Ancient Acadians: Loire Valley nurtured future settlers of Acadia

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Nearly two-thirds of France, in the north and west, is flat and gently rolling, with wide plains drained to the north and west by the principal rivers. The Massif Central, the rough, hilly country of Central France, rises from the lowlands, and is separated by the Rhone River from the southern Alps. Much of the country is either good crop or pasture land, with an annual rainfall of 30 to 40 inches.

The Loire is France’s longest river. It flows 625 miles into the Atlantic Ocean through the provinces of Orleans, Touraine, Maine, Anjou and Brittany. midway along its course, it widens and becomes almost lazy as it seeks its final course.

The Loire Valley, paved with the river’s rich bank, has been called the “garden of France.”

It was from soil that many of the future settlers of Acadia were nurtured. They were, for the most part, tillers of the soil, or herdsmen, and the artisans who made the things that farmers and herdsmen need.

The richness of the valley’s soil meant that its tillers were among the most productive in the land. They were a people tough and trained in hardship. They had to be survive, for life in the 17th Century was not easy, anywhere in the world, for those who were not rich or high-born.

They lived on the land, worked with it, and thought of it. There were no big cities in the valley in the modern sense. People spent most of their time out of doors. The tillage of the soil required labor from dawn to dusk. Wheat was the most constant crop. Other crops were millet, vegetable crops and some fruit, as well as grapes in the wine country. Wheat fields were rotated triennially.

In the Loire Valley cattle raising was also important, both as draft animals and as a source of milk. Cattle were never slaughtered for food in fact, until the 19th Century, the consumption of beef was incidental for the average human diet. If an animal died of natural causes, or was no longer useful for tilling the soil or for furnishing milk, it was eaten. Cattle were not raised specifically for meat anywhere in the world until long after the Pilgrims came to America.

Generally, separate inhabitants were the rich, and agriculturalonomics as a rule. There were numerous abodes, or holdings free of feudal obligations.

French rural life hinged on the extended family, the village assembly of inhabitants, and the Church. From the parish pillar, royal decrees were read, and from its congregation was formed the village assembly, endeavoring the village with a corporate voice.

Land itself was divided into forest land, waste land, cultivated land, vineyards and orchards, the seigneur’s domain and the manse, the house and strips of land of the peasant farmers. The seigneur had greater domain over forest land and waterways than over arable land. He had exclusive hunting and fishing rights. Peasant farmers, however, could graze their flocks in the forests and could gather wood.

Maps of landholding patterns and road communications show a great continuity from Roman Gaul to medieval and modern times, especially in the long strips of land and open fields.

Chief crops were wheat and millet, plus vegetables and some fruit trees.

Houses would be deemed primitive by today’s standards, with thatched roofs and no floors. The kitchen was the most important room in the house. It was sometimes called the “heater,” because this was where the fireplace was located. There was always a fire. There was always a stewpot on the fire. There was always a layer of straw on the floor to keep people’s feet warm.

When the farmers and their sons came in from the fields at the end of the day, the kitchen was filled to overflowing. Adding to the bubble were the animals. Chickens and ducks made their home under the table. Dogs scratched out on the floor, or searched for their food.

The everyday food was more or less filling. Bread was the staple, of course, along with a thick soup or stew. When there was meat it was usually game or fowl, although pork made its appearance from time to time.

Life was not all labor. There were Sundays and 20 to 30 holy days made jelly by dances, archery matches, wrestling competition and just plain gossiping. There were also the days of markets and fairs, when life was much more colorful.

In spite of a modest material existence, a grinding routine, and frequent suspicion of injustice, the French farmer, by and large, led a contented if not happy life. He was independent, self-reliant, suspicious of strangers and innovations, and determined to maintain his rights and be his own man. He survived, prospered, and became the strong foundation of the French realm.

It was to farmers like these that the Sieur d’Anchay turned in the 1630’s, when he sought colonists for Acadia.