

**THE MUSHRAT FRENCH: THE SURVIVAL OF FRENCH CANADIAN
FOLKLIFE ON THE AMERICAN SIDE OF *LE DÉTROT***

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Historically, the Detroit River Region was one community, but time and an international border created two different French-Canadian identities. It is clear that the Canadian identity revolves around language—look for example, at the word francophone in the title of this conference: I would venture to say that ninety-five per cent of the people of French descent on my side of the Detroit River would not have a clue as to what the word means. On the American side language has surprisingly little to do with the French identity of the descendants of the *Canadiens* pioneers.

My approach to the *Canadiens* of the Detroit is different from that of most of the scholars here, too. I view the community through the discipline of folklife—a holistic combination of material culture, foodways, and oral traditions.

There are several old French enclaves on the American side of the river. A number are in Macomb County to the north. To the south there are concentrations of old families in Downriver Detroit and along the Lake Erie shore from Toledo to Sandusky, Ohio. Specifically, my paper concentrates on the French-Canadian community in Monroe County, Michigan—the county just south of Detroit. Through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century this was the largest, and culturally the most cohesive, of the old French settlements on the American side.

Centered in Monroe County is the old River Raisin—*Rivière aux Raisins*—settlement. In the 1780s and 90s *Canadiens* from Detroit moved here, establishing a place for their French culture to flourish. The community grew fast. A census taken in 1796 enumerated 430 people. At a time when observers commented that Detroit was a mixture of English, Scots, Dutch, Yankees, and French, on the River Raisin, ninety eight per cent of the surnames were French. A full fifty one per cent of the men on the 1796 census were native-born

Detroiters. On the eve of the War of 1812 another census counted 1,340 people here.¹

The River Raisin looked Canadian. The settlers laid out their claims in the French long lot pattern—210 individual *rotures*. The landscape architecture—placement of houses, barns, roads, fences, and fields—was right out of *French* Canada, too. This is well documented in a nineteenth century painting of the Lasselle farm by Charles Lanman and by maps such as the circa 1825 rendition of The Michigan Road.²

Monroe County also has the largest and best survival of *Canadien* vernacular architecture in the Detroit River Region. There are almost twenty houses here with recognizable French-Canadian traits. The earliest and most important is the Navarre-Anderson Trading Post. François Marie Navarre *dit* Heutreau erected this house in 1789. Constructed in the *pièce sur pièce* style, it is a classic material connection to both French Canadian culture and the fur trade. Unable to compete with the Yankee carpenters and balloon frame building methods, the traditional building techniques died out here by the 1830s.³

¹"Census of Wayne County, Northwest Territory, September 21, 1796," in ed. Donna Russell, *Michigan Censuses, 1710-1830*, Detroit, Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1982, 66-88; Rev. Fr. Christian Denissen, *Genealogy of the French Families of the Detroit River Region, 1701-1830*, 2 vols., ed. Harold Frederic Powell (Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1976), passim; and "Census of Michigan Territory, 1811," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 40 vols. (Lansing: Wyncoop Hallenbeck Crawford Company, State Printers, 1908), vol. 36, 235.

²Dennis M. Au, "Maps and Archaeology: The French Colonial Settlement Pattern in the River Raisin Community in Southeastern Michigan," paper presented to the French Colonial Historical Society, The Newberry Library, Chicago, 10 May 1991, passim; David C. McCauley, "The River Raisin Settlement, 1796-1812: A French Culture Area" (Masters Thesis, Department of Geography, Eastern Michigan University, 1968), passim; Harry Frederick Orchard, "Charles Lanman: Landscapes and Nature Studies" (exhibit catalog published by the Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences, Morristown, New Jersey, 1983), 1; and David Buisseret, *Mapping the French Empire in North America* (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1991), 56-7.

³Georges Gauthier-Larouche, *Évolution de la maison rurale traditionnelle dans la région de Québec* (Québec: Les presses de l'université Laval, 1974), 23-97; Michel Lessard and Huguette Marquis, *La maison traditionnelle au Québec* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'homme, 1974), 29-78 and 101-292; Dennis M. Au, "Standing for Two Centuries: The Navarre Anderson Trading Post," *Michigan History*, November/December, 1989, 32-6; and Dennis M. Au and Joanna Brode, "The Lingerer Shadow of New France: The French-Canadian Community of Monroe County, Michigan," in *Michigan Folklife Reader*, eds., C. Kurt Dewhurst and Yvonne R. Lockwood (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1987), 325-28.

There has been more archaeological work done on French cultural sites in Monroe County than anywhere else in the Detroit River Region. Archaeologists located and sampled the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century homes of Jean Baptiste Couture, Jean Jacques Godfroy, Jean Baptiste Jérôme, and Hubert Lacroix during surveys of the River Raisin battlefield in the 1970s and 80s. The foundation and rear cellar of the François Navarre *dit* Heutreau home was also explored. All of these were limited excavations, which nevertheless expanded our understanding of the landscape architecture, building techniques, and material culture of the French pioneers.⁴

The excavation of the François Deloeuil house and blacksmith site on the River Raisin, though, represents a large-scale investigation of a site of National Register caliber. At this site I supervised the excavation of an area covering 19,000 square feet. Of most interest were settlement middens from 1789 to 1813 and from 1818 to 1867, two wells, a circa 1818 house, and a blacksmith shop dating from 1789 to 1813. Of particular importance were the insights into the activities of a fur trade blacksmith and the material culture of the early nineteenth century *Canadien* settlers. While the vast majority of artifacts recovered were not specifically associated with the French, a few shards of *faïence de Rouen* and parts from several *fusils fins* were exciting hold-overs from the time of New France.⁵

Monroe County also has other ethnically specific items of material culture in the community's museum and in private collections. Though rather humble looking, the three late eighteenth century side chairs from the Col. François Navarre house in the Monroe County Historical Museum's collection are key items. In every stylistic and construction detail they are classic examples of the *chaises à la Capucine* that were so common in Québec.⁶ On the artistic side there are three pieces of note. A small wallet em-

⁴ Au, "Maps and Archaeology" and Dennis M. Au, C. Stephan Demeter, and Donald J. Weir, "An Historical and Archaeological Investigation of the River Raisin Battle Site of 1813," report prepared for the Monroe County Historical Commission, 1 July 1977, 105, and 111-45.

⁵Dennis M. Au, "A French-Canadian Blacksmith on the River Raisin," *Michigan History*, May/June 1989, 12-17; Dennis M. Au, "François Deloeuil Site, 20MR 229: Field Notes on the Features," report to the Monroe County Historical Commission, 6 September 1995; and Gerald P. Wykes, "An Eye on an Early Michigan Blacksmith: Smithing Artifacts from the Deloeuil Site," *Michigan History*, May/June 1989, 18-23.

⁶Au, "The Lingering Shadow of New France," 328-29; and Jean Palardy, *The Early Furniture of French Canada*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978), 213-26.

broidered by a member of the Lacroix family in 1802 is a wonderful example of floral embellishment. The *tour de force* of embroidery, though, is the self-portrait of Madame Marie Thérèse Lasselle in the Monroe County Historical Museum collection. Beautifully executed in watercolor and silk embroidery thread on silk at the end of the nineteenth century, it is clearly reflective of Madame Lasselle's convent school education in Montréal. This portrait, plus another in the Monroe County Historical Museum collection, an oil portrait of Madame Marie Jérôme of the same era, give us the earliest known images of *Canadien* women of the Detroit River Region.⁷ These portraits and all of the material items discussed are irrefutable cultural markers tying the River Raisin and the Detroit River Region to the St. Lawrence River valley *Canadien* cultural hearth.

Then we have a photograph of Pierre Navarre, grandson of the French royal notary at Detroit. A noted scout in the War of 1812, in 1867 an artist asked him to dress the part for this picture. The important item is the turban affair on his head. This is exactly what the artist George Winter painted on the heads of the Native people of the Miami and Potawatomi tribes of the Maumee-Wabash River basin, the very area where the Navarres were known to be active in the fur trade. This is strong evidence of the other cultural aspect of the Detroit River French, a *Métis* connection.⁸

The War of 1812 and the subsequent decline of the fur trade was the great watershed for the French on the River Raisin and in Detroit. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, then, opened the floodgates to English speaking Yankees. It was not long before the French lost their political and cultural hegemony forever. But by no

⁷Dennis M. Au, "Marie Thérèse Lasselle: A Revolutionary Woman," *Michigan History*, July/August, 1992, 13-17; and Brian Leigh Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 74 and 89.

⁸Au, "Standing for Two Centuries," *Michigan History*, November/December, 1989, 36; Dennis M. Au, "The River Raisin: Portrait of a Southern Great Lakes Fur Trade Community," paper read at the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May, 1996; Jacqueline Peterson, "Many Roads to Red River: Métis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815," in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, eds. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 37-72; and R. David Edmunds, "George Winter: Mirror of Acculturation," in eds. Sarah E. Cooke and Rachel B. Ramadhyani, *Indians and a Changing Frontier: The Art of George Winter* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1993), 26 and 28.

means did this mean that the French simply disappeared or took up English.⁹

Given the importance of language in the Canadian context, it is interesting to note the various examples of linguistic survival in the River Raisin region.

Right from the beginning, the River Raisin settlement had one distinguishing linguistic feature—illiteracy. It was no accident that when the people chose a patron saint for their parish, they chose Saint Antoine of Padua—whom some consider to be the patron saint of the illiterate. Indeed, throughout its history there was *never* an effort to formally teach the French language. The Catholic Church was the only institution that made any effort at all to serve the French speaking population. In the late eighteenth and early nine-teenth century a French Sulpician priest was assigned here. Later in the nineteenth century, the bishop assigned several priests from France and Belgium. While these priests did hear confessions in French and preached homilies in that language, they did little to promote the language among the young.

There was an obvious need to take up English in the nineteenth century. The language was learned in fits and starts. In the middle of that century Father Camillus Maes, the priest at the culturally central St. Mary's parish in Monroe, observed that the more affluent and commercially active families were the first to learn English.¹⁰ Indeed, my research supports this since I found that the last to cling to French in the twentieth century were the poor and commercially isolated families.

University of Michigan linguist Edgar Brandon published a paper on the Monroe community in 1898.¹¹ Brandon found that French "remains in most families the language of the home. It is the language of the church, and is commonly employed in business and social intercourse." Everyone Brandon encountered could speak English, and a majority of people under thirty could write in English. The experience of all of my informants born in the nineteenth century supports these observations. In their pre-teen years, they all spoke only French at home.

The twentieth century saw a rapid decline of the French language here—in part due to intermarriage with other ethnic groups

⁹Russell E. Bidlack, *The Yankee Meets the Frenchman: River Raisin, 1817-1830* (Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1965), passim.

¹⁰Rev. Fr. Camillus P. Maes to Archbishop Elzéar-Alexandre Taschereau, Monroe, Michigan, 22 February 1872, MS, Archives of the Archdiocese of Québec.

¹¹Edgar E. Brandon, "A French Colony in Michigan," *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 13 (April 1898), 242-48.

such as Germans and Irish. All but one of my informants born in this century grew up in households where French was not the primary language. Edward Labadie of LaPlaisance in Monroe County is the one exception. In 1928 he was born of parents at the very end of their childbearing years. His only siblings were much older. When he went to school in 1934 he could not speak English—though he could understand some of it. It is my conclusion that the 1930s was the last decade when French was still the conversational language in some homes.¹² Some of the people who have a respectable command of French I sense have specialized vocabularies. Edward Labadie, for example is very competent when speaking about hunting, fishing, and plants and animals. Marie Germani (néé Fix), is comfortable speaking about food and food preparation.¹³

I am often asked, "Does anyone speak French now?" With the exception of a few who may still recite some prayers in French, the answer is no. If the question is, "*can* anyone speak French?" The answer is yes. Admittedly, for those who can speak, the language represents memory culture from their youth. I asked nearly everyone I interviewed about their ability to speak French. In every single case the people were reticent to speak. They were embarrassed about the French they knew. They believed it was "not good"—which translates they believed it was low class French. Before they opened up to me, I had to overcome a very deep-seated linguistic insecurity. To do this, I usually spent a considerable amount of time building a rapport.

The present generation does certainly recognize French as the language of their ancestors and they may remember their grandparents speaking it. If anyone in the current generation knows any French, it is usually confined to three words, *mim*, *pip*, and *fesse*.

Because my training in French is largely confined to reading, I have not really delved into linguistic details. It is obvious that the French that is spoken is *Canadien* in origin. Ask them to tell you the word for horse and they will give you the classic *Canadien* pronunciation of *cheval*. However, when people such as Father

¹² Dennis M. Au, "Fieldwork Report: The Mushrat French of Southeastern Michigan," October, 1986, report to the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Interview with Clarence "Putsie" Reaume, 24 October 1975, Monroe, MI, tape in the possession of the author; and Interview with Edward Labadie, 1 April 1977, LaPlaisance, MI, tape in the possession of the author; and Interview with Rev. Fr. Lambert LaVoy, 7 September 1976, Erie, MI, and 9 November 1988, Monroe, MI, tapes in the author's possession.

¹³ Au, "Fieldwork Report;" and Interview with Marie Germani, 29 September 1986, Monroe, Michigan, tape on file in the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lambert Lavoy—the most fluent of my informants—have tried to speak the local dialect of French in Québec, they experienced great difficulty being understood. It is obvious that the French spoken here is unique. This was noticed in the late nineteenth century when the *patois* became known as "Mushrat" French.¹⁴

Folksongs do survive on both sides of the Detroit River. Conrad Laforte, the Laval University scholar who compiled the encyclopedic reference of over 60,000 French-Canadian folksongs, was certain there was not a trace left of the French culture on the Canadian side of the Detroit—much less on the American side.¹⁵ This area has turned out to be one of the most fascinating and fertile areas to collect traditional songs. Indeed, practically everyone I interviewed could sing at least a fragment of a folksong.

Because our colleague Marcel Bénéteau has done such a remarkable job of collecting folksongs on the Canadian side, there is material for a few comparative comments. Though weighted very heavily by the intensity of Marcel Bénéteau's collecting, a simple comparison of the number of folksongs in my collection—25—in contrast to what Marcel recorded on the Canadian side—1,700—tells an obvious comparative story of cultural survival.

In sharing notes with Marcel, we found important similarities in the singing traditions. On both sides of the river *Un p'tit coup* is the overwhelming favorite song. Also, on both sides of the river the people do not know what they are supposed to know: the classic voyageur and *Québécois* repertoire recorded by Marius Barbeau. During my interviews I always sang a few bars of songs like *Trois beaux canards*, *À la claire fontaine*, and *Alouette*. With the exception of one informant who remembered hearing *Alouette* later in his life, not a soul knew or had heard these songs. I speculate that isolation from the Quebec and the Francophone media has something to do with this.

The songs I collected are a mixture of drinking tunes, lullabies, and short off-colour and scatological ditties. Many are well represented in archival collections—songs like the lullaby "*La poulette grise*"—the Little Gray Chicken—and "*Un p'tit coup*,"—Take a Little Swig.¹⁶ Sometimes there are unique, local adaptations of well-known

¹⁴ Interview with Rev. Fr. Lambert LaVoy, 7 September 1976, Erie, MI, tape in the possession of the author; Bela Hubbard, *Memorials of a Half-Century* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1887), 118 and 149; and Neil H. Johnson, "The Sugar Bush Speech of the Detroit French Dialect" (Master's thesis, Wayne State University, 1966), 24 and 46.

¹⁵ Letter, Marcel Bénéteau to Dennis Au, Comber, ON, 26 June 1992.

¹⁶ Au, "The Lingering Shadow of New France," 331-336.

songs. When Mrs. Edna Jacobs sang the much loved child's song, // *était une bergère*, instead of the old woman making cheese out of sheep's milk, she is dressing sturgeon—something that would make more sense on the shores of Lake Erie. Then there are a few songs that have either never been documented before, are represented by only a few recordings in the French speaking world, or that are original compositions. Gilbert LaVoy's song about the locals who come and go at the tavern at Pointe au Chênes at the mouth of the Maumee River was composed by his grandfather Moïse LaVoy.¹⁷

The main point is that the songs of the Detroit River Region represent a localized cultural expression that is connected to, but distinct in, the French-speaking world. The songs, just like the language, are largely a part of memory culture on the American side. When my recording session with Clarence "Putsie" Reaume was over, his wife of nearly fifty years commented that she had never heard her husband sing or speak French before.¹⁸ The songs will die out in a generation.

The *loup garou* still lives in Monroe County. I recorded a small, but rich collection of traditional folktales. The entire pantheon is here—the *loup garou*, *le lutin*, *feu follet*, and the devil.

In my fieldwork, I collected only a few "complete" folktales. One of the best of these is Laura Gray's story of "The Devil at the Dance." Gray's grandfather, Eli Cooley, told the tale to her. Though told in English, nearly every element of the story as it came to North America from France is present and vividly recounted—the young girl longing to meet more sophisticated city men, a mysterious stranger appearing, the parents sensing trouble, the girl going to the dance with the stranger, the babies crying in the corner, the stranger claiming the girl, the priest coming to the rescue with holy water, the girl returning to the arms of her father, and the realization that the stranger was the devil after he is driven away.¹⁹

Just as with the songs, though, most of the stories I encountered are fragmentary. Some of the tales are faithful to the traditional formulas; other tales have been highly localized. The stories of the *loup garou* represent this well. Following the formula, Ed Labadie's *loup garou* repeatedly terrorizes a household. The head of the house

¹⁷ Interview with Mrs. Edna Jacobs, May 1979, Erie, Michigan, tape in the possession of the author; and Recording of Gilbert LaVoy, 17 October 1942, vinyl record in the possession of the LaVoy family.

¹⁸ Interview with Clarence "Putsie" Reaume, 24 October 1975, Monroe, MI, tape in the possession of the author.

¹⁹ Au, "The Lingering Shadow of New France," 337-338; and Interview with Laura Gray, 13 February 1987, Monroe, MI, tape in the possession of the author.

finally gets unbelievable advice from an elder that the animal bothering them is the *loup garou*. He is told he must draw blood from the creature without the creature drawing blood from him. The man of the house does this and right before his eyes the creature is transformed from a vicious dog into one of his friends. Oneal Petee's *loup garou* tale is an example where the raconteur simply inserted the French creature—the *loup garou*—into a tale genre that is not uniquely French, thereby giving the story a French flavor. Petee's story is the old fierce two-headed animal theme, where the conclusion is that the animal—in this case the *loup garou*—is so mean because he has a head on both ends and can't shit.²⁰

Certainly, the folktales made the transition into English without much problem. These tales have had more difficulty making the transition into the twentieth century. These stories do not have a context to sustain their survival in the modern world. In most cases, the people I interviewed remembered their grandparents telling these stories. One person's comment to me about his raconteur grandfather is especially telling, though. "*Pip* tells these crazy stories ... *pip's* crazy!" It will be difficult for many of these tales to survive long into the twenty-first century.

The strongest and most interesting area of cultural survival is foodways. Again, some of the recipes are straight out of France and Québec. Others are regional and have taken on a life of their own.

Several foods common on eighteenth century tables in France and Québec are still savored. We are talking about plain, but substantial fare. *Glacies* or *glissants*—variations on chicken and dumplings—are a favorite. Pork *boulette* is well liked. A couple of my informants call these pork meat balls cooked in *rou gris* "bullets." Marie Germani, a woman with a marvelous local French cooking vocabulary, specially grows her own summer savory to spice her meatballs. *Galette carée* or "square cake," is also remembered by a few. This is a simple, but delightful fry bread.²¹

Near the top of the gastronomic hierarchy is *tourtière*. Called "tut" by many now, this meat pie is a meal all by itself. Basically, it is a combination of beef, pork, onions, and potatoes. The ingredients are steamed in a skillet and then placed in a pie shell and baked. As this

²⁰ Interview with Edward Labadie, 1 April 1977, LaPlaisance, MI, tape in the possession of the author; and Interview with Oneal Petee, Erie MI, August, 1988, tape in the possession of the author.

²¹ Wilma B. Price, compiler, "Old French Town Cookery: Receipts from the Cookbooks of Descendants of French Residents of Monroe County, Michigan," booklet (Monroe: Monroe County Historical Society, 1979), passim; Interview with Marie Germani, 29 September 1986, Monroe, MI, tape on file in the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

folk tradition is not frozen in time, the beef and pork most recipes call for is hamburger and bulk sausage. Marie Germani has a meatless Friday version of this treat - *tourtière de patate*.²²

In many families, *tourtière* is reserved for holidays. Formerly it was the centerpiece of the *réveillon*. Now it may be baked for Christmas day. In remembrance of the importance of New Year's Day in the *Canadien* calendar, some families serve it then. One of the Brancheau clans in the county has it on Thanksgiving, substituting it for turkey. There are several variants offered on the holiday table and there is usually talk about the best recipe for that year.²³

All of the recipes I just discussed are in no danger of fading into history. They are commonly passed on to the next generation.

The one food, the one point of culture, that continues on with an incredible vivacity is muskrat. The locals will know you are from out of town if you give it the dictionary pronunciation, muskrat. In French, of course, it is *rat musqué*. The muskrat is a North American aquatic rodent. It is, assuredly, not a Norway rat—but then it is not a beaver either. The Native peoples ate it. Surely, the French picked up a taste for the rodent in the days of the fur trade when the French wintered in the Indian camps. The Native people certainly offered this food to them. These Frenchmen, then, brought the idea of this food home where they added a few French twists, and there is a classic *Métis* creation.

As it has been brought down to today, the preparation of muskrat is very carefully and strictly prescribed. First the rat must be harvested in the winter and before the breeding cycle begins—the musk of breeding muskrats is especially strong. After the rat is skinned, the musk glands and all fat are removed. Next the carcass is parboiled with onion, a few cabbage leaves, and celery. Some cooks also add spices like dill weed. Those French who like the musky taste may make a *bouillon* of the broth. Most dispose of the water and wash the carcass again. From this point, there are two culinary traditions. In the home, the meat may be browned and fried with onions or may be covered with onions and baked. At most public dinners it is placed in a roasting pan, covered with a mixture of creamed corn and butter, and then baked. It does not taste like

²² Ibid.

²³ Dennis M. Au and Florence "Dede" Coleman, "Tourtière: A Comparative Look at the Survival of a French Foodway in the American Midwest," *Le Journal, the Quarterly Publication of the Center for French Colonial Studies* (Spring, 1991), 4-5; and Au, "The Lingering Shadow of New France," 340-341.

chicken! Many of the older generation prize the brain and the tongue. Some make a *bouyah*—a kind of vegetable soup—with the heads.²⁴

In the nineteenth century several traditions grew up around this foodway. First, the expression, "Mushrat French" came into being then. The Yankees and others who came to populate the area recognized that the old French pioneers were a distinct lot. This foodway was especially striking and it was something very dear to the French. So, to this day "Mushrat French" is used to distinguish the descendants of the French pioneers from later arrivals from Québec and France. To be sure, the French themselves identify with this name and foodway.²⁵

Also in the nineteenth century, a popular tradition took hold. At this time the French came to believe that they had a special dispensation to eat muskrat as fish on the days of abstinence on the Catholic calendar. I have looked into this. Eating aquatic mammals and diving ducks as fish for the purposes for the Catholic meatless fast is a known folkloric genre. For example, the well-known Swedish botanist Peter Kalm noted that beaver tail was eaten as fish in Québec during his visit there in 1749.

Some locals cite stories on the origin of this tradition. Many tales go back to the War of 1812 when the River Raisin was especially ravaged. Desperate for food in the winter, all that was available to eat was muskrat. This was a problem since there were so many days of abstinence during that season. So, to elevate the desperate hunger, they were given a special dispensation to eat muskrat—after all it is questionable if this animal truly lives and breathes on land. Some say the pope or a bishop granted the dispensation. Others cite the still much revered Father Gabriel Richard. One of my informants, Ed Labadie told me, though, "The truth is, we just didn't want to miss out on meat."²⁶

In some households, eating muskrat on Fridays became a ritual. At the Laboe's on Sandy Creek, when the muskrat was brought to

²⁴ Interview with Hudson "Huddie" Peltier, 18 September 1986, Monroe, MI, tape on file in the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Interview with Raymond Dusseau, Erie, MI, 28 October 1986, tape on file in the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Price, compiler, "Old French Town Cookery," 3-4; and Au, "Fieldwork Report," 4-7.

²⁵ Dennis M. Au, "God Bless dee Mushrat: She's a Fish!," in *1987 Festival of American Folklife Program* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), pp. 73-76; Hubbard, *Memorials of a Half-Century*, 118; and Gerald P. Wykes, "Michigan's Mushrat French," *Michigan Out of Doors*, November, 1988, 50-55.

²⁶ Interview with Edward Labadie, 1 April 1977, LaPlaisance, MI, tape in the possession of the author; Au, "The Lingering Shadow of New France," 341-342; Au, "Fieldwork Report," 4-7.

the table, *Pip* Laboe stood up and pronounced, "*Ora ramus*—God bless dee Mushrat, she's a fish!" And, then they happily feasted.²⁷

Father Lambert Lavoy, a local French priest who served two predominantly French parishes in Monroe County from the 1940s through the 1970s, told me that quite often his parishioners asked him in the confessional whether they were sinning by eating muskrat on Fridays.²⁸

Muskrat fits the local French lifestyle. In the nineteenth century, and to this day, a majority of the French here live in close proximity to the marshes. Hunting, fishing, and trapping are still a part of this community's personality.

Muskrat eventually spread to the broader community here. This started at the end of the nineteenth century. Young Frenchmen were the preferred hunting guides for the elite of the area who enjoyed waterfowling in the marshes. These French guides introduced their patrons to muskrat. In 1902 some of these hunters put on the first muskrat carnival for the Monroe Boat Club. The seven-year run of this festival was a smashing success. Special rail cars brought revelers from Detroit and Toledo. There were festival banquet favors, and even buttons promoting the rat dinners. This launched a public muskrat dinner tradition that continues strongly today. In Monroe County and Downriver Detroit, sports clubs, veteran's organizations, and even churches sponsor muskrat dinners to raise money. These are must show events for local politicians—and they better eat the muskrat!²⁹

As a community, Monroe identifies itself with muskrat. "Mushwa," a muskrat with a French *tuque* and sash was the mascot and symbol of the town's bicentennial celebration!

In 1987, several issues provided a sounding on how truly profound this muskrat tradition is with the French of southeastern Michigan and especially in Monroe County and Downriver Detroit. On Ash Wednesday of 1987, a feature writer for the Detroit *Free Press* wrote an article about faithful Catholics making their yearly

²⁷ Interview with Jack Laboe, 25 September 1989. Monroe, MI, tape in the possession of the author.

²⁸ Interviews with Rev. Fr. Lambert LaVoy, 7 September 1976, Erie, MI, and 9 November 1988, Monroe, MI, tapes in the possession of the author. Father LaVoy told me that when asked about eating muskrat in the confessional, he in turn asked the parishioner if he believed he was eating fish or flesh. If the answer was fish, he told them there was no problem.

²⁹ Dennis M. Au, "God Bless dee Mushrat: She's a Fish!," 73-76; and Dennis M. Au and Yvonne R. Lockwood, "Mushrat on the Mall and on Campus," *Folklore in Use*, vol. 2 no. 2, 1994, 254-255; and Frank Heywood, "Two Famous Sportsmen's Clubs," *Field and Stream*, May, 1901, 131-137.

pilgrimage to a Downriver restaurant to have a muskrat dinner in honor of the meatless or fast day.³⁰ The article caught the eyes of the authorities—both secular and ecclesiastical. I can still see the wheels in the heads of the state bureaucrats turning. I am sure they thought, “My god, people are eating rats! And un-inspected rats at that.” Within days, inspectors from the Michigan Department of Agriculture had orders to shut down any market selling muskrat meat, any restaurant serving the meat, and any public dinner featuring the meat.

There was a great grass roots hue and cry. It was as if the state had banned the sale of apple pie. Two Monroe County politicians took on the fight. State representative Jerry Bartnick and county commissioner Richard Reed organized the political action. There were public protests, complete with all of the paraphernalia—buttons, placards, t-shirts, and bumper stickers. On April 15 muskrat supporters staged a demonstration at the Monroe County Courthouse to urge the county commissioner to pass a resolution to have the state ban rescinded. That same night, supporters of a bid to build a Super Conducting Super Collider in the county and opponents of the licensing and operation of a nuclear power plant in the county also called for mass turnouts of their compatriots to show support for their causes. The two nuclear *causes célèbres* of the twentieth century garnered a total of about a dozen protestors. Muskrat claimed 150 die-hard supporters. As Commissioner Reed said that night, let's have "...less bureaucrats and more muskrat dinners!"³¹ That night the county commissioners passed a resolution asking the state to rescind its ban.

Representative Bartnick quickly maneuvered a state of the legislature resolution through the state house, declaring it was never the intent of that legislative body to so strictly regulate public game dinners. That put the public dinners back in the good graces of the law. This did not cover the restaurants and meat markets selling the dinners and meat. A Downriver restaurateur soon found a loophole in the law. He imported his rat from Canada. In Canada, muskrat meat is inspected. The Canadian inspectors look to see that one paw is left on the carcass—to insure it is a muskrat and nothing else. So, when the meat crosses the border into Michigan, it becomes a

³⁰ "Muskrat Fair Game for Downriver Palates, Especially During Lent," *Detroit Free Press*, 5 March 1987.

³¹ Dennis M. Au, "Let Them Eat Muskrat," *The Digest: A Review for the Interdisciplinary Study of Food*, 8 (Spring, 1988), 4-6; "County Board Asks State to Okay Muskrat Meals," *Monroe Evening News*, 15 April, 1987; "Rally Pleads: Give Us Muskrat '," *Detroit Free Press*, 15 April 1987; and "Where the Muskrat Is a Delicacy for Lent," *New York Times*, 1 April 1988.

federal, and not a state regulation matter—and the U.S. Department of Agriculture accepts the Canadian inspection! And there you have it; muskrat is back on restaurant menus and in meat markets.³²

The matter with the Catholic church was also controversial. The Archbishop of Detroit could not believe it when he read that priests in his diocese actually told their parishioners there was a special dispensation declaring muskrat a fish for the purpose of the fast. He ordered a thorough search of the church archives on this matter. They found no dispensation. A debate raged in the archdiocese as to what to do. One of the bishops finally recalled the issue had been settled back in 1956. At that time, because the belief in the dispensation was thought to go back at least a century, it was declared an "immemorial custom," and, hence, allowed by Canon Law. Therefore muskrat returned to the good graces of the church.³³ In all of this controversy, the Mushrat French and their converts were ready to defy the law and to consider the archbishop an ignorant outsider if necessary. They were confirmed in their beliefs. Muskrat was the line in the sand for them. This is not Canada. The battle for the language was lost decades ago. While they lost the battle to preserve their language, though, they were not going to have muskrat taken from them without a fight.

I have two conclusions. First, I perceive that there is a fascinating contrast between the cultural survival on the Canadian side of the Detroit and on the American side. There is no doubt that our different national experiences and priorities come into play here. French in Canada is a fact; in the United States it is no more than a footnote. There is fertile ground here just *begging* for a comprehensive comparative study.

Finally, though some anchors of the culture, such as language and song, are all but gone, I strongly believe that after three hundred years, the French culture on the American side of the Detroit is not dead or gone. What we have here is a unique and vibrant expression of French culture that has evolved in isolation and that has stood remarkably well against the Herculean forces of American acculturation. Here, as I have demonstrated in Monroe County, is a French people *not* defined by language—as they are all too much in Canada. French on the American side is defined by historical connections and an affinity with and a love of a foodway— "Mushrat."

³² Au, "Let Them Eat Muskrat," 5-6.

³³ *Ibid.*; and "Is Muskrat Friday Fare?," *Michigan Catholic*, 10 April 1987.