

AN ACADIAN ODYSSEY

By Don Cyr

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The Cyr family is from Acadia, which was settled in 1604 by the French—before the Jamestown settlement in Virginia and the Pilgrim settlement in Massachusetts Bay. Many of the family now reside in the Saint John Valley, on the northern border of Maine, and have been there since that area's settlement in 1785—a generation before Yankee settlers arrived from southern Maine. The Cyrs and other Acadians took refuge there from a series of wars with the English that had been nearly continuous since 1613. Their odyssey was one of strife and hardship, and their search for peace and isolation would always elude them.

The founder of the Cyr family in Acadia called himself Pierre “Sire.” He could write, and that is how he signed his name. There are actually many ways to spell the name, because there was no standardized spelling at that time. Whoever wrote the name then did so by sound and by what was familiar—both versions of name are pronounced the same way. Pierre was born in 1644, but where in France he actually came from is not certain, although two spellings of the name (Cyr and Sire) are common in the old province of Touraine, on the Loire River, southwest of Paris. Pierre arrived in Acadia in about 1668 and is found in the 1671 census, where he is listed as a twenty seven-year-old gunsmith married to eighteen-year-old Marie Bourgeois. Married in 1669 at Port Royale, they had a three-month-old son, Jehan (Jean). They owned eleven head of cattle and six sheep, but none of their land was yet under cultivation.

Pierre had married into a network of families that had been in Acadia since 1636. Marie was the daughter of Jacques Bourgeois, surgeon, and Jeanne Trahan of Beaubassin—near the present-day border between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Beaubassin was a new settlement in Acadia, at that time, and had been created by Jacques Bourgeois and his extended family. Its topography is that of a huge diked plain, known for agriculture. However, King Louis XIV granted Beaubassin to the Sieur de la Vallière as a *seigneurie*, probably to the disappointment of Jacques Bourgeois, who had hoped to be the *seigneur*.

When the French resettlement of Acadia began in the 1630s, they began to reclaim tidal marshlands, where the tide was held back with huge dikes built with communal labor. This gave the Acadians access to fabulously rich land, which was cultivated in grain. Some of these diked lands consisted of thousands of acres: up to 11,000 at the settlement of Grand Pré alone. Their grain was often illegally traded with merchant ships from New England.

Acadia had been renamed “Nova Scotia” by Sir William Alexander, from Scotland, when he attempted a settlement at the abandoned site of Port Royale in 1628. The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye put an end to that effort, but the name would be remembered and used each time the English won Acadia. This happened in 1654, and again in 1710. Beaubassin was burned twice, once in 1696 and again in 1704, by expeditions led by Benjamin Church from New England. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 saw Acadia again in British hands. From the point of view of the Acadians, this was a temporary situation. They had experienced British rule before, only to be returned to French administration later. This time would be different.

The British were in a peculiar spot. The Acadians were French-speaking and Catholic, but the British had to convince them to stay, otherwise, who would provision the troops? Protestant, English-speaking people were not interested in settling in contested territory, especially in a territory that had Natives allied with the French. Possible settlers from New England saw the colony as hostile territory.

For their part, the Acadians also had a problem. The British demanded an oath of loyalty to the Crown. How could they swear an irrevocable oath, to an entity from which they expected to be delivered? An oath was honor-bound, sacred, and was not taken lightly. Pledging loyalty also meant the probability of serving in the army and marching against their compatriots in Canada.

The Acadians negotiated an oath of neutrality and that oath seemed to work until 1749, when Governor Cornwallis pushed for an unqualified oath.

Change had come about over the course of forty years. Halifax had been founded, more troops had come to the colony, and German Protestants were being directed to set up settlements. The British garrison no longer depended on Acadian supplies, and Britain was preparing for another war with France. Nova Scotia needed loyal subjects, not a possible enemy within its borders. Despite ongoing Acadian problems with English translation, as well as their stubbornness and independent spirit, the situation had not changed much from a local Acadian point of view. However, in the larger world the situation had changed dramatically.

The British saw new dynamics pulling at the Acadians with greater intensity. The Acadians had a long tradition of kinship, trade, and religion with the Mi'kmaq. The British saw this link as a severe threat, because the Mi'kmaq were a part of a much wider confederacy allied to the French, one that was encouraged by the French garrison at the nearby Fortress of Louisbourg. The Acadians also were influenced by priests and missionaries appointed by the bishop of Québec and paid by the French Crown. So, when Colonel Charles Lawrence became acting governor of Nova Scotia, because of the mental illness of Governor Hopson, he was able to implement a plan to settle the issue of Acadian loyalty once and for all. War between the British and French had broken out in the Ohio Country, and the French, with their Native allies, were considered a strong threat. Lawrence did not want to have to defend British settlers from an "enemy" majority within the colony.

As the war in the Ohio Country spread, events quickly unraveled in Nova Scotia in 1754 and 1755. Some 300 Acadians sought refuge in the nearby French post of Fort Beauséjour, because Father LaLoutre, a partisan missionary, and his Mi'kmaq warriors had burned their settlements in retaliation for their neutrality (most of them were Cyr or related to the Cyr family). Lawrence saw this "reinforcing" of the fort as an insurrection and called for troops. The commandant of the fort surrendered because most of the Acadians refused to take up arms against the British.

The resulting deportation proved to be a formidable task for the British. About 50 percent of the Acadians escaped to French territories in Isle Royale (Cape Breton), Isle Saint Jean (Prince Edward Island), and what is now New Brunswick. Many eventually reached Canada. The Cyr family was among these people. They did what Lawrence feared—went to the aid of the enemy. Seven thousand Acadians were captured and sent to British colonies over the next seven years. Lawrence hoped to assimilate them by spreading them all over the British-American colonies. However, many Acadians died in transit, as they had not experienced epidemics and were vulnerable to diseases such as smallpox.

The deportation was not just a one-year event but continued until the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Many refugees who had escaped the initial wave of deportation were rounded up later. In one of these operations Moses Hazen and his men attacked Acadian refugees on the lower St. John River. Some were killed but most escaped into the woods. From this, the idea of finding a more isolated place to settle probably developed in the minds of the beleaguered Acadians.

After fleeing into the forests of New Brunswick, many Acadian refugees initially assembled in the Kamouraska region of Québec, on the lower St. Lawrence River. In 1758, they were joined by other Acadians escaping from Prince Edward Island when it was cleared by the British on their way to Quebec City. Thus, the implications of the capture of Québec by the British must have been devastating to the Acadian refugees. The Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years' War in 1763, meant that the French Empire in North America had all but disappeared. The treaty did allow the French the freedom to move wherever they wanted. What most of them wanted was to return to Nova Scotia, but their fabulous diked farmlands had been confiscated by British subjects.

At the end of the Seven Years War (1763) the Cyr family members were listed as British "prisoners" at Crock's Point, on the lower St. John River near Fredericton, New Brunswick. Named were Jean-Baptiste Cyr, born in 1710; his wife, Marguerite Cormier, a sixteen year old whom he had married in 1734 in Beaubassin; and their nine sons born between 1737 and 1768. Many of the sons married women from Kamouraska. When or if they moved to Kamouraska is unknown, but they—and others—would move back and forth between Kamouraska and Crock's Point, along with families from Beaubassin. Why? One answer might lie with the Ayotte family.

The Ayottes had originally moved from Kamouraska to Beaubassin shortly before the troubles began in the 1750s, and then moved again to Crock's Point, where they lived for sixteen years. Their familiarity and connections with Kamouraska and Beaubassin may have attracted other families to Crock's Point. In any case, there was much intermarriage between families from these three areas, but not much of a paper trail as to their comings and goings.

The large extended family of Cyr family members settled at Crock's Point before 1763, where they were joined by many other families from Kamouraska and Beaubassin. One reason was that the Kamouraska area was running out of good farmland, while the Saint John River offered many fertile islands—perfect for grazing—that were unoccupied. When the Acadians first settled in this area it was considered "French territory," because the British didn't have the manpower to hold it. This settlement at Crock's Point, however, was only a brief interlude in the violence.

A Malecite village also lay close by, so they had the services of a missionary priest from time to time. Priests were scarcer than today, so church services were intermittent ceremonies where the settlers would "catch up on the sacraments." An elder man in a community would perform baptisms, marriages, graveside rituals, and prayer services when a priest was not available. Locating near an Indigenous village assured that the priest would come at least once a year. The British regime did not allow new priests in the Maritimes, because they saw them as subversive elements. In this period there was only one Catholic missionary in what is now the Maritime Provinces.

The American Revolution, from an Acadian and French-Canadian point of view, was a somewhat confusing event. Many of the Acadian deportees from 1755 were scattered throughout the thirteen colonies that would become the United States.

While the Revolution was a popular cause in New England and the South, it was not popular in New York. Nova Scotia, which included what is today New Brunswick, was essentially a military camp with few permanent residents. American colonists who remained loyal to the British moved to the Maritimes and Canada. These Loyalists were a sizeable number. The Crown awarded them with land grants in strategic places to stop rebel incursions into British territory.

The St. John River was one of those strategic places, and the Acadians on the lower St. John were "in the way" again. It seemed that a cloud of injustice was following them wherever they went. They had cleared farms over the past decade and now the area was being claimed by the Loyalist newcomers. Land tenure in old Acadia had been very loose, so the Acadians had the attitude that one could settle any where without being molested. This was not so with the British, for whom paper deeds showing ownership meant everything. There was some compensation for improvements that had been made to the land, but the Acadians lost again. Jean Baptiste Cyr, the father of nine sons, most of whom were future Madawaskans, cried out: "My God, can it be that you no longer create land for the Cayens?"

Twice fooled, they got the message! They knew that French sovereignty in North America was gone, not to return. Now was the time to give in to the British system. They petitioned the king for land in the northern part of New Brunswick. Their purpose was isolation. They petitioned for land above Grand Falls, on the middle St. John River, where there was a settlement of Malecites and intervals of rich, low land. The authorities approved the petition for the Madawaska Territory, as well as the northeastern part of New Brunswick near Caraquet, splitting the petitioners into two groups. The British knew that the Madawaska Territory was a contested area with the United States and saw an Acadian settlement as providing a buffer zone in case of a territorial dispute. Thus, the tribulations of the Acadians were guaranteed to continue.

The settlement of the Madawaska Territory began in 1785. It was necessary to carve farms out of the forest before the land grants would be finalized. When the first settlers arrived, they found a trading post run by two half-brothers, Pierre Lizotte and Pierre Duperé. It lay near the mouth of the Madawaska River, close by the Malecite village, where the commercial center of Edmundston, New Brunswick, is today. Most of the Acadian settlers settled on the south bank, or United States side, of the river, away from the Malecites. The Malecites were probably not thrilled with their presence.¹ The initial Acadian settlement area spread from present-day St. David Flats to the flats in Grand Isle. By 1789 settlements had expanded onto all of the flats to Grand Falls. The deeds were finalized in 1790 and 1792. In 1789 the Violette family, along with the Cyrs and Soucys, started clearing land in the Grande Rivière Settlement where Van Buren-Saint Léonard is today.²

The settlers laid out their farms in long thin lots that allowed all to have good bottomland, access to the river for transportation, and uplands with good timber. This arrangement also allowed homesteads to be in close proximity for mutual support. The settlers were mostly kin, so long-held and familiar patterns of communal life were continued. Shared projects such as dike-building, house-raising, or church building were the custom. Large families were the custom, and all of the early settlers were connected by the Cyr brothers who had a total of eighty-seven children by 1814. The children and their numerous offspring married into all of the other families of the region.

In 1797 a famine (*la misère noire*) provided Marguerite Blanche Thibodeau Cyr, known as "Tante-Blanche," the opportunity to show her leadership and strength of character. Tante-Blanche was the granddaughter of René LeBlanc, a legal notary from Grand Pré and the only real person mentioned in Longfellow's poem *Euangeline*, an epic poem about the misery caused by the Acadian deportation. She lived in the Grand Rivière Settlement, along with the families of her two sisters and a brother. Tante-Blanche rose to the occasion when the settlement was in famine. Food was running out and the men had gone hunting, only to be caught up in an eight-day snowstorm. Tante-Blanche went from house to house and gathered up and redistributed all of the remaining food, thus saving many lives. She was a strong, respected woman who had to have had the complete trust of everyone to have been able to take food away from the needy in starvation times. She became the stuff of legend, was venerated as a living saint, and was eventually buried inside the church at St. Basile. There were many heroines among the Acadians, who were rough, resolute survivors. To this day, when some of the old people ask you how you are, they ask: "How are you surviving?"

It seemed to the Acadians that they had found a permanent home. But there was one more storm to weather. The British had erred in describing the borders between their colonies after the first Treaty of Paris in 1763, an unimportant matter at the time, because it was "only" settled by the French and Indigenous people, and was all British territory, anyway. The problem came with the second Treaty of Paris in 1783, when the language from the previous treaty was copied without thinking of its future implications. The border was based upon the supposition that the watersheds between the St. John and

¹ The Indigenous peoples of New Brunswick were wards of the colony and had no rights in the eyes of the government. Any encroachment by Europeans on their grounds would have been seen as an undesirable development, yet they were powerless to stop it.

² The only families in the Madawaska Settlement that had been deported aboard Colonel Lawrence's ships in 1755 were the Mazzerolle and Thibodeau families.

St. Lawrence Rivers were divided by highlands, but actually the whole region is a low plateau. The highest land lies in central Maine, where Katahdin and the mountains west of it divide the rivers that flow into the Gulf of Maine from those that empty into the St. John River, which empties into the Bay of Fundy. The result was a growing dispute between Britain and the United States over the unclear language of an unknown geography.

The inhabitants of the Madawaska Settlement, in the midst of this uncertainty, came to experience a kind of "cold war" between the British and the United States. New Brunswick had been carved out of Nova Scotia in 1784 and Maine broke away from Massachusetts in 1820. Both these new polities needed start-up cash, and timber was the resource that provided it. The area witnessed arrests on both sides for incursions on each other's claims. The Northeastern Boundary Dispute was about British claims in order to have easy access to the St. Lawrence. The Aroostook War was about timber rights. They are actually two separate issues, but were "fought" at the same time in the 1830s.

The Acadian settlers were used by each side to anchor their claims to the region. Maine had little leverage in the area. The Acadians, British subjects of French ancestry, outnumbered the Yankees dramatically and had been there since 1785, whereas only a pitiful number of Yankees began to arrive after 1817. These Yankees were, however, in the lumber business and had U.S. financial backing. The Acadians, armed with British deeds, were all farmers and had no backing. Maine tried to incorporate Madawaska as a town in 1831, and then elected a reluctant Pierre Lizotte as a legislator. Lizotte refused to go to the State House in Augusta because he said he was a British subject.

In actuality, neither London nor Washington wanted war. They were both of the opinion that the land in dispute was valueless, except for trees, which seemed to be plentiful everywhere. Negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Washington in 1842, also known as the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. The St. John River was declared the northern border between Maine, Québec, and New Brunswick. War had been averted. Although spared bloodshed and removal, there was a price for the Acadians.

The price was that the Madawaska Settlement was divided in half—stranded in different nations—on either bank of the river. Canadians condemned Britain for negotiating away 2,000 "loyal" and "British" subjects on the south bank of the river. Maine felt shortchanged, losing trees but getting 2,000 French settlers without their consent. If the settlers had been asked, they certainly would have declined their assignment to Maine, as the deeds to their land were from the British. Nonetheless, Maine honored the deeds by transferring them to the Maine registry.

Learning the U.S. way of government took some time. James Madigan, from Houlton, French-speaking and Catholic, came to the St. John Valley to help with the transition. The parishes were really the power structure in the region, but now town governments had to be set up and Maine law had to be abided. One of those laws, passed in 1851, was prohibition. This law interfered with local custom and was not respected. Wine was used in the Catholic mass, and liquor could be manufactured and bought across the river from the British colonies. Prohibition, which lasted until 1934, created a publically sanctioned illicit trade and a tradition of smuggling in the valley.

The U.S. side of the St. John Valley would be, and still is, a backwater of little significance to the rest of the country. The Canadian side, however, contains a main transportation corridor for Canada. The railroads and the Trans-Canada Highway pass parallel to U.S. Route 1 about a mile apart for forty miles. Mainers south of the St. John Valley believe that the world ends with the border. Valley people see the border as a beginning.

These days, most of the investment in northern Maine is coming from New Brunswick, with the McCain family in farmland and potato processing, and the Irving family buying farmland and woodland, and engaged in oil refining. These families are creating jobs in northern Maine as they take over the economy of the region. Lord Ashburton may have given northern Maine away, but the Canadians are buying it back.