

L'arrière-plan to my childhood memoir, *Growing Up French*

by Denis Ledoux

*Let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them look
also to the land of their children.*

—Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister, Canada

When my paternal great-grandparents, Thomas and Aurélie Gagné Bilodeau and Georges and Aurélie Dupuis Ledoux, and hundreds of thousands of their fellow *Canadiens*¹ crossed the 45th parallel and left their homeland, they made a decision—although perhaps unwittingly—that inserted me and millions of their Franco-American descendants into another people's history.

This is a story of exile, but not of the political sort. This is a story of emotional and cultural displacement. I am not a refugee, but I am a person living in another country other than the one that ought to have been mine.

My great-grandparents, my grandparents and my parents—and now I—have lived in southern, central Maine, a region I call home, for more than a century. My paternal grandparents came to Lewiston in 1916 to work at the Bates Mill, a textile factory that was part of both a chain of New England

¹ I use the term *Canadiens* to distinguish francophones whose roots date from before the Conquest of Canada from anglophone Canadians who came as a result of the Conquest. They share a citizenship but are not the same people.

mills and an industry that flourished region-wide and, for three-quarters of a century, needed an ever-larger work force than the local population could provide. In the early nineteenth century, the workforce for the growing New England textile industry was supplied by Yankee girls—the term used for young women who left their family farms to work in the local mills. These small mills that might have employed a hundred or two hundred operatives, many of whom were young women who slept at the family farm in the evening and every morning walked to work. New England is spotted with these small mills. My town—Lisbon Falls—had three such mills, two along the Sabattus River and one along the Androscoggin. These young women worked among people of their culture—the foremen and overseers and the mill owner were Yankees like themselves. There was homogeneity to this community of mill people when those in charge and those in employ attended the same Baptist Church on a Sunday morning. This common culture precluded disrespect for and lack of status attributed to “otherness.”

By mid-century, capitalization of textile mills in Maine—this had already happened in southern New England—shifted from local owners to ever-more-distant investors who sought to maximize the potential of the industry. They constructed large mills that could employ thousands of operatives. The new mills were erected first in Massachusetts cities such as Lowell, Springfield and Fall River. By the 1850s and 1860s, the potential for growth of these cities had been largely exploited. Lewiston’s Great Mills—the Bates, the Hill, the Continental, the Androscoggin and the Pepperell—were next to be capitalized as investors looked for undeveloped sites to construct bigger mills.

Earlier in the century, smaller mills in Lewiston—the Lewiston, the Porter, and the Libby—had been built along the Androscoggin River. As elsewhere, the rivers proved to be unmanageable. Canals were the answer. They could lead water to where it was used most effectively, and canals minimized the danger of flooding, but constructing canals was expensive and that is where investment capital from Massachusetts proved to be necessary to larger-scale, local development in which the established, small mill owners were overlooked. Once constructed, the Great Mills continued to attract Yankee girls who, because they now came from greater distances to work, sometimes stayed in dormitories run *in loco parentis* and were marched to a Protestant church on Sunday mornings. (Maine, unlike Massachusetts, was Baptist and not Congregational.)

Many of the young women were earning the cash that would finance the improvements to the family farm or perhaps would assure a dowry for themselves. They certainly were not people who were seeking a “career.” The bulk of these women stayed at the mills only for a while before returning to their country or small-town lives to be married and raise a family. Some, however, never married and continued to work in the mills in order to support themselves, while others married another operative and raised children in the shadow of one of the Great Mills.

As the textile industry expanded and many Yankee families moved westward into Ohio and Indiana and Illinois, depleting the native population, the local source of workers was exhausted and no longer sufficient to run the mills. By the 1840s and 1850s, the mills looked to other sources of labor to supplement the locals. First came the Irish, fleeing oppression at the hands of the British, and then the source of cheap labor shifted to closer at hand, a

relatively short train ride away—the *Canadiens* who, like the Irish, were governed by the English, a dominating people all too often pleased to have their resistant colonials gone, no longer an impediment to the policy of subjugation and assimilation. The exodus of the *Canadiens* was facilitated as francophone operatives who had come earlier wrote to family members to come join them. Added to this were the hired mill recruiters who traveled to the *Canadiens* and called on them to join the ranks of the mill hands. These sometimes traveled on free passes given them by the English-Canadian-controlled railroads.

In this way, aided by calamities at home, the Irish, the Germans, the Jews, the Italians and the *Canadiens* joined the ranks of the working class in Lewiston. Soon the immigrants outnumbered the Yankee labor and began to characterize the work force. By 1900, Lewiston was 60% Franco, but it would take another decade and a half before we elected our first mayor.

The Irish first and then the *Canadiens* built their churches. Then the Greeks and the Jews established their own houses of worship—there was also a small Lutheran church for the Germans. Italians, Lithuanians and sundry other ethnic groups tended to go to the Irish Catholic churches where worship was in English, the language these immigrants were learning.

Lewiston was built on rolling hills through which flows the Androscoggin River. By the time the Androscoggin runs through the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn, it has been meandering some 150 miles from its source in Lake Umbagog in New Hampshire. It has yet another 40 miles to go on its way through Lisbon Falls and Brunswick as it reaches the

Kennebec at Merrymeeting Bay and flows at last into the Atlantic. Far upriver from Lewiston, the falls along the Androscoggin had been harnessed in the nineteenth century in Berlin, New Hampshire, and Rumford and Livermore Falls, Maine, for the paper industry. There, the large mills which dominated the towns were themselves overshadowed by the hills and mountains that surrounded them.

Lewiston's mills were the main source of jobs, but the city had also become a center for the region so that there were many other motors of the economy. Lewiston's sister city Auburn across the river prospered due to its many shoe shops. These were run in smaller factories that did not depend on the river or canals as did four of Lewiston's five Great Mills—the Bates, the Hill, the Androscoggin and the Continental (but not the Pepperell).

The Androscoggin River which drops thirty-seven feet when it reaches Lewiston had made it attractive by the 1850s when development in southern New England had already been exploited for state-of-the-art hydro technology to be implemented. Lewiston's textile mills were built along the canals that had been diverted north of the falls² and then descended southward in two channels through the mill district. The canals dropped a second time beneath the mills on Canal Street and then again at Lincoln Street before rejoining the Androscoggin.

At first, there were only two great mills, owned by people after whom they were named: Thomas Hill and Benjamin Bates. In time, other mills were constructed and mill ownership was jockeyed about: now in Boston, then in Philadelphia, Chicago or perhaps New York. The owners no longer

² Largely by the Irish.

had names of people but were corporations that operated Lewiston as a colony (to be exploited as the British exploited India, Ireland and francophone Canada. In this regard, Lewiston differed little from Lowell, Holyoke, Springfield, or Fall River in Massachusetts, Woonsocket in Rhode Island, Manchester and Nashua in New Hampshire, Biddeford and Waterville in Maine). The prosperity generated in Lewiston and these other industrial cities was shipped off to improve the quality of life in the "mother country"—Boston, New York City, and elsewhere. Lewiston's money financed athenaeums and universities and athletic facilities and monuments and parks in distant cities where the financiers lived.

Here in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, tens of thousands of *Canadiens* came to work. A large number came as migrant workers—many returning home in the summer to farm their land—and not as immigrants who intended to make the US their home. (In this, they were not unlike the Yankee girls who committed to work only for a short time.) Even those who did not return in the summer were people who, as my aunt Rosa Bilodeau Aubut said of her parents, Thomas and Aurélie Bilodeau, “had come to make *un tas d’argent* (a pile of money)” so that they could return. If the statistics for New England are true of Lewiston—and I see no reason why they shouldn’t, half of these migrants eventually took the train back permanently to their homeland in Québec—the percentage for European immigrants was nearer twenty-five percent for the Western European who were, for geographical reasons, more likely to undertake the return trip than the Eastern European.

Thomas and Aurélie Bilodeau had gone down to southeastern Massachusetts—Taunton and Fall River—in 1896. There, they worked for some ten years in the textile mills. Like so many others, they had returned to their homeland—their farm was in Saint-Narcisse de Beauce, some 60 miles southwest of Québec City—around 1906. Not able however to buck the economic situation in Canada that favored the anglophone over the francophone, my great-grandparents admitted defeat—perhaps believing their failure was personal rather than an institutional aspect of colonization—and came south again after a few years of struggle during which they had spent their savings (“*ils avaient dépensé leurs économies,*” according to *ma tante* Rosa Bilodeau Aubut).

With farms empty all around them, the Bilodeaus could not hope to sell their place. (Thomas had built the house before 1879, the year he and Aurélie Gagné had married.) First in the mid-1890s and then later toward the end of the first decade of the last century, they had simply left their farmhouse vacant one day, unable to pass it on to anyone. (Two of their sons eventually returned and occupied the farmhouse. Perhaps because they were then single, they made a go of farming and did not return to the factories in which they had labored in the US—contrary to most of their siblings who found themselves here permanently.)

Many factors contributed to keeping people in the United States. Marriages of children to people from another region of Québec complicated a return when the young spouses could not agree on where to return to and so decided to stay. Then, mothers were especially prone to respond to this situation with “I’m not leaving my children in the US.” Home ownership which was promoted by the *curé* (the pastor) as a way of stabilizing the

population and promoting church affiliation was also conservatizing—especially if the family had been able to sell their property in Québec and had no place to return to—and, of course, continuing poverty trapped many of the *Canadiens* into a permanent stay in the US. To these must be added those who had done well here—the relatives who had pooled their savings and had build tenement building (“*des blocs*”), the entrepreneurs who had opened shops and small businesses that catered to the Franco community, or people who had simply been able to put money away.

When my Ledoux grandparents—William Ledoux and Marie Bilodeau Ledoux—came to Maine in 1916 after a sojourn of several decades in Fall River, Massachusetts, they brought with them my grandmother Ledoux’s extensive family—including her parents Thomas and Aurélie Gagné Bilodeau—to Lewiston. The whole family worked in the mills—except Aurélie who, now in her sixties, took care of her daughter’s children while they worked. Her husband Thomas continued to work in the mills.

On the evening of February 29, 1928, Thomas Bilodeau, came home after a day working at the Hill Mill to his daughter's apartment where, in pre-Social Security days, he and his wife, in their older years, had accepted shelter. (Every few months, they would shift their residence to another daughter’s home.) After an evening that gave no indication of what was to happen, Thomas had gone to sleep from which he never awoke. He was 78.

A walk through Lewiston and a second walk through Portland (30 miles to the south) points out the difference that inevitably is produced in a city by a history where local money was sent away and in another city where local money had tended to stay.

The memoirist must ask: what happens to people who experience colonization for generations—first in their own country and then in a new country?

History is all around us—in my native Lewiston and wherever you live, dear reader—and knowing it can explain us to ourselves—and to others.

Knowing one's history is what this book is about.

This book is also a story about one of the products of history—me—in this new land.