

Texte d'une conférence présentée à l'assemblée de la Conférence: The French In New England, Acadia and Québec le deux mai, 1972

Monsieur Rioux, Mesdames, Mesdemoiselles, Messieurs. Avant de parler, j'aimerais dire quelque chose.

On m'a demandé de résumer ce qui est en train de se passer ici à l'Université du Maine à Orono. En préparant cette petite conférence, j'ai constaté que nous avons déjà beaucoup accompli; et je vous assure qu'il est très difficile de résumer, en peu de temps, ce vaste travail que nous avons commencé. D'ailleurs, ça m'a permis de passer la nuit blanche afin d'arriver un peu à écrire nos programmes ici à l'Université.

Concerning the Student Affairs Program, which is in the process of development, I wish to say that it has been conceived from a layman's optic, and that it is a grass roots program. I would like to preface the actual enumeration of programs in the works with a general view of the basic reasoning which has persuaded us to tackle this vast endeavor.

The Franco-American program here at the University of Maine had a somewhat insecure birth last spring, when a group of Franco-Americans--due to circumstances somewhat beyond their control--found themselves together in a room, sharing past and present experiences relating to our educational institutions. We labored at length, in exchanging deeply personal experiences concerning injustices, inequities present in an educational environment which did not reflect our culture, its values, customs and language; an educational environment in which we had very little, or no meaningful input as Franco-Americans. The birth literally, experience by experience, that we had forfeited an aspect of ourselves to one degree or another; and that this forfeiture had deprived us of a richness in our lives.

The lack of possibility or opportunity in our past to fully live our reality as Franco-phones, and to interact meaningfully in the educational system with our cultural reality, had created an emotional and intellectual situation which at one end of the spectrum expressed itself: ranging from resentment, to insecurity, loneliness, alienation, disillusionment and to very negative self attitudes on the other end. In short, being French was not equated with being popular or successful.

A law on the state books until very recently prohibited the speaking of a foreign language in school or on school grounds. A

foreign language could only be spoken in the class where it was taught. And there most of the time, the teacher impressed on Franco-phone students that their native language left much to be desired. The law is no longer on the books, but the attitudes are still there.

We know there are many Franco-phones who are ashamed to be identified as such. In our very group, French has only begun to be consistently spoken within the last two months. We are scratching the surface.

Our cultural identity, and our language have been relegated to an inferior and unproductive level. We have been led implicitly and explicitly to believe that our culture and language have little value, that they are not viable and meaningful as living realities and experiences.

Many Franco-American groups in the State, as a last resort, concern themselves solely with the collection, preservation and burial of Franco-American cultural items and artifacts. It is my pleasure to announce that our group here at the University of Maine is still living, breathing - does not want to be collected and preserved. We may need some restoration. Our pride in our cultural identity has been damaged but it is well under way to good health. We have created some space in this community whereby ideas, exchange of ideas concerning the positive aspects, the assets of our cultural identity, are beginning to bear fruit.

During the past year, with barely token recognition, we have grown to believe that possibly we can be appreciated to some degree, if not understood. We have grown to believe that as Franco-Americans, we can be respected and even be admired to a certain degree, in spite of the fear and hostility encountered in some cases. We have grown to believe that in spite of the lack of financial support; in spite of the prevalent ignorance about our contemporary reality, in spite of the problems inherent in dealing with ourselves, each other, and our past as second class citizens, without a history or a valid culture and language; we have made an impact on this community. We are not members of Academia, and we are not administrators; but we are experts in the domain of our individual needs. We are also experts in how these needs can best be met.

help. We are suggesting that we are best qualified and equipped to make decisions concerning our lives, concerning the re-establishment of a living, valid and creative cultural identity in which we can be proud.

Hopefully, we can serve as a model for Franco-Americans here at the University, and others throughout the State who might have doubts about their cultural heritage - their ethnicity and its creative force. ;Hopefully, we can eradicate the dubious value placed on the expression of ourselves as second class "Anglo retreads". A basic change of attitude is needed on the part of our institutions, economic, political and educational.

Our program, the members of which have contributed freely of their time and energies: firstly, has had a marked impact on the participants, in the rekindling of faith and pride in the potential of a way of life and its evolution - not to a reliquary - but to a relevant and an integrated consciousness from which we need not be exiled; secondly, we have gone and are going to considerable pain to ensure that we have the space and freedom to define ourselves, our needs; by finding, inventing, creating ways and means whereby members can participate on their own terms within the possibility afforded by their resources (financial, intellectual, emotional); thirdly, we have begun a multi-faceted endeavor which can begin to alleviate the inequities and injustices brought about by cultural alienation; by creating space in which a Franco-American individual can actualize his cultural identity in the pursuit of specific goals dealing with the Franco fact. The results of our program cannot be best identified by goals attained, information produced, or scholarly works published; the results are intangible but are manifested in changes of attitudes in the process of interaction of members who feel and express positive cultural repatriation.

We have involved ourselves in numerous areas as Franco-phones: last spring, with the help of Jerry Herlihy of the ONWARDS Program, and Kristine Dahlberg of Student Affairs, we have instituted a special Orientation Program for incoming Franco-American Freshmen at the University. Our group, after hours and days of preparation, visited most of the high

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schools in the St. John Valley; interacting with students, teachers and administrators concerning our personal experiences at the University and in the educational system as a whole. This was more complicated than it would appear. For instance, we sought to meet with parents of students. We had little or no response. Some high schools claimed not to have Franco-phone students in their schools. Yet these same schools have since applied and have obtained federal funds for the purpose of instituting bilingual education programs. A group of volunteers coordinated by Annette Tanguay and Marc Violette presently is preparing similar visits to high schools throughout the State. Some doors have already been closed to them.

Since February 1st of this year, we have been officially recognized on campus; we were given an office and 950 dollars, which we could use to begin to write and rewrite the history of the Franco fact in this State. Much of our task remains ahead of us. We don't want to be unappreciative, but our principle objective - consciousness raising - requires that we delve in many areas, academic as well as social.

Vice-President Clark has expressed strong support for our program and recently enlisted our help through Professor Rioux, in preparing the beginnings of an undergraduate Franco-American Studies Program.

This year, we have been invited by many groups, on and off campus, to discuss the Franco- fact as it relates to our personal experiences. We spent many hours in the course of six weeks interacting with the ladies of YWCA in Bangor, which claims to serve this entire region. We had some difficulty in convincing these ladies that a large Franco population existed in Old Town. The "Y" is not exactly replete with Francos. But we did create a certain awareness that all living things do not function according to W.A.S.P. middle class values.

Within our program, a group headed by Steve Armstrong, our token Anglo, is concerning itself with the gathering of data for the purpose of documenting future proposals in order to obtain financial support. There is a paucity of valid current statistics concerning the Franco fact in Maine.

We began last month to look for funds to support what we think is our most creative and intelligent endeavor, that is, a theatre workshop. We do not want to present French or Québec plays. We want to do Maine Fran-

co fact plays. There is a difficulty. To our knowledge, none has been written. We wish to use this medium to first get ourselves immersed in the contemporary Franco-American experience, its issues and to use our language in a creative and positive manner. Sources from which we seek money want us to tell them what the play is going to look like, how many there will be, and where we will present them. That's another difficulty. We know that there is enough talent, imagination, creativity and interest in our group to identify and express issues and experiences through the medium of theatre. We do have a plus here. We do have a number of actors. Claire Bolduc, who is responsible for planting the germ of this exciting series of difficulties can tell you more about it later.

In the process of sticking our noses in places where they did not use to be, we met Dr. Ruth Benson, Director of the Affirmative Action Program for the University System. Dr. Benson dispenses equality and opportunity. So we requested some. Céleste Roberge, Claire Bolduc and Steve Armstrong have been compiling a list (about 25 pages) of recommendations with documentation concerning the Franco fact here at the University. The document has just been completed and will be submitted this week to Dr. Benson.

A number of members are involved in the making of a film sponsored by the English Department with Professor Peggy Danielson as Director-Producer.

Maxine Michaud is the star, with a strong supporting cast.

We hope the film is finished in time for next year's awards.

Roger Pelletier, also working with the English Department, under Doctor Carlson, is presently reaping dozens of surveys which he, with the support of our group, devised, organized and developed for the express purpose of giving the English Department a better idea as to how to meet the needs of Franco-Americans.

The members of the English Department, who are present can paint a better picture of what they are doing in their special courses for Franco-Americans later.

Professor Rioux, token academia in our group, also a member of the faculty of the Foreign Language Department has obtained money from the State Commission on Arts and Humanities for the purpose of presenting a series of lectures relevant to the Franco fact in the State. A number of learned Franco-Americans have been in-

vited to share their knowledge and interest in this area. In addition, Professor Rioux, in his spare time, has established a number of courses in the Department of Foreign Languages, in which the Franco-American can utilize his own cultural and linguistic resources in whatever manner they exist. New additional courses are in the works for next fall. Professor Rioux will tell you more about this area if I ever get through.

Another member of our group, Roger Fortier, is working on a newsletter which is supposed to be distributed last month.

Lilianne Labbé, our musician in residence, is preparing to study Franco-American folklore and is also learning and singing songs that we recognize.

As you know, the N.E.A.P.Q. Center has also been directing some of its energies and resources in the area of the Franco fact. I would like to thank Doctor Stewart for a magnificently organized conference. I did not think it was going to be so much fun. It must also be mentioned that Irene Simano, the N.E.A.P.Q.'s token Franco in residence, has compiled a list, (it's more like a book) of library materials currently available in Maine. Irene has also devoted much time and energy toward ensuring the success of this conference. The N.E.A.P.Q. also sponsors exchange programs with Laval University and the University of New Brunswick as well as devising and compiling Canadian studies materials for Junior High School level. Dr. Stewart may wish to fill you in more adequately in all these areas.

I have saved for last what I think is our crowning achievement for the year. Dean Grinder, of the College of Education, last fall asked us to teach a five-week module entitled, "The Franco-American in Maine Schools". We have taken the opportunity to dispense our best propaganda to a captive audience. The course is taught informally by our group with the help of unique and innovative ideas emanating from our group, and with visual aids devised by Claire Bolduc. We have just ended our first five-week module, and we have been asked to teach a second. It is indicative of the existence of a certain void or vacuum in the area, if not a fantastic piece of work by our group.

In closing, I must say in all frankness that not all the people mentioned above are members of our group, although I might have allowed it to appear that way. Dean Grinder, Doctor Stewart and Doctor Clark have yet to apply for membership. *(Continued on page 13)*



UNIVERSITY OF MAINE • ORONO, MAINE 04473

DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

NORTH HALL

207/866-7822

August 10, 1971

Mr. James Clark
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Alumni Hall, Campus

Dear Jim:

I read the Franco-American program for UMO with great interest. I am not versed in this area, but it does seem reasonable, and I know from experience that we have a great many French people in Maine. I had occasion this weekend to mention such a program to some people from St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, who were visiting with us. They were quite surprised to learn that such a large proportion of Maine people have a French background.

In our research we have found that there are seven Foundations, all in New York and Connecticut, that have an interest in cultural affairs of special groups. Some of these Foundations are specifically directed toward Jewish studies, but I would think that if we had a good write-up for a Foundation presentation, we could start right down the line and present it to one after another and surely we would find one that would accept our proposal.

As I said in my previous note, the program would have to be completely re-written and I would think lined up just like a scientific project, in that it should contain (a) title, (b) object, (c) methods, (d) finances required and (e) summary and conclusions. I noticed in the write-up that there is considerable repetition of material.

If you think this plan is feasible, I would think that we should proceed as rapidly as possible, before some other University gets all the money from these Foundations.

Yours sincerely,

H. L. Chute, D. V. M.
Director of Development

HLC:RES

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And in closing again, I would like to acknowledge the enthusiasm with which President Libby and Vice-President Clark have received our group, and our program. We can assure President Libby that we will take him to task in reference to a statement made in his address at the beginning of this conference: "This University will try conscientiously and seriously to concern itself with

Franco-Americans in the State of
Maine".

*Je vous remercie de votre attention.
Yvon A. Labbé, Coordinator
Franco-American Program
University of Maine at Orono*

