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Learning to be Proud

by Marc R. Collard

New immigrants to this country in the late 1800s and early 1900s had a tough row to hoe. They had to leave everything familiar behind, taking a bag or two and sometimes a young family to venture into a new country. If they were lucky, they had relatives here who could help make the transition easier or, as was the case for many French Canadians, a textile company representative who guaranteed them a job in a mill and a place to live. It is no wonder that ethnically and religiously connected groups in Biddeford, Maine, stuck together.

Second and third generation children of these immigrants had it much easier. They had the Catholic Church, parochial schools, and neighborhoods where children similar to themselves grew up together. Language was part of the glue. French was the first language in these communities, certainly at home, in church, and for many through elementary school. In our home, TV made its appearance in 1954 so by the time I started kindergarten in an English-speaking school, English was natural.

I never lived through neighborhood fights (English speakers versus French speakers) that my father told me about. I also did not realize that my French-Canadian language was anything other than what we spoke at home, with older relatives, and the language spoken by the parish priests for the sermons. Between grades 1 through 6, we had essentially half a day in French and the rest in English in St. Joseph's School. Recess and after-school playtime were definitely in English. By grades 7 and 8, French was just a school subject. It was in grade 6 that I learned from the nuns that my first language was not proper French. One nun in particular made a point of teaching us that French-Canadian was "bad" French. This was quite strange in hindsight because she was just as French-Canadian as her students. She did make a point of teaching us "proper" French, but this was a harsh lesson that left the impression that perhaps this "badness" applied to the people who spoke French-Canadian as well. The effect was that she was teaching us that the French-Canadian community was one or two steps lower on the social hierarchy ladder than other nationalities in Biddeford.

All the blame, however, cannot be placed on a single nun. We did it to ourselves within our own families and social circles. It was normal to refer to something as "canuck" if it was not the current style or not quite American enough. This derogatory term supported the idea that French-Canadians were second class citizens. So, when the Vancouver "Canucks" joined the National Hockey League as an expansion team in 1970, I was incensed. They had been around for years as a minor league team and in the Canadian leagues but I only became aware of them when they insulted my sense of pride.

As a student at Northeastern University in Boston in 1971, I signed up for an anthropology course taught by Professor Mary Catherine Bateson. The term paper requirement asked that each student select a language from a list provided. The purpose of the paper was not to study the language for fluency but to study the language as a part of the culture. My choice of Haitian Créole was not only because I knew French-Canadian from growing up with it, but also because

I worked in the University food service with several Haitians. Although I could not speak Créole, I could understand quite a bit of it and my Haitian co-workers could understand my French. This made my job as an assistant manager much easier since I could organize the work of feeding 600 dormitory students with a lead group of Haitians.

The roots of Haitian Créole are similar to the roots of French-Canadian. The 17th century French buccaneers, soldiers, sailors and farmers mostly from Normandy and Brittany brought their language with them. In Haiti, native Indians and the Spanish added words and grammatical constructions that did not make their way into French-Canadian. As the buccaneers settled down, the need for cheap labor on the plantations grew. African slaves satisfied this need. They also added vocabulary to the Haitian Créole language without changing its grammatical core. A few examples of similarity in sounds would be helpful. French-Canadian changes the French word for “me” from “*moi*” to “*mwé*” and the word for “you” from “*toi*” to “*twé*.” The same change happened in Haitian Créole. This does not constitute “bad” French or “Biddeford” French. It goes back to the 17th century. In fact, if you visit Québec today or listen to French-Canadian radio or TV the language you hear is easily recognizable as the voice of your grandparents or great-grandparents talking. Louisiana Créole (or “Cajun” from the word “*Acadien*”) has the same roots. (The French language cable TV channel “TV5” displays standard French sub-titles when they broadcast French-Canadian movies to help those who cannot understand the dialect.)

A by-product of this term paper was discovering that certain changes to the French language could be found in French Indochina (essentially Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia) in the late 1800’s. French remained as a government language (or educated -class language) until the end of the Viet Nam War in 1975. A simple example of how French changes consistently when it is imported to a new location is the French number ten or “*dix*.” French-Canadians, French speaking Caribbean islanders, and Louisiana Créole speakers commonly pronounce this as “*dzis*.” The Vietnamese speakers of French do too. In fact, the location of the 1955 decisive battle between the French army and the Vietnamese is Dienbienphu, but the pronunciation is commonly “Dzienbienphu.”

This last example is what finally convinced me that the French-Canadian of my childhood was not a lesser form of the French language even if the nuns in parochial school tried to convince us of this. It is truly just a language based on 17th century French. Studying standard French in high school and college was made much easier because of the solid background in French-Canadian, but at times it was like learning a new language. While traveling in various parts of France, I have been asked where I was from. I sometimes would answer the province of *La Picardie* for two reasons: first, I could get away with it, and second, a former landlord of mine when I lived in Belgium was fond of saying, “*Après tout, nous sommes tous Picards*.” (“After all, we’re all from La Picardie.” – meaning French-Canadians and Belgian French speakers). I will always be proud of my French-Canadian heritage.