only a few miles behind. Other parts of the new environment were very different from Quebec, however, and contact with American culture had an important impact on the rural *Canadien*.

Those French-Canadians who crossed into Vermont were not, for the most part, enticed by visions of streets paved with gold, as were some of the Canadians lured across the border by the hard-selling mill recruiters. Many of those who came to Vermont made an almost imperceptible crossing of an imaginary boundary line to a landscape very similar to the one they left behind in their home parishes. The commitment, at first, was not even very strong. Many came to Vermont as seasonal migrant workers during the harvest season, and following the season, they quickly returned to their homes. When Quebec's farmers did cross the border in a more permanent trek, they did so for economic reasons such as the higher prices "the farmers of the United States were receiving for their produce."² They also wanted fresh, fertile land. Much of Quebec's once rich soil had become exhausted, and the Province had little arable new land. As a result, the sons of Quebec's farmers could not expect to find farmland of their own in their native province. The need for fresh farmland was intensified by the farming practices employed in Quebec during much of its history. Based on labor-intensive agriculture requiring the services of a large farm family, a Quebec farmer needed at least three able-bodied sons and an equal number of daughters to maintain the family farm. Yet the farms did not have the capacity to sustain all of these children in their adult years. Only one of the sons could inherit the farm; the others would have to find new lands. This system was "structurally dependent upon a continued supply of new land upon which surplus children could be established."³ The system worked for over two centuries, but it could not sustain itself against the population pressures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When the farmland gave out, the French-Canadian father had to find other outlets for his children, and the comparatively fertile, rural counties of Vermont offered one solution.

A large number of the French-Canadian farmers who came to Franklin County, Vermont, in the decade from 1920 to 1930 found it particularly attractive because "it is one of the best dairy regions in the world."⁴ To the French-Canadian farmer, with depleted soil and unsettled sons, Franklin County offered fresh opportunities: "Its farms average 21 head of cattle compared with 6 to 12 to 15 in Quebec."⁵

Few French-Canadian farmers could buy their own farms immediately after they had crossed the border. Many started as hired farm laborers, others "found casual employment as day laborers, while others were hired as brickmakers, woodchoppers and quarry workers."⁶ Some like Jane

Bonneau's grandparents, who came to Fairfax, rented a farm when they moved and remained on that farm for ten years.⁷ Sharecropping provided another solution for cash-poor French-Canadians. In describing the farm families in her Franklin County sample in 1940, Mildred Huntley reported that sixty-four owned their own farms or were buying them, eight rented farms, and five were farming on shares.⁸

The French-Canadian farmers who came to northern Vermont with the ability to purchase farms bought farms considerably larger than those they left behind in Quebec. The acreage farmed in St. Denis in the 1930's was only 7,000 acres divided among 80 farming families, an average of about 87 acres per family.⁹ Moreover, the St. Denis farms kept a smaller number, but more diversified, of livestock. In the 1930's "the average farm [had] fourteen head of cattle, ten head of sheep, seven swine, and two or three horses."¹⁰ They also kept large numbers of chicken and geese.

In the same period of time in Franklin County the French-Canadian farmers owned much larger farms, the largest being a five hundred acre farm in East Sheldon which kept eighty-six cows. Of the seventy-seven farms owned by French-Canadians in Mildred Huntley's sample, nine had fifty or more cows, and the average had thirty-two. These Franklin County farmers kept fewer hogs than their St. Denis counterparts — only eleven of the farms had more than two. But they did keep an average of thirty-nine chickens.¹¹

Today's French-Vermont farmers have concentrated even more in the dairy industry. In South Canaan, for example, the farms vary from 100 to 600 acres. André Chabot estimates that the biggest dairy farmer there has over 120 milkers with the smallest having no less than 40. Other livestock are negligible, kept for family consumption. Farming practices in modern Vermont have also altered types of crops produced. Franklin County farmers primarily grew grass and hay in the 1940's. The South Canaan farmers today buy cereal from large distributors like Agway and concentrate on planting corn for their livestock. Near their farmhouses the women grow large vegetable gardens for food which they preserve for the long Vermont winter.

The majority of contemporary, rural French-Vermonters do not, however, live or work on farms. According to information in the 1970 Census of the United States, sixty percent of the French mother-tongue Vermonters live in rural areas of the state but a little less than twelve percent (11.9%) live on farms. Even so, the French-Vermonters did represent over nineteen percent (19.2%) of Vermont's total farm population in 1970.

French-Canadians have experienced increasing difficulty in buying farmland in Vermont, and those who own land are finding it hard to

maintain their small family-run farms. Since the 1950's, farming has become agribusiness — large scale, technical, and highly mechanized farming. The modest French-Vermont farmer, who depended on his family for labor intensive farming, has had considerable difficulty surviving. For example, Island Pond had over twenty working farms in the 1950's but by 1970 only three remained. Farmland has skyrocketed in cost. Farms which sold for \$11,000 in the late 1940's sold for ten times that much in the 1970's and 1980's. Farm equipment, which has become a necessity, demands an additional investment of thousands more dollars. At the same time, income from farming has not kept pace with inflation and the cost of living. Raymond Lamarche, the third generation of his family to work his farm, has recently sold it to a Swiss corporation for \$182,000. He wanted to keep the 196-acre farm long enough to see if his son, who is in the eighth grade, wanted to take it over, but he decided under the circumstances that he could not encourage that.

With the influx of foreign investors willing to pay top prices for Vermont farmland, few French-Vermonters can now afford to buy farms. In Canaan, in the extreme northeastern corner of Vermont, the majority of the farmers bought their original farms before 1955. Some have been working their farms since the 1920's, but many bought farms shortly after World War II. Like their predecessors, they came to Vermont because land was available, and they found farming in the United States *plus payant* because of better milk prices.¹²

But the majority of rural French-Vermonters do not have the capital to become farmers. Several own their own businesses, mostly family run and service oriented in a pattern similar to the 1930's. Describing village occupations in Franklin County, Huntley found French-surnamed hotel proprietors, meat peddlers, and many shopkeepers, "particularly grocers, others dealing in meat, lumber, grain, agricultural implements, hardware, auto supplies, dry goods, and shoes."¹³ Data from Canaan in the late 1970's produced a similar list of family-run and service-oriented businesses owned and operated by French-surnamed Vermonters, which included a grocery store, a hotel, two motels, an insurance agency, a real estate agency, a laundromat, an automobile supply dealer, a hardware store, a restaurant, a garage, and an auto body shop. Other French-Vermonters own rigs for hauling logs and lumber to the furniture factories in the area. Some have their own small businesses supplying firewood to the growing number of Vermonters who heat their homes with wood.

Still other French-Vermonters continue to work as laborers — woodcutters, lumberjacks, and truck drivers. Several work in small factories: the Ethan Allen Furniture factories of Beecher Falls and Island Pond, and the Butterfield factory which makes taps, dies, and reamers in Derby

Line. Although most of the farmers' wives, as in South Canaan, do not work outside the home, many rural French-Vermont women hold jobs outside the home as factory workers, waitresses, cooks, salespeople, secretaries, bank clerks, and teachers.

Unlike those *Québécois* who left their parishes to travel a considerable distance to the textile mills of southern New England, the French-Canadians who came to Vermont did not travel far from their home parishes. Many of the French in Franklin County in the 1930's moved "just across the line into the United States," primarily to towns along the border and along Lake Champlain.¹⁴ A survey of the French-Vermont farmers in South Canaan in 1976 revealed that most of them came from small towns less than fifty miles from where they then resided.¹⁵ A survey of French-surnamed obituaries from *The Burlington Free Press* demonstrated that most people came to towns in Franklin County near the border or to the Burlington-Winooski area; "the overall distance between birthplace and the place of residence at the time of death is relatively short — in most cases from ten to forty miles."¹⁶

Like their urban counterparts, some rural communities established *p'tits Canadas* and developed institutions resembling their parishes across the border. If the population density were large enough to convince the Catholic church that a community had a valid claim to such service, it would erect an edifice around which the institutional life would develop. Beecher Falls in Canaan, Vermont, was just that kind of community, though in that case the church authorities in nearby New Hampshire responded to the need, even though the majority of French Catholics in the area lived on the Vermont side of the state line. The buildings and the institutions they housed were not as grand as those found in the typical "Little Canadas" of the southern New England mill towns with their impressive churches, the "tall spires topped by the Roman Catholic cross,"¹⁷ and attached presbytères, the priests' residences. Clustered around the churches were the parochial schools, one for the boys and one for the girls, and also close by were the nuns' convents and the brothers' homes.

The rural *p'tit Canada* represented a compromise: rural parishioners did not have the population or the resources to construct edifices on the same scale. St. Albert's in Beecher Falls is a relatively large wooden building with its cross attached to the peak of the roof. The church building also serves as the parochial school where both the boys and girls attend. Three nuns who teach in the school reside in a modest home nearby, and a short distance off Father Baudet lives in a small bungalow.

The Franco-Vermont farmers of South Canaan, all practising Catholics and living a few short miles from the Beecher Falls school, chose to send

their children to the Catholic school in the larger community of Colebrook, New Hampshire, some ten miles away. When the Catholic school in Colebrook closed, the South Canaan parents sent their children to the public school in Canaan. These parents gave several reasons for not sending their children to the nearby parochial school in Beecher Falls. That school did not provide hot lunches, and it only included eight grades.¹⁸ They did not articulate the underlying reason of the fundamental differences between the two communities of rural Franco-Vermonters; one composed of independent farmers and businessmen and the other of factory workers.

The town of Canaan, moreover, has its own separate Catholic church, the Church of the Assumption, housed in a small, modernistic building, strikingly different from the traditional French-Canadian church with its gothic or baroque style and its lofty spires. The church in Canaan does reflect its French heritage in the bilingual sign which appears on the front lawn. Many of the priests, if not all, who have served this parish have been of French-Canadian heritage and fluent in French. Currently, Father Poulin, also fluent in French, serves as the parish priest in Canaan. In lieu of the traditional parochial school education, the children of the Canaan parishioners attend class once a week at the church where lay members of the parish teach the catechism in English.

The shift from parochial to public schools reflects some weakening of the religious traditions of the parishioners in the area, but their faith remains strong. Close to many of the farmhouses or village homes can be found colorful, meticulously kept outdoor shrines. All of the French-Vermont homes in the area display crucifixes prominently on living room or kitchen walls. Even one of the motels has crucifixes over the doorways of the motel rooms. Nevertheless, some changes in religious practice have taken place from the time of the rural parishes in Quebec in the 1930's. Few of Vermont's French families say daily prayers at the sounding of the Angelus early in the morning. And only a very few of the families seek their father's benediction on New Year's Day. But the mass on Christmas Eve still stands as the highlight of the religious year, as does the *reveillon* that follows it.

The religious ban on the practice of artificial birth control provides one source of religious conflict in Canaan. The Canadian French in Vermont experienced a dramatic decrease in the birth rate and subsequent family size. Data from the 1930's indicates that the Canadian French in Vermont continued to have large families as they did in that period in Quebec. In Mildred Huntley's sample of ninety-five families, twenty had nine or more children, and several others had seven or eight. "The average number of children was 8.75." In contrast, the 1970 census shows that the average household size (including families of non-French heritage) in Franklin County was only 3.57. Elton, in her interviews in South Canaan, discovered

that most of the homes she visited had no more than four or five children; a considerable drop from their parents who often had from nine to thirteen siblings.¹⁹ Beecher Falls, where the largest number of factory workers in the Canaan area live, has experienced an equally dramatic drop in family size. Father Baudet maintains that he baptizes half the number of infants that he did twenty-five years ago. He attributes much of the difficulty in keeping the parochial school open to the decrease in numbers of children entering it. This decrease in birth rate seems to result from a conscious effort at family planning, rather than out-migration during the child-bearing years.

Decrease in attendance at the parochial school also results, in part, from the larger number of children sent to the public. The traditional role of the parochial school to educate children morally and spiritually, culminating in the ceremony of confirmation, no longer has the same importance. The decision to send children to the public school indicates a change in parental values from an emphasis on spiritual education to that of practical instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

In addition to their religious faith, the South Canaan families have retained other French-Canadian patterns. For example, they maintain very traditional sex roles. The men, as one would expect, do the heavy farm-work and maintain and operate the mechanized equipment. They also take care of all outside business contacts. The women manage the home: prepare, serve, and clean up after the meals; take care of and see to the educational and spiritual development of the children. The women also cultivate the large vegetable gardens close to the farmhouse. In addition, many of the women, often because they have more education than their husbands, take care of the farm's relevant correspondence and the accounts. The women see their roles as complementary to their husbands. As one wife put it: "*C'est lui le grand boss, moi, le petit.*"²⁰

Since many French-Vermont women work outside the home, they could develop a somewhat different attitude toward women's roles than their rural South Canaan counterparts. However, a survey of working mothers of grade school children in three northeastern Vermont communities, indicated that all of the French-Vermont mothers who responded to the questionnaire, even though they all held outside jobs, still maintained that the proper vocation for a woman was to be a mother.

The role of children in the French-Vermont farm family has changed more dramatically than that of their parents. The children take less responsibility for the daily maintenance of the farm than they did in earlier generations. In the 1930's Huntley maintained that the French managed to "carry on their large farms without hiring help because of their large families." This was labor intensive farming where all the children

participated. Huntley cites one example of a labor intensive operation of a farmer with eight children in Enosburg Falls "of whom six are boys old enough to help with the work."²¹ With the introduction of highly mechanized and automated dairy farming, fewer children were needed to labor on the family farm, nor did they need to work as hard or as long. Younger children still bring the cows home and help feed the animals. Older children clean up the barn, and the oldest attach and remove the milking units.

Smaller family size also has reduced the need for additional aid in meal preparation, sibling care, and clothes washing. Moreover, just as the working part of the farm has been mechanized, so too has the farmhouse. The French-Vermont farm women take a great deal of pride in their kitchens, and they have a keen desire to equip their kitchens with the most modern appliances and gadgets. These labor-saving devices have reduced the time a woman and her daughters need to spend in the household. Nevertheless, farm children are expected to do their assigned tasks before and after school. Boys help with the management of the farm; girls work in the home and garden. The parents believe that their children have more freedom than they had at the same age in the sense that they have fewer daily chores, more time to play, and more toys to play with.

The French-Canadian farming tradition will face radical changes. Few of the farmers' sons have enthusiasm for following in their fathers' footsteps. The French-Canadian farmers place a strong value on the survival of the family farm. Interviews in the late 1970's with farmers in a small Quebec community revealed that most of the surviving farms had remained in the same families for over two hundred and fifty years. Although no French-Vermont farms have that long a history of family ownership, nevertheless, farmers brought with them the expectation that one of their sons would take over the family farm. A strong relationship often developed between the farmer and the son who would assume management of the farm. Most of the sons today prefer to leave the farm to find work with shorter hours and more available cash. As a result, parents now expect to sell their farms to outsiders when they can no longer work the farm.

Other family traditions are disappearing as well. As older generations of French-Vermonters die, many social traditions die with them. Leo Lanctot, a native of Canaan, Vermont, remembers the celebrations in his family held on New Year's Day, a tradition which went back to his maternal great-grandfather. He remembers meeting aunts, uncles, cousins, but he especially remembers the foods. His grandmother, "Mémère Poutre prepared," he recalled, "almost everything from *tourtières* to fruit pies, homemade pickles—sweet and sour—relishes and roasts of pork and beef."²² He also remembers the social activities which followed—dancing,

singing, and card playing. When Lanctot's great-grandfather died in 1958, the soirées, where relatives came to dance and sing, became less frequent. And when his great-grandmother died, the family no longer had any large reunions. His maternal grandparents, who are still living, prefer to spend the season of *les fêtes* in Florida.

The key element in French-Vermont identity, language, also shows signs of acculturation. Assimilation to English, however, varies from community to community and from family member to family member. In Canaan, for example, nearly half the town (43.8 percent) is mother-tongue French. French is still heard frequently on the streets. Many young people in border communities like Canaan are fluent in French. They often go to the larger towns in Quebec for shopping and dating. To many of them, the border does not represent the entrance to a foreign country. For Carmen Gaudreau of Beebe Plains the nearest kindergarden was on the other side of the border. She still goes to Canada frequently "to visit relatives, friends, to shop, and to see hockey games."²³ In communities like this, French is a functional language that has had little difficulty in surviving among the generation of French-Vermonters in its early twenties.

But proximity to the border does not always guarantee the retention of French. In Holland and Island Pond where Vermont's first Title VII French-English bilingual program operated, language assimilation occurred at an alarming rate. In 1973 the pupils at the elementary schools used little French. The schools had only eight French dominant students in grade five, four in grade one, and only one prospective French dominant pupil who was to enter school in the fall.²⁴ The decline in French language dominance among the children in this area happens for two reasons. Older French dominant children in a family, after acquiring English, influence their younger siblings. It also occurs because families are gradually being assimilated into the English speaking community. The slowdown of French-Canadian immigration to Vermont since 1965 also tends to erode the use of French. Since few families with young children immigrated to northeastern Vermont in the last decade and a half, the majority of children entering the schools in recent years were American-born. Marcel Charland, the last director of the Derby Project, argues that French in the area does not have a functional base; thus, has no reason to survive. He points out that English is the language used for "practically all public functions, including meetings, school instruction, social services, religious worship and instruction, government operations, auctions, buying and selling in stores and shops, industries and daily work, recreation and by the news media."²⁵

Attitudes of the schools themselves influence language retention by French-speaking Vermonters. A local, private, Catholic school in northeastern Vermont sent notes home to parents with French-dominant

children asking them to stop using French in the home because the school claimed it impeded the progress of the children in the school. And, a northern Vermont school district routinely treated children who came to school dominant in French as slow learners and either enrolled them in special education classes or held them back a grade. As a consequence, this reinforced the view of both parents and children in the area that speaking French was not an asset but rather a barrier to success in school.

Assimilation to English becomes increasingly common from generation to generation. Many third generation French-Vermonters do not know how to speak French. Yet in spite of all these reasons for inevitable language loss, many families in northeastern Vermont refuse to allow their maternal language to die. The bilingual postmaster in Beecher Falls insisted on sending his boys to be educated, in French, in Quebec. A widow in the same town insists on the use of French in the home, regardless of the language dominance of guests visiting there. A Christmas tree farmer in South Canaan works alongside his sons in the woods, all of them speaking French, even though they are all bilingual. But even members of the same family may have different language policies. One sister of a farmer in Newport insists that her children learn French so that they can communicate with their French-dominant grandparents. Another sister, on the other hand, does not feel that handing on French to her children merits the necessary effort.

The degree of integration in the Vermont communities is another factor in the acculturation of the French-Vermonters. In earlier days, the independent French-Vermont farmer isolated himself and his family from his English-speaking neighbors. His friends and those of his children consisted of relatives and siblings much like himself. His children, if they went to public school, did not bring their classmates home to play. Outside social contacts were often church oriented and, until the 1940's, were French speaking. The women were more isolated than the men, "confined by household duties."²⁶ Moreover, the Canadian French of the 1930's were not particularly interested in politics, as they had little experience with the American political system and had few contacts with people who could explain it to them, and because "those not naturalized show little interest because they are unable to vote."²⁷

The French-Canadian in Franklin County in the 1940's were still oriented toward Quebec. They continued to read French-Canadian newspapers and to keep up on current events across the border. The modern French-Vermonters has only mild interest in what happens in Quebec, usually only to the extent that events affect relatives in Canada. Very few farmers now read French-Canadian newspapers. A 1974 survey showed none of the parents of French-background children subscribed to French-

Canadian magazines or newspapers. Few watched Canadian television news programs or listened to French-Canadian news broadcasts.

On the other hand, the French-Vermonters now take an active interest in politics, especially at the local level. In Canaan, Vermont, French-surnamed auditors, selectmen, listers, and school directors fill the list of officeholders. The same pattern persists throughout rural, northern Vermont.

The rural, French-Vermonters show no particular interest in those Franco-American societies which have attempted to safeguard the language and traditions of French Canada in the United States. These rural French-Vermonters do not, as a rule, join associations. Even in the 1930's the Canadian-French showed little interest in these associations. In Huntley's sample, twenty of the women belonged to the Ladies of Ste. Anne; of the men, only four belonged to *l'Union de St. Jean Baptiste*, and seven to the *Forestiers*. The pattern persists. If the rural French-Vermonters belong to any groups, they belong to church-related associations. The associations to which the men belong today seem to be related more to personal interests than to ethnicity. Many of the ex-service men are members of American Legion posts. In recent years, they show considerable interest in membership in local snowmobile clubs. Although some of the snowmobile clubs tend to divide along ethnic lines, the clubs themselves have little orientation towards ethnic identity or culturally-oriented traditions.

Yet, the rural Franco-Vermonters have a sense of their identity as French people, both those who live on family-owned farms, and those who live in mini-mill towns like Beecher Falls. The French-Vermonters' identity is tied to his nuclear family and the long tradition of his extended kin. They maintain contact with Quebec through relatives who live close by, and identify with them as individuals rather than some abstract, ethnic identity or national dream. The Franco-Vermonters are neither tied to Quebec's cultural past nor Quebec's future, except as they affect relations with his kin across the border. The French-Vermonters who work in small mill towns like Beecher Falls may on the surface have a closer relationship with his cultural traditions: that is, identifiable Franco-American institutions. But those institutions survive only with great difficulty.

In spite of the lesser culture shock French Canadians felt in coming to rural Vermont, rather than the mill towns of southern New England, the same economic, social, political and educational forces have changed the language, social organization, and cultural traditions of the French-Vermonters. The modernization and mechanization of farming have also affected the size and activities of the family. The need for greater family

income has produced changes in sex roles and family expectations. The closing of parochial schools, often the result of lowering birth rates, has led to more rapid assimilation of children into the dominant linguistic and cultural traditions of the United States. As older generations die off, many of the traditions and cultural activities die with them. A major impact is the imminent demise of the French-Vermont family farm because few sons wish to or can afford to continue the tradition. And yet in pockets here and there Franco-Vermont culture thrives in rural Vermont; often the result of the determination of a few hardy souls who still carry the dream of *la survivance*.

NOTES

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- 4 Huntley, "Franklin County," p. 32.
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