



photo: Courtesy of Société historique de Saint-Boniface

OF FRANCOPHONE MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION TO MANITOBA

Since 2001, the leaders of Manitoba's French-speaking community have decided to enter into a "seduction operation" with Francophones from the rest of the world in order to expand their space and thus see the language that is so precious to them continue to live, grow and evolve.

The wave of French-speaking immigrants may be the result of community strategies, but Francophones have been settling in Manitoba for almost the last three centuries.

THE RAGOT FAMILY

Gustave Ragot was part of the first wave of Francophone immigration from outside Canada. He arrived from France in 1893 and settled in Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes. He became a farmer and started his family there. In the photo, he is seen surrounded by his wife and some of his 23 children in front of their house.



BY CAMILLE HARPER

Yves Frenette is a specialist in pre-20th century Francophone immigration issues at the University of Manitoba. (1) He explains:

“The first wave of Francophone immigration was that of the Voyageurs between 1750 and 1860 or so. These men from Quebec married Aboriginal women on the Canadian Prairies. They are the fathers and grandfathers of the Métis people.”

Then, there was the wave of Quebecers who came to open up land in the West, between approximately 1875 and 1914. “In the 19th century, the West was seen as a promised land, almost free. Everything had to be cleared. The agricultural migration from French-speaking countries was massive, but it was more so from English-, Ukrainian- and Polish-speaking countries.”

While these two waves of Francophone immigration were actually waves of migration from Eastern Canada, a third wave of Francophone immigration, beginning around 1890, came from outside Canada.

Yves Frenette talks about it: “It was the church authorities who sent immigration agents to recruit French-speaking families in France, Belgium and Switzerland. In 1914, there were 1.6 million people on the Prairies, of which about 50,000 were French-speaking. (2) Of these Francophones, 10 to 12% were born in France.

“Language was one reason for seeking these immigrants, but also religion,” he says. “We wanted to have more Catholics in Manitoba, and Francophones were predominantly Catholic.”

Why was it so important to have Francophone Catholics in Manitoba? Says Yves Frenette: “The first white settlement in the West, which arrived with Father Joseph-Norbert Provencher, was Francophone and Catholic. But the bishops of the West saw the Prairies populated by Protestants and English Catholics. At the time, language and faith were very much linked, so more Francophones were needed to ensure the survival of the Catholic religion on the Prairies. This was very important for the Church.”

He notes that although religion is no longer a factor in encouraging immigration, the French language and Francophone identity still are.

Moreover, Yves Frenette is amused to note that “the diversity among French-speaking Canadians goes back as far as their immigration: as early as the 18th and 19th centuries, some French-speaking newcomers came directly from Quebec, others came through the United States, and still others came from Europe.”

Immigration to Manitoba slowed considerably after the Great War. Yves Frenette explains: “The best land in the West was already taken, and the Quebec economy was doing better thanks to the development of pulp mills, cities and hydroelectricity. Francophones in Eastern Canada therefore preferred to stay in Quebec.

“As for immigration from France, the French government preferred to send its nationals to the French colonies, especially Algeria. Moreover, Church and State had been separated in France since 1905, and the latter was very hostile to the Catholic Church.”

Francophone immigration to Manitoba, however, has never disappeared. And in the 1980s and 1990s, after the abolition of the Thornton Act (3) and the return of French as the language of instruction in the schools, it picked up again, encouraged by all levels of government and communities.

Yves Frenette: “We brought in Francophones for the survival of the French-speaking communities in Manitoba. A few new Francophone families with children can make a big difference in whether or not a French school is maintained.”

(1) Yves Frenette is Professor and Tier 1 Canada Research Chair on Migration, Transfers and Francophone Communities at the Université de Saint-Boniface.

(2) The figure of 1.6 million Prairie residents does not include Aboriginal people, who were not counted at that time.

(3) The Thornton Act, passed in 1916, imposed English as the official language of education in Manitoba, thereby abolishing French-language education in the province. It was not until 1970 that the status of French as a language of instruction was re-established under the NDP government of Edward Schreyer. ▶