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FRANCO-AMERICAN IDENTITY AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

*Nineteenth-century Franco-Americans enjoyed a rich cultural heritage buttressed by parish, community, and family institutions. Faced with pressures to assimilate, Francos abandoned “la survivance” – strategies for preserving Franco identity – in the 1920s. In the 1960s Franco-American students at the University of Maine responded to a national upsurge in civil rights activism and ethnic and gender consciousness by organizing the Franco-American Resources Opportunity Group (FAROG). The Group’s accomplishments – a university resource center, a curriculum in Franco-American studies, and a journal with international readership – testified to revitalized Franco-American identity in the 1970s. Michael Brown, a native of Tachikawa, Japan, received a M.A. in history from the University of Maine in 1992 and a J.D. from Temple University School of Law in 1995. He has published articles on Maine civil rights and Franco-American ethnicity and currently resides in Seattle, Washington.*

During the nineteenth century, approximately 500,000 French-Canadians emigrated from Québec to New England.<sup>1</sup> In Québec they had enjoyed a rich and varied tradition forged in eighteenth-century relations with the English, with the land, and with the Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> In New England, French-Canadians responded to an unfamiliar and often hostile world by staunchly



Le Centre Américain at the University of Maine. Founding the center capped a half-decade of cooperation between University administration and the Franco-American Resources Opportunity Group (FAROG). *University of Maine Special Collections Department.*

resisting assimilation. Instead, they clung tenaciously to their ethnic and cultural heritage, adopting a strategy of *la survivance* – the attempt to preserve French language, culture, and religion in the new land.<sup>3</sup>

*La survivance* was propagated through institutional structures that affected every aspect of Franco-American life. In New

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England these included the ethnic-centered neighborhood, the family, numerous social organizations, the Franco-American press, and the Catholic Church. Each of these institutions of played a pivotal role in encouraging a strong sense of ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its enormous role in shaping Franco-American culture, *la survivance* began to wane after the turn of the century. Indicative of this decline was a series of stormy battles within the New England Catholic Church. In 1924, for instance, French-Canadian leaders in Providence, Rhode Island, accused the Irish-dominated church of attempting to force Franco-Americans to assimilate. The French-Canadians' battle to preserve local control over church affairs ultimately failed when the Pope excommunicated Franco leaders in 1927. This and other church battles, carried on for years, took a severe toll upon the Franco-American community in New England. The divisiveness, the loss of leadership, and a general tenor of nativism throughout America in the 1920s precipitated a sharp break with earlier efforts to preserve French-Canadian ethnic identity. The break with the past was accompanied by rapid assimilation into mainstream Anglo-American culture, as French-Canadian immigrants, lured by prospects of material gain, turned away from French traditions and relinquished their Québécois citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Loss of cultural identity deprived them of an important bulwark that had sheltered earlier immigrants from the harsh experiences in the mills and neighborhoods of Yankee New England. While *la survivance* disappeared, the hardships of life as a minority persisted. This was often translated into educational disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> By the 1950s there were only scattered remnants of the once ubiquitous efforts to preserve French ethnic identity.

**B**etween 1969 and 1971 a new Franco-American group emerged out of a series of meetings at a University of Maine student snack bar, at which students shared their experiences and tried to define a new Franco-American identity. In 1972 members of this informal group created an organization, eventually called the

Franco-American Resources Opportunity Group (FAROG), at the University of Maine.<sup>7</sup>

The group's evolution was hampered by tensions, partly arising from participation by Anglo-Americans in the meetings and partly from questions of leadership and structure. Relations between males and females were also strained, since Franco women students were beginning to assert themselves not only as members of a minority group but also as women.<sup>8</sup> More fundamentally, the young Francos faced the difficult challenge of reconciling their traditional culture and their need to articulate a new Franco-American identity. The means for meeting this challenge became apparent in the events that rocked the American nation in the two decades preceding FAROG's beginnings.

The two decades before FAROG's birth brought a remarkable change in American political consciousness. In 1958 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, awakening Americans to the need for improvements in education. Between 1958 and 1971 the government, anxious to improve the quality of American public education, passed a series of programs which indirectly boosted French bilingual education programs and aided Francos who sought government help to preserve their cultural heritage. One beneficiary of the new emphasis on bilingual education was the PACE Fabric Project in Northern Maine, which received a federal grant to help French-speaking children.

During the 1960s political change accelerated. The peace movement swept the nation, and African-Americans mobilized in the South to break down the system of racial segregation. Women returned from the southern civil-rights movement seeking equality for their own gender. In Canada, French-Canadians fought for an autonomous Québec. Maine Franco-American students saw, too, the beginnings of a new phase of *la survivance* in different parts of New England.<sup>9</sup>

By 1964, the federal government had become heavily involved in civil-rights issues. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and in the following year enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided funding for bilingual

**LES CONFÉRENCES  
DE L'INSTITUT FRANCO-AMÉRICAIN  
DE BOWDOIN COLLEGE**



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**BRUNSWICK**

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The body of research on Franco-American history expanded in the 1960s, encouraging university students to articulate a new Franco-American identity.

education programs. In 1971, President Richard Nixon promulgated Executive Orders 11246 and 111375, requiring agencies receiving federal funds to apportion them according to local population characteristics, including ethnicity and native language. In 1972, Congress approved an "Ethnic Heritage Studies Program" and mandated bilingual education programs under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Emergency School Aid Act.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise the University of Maine saw a flowering of activities encouraging ethnic and cultural diversity. In November 1971 the Board of Trustees created an Affirmative Action Office in the Chancellor's Office, and the university actively recruited black students from large urban areas. The university assigned a Foreign Student Advisor for international students and for the first time in its history began a formal program for hosting students from other countries.<sup>11</sup> Students themselves worked for cultural diversity: The Chinese Students Association offered Mandarin language lessons during the winter of 1971, and Native-American students, led by Ted Mitchell, an undergraduate student and member of the Passamaquoddy tribe, established an organization for Native-Americans.<sup>12</sup>

**I**nspired by the women's movement sweeping the nation, Franco-American women sought new ways of defining their relationship to the larger society. Claire Bolduc, for one, believed that her own experience with the "sisterhood" contributed to her participation in Franco-American activities.<sup>13</sup> Students on the Orono campus also took inspiration from French cultural activities throughout New England in 1971: new bilingual education programs in northern Maine; a "Franco-America Week" in Lowell, Massachusetts; publication of the assertive French/English bilingual newspaper *Observations* in Lewiston; and the revival of Lewiston's Franco-American Le Club Richelieu, La Legion de Marie, and the Saint John the Baptist Society. Members of the Franco Group were also were impressed by the Québécois effort to gain autonomy from English Canada.<sup>14</sup>

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Women in the Group derived inspiration from the women's movement. "We looked at our mothers' lives and decided that was not what we wanted," Claire Bolduc recalled. Women students realized that "it wasn't right to give men all the power" because "that would be as bad as letting the French be put down."<sup>15</sup> Sensitive to discrimination against women, they tried to come to terms not only with sexism in the United States, but also with sexism in their own French culture. They sought an identity that would balance ethnicity and gender. In Claire Bolduc's words, "It was really confusing...Are you a woman first, or a French person first?" The women – four of the Group's five core members – regularly participated in campus women's meetings and indicated to males who attended the Franco-Americans' own consciousness-raising sessions that they would not accept subordinate status. The Group was influenced by contemporary political upheavals and sought new ways of defining Franco identity in this milieu. "Let's talk different ways, let's invent ways to use our culture," was Bolduc's response to the times.<sup>16</sup> The civil-rights movement showed the Group that they, like their ancestors, could articulate a proud French ethnic identity.

**I**n addition to traditions from Québec and contemporary civil-rights activity, the Franco-American Group drew sustenance from the conscious choices its members made about naming themselves. Yvon Labbé was born in 1938 in Québec, where his father worked as a cook for logging crews. At age eleven, when he and his family moved to Stratton, Maine, he spoke only French. After attending seventh and eighth grades at St. Georges de Beauce, Québec, he studied for five years at an American high school in Madison, Maine. There, only English was spoken in the classroom. Although Labbé's teachers in Québec told him that he was very bright, those in Madison informed him that "there was something wrong" with him: he could not talk correctly and his thinking was skewed. Labbé faced other obstacles. Anglo classmates teased him because, to them, his name sounded like an Anglo feminine name – "Evonne." To stop the teasing, he adopted the name Ivan and

began to hide his French identity. Withdrawing from his classmates, he developed negative attitudes about his language and background. He began to believe that his French identity was something to be ashamed of.

Labbé's college years also encouraged him to deny his Québécois heritage. After finishing his undergraduate work at the University of Maine in 1963 and matriculating in 1965 into a graduate program in the College of Education, he traveled to France. While there, he diligently erased his Québécois accent. After he completed graduate studies in 1968, he began teaching French in Wellesley, Massachusetts. He began to rebel, however, against the thought of teaching French, his mother-tongue, as if it were a "foreign language."<sup>17</sup> He had begun to reject the idea that his French-Canadian heritage was culturally inferior.

Claire Bolduc, like Labbé, gradually came to affirm her French ethnicity. Born in Eagle Lake, Maine, in 1946, Bolduc attended early elementary school in Québec and between fourth and twelfth grades attended schools in northern Maine. After graduating as salutatorian of her high school class in 1963 and winning a scholarship, she enrolled at St. Joseph's College in North Windham. There she participated in various activities, including student government, the French Club, and the Judicial Board.

By the time Bolduc joined the other Francos of the Group in 1970 she was a veteran of the women's movement, had performed in street theater, and knew how to use language as a consciousness-raising tool. She was also well aware of the stigma attached to French-Canadian descent. In elementary school she had learned about Anglo-American prejudice when a teacher punished her for speaking French outside of the classroom. The teacher made her write, one hundred times, "I will not speak French." As a college student, Bolduc noticed that nowhere was there evidence of French contributions to the state of Maine. People who held the most prestigious jobs were Anglo-Americans, and that those who held the least, French.<sup>18</sup> At Orono in 1970 she met others in the Franco-American Group and began to realize that they all shared the same experiences.





A gathering of Franco-American cultural advocates. Left to right: Paul Paré, Yvon Labbé, Claire Bolduc, and Roger Lacerte. *National Materials Development Center for French and Portuguese, Les Franco-Américains* (1976).

Lillian Labbé, for instance, had embraced her French heritage even in elementary school, but she was known in the neighborhood as “the French kid” because of her insistence on speaking French. As people like Bolduc and Labbé became aware of this history of denigration, they became determined to articulate a new French identity.<sup>19</sup>

Their aspirations were encouraged by contact with other New England Franco-Americans. One noteworthy example occurred in late 1972 when the *Bangor News* printed an article

about the rise of Franco-American ethnic consciousness. The article, entitled, "Frog Power": Ethnic Identity Forms," mentioned the appearance of green "Frog Power" bumper-stickers and described the Orono students as among the most vocal in the state. The article resulted in a flurry of letters from Franco-Americans across New England. François Beaudet, a French-language teacher in Rhode Island, wrote to ask for bumper stickers and information on how he could help the Group. Ethelyn LaGassey Montgomery of East Millinocket made a similar request and sent words of encouragement, as did Robert Massé, chef at the Hyde School in Bath.<sup>20</sup>

Having resolved to organize, the Group still had to find a practical means for transforming ideals into reality. In 1970, Yvon Labbé and other members of the Group met with President Winthrop Libby. Over several meetings that spanned a period of months, the students and the president carried on informal discussions about the condition of Franco-Americans at the university. During the initial meetings, the young Francos asked nothing of the university. The president, however, became personally involved, as the meetings made him increasingly aware of the discrepancies between the lives of Anglos and Franco-Americans.

In April 1972 the Group distributed a campus-wide survey to ascertain administrators' attitudes towards the establishment of a Franco-American program. In his response to the survey, the president was strongly encouraging. He acknowledged that the University of Maine had provided only "lip service" to the Franco-American community, and that it must, in the future, make a "major, concerted effort...to understand and appreciate the contributions of the Franco-Americans to the culture of the Northeast." The French population "could become a source of great strength to the University...[and to] the State." Libby suggested, among other things, research projects about Franco-Americans, a "massive program" to teach conversational French to both undergraduates and adults, a Franco-American studies program, counseling for children from French backgrounds, recruitment of Franco-Americans for professional positions,

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and television programs to explain Franco-American culture to all Maine citizens.<sup>21</sup>

President Libby's support was based on his understanding that the cultural oppression was due in large part to ignorance. Libby acknowledged in a public address that he himself had, through ignorance, helped perpetuate "second-class citizenship" for Francos; his Anglo background prejudiced him "against recognizing the tremendous contributions of the Franco-American to our culture." In late 1971 when the university received a federal grant for supplementing its personnel, it was President Libby who allocated a portion of the grant to establish what became the university's formal Franco-American program.<sup>22</sup>

Other administrators, too, were committed to helping Franco-Americans. The Onward Program, established in 1970 to assist students from low-income and other non-traditional backgrounds, provided some of the initial support for the Group. Gerald Herlihy, director of the program, met with Labbé, Vice-President Jim Clark, Foreign Languages Professor Robert Rioux, and several Franco-American students to discuss the needs of Franco-Americans, and in 1971 Herlihy hired Labbé and three other Franco-Americans to visit Franco-American students in northern Maine high schools. Kristine Dahlberg, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, believed that the status of Franco-Americans had to be redefined. In late 1971 she was involved in hiring Labbé as the first coordinator of the newly-founded Franco-American program. Ruth Benson, the chancellor's Affirmative Action Officer, encouraged the Franco-American Group to supply statistics demonstrating concrete examples of social and economic discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

The Franco-American program at the University of Maine was remarkable for a number of accomplishments. Among these were the establishment of a program office, the compilation of a library and archive of Franco-American materials, the organization of a clearinghouse for statewide exchanges, and a cluster of university courses on Franco-American culture.<sup>24</sup> The program's *Le FAROG Forum*

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articulated Franco-American issues to a broad audience using material ranging from poetry to letters, opinions, and scholarly articles from different parts of the French-speaking world. By the late 1980s the paper had subscribers not only from Maine but also from other New England states, Quebec, and France.

Perhaps the greatest significance of the program, however, was the lesson to be gained from the history of its founding: Responding to the confluence of events in the 1960s and early 1970s, Franco-Americans reinvented their ethnicity and created a means of articulating it. Dissatisfied with the identity forced upon them, Franco-Americans learned that it is possible to redefine that identity on their own terms.

Relations with the English in eighteenth-century Québec, the experience of immigration, and the rise, decline, and rise again of *la survivance* paved the way for FAROG. So, too, did events in the United States and Québec during the twentieth century – as did the individual life experiences of the Group's leaders. FAROG's genesis was the culmination of a complex process that originated in both Franco-American traditions and in the contemporary historical context.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> François Weil, *Les Franco-Américains* (Tours, France: Mâme Imprimeurs, 1989), pp. 14-17; Gerard J. Brault, *The Franco-American Heritage in New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1985), p. 52. See Madeleine Giguère, *A Franco-American Overview*, vols. 3-4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Evaluation, Dissemination, & Assessment Center, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See Honoré Beaugrand, *Jeanne la fileuse* (Bedford, N.H.: National Materials Development Center for French, 1980); Mason Wade, "The Loyalists and the Acadians," in Giguère, *Franco-American Overview*, 3, pp. 69-82; Brian Young, *A Short History of Québec* (Ontario: Copp Clark Pitman, Ltd., 1988), p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Resistance to assimilation was due also to the notion that French-Canadians were endowed by God with the mission of carrying their religious beliefs and practices to New England. See Maurice Poteet, *Textes de l'exode* (Montréal: Guérin Littérature, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Anctil, "Aspects of Class Ideology in a New England Ethnic Minority: The Franco-Americans of Woonsocket, Rhode Island (1865-1929)," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1985; Hervé B. LeMaire, "Franco-American Efforts on Behalf of the French Language in New England," in Giguère, *Franco-American Overview*, 4, pp. 1-7; and Jacques Ducharme, "The Shadows of the Trees," in Giguère, *Franco-American Overview*, 3, pp. 255-62.

<sup>5</sup> Weil, *Les Franco-Américains*, pp. 96, 148, 151-152, 154; LeMaire, "Franco-American Efforts on Behalf of the French Language," pp. 30, 35; Ducharme, "Shadows of the Trees," pp. 255-261.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Stewart Doty, ed., *The First Franco-Americans* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1985); Steven Armstrong, "A Presentation of Some Statistics Concerning Franco-Americans at U.M.O." (Orono: FAROG, 1972), pp. 2-4, 9; Steven Armstrong, et als., "A Compelling Case for the Recognition of Franco-Americans in Maine Public Schools" (Orono: FAROG, 1971), p. 3; Madeleine Giguère, "Social and Economic Profile of French and English Mother-Tongue Persons: Maine, 1970" (Orono: Department of Sociology, University of Maine, 1972), p. 7; Lorraine St. Pierre, interview by the author, December 29, 1990, Gerald Herlihy, interview by the author, January 23, 1991, Claire Bolduc to WCBB-TV, Lewiston, May 15, 1972, and unsigned letter, "Low Road," October 1, 1972, Franco-American Center Documents (hereafter cited as FACD).

<sup>7</sup> For other descriptions of the Group, see Brault, *French-Canadian Heritage in New England*, p. 182; Dyke Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence* (Portland: Gannett Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 215-220; and Weil, *Les Franco-Américains*, pp. 217-218; *Maine Campus*, December 10, 1971; "Capsule History of Franco-American Activities at U.M.O." (Orono: FAROG., 1989), FACD; Yvon Labbé, "Annual Report on Activities of the Franco-American Program for June 30, 1972 to July 1, 1973," and Labbé, "The Franco-American Program and its Development," FACD.

<sup>8</sup> Yvon Labbé, interview by the author, November 27, 1990, and Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, November 8, 1990, January 4, 1991, FACD.

<sup>9</sup> Yvon Labbé, interview by the author, December 30, 1990, and Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, March 29, 1991, FACD. On the women's movement, see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 9, 141-45; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 156-211; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Days of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), pp. 362-76.

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<sup>10</sup>Steven Kemp Bailey, *The Office of Education Administers a Law* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1968); *Equal Educational Opportunity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); Arnold H. Leibowitz, *Federal Recognition of the Rights of Minority Language Groups* (Rosslyn, Va.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1982); Maine, *An Act Establishing a Human Rights Commission* (1971); Brault, *Franco-American Heritage in New England*, pp. 172-76; Weil, *Les Franco-Américains*, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup>Madeleine Giguère to Donald McNeil, December 9 1971, and Gerald Herlihy, interview by the author, January 23, 1991, FADC; *Maine Campus*, September 21, October 26, 1967; August 9, 1972.

<sup>12</sup>*Maine Campus*, December 3, 10 1971; July 5, 12, 19, 26, 1972; Task Force on Women, "Report" (Orono: President's Office, 1973).

<sup>13</sup>Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, November 8, 1990, and Yvon Labbé, interview by the author, October 12, 1990, November 10, 1990, FADC.

<sup>14</sup>Yvon Labbé, interview by the author, October 12, 1990, FADC; *Observations*, November 3, July 15, 1971, November 3, 1972; September 9, 15, August 18, 1972; Brault, *Franco-American Heritage in New England*, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup>Claire Bolduc, interviews by the author, November 8, 1990, March 27, 1991, FADC.

<sup>16</sup>Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, November 8, 1990, FADC. See also Claire Bolduc, *ibid.*, March 27, 1991, FADC.

<sup>17</sup>Yvon Labbé, interview by Dyke Hendrickson, in Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence*, p. 217; Labbé to Kristine Dahlberg, n.d., and Labbé, interviews by the author, October 12, November 10, 1990, FADC.

<sup>18</sup>Claire Bolduc, undated resume, c. 1970-1972, 1, and Bolduc, interviews by the author, November 8, 1990, January 4, 1991, FADC; Armstrong, "Presentation of Some Statistics Concerning Franco-Americans at U.M.O." See Brault, *French-Canadian Heritage in New England*, p. 169, for information on punishing children who spoke French.

<sup>19</sup>Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, November 8, 1990, and Lillian Labbé, interview by the author, June 19, 1991, FADC.

<sup>20</sup>Jack Aley, "'Frog Power': Ethnic Awareness Forms," *Bangor Daily News*, October 20, 1972; François Beaudet to FAROG, October 22, 1972, Ethelyn LaGassey Montgomery to FAROG, October 21, 1972, and Robert Massé to FAROG, October 1972, FADC.

<sup>21</sup>Armstrong, et als., "Compelling Case for Recognition of Franco-Americans," Appendix M.

<sup>22</sup>Winthrop Libby, quoted in Yvon Labbé, interview by the author, October 12, 1990, FADC; Libby in Edward Shriver, ed., *The French in New England, Acadia and Québec* (Orono: New England-Atlantic Provinces-Québec Center, 1972), p. 1; Ethelyn LaGassey Montgomery to Libby, November 13, 1972, Libby to LaGassey Montgomery, November 16, 1972, and Labbé to Libby, December 20, 1972, FADC.

<sup>23</sup>Céleste Roberge, "Semester Review and Report for Fall, 1972," pp. 1-2, and Claire Bolduc, interview by the author, November 8, 1990, FADC; James Clark and Kristine Dahlberg in Armstrong, et als., "Compelling Case for Recognition of Franco-Americans," Appendix M; James Clark in Shriver, *French in New England, Acadia and Québec*, p. 3; Dahlberg to Yvon Labbé, January 1972, and Labbé, interview by the author, October 12, 1990, FADC.

<sup>24</sup>Yvon Labbé, and Kristine Dahlberg, "Franco-American Resource and Opportunity Group Description" (1972), p. 2, FADC. See also Labbé, interview by the author, October 12, 1990, FADC.