

Speech of Louis Gareau at the launch of *Les rendez-vous de la Francophonie 2005* in the Public Service of Canada

French presence in Western Canada

The Honourable Mauril Bélanger, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Alberta and Saskatchewan are celebrating their 100th anniversary this year. It is thus a good time to consider the history of French presence in Western Canada, specifically in the three Prairie provinces. And this occasion—the launch of National Francophonie Week—is an excellent opportunity to do so.

The French may, or may not, have been the first White people to venture into the Canadian Prairies. We know that the La Vérendrye family visited the Lake Winnipeg area in 1741, and that Samuel Hearne of the Hudson's Bay Company went as far as the Saskatchewan River in 1774, but other Francophone or Anglophone adventurers may well have arrived in the region before them.

Next came the great fur company battles, and the presence of a great number of French Canadians among the *coureurs de bois*, fur traders and *voyageurs* working for those companies. This influx of Francophones even gave birth to a new race—the Métis nation. They had such a great impact on the development of the West that, in 1870, French Canadians and French-speaking Métis dominated in Red River. And we should not hide this fact, despite the negotiations of people like William McDougall, John Schultz, John Mair and Thomas Scott. They dominated to the point that, in the *Manitoba Act*, Louis Riel had French accepted as equal to English in the new Canadian province.

But Francophones would not have peace for long in Western Canada. Starting in 1890, Thomas Greenway's Manitoba government passed laws to abolish French as an official language, as well as to prohibit non-denominational, or Catholic, teaching in State run and funded schools. What was needed at that time was a true champion. When Wilfred Laurier came to power in 1896, he did not want to upset the Anglophone voters in Ontario. He therefore gave in to the English in Manitoba on the issue of language in the Laurier-Greenway Agreement, to obtain a few small concessions on religious instruction in French.

In 1905, when the creation of two new Prairie provinces was proposed, Wilfrid Laurier raised the issue again—perhaps to compensate for the 1896 Laurier-Greenway Agreement. He proposed that the two new provinces be bilingual to comply with the *North-West Territories Act* of 1875. Unfortunately for us Francophones, Laurier again capitulated, this time to his Immigration Minister, Clifford Sifton, a former MP in Greenway's Manitoba government. Clifford Sifton was adamantly opposed to bilingualism in the West.

Saskatchewan and Alberta became unilingual English provinces—at least until the 1988 Supreme Court ruling in the *Mercure* case. And even that did not last very long.

After 1870, many Francophone settlers arrived in the Canadian West. They came from France, Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec. They even came from the United States, since, between 1850 and 1900, over half a million French Canadians from Quebec were forced to move to the United States because there was no more fertile land in Quebec.

Initially, the Francophones tended to settle in regions already occupied by the French-speaking Métis. They settled in Saint-Laurent in Manitoba, in Willow Bunch, Batoche, Lebret and Duck Lake in Saskatchewan, and in Pincher Creek in Alberta.

Shortly thereafter, the work of colonization was begun, either by companies or individuals. Between 1885 and 1888, a large number of French nobles arrived in the Whitewood, Saskatchewan region, including counts Roffignac, Jumilhac, Beaudrap and Quercize, the Baron of Boissieu, and the Viscount of Seyssel. This led to colonization of the region to help them in their farming operations. With the nobles came workers.

When the nobles left Saskatchewan around 1890, many of their servants and employees stayed behind to found St. Hubert's Mission. Montmartre in Saskatchewan is another example of French colonization by individuals. In this case, it was a group of young businessmen from Montmartre, near Paris. They wanted to bring French settlers to Saskatchewan in 1892.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church in the West, under the direction of men like bishops Taché, Langevin, Grandin and Pascal, dreamed of establishing a compact group of French parishes from Saint-Boniface in Manitoba to the Rockies in Alberta. Indeed, between 1870 and 1890, many Francophone villages sprang up in Manitoba: Sainte-Anne-des-Chènes, Saint-Pierre-Joly, La Broquerie, Somerset, Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes, Saint-Laurent and Sainte-Rose-du-Lac, to name just a few.

To help recruit French people, the bishops turned to missionary-colonizers. Abbé Jean-Isidore Gaire began his recruitment work in 1888 in Grande-Clairière, a small mission in southwestern Manitoba. He travelled to France and Belgium a few times to recruit new French and Belgian settlers. He was so successful that, starting in 1892, he was required to direct some settlers to southeastern Saskatchewan, where they founded the communities of Bellegarde, Cantal, Wauchope, Redvers and Stoartoaks. They settled as far as the Forget area, southeast of Regina.

At the same time, around 1891, Bishop Grandin recruited Jean-Baptiste Morin, a young parish priest from Quebec, as a missionary-colonizer for the Edmonton, Alberta region. Abbé Morin travelled to villages in Quebec and New England to recruit people who would found a series of communities near Edmonton: Morinville, Legal, Beaumont, Saint-Pierre de Villeneuve, Rivière Qui Barre and Lamoureux (today Fort Saskatchewan). Some of Abbé Morin's colonists even settled in Vègreville and Red Deer.

Up until that time, the colonization of Alberta and Saskatchewan took place very, very slowly. In 1896, the Liberals came to power in Ottawa, and Wilfrid Laurier and his Immigration Minister, Clifford Sifton, decided to fill the vast plains of the West. There was a homestead act, which enabled all new settlers to obtain 160 acres of land for free in return for a \$10 registration fee. The new settlers also had a right of pre-emption on another 160 acres at the cost of one, two or three dollars per acre. Laurier and Sifton launched enormous campaigns to recruit new settlers. These campaigns took place in Ontario, Quebec and the United States, but in particular in Europe, Great Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, Ukraine and Poland, as well as France, Belgium and Switzerland.

Certain historians have even suggested that Clifford Sifton discouraged French immigration, especially in view of the fact that it cost less for a ticket from Liverpool, England to Regina, than for a Montreal-Regina ticket. And this was at a time when half a million French Canadians from Quebec were being driven to the United States.

The Catholic Church did everything in its power to draw French Catholic settlers to the West. At the beginning of the 20th century, Abbés Royer, Gravel and Bérubé in Saskatchewan and Abbés Therrien, Joussard and Giroux in Alberta were appointed as missionary-colonizers. Other parish priests acted independently, such as Abbé Paul Le'Floc'h, who founded Saint-Brieux in Saskatchewan and who was responsible for bringing a hundred Breton settlers to Canada in 1904. The missionaries' work led to the establishment of a hundred Francophone communities in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

The French, Belgian and French Canadian settlers came to the West for one reason: they could get into farming with little means. They thus spread out over the entire territory in search of the best farming land. They sometimes also spread out because of the bickering between parish priests and villages. In Saskatchewan, French colonization primarily took place in two regions: in the south, where there was a series of villages between the Trans-Canada Highway and the American border and stretching from Manitoba to Alberta, and along a strip of land between Saskatoon and the northern boreal forest, where we find villages such as Debden, Léoville, Makwa, and even Lac des Prairies, or Meadow Lake.

And of course, both in the north and the south, Francophones could be found between the Manitoba and Alberta borders. Further west, in Alberta, French colonization primarily took place north of Edmonton, but extended as far as the Peace River area. South of Edmonton, French colonization was negligible, as some were put off by the cowboy mentality there.

In Saskatchewan, our work at the Historical Society has enabled us to identify over 150 places in the province where there has been a strong French influence. Most of these places were villages, but others were simply rural post offices, with perhaps a small country school and a general store. Similar work in Manitoba and Alberta would reveal an equally high number of Francophone communities.

Initially, the Francophones came to settle on farms. However, farming is admittedly not for everyone. For example, when the First World War broke out in 1914, a number of young Frenchmen were quite happy to go do their military service to defend their native country, France. They were fed up with their lives as land-clearers, but did not themselves have the means to leave and return to France. Others, such as Donatien Frémont, a great journalist of Western Canada, abandoned their homesteads to go work in town or to open a small business in their village. But the majority stayed on the land—that is until the late 1950s, when farm mechanization and the establishment of centralized schools caused many Francophones to head for large cities to find jobs. And, in large cities, it is very easy to disappear, especially for those who have mastered the language of Shakespeare.

Thank you for your attention.

We Francophones of Western Canada have a rich history. It remains to be seen whether we can pass it on to future generations.

Laurier Gareau