



## Footprints in the snow

by Dan Gendreau

Twin Cities Chapter

I lately heard a comment that was supposed to have been made by a state historian, that in brief stated that the French had no significant part in the settlement of Minnesota. How could any learned person make such a statement? Were not the French the first non-Indian settlers? Don't we have French place names all across the state? What about all the French family names that have been in this state for generations? What was it about the French-Canadian pioneer that left an impression like a footprint in the snow - one that may last only the season and then disappears with hardly a trace left behind?

The French-Canadians tended to isolate themselves, in fact they considered themselves a culture in isolation. In a number of oral interviews I've heard, the subject referred to his or her origin as Canadian-French. The import of this phrase is in position of noun and adjective, meaning a Frenchman from Canada, rather than a Canadian of French origin.

They were deeply religious Catholics who centered their communities around the church. In fact many of the towns took their names from the patron of the local church. His faith imparted to his character features which make him less than notable to the historian interested more in the empire builders of our past.

In most cases he was a humble farmer who worked the land to feed and cloth his large family. He was not often to become rich because he seemed to believe in not storing away the wealth of this world in favor of enjoying the fruits of his success with family and friends. He did tend to enjoy

himself.

He took great pride in his craft. Be it farmer, butcher, baker, voyageur, or builder, he strived to be known as the best. Because he would not compromise his craft, he seldom became the richest.

He was faithful to his family. Many, many marriages were pre-arranged with the bride and groom never seeing each other before they stood together at the altar. Marriage however is until death do you part, and it was very rare that one ended any other way.

He was long suffering. He left parents and childhood friends to move to new parts of the world knowing that he was not likely to see them again in this life. He endured bad crops, harsh winters, illness and lost wives and children to still continue on. He continued on because he believed that that was what life was all about. You work and suffer what this life has to offer to store away the riches you will enjoy in the life to come.

Therefore, he passed from this life to the next not leaving much behind of interest to the historian. A number of places called by the terms he used to identify them, a surname, and a strong religious faith were the rich inheritance he left to we, his descendants. To the historian of empires, . . . only footprints in the snow.

## Commentary

"You describe my Dad, his attitudes and love of simple pleasures - almost as though you had known him."

Betty Morency Hudelson  
Bovey, Minnesota

"There are many kinds of historians. I would like to know about the one who stated that the French played no significant role in the settlement of Minnesota. As you

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yourself point out, the person in question might be interested mainly in major figures who were on the winning side of major political and military campaigns. As such, many common people, men and women, young and old of many races and ethnic groups would probably be viewed as insignificant, not just the French in Minnesota. There are, however, many ways of telling history so that the roles and places of more people can be understood and appreciated. History should be inclusive not exclusive, don't you think?

The French and French-Canadians in the Midwest have lived through very complex diplomatic and political times from the 1620's to the present. This period of time has involved negotiations with many Indian peoples; struggles with the British Empire; the formation of the Canadian nation as British and French; territorial and border confrontations with the United States and Canada; as well as modern day affirmations of cultural preferences and life styles based on different histories and experiences. Few writers have proven themselves capable of understanding the political and diplomatic complexities of the history of the French in the Midwest from 1621 to the 1860's. One of the reasons is that so many historians have been "settlement" historians. They seem to focus mainly on white settlement history, often referred to as immigrant history.

But what if you are or were of French or of another national descent living here before the 1860's? What if you are or were Metis? Would you not count as very important? When the telling of history is done in such a way as to focus on settlement alone, a grave injustice is done to many who were not settlers. What of the native peoples, the traders, the explorers, the negotiators, and those who stayed for short periods and moved on?

The people who inhabit the borders of our state have not just been white male well-intentioned settlers. They have been men and

women of many races, ethnic groups, and of diverse moral fiber. As for the French and French Canadians, they have enough history in the state from the time of pre-settlement, settlement, and post-settlement to make a lot more "tracks in the snow", which at least cannot be plowed under, especially with winters like this one!"

Virgil Benoit

Red Lake Falls, MN

(ED. NOTE: Dr. Benoit will be happy to respond to comments, and answer questions about French and French-Canadian history. Comments and questions along with the responses will also be sent to the F.A.R.O.G. FORUM for publication unless requested otherwise. The FORUM is a bilingual newspaper printed in Orono, Maine.

You may write directly to Virgil Benoit, Box 253, Red Lake Falls MN 56750.)

## Letter

from Loria Collette Kelly  
East Grand Forks MN

I write to tell you about our French club - L'Assemblee francais de Grande Fourche - a part of a national group formed to preserve our French-Canadian heritage.

Our club is about two years old. We aren't too structured - it's not French to be so, right?! We do a little history and a little roots work. . . it has been so interesting comparing our roots with others in the club.

A lot of similarities. One fellow told me his grandfather had the same name as mine - well, said the same, but spelled differently.

We entertained the St. Boniface choir here in Grand Forks. What a delight. They came right after Christmas last year. We had a French Mass and they sang the Mass plus French carols. Marvelous!

This year I believe we are going to do a little studying about the area, especially around Leroy where Louis Riel came from.... (I don't know if Louis came from there but he did locate there at some time.)

STOP!!!

Before you turn to page four of Chez Nous try your hand at translating the article printed below. The actual translation is on page four of Chez Nous. Our special thanks to Pat Ciochetto, Side Lake, MN, who submitted this article and its translation:

### LA GASTRONOMIE AU MINNESOTA?

Mais oui, c'est possible! Dernierement je me suis trouve dans un petit restaurant francais tout a fait charmant. Chez Stephaie's On The Lake, dans le complexe Fitger's Duluth, on se croit dans un petit coin de la France, ou encore du Quebec.

On peut deguster les patisseries francaises, de la soupe a l'oignon, de la quiche, et on trouve toute sorte de petite friandise qui ne se trouvent rarement ici, et le tout dans une ambiance bien agreable. En plus, les prix sont bien raisonnables!

Moi, je me suis regale de champignone farcis - dilicieux! Si vous trouvez a Duluth dans le proche avenir, il faut y aller!