

# **MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES**

**By Joyce Banachowski**

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*In the United States, we can find a great number of Rouleau families whose ancestors all originate from the Province of Quebec. This great migration happened between 1830 and 1930. Here, an American historian and researcher reveals the different reasons motivating this important movement of French-Canadian people.*

*The influx of the British as the result of the American Revolution and European immigration not only brought a new population but introduced new ideas and farming methods which evidently would lead to overcrowding and discontent in rural areas.*

*In addition, the French Canadian population and its “revenge of the cradle” contributed to the problem. (The French Canadian population had been encouraged by French Canadian nationalists and the clergy to have large families because the natural increase would counter the flood of British immigrants.) This attitude was so successful that the 140,000 Canadians of 1791 had increased to 1,000,000 by 1871, providing a greater strain on the land.*

*Before the 1840’s, hundreds of French Canadians left Quebec for the U.S. – some to escape reprisals from siding with Americans in the Revolution – others to escape the consequences of taking part in the Rebellions of 1837-1838. Between 1840 and 1900, economic reasons forced thousands more to move. This is the group to whom we are now turning our attention.*

*By the 1830’s, arable land in Quebec, south of the Laurentians to the American border, had been taken up. A rural migration to cities found young Canadians having to compete for labor jobs with newly arrived Irish immigrants. By the 1840’s, these young men, having little hope of land or jobs emigrated to New England where they found jobs in the textile mills. This mass exodus worried those in Quebec and an effort was made in the 1830’s to have them more northward to undeveloped lands which formerly were mere stopping places before coming to Quebec.*

*New England employers wanted hard working, obedient French Canadian workers. The development of machines allowed the rural unskilled to get jobs, and there was a high turnover of workers after the Civil War. At the same time, the end of the Civil War created a demand for French-Canadian labor in New England textile mills. The French Canadian was less likely to strike than the Irish immigrant. Agents, often French Canadian expatriates, were sent to Quebec to encourage more to come. Advance publicity in newspapers, cut-price tickets by railroads, and those who left to return to live or visit friends and relatives in Quebec all motivated larger numbers to seek their fortunes. Agents worked out details of the trip, introduced them to fellow French Canadians and helped them find housing. The best promoters were the French Canadians themselves who displayed their success to their friends and relatives when they returned and visited in Quebec.*

*Between 1861 and 1900, over a half million Quebecers emigrated to Yankee mill towns. By 1930, about 900,000 French Canadians had gone to northern U.S.*

*By 1900, there were little Canada all over Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut.*

## ***MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES (suite)***

*Farmers of southern Quebec had continued to go into debt improving crops, building herds, buying equipment and expanding farms by borrowing money at 12% interest. Declining prices of 1873-1879 and bad harvests of 1888-1890 heightened the problem. Some sold. Others borrowed more, and others had their property seized. In the northern areas, soil was poor, and they left for cities to find those there, leaving and heading south. 1873-1896 were years of depressed prices and competition. Larger firms turned to mechanization, specialization, aggressive sales and keeping wages down; wages scarcely enough to pay for the necessities of life. Again, many left to go to the mills of New England.*

*However, new options were opened. Jobs in the mines and lumber camps and new areas of farmland were opening to the west. The U.S. was passing land laws offering cheap or free land just for the asking. Land grant laws of 1854 opened lands into Michigan and the Midwest. In 1862, the Homestead Act offered free land from western Minnesota to the Great Plains.*

*Once again, the agents were there promoting the opportunities of jobs and land. More left to go to Upper Canada (Ontario) and then on into Michigan and Minnesota. Later on, the lure of jobs and opportunities would attract them even further into the west into Oregon, Idaho, Washington and a few in Alaska. All were hoping to make a better living and improve the lives of themselves and their families.*

*Like most immigrants, these people held on to their language, ways and customs and refused to be assimilated. At gatherings, they kept their music and reminisced of their Canadian homelands. Soon, parish priests followed them. They not only provided religious needs but acted as adviser and mediator-arbitrator and were the center of social activity. Parish schools were established helping to preserve the language, religion and traditions. Many times, mutual aid societies offered help in times of illness and death.*

*Many who left improved their conditions. Very few became rich. Generally, they had the worst jobs in the mills of the East, the first to be laid off. Wives and children often had to work. In the West, they endured the multiple hardships of clearing land, facing the dangers and hardships of diseases, isolation and weather and miles from family and friends, probably never to see them again in the wilderness of the west.*

*Homes were small, crowded, run-down, and breeding grounds for disease. However, the cities gave their young a greater range of amusement and distractions. The West provided the opportunity to own and develop your own land for you and your family. Parishes offered a sense of security and belonging.*

*By 1930, the emigration out of Quebec diminished because of the Great Depression and the severe new immigration laws imposed by the U.S. government.*

**Information for the above article was extracted from Roby, Yves, "Little Canadas", in Horizon Canada, vol. 7, under direction of Benoit A. Robert, Michel MacDonald and Raynold R. Nadeau, published by the Centre for the Study of Teaching Canada, Education Tower, Laval University, Quebec, 1987, pp. 1952-1957.**

**Editor's note: Once again, our thanks go to cousin Nelda who sent us this very interesting article. As most of us know, besides being a member of the French Canadian/Acadian Genealogists of Wisconsin, Nelda is a long-time member of the Rouleau families Association.**