Acadian culture thriving in Nova Scotia

By JEFF BRADLEY
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GRAND PRE, Nova Scotia (AP) — One of the sorriest hours in British colonial history, as Longfellow recounted in "Evangeline," took place in the church of Grand Pre at 3 o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, Sept. 5, 1755.

For 40 years, the British had been attempting to exact oaths of allegiance from the French-speaking Acadians of the Nova Scotia peninsula, who had chosen to remain neutral in hostilities between England and France.

At the fateful gathering, the distrustful British announced the immediate deportation of all Acadians to the American colonies, confiscated their property and burned their houses.

Within eight years, some 14,000 Acadians had been redistributed from Boston to Georgia, separating loved ones like Longfellow's fictional Evangeline, "fairest of all the maids," and her Gabriel, the blacksmith's son who was "noblest of all the youths."

"My ancestor said he would rather swallow a dogfish tail than swear allegiance to the (English) queen," said Marie-Germaine d'Entremont, director of the Acadian Federation of Nova Scotia (Federation Acadienne de la Nouvelle-Ecosse).

She referred to Baron Sieur de L'Ars, who in 1655 founded the fishing village of West Pubnico on the southwest coast of Nova Scotia, the oldest town in Canada still inhabited by descendants of its first settlers.

"I never dated an English person," Ms. d'Entremont added with a firmness not usually seen by the American tourists warmly received here each summer.

With its colonial-style homes and high-steeped Roman Catholic Church, West Pubnico resembles a New England village. But its 1,900 residents are a self-contained bastion of Acadian tradition.

Most speak English because of schooling, but among themselves they use a dialect that was in vogue before the French Revolution in 1789.

This archaic tongue translates 70 years as "sept ans," instead of the modern "soixante-dix."

The "o" in "coeur" (heart) is pronounced like "ch," and the Old French word "hardes" means "beignets a la rapure," the grated potato and poultry pancakes known locally as rannie pie.

"When my daughter went away to Ottawa to university, her teacher said her French was so bad it was like a violinist trying to play on one string," said Celeste LeBlanc, who was born in West Pubnico, fell in love with a local boy and has been with him ever since.

"Our trouble was that we were afraid of the English — but not any more," she said.

"Our radio, TV, newspapers — everything is English," complained her husband, Jules LeBlanc, a retired fishery inspector whose family came from France 10 generations ago.

The LeBlancs rankle if local gas station attendants switch to English when an English-speaker pulls up. The few native English-speakers in town are barred from a society formed to insist on state-funded, French-language instruction in grammar schools.

The battle for more French schools, textbooks and participation on school boards is being waged across the province, following a landmark 1981 law recognizing the educational rights of Acadians.

Nova Scotia still has only one provincial court judge who speaks French, while in New Brunswick, two-thirds of the mostly English village of Salisbury recently staged protests when the post office named a French-speaking postmistress.

High school dropouts can earn 50,000 Canadian dollars ($38,000) in their first year on the fishing boats, harvesting lobsters and scallops for the U.S. market and herring roe for Japan, LeBlanc said.

Million-dollar cruise ships are docked in the harbor and five processing plants add more value to each catch, while the north lucrative mink farms raise 10,000 to 15,000 animals at a time.

In addition to the nine-hole West Pubnico Golf Course, the town has a baseball diamond, health club, pizzeria and credit union.

Statue of Evangeline in Grand Pre, Nova Scotia

A JOYFUL EVENING OF CHRISTMAS CHEER

James Galway's Christmas Carol
7 PM

Celebrate the traditional music of Christmas with flutist James Galway.

Christmas with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Shirley Varrett 8:10 PM

Travel to the Salt Lake City Tabernacle and hear the 325-voice Mormon Tabernacle Choir and opera diva Shirley Varrett perform Christmas classics.

Jessye Norman's Christmas Symphony
9:10 PM