Iconic Portrait of a French-Canadian Family

What is it to be a real French-Canadian? Here is one portrait that demonstrates in a highly iconoclastic manner the heart of the French-Canadian culture – to laugh and be happy despite daily hardships.

This portrait would never be considered a gem or a “photo-op” by today’s’ standards but it is exactly that by 20th century standards.

In reply to “The Body or the Soul? Religion and Culture in a Rural Quebec Parish, St-Joseph-de-Beauce, 1736-1901”by Francis a. Abbott, this photo does reveal the true nature and cultural identity of a family born and raised in Saint Joseph de Beauce, a family practicing the Catholic faith, a group of people connected by a culture that is expressed outwardly despite daily challenges and economic hardships of the time.

The Poulin family, partially presented here, fulfilled every required demonstration of the Catholic faith but continued to hold to their cultural autonomy through song, dance and merriment despite the rigors that village cures attempted to impose on them.

After decades of moving away from their Canadian roots, the members of this photo continued for years to demonstrates the ***temps des fétes***, the winter feasting that characterized Quebecois families.

Despite the vision of the Reverend Antoine Racine put forth in his 1853 report on the township of Saint-Joseph to Archbishop Turgeon, the continuation of exuberant celebration never did disappear from Saint-Joseph, nor from the traditional customs of the surrounding population. The attempts to change people’s attitudes toward a more submissive behavior and posture were seen as failures by 1901. No amount of catechism school lessons would bring forth the modified behavior viewed as appropriate by the Catholic Church.

These people were farmers, loggers, miners and trappers. Young boys and girls were pulled from their studies based on the farming seasons, the logging opportunities to earn a few dollars, the cyclical movements of game in the area. By 1901, local farmers had minimal interest in having their children schooled in drafty, one-room schoolhouses. Of what use was an education on sheep, grain and dairy farms that valued an extra set of hands each day of the year?

For far too long, the Catholic Church has tried to interfere with basic cultural indoctrination, a facet of character that is not really part and parcel of a “fervent faith in God”, is it?

To be truly French-Canadian, your family would resemble much more closely the one depicted above.

Left to right: Siblings Blaise Poulin, Anne-Marie Poulin, Cecile Poulin, their mother, Lucia Vachon, then siblings Lucienne Pouln and Martha Poulin.

Abbott, Francis A. (2012) *The body or the Soul? Religion and culture in a rural Quebec parish, St-Joseph-de-Beauce, 1736-1901*, published Fall 2012, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada.