

On Thursday, September 14, 2006 at 4:30 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Town of Hearst unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating the French Presence in Hearst at Grotto Park in Hearst, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

### **THE FRENCH PRESENCE IN HEARST**

French Canadians began to settle in Hearst in 1912 during the construction of the National Transcontinental Railway. Most came to farm but soon turned to the more lucrative forest industry. Sawmills established by French Canadians prospered as family enterprises for decades, before being amalgamated into large forest-product companies by the end of the 20th century. Over the years, the French-speaking community in Hearst – once a minority – grew to 89% of the population with Francophones taking on leading cultural, economic and political roles. Institutions such as the Catholic Church and the Université de Hearst, founded in 1953, have played important roles in Franco-Ontarian education and society.

### **LA PRÉSENCE FRANÇAISE À HEARST**

Les Canadiens français commencèrent à s'établir à Hearst en 1912 durant la construction du Chemin de fer National Transcontinental. La plupart d'entre eux étaient venus pour cultiver la terre, mais se tournèrent vite vers l'industrie forestière, plus lucrative. Des scieries familiales créées par des Canadiens français prospérèrent pendant des décennies, avant de fusionner en de grosses sociétés de produits forestiers à la fin du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Au fil des ans, la communauté francophone de Hearst – jadis une minorité – finit par représenter 89 % de la population, les Francophones assumant des rôles de chef de file dans les domaines culturel, économique et politique. Des institutions comme l'Église catholique et l'Université de Hearst, fondée en 1953, jouèrent un rôle important dans l'éducation des Franco-Ontariens et au sein de la société franco-ontarienne.

## **Historical background**

### **French-Canadian settlement**

At the time of Hearst's creation, the Ontario government was encouraging settlement in the northern Ontario Great Clay Belt region in order to stimulate economic development in the province.<sup>1</sup> French Canadians were among the first settlers to arrive in Hearst in 1912 during construction of the National Transcontinental Railway that began to serve the town the following year. By 1920, about 100 French-Canadian families lived in Hearst<sup>2</sup>, whose population was mostly Eastern European and British.

The French-Canadian nationalist clergy saw the opening of Ontario's north as an opportunity to encourage a French-Canadian presence by establishing agricultural communities that would create a continuous band of Franco-Ontarian settlement extending to the existing French community of Saint-Boniface, Manitoba.<sup>3</sup> Bishop Joseph Hallé was nominated to the Hearst appointment in 1919 and became head of the Catholic Church in the area. Characterized as an "entrepreneur en colonization,"<sup>4</sup> he was a major force in recruiting and helping to settle native Quebeckers in the area. His vision was clear:

We need to set up Catholics, families, parishes, and a diocese in the huge uninhabited area between Lake Superior and Hudson Bay. We need to complete the vast loop that will unite the two groups of Canadian Catholics. We need to establish a vibrant line of Catholics along the railway tracks that go through forests from east to west like steel strands ...<sup>5</sup>

French Canadians were recruited through advertisements in Quebec newspapers and church sermons given by Bishop Hallé<sup>6</sup> and by Fathers Zénon Alary, Zoël Lambert and Joseph Payette, among others.<sup>7</sup> Bishop Hallé recruited members of his and his colleague's families to settle in Hearst,<sup>8</sup> and Father Ouellette recruited two of his nephews.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Bernard, *Le travail et l'espoir*, Hearst, Le Nordir, 1991, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Gaetan Vallières, *L'Ontario français par les documents*, Montréal, Éditions Études Vivantes, 1980, p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> Danielle Coulombe, *Coloniser et enseigner. Le rôle du clergé et la contribution des Sœurs de Notre-Dame du Perpétuel Secours à Hearst 1917-1942*, Ottawa, Le Nordir, 1998, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, "Brillant concert sacré donné à l'église Notre-Dame, en l'honneur du Préfet apostolique de Hearst, par l'Union Musicale de Québec", *La Lumière*, vol. VII, no 25, June 28, 1919, p. 3, in Coulombe, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Société historique, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Gens de chez nous*, Hearst, Les Éditions Cantinales, 1997, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Société historique, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> *Gens*, p. 27.

## Farming and forestry

While the Catholic clergy had a divine vision in mind when they encouraged colonization, many if not most of the migrants went to Hearst for economic reasons. To support the French-Canadian farmers, an agricultural and dairy cooperative was formed, as well as a section of the Union des cultivateurs catholiques.<sup>10</sup> Bishop Hallé recognized that, in order for agriculture to flourish in this vast region where the only means of transport and communication was the "ruban d'acier"<sup>11</sup> of rails, there was a critical need for roads and bridges. He lobbied the provincial government to provide funds for infrastructure improvement.<sup>12</sup>

The Hearst area did not lend itself to farming due to its heavy clay soil, preponderance of rock and short summer season, so settlers practised a mixture of farming and forestry.<sup>13</sup> As it became evident that farming was less profitable than forestry, the balance of economic activity shifted in favour of the forest industry, although many people also maintained a small farm.

By the 1920s, some farms had already become deserted and agricultural expansion in the area had stopped.<sup>14</sup> Bishop Hallé regretted the French-Canadians' tendency to abandon agriculture and to follow "their lumberjack mentality." He hoped that the younger generation could be persuaded through education to return to agriculture.<sup>15</sup>

## From Quebec to Ontario

French-Canadian immigrants to Hearst came from different regions that varied with the period of migration. For the period 1916-1930, two-thirds of the immigrants came from the Beauce region of Quebec, located south of Quebec City. During the decade of the Great Depression, Montreal became an important point of origin. In the 1940s and 1950s, most people came from northwestern Quebec, especially from Abitibi, and later from the Gaspé region during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

Sixty to seventy-five per cent of the immigrants, depending on the period, worked as farm workers or were employed in the forest or wood industries prior to leaving Quebec. Half worked as lumbermen in their first job after arrival, and one in three worked in agriculture.<sup>17</sup> Moving from Quebec to Ontario was not a significant change for immigrants. Indeed,

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<sup>10</sup> Société historique, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous in Coulombe, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Coulombe, pp. 78-79.

<sup>13</sup> Nelles, H.V. (Henry Vivian), *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines, and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941*, Hamden, Connecticut, Archon Books, 1974, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard pp. 44-47.

<sup>15</sup> Coulombe, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard, pp. 51-55.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard, p. 161.

recruitment publicity downplayed the differences between Quebec and Ontario. The area was presented as an extension of northern Quebec, and the provincial border was not always drawn on illustrations contained in recruitment materials.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, given that cultural and religious institutions, primarily the Catholic Church, were established very early, it could be said of the migration: "it was not a case of uprooting, but rather of a Quebec development project in Ontario."<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, although French-Canadian migrants came to Hearst with the intention of improving their economic lot, for many, the first years were actually a step down the socioeconomic ladder. Among the people who arrived before 1940, only three per cent had previously lived in log cabins in their place of origin, while 50 per cent of them had a log cabin as their first residence in the Hearst area.<sup>20</sup>

### First institutions

Institutions built on the model of those in Quebec helped French-Canadian culture take root in the new settlement. Missionaries served the French-Canadian community from 1912 to 1919 when Bishop Hallé arrived and founded the parish of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Hearst.<sup>21</sup> By the following year, the French-speaking community had a rectory, a church and a school. In 1947, a parish hall was added, and the cathedral was built in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup> These buildings served religious purposes and were also used for social gatherings in which the community sang, danced to the music of fiddlers and played cards.<sup>23</sup> For some people in the early days, the demands of work and the lack of good roads meant that Sunday mass was their only social activity.<sup>24</sup>

Hearst's separate school board was created in 1917.<sup>25</sup> The Soeurs de Notre-Dame du Perpétuel Secours arrived in 1920 and opened a convent school that had day and residential students, as well as an orphanage.<sup>26</sup> French was the language of communication and instruction, a practice that contravened Regulation 17 that strictly limited the use of French in Ontario's classrooms between 1912 and 1927.<sup>27</sup>

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18 Bernard, p. 65.

19 Bernard, p. 66.

20 Bernard, pp. 203-205.

21 Bernard, p. 280.

22 *Album-Souvenir*, p. 27.

23 Société historique, p. 60.

24 Société historique, p. 89.

25 Coulombe, p. 13.

26 *Album-Souvenir*, p. 35.

27 Coulombe, pp. 80-81.

The growth of the French-Canadian population, specifically in the Hearst area, resulted in the creation in 1920 of the Vicariate Apostolic of Northern Ontario that became the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hearst in 1938. In 1954, the Diocese of Hearst had 28 parishes, some 50 missions and 25,000 faithful. Over the years, many parish-based organizations were created to serve the religious and social needs of the community: Dames de Sainte-Anne, Congrégation des enfants de Marie,<sup>28</sup> Cercle Notre-Dame,<sup>29</sup> Ligue du Sacré-Coeur, Femmes chrétiennes, Croisade eucharistique (also known as the J.E.M.), Femmes canadiennes-françaises, Filles d'Isabelle, Chevaliers de Colomb, Richelieu club, girl guides and boy scouts.<sup>30</sup>

In 1953, St. Paul's Hospital, which had been run by a protestant group, was for sale. Bishop Louis Lévesque, aware of the desire to provide Catholic health services to the area, arranged for the sale of the facility to the Catholic Sisters of Charity of Providence from Ste-Agathe, Quebec. It was renamed Hôpital Notre-Dame Hospital.<sup>31</sup> In 1955, another parish was founded – Saint-Pie X – to meet the needs of the growing French-Canadian population. By 2004, there were 35 parishes and missions, and the diocese numbered about 30,000.<sup>32</sup>

### **French-Canadian lumber barons**

Some of the pulp and paper operations owned property outright or had cutting rights on Crown Land surrounding Hearst. During the first decades, lumbermen cut wood and sold it to the pulp industry through wholesalers. Gradually, sawmills set up as family enterprises successfully negotiated rights to harvest timber and replaced pulp and paper as the dominant industry. In contrast to many other towns in the north, multinationals did not dominate the scene in Hearst during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup>

From the 1930s to the 1960s, entrepreneurs – mainly immigrants from Quebec – established lumber mills in and around Hearst for the production of “bois d'oeuvre,” locating them according to the availability of wood. During this period, sawmills were set up and moved according to need. Lumbermen followed the work, living in camps while they followed the wood from cutting to transporting.<sup>34</sup> During the 1960s, the industry became more mechanized, which necessitated permanent installations that were established on the outskirts of Hearst. Companies became integrated so that they controlled the entire process from cutting and sales

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<sup>28</sup> Société historique, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> *Gens*, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, p. 46, and website of Hôpital Notre-Dame Hospital [www.ndh.on.ca/homepage/English/About%20the%20Hospital/1briefhistpage.html](http://www.ndh.on.ca/homepage/English/About%20the%20Hospital/1briefhistpage.html).

<sup>32</sup> Robert Choquette, *La foi gardienne de la langue en Ontario, 1900-1950*, Montréal, Bellarmin, 1987, p. 80, and website Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, [www.occb.on.ca/english/occb.html](http://www.occb.on.ca/english/occb.html).

<sup>33</sup> Bernard, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard, p. 48.

to transport of the products. These companies were controlled by local families.<sup>35</sup> Four families were particularly prominent in Hearst's sawmills: the Fontaines, Lecours, Lévesques and Gosselins.<sup>36</sup> The 1970s was a very prosperous decade and, by the end of this period, there were approximately 25 millionaires in Hearst, among a population of some 6,000.<sup>37</sup> In 1977, in the six wood manufacturing companies in the Hearst area, these four family companies provided 706 of the 901 jobs.<sup>38</sup> Their ascendancy in this sector was typical of the situation across Ontario: by the 1980s the sawmill industry in the province was dominated by a dozen Franco-Ontarian lumber barons.<sup>39</sup> However, the early 1980s eventually proved to be difficult years due to a large decline in construction across North America.

### **The Fontaine family**

The Fontaine family is a good example of the trajectory of the French-Canadian presence in Hearst. Noé Fontaine started one of the larger sawmills in the Hearst area during the 1940s and went on to build several in different towns in northern Ontario. His son Zacharie consolidated them all in Hearst in the 1960s. Noé's grandson René amalgamated the family business with two others, and was a partner in the resulting United Sawmills. Hearst's sawmills survived further consolidations.<sup>40</sup>

René Fontaine was mayor for 14 years, ending in 1980. It was during his time in office, and thanks to his efforts, that Hearst's municipal administration began to function bilingually in 1978 (until then all was in English).<sup>41</sup> To honour this legacy, the local airport bears his name.

### **French-Canadian dominance**

The rise in importance of the economic role played by French-Canadian citizens ran parallel to the increase in the French presence in Hearst. In 1941, people of French-Canadian ancestry represented 56.2 per cent of the population. Over the next 40 years, the French-Canadian population multiplied by six and, in 1981, made up 84.7 per cent of the population.<sup>42</sup> In 2001, francophones constituted 88.9 per cent of Hearst's population.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bernard, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Arnopoulos, p. 140.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard, p. 279.

<sup>39</sup> Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos, *Voices from French Ontario*, Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Arnopoulos, pp. 140-143.

<sup>41</sup> Arnopoulos, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard, pp. 48-49.

<sup>43</sup> According to the 2001 Canadian Census, website Office des Affaires francophones de l'Ontario, [www.ofa.gov.on.ca](http://www.ofa.gov.on.ca).

French Canadians became dominant not only in the forest products industry and associated supporting trades but also in other areas of business. During Hearst's early years, 98 per cent of the city's businesses were owned by Anglophones and Bulgarian immigrants. By the end of the 1960s, francophones owned the majority of stores and hotels, and also had considerable ownership in motels, garages and gas stations.<sup>44</sup> They were represented in a wide variety of occupations, including medicine, education, accounting and insurance.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Blossoming of a northern cultural centre**

Franco-Ontarian economic and demographic ascendancy was accompanied by the flowering of Franco-Ontarian culture. One institution in particular has played an important and ever-growing role in this area. The Séminaire de Hearst was founded in 1953 by Bishop Louis Lévesque to offer secondary-level studies to francophone boys. Its larger mission was to prepare French-Canadian leaders. The institution began offering university courses in 1959, became a public university in 1971 and became affiliated with Laurentian University in 1963.<sup>46</sup> During the 1990s, satellite campuses offering full-time study programs were created in Timmins and Kapuskasing. The institution then adopted the name Université de Hearst.

The Université has always been a strong supporter of the arts. La Pitoune (a word meaning log) – a cultural centre located at the Université in the 1970s – offered a place for musicians, painters, photographers and poets to develop and share their work. A puppet theatre, La Fabrik à Pantouf, was created there in 1972 and toured Northern Ontario, giving shows until the end of the decade.<sup>47</sup>

The 1970s was a time of cultural and social effervescence in Hearst. The rise of feminism resulted in the creation of two organizations: the Association Parmi-Elles and Franco-femmes.<sup>48</sup> The French-language weekly newspaper *Le Nord* was first published in 1976. With a circulation of 1,600 at its debut, it had a circulation of 3,500 by the year 2000, and its distribution extended from Longlac in the west to Smooth Rock Falls in the east.<sup>49</sup> The Conseil des Arts de Hearst held its first meeting in 1977. It has been active in the development of theatre, festivals

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<sup>44</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> *Album-Souvenir*, p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> Website for Université de Hearst, [www.univhearst.edu/historique.html](http://www.univhearst.edu/historique.html).

<sup>47</sup> CRCCF, Site La présence française en Ontario: 1610, passeport pour 2010, [www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport/II/B2a/II/B2a12-6.html](http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport/II/B2a/II/B2a12-6.html).

<sup>48</sup> Danielle Juteau and Lise Séguin-Kimpton, "La collectivité franco-ontarienne: structuration d'un espace symbolique et politique", in Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Les Franco-Ontariens*, Ottawa, Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1993, p. 271.

<sup>49</sup> Website for *Le Nord*, [www.lenord.on.ca/entree.htm](http://www.lenord.on.ca/entree.htm).

and community radio, including the Théâtre de l'Épinette noire, and the community station Radio de l'Épinette noire CINN-FM.<sup>50</sup>

In the 1980s, francophone poets began publishing in a broad range of styles. Three poets who grew up in Hearst gave voice to local experience – Guy Lizotte and Michel Vallières found inspiration in the simplicity of people living close to the earth, while Réginald Bélair spoke of the difficulties of the worker's life.<sup>51</sup> The publishing house Le Nordir was founded in 1988 at the Université de Hearst. In the 1990s, Les Éditions Cantinales, associated with the publisher Omer Cantin of the newspaper *Le Nord*, began publishing works showcasing the francophones of Hearst and the surrounding region.<sup>52</sup> A campus of the Collège Boréal opened in the city in 1995.<sup>53</sup>

### **An expression of Franco-Ontarian life in the north**

Franco-Ontarian life in Hearst is characterized by factors affecting the French-speaking population throughout Northern Ontario – geographic isolation, the dependency on natural resources, domination of a single industry and the desire to preserve Franco-Ontarian heritage. Over the years, the French-Canadian community in Hearst has grown from being a minority to comprising 89 per cent of the total population. Although in its early years the French-speaking population focused on farming and lumbering, today francophones play a leading role in a wide variety of commercial and cultural activities that reflect the community's strong and vibrant Franco-Ontarian heritage.

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<sup>50</sup> Website for Le Conseil des Arts de Hearst, [www.conseildesarts-hearst.ca](http://www.conseildesarts-hearst.ca).

<sup>51</sup> René Dionne, "La littérature franco-ontarienne : esquisse historique (1610-1987)", in Jaenen, pp. 380-381.

<sup>52</sup> Website for *Le Nord*, [www.lenord.on.ca/entree.htm](http://www.lenord.on.ca/entree.htm).

<sup>53</sup> Website for Collège Boréal, [www.boreal.on.ca](http://www.boreal.on.ca).