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“Le Messenger: A Franco-American Newspaper and its Impact”
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I grew up in Lewiston as a Franco-American on both sides of my family. My heritage has always been a fascination of mine. Anyone who studies Franco-Americans can’t help but notice that there is a striking sense of what it means to be a part of the big-C Community. Franco Americans are good Catholics, their work ethic is unmatched, families are generally on the large side, and they generally vote Democrat (this is changing a bit, but historically is the case).

This social order is well known to those in the community. One of my favorite moments which really highlighted this for me was in High School. Some quick background on me: As with most Francos, I was brought up Catholic; I went to a private Catholic school, I went to mass on Sundays, I went to confession, my uncles were active Knights of Columbus (KoC). However, throughout high school I had found myself attending a Protestant church on the outskirts of Lewiston. Once I got to College, I ended up joining a Freemason lodge up by the University (for those who don’t know, Freemasons are essentially KoC, but KoC are Catholics only and Freemasons are non-denominational).

During one of my breaks I ended up going down to visit my family. During a discussion about what I was up to, I told my Memere about joining the freemason lodge. Her response to me was “Why didn’t you just join the KoC?” and my response was “Well, I’m not really a Catholic. I’m a protestant”. For the next few minutes I sat there and watched the gears try to

churn that one out. All she could manage was “But.. you’re... we’re French, you’re a Catholic.” Clearly to her, there was a nonseparable link between Catholicism and being a Franco.

While this may just be a silly anecdote from my personal past, the idea that Francos have a strongly bonded sense of national identity has been well established in the realm of Franco-American Studies. Historians like Mark Paul Richard in his book *Loyal But French* have done an extensive amount of research and come to this conclusion. What I want to know, though, is what caused this to happen? After doing taking my undergraduate thesis seminar in the history of written media, I believe that the newspaper *Le Messenger* from Lewiston had a heavy part to play in forging this sense of identity and homogeneity for the community. In order to prove this point, I’m going to try to prove to you 3 things: That this newspaper was an integral source of information dissemination within the community, that the Francos really did have the overt sense of identity and homogeneity that I think they do, and that the paper consciously pushed this sense of identity on the community. To do this, I’m going to try to focus mostly on the early 20th century, an era which I believe saw the full force of this identity movement.

I would like to start by speaking towards the efficacy of newspapers as a media source. I’m not the first person to postulate that newspapers hold the key to communal information processing.

In a study done a number of years ago, the Pew Research Center found that in the early 20th century, newspapers were the single most useful source for communities to obtain

information on crime, taxes, government activity, politics, jobs, events, social services, and advertisements.

The first place I was able to draw a link between these useful newspapers and community information was a book titled *Newspapers and the Making of Modern America*, historian Aurora Wallace tells a story of rural Iowa in the early-mid 20th century. The paper *Des Moines Register* was published and distributed throughout the entire state of Iowa to the rural farmers and other workers, published and delivered by a network of a small team of writers and a large distribution network of paper boys. In her research, Wallace found that, although these rural farmers had almost no communication with each other, all over the state they overwhelmingly shared the same stances on local and national politics, they worshiped and interpreted their religion similarly, and used the same parlance.

I believe this sets the foundation for my first claim: that this newspaper was the integral source of information dissemination for the Franco community of Lewiston.

The Francophone workers in this area during the early 1900s were overwhelmingly mill workers. The 1920 census found that over 50% of Franco American males and 83% of Franco American women worked in industrial mills. These were certainly not high paying jobs and the workers could not afford to splurge with their capital. In need of staying connected, they could turn the *Le Messenger*, which cost only a few cents per issue. But were they?

I was able to get my hands on a copy of the *Pettingill's Newspaper Directory and Gazetteer*. This is a compilation of newspapers published within the US at the time of publishing. Inside,

there is a small ad for *Le Messenger*. It boasted 3,200 copies twice weekly to L-As Francophone population of 1300; generously 1 copy for every 5 people. A quote seen within says, “There is not a manufacturing town in NE where French speaking people are employed that does not contain subscribers to *Le Messenger*”.

It would be safe to say, then, that combining the knowledge of Newspapers as a source and the popularity of *Le Messenger* yields that it was the integral source for disseminating information to the community.

Onto the second of my 3 requisites, and perhaps the easiest to tackle: there was certainly a strong Franco identity within the community. There are 2 cases that, I believe, strongly make the case for this sense of identity and norms.

In 1902, there was an open Bishop seat and the two candidates for the position were an Irish Catholic and a Franco Catholic. The Irish candidate was selected for the position and *Le Messenger* says:

Does the Pope ignore the sad state of affairs? There are more than 100 thousand French Canadians and scarcely 40 thousand Irish. The Pope or his advisers must pay for the evil that is done to us.

US. This clip clearly displays a loyalty to the Franco community before even the church to which almost every Franco belonged.

Politically, we see a similar attitude. At one point the English paper in Lewiston published that there were 200 Francophones starting a Republican club in the city. *Le Messenger* scoffed back, stating that this couldn't be true because there was no way there were 200 French Republicans in Lewiston.

The third and final piece is that this paper presented its information in such a way that it influenced the community to craft this sense of Franco Identity.

Going back to this incident between the Franco and Irish Bishop candidates: While this was happening *Le Messenger* was publishing information about the whole ordeal. In one issue, there's an article titled "Test of Conscience" which outlines the two candidates. According to this article, the Irish candidate is an awful catholic who disobeys many of the tenants of the faith while the Franco, on the other hand, is a perfect model Catholic. One of the lines in particular that goes very far in pushing the Franco candidate: It mentions that the French Canadian "Race" is the most intelligent race in North America.

A separate article creates a similar sense of connection to the community. I don't have to go much farther than the title on this one: it reads, The Franco American brotherhoods must exist outside of foreign protection. This talks about how Francos as a people must stick to their own, build their own societies, and stay strong without the help of anglophones protecting them.

For the reader, this creates a clear separation of Francos from the rest of the population and fosters a loyalty to them by claiming that they are inherently better than everyone else. This same effect is delivered within the quote about the Pope betraying the Francos. That is to say, the paper is actively pushing onto the readership that they are a special subset of people who are loyal to themselves before anyone else.

The piece that I mentioned about the paper scoffing at the idea of Franco Republicans. This narrative would have a similar impact on those who read it. If you are part of a community with such strong ties and you are confronted with the information that EVERYONE is a Democrat, and the idea that less than 0.1% of the population is a Republican is funny, it's going to deliver the clear message that you, too, are a Democrat and should be a Democrat.

These articles are additionally significant when you consider that the staff writing them consisted of less than 20 people. The writers had a small enough atmosphere to purposefully and deliberately push the message of Franco unity. The people who would then read this agenda would eat it up and digest its message. With an established large readership, established sense of identity and conformity, and an established agenda, I conclude to you that *Le Messenger* was a vital source for creating and preserving a sense of Franco identity in Lewiston, Maine.