

---

2018

## ***Le base ball*, Assimilation, and Ethnic Identity: The National Pastime in Franco-America**

Jonathan Gosnell  
Smith College, [jgosnell@smith.edu](mailto:jgosnell@smith.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.smith.edu/frn\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/frn_facpubs)



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Gosnell, Jonathan, "*Le base ball*, Assimilation, and Ethnic Identity: The National Pastime in Franco-America" (2018). French Studies: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
[https://scholarworks.smith.edu/frn\\_facpubs/9](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/frn_facpubs/9)

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in French Studies: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu)

***Le Base ball, Assimilation and Ethnic Identity:  
The National Pastime in Franco-America***

*“... la paroisse avait été atteinte de la fièvre du baseball” (Lemelin 79)*

This article explores the allure of baseball in “Franco-America,” in parts of the northeastern United States where immigrants of French or Francophone descent settled permanently. It examines sporting news in the French ethnic press of Massachusetts notably to underscore ways in which the game of baseball both affirmed the assimilation of a working-class, Catholic, and culturally French-Canadian group, as well as helped to articulate its French ethnic distinction. Historians and sociologists have long studied how immigrant groups in the United States have defined themselves through a variety of forms of athletic competition, Irish-Americans and Italian-American for instance, but rarely have the competitive exploits of French-descended people drawn much attention.<sup>1</sup>

One does not typically think of baseball being played in French or as an expression of French sporting prowess, in the United States or in North America generally. Scholars as well as citizens more often associate ice hockey with the French athletic tradition in North America, and no professional player of team sport symbolizes Quebec nationalist spirit more than Maurice “Rocket” Richard of the Montreal Canadiens in the 1950s (Melançon 13). Gilles Janson suggests that French sport in North America developed in a context of rivalry with the British. First practiced by English officers, administrators, and merchants, a growing and increasingly influential French-Canadian middle class took up the challenge of sport in the late nineteenth century (Janson 197-8).

People of French descent throughout Canada and the U.S. struggled with the trauma of loss and losing since the military defeat at the hands of the British on the Plains of Abraham outside of Quebec City in 1759. Athletic confrontation in the contemporary arena, symbolizing the rivalry that played out over several centuries in the Atlantic world, has provided regular opportunities to measure success.

The game of baseball appears as a compelling social activity in popular contemporary works of French-Canadian literature in French such as *Les Plouffe* by Roger Lemelin (1948), as well as more recent and obscure novels written in English like *Never Back Down* (2012) by Ernest Hebert. People of French-Canadian descent certainly played in one and sometimes both languages for parts of the last two centuries. Baseball was catching like a bad cough or a disease, Lemelin contends, and an entire community of faith in Quebec had been stricken during the Second World War, a favorable circumstance, ironically. By the mid-twentieth century, the fever (“fièvre”) had permeated traditional, French-Canadian society, transforming individuals and even institutions such as the Catholic Church. Baseball often conjures up notions of tradition, but in early Franco-American communities, play also embodied transformation. I will argue that playing *le base ball* echoed the winds of change on the American side of the U.S./Canadian border particularly, as the game became a popular sport by 1900 in French-Canadian communities in places such as Lowell and Holyoke, Massachusetts. One could in fact remain true to the *survivance* ideal, to the sacred replenishing of French cultural roots, while also taking up the American national pastime. There is a rich history of sport emerging in the mill towns of western Massachusetts, basketball and volleyball namely, and as we will see in the unfolding story, baseball gained in popularity

among French-Canadian immigrants. Clifford Putney, author of *Muscular Christianity*, demonstrates that such team sports helped to develop character, shaping a sense of self in immigrant communities (196). Commentators began to talk about the game in the French-language press, contributing to this evolving cultural identity.

Let us consider the origins of baseball in America as well as more specifically in Franco-American enclaves in industrial America. Historians of the game concur that baseball began as an aristocratic pursuit of leisure, originating as cricket in the United Kingdom, before being taken up by American working classes. Through play of immigrants, an English pastime was transformed into the modern American game of baseball (Szymanski, Zimbalist 18). Specialists identify the American Civil War and aftermath as opening the game to a greater part of the population, and indeed helping to heal the wounds of a divided nation. Through good-natured competition along the North-South divide, Americans forged ahead during Reconstruction with baseball providing a vehicle for shared play and destiny.

By the early twentieth century, although often violently scorned, ball-playing immigrants began to change Anglo cultural practices. The Irish in the U.S. may indeed have helped to Americanize an increasingly democratic sport, as did other immigrant groups, but black exile from professional baseball also led to the development of the Negro Leagues (Redmond 2; Heaphy 3). Samuel Regelado's *Nikkei Baseball* examines Japanese-American internment and ball play. While baseball never became a worldwide sporting phenomenon like soccer, parts of the world did take to it, including Franco-America. The authors of *National Pastime. How Americans Play Baseball and the Rest of the World Plays Soccer*, Stefan Szymanski and Andrew Zimbalist, are correct in their

assertion that baseball remained a predominantly *American* (my emphasis) sport, increasingly for participating foreign immigrants as the game extended its base of players. It could certainly help immigrants who had embarked on the path toward assimilation, for baseball fostered a meeting place between individuals and the home culture. Baseball as *America's* game is representative of a broader, transcontinental phenomenon, as its popularity throughout the Americas in fact, in Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada attest.

Aficionados know well that there exists a long-standing love affair with the game, conveyed eloquently in works of American literature. In prose and poetry, enthusiasts have touted the influential and sustaining qualities of execution, those espousing fair play, discipline, advancement, scientific precision, even pastoral beauty in the age of industrialism (Bouchard, Andrès 176). Such rapture is not as evident in a much smaller body of fiction of French North America. Franco-America's most well-known author Jack Kerouac, nonetheless, acknowledged the importance of baseball in his native Lowell, Massachusetts, in books such as *Doctor Sax* (1959). Local children played ball in Lowell's French ethnic neighborhood the author notes (Kerouac 12). Contemporary novelist Normand Beaupré asked in his 1999 autobiographical work, *Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs*, where one could find models of success in Franco communities, for the stigma of failure had become so deeply ingrained for displaced and French-speaking working class individuals (157). The 2013 box office smash in Quebec *Louis Cyr*, about the reported strongest man in the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, captivated French-Canadian audiences in Quebec as well as in New England, because of its portrayal of ethnic success (Perreault 200).<sup>2</sup>

Sport, faith and physical vitality were closely linked in Anglo America, promoted as they were through organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). In the late nineteenth century, the YMCA began to promote the virtues of balancing body and mind development through "muscular Christianity," a "sport ethic" first developed in the United Kingdom (Gems *The Athletic Crusade* 2). We find some of the same corporal and spiritual ideals constructed in Franco centers. French parishes in New England attempted to connect with youth through sport so that they would not be coopted by a proselytizing and protestant organization such as the YMCA. We will see parish support of baseball specifically in a subsequent section.

One of the educational institutions most responsible for shaping the moral, intellectual and economic elite in Franco-American society, Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts included sport and physical fitness in its definition of an educated Franco-American. Founded in 1904 by Assumptionist priests in order to shore up the French "race," the institution had a baseball team beginning in 1912, with consistent Franco captains and leadership.<sup>3</sup> Sport could help to strengthen the French race of America, which is what Assumption, as well as the French ethnic press more generally, attempted to encourage. By race, they recognized the cultural and ethnic distinction of an immigrant group, the space inhabited by persons whose Frenchness was defined linguistically, culturally, and philosophically. Opportunities for interaction in French were rapidly decreasing by the early to mid twentieth century in New England and the cultural interests of the younger generations were also shifting.<sup>4</sup>

Baseball crossed the Canadian/U.S. border in the 1860s, moving first into southwestern Ontario and then Quebec. By the 1870s, French Canadians were playing

baseball. American students in Quebec helped to deliver the pastime to their Canadian neighbor. Historian Gilles Janson states that a Franco-American immigrant from Marlboro, Massachusetts, helped to transplant baseball to rural Quebec upon return to Trois-Rivières in 1884 (Janson 77). Immigrants living in ethnic enclaves in American mill towns picked up the national pastime at about the same time, even sooner in some cases. For all of its pastoral connotations, baseball was an urban phenomenon for French Canadians. It is unlikely that people on farms in rural Quebec played before coming to the U.S. to work in the textile mills. Industrialization, urbanization and immigration were three important factors in the development of baseball in North America (Janson 25).

By the late nineteenth century, French baseball stars had begun to emerge in the United States. Napoléon “The Big Frenchman” Lajoie reached the heights of American professional baseball in the early twentieth century, arousing ethnic pride in French neighborhoods, and even having a team named after him for a brief period (The Cleveland Naps from 1903 to 1914).<sup>5</sup> He was certainly not the only prominent player defined by his religion or ethnicity; Hank Greenburg, “the Jewish Slugger,” exemplified sporting success by a member of a different faith (Riess *Sports and the American Jew* 189). Lajoie was a product of Woonsocket, Rhode Island’s Little Canada, which some residents once considered the Frenchest town in the United States. He still maintains the highest league batting average, .426 attained during the 1901 season, as cited in a *New York Times* article (Katz, Buchanan, Ward 8-9).<sup>6</sup> Léo Durocher is another fabled Franco-American ball player from Springfield, Massachusetts who began his major league career in 1926, after being noticed while playing for a Hartford, Connecticut club. He received accolades for being best league defensive shortstop (“arrêt-court” in French), but is

recognized more today for managerial savvy that helped to ease Jackie Robinson into play with his club and thus desegregate baseball. He had a minor part in the film “42” about Robinson’s entry into the Big Leagues (Early 46-7).<sup>7</sup> Both Napoléon Lajoie and Léo Durocher entered baseball’s Hall of Fame, in 1937 and 1941, respectively.

### **“French” Ethnicity in New England**

“Sport in our country cannot be considered anything but ethnic-based,” claimed the sociologists/editors of *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*. “Among the many social and cultural institutions, sports assumed a unique, though often misconstrued, role of uniting, integrating and socializing ... newcomers into mainstream America (Eisen, Wiggins xi).” It relevant to note, as discussed herein, that sport provided mechanisms for expressing cultural distinction as well. Athletic competition, as many know well in the United States, has provided an escape route out of cultural and socio-economic ghettos for disenfranchised groups, but has also constructed a gilded cage for athletes (Early 3). Study of baseball within French immigrant communities provides responses to questions often unasked and generally assumed about the Americanness of Francos. The question of dual French and American cultural identities has long been a perplexing one. The French side of the equation has dominated discussion by scholars primarily interested in understanding the perpetuation of French cultural traditions in industrial America. In what ways were Francos distinctly *American*? Historian François Weil claims that French Canadians entered the United States as Americans, via land

migration, although they did not self-identify as such (Weil 9). Mark P. Richards, author of *French But Loyal*, finds competing but not exclusionary ideas among immigrants.

A pervasive Franco-American identity reached fruition more than a century ago, around 1900, in culturally and linguistically homogenous enclaves in industrial New England, though seasonal migrations meant that populations continued to return periodically to ancestral Quebec. Between 1840 and 1930, a million French Canadian migrants came (quietly) to the United States in search of steady, sustaining work that was scarce in many parts of impoverished rural Quebec. They remained in the U.S. becoming *Franco-Americans* increasingly, a shift from French Canadians. Industry recruiters sought capable workers, both male and female, to send down from Canada to work in the mills. Along with the Irish most notably as well as other groups, they helped to power the paper and textile industries along the banks of New England's swift-flowing rivers. French-Canadian immigrants formed ethnic enclaves, "petits Canadas" in the mill towns of Lowell, Massachusetts, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Manchester, New Hampshire, and Lewiston, Maine where they established French ethnic societies, parishes, schools, newspapers, businesses, and baseball teams (Roby 77, 82). Ethnic literature and the press relate oft forgotten French tales of this American life.

The qualifying term *Franco-Américain* entered print and public consciousness in the 1880s and 1890s; it began to circulate increasingly in the French ethnic press (Brault 68; Richard 71). Franco-American expressed an increasingly dual sense of identity, still tied to traditions from the north but anchored to life in the U.S. Today, there are some twenty million people of French descent in North America (Beaulieu, Bergeron 10). The French are the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States according to the census.

They refer to themselves as French, Franco-Americans, and French-Canadians, as well as simply Francos today. These terms evoke their transnational existence, distinguishing immigrant populations connected to different places, languages and traditions.

Elders voiced the importance of preservation of French- Canadian traditions, namely French language, Catholic faith and culture. For the old guard, the politics of French cultural *survivance* were indeed paramount. *Le Petit Canada* represented the bastion of transplanted French identity in the United States, the physical space where elites expected people to conduct their material, spiritual, cultural (and sporting) lives in French. But the tides of American culture could not be kept at bay eternally. Francos could convey an emerging *américanité* by taking up the game of baseball, but early prose from Franco-America suggests that sport could also be experienced, played, imagined, and commented in French. It is through conduits such as baseball that a particularly American kind of Frenchness took shape. Today cultural elites in Quebec bicker over American cultural identity and whether it is indeed possible to be “American” in French Canada without losing one’s linguistic and cultural compass to predominant U.S. and English-led cultures (Thériault 354). French and American have long appeared to be mutually exclusive forces despite similar global trajectories, yet the possibility exists for an often forbidden *métissage* between French and English.

While Quebec’s political and religious authorities may have preached the gospel of ethnic resistance, American cultural, commercial and competitive influences beckoned to the youth especially. Baseball was not the only sport practiced by Franco-Americans but it was the one most symbolically important for its American-affirming qualities. Baseball may appear synonymous with Americana (accentuated by its representation in

several Norman Rockwell illustrations), but the foreign, immigrant roots of baseball are compelling. Cultural critic Denise Bombardier did not include baseball in her sardonic dictionary of beloved things *québécoises*, like Louis Cyr or hockey, but the sport has helped to transcribe Franco-America (Bombardier 181, 186).

Sport gave French-Canadian immigrants an opportunity to play, to excel, *en français*. Sports writers told their readers about ethnic athletic feats, often glorifying them. Newly emergent sports columns in French newspapers catered to the many young men who had come to work in the mills, although women represented the bulk of ethnic paper readership (Ducharme 123-4). In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community*, we find the affirmation of collective identity through prose. "Fellow-readers," Anderson states, "... formed the embryo of the nationally imagined community," even a regional or ethnic one (Anderson 44). The readers of French newspapers in New England, including Franco-American baseball fans, made up a community of sorts through the sharing of information about their sport; they participated in the creation of a vocabulary to talk about it. "La presse joue un rôle essentiel dans la diffusion de la culture sportive, la création et l'éducation d'un public de 'connaisseurs,' " asserted Gilles Janson (193). Steven Riess claimed that foreign-language newspapers in the United States pay little attention to baseball, but this is not altogether true in the French case, particularly after 1900 (Riess "Race and Ethnicity" 41).

The French ethnic press had begun to develop as early as the 1830s in areas where immigrants congregated, providing news from home and articulating how home was being actively constructed in the nascent Little Canadas of early industrial New England (A. Belisle, 2). Over the next one hundred years, French ethnic communities developed

daily newspapers in several cities, well into the twentieth century, as well as weekly and monthly publications with modest circulation numbering often in the thousands. While carrying on the *survivance* imperative, they simultaneously expressed increasingly bicultural realities for immigrants. Daily publications such as *L'Etoile* (1886-1957) of Lowell, Massachusetts and the weekly *La Justice* (1904-1964) of Holyoke, Massachusetts, edited by professional journalists Louis-Alphonse Biron and Joseph Lussier, respectively, offered local insight. Alexandre Belisle noted the importance of French ethnic journalism specifically in the state of Massachusetts (127).

Some of the early prominent Franco newspapers, *L'Écho du Canada* (1873-1875) of Fall River, Massachusetts, *L'Étendard National* (1869-1874) and *Le Travailleur* (1874-1886) of Worcester, Massachusetts, edited by pioneering journalists Honoré Beaugrand and Ferdinand Gagnon, affirmed foremost the dignity of the French-Canadian community. Franco-American founder Gagnon stressed the importance of work in his most noted publication, particularly for immigrant communities removed from mother Quebec, hence the title *Le Travailleur*.<sup>8</sup> Following the title, the masthead read: *Journal Canadien-Français – FOI, ESPERANCE, et CHARITE*. Though their material and spiritual salvation might be attained through hard work, such necessary and fruitful labor did not preclude play (in moderation). "... la part des douceurs de la vie revenant à chaque ouvrier dépend non-seulement des salaires qu'il gagne, mais aussi de la manière dont il les dépense," *Le Travailleur* noted (18 décembre 1874, 1). As populations worked, saved and acquired wealth, they had more disposable income for leisure and "douceurs". Many such activities accelerated the process of assimilation for French Canadians.<sup>9</sup> Maximilienne Tétrault asserted in an early study that founding Franco

newspapers, such as *L'Écho du Canada* and *Le Travailleur*, “expliquaient la vie américaine” (64). This is an evocative assertion as their stated objective was clearly maintaining French-Canadian traditions, yet the ethnic press simultaneously articulated a growing recognition of American identity.

An example of steady Americanization can be found in the centennial year 1876. Franco-Americans in Worcester celebrated the one hundred year anniversary of the Declaration of American independence along with other immigrant groups. Ferdinand Gagnon, staunch Canadian nationalist but also realist, wrote in his newspaper that the local French community had been asked by city officials to build a French float to be exhibited during the celebratory parade, and immigrant leadership responded affirmatively. Group participation represented an early public display of both ethnic identity and fidelity to the adoptive American nation. An American flag appeared in the special Fourth of July edition of *Le Travailleur* in 1876. French-Canadian readers discovered a history lesson on the American Revolution (4 juillet 1876, 1).



(Figure 1 – *Le Travailleur*, July 4, 1876, courtesy of American Antiquarian Society)

In another telling sign of steady assimilation, the printing of the weekly Worcester paper was disrupted by Thanksgiving celebrations in which immigrants were beginning to take part (27 novembre 1874, 8). Playing ball would follow. Archival sources indicate that baseball was played in Worcester as early as in 1879. Match rosters indicate that French Canadians played alongside Anglo Americans.<sup>10</sup>

The early Franco press at this time expressed only little interest in the modern game that had begun to be played in increasing numbers. Franco-American papers sometimes displayed distinctly French content, a noteworthy element, in addition to French-Canadian news. In August and September 1870, the Franco-Prussian War occupied the front-page in *L'Etendard National*. A series entitled “La Guerre” appeared on the cover in several issues (18 août 1870). Three decades later, the Dreyfus Affair riveted readers of *L'Etoile* (1 juillet 1899). While this press was discernably French to some degree in its early phases, modern France did not always draw admiration. “Hélas! La France d’aujourd’hui a bien changé mais c’est toujours notre mère-patrie, et nous espérons que Dieu qui a fait les nations guérissables, lui fera regretter ses erreurs et la ramènera au berceau de l’Eglise” (*L'Etoile*, 10 août 1905, 4).<sup>11</sup> Revolutionary France had strayed too far clearly for some conservative Francos, although by this time Napoléon Bonaparte had reconciled the Church and the Revolution. The play (and discussion) of baseball helps to illustrate how this press and its readers evolved in the United States, from a position supportive of exiled French Canadians, who sometimes remembered France nostalgically, to one that conveyed the interests of Franco-Americans, a new transnational identity. Francos celebrated the success of Quebec in 1908, illustrated by three hundred years of French existence in North America in 1908. The *Je me souviens*

ethos linked France, Quebec and the United States. *L'Etoile* discussed the local monies raised to build a tribute to Samuel de Champlain and to French interests in North America (16 avril 1907, 2).

The daily newspaper of Lowell, Massachusetts, *L'Etoile* claimed in its very first edition in 1886 what French-Canadian identity represented: French language and traditions, devotion to church and family, a life defined by obedience, respect and good will toward others.<sup>12</sup> “Qu’est-ce qu’un Canadien Français? C’est un homme qui habitant le beau pays du Canada a du sang français dans les veins. C’est un homme qui a conservé intactes dans son coeur les belles et bonnes traditions qui nous viennent de la France. C’est un homme qui parle la langue française et qui s’en fait une gloire ... C’est un homme qui, le jour de la St. Jean-Baptiste, met de côté ses instruments de travail, revêt ses habits de fête et ne lésine pas pour consacrer à la patrie un seul jour dans l’année” (16 septembre 1886, 1). Such qualities might make for an assiduous French Canadian, but it is unclear whether they translate to success in sport. During Saint John the Baptist day celebrations in the Holyoke, Massachusetts area thirty years later, local populations affirmed a racial or cultural identity in what was most certainly a performance of ethnicity for people within and without Little Canada (see figure 2). This was the “national” holiday of French Canadians in Quebec and New England, an ethnic pride celebration on par with parades that transpire today on St. Patrick’s Day. The local press went to considerable lengths to diffuse this collective expression of identity throughout the region.



(Figure 2 – French ethnic celebration in Springfield, MA. *La Justice*, 25 juin 1914)

## A Franco-American Pursuit

While sport was not an ethnic priority, Lowell's *L'Etoile* went so far as to highlight the qualities of the French race that might produce success in Francos. “Il y a de la force, de l'énergie, de l'endurance, de la bravoure et de la *furie française* dans le Canadien.” Such French force could perhaps translate into victories for sports teams. The “race” could also certainly benefit from these qualities. The article regretted the relative absence of French participants in sport but “bon sang ne ment jamais” (4 juin 1897, 1). In an article published in *L'Etoile* in 1896, on the subject of sport, Franco journalists declared with regret that English words were making their way into French in Canada as well as France *via athletic competition*. The paper noted that if Franco journalists allowed themselves the same linguistic liberties, they would be treated like Iroquois, the traditional indigenous enemies of the French in North America.<sup>13</sup> The writers suggested, in contradiction with later declarations, that French words be invented

for English sporting events such as “Jockey” and “lawn-tennis.” The bicultural baseball idiom appearing in the early twentieth-century press is a sign of Franco-americanization.

*L’Etoile* reports of Louis Cyr’s exploits are the only significant pre-twentieth century sporting news reported; the strongman had spent some of his early years in Lowell. In May 1896, Louis Cyr was front-page news in Lowell’s French community of readers. 1000 people witnessed his demonstration of strength in Chicago (23 mai 1896). The following year, “l’homme le plus fort du monde est l’un des nôtres,” claimed protectively *L’Etoile* (4 juin 1897, 1).<sup>14</sup> The paper voiced ethnic group appropriation of individual success. Consumer advertising hints that Franco-American tastes and cultural desires were already beginning to shift, as reflected in the images used to attract reader’s attention. One summer 1888 ad for a local department store in Lowell’s French ethnic paper included an image of a baseball batter awaiting a pitch and the following headline: “Nous frappons à point ...” (4). The store’s merchandising and pricing may very well have been “on the mark” or *à point*, as the advertisement intended to convey to shoppers. The commercial listed precisely what items and prices placed it in this enviable position.



(Figure 3 – Putnam & Fils ads, *L’Etoile*, 7 juin 1888 and 19 septembre 1889)

A year later, the same store announced its back-to-school wares with another baseball-inspired ad. “Adieu! Vacances,” claims the headline as a school child says goodbye to the bat, ball, and racket used during the summer (4). Readers deduce that these recreational accessories were increasingly a common part of Franco-American life. Katherine T. Frith suggests that “... by circulating and recirculating certain myths advertising shapes our attitudes and beliefs” (14). An accompanying sign in English announced that the cited child entered school as a new year began. The ad had clearly been translated into French for Franco readers, who increasingly found themselves in transit between cultures. The underlying message in both illustrated ads is that Francos were becoming American, at least partially through consumption. “The products we consume express who we are, they are cultural signifiers” (Frith 3). Festive French ethnic wear as well as American sporting attire could be purchased at new department stores in Lowell (D. Belisle 48). Only a few years later, advertisements for baseball games began appearing in Lowell’s French daily. The local team played sides from Manchester and Concord, New Hampshire in 1903; admission cost fans twenty-five cents (*L’Etoile*, 16 avril 1903).

People went out, celebrated and consumed on Saint John the Baptist Day and the Fourth of July, as the ethnic press alluded on both summer days, consolidating a Franco-American identity. Later in the fall, Americanization through consumerism continued at Thanksgiving. In fall 1890, *L’Etoile* announced “occasions exceptionnelles pour la semaine de Thanksgiving. Affaires extraordinaires comme vous n’en avez jamais eu.” (29 novembre 1890, 8). Commercialism, media hyperboly (and sports) in the press signaled cultural absorption by immigrant groups. America’s French participated in the

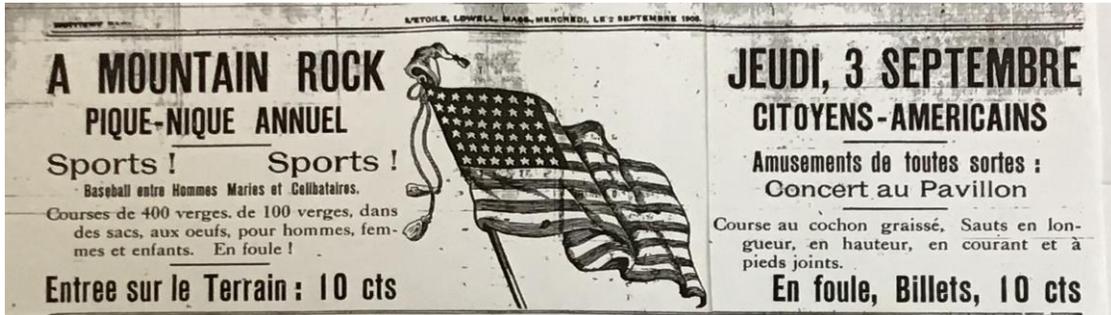
process of baseball developing as a national sport. The previously cited Napoléon Lajoie, perhaps the most feared hitter in the history of the game, battered American League pitchers in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> The aptly named Lajoie (joy) provided cheer to ethnic communities and identity in need of heroes south of the Canadian border, although Francos faced considerable social pressure from community leaders to reject American culture in all facets. First mention of the game of baseball, or “parties de base ball” in French, appeared in *L’Etoile* of Lowell, Massachusetts at the end of the nineteenth century. *L’Etoile’s* description of baseball in these early interventions indicates the social nature of the early game as it developed in New England. The introduction of sport to new places required enthusiasts from the professional classes to lead, as well as interest among the working masses and a desire to surpass the teachers of the sport (Szymanski, Zimbalist 64). Some industrial elites hoped that playing baseball would have a calming and assimilating effect on the laboring, foreign populations in New England, in places such as Lowell, although Francos had the reputation of being docile workers. The YMCA certainly sought to provide a sporting and tranquilizing outlet for young men.

The first actual reference to playing baseball in *L’Etoile* occurred on Fourth of July celebrations in 1897, echoing the Anglo-American roots of the sport. Just a few years later, sports writers at the French daily proudly asserted the paper’s leading role in sharing the successes of its baseball team. “*L’Etoile* était le seul journal de la ville à annoncer hier que les Lowells étaient en deuxième rang” (5 août 1901, 1). The Star’s (*L’Etoile* in French) rivalry with Lowell’s English language paper, *The Sun*, is clear. Like other immigrants to the United States and evolving citizens, Francos quite naturally played baseball on Independence Day.<sup>16</sup> Baseball was front-page news and the most

important sport to local communities, more so than physical feats of strength or hockey. It was precisely in a spring 1901 edition of *L'Etoile* that sport and baseball took center stage (6 mai 1901, 1).<sup>17</sup> Sports columns featuring baseball entitled “Le Sport” appeared at this time, some in cover headlines, in daily and weekly papers such as *L'Etoile* and *La Justice*. In the spring of 1902, 3000 spectators attended the first game of the season in Lowell.<sup>18</sup> Sport was increasingly a pastime for the middle classes, prospering in the manufacturing realm, and newspapers actively sought new readers in a competitive market for potential patrons. The French ethnic press not only supported Franco baseball but also Franco economics. Readers were encouraged to keep their money in the ethnic enclaves by buying from Franco merchants. Consumption of baseball, apple pie and hotdogs were annual rituals in which Franco-Americans had begun to participate. In a summer 1910 issue of *La Justice*, “la célébration du 4 juillet” included a “partie de baseball” (7 juillet 1910, 1). Playing may have provided relief from watching the local team that was doing poorly at that time.

What is evocative is that baseball would also be played in Franco American enclaves on St. John the Baptist Day. “Parties de Baseball” took place alongside the celebratory picnic, patriotic speeches (“Discours patriotique”) and assorted attractions expressing ancestral connection to Canada. Ball play and rallying French-Canadian declarations certainly made for an eclectic, bicultural mix. Franco ethnic organizations such as the Club Citoyens-Américains published ads that described the play of the transnational pastime at annual events. One promised a match between married and single men. A thousand people attended the club picnic, according to *L'Etoile* (4 septembre 1908, 8). The following write-up noted all of the individual players of the

match by name and position. The paper noted that the married men prevailed, 3-2. The French names of the *Citoyens-Américains* are striking. The French named Club of American Citizens continuously negotiated the cultural minefields of its constituents.



(Figure 4: *L'Etoile*, 2 septembre 1908, annual picnic, Club des Citoyens-Américains)

“Compatriotes, venez en foule!” exclaimed *La Justice* in summer 1909 in preparation for St. John the Baptist Day festivities in Holyoke, MA. Baseball was one of the featured activities advertised in the paper, a weekly French publication printed in Holyoke for over a half-century (17 juin 1909, 1). “A 11 heures a.m. se jouera une partie de baseball entre les enfants de la paroisse de Saint-Joseph et ceux de Saint-Thomas de Brightwood, et à 2 heures p.m. entre les hommes et les garçons de Springfield.” The advertising and staging of regular games in Holyoke and Lowell, between many different constituencies, suggests the extent to which baseball was becoming ingrained in Franco communities. In spring 1909, the ethnic paper suggested that community members attend matches of a very competitive team: “Ceux de nos compatriotes qui aiment *le jeu national* (my emphasis) américain feraient bien d’assister aux parties; car, après tout, l’équipe de cette année est supérieure à celle de l’année dernière” (13 mai 1909, 10). Francos had indeed learned to associate playing ball with American identity. Joseph Lussier, a longtime director of *La Justice* during the interwar period and a distinguished

participant in Franco-American journalism, might not have enthusiastically supported the adoption of America's game by French-Canadians immigrants, for he was an enthusiast of traditional French culture, namely poetry (Guillet 21).

In *La Justice's* regular "Le Sport" column, baseball dominated as in Lowell's *L'Etoile*. Writers commented on the participation and success of local Franco-American boys on the team. "Les années dernières, plusieurs Canadiens figuraient sur l'équipe locale. Cette année, nous n'envoyons pas un seul, à moins que Ruell, ce second but soit un de nos compatriots. Nos joueurs Canadiens se sont tous distingués, ce qui leur a valu une promotion. Il y a bien peu de spectateurs qui ne regrettent pas la disparition de Boucher, 'short stop,' malgré que McCormack remplisse bien cette position. Mais ce dernier n'a ni l'élégance ni la rapidité du jeu de son prédécesseur" (*La Justice*, 13 mai 1909, 10). Holyoke's French publication clearly assumed proprietorship over Franco players, whose French flair distinguished them. Their success removed them from the local viewing public as they were promoted. We find similar commentary about French players of baseball in *L'Etoile*: "Lemieux, le *catcher* des Lowell fait du bon ouvrage du bâton et derrière le bâton (10 juillet 1908, 5). The paper noted later that July that "Rivard a très bien lancé durant les 12 *innings* de la dernière partie hier" (29 juillet 1908, 5). French ethnic fans thus followed players from their tribe while journalists contributed to the Franco-American language of baseball.

Baseball play, again, began for Franco and other children in the streets and in schoolyards, even in the traditional French parochial schools where half the day classes were conducted in French and half in English. In high school, Franco-American athletes such as Kerouac distinguished themselves as talented baseball players, and even adults

had taken to the sport.<sup>19</sup> In the summer of 1908, Lowell's French daily publication noted the amateur youth results of "la Ligue des Jeunes," scholarly Catholic baseball. The league included six parish teams: Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Saint-Antoine, Saint-Michel, Saint-Joseph, Saint-Louis and Saint-Henri (5 août 1908, 5). The French of Lowell thus created their own league where *le base ball* was played in French and commented in the stands in the accented language of Molière as well. Saint-Joseph's team included players named Archambault, Boulanger, Guilbault, Ducharme, Arcandy (x 2), Bernier, Lemieux, Levasseur. There is perhaps no better illustration of French Catholic baseball.

Results and standings of this amateur Catholic league sometime preceded minor and major league information. Editors sometimes featured reporting on the New England League and Connecticut Leagues, which had French representation, before the National and American Leagues, with less so. *L'Etoile* published two daily columns with baseball news, "Chez les amateurs," commenting results from the youth league and "Autour des buts" with reflection on professional play. The French press stated that baseball was played by the members of social groups such as the Club Rochambeau founded for the specific purposes of French cultural preservation. Twentieth-century, Franco-American cultural activities now included baseball.<sup>20</sup>

Franco-American journalists at *La Justice* were beginning to know the game and discuss it with fans and ethnic community members. One can measure the influence of baseball in the evolving discussion about sport and culture located in the Franco press. "On nous demande la manière de trouver le pourcentage des frappeurs. Voici comment on procède. Il suffit de diviser le nombre de coups sûrs "hits," par le nombre de fois au bâton (at bat) - (17 juin 1909, 10). Writers explained its rules and early on broached the

topic of the language of baseball. Increasingly by this time, in the sports columns of the French ethnic press, a host of French or more accurately Franco-American baseball terms appeared in translation on the printed page of standings, results and averages: *Jeu au champ* (fielding average), *buts sacrifiés* (sacrifice bunts), *buts volés* (stolen bases), *coups pour buts extra* (extra base hits), *les plus forts frappeurs de la ligue* (best league hitters), *frappage moyen* (batting average) (10 juin 1909, 8).

Some rejected the first attempts in Quebec to create French terms and opted to keep American words and expressions in quotes, such as “short stop,” so that local readers would understand. *La Justice* stated explicitly however that its adoption of English words did not in any way express an absence of French-Canadian patriotism. “Si nous nous servons des termes anglais, c’est moins par manque de patriotisme que dans le but d’être plus concis et mieux compris des amateurs du jeu national” (21 mai 1909, 10). Playing the “national game” and using English words clearly required some explanation. Franco journalists and readers saw no contradiction in expressing French and American dualities. While the term “pitcher” was used early in the century for instance to designate throwing the ball into play toward the opposing batter, by the 1920s, we find “lancer” in the French baseball vocabulary. In the realm of hockey, use of words such as “puck” and “rondelle” suggest that Anglos and Francos did not play the exact same Canadian national game (Blake, Holmon 7).

Baseball, journalists contended, was not simply an American production. *La Justice* asked readers they assumed would be quite interested if they knew that the first “balle à trajectoire courbe” or curve ball was thrown by a loyal French-Canadian. “C’est en 1863 qu’un nommé Alphonse Martin, un compatriote, ‘pitcha’ sans même en avoir

conscience la première ‘curve’” (24 juin 1909, 12). The history of the curve ball is ambiguous, with no apparent verification of the French narrative in the annals of baseball. It is interesting nonetheless that word of the “French” curve accidentally becoming part of the game lingered. Could a curve really be anything other than French? The “Big Frenchman” had certainly left his mark on professional baseball by the beginning of the twentieth century. Napoleon Lajoie was a full-fledged baseball star, with several superlative seasons completed and a Cleveland team still named in his honor. A column in *La Justice* quoted Franco-American’s beloved player, “le célèbre joueur de baseball.” Despite his individual talent, in no other sport did chance (“le hasard”) play as great a role as in baseball, Lajoie reportedly stated.<sup>21</sup>

There appears to have been sustained interest in baseball among a growing Franco socio-economic elite, harking back to baseball’s privileged beginnings. The Holyoke press mentions professionals in the stands for games, the social strata with the leisure and means to pursue to such interests. Announcements of amateur games in *La Justice* between lawyers and doctors appeared (2 septembre 1909, 8).<sup>22</sup> In Figure 5, we see that local business leaders in Holyoke encouraged a culture of sporting competition. English owners maintained teams with Franco players. While termed “parties de baseball,” matches certainly represented more to some than simply fun and games. The Holyoke Papermakers competed for the Connecticut League championship in 1909 and had already won three league titles and developed a core of French ethnic players specifically followed by the fan base. The team generated support even though there were fewer Franco-Americans on the team in 1909 than in the past, suggesting increasingly strong ties to the adopted mill town.



(Figure 5. Reproduced courtesy of the Holyoke Public Library. Holyoke, MA)

At the advent of the First World War, the ethnic press came under scrutiny in the United States for harboring foreign or anti-American sentiment. The Franco press attempted to make clear its belief that being French and American posed no threat. Several papers made much in fact of the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, of a new American allegiance of immigrants, even if French Canadians had passed by terrestrial routes into the United States. The prevalence of the word *national* in the titles of the Franco-American press suggests that it was to the Canadian nation that the ethnic press remained sentimentally attached, yet passion for baseball indicates shifting attitudes and loyalties. Franco-American journalists, when pressed for proof of fidelity, or visible signs of American patriotism in wartime, could easily point to baseball and to the level of Franco participation in America's game. On the 4th of July and on June 24<sup>th</sup>, Francos increasingly played ball. The ethnic press expressed Franco-American identity quite intentionally. While newspapers such as daily *L'Avenir National* of Manchester, New Hampshire articulated American loyalty as the First World War began, *La Justice* printed

the lyrics of the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” on its cover (13 août 1914). This underscores the enduring binational and bicultural sensibilities of the Franco-American population.

In the mid-twentieth century, the game of baseball was one of a few signs of change in a traditional, hierarchical society regulated by the Catholic Church. It had penetrated a homogenous, devout country of believers in the capital city of Quebec. When the honor of the French nation was tested by American inroads, the parish priest delivering the ceremonial ball in the name of the Church quite curiously symbolized resistance (Lemelin 114). Franco-Americans could express a new, modern and hybrid sense of self through sport. The Franco expression and experience of baseball demonstrates a willingness to play American’s game on one’s own terms. Through play quite simply, an evolving American game was made more so by migrants in the modernizing cauldron of early industrial New England. Roger Lemelin writes at length in *Les Plouffe* about an improbable fusion of French and American. Past cultural and national tensions, when French and English stood as rivals, were forgotten on festival days. “Mais vienne une belle parade, 1760 n’existe plus, et hourra pour la procession!” (148). The same could be said about baseball, for sport could unite as well as pit hostile factions against one another. We witness through play that Francos could *compete* and even *triumph*, both stereotypically American traits. Outside of war, baseball gave Francos an opportunity to take on a winning role.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is the notable exception of a now dated article published by Richard Sorrell (see Works Cited).

---

<sup>2</sup> Sporting news in the French ethnic press at the end of the nineteenth century confirms Louis Cyr's symbolic relevance.

<sup>3</sup> [www.assumption.edu](http://www.assumption.edu). Web. Accessed 29 August 2015. While there were many Franco captains in the early years, there were fewer ethnic team coaches of the national pastime at Assumption College. Wilfrid Rousseau captained the first team.

<sup>4</sup> The editor of Holyoke, Massachusetts weekly newspaper, "Le Justice" was delighted about continued local interest in French theater in early 1914. See *La Justice*, 29 janvier 1914.

<sup>5</sup> *La Survivance*. An accompanying brochure to the permanent exhibit at the Museum of Work and Culture. Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Lajoie's hitting title was earned against historically weak pitching in the American League.

<sup>7</sup> Jackie Robinson had had a positive minor league experience with the Montreal Royals in 1946, it should be noted.

<sup>8</sup> Repatriation in fact remained a recurrent theme in the early Franco press.

<sup>9</sup> Edition spéciale du 4 juillet 1876. *Le Travailleur*, journal canadien-français.

<sup>10</sup> 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ephemera, Worcester Baseball club, 1879. American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>11</sup> See article entitled "Le Canada."

<sup>12</sup> "Qu'est-ce qu'un Canadien Français?" *L'Etoile*, 16 septembre 1886, 1.

<sup>13</sup> "La langue française," *L'Etoile*, 19 juin 1896, 1.

<sup>14</sup> The 4 juin 1897 article is entitled "Le sport parmi les Canadiens-Français."

<sup>15</sup> *La Survivance*. An accompanying brochure to the permanent exhibit at the Museum of Work and Culture. Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> See "Le Quatre à Lawrence" column, *L'Etoile*, 9 juillet 1897, 4, about July 4 activities that included baseball in Lawrence, MA. An advertisement appeared in *La Justice* on July 7, 1910, announcing Franco play on the Fourth in Holyoke.

<sup>17</sup> On August 29, 1895, baseball players for the local "Le National" side appear *à la une* in Montreal's daily *La Presse*. See illustration in Janson, 148.

<sup>18</sup> "Première défaite," *L'Etoile*, 21 avril 1902, 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Legrand est le meilleur frappeur des Lowell High," *L'Etoile*, 21 juin 1927, 6.

<sup>20</sup> "Le Baseball au cercle Rochambeau," *La Justice*, 21 avril 1927, 1. The following week a similar announcement appeared in the paper about social club activities.

<sup>21</sup> "Le Sport," *La Justice*, 15 juillet 1909, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *La Justice*, 13 mai 1909, 10.

## Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.

Beaulieu, Alain; Bergeron, Yves. *Amérique française. L'aventure*. Québec, QC: Fides, 2002.

- 
- Beaupré, Normand. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs*. Chicoutimi, QC: Editions JCL, 1999.
- Belisle, Alexandre. *Histoire de la presse franco-américaine*. Worcester, MA: L'Opinion publique, 1911.
- Belisle, Donica. *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2011.
- Blake, Jason and Holmon, Andrew C. *The Same but Different. Hockey in Quebec*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2017.
- Bombardier, Denise. *Dictionnaire amoureux du Québec*. Paris: Plon, 2014.
- Bouchard, Gérard and Andrès, Bernard. *Mythes et sociétés des Amériques*. Montréal: Québec Amérique, 2007.
- Braut, Gerard J. *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1986.
- Ducharme, Jacques. *The Shadows of the Trees. The Story of French Canadians in New England*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943.
- Early, Gerald L. *A Level Playing Field. African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Eisen, George and Wiggins, David K., editors. *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- L'Etoile*. Daily French-language newspaper of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1886-1941.
- Frith, Katherine T. *Undressing the Ad. Reading Culture in Advertising*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.
- Gems, Gerald R. *The Athletic Crusade. Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*. Lincoln, NE : University of Nebraska Press, 2006.
- . *Sport and the Shaping of Italian-American Identity*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2013.
- Guillet, Ernest B. *Essai de journalisme*. Bedford, NH: National Materials Development Center, 1981.
- Heaphy, Leslie A. *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003.

---

Hebert, Ernest. *Never Back Down*. Boston: David R. Godine, 2012.

Janson, Gilles. *Emparons-nous du sport. Les Canadiens français et le sport au XIXe siècle*. Montréal: Guérin, 1995.

*La Justice*. Weekly French language newspaper of Holyoke, Massachusetts, 1904-1964.

Katz, Josh; Buchanan, Larry; Ward, Joe. "Catch Me if You Can: The Lifespan of Baseball Records." *The New York Times* (Sports Sunday), April 5, 2015, 8-9.

Kerouac, Jack. *Doctor Sax*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.

Lemelin, Roger. *Les Plouffe*. Québec, QC: Bélisle, 1948.

Levine, Peter. *A.G. Spaulding and the Rise of Baseball. The Promise of American Sport*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Melançon, Benoît. *Les Yeux de Maurice Richard. Une histoire culturelle*. Montréal: Fides, 2008.

Perreault, Robert B. "Louis Cyr: un retour aux sources." *Rabaska: revue d'ethnologie de l'Amérique française* 12 (2014): 196-200.

Putney, Clifford. *Muscular Christianity. Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001.

Regalado, Samuel O. *Nikkei Baseball. Japanese American Players from Immigration and Internment to the Major Leagues*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Redmond, Patrick R. *The Irish and the Making of American Sport, 1835-1920*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014.

Richard, Mark P. *Loyal But French. The Negotiation of Identity by French-Canadian Descendants in the United States*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2008.

Riess, Steven A. "Race and Ethnicity in American Baseball: 1900-1919." *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 4.4 (Winter 1977): 39-55.

Riess, Steven A., editor. *Sports and the American Jew*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1998.

---

Roby, Yves. *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 2006.

Sénécal, Joseph-André. *The Franco-American Bibliographic File Project. Newspapers and Periodicals: A preliminary checklist*. Burlington, VT: Crefane, 1995.

Sorrell, Richard. "Sports and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930," *Rhode Island History*, Fall 1972.

Szymanski, Stefan and Zimbalist, Andrew. *National Pastime. How Americans Play Baseball and the Rest of the World Plays Soccer*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005.

Tétrault, Maximilienne. *Le Rôle de la presse dans l'évolution du peuple franco-américain de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Marseille: Imprimerie Ferran, 1935.

Thériault, Joseph Yvon. *Critique de l'américanité. Mémoire et démocratie au Québec*. Montréal: Québec-Amérique, 2002.

*Le Travailleur*. Weekly newspaper of Worcester, MA 1874-1886.

Weil, François. *Les Franco-Américains*. Paris: Belin, 1989.