

## **Evangeline comes to life in new edition of classic poem**

By Mary Jo Shafer

**ST. JOHN VALLEY-** Evangeline has long been a symbol of the Acadian experience. For many, the heroine of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem embodies the characteristics of courage and devotion as she struggles to find her lover, Gabriel, after the deportation of the Acadians from Nova Scotia. Longfellow's historic poem, *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* is still studied, read, discussed and cherished by those who appreciate the poem for its beauty. Some also see a snapshot of their own history in Longfellow's words.

For Françoise Paradis Ed.D., a psychologist now living in Buxton who was raised in Frenchville, the poem held a particular spot in her heart ever since she was first introduced to it in high school. Paradis has now completed a lovingly crafted large format version of the classic poem that includes intricate engravings from an edition of the poem published in 1886 and detailed historic paintings created by Don Cyr. The book also includes an introduction, historical sketch, pronunciation guide and glossary written by Paradis and a foreword and biographical sketch of Longfellow, written by Layne Longfellow, Ph.D. a descendent of the poet. Compiling the book was a labor of love for Paradis. She worked on the Book at night and on weekends through the winter, drawn to the story and driven by an intense drive to bring Longfellow's epic poem alive for a new generation of readers. "I've always loved the story because it is a story of courage and devotion," Paradis says. "Evangeline is a very strong and determined woman."

Part of the appeal of the poem, besides its artful composition and the lyrical pictures Longfellow paints with his words, is the historical context. Longfellow successfully brought the experience of the Acadians to national consciousness when he wrote the poem in the 19th century. Although she is a fictional character, Evangeline has become something of a national heroine for the Acadian people. A statue of her stands in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia and Acadians from Canada, to Maine to Louisiana have embraced her and her story as a powerful symbol of le grand dérangement.

Paradis herself felt a personal pull to the tenacious subject of Longfellow's epic poem. The first time she visited Grand Pré, the site of the deportation that began in 1755, Paradis was moved. She felt a deep connection to the place and to the story of her Acadian forebears who were forced from their homeland. "When I entered Evangeline Park, I was transported to another time and like many visitors there experienced a most profound sense of loss, grief, emptiness, and yearning that left me marked for life," she writes in the introduction to the book. "I stood at the statue of Evangeline and sang, along with others, the French song, "Evangeline," and I filled with tears and a grief so profound I felt nauseous." She walked in the park, "touching the ancient weeping willow trees, sensing that each leaf represented a tear of an Acadian." As she left the park that day, "I knew that this was not the end of my experience with Evangeline. I knew that it was a beginning," she writes.

While most in the Valley have a familiarity with the history of the Acadians, their story is not as well known in the rest of the country, with the exception perhaps of Louisiana, where Cajun culture is celebrated and retained. Most schools in the United States don't teach about the deportation, or the contributions Acadians have made to the country, just as most schoolchildren are taught that Jamestown, Va., and the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Mass., were the first Europeans to establish themselves in North America. St. Croix and the French settlement there in 1604 are all but forgotten in many schools.

By publishing Longfellow's poem in an easily accessible and highly readable format, Paradis hopes to rekindle an awareness of Acadian history and culture. "Through the retelling of the events of their 400 year history, I hope to shed a healing light on the Acadian community," she writes. She purposefully set out to get the book ready in time for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in St. Croix and next summer's commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deportation as well as in "celebration of Queen Elizabeth the Second's proclamation of acknowledgement of the 'great upheaval,' and the designation of July 28 as "A Day of Commemoration of the Great Upheaval." The book was officially unveiled at this year's *congrés mondial acadien* (World Acadian Congress) in Grand Pré, an appropriate place to showcase a new edition of the poem that celebrates the spirit of one Acadian woman. Paradis even had a chance to do a reading and host a book signing at the Evangeline statue.

"I wanted to stir up more interest because her character is such a good way to know and understand Acadian history," Paradis says. The soft-spoken woman also hopes that Longfellow's poem can serve as a powerful reminder to today's readers what intolerance and hatred can lead to. "The messages in Longfellow's poems are really timely," she points out. "They are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them."

Education is one of Paradis' missions with this new edition of the poem. She hopes to mount a traveling exhibition of Evangeline memorabilia and images that she can bring to schools. The exhibit would feature everything from postcards, to wine labels to chocolates that feature Evangeline. It will also be a way to get students thinking and talking about the history of the Acadians. The book includes a historical sketch on this history which manages to capture 400 years of history in an absorbing and informative 25 pages. Paradis follows the Acadians from St. Croix, to their exile, to the founding of settlements in the Valley. She concludes with the recent signing of a proclamation of acknowledgement of wrongdoing for the deportation by the British government and Crown by Adrienne Clarkson, the governor general of Canada and representative of the Queen. Paradis is particularly proud of the glossary that is included in the book. To craft this part of the book, Paradis read the poem with high school students and collaboratively they formulated the list of sometimes archaic words that the average 21st century reader may have trouble with. "I wanted to make it accessible to them," Paradis explains. The poem offers teachers a "beautiful piece for studying," with their classes, Paradis says. She is working on creating a study guide for students and teachers that they can use in reading and discussing the poem.

Paradis was ecstatic to come across the 1886 edition of the poem. It was here she found the lovely drawings that now grace the newly published book. "I saw that book and

the illustrations were so beautiful," she says. Drawing on the talents of Cyr, Paradis added another Valley connection to her book. Cyr is an artist, professor, historian and curator of the Centre Culturel du Mont. St. Carmel in Lille. His paintings are on exhibit at the Madawaska Public Library.

The poem itself holds another connection to the Valley. The only real person in Longfellow's poem is Rene LeBlanc. His granddaughter, Marguerite Blanche Thibodeau, was an early settler in the Madawaska region. "Tante Blanche," is widely credited with saving many residents during a winter famine by bringing food and medicine to the starving and looking after the sick. The Tante Blanche Museum in St. David is named after her.

Paradis will have a book launching in Fort Kent on Sept. 17 at 6 p.m. at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. It is a fitting day for celebration of the book since it is also the grand opening of the university's new Acadian Archives building. Paradis will also have a book signing at Country Cottage in Fort Kent on Saturday, Sept. 18. She hopes to set up similar events in Lille and Madawaska. Portions of the profits from the sale of the book will be donated to the Centre Culturel du Mont Carmel in Lille to help support the restoration of the 19th century church which houses the center.

The book is available at Pro-Photo and Jackie's Nature Shop in Madawaska, Country Cottage in Fort Kent or through Paradis at [www.francoiseparadis.com](http://www.francoiseparadis.com).