

Adelard L. Soucy, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, USA

By: Ronald M. Bernard

Historians estimate that as many as 900,000 French-Canadians emigrated from Quebec to the United States between 1840 and 1930. This dramatic and remarkable exodus has shaped the destinies of both Quebec and the proximate New England region.

The story of Adelard L. SOUCY (1886-1931), representative to the Rhode Island legislature and mayor of that most French of all immigrant communities, Woonsocket, is probably the best example of the character, work ethic and pride of these special new Americans. They sought a better life and future for their families and were willing to sacrifice so much to attain it. At the same time they were determined to retain their culture and their dignity.

Immigration from Quebec to New England in the 19th Century

Starting in the 1840s towns and cities throughout New England were being industrialized and transformed into economic dynamos. There was a virtually unlimited need for factory labor. Nevertheless, native born Americans were turning away from such miserable, exhausting, dangerous and unhealthy work. Their places had to be filled by foreigners. Irish immigrants stepped in but soon they too abandoned it. After the Civil War the textile industry looked north to Quebec and found a large, dependable source of factory workers.

Meanwhile in rural Quebec the combination of population explosion and worn out, failing farmland, few non-agrarian opportunities, indebtedness, and an indifferent government and elite class drove thousands into poverty and desperation. By the 1870s good rail service between Quebec and the New England states turned a trickle of immigrants into a flood. Beckoned by established family members and friends, the countryside and villages emptied of residents with their hopes for a better life albeit in a strange, alien urban America. Almost 600,000 made the trek by 1900, leaving behind ancestral farms and extremely close social, cultural and religious connections. It is estimated that as much as one-third of the entire population of Quebec departed, most permanently. Too late this was recognized as a social catastrophe for the Province with demographic consequences to this day.

Waves of poor French-Canadians settled into overcrowded ghetto tenements in major textile centers like Lewiston, Manchester and Nashua, Lowell, Lawrence, Fall River and Worcester, and dozens of others. They transformed sleepy Yankee communities into lively towns. They also brought the vibrant French culture of Quebec anchored by their strong Catholic faith: at least 250 new French parishes were established in New England in this period. In turn parish schools, infirmaries and even colleges were established. Despite 60+ hour work-weeks for adults *and* children under dreadful, unforgiving

conditions and low wages – plus social discrimination and tension-- our great-grandparents helped to create the foundation of our modern economy and comfortable lifestyle. I wonder if we, their grandchildren in America, can appreciate the legacy they left us—their family values, work ethic, selflessness, sacrifice and courage. I do wonder.

The Rise of Industrial Woonsocket and the Role of its French-Canadians

Nowhere was the impact of 19th century Quebec French immigration more profound than and evident today than in the small northern Rhode Island city of Woonsocket (pop. 43,200), one of the earliest destinations. Before the American Civil War 117 “French” families settled in and around what had been a collection of six distinct “mill villages.” These evolved by 1888 into modern Woonsocket.

French-Canadian immigrant destinations tended to lure families from particular areas or parishes. One family attracted another. For example, in the case of Woonsocket 23 of the original 117 families came from the village of St.-Ours. This pattern eased economic, emotional and cultural burdens for the immigrants and assured homogeneous communities for them. There was even a term coined for their affinity to their language, traditions and culture: *la survivance*. Naturally at the time local populations did not generally ‘appreciate’ this social self-segregation by the French-Canadians. Not infrequently this resulted in unfortunate cultural misunderstandings and hard feelings. By 1900 French-Canadian families accounted for 65% of the population of Woonsocket, the highest proportion in any major industrial town or city in New England.

Woonsocket quickly became one of the largest industrial textile manufacturing centers in the United States. The boom produced a modern city with all the amenities including a convenient trolley system, excellent railroad connections, beautiful architecture and advanced public services and buildings such as libraries and auditoriums. But it would not last. By the 1920s while various other manufacturing forms continued to prosper, the cotton industry, mainstay of the city’s economy, collapsed signaling the decline of textiles in New England and the end of immigration to the area by French-Canadians.

Adelard L. Soucy, Public Servant

Probably the most beloved figure in Woonsocket in this period of immigrant transformation was Adelard L. SOUCY. Son of immigrants from St.-Felix parish in Valois, Quebec, Adelard SOUCY became at an early age one of the most prominent public figures to come from the French-Canadian community. In her historically important book, “The Beginnings of the Franco-American Colony in Woonsocket, Rhode Island”, Woonsocket native Marie-Louise BONIER (1867-1927), published an extraordinary history (with the genealogies of the original families) of the city and its relationship to the French-Canadians who played a major part in its development. She wrote it in French for the Franco-American community to help them understand their contribution and to foster pride in their accomplishments and in their new home.

In 1997 Claire QUINTAL, professor of French at Assumption College and head of the Institut Francais in Worcester, Massachusetts, expertly translated and edited the entire work into English, thereby opening a window to newer generations interested in their Franco-American heritage. We are grateful for this contribution.

Louise BONIER included the following (1920) biography of Adelard L. Soucy, someone she obviously knew and admired. He was mayor of Woonsocket, 1919-1926. Admitted to the bar as an attorney when only 21, he served in the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1914 at the remarkably young age of 28.

“Adelard L. Soucy is a prominent Franco-American and one of the most eminent citizens of the city. He did not wait to grow old before achieving success. His fellow citizens thought enough of him to elect him mayor of Woonsocket in the fall of 1918 with a resounding victory in all wards; he won with a 1285 majority of the votes cast.

He was born in Manville, R.I. on May 28, 1886, the son of Mr. Bruno Soucy and Miss Olivine Henault. He gave proof early in life of conceptual ability, unusual in a child. His first years in parochial school were notable for his steadfast docility, his passionate love of study, his precociously convinced piety and extraordinary intelligence. The virility of his character and his aptitude for leadership resulted in his being named captain of the young Zouave Guards which he trained to be admirably disciplined. No ceremony took place at that time without the presence of these young boys who added dazzle to the events by their captivating maneuvers.

His parochial school teachers having noted his remarkable intelligence and the seriousness of his character, he was sent by his parents to the Joliette Seminary where he continued to distinguish himself in his course work. In June, 1910 he brilliantly completed his course of classical studies for the baccalaureate degree granted magna cum laude by Laval University. Soon thereafter, however, exhausted by having studied too intensely, he was obliged, with great regret on his part, to cut short his graduate studies. He then went out to the Canadian Northwest to regain his health.

In 1914, he became a journalist at the Canado-Americain of Manchester, New Hampshire, where his talents drew attention



M. ADELARD-L. SOUCY,
le maire actuel de Woonsocket; élu en 1918.

He returned to reside in Woonsocket that same year where he became the manager of the Social Realty Company's business bureau.

He soon started his own real estate agency where he also sold insurance and became a notary public. His business has since grown by leaps and bounds, making him one of the most outstanding real estate agents in the city as of this writing.

His interest in public affairs and the working class being natural to him, it was only a question of time before he turned to politics. In 1914 he was elected to the General Assembly of Rhode Island. From this first political campaign of his, everyone was unanimous in recognizing his leadership qualities and a natural propensity to take on the task of defending the rights of the weak and the cause of the worker. He was re-elected in 1916. In his actions as mayor can be seen this same concern for justice for all classes of society, but especially for the weak and working men and women.

Mr. Soucy's already accomplished career is a wonder to all. But the future seems, nonetheless, to have even more brilliant successes in store for him.

He is a man of deep religious conviction, and his honesty is without reproach. He is a worker, a self-made man, an American with a clarity of vision regarding our country's destiny, a gentlemen of whom everyone is proud, and who will certainly continue to bring honor to his people and to be a factor in attracting to them in the future all the respect which is their due."

The above was written in 1920 while SOUCY was in his first mayoral term. He was re-elected several times ultimately serving longer in that office than any previous mayor. Sometime after 1926 he developed a serious illness which culminated in his death on July 14, 1931 at the untimely age of only 45.

Adelard SOUCY was not only a tireless champion for his community in his public role but he also served in numerous civic capacities including as a long-time trustee for the St. Louis church, a knight in the Papal Order of St. Gregory, and leading benefit efforts. One can imagine that his proudest moment was his dedication of the fabulous Stadium Theater in 1926. He probably had used all his energy and powers to make the Stadium a reality for the people of Woonsocket. Lovingly restored as an Arts Center in 2001, it lives in testimony to the golden age of Woonsocket.

His funeral was a very impressive affair according to the *Woonsocket Call*. Hundreds of ordinary citizens as well as business, community, religious and political leaders paid their respects the evening before at his home which was directly across the street from the church. Every civic and religious organization sent a delegation. His large family and relatives from throughout New England as well as from St.-Hyacinth, Quebec attended.

Although his life was short, SOUCY accomplished everything he had set out to do while also earning admiration and respect from the people. He was a brilliant, unusually gifted

man who used his talents and prodigious energy to improve his fine city. Adelard SOUCY was truly a credit to his French-Canadian heritage and will be long remembered.

His family included four sons and two daughters and several of them had distinguished careers in Woonsocket. Like his father, Jean-Paul SOUCY (1921-2000) was an attorney with a 50-year career and served a term as mayor of Woonsocket (1957-58). He was also active in Woonsocket community service organizations. Adelard Jr. (1917-2003) and Rodrigue (c.1920-2007) managed the Soucy Insurance Agency founded by their father and operated today by grandson David SOUCY. This Soucy family from Woonsocket continues a proud tradition of community service and upstanding citizenship.

Proud of his Soucy family roots through his maternal side, Ron Bernard has been researching North American Soucy genealogies for 25 years and hopes to eventually complete the entire Soucy family tree. He is eager to correspond with any Soucy (ie) interested in the project or to share information. Contact Ron by email at Ronbernard@aol.com or write to him at P.O. Box 1288, Farmington, CT 06034.

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Special thanks to the American-French Genealogical Society in Woonsocket for their kind assistance.