

Tante Blanche, The Savior of Her People

By Françoise Paradis

Some Acadians who had escaped the deportation of 1755 by fleeing through the forest and winding their way to the mouth of the St. John River and up the river to the Fredericton area, were caught by the British in 1757 and expelled from their homes and villages. They were left with nothing and moved further up the river to Ste-Anne-Des-pays-Bas up to Ecoupag. In 1759 they were attacked by the British in what became known as the Ste-Anne massacre led by Captain Hazen and Major Moncton. The Acadians were forced off their land, and three Acadians were reportedly killed. The Acadian homes and belongings were burned. The Acadians again fled through the woods, finding their way to Baie-de-Chaleur and the St. Lawrence River. The French colonists who were already settled there were also dealing with English forces, and the Acadians did not find refuge so they returned to Ste-Anne and Ecoupag. Many were caught and imprisoned. By 1763, most of the Acadians were either deported or imprisoned by the British. But there was a small number who had indeed found refuge and settled on the St. Lawrence River and in Quebec.

According to historical records, in 1767 and 1768, about thirteen years after the deportation of 1755, and four to five years after the end of the war (1763), a group of about 800 Acadian families traveled north from Massachusetts through the forests to reclaim their lands and homes in Acadia. Some settled around what is now Fredericton and established a colony at Kennebecassis. Acadians who had escaped the deportation by fleeing to the woods and winding their way north along the St. Lawrence River to Quebec were also returning to claim their Acadian lands. Some participated in establishing the Kennebecassis colony, which still exists today, located between Moncton and St. John, New Brunswick.

After the American Revolution ended in 1776 and America gained its independence from England, the Tories who had refused to join the fight for independence asked the British Crown for protection and new land. Nova Scotia and present day New Brunswick had remained under British control, so these "loyalists" were given land in those areas. At Kennebecassis, Acadian farms were confiscated and given to these loyalists as compensation for their loyalty, thus the Acadians were once again deported. Some traveled north to the Madawaska

Territory, which they might very well have become aware of during their trek north when they first escaped the deportation.

The first settlers are believed to have arrived in the St. John Valley in the spring of 1785 under the leadership of Joseph Simon Daigle. There were sixteen Acadians who landed on the shores of the St. John River in present day St. David, and erected a cross to give thanks for their good fortune after obtaining the blessing of the Maliseet Chief François-Xavier. The first 16 Acadians to settle at St. David were: Joseph Simon Daigle, Sr.; Joseph Daigle, Jr.; Pierre Duperre; Paul Poitier; Jacques Cyr; Baptiste Fournier; Louis Mercure; Michel Mercure; and Louis Sanfacon. Others came later. By 1790 there were 174 citizens who were almost entirely Acadian, except for a few Canadians from the St. Lawrence. They worked hard to clear the land, transporting the logs on the river to be sold to the English for building their ships. To sustain themselves, they grew grain, raised cattle, made maple syrup, and trapped for fur. They encountered adversities due to very harsh winters, but their hard work paid off. They survived and increased their population as more Acadians and Canadians moved into the area and had large families.

Among the citizens of the Madawaska settlement resided a direct descendant of the only true Acadian character in Longfellow's poem, ***Evangeline***. René LeBlanc's granddaughter, Marguerite Blanche Thibodeau was born in 1735 and, in 1760, married Joseph Cyr, a direct descendant of one of the first settlers of Madawaska. . René LeBlanc was described by Longfellow as a wise old man, loved by all his children and the children of the village.

*Bent like a laboring oar, that toils in the surf of the ocean,
Bent, but not broken, by age was the form of the notary public;
Shocks of yellow hair, like the silken floss of the maize, hung
Over his shoulders; his forehead was high; and glasses with horn bows
Sat astride on his nose, with a look of wisdom supernal.
Father of twenty children was he, and more than a hundred
Children's children rode on his knee, and heard his great watch tick.
Four long years in the times of the war had he languished a captive,
Suffering much in an old French fort as the friend of the English.
Now, though warier grown, without all guile or suspicion,
Ripe in wisdom was he, but patient, and simple, and childlike.*

*He was beloved by all, and most of all by the children;
For he told them tales of the Loup-garou in the forest,
And of the goblin that came in the night to water the horses,
And of the white Letiche, the ghost of a child who unchristened
Died, and was doomed to haunt unseen the chambers of children;
And how on Christmas eve the oxen talked in the stable,
And how the fever was cured by a spider shut up in a nutshell,
And of the marvellous powers of four-leaved clover and horseshoes,
With whatsoever else was writ in the lore of the village.*

Rene LeBlanc did not escape the deportation, and Longfellow placed him in Philadelphia at the time of his death. There is documentation that indeed Rene LeBlanc lived in Philadelphia and died there, poor and alone. Carolyn Sherwin Bailey, in 1922, published a prose version of Evangeline with

*There from the troubled sea had Evangeline landed, an exile,
Finding among the children of Penn a home and a country.
There old René Leblanc had died; and when he departed,
Saw at his side only one of all his hundred descendants.
Something at least there was in the friendly streets of the city,
Something that spake to her heart, and made her no longer a stranger;
And her ear was pleased with the Thee and Thou of the Quakers,
For it recalled the past, the old Acadian country,
Where all men were equal, and all were brothers and sisters.*

René LeBlanc's granddaughter, emulated her grandfather in becoming the most valuable and loved citizen of the Madawaska settlement. She was known as "Tante Blanche" because she was related to many of the neighbors and became a kind of Florence Nightingale, ministering to the sick, the needy, and the troubled. She was hailed as the guardian angel of her village and later, at her death in 1810, was revered as a saint. Her life devoted to love, caring, and charity earned her the honor of being interred in the chancel at St. Basile Cathedral. This was an honor reserved for priests and nuns. She was the first lay person ever to be given that honor.

The defining act of Tante Blanche's reputation was her courage in saving her village during an eight-day snowstorm. After two years of flooding, early

frosts, and harsh winters, the crops were completely destroyed and the hunting was difficult. In 1797, the settlement experienced the “black famine” or “*la misère noire*.” Some of the settlers migrated to Fredericton or up the St. Lawrence River for the winter. They had asked the government for help, but it was not to come until the spring. Those who stayed nearly perished. During an eight day snowstorm, while the men were out hunting and the neighbors were running out of food, Tante Blanche is said to have packed, on a snow sled, some warm clothing and provisions she had gathered from her own coffers and from neighbors, donned her snowshoes, and went from home to home to distribute food, minister to the sick, and raise the morale of the discouraged. When the men finally returned with a few provisions, they brought home the body of one who had died of privation and cold and another who was dying. Tante Blanche took care of them both. And the colony was saved because of Tante Blanche’s courage and charity.

When the colony heard of Tante Blanche’s brave and charitable deed, she became known as a “*traitaur*”, or shaman. (See the following essay about *traitaurs*.) She was called upon to cure the sick, chase out evil spirits, find lost objects, reconcile conflicts among enemies, reform blasphemers and drunkards, and soften hardened souls. She was the colony’s heroine who continued to be a legend after her death, at age 72, on March 29, 1810. The Madawaska Historical Society, in 1972, named its log cabin museum in her memory: Tante Blanche Historic Museum.

Bibliography

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