

June 4, 2006

Long-Scorned in Maine, French Has Renaissance

By [PAM BELLUCK](#), *New York Times*

Correction Appended

SOUTH FREEPORT, Me. — Frederick Levesque was just a child in Old Town, Me., when teachers told him to become Fred Bishop, changing his name to its English translation to conceal that he was French-American.

Cleo Ouellette's school in Frenchville made her write "I will not speak French" over and over if she uttered so much as a "oui" or "non" — and rewarded students with extra recess if they ratted out French-speaking classmates.

And Howard Paradis, a teacher in Madawaska forced to reprimand French-speaking students, made the painful decision not to teach French to his own children. "I wasn't going to put my kids through that," Mr. Paradis said. "If you wanted to get ahead you had to speak English."

That was [Maine](#) in the 1950's and 1960's, and the stigma of being French-American reverberated for decades afterward. But now, le Français fait une rentrée — French is making a comeback.

The State Legislature began holding an annual French-American Day four years ago, with legislative business and the Pledge of Allegiance done in French and "The Star-Spangled Banner" sung with French and English verses.

Maine elected its first openly French-American congressman, Michael H. Michaud, in 2002. And Gov. John E. Baldacci has steadily increased commerce with French-speaking countries and led a trade delegation to France last fall, one of the first since tension with France began after the Sept. 11 attacks. In an interview, the governor, who is of Lebanese-Italian descent and studied Russian in high school, added, "I've been working on my French."

The Franco-American Heritage Center, opened in Lewiston a few years ago, fines guests at its luncheons up to a dollar if they lapse into English — jovial retaliation for the schools that once gave students movie tickets or no homework if they squealed on French speakers.

"Reacquisition classes" and conversation groups have sprung up at places like the South Portland Public Library, giving people a chance to relearn their mothballed French. Census figures show Maine has a greater proportion of people speaking French at home than any other state — about 5.3 percent.

And in South Freeport, there is L'École Française du Maine, a French-immersion program that began

as a preschool in 2001 and proved so popular it has added a grade each year. Many students have French-American parents who were estranged from the language, and some commute long distances to the school.

“My dad grew up speaking only French and went to school and got teased by other kids, and he wanted to spare his kids that experience, so both my wife and I are kind of a generation that got skipped,” said Bob Michaud, whose son, Alexandre, attends second grade at L’École Française, 45 minutes from home. “I’m doing it because I want Alex to learn more about our heritage and background.”

The school has made Anna Bilodeau, 8, and her brother Markus, 7, so fluent that they routinely speak French with their grandmother Arlene Bilodeau, 68, who regrets that she did not ensure her own children were well versed in French.

“It made me feel sad — this was our language,” Ms. Bilodeau said. “When I hear Anna and Markus speaking, I just admire what they’re doing.”

People of French descent poured into Maine and other New England states from Canada beginning in the 1870’s and became the backbone of textile mills and shoe factories. But resistance developed, and people began stereotyping the newcomers as rednecks, dolts or inadequate patriots. In 1919, Maine passed a law requiring schools to teach in English.

French-Americans had a saying: “Qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi” (“Who loses his language, loses his faith”). But many assimilated or limited their children’s exposure to French to avoid discrimination or because of a now-outmoded belief that erasing French would make learning English easier.

“There was just a stigma that maybe you weren’t as bright as anybody else, that you didn’t speak English as well,” said Linda Wagner, 53, of Lewiston, who takes classes to reclaim language lost as a child.

Suzanne Bourassa Woodward, 46, of South Portland, who recently joined a conversation group and enrolled her 10-year-old daughter in French classes, said “my French went underground” in fourth grade because “I was ridiculed, the dumb Frenchman jokes came out.”

“After that,” she said, “my parents would always speak to me in French, but I always responded in English.”

As recently as the early 1990’s, a character named Frenchie, who caricatured French-Americans, was a fixture on a Maine radio show until protests drove him off the air.

The stigma was compounded by the French-American dialect, which can differ from French spoken in France in idiom, pronunciation, vocabulary — like British and American English.

French-American French, derived from people who left France for Canada centuries ago, resembles the French of Louis XIV more than the modern Parisian variety, said Yvon Labbé, director of the French-American Center at the University of Southern Maine.

French-Americans may say “chassis” instead of “fenêtre” for window, “char” instead of “voiture” for car. Mr. Labbé said many French-Americans pronounced “moi” as Molière did: “moé.” A saying illustrated French-Americans’ inferiority complex about their language: “On est né pour être petit pain; on ne peut pas s’attendre à la boulangerie” (“We are born to be little breads; we cannot expect the bakery”).

“We were always told that we spoke bad French, that we were worthless as people because we spoke neither French nor English,” said Ms. Ouelette, 69.

Indeed, when Jim Bishop, son of Fred Bishop (né Frederick Levesque), took high school and college classes to recapture French “it was just a nightmare,” he said. “At times I would say words and they would turn out not to be real words.”

Maine’s French renaissance is partly due to the collapse of the mills and factories, which put French-Americans into the mainstream. It was aided by a group of legislators who in 2002 began holding weekly meetings in French.

The revival includes both French-American patois and culture, celebrated at places like the Lewiston center, and Parisian language and curriculum, taught at L’École Française. The government of France is also involved, seeing “very big potential” to “develop trade relations, tourism,” said Alexis Berthier, a spokesman for the French consulate in Boston, which is promoting programs and events in Maine and working to establish sister cities.

Most Maine schools, like those elsewhere, teach considerably more Spanish than French. But for those like Norman Marquis of Old Orchard Beach, who takes reacquisition classes, the resurgence of his lost language is profound.

“It’s almost like I found religion,” said Mr. Marquis, 68, suddenly choking with emotion. “My religion, No. 1, was French. I have a personal movement in my heart for it.”

Ariel Sabar contributed reporting from Augusta, Me., for this article.

Correction: June 6, 2006

An article on Sunday about renewed interest in French language and culture in Maine misidentified

the academic affiliation of Yvon Labbé, who said French-American dialect differs from the modern Parisian variety. He is affiliated with the University of Maine, not Southern Maine. Because of an editing error, the article misstated the name of the institution he heads. He is director of the Franco-American Center, not French-American Center.