

Social history

Making ends meet

During the 1920s and 1930s, fishing played a major role in the work and social life of Val Comeau, an Acadian village

The 1920s and 1930s are now sufficiently distant in time to be fading from living memory and moving into history books. This article is one part of that transition. It describes life during the inter-war period in the small village of Val Comeau, as remembered by a handful of village elders and their children.

That memory speaks of hardship, but also of a time when an abundant environment provided the villagers with the resources to have large families and a vibrant social life. Theirs was a way of life far removed from the alienating offices and suburbs of modern North America. Work consisted of a multiplicity of activities which varied according to season, depended on the abundant resources of the ocean, forests, and land around Val Comeau, and were organized socially by household, gender and class.

The village of Val Comeau is on Canada's Atlantic coast, looking out from its north-eastern New Brunswick shore across the icy Gulf of Saint Lawrence towards Newfoundland, 400 km distant. It straddles a small peninsula, a kilometre wide at its base and 5 km long, cutting between the ocean and Tracadie Bay.

From its founding, the settlement has followed two roads, one, which traverses the base of the peninsula and the other which cuts northward up its centre. In the 1920s and 1930s, the houses were placed at the roadside, while expanses of pasture and vegetable gardens were cut out of the forest behind them.

The small fishing dories of the community and its merchants were pulled up above the high-water mark on the beach beneath the lobster canning factory of the merchant house, WS Loggie.

The people of Val Comeau are known as Acadians. They are descendants of some of the earliest European settlers to North America, coming from France in the 17th and early 18th centuries. The Acadians settled in what is now known as Nova Scotia, hundreds of kilometres south of the main area of French settlement in Quebec. They rapidly developed a pattern of farming and a cultural tradition distinct from their northern brethren.

In 1755, they were forcibly deported from their homeland by the English during the war for Canada, a war in which the English eventually triumphed over the French.

After years of being scattered around the British and French colonies that fringed the Atlantic, some Acadians made their way back to Canada's eastern seaboard.

As their lands had been colonized by a wave of Scottish and English immigrants, the Acadians were compelled to move to other areas of the east coast. An important destination was the northern and eastern coasts of New Brunswick, areas far removed from the major centres of English Canada. Val Comeau and its larger neighbour, Tracadie, were probably founded at the end of the 18th century by this wave of Acadian refugees.

By the 1920s, Val Comeau was a well established village with around 200 residents and branches of two merchant fishing companies. Household and class were the primary social divisions within the village. The most important and most evident form was the household.

Family ties

The family bonds within the household served to organize most aspects of life. Social and economic responsibilities in the

household were organized along gender and age lines.

Adults were most directly concerned with production, while the old and young helped where they could. At a broader level of class differentiation, there were two groups: the three or four large landholding households and the poorer villagers with only small plots. The former were descendants of the initial settlers of Val Comeau who had managed to preserve the land parcels that their ancestors had received from the Canadian government as settler grants. The remaining villagers were either post-land grant immigrants or those who had lost their lands.

All households possessed enough land for a garden large enough to provide vegetables for the long winter, but only the large landholders could make farming their principal occupation. They were in a position to hire the poorer villagers to assist them during planting and harvesting.

A third, non-resident, group was also vitally important for the village: the merchants. Both the merchant companies in Val Comeau were from English-speaking areas of New Brunswick. WL Loggie was the major player in Val Comeau, specializing in lobster fishing and canning, for which it had boats and a factory in the village. A &

R Loggie fished salmon, for which it hired a number of men to work on its dories. A & R also had storage sheds at Val Comeau for its equipment.

For the villagers of Val Comeau, the merchants were the primary link to the world economy. Their shops in Val Comeau and Fracadié stocked goods basic to the lives of Val Comeau's residents, but which were in short supply or unavailable locally. From their shelves could be procured everything from wheat flour, salt and lard to cotton thread, fishing supplies, and cast iron wood burning stoves. To gain access to the goods, the villagers needed cash, a primary source of which was the merchant companies themselves. The latter hired the men and women of Val Comeau to fish for them and work in their factories.

In many parts of Atlantic Canada, fishers and their families were bound to merchants through a system of debt relations. A weaker version of this system prevailed in Val Comeau. The merchants were the principal source of the industrially produced goods which made life more comfortable.

Credit availability

As these goods were available on credit redeemable against labour for the merchants, the latter were able to assure themselves of a regular labour supply. Two factors, however, limited the

merchant power to control the workforce of Val Comeau.

First, the villagers had access to an abundant environment which gave them a subsistence base other than the merchant stores. Second, by the 1920s, the growing Canadian economy provided alternative sources of employment in New Brunswick and beyond.

Work in Val Comeau was directly structured by the year's four seasons. Late spring, summer and early fall, from the beginning of May to late September, was the crucial period of the year for subsistence. During that time, sufficient stores had to be accumulated so that the household could survive the harsh winter. For the large landholders, this meant planting and tending their crops of wheat, oats, buckwheat, potatoes and vegetables.

For the rest of Val Comeau's residents, this meant different tasks for men and women. Most of the men worked on the merchant boats fishing principally for lobster, cod, mackerel, salmon and herring. Around four or five men owned their own small boats from which they caught their own lobster and other fish. In both cases, the men ensured that they salted or pickled sufficient fish for the needs of their households throughout the winter. Other fish did not require a boat:

eels, trout, salmon, and gaspareau were fished from the rivers, while clams were available in great quantities at low tide. As their men were away at sea much of the time, the women of Val Comeau had the primary role in tending the family vegetable plots and caring for the few animals that they might have. Cabbages, potatoes, beans, turnips and carrots were the principal crops. They were stored through the winter in root cellars dug into the ground behind the house.

Late summer was a busy period for the household. At the end of August, many families decamped *en masse* to blueberry fields in the interior where they picked blueberries at a penny a pound for farmers or merchants. In September, the harvest had to be brought in rapidly to escape the first frost.

At the end of the month, the men stopped fishing in order to cut firewood for the winter heating and cooking needs. They generally exchanged salted fish for firewood at the rate of one 200-lb barrel per 20 cartloads. September and October were also the best times for hunting moose and deer, which were a welcome addition to the winter stores. Rabbits, ducks and geese were also hunted at this time and through the winter.

Merchant boats

A few men of Val Comeau continued to work on the merchant boats through the

fall, but most departed for New Brunswick's extensive forests where they were employed by timber companies through to the following April. Trees were felled through the late fall and winter, until the spring thaw in late March or early April and then rafted down the rivers swollen with the run-off of melting snow. Those men who remained in Val Comeau through the winter engaged in hunting and smelt fishing through holes carved into the ice on the Tracadie river, or in the small bays down the coast from the village.

As men's work took them away from the house for extended periods, women had a critical role in assuring the vitality of the household. They were the caretakers of the household, stitching clothes, ensuring that the winter stores were sufficient, preparing meals, caring for children, and cleaning. At the same time, they played a central role on the family farm and engaged in wage labour when it was available. Many women, especially those not yet married, worked in the Loggie factories canning lobster, cleaning fish or cooking for the employees of WS Loggie who lived in the village.

Softening the challenge of deriving a living in the harsh climate of northern New Brunswick were the numerous social activities of the villagers. In that pre-television era, entertainment was a family and community affair. Its primary site was the kitchen of the house. After a copious meal of boiled fish, potatoes and molasses-based desserts, family and neighbours sat around the wood stove listening to legends, singing, playing instruments and joking. The major festival of the year was the Mi-Careme, towards the end of winter, where a masked gang of men went from house to house in the village hooting, banging, scaring small children, and telling tall tales about the residents of each house they visited. Attendance at the Sunday mass in Tracadie also provided a chance for socializing, as did frequent shopping trips to the larger centre.

It would be misleading to say that Val Comeau in the 1920s and 1930s was a fishing village. Fishing was just one, though perhaps the major, economic activity of the village. Val Comeau's most

important economic characteristic was the diversity of its economic base which depended on three rich ecological zones: the ocean, the forest and the land. From these, the residents of Val Comeau met their own direct subsistence needs and earned the cash with which they could access industrially produced goods. The diversity of Val Comeau's economy and the adaptability of its residents provided security in a beautiful but unforgiving environment.

This piece by Derek Johnson draws on data collected during the course of his work for an M.A. thesis