

# French-American Traditional Culture: An Overview

by Kathy James

Between Maine and California can be found over 3,000 French place names, testimony to the zeal and dynamic spirit of the early North American French. Their first permanent settlement was at Quebec in 1608, a year following the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. Some were *habitants* (subsistence farmers), Catholic priests, and miners, but fully a third of them were full- or at least part-time fur-traders. This commerce dominated French interests in North America for 150 years. While the British colonists were still enclaved at the Atlantic Coast, the search for furs dispersed the French as far as the Rocky Mountains and beyond, the profits to be made in the fur trade inducing the French to develop great skills in Indian diplomacy and to seek good relations with distant Native American tribes.

Among the important Indian allies of the French fur-traders and the *voyageurs* who carried the pelts back to Quebec were the Cree and Chippewa people, whom the French encountered during their initial explorations of the Great Lakes. Intermarriages of Frenchmen and women of these tribes resulted in the creation of a people who today continue traditions, language, and arts passed down from Indian and French forebears. Such a group are the 16,000 Mitchif Indians, half of whom live upon the small Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. (In Canada they are commonly called Métis [mixed].) Mitchif fiddlers play in the Quebec manner, beating a rhythm with their feet, while dancers such as the respected Mitchif patriarch, Alex Morin, beautifully fluent in French, perform the "Red River Jig," a dance that combines the European jig form with Indian dance steps and rhythmic cadences.

The British and French colonies were drawn into a series of wars and disputes in the New World that lasted for two centuries. These wars left an

Minature lumberjacks with traditional tools carved by Rodney Richard, a woodcarver and lumberjack of Acadian descent from Rangeley Lakes, Maine. Photo by Allen Carroll.







Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoine, a Creole musician from Duralde, Louisiana. Photo by Robert Yellin.

French-Speaking Houma Indian palmetto weaver from Dulac, Louisiana. Photo by Marjorie Hunt.

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#### Suggested reading

Barkan, Elliott Robert. "French Canadians." In *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, pp. 388-401. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980.

Hendrickson, Dyke. *Quiet Presence*. Portland, Maine: Guy Gannett Publishing Co., 1980.

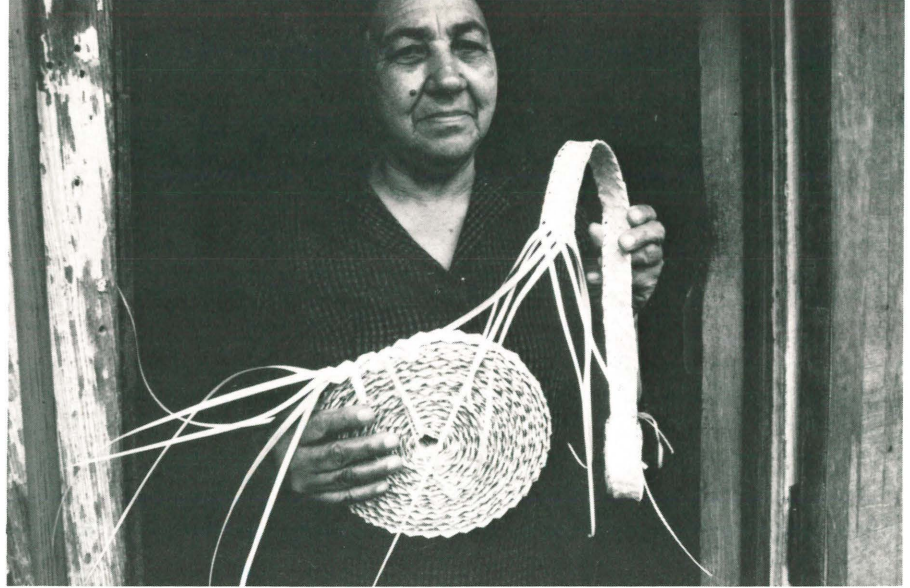
Thomas, Rosemary Hyde. *It's Good to Tell You: French Folktales from Missouri*. Columbia, Missouri and London, England: University of Missouri Press, 1981.

#### Suggested recordings

Louis Beaudoin. Philo Records 2000. (The Barn, North Ferrisburg, VT 05473.)

Louis "Pitou" Boudreault, Violoneux: *Musique et Danse Traditionnelle du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean*. Le Tamanoir 27018. (Alta, 9375 rue Meaux, Saint-Leonard, Quebec.)

*Music of French America*. Rounder Records 6010. (186 Willow Avenue, Somerville, Mass. 02144.)



indelible imprint not only upon the geography of the continent but also upon the direction of government and culture in North America. In the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, France ceded to Britain Nova Scotia (Acadia), Newfoundland and the vast Hudson Bay region. When the French residents of Acadia were reluctant to swear allegiance to the British crown, the British began drastic measures that culminated in the 1755 expulsion of the Acadians. After great hardships, many of these refugees from Canada settled the plains and prairies of southwestern Louisiana and eastern Texas where they now have at least 900,000 descendants, many of whom still speak French.

Both Britain and France viewed their colonies as sources of raw materials and a market for finished goods, but French control was much greater. The location of mineral resources, even at sites far removed from potential North American markets, created companies charged with extracting the material. A small pocket of French culture still extant in southeastern Missouri resulted from such a mining venture. When *voyageurs* noticed surface lead deposits on the west bank of the Mississippi, inflated stories about the richness of these deposits reached France. In 1719 Le Sieur Renault, scion of a smelting family, left France with a mining expedition of at least 200 members. In 1723, he received the earliest documented land grant in upper Louisiana. By 1742 his mining had ended, but some Frenchmen continued to live in the area. In time, their descendants became miners of the barite deposits (known locally as tiff) found with the lead. Some 400 French-speaking families still live in Washington County, Missouri, most of them near the area popularly called "Old Mines."

French government formally ended in North America with the Louisiana Purchase. Still, many thousands of French-speaking people remained, surrounded by Protestants and governed by systems most did not understand. In Quebec the French-speaking people suddenly became a minority in their own country. Feeling more abandoned than defeated, they turned inward to the two institutions left – the family and the church. In families and small communities they created a rich body of oral literature and a variety of folk musics. While their farms tended to be poor, due to the conditions of the soil and climate, their crafts flourished.

The opening of the mill towns of New England drew many thousands of Québécois south. The great majority of today's French-American New Englanders trace their ancestry to Quebec Province through those who came to take entry-level jobs in New England mills. A "Little Canada" can be found in most of the older mill towns, a place where poor Quebec workers lived. The late Louis Beaudoin, a brilliant French-American fiddler and many times a participant in the Festival of American Folklife, was a third generation American born in the "Little Canada" of Lowell, Massachusetts.

The French Americans have been partners in the cultural, economic and political development of North America from the beginning. They have left this country a cultural legacy rich in music, language, song, material culture, foodways and celebrations. Fortunately, the diversity of transplanted French culture is beginning to be appreciated for its contribution to the mosaic of the New World.