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CFCL Radio

On Wednesday, September 21, 2005, at 2 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Foundation and the Timmins Museum: National Exhibition Centre unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating the broadcast debut of CFCL Radio in Timmins.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

CFCL RADIO

The first French-language radio station in Ontario, CFCL-Timmins, began broadcasting in December 1951. The event was greeted with enthusiasm by Franco-Ontarians who until then had heard limited programming in French over the airwaves. The station reached listeners from Kirkland Lake to Hearst, showcasing local talent and creating a sense of community among the widely dispersed francophone population of northern Ontario. Daily features on French life in the region taught cultural pride, the love of one's maternal language, the importance of sending children to French schools, and of furthering their education. The creation of CFCL by the station's owner and founder, Conrad Lavigne, was a landmark in the cultural development of the northern Franco-Ontarian communities.

STATION DE RADIO CFCL

Première station de radio française en Ontario, CFCL Timmins a commencé à diffuser des émissions en décembre 1951. Cet événement a été accueilli avec enthousiasme par les Franco-Ontariens qui, à l'époque, n'entendaient que rarement des émissions en français sur les ondes. La station mettait en valeur le talent local et créait parmi ses auditeurs francophones, éparpillés dans tout le Nord de l'Ontario, de Kirkland Lake à Hearst, un sentiment d'appartenance communautaire. Grâce à ses émissions quotidiennes sur la vie en français dans la région, la station a stimulé chez les francophones une fierté culturelle et l'amour de la langue française et les a sensibilisés à l'importance de l'éducation en français et des études supérieures. La création de CFCL par M. Conrad Lavigne, fondateur-propriétaire, a marqué un tournant dans le développement culturel des collectivités franco-ontariennes du Nord de la province.

Historical background

A musical gala filled the Palace Theatre in Timmins, Ontario on a Sunday afternoon in January 1952. The great crowd of people inside the theatre – and the equal number standing outside listening to loudspeakers – were thrilled to be part of the festivities. Even more people were listening in their homes, since the event was the inauguration of CFCL-Timmins, the first French radio station in Ontario. The extraordinary nature of the day was underlined by the presence of many dignitaries. The mayors of Timmins and Kapuskasing, the member of parliament for Timmins, the official representative of the Roman Catholic Bishop, the director of Société Radio-Canada, and the general manager of the Ottawa daily *Le Droit* all gave speeches. Representatives were present from the radio stations in Sudbury, Ontario and Verdun and Ville-Marie, Quebec.¹ The broadcast was followed by a dinner and concert at the Goldfield Hotel, under the auspices of the Club Richelieu, which was attended by 350 people.²

CFCL-Timmins had gone on the air several weeks earlier, in December 1951, reaching thousands of Franco-Ontarians from Kirkland Lake to Hearst in French, "who understood each other, recognized their accents, their way of speaking, and especially, realized that for the first time on the airwaves in Ontario, CFCL gave the French language an official status!"³

The launching of CFCL came after two years of effort on the part of the station's owner and founder, Conrad Lavigne, for whom the call letters CFCL stood for "Canadien Français, Conrad Lavigne."⁴ Before founding CFCL, Lavigne – who was born in Chénéville, Quebec and raised in Cochrane – ran the Prince George Hotel in Kirkland Lake in partnership with his uncle. Lavigne was active in the community, serving on the school board and participating in amateur theatre. He bought a half-hour time slot at noontime on Sundays on the local radio station CJKL, owned by Roy Thomson. With his theatre colleagues and others, Lavigne presented songs, stories, local features and dedications in French. The show was a success and Lavigne received many compliments for taking such an initiative.⁵ One Sunday, the cast arrived at the station only to be told their show had been cancelled. The management explained that complaints had been lodged against Lavigne's show because it was in a "foreign" language. This reaction to French programs on English radio stations was typical across Canada at the time.⁶ After being refused 30 minutes a week of radio time in French, Lavigne decided to start a French language station. He chose Timmins because it was located in the centre of an area with a potential audience large enough to make the station financially viable. Timmins already had an English-language radio station that, like the one in Kirkland Lake, was owned by Roy Thomson. But Timmins was 60 per cent Francophone and the local radio station only offered five minutes a day of French news programming.

At the time, there was no French radio station in Ontario. The Franco-Ontarian community in Ottawa was served by the French-language station CKCH with broadcasts from Hull, Quebec. There was one bilingual station, CHNO, in Sudbury. The English radio stations in the smaller

Northern Ontario centres that had large French-Canadian populations offered limited service in French, just as in Kirkland Lake.⁷

After consulting Father Anicet Morin of Larder Lake, who supported him, and Bishop Louis Rhéaume of the Diocese of Timmins, who initially refused his support but later endorsed the project, Lavigne set to work. Two previous applications for broadcasting permits for French stations in the North had been refused, and he knew that his application had to be convincing in order to be successful.⁸ Some supporters of the project wanted to help by writing a historical background document detailing the injustices against Franco-Ontarians going back to Confederation. But Lavigne felt that this approach would only poison the situation, causing threats and recriminations. He worked alone to produce a 300-page document showing the need and feasibility of a French radio station.

He received more than 300 letters of support.⁹ Among them was a letter from the Anglican Bishop of Cochrane and Moosonee.¹⁰ Two hundred members of the Canadian Pulp and Paper and Steelworkers Union also signed letters.¹¹ The Association canadienne-française d'éducation d'Ontario (ACFÉO), which had been fighting for French stations in Ontario since the 1930s, also submitted a letter in favour of the initiative.¹²

The English station CKGB in Timmins voiced its opposition to the Board of Governors of Radio-Canada, which was considering Lavigne's application. The station's director contended that the 1,000 watts proposed by Lavigne for the station was not strong enough to serve the intended area and that the addition of a second radio station in Timmins would offer serious competition to the existing station that some argued was already having difficulty surviving. He questioned the need for French radio, saying that the French-speaking population usually spoke English during commercial transactions, and stores did not feel the need to advertise in French. He reasoned that if the French-speaking population had asked for more radio broadcasting in French, his station would have acceded to their request long ago, for it would certainly have meant more revenue.¹³

But Lavigne's application was convincing. Once the permit was approved, there was an outpouring of emotion and support from the population that would be served by the station, but challenges still had to be met in order to get the station on the air. Lavigne financed the project by selling half of his assets in the Prince George Hotel for \$50,000, using another \$50,000 that he had saved, and borrowing part of the capital. The banks were wary and Lavigne had to offer his hotel as security for the loan.¹⁴

The next challenge was to find a suitable piece of land for the transmission tower since the large amounts of metal deposits in the soil in the area could interfere with radio waves. Lavigne finally settled on a lot five kilometres from town, then set to work having the land cleared. A small army of people, including school-aged boys, worked alongside the tractors. Then there

was the problem of finding enough steel to build the tower. Rationing of steel was still in effect following the war. Thanks to the intervention of C.D. Howe, federal Minister of Commerce, Lavigne was able to purchase sufficient steel to construct the 300-foot transmission tower.¹⁵

The studio and offices were organized in rented space at 175 3rd Avenue in Timmins. The talented team that would run the station was brought together. Many would later go on to careers at larger stations. Among them were Roch Demers, Yvan Ducharme, Jean-Pierre Coallier, Raymond Lemay, Gaston Bergeron, Henri Saint-Georges, Ted Meunier, Pierre Stein, Aurèle Lacoste, Roger Poirier, Robert De Blois and Jean De Villiers.¹⁶

Businesses from Kirkland Lake to Hearst enthusiastically endorsed the project by buying advertising.¹⁷ The station's success sprang from the fact that it presented local talent and covered local events. Its journalists, artists, technicians and business people were enthused by the opportunity to work locally in French. And the broadcast of so many voices of residents from the area served by the station created a sense of community among a population dispersed over a very large area.

The euphoria lasted for months as listeners called from far and wide to make requests and dedications. The programming of the station was at least 80 per cent in French and, in addition to English shows, there were also broadcasts in Italian and Ukrainian.¹⁸ Personal dedications were so popular that the program "Curb Service" was created. An English title was used, since many of the regular listeners of the station were Anglophone. In order to let passersby make live dedications, the host stood on the sidewalk in front of the station with a microphone. The response was so great that police officers had to direct traffic around the station.¹⁹

Among the other most popular shows were "Les nouvelles de chez nous" (local news), "Le chapelet en famille" (the rosary) and "Le hockey des Canadiens" (The Canadians hockey). "Les deux Jeanne" (The two Jeannes) was the very successful morning show hosted by Jeanne Larcher and Jeanne de Cayen. Many listeners wrote to say they enjoyed the live piano music played by Jeanne Larcher and also the recipes, poems, news of social events and guests. "René and Georgette", "Les Hirondelles" (The Swallows), and "Le quatuor des Gais Lurons" (Gais Lurons Quartet) were also hits, along with "Radio Pierrot" which brought an entire elementary school class to the studio for each show. "L'histoire de Charles Martel" (The Charles Martel story) caused life in the North to stop for a half hour every weekday so that listeners could follow the story that was written by Robert De Blois from Cochrane and presented by the staff of the station. Local hockey was broadcast once a week. Musicians also contributed to the station's success, in particular the bands of Hank Kelneck and Gene Crocco from Timmins, Al Pierini from Ansonville, Gene Longstree from Matheson, and Ti-Gus Saint-Aubin. In the summer, weekend broadcasts were made from the parish halls from Val Gagné to Hearst.²⁰ Through its affiliation with Radio-Canada, CFCL broadcast programs from Quebec such as "Un homme et son péché" (A man and his sin) and "Yvan l'intrépide" (Yvan the intrepid).²¹

The atmosphere created by the launch of the CFCL radio station was extraordinary. In the words of the ACFÉO, "You had to be in Timmins during the first few weeks after the inauguration of CFCL to see the happiness our compatriots felt by being able to have a more intimate contact with their French identity through the radio. Everywhere you went you could hear the station, CFCL, the French voice of Northern Ontario. You could hear songs whose tunes touched your heart and brought words to your lips that the years have not been able to erase. You heard traditional music and various and uplifting rhythms that made your worries disappear and made your heart want to grow and stay faithful to your heritage."²² The hundreds of messages received by the station from listeners included many expressions of gratitude: "You would not believe how happy we are to be able to hear French in our homes all day long"; "A heartfelt thanks to Mr. Lavigne for the wonderful programs that we listen to in our language."²³

The founding of the station was a landmark in the cultural development of the northern Franco-Ontarian communities. An editorial in *Le Droit* described the profound impact of the station in the context of the survival of French-Canadian culture in Ontario. It noted that the station increased the part played by the French language in the public life of Timmins. The daily features on French life in the region taught cultural pride, the love of one's maternal language, the importance of sending children to French schools and of furthering their education. Because CFCL re-broadcast programs from Radio-Canada, listeners to CFCL benefited from access to the best programs on the French network. These re-broadcasted programs also meant that CFCL provided continual contact between the French Canadians of the region and elsewhere in Canada.²⁴

Building on his experience with CFCL radio, Lavigne went on to start the first television station in Timmins in 1955. It also had the call letters CFCL and broadcast mainly in English, with 20 hours of French programming a week. Lavigne explained the decision to open an English station as being based on a business imperative: the costs associated with television programming were greater than those of radio broadcasting and the population of the broadcast area was not large enough to support both French and English stations. The television station greatly diminished the radio audience, and many of the best radio personalities left radio in order to do television.²⁵ Lavigne sold CFCL radio in 1980, and the station maintained its call letters until another sale in 1990, when it became CKOY, then later CHYK.²⁶

From his entry into television with CFCL, Lavigne went on to build the largest privately owned television network in the world – the Mid-Canada Television System. In Ontario, its broadcast area extended from Moosonee to Ottawa, and from Hearst and Chapleau to Mattagami, Quebec, using four originating stations and a dozen re-broadcasting towers linked across 1,600 miles (1,000 km) of microwave systems.²⁷ In 1980, when the CRTC refused permission for a cable network in the North, citing the danger of a monopoly, Lavigne divested himself of his broadcast holdings.²⁸

Since CFCL began broadcasting, French stations have been gradually created throughout the province. In 1957, CHNO in Sudbury was split into an English station that retained the original call letters, and a French station called CFBR. Radio-Canada began establishing French stations in the province beginning in the 1960s. After years of effort, Toronto received a French station when the CBC station CJBC changed from English to French in 1964. The same year, station CBOF started broadcasting in Ottawa. By 1969, there were six French radio stations in the province.²⁹ There was no French radio broadcasting in southwestern Ontario until CBEF-Windsor was created in 1970. Beginning in the late 1980s, a push was made to create community stations in French by the Mouvement des intervenant.e.s en communication radio de l'Ontario (MICRO) – radio communication advocates for Ontario – resulting in stations in Penetanguishene, Hearst, Cornwall-Alexandria, Kapuskasing and in the Nipissing region. There is also a community radio station in Sudbury.

CFCL's inauguration and first years were a golden moment in the history of French radio in Ontario.

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¹ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in J. Conrad Lavigne, *Tours de force*, Ottawa, L'Interligne, 1993, p. 110.

² *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 109.

³ *Tours de force*, p. 106.

⁴ *Tours de force*, p. 98.

⁵ See the documentary film on Lavigne, *J. Conrad Lavigne: tours de force*, TFO, 2003.

⁶ Stéphan Larose and Greg M. Nielsen, "Médias et altérité: l'espace public et l'Ontario français virtuel", in Jacques Cotnam, Yves Frenette and Agnes Whitfield, Eds., *La francophonie ontarienne: Bilan et perspectives de recherche*, Ottawa, Le Nordir, 1995, p. 298.

⁷ *La Presse*, January 12, 1951, in *Tours de force*, p. 99.

⁸ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 107.

⁹ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 108.

¹⁰ *Tours de force*, p. 100.

¹¹ *La Presse*, January 12, 1951, in *Tours de force*, p. 99.

¹² *La Presse*, January 12, 1951, in *Tours de force*, p. 99. See also a letter from Edmond Cloutier, Secretary of ACFÉO and an excerpt from an ACFÉO report on the pages devoted to the radio on the website *La présence française en Ontario : 1610, passeport pour 2010*, www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport.

¹³ *La Presse*, January 12, 1951, in *Tours de force*, p. 99.

¹⁴ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 108.

¹⁵ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 108.

¹⁶ *Tours de force*, p. 117.

¹⁷ *Tours de force*, p. 106.

¹⁸ *Le Droit*, February 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 105.

¹⁹ *Tours de force*, p. 111.

²⁰ *Tours de force*, p. 111-114, p. 123.

²¹ *Le Droit*, January 16, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 108.

²² *Le Droit*, January 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 119.

²³ *Le Droit*, January 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 119.

²⁴ *Le Droit*, 1952, in *Tours de force*, p. 120.

²⁵ *Tours de force*, p. 129.

²⁶ The Bill Dulmage Radio and Television Archive website, www.billdulmage.com/history/timmins.html

²⁷ Canadian Communications Foundation website, www.rcc.ryerson.ca/ccf/personal/hof/lavign_c.html, and the obituary of Conrad Lavigne on the *Daily Press*, Timmins, website, www.timminspress.com/webapp/sitepages/gencontent.asp?contentID=29389&catname=Obituaries.

²⁸ Canadian Communications Foundation website, www.rcc.ryerson.ca/ccf/personal/hof/lavign_c.html.

²⁹ *Larose*, p. 301.