

The following article was delivered by Reverend Denis Boudreau to the membership of the American French Genealogical Society at its monthly meeting in January of 1980. Reverend Boudreau is the local expert on the Acadian Genealogy of the Iles de la Madeleine in the Province of Québec. He has discovered many omissions and errors in the existing authoritative work of Bona Arsenault. Reverend Boudreau is currently working on a correction guide to Arsenault as well as a Talbot-like genealogical work concerning the Acadians of the Magdalen Island.

THE MAGDELEN ISLANDS

This past year at St-Joseph's Parish, where I'm stationed, we celebrated our parish's 50th Anniversary. During the Golden Jubilee Mass, I listened intently to the first reading, taken from the 25th chapter of the Book of Leviticus, which reads: "During the Year of Jubilee, everyone shall return to his ancestral home." Throughout that whole celebration, my thoughts returned to a two week work-holiday I had just spent the month previously in Canada. For me, that line of Scripture had become suddenly alive.

Tonight, I've been asked to speak to you about those extremely interesting two weeks on the Magdelen Islands. These Islands are the ancestral home of my father's family (the Boudreau's) for six generations from 1765 to 1924, when my paternal grandparents arrived here in North Providence. They are also the home of the family who adopted my mother (the Gaudet's) for four generations from 1792 to 1896, and who became the first Acadians to settle in Centredale in 1910. The Islands were all I heard about as a child; its people, legends and history were always the subject of conversation whenever my grandparents and their brothers and sisters got together on holidays and other numerous family occasions. I might as well have lived there myself, surrounded by so many people from this place, as I grew up.

Many times, when people find out that I'm doing genealogy, they ask me where in Canada my ancestors came from, and I answer: "The Magdelen Islands." Their response is usually: "Where's that?" or "Never heard of it," or the best one yet, "Oh, yeah—" (but I know they really don't know, unless I explain further). It's not as famous as Trois-Rivières, or St-Hyacinthe, or Montréal, but I assure you, after tonight, you WILL remember it.

Part of maritime Québec, it's situated dead-center in the Gulf of St-Lawrence, about 60 miles northwest of the coast of Cape Breton Island, and about 80 miles northeast of Prince Edward Island. A chain of 12 small islands, most of which are connected by sandbars, its shape resembles that of a fishing hook—thus its nickname *l'hameçon*, christened by its inhabitants and descendants, and many people of the Maritime area.

A SHORT HISTORY

I think a bit of history is important here. It was first discovered by Jacques Cartier on his maiden voyage to New France, and it was described by him in detail in his subsequently published journal of his travels in the Gulf, dated June of 1534. Samuel de Champlain in 1626,

on a return visit from France, anchored there in the protective harbor which he himself named Havre-Aubert, the name it possesses to this day. Long before these two explorers, and likewise, long after them, Basque, Breton, and Norman fishermen were frequent visitors to its shores, using it as a base of operation while they fished the plentiful seabeds of the St-Lawrence Gulf.

After the founding of Acadia, the Islands had a string of seigneurs, from the famous entrepreneur, Nicolas Denys, whose domain stretched from the Baie de Chaleurs to the Gulf of Canso at Ile Royale; next, it went to François Doublet of Honfleur in Normandy, who arrived while Denys still held possession of them, planted his cross in May 1663 at Havre-Aubert, imitating the Christian gesture of Cartier at Gaspé—then, the fight began over whose patent letters were official. The last of the French seigneurs to take over the Island were the Pacaud Brothers of La Rochelle, who like their predecessors, Gabriel Gauthier, the Count de St-Pierre, and the Sieur Harenedé, eventually abandoned their claims at the Islands.

In 1762, after the Fall of Québec and Louisbourg, and well after the Great Expulsion of the Acadians in 1755, the Island passed into the hands of English seigneurs, the first of whom was Richard Gridley. It was he who set-up the first successful sedentary fishing post on the Islands in 1763, and who began the first successful colonization of the Islands. He was followed by the tyrant, Sir Isaac Coffin and his nephews, who successfully managed to enslave the Madelinot population for over a century, levying on them harsh rents on their property, unjust taxes, and limiting their fishing rights in the Gulf. Louis Boudrot, my 4x great-grandfather, became the first attorney of the Islanders in their dealings with Mr. Coffin. For more than 100 years, the Madelinot people, and clergy with them, fought for liberation and incorporation into the Province of Québec. It was only at the turn of this century, that they finally were incorporated into the County of Gaspé. Presently, they form their own County, with representation in the Parliament of Québec. The Magdalen Islanders have also had many people employed in the ministerial fields of agriculture and fishing

ITS PEOPLE

Outside of the few fisherman from France, who stopped occasionally at the Islands to use it as a base for their trade, the Islands' first inhabitants were the familiar Micmac and Abenaqui Indians, long-time allies of the Acadians. By 1755, these tribes had likewise abandoned the Islands. When Richard Gridley received concession of them in the summer of 1762, he persuaded several families of Acadian, Canadian and English extraction to work for him at Havre-Aubert,

fishing for cod and lobster, and chasing after seals and walrus, for their skins and oil. Cod-fishing and lobster-trapping are still among the chief occupations of the Islanders today.

From an oath of allegiance, dated 31 August 1763/5, we learn the names of the Islands' first inhabitants. The Acadians included the Arseneau, Boudreau (ours), Haché *dit* Gallant, DesRoches, Poirier and Thériault families from St-Pierre-du-Nord on Ile St-Jean (today's Prince Edward Island). We also find among the pioneers, the Noël family, originating from Jersey Island in the English Channel, and whose son, Edouard, had married in Québec in 1761 to Marguerite Gauvereau. To these were joined: Louis Snault *dit* Arsenault of Marseille, France; and James Clarke, John Rankin, and George Goodwin, three brothers-in-law with their families, from Argyle in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia.

In 1772, these families were joined by more Acadians from Port-Toulouse, Ile Madame, and the Arichat, Nova Scotia regions, and included another family of Boudreau's (closely related to the first), the Cormier and Turbide families. The next wave of Acadians to settle came from Prince Edward Island, and included the: Etchéverry, Montigny and Renaud families. Still another wave of them arrived in 1793 from Miquelon, led by the ousted Norman cleric, Abbé Jean-Baptiste Allain. This priest was chased from France by the on-coming Revolution, to Miquelon, where the same seeds of discontent and revolt were also being felt, just prior to their leaving. He became the first resident clergyman (*curé*) at the Islands, opening its first local register there in the summer of 1793, with the baptism of Françoise-Anne Bourque (my 3x great-grandmother). This migration, composed of about 250 Acadians, included the: Bourgeois, Bourque, Chiasson, Cyr, Gaudet, Hébert, Hubert, Loiseau, Petitpas, Richard and Vigneau families.

After 1800, still another Acadian grouping settled at the Islands from Chéticamp and Margarée on Cape Breton Island; hence, we find the Aucoin, Déraspe, Leblanc, Lapierre and Deveau families, as well as the Jomphe, Roach and Delaney families. Again, other Acadians, from as far away as Wedgeport, Nova Scotia: the Doucet's and Molaison's, made their way to Havre-Aubert. Many Canadian families from the Montmagny, Bellechasse and Islet areas settled there in the 1800's, among whom we find the: Carbonneau, Bouchard, Lafrance, Chévrier, and Paquet families. All these families, needless to say, married into each other. Now, we see the truth of the old prover: "Marry someone from an island, and marry the island." Who else is there?

The Madelinot people, as they have been termed by Frère Victorin, are truly an Acadian people, with a specific culture, dialect, traditions and personalities all their own. It seems as though time forgot them. For the most part, they are still mainly carpenters, farmers and

fishermen. The rate of longevity there is extremely high, with many living well into their late 80's, 90's and even over 100 years of age; for example, my 4x great-grandmother, who died in 1861 (Louise Dugas), at the age of 105, after having been a mid-wife (*sage-femme*) for over 300 of the Islands' children, as well as their baptismal sponsor.

Some held government positions (e.g., Jean-Baptiste-Félix Painchaud—local customs official; and Joseph Cormier—the Islands' sheriff); many became priests and religious, of whom our family, the Boudreau's, claim five priests (Charles-Nazaire in 1846, Stanislas and Nazaire-Antoine in 1876, Charles-François in 1940's and myself in 1977), all direct descendants of the same first family. On the Islands, you had everything from the very-rich “Gros Nelson” Arseneau and the very-educated “Jean-François Solomon, Ph.D.” to the very poor and uneducated. It even has its poets, Gilles Vigneault of Natashquan on the North Coast of Québec, who is the great-grandson of the Madelinot historian, Placide Vigneau, who, by the way, married a Boudreau (Marsoline). Their traditions and legends range from the very serious and spooky, to the spectacular and hilarious. Their songs, too, are primarily sea ballads, but one finds their island anthem written by Père Isaac Thériault, the then *curé* of Bassin, somewhat nostalgic (even if it is written to the tune of *Deck the Halls*).

This neglected Acadian grouping has its own share of the superstitious, like the two drunks who ran to the rectory at Havre-Aubert to tell Father Boudreau they had just sighted the devil sleeping under a haystack—when in reality it was August Le Bourdais of Islet, who had just been shipwrecked at the Islands and crawled under a haystack to shield himself from the cold and winter storm, which brought him there...to the very religious, like my great-grandfather's sister-in-law, Céline Chévrier, about whom I heard the following real story. In the old days on the Island, whenever the parish priest at Havre-Aubert had to bring Communion to the sick, he would hitch-up his horse and buggy, and ring a little bell as he rode through the street to the home of the sick person. Out of respect for the Eucharist, whenever anyone heard the bell, no matter where they were or what they were doing, they'd kneel on the ground until the priest had passed, and was out of sight. Some years later, after the death of her husband, Herménégilde Boudreau, Céline and her family moved to Montréal, she heard someone ringing a bell, and reverently fell to her knees on the crowded sidewalk. To her embarrassment, it was only a passing umbrella salesman. Another day, upon going into a theater there, it is said she genuflected before going into her seat—no doubt, out of sheer habit.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

For many years, the Magdelen Islands were serviced by circuit missionaries, from as far away as Beaubassin. These circuit missionaries travelled from there and the Baie de Chaleurs, to Ile St-Jean, to the Magdelans and continued on to Cape Breton Island, ending their circuit at Arichat on Ile Madame. This is important to know because the registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths, prior to that of Abbé Allain's, were kept at the rectory in Arichat, until their tragic disappearance in a fire there in 1838. This is attested to by Stephen White of the Centre d'études acadiennes at the University of Moncton, who, at present, is trying to reconstruct from census records and existing marriage dispensations, complete information on the families of this area, of whom it is certain that some of which sailed back and forth with the missionaries to the Magdelen Islands. Thanks to this procedure, Mr. White has even helped me clear-up some misunderstandings regarding my own paternal lineage, and has aided me in arriving at both an accurate and certain ascendance back to Michel Boudrot of France and Port-Royal.

Havre-Aubert, situated on the lower Island called "Amherst," continued to be the only parish on the Islands until the 1830's, when a second one was begun at Havre-aux-Maisons on "Alright Island." The newer parish served the needs of the Catholic population on the Islands of Grande-Entrée and Pointe-aux-Loups until they each received their own parishes in the early 1900's. Also in the 1830's, on "Grindstone" Island, the middle island, a small chapel was built at Etang-du-Nord. This chapel was replaced by a large wooden church at LaVernière, dedicated to St-Pierre in 1870, and from which two other parishes were recently born: St-André at Cap-aux-Meules, and N.D.-du-Rosaire at Fatima. Havre-Aubert's N.D.-de-la-Visitation parish also gave birth to a new parish at Bassin in 1870, that of St-François-Xavier, which today services the Catholics in the whole western portion of Amherst Island.

There is also a large Anglican population on the Island, primarily made-up of settlers of English extraction, for whom four chapels are presently in use: one at Leslie on Gros-Ile, and one at Old Harry, one at Cap-aux-Meules, and one on Entry Island.

MIGRATIONS

At the height of the fighting in the 1850's over land and fishing rights, between Mr. Coffin and the Islanders, many of the Islanders decided to emigrate to other parts of Canada. Wave-upon-wave of Madelinot people left their homes behind, settling in Newfoundland, Miquelon, Labrador, and in the Charlevoix/Saguenay areas on the North Coast of Québec. One finds them

still in Baie-Comeau, Sept-Iles, Natshquan, and Havre-St-Pierre, as well as a score of other localities. Others went to the Beauce region, settling at St-Côme, St-Théophile, and St-Zacharie. Another group went to the Matapédia Valley, newly-opened by the government for farming, where they settled at Amqui, Lac-au-Saumon, and St-Edmond. Others found themselves settled in the Madawaska region, Québec City, Cap-de-la-Madeleine, and the Verdun district of Montréal. In all of these regions, their descendants were *very* numerous. Another significant grouping also went to Halifax in 1875, but were shipwrecked before arriving there.

Also in the United States, Island descendants found themselves like other Canadians, working in the mills of Fall River and New Bedford, or employed in “Gros Pierre” Arseneau’s rubber shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some came here to Rhode Island, settling in North Providence and Smithfield, where they worked in the mills at Allendale, Esmond and Greenville. Among this last grouping are my grandparents (and Charles Gaudet’s parents). The Gaudet family were the first Islanders to settle in Centredale; they were quickly followed by the Boudreau, Cormier, Cyr, Arseneau, Doucet, Doyle, Lapierre, Petitpas, Renaud, and Vigneau families. Also, the Leslies of Cap-aux-Meules, settled in near-by Georgiaville. A strong Acadian population was established—it was like growing-up on the Islands ourselves. In fact, at one time, one favorite warning to us as we grew-up, was: “Don’t ever fall in love with anyone from Centredale—they might be your cousin, and won’t be able to marry them.” That’s how many of us there were. The migrations from the Islands continued to all of these places, until well into the 1930’s.

AN END TO ISOLATION

Until the beginning of this century, the Magdalen Islands have remained virtually isolated from the mainland. After a terrible winter in 1910, when most of the Gulf and frozen-over, communication with the mainland had become impossible. The Islanders had an idea; they filled a barrel full of mail, and took it to the edge of the ice where they kicked it off into the Gulf waters. Some days later, it landed on a beach on Cape Breton Island, telling the mainland of their plight. Very soon afterwards, the Islands received its first telegraph system, run by Mr. Auguste LeBourdais, whom we mentioned earlier. The first telephone was installed in 1915—a very crude system, at that. Although it was a modern convenience, it did have its drawbacks. At any time of the day, anyone from one part of the Islands could pick-up their phone and eavesdrop on someone else’s conversation, as there were multiple parties on a single line. And we get upset at wire-tapping! To illustrate this further, my Aunt Harriet Gaudet and Sadie Boudreau went to visit the Islands in 1916. One day, her cousin Raymond Gaudet’s wife called her at her grandfather’s

home at Cap-aux-Meules, and during their conversation, invited her over to their house that evening for dinner. My aunt replied that their other cousin, Amelia, had also invited her to dinner that same evening, and she already said she'd be there. There was suddenly a lull in the conversation, which was broken by Amelia's voice, which said: "And you'd better be there, too!"

The first automobile made its appearance in 1917, and the first flight to Islands was in 1928. The birth of the fishermen's cooperative took place in 1933, and electricity was first introduced in 1953—can you believe it? Today, the total population is 14,000 and the Islands have become the summer "hot-spot" for the Québécois, and more principally, for Island descendants living in Montréal.

VACANCE

After hearing about this place all my life, this past summer I finally got the chance to visit our ancestral home. I still have two paternal great-aunts who live there, and many cousins. I said it was a work-holiday, and indeed it was that, because although I met relatives I had never seen or met before, I did a lot of research, and made many discoveries. I went there especially to visit our ancestral homesteads, walk the lands our families owned, stop at the cemeteries, say Mass in their parish churches (especially in the new Church at Havre-Aubert, because the first wooden one which replaced the primitive chapel in 1793 was built by my great-great-uncle, Père Charles-Nazaire, pastor there from 1849 to 1888). I did all of this and more; saw the Islands top to bottom, east to west; spoke with many local inhabitants, most of whom were related to me in some fashion, or were childhood friends of my grandparents; listened intently each evening to the familiar and not-so-familiar tales my great-uncle Elphège told me to refresh my memory; spent four days of intense research in the Island's maritime museum's genealogical archives, returning home with over 1200 marriage records, 500 baptisms, and over 200 dates of death—"sheer genealogical heaven." I was also able to take pictures of old snapshots, as well as the beautiful countryside that my grandparents and relatives once called with affection, *mon Ile*.

The high point of the whole trip was the morning I walked from my great-aunt Gertrude Vigneau's home at Portage-du-Cap, a little under three miles, to Havre-Aubert. It was very early, and quite crisp, with a bag of notebooks under my arm, I headed out for the museum, an hour and a half's walk away. On the main road, I passed my great-grandfather Doucet's house, stumbled on a sign that read *Chemin Boudreau*, then decided to take the winding road that ran by the sea uphill to the three hills, known since the foundation of the Islands as *Les Demoiselles*. The highest of these hills was owned by my great-grandfather as his backyard, and which plunges

some 200 feet into the sea below. As I climbed the road, I stopped often to just stare and take in the beautiful scenery of this place. As the road rounded one of the hills, it began to descend into Havre-Aubert. To the left was the cemetery, where I stopped first to visit the graves of Père Charles-Nazaire, and my great-grandparents, Nectaire and Esther (Cormier) Boudreau. After jotting down a lot of information, I continued my journey, meeting my cousin Robert Boudreau who had rented my great-grandfather's house for his family's summer vacation. I got the grand tour of the house built by *his* father (Nectaire's), Hyppolite Boudreau in the 1860's. My cousin gave me a ride the rest of the way to the museum. I'll never forget that morning. It seemed as if past, present and future had all merged into one unforgettable moment. Now we will move on to the slides—a mixture of old and new: some I've recopied from old photographs, others from this past summer.

I'm also glad to announce that the répertoire of marriages for the Magdelen Islands is almost ready to be printed. It's one of the last counties of Québec to be done, and I'm proud, as one of its descendants to have brought it out of hiding. The marriages in it are of the Islands from 1794 to 1900 inclusive, and it includes many ancestral lines back to Acadia and Canada, as well as many descending lines as I could find in other répertoires, and that's beaucoup. Publication date and price to be announced.

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