
BOOK REVIEWS

The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers Project, 1938-1939. By C. Stewart Doty. (Orono, Me.: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1985. Pp. 163. Paper \$9.95.)

Becoming acquainted with the history of Franco-Americans is often a frustrating enterprise. There is little published material available in English and no primary materials which are readily accessible. *The First Franco-Americans* responds to this dearth by presenting first-person accounts of ordinary Franco-Americans, from the archives of the Federal Writer's Project of the 1930s. The core of the volume is the seventeen life narratives from four communities: Manchester, New Hampshire; Old Town, Maine; Barre, Vermont; and Woonsocket, Rhode Island. In addition, the editor, Professor Stewart Doty of the University of Maine at Orono, provides us with a general introduction to the Federal Writer's Project as well as short histories of each community from a Franco-American point of view. An interpretative essay on the life narratives by the editor concludes this publication of the University of Maine at Orono Press. Eight photographs illustrate the book.

The narratives give us a nuanced picture of Franco-American life in New England from the Civil War through the nineteen thirties. Clearly, the dominant industry of the community shaped the narrators' lives, whether it is cotton textiles, wood products, granite products, or woollens. Some interviewees saw their lives as materially successful; others struggled with the erratic employment of the thirties. Most of the narrators are men, but we do hear from three women: A "Franco-American Grandmother"; the wife in a husband-wife team of narrators; and a widow. The women's narratives reflect family concerns to a greater extent than the men, but even their lives are, to a large extent, molded by the major industry — witness the granite-dust widow keeping a boarding house in Barre.

That so few women were interviewed and that no never-married woman, not even a nun, was interviewed in the Federal Writer's Project is a reflection of the ethos of the thirties. Certainly, life-long single women were often the pillars of Franco-American family and community life.

As editor, Professor Doty rendered some narratives written in French-accented English into standard English. He also removed the interviewer's voice so that the narration remains in the first person. On the other hand, because of the quality of the text, only grammar was corrected in the Barre narratives. The editing undoubtedly improves the readability of the life histories. Attention is not diverted from the Franco-American narratives by grammatical errors, nor by French-accented English or patronizing interviewers. To this reviewer, who experienced the thirties in a Franco-American textile city, the voices and the content of the life narratives sounded most authentic.

It is a tribute to the original interviewers of the Federal Writer's Project as well as the editor that these life histories evoke warm and individualized portraits of the lives of the narrators. The majority of the photos come from the Library of Congress collection, including some by Lewis Hine, the eminent photographer of the thirties. Although none of the photographs seem to be directly connected to the narrators, the pictures contribute to the texture of the life histories by providing a visual context.

In his thoughtful "Afterword" Doty summarizes the major themes found in the narratives, massages the life histories to suggest answers to some previously unanswered questions about Franco-Americans, and then attempts to generalize his conclusions. He is very successful in summarizing the major themes of *The First Franco-Americans*. These include ambivalence toward French Canada and assimilation in the United States, chain migration and chain employment, and success and failure on the American scene. The Vermont narratives do shed some light on the evolution of the French-Canadian immigrant from labor scab to union member. Doty is less successful in attempting to make the narratives explain why Franco-Americans have so little political power in New

England. He is even less successful in trying to generalize to all Franco-Americans from the seventeen life histories and in attempting to draw conclusions about New England textile centers from four interviews.

But even given these reservations regarding the "Afterword," *The First Franco-Americans* is an excellent volume. Professor Doty has performed an important service in rescuing these life histories from the archives of the Federal Writer's Project in the Library of Congress. He has enhanced the voices by his editing. Thanks to his efforts, we now have first-person narratives of the first generation of Franco-Americans as they recollected themselves in the late thirties. It is a most significant addition to the primary source materials on Franco-Americans.

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