*[French Canadian Textile Worker]*

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Subject: Living Lore in New England THE FRENCH CANADIAN TEXTILE WORKER

By Philippe Lemay Reported by Louis Pare

"French Canadians from the province of Quebec have worked in the mills of Manchester for a long, time. There was one as far back as 1833, and for more than 50 years they kept on coming until

now we are 35,000 strong, 40% of the entire population of the city. Ours is said to be the largest

single nationality group.

I am going to tell you as well as I can the story of the French Canadian textile worker; what

brought him here; how he came, lived, worked, played and suffered until he was recognized as a

patriotic, useful and respected citizen, no longer a 'frog' and 'pea soup eater,' a despised Canuck.

And it's the story of all the French Canadians who settled in New England mill towns. Some came before, as you will see, others after, as long as there was no limit by law on immigration, no head-

tax nor passport required.

Why did our people leave Canada and come to the States? Because they had to make sure of a

living for their family and themselves for a number of years, and because they greatly needed

money. The wages paid by textile mills was the attraction.

Here and wherever else they went, they didn't forget their duty to God: the churches, schools and

other institutions they built testify to that. But their duty to the country that was feeding them, that was another thing. They didn't like to become citizens and feared it for more than one reason. Theycouldn't speak English, and that, let me tell you, was a big handicap. They were afraid of war and might be drafted. Most of them were still tax-payers in the province of Quebec and the different

places from which they came, and they felt that they couldn't pay taxes here too. Most of then

hadn't come here to stay. What they wanted most was to go back to their Canadian farms with the money earned in the textile mills.

You would like to have me introduce myself? Because it will lead me up to my first job in the

mills, I will try to satisfy you, but we'll make it short, because there are so many things much more

interesting to tell.

I was born in St. Ephrem d'Upton, P.Q., not far from St. Hyacinthe and Montreal, June 29, 1856. I was the fourth in a family of fourteen children, five of whom are still living. I told you that my

mother was of good old Canadian stock. She was 97 years old when she died. My father was killed in an accident while at work; he was 80 and in perfect health, so he might have lived for quite a

few more years, don't you think so?

When we came here in 1872, we lived in 'Squog, on the west side of the river. After I was marriedI occupied the same tenement for 44 1/2 years in an Amoskeag corporation house, on the north side of Stark Street, between Elm and Canal Streets. For the last ten years, we have lived in this

cottage I own on Candia Road, near Lake Massabesic. I have with as my granddaughter, the

housekeeper, and her son, 17 years old and a Freshman at St. Anselm's College.

In 1871, there were about two thousand French Canadians in the city. After Father Chevalier's

coming and the opening of the first church in 1873, immigration was speeded up for a while, as

many as five or six families arriving on the Canadian train, the train du Canada, every day.

What was the pay of these earliest settlers? Well, in 1845, Michel Cote mixed mortar for five

shillings a day, but in the mills where every other French Canadian was employed, the pay was

fifty cents a day and the board cost two dollars a week. The workday began at five o'clock in the morning and finished at eight o'clock at night. The workers had a half hour off for breakfast, dinner and supper. Later, every day of the week, in summer as inwinter, the working hours of mill hands were from six in the morning till 6 at night and that schedule was continued for many years.

Nobody complained because everybody was happy and contented. It was good to have a steady job and a steady pay with the assurance that you didn't have to loaf unless you wanted to. During my fifty-three years in the local mills, I have seen a seventy-five percent improvement.

New looms in which the machine stopped if a thread broke were introduced about 1885 and saved much time and cloth. Ring spinning succeeded fly spinning with fine results for everybody. In 1872, the mills made fancy shirting, fleeced and plain cotton cloth, as well as blue and brown drilling for frocks and over-alls; then came gingham and ticking and finally woolens, worsteds, every kind of

textile product.

Each spring and fall, it seems, the older immigrants had a touch of homesickness. Most of them

still had farms in old Quebec. "I want to see if it is still where I left it," they'd smilingly tell the

boss when they asked permission to be away for five or six weeks. So they went back to Canada

twice a year. While there, they visited friends and relatives, that's sure, but their principal reason

was a serious one, and they had to make many sacrifices in order to save up enough money to pay railroad fares and other necessary expenses.

At heart, Monsieur, they were still farmers like their ancestors had been, and they wanted to get

something out of those farms, some of which had been in the family for many generations. In the

spring, they attended to ploughing, harrowing and sowing; in the fall, to the harvesting of the crops. During the summer, some relative or neighbor kindly gave a look once in a while to see that all

was well.

Many French Canadian textile workers got well deserved promotions. Theophile Marchand, better

known as John, was one of my own second hands, and I recommended him. He was a boss just

three days, then he came back to his old job with me, after telling the superintendent that he'd be

happier and healthier that way. 'An overseer's job has too many worries,' he said. 'The first thing

you know, I'd be loafing because I was sick, and I can't afford to do that, because I have quite a

family to support.' And so, my friend Tofil had the distinction of being the first French Canadian,

perhaps the first one of any nationality group, to refuse an overseer's job.

Now, the surviving French Canadian textile workers of long ago, their children, grandchildren and

great-grandchildren have won the respect and esteem of their fellow-citizens. Yes, a we surely have found our place in the sun of American liberty. Franco-Americans are prominent in all lines of

business and many are quite successful in politics. Since 1918, Manchester has had four mayors and they were all Franco-Americans. We have distinguished doctors, lawyers, educators, judges, artists, architects, bankers and clergyman, one of these having been the third bishop of Manchester for 25

years.

To what do we owe our success? I believe we owe it to the self-sacrificing French Canadian

immigrants from old Quebec, to the courage that made them refuse to accept defeat and quit when

that would have seemed the natural thing to do; to the cheerfulness that carried us through our trials and tribulation and helps us old-timers to wait happily for the final bell calling us home to rest

after our long, hard life in the textile mills.