

"I was born on Knox Street. Then we moved up [the hill to] Pleasant Street....We were the only house up there....We had pigs, we had chickens, we made our own butter.... We never had inside plumbing. We had an outhouse in the back, and in the kitchen we had a pump." Lionel Audet

Most immigrants settled in the tenement districts near the mills. Rents were affordable, especially if families crowded into small apartments, and the hunt for work was close by. Families clustered by ethnic background. Irish congregated in the Gas Patch and Bleachery Hill; Poles and Lithuanians lived east of City Park; a small German settlement was located a few blocks north.

Yet it was French Canadians who predominated. The heart of their community was Little Canada, bounded by the canal, the Androscoggin River, and the Gas Patch. A network of francophone institutions upported this tight-knit neighborhood. The Dominican Block housed a community center and parochial school; St. Mary's was the "French parish church." Salesmen from F.X. Marcotte's store (still located at the corner of Lincoln and Chestnut Streets) greeted newcomers at the Grand Trunk Depot, helping them find apartments and selling them furniture on credit.

Yet Lewiston was not a mosaic of ethnic enclaves. Most neighborhoods were mixed; the French lived everywhere. Many Quebecois migrants bought land on the outskirts of town, keeping gardens and animals for subsistence, re-creating something of the rural life they had left in Canada.





La Survivance: Inside an Ethnic World

Millworkers made more than just bedspreads in the years before World War II. They created a close-knit community of families, neighborhoods, and ethnic and religious institutions. Their social life could be insular and even defensive. Yet the ethic of loyalty and mutual care enabled millworkers to endure the hardships of migration and economic depression. Franco-American elders have a phrase for this experience: la survivance. The phrase means something deeper than mere survival, more than just the capacity to outlast adversity. La survivance marked a kind of stubborn resilience that, in the hard times of the early 20th century, created a rich communal world.

"We bought our groceries at a store at the corner of Randall Road and Sabattus Street.

...run by a Beaulieu. We knew the family well. And they took care of us good over there.

We could buy let's say for two, three weeks at a time,

we wouldn't have to pay,

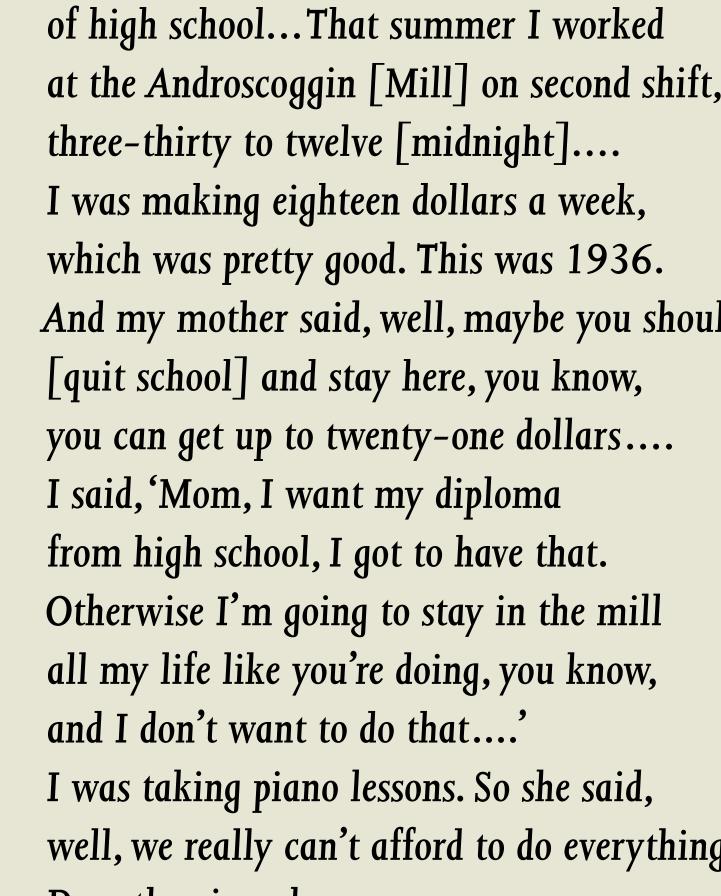
just when my father was able to dump some money. So that helped him during the Depression, you know, it helped the family out." Gerard Bergeron

"You haven't lived those days.... Not everybody had cars, so if somebody came in, a cousin or something with a car, we'd all go out for a ride. And on Sundays, compared to look[ing] at TV all the time, we used to have family gatherings,

play cards and enjoy ourselves." Rolande Begin

La survivance had a less happy side —

especially for young people. When a teenager left school for the mills, or put her pay in the family cash-box, she set aside her own dreams and pleasures. Sometimes parents wanted nothing more than for children to escape the toil. At other times, the tension between the generations, between the claims of home and the claims of hope, was painful.



"I was almost sixteen... with two years

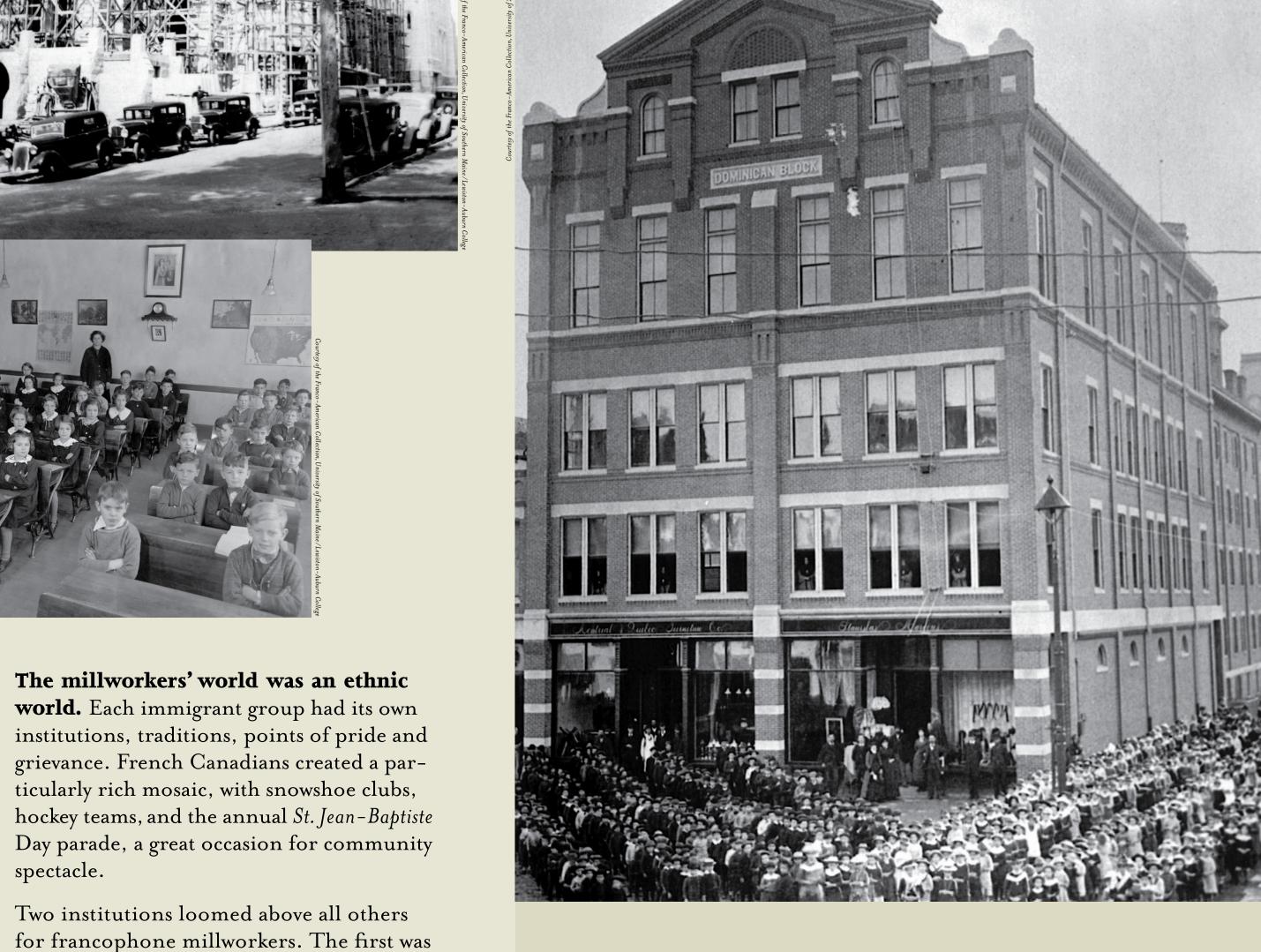
at the Androscoggin [Mill] on second shift, And my mother said, well, maybe you should well, we really can't afford to do everything. Drop the piano lessons. Okay, drop the piano lessons." Helen Little



Immigrant neighborhoods and ethnic loyalties were a recipe for conflict. For one thing, immigrants faced prejudice from native-born Americans; in the 1920s, the

> in Lewiston, trying to intimidate French Catholic newcomers. There was also conflict among millworkers of different ethnic groups. Elders tell many stories of brawls and rivalries, especially between the French and Irish; even today, shamrocks are stenciled along one wall of the Bates Mill and fleur-de-lis along another. Yet their memories paint a complex picture of group relations. Lewiston did not witness the kind of enmity that marked other industrial communities in the U.S. There were scrapes among teenagers, but little gang fighting and no riots. And we hear many stories of connection and mutual aid: interethnic friendships and courtships, fond memories of a worker who translated shop floor grievances between French and English. Threads of cosmopo tanism were woven through the social fab of the ethnic milltown.

local Ku Klux Klan held cross-burnings



"My father was making eleven dollars and seventy five cents a week, so he couldn't afford to hire anybody to take care of us... One week I would stay home and take care of the three-yearold [and] the next week I'd go to school [and] he'd stay home.... We did that for two years... You come in and they've been studying and you don't know anything that's going on. So, I wasn't going to graduate.

So this nun that I had she says..., you can come in any time you want to. You got time at night, Saturday or Sunday, let me know, call me and I'll spend all the time I can with you to try to get you caught up. And she succeeded. I caught up. I didn't graduate with honors, but I graduated. If it hadn't been for her, she was like a mother to me." Lionel Audet

...as French kids you didn't go in City Park, because they were all Irish over there. Sometimes you had to cross through, but you didn't go there on purpose.... There was usually somebody waiting for us around the bushes or something like that you know." Lionel Morency

Two institutions loomed above all others

the French language itself, ever-present

and in the daily paper Le Messager. Until the

—learning the multiplication tables, singing a lullaby—happened in French. Equally

important was the Catholic church. In the

depths of the Depression, working-class

Paul. The church returned their devotion is

many ways. Parish clergy brought groceries

Lewiston's children, in separate schools for

francophone and anglophone Catholics

and separate classrooms for girls and boys

Priests gave stern instruction as to how

children should grow up and whom they

might mix with and wed. The power of

traditional Catholicism cannot be overstate

-until world war, consumer prosperity,

and the Vatican II reforms challenged it.

to the poor. Priests and nuns educated

families gave precious nickels and dimes to complete the vast Church of Saints Peter and

1960s, even the most everyday experience

on Lewiston's streets, in Catholic schools,



Family bonds were key to la survivance, whether in Little Canada or on a garden plot up the hill. Everyone shared the toil of the household and the pay envelope from the mill. (Mothers and daughters had an extra burden, since they did the lion's share of the laundry, cooking, and cleaning.) The neighborhood was an economic unit as well: child care from a neighbor and credit from the local grocer were often

essential aids to getting by.

Of course family and neighborhood were more than just instruments for making ends meet. They created spaces of intimacy, pleasure, and shared meaning, sheltered from the realities of mill work and economic crisis. Despite their stories of hardship, today's elders often recall family parties or musical evenings with a wistful tone. In contrast to the consumer satisfactions that came after World War II—the TV sets and department store clothes—families in the 1930s did not have or need very much money to enjoy life.



