

Francophones in B.C., A Long and Continuing History

By Maurice Guibord, Historian and President, Société historique francophone de la C.-B.

The *Société historique francophone de la Colombie-Britannique* (SHFCB) was formed in 2009, with the mandate of collecting, archiving and disseminating the historical facts documenting the history of Francophones in B.C., right up to its very vibrant presence today. A very young history, some might say. Ah yes, there's Maillardville, some might remember. But in fact, that history goes back to the 1790s, when the first European explorers arrived in what would later become British Columbia.

Indeed, Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson were all accompanied by documented teams of French-Canadian Voyageurs on their expeditions. The fur trading posts built by the Hudson's Bay Company that followed also depended heavily on their largely French-Canadian and French-speaking Métis employees to operate. Chinook, the language spoken with the Native inhabitants in this commerce, was actually half-composed of French words. Many of these workers chose to remain in this new territory, where they settled with their wives from nearby First Nations. Before the Gold Rush of the 1850s, some 60% of the Europeans living west of the Rockies were French-Canadians.

Many of the first wave of missionaries were also Francophones, from eastern Canada and from France and Belgium. Many came to the Oregon Territory (today's Washington, Oregon and Idaho states), where the HBC operated its headquarters at Fort Vancouver, another mostly Francophone outpost. In 1838, Modeste Demers, from Lévis, Québec, was the first missionary to arrive in the continental part of the colony, then named New Caledonia. He would become the first Catholic bishop of Vancouver Island. Six of the first seven bishops of Victoria would actually be Francophones - Canadians and Belgians - and several more would follow to this day.



St. Jean-Baptiste Day Picnic, Queen's Park, New Westminster, June 28, 1936. (SHFCB)

Demers brought in the Sisters of Sainte-Anne from Montreal to set up Fort Victoria's first school and hospitals. Their presence in Victoria, as well as that of other Francophone religious orders, brought about the erection of stately buildings in the French / Québécois style that can still be admired in that city and around the province, in the numerous areas that asked for their services. The taint of their involvement with residential schools in these edifices, however, sadly darkens their legacy somewhat.

Francophones, both lay and religious, also helped establish several other cities and towns in B.C. - Quesnel, Mission, Kelowna, Maillardville/Coquitlam, Meritt, and Kamloops, among others. Father Charles Pandosy, from France, for example, brought in the first cattle, grape vines and fruit trees into the area that would become Kelowna. Over 500 French place names dot our provincial landscape, some of them with roots that have already dissolved into the mists of our past. Given the illiteracy of most of the original French-Canadian settlers, written records from them are nearly non-existent. We are mostly left to the

records of the HBC and the missionaries to compile their histories. Still, ongoing research is being published. Historian Jack Little's biography of a Quebec Premier who became Lieutenant-Governor of B.C. in the early 1900s, Sir Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière, has just been released, and historian Jean Barman's *History of Francophones in B.C.* will appear in the spring; she promises to revolutionize B.C. history as we know it.

The SHFCB has inherited some 200 cases of archival materials and a related library from a previous historical society with a similar mandate that ceased its operations some fifteen years ago. What must now be done is to catalogue the collection anew and then to follow up on the numerous leads and invitations from all over the province to add regional materials to that archives. New areas of interest include the documentation of several more recent Francophone nuclei in the province, from the Caribbean, Africa and south-east Asia. Once the collection is documented, it will be reopened to public access, in the SHFCB's new storage cum office space in La Maison de la Francophonie in Vancouver. Stay tuned for its grand opening in January 2014!