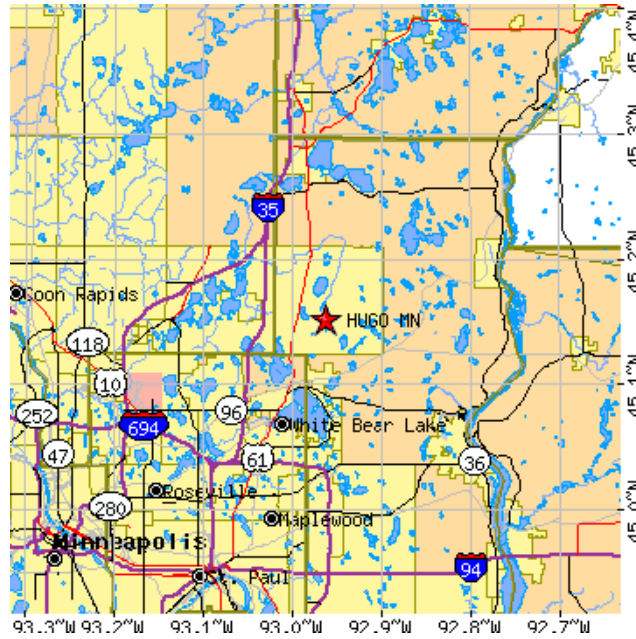


History of Hugo

My mother and her parents were born and raised in a bucolic little village 14 miles north of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. The best way to understand the history and heritage of the village of Hugo is to study the journey taken by its founding families.



From France to New France

Hugo was settled by French-Canadian emigrants from the St. Lawrence Seaway, principally the river region between Quebec City and Montreal. The ancestors of these French Canadians had left France in search of a better life in New France. France had a strategic interest in establishing a colony to counter the influence of the British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard. The French explorers found no gold as had the Spanish in Central America, but profits were to be made in fishing and in the fur trade. Our ancestors came over as soldiers, farmers and skilled laborers. The French explorers opened the St. Lawrence River valley to the fur trade and then to farming. And then they moved west and south of the Great Lakes. They mapped the region and named many of the natural sites. As the Canadian fur trade waned, most people turned to farming.



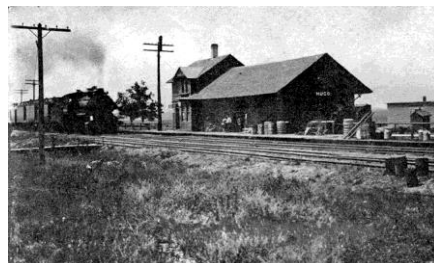
St. Lawrence River

After a couple hundred years of big families, there was not enough land or jobs to support everyone. The 19th Century brought economic depression and repressive government policy toward French Canadians. As a result, waves of emigrants moved to the factories in New England and to the farmland newly available in the American Midwest. Previous generations of French Canadians were familiar with the waterways of Minnesota and so they settled along the rivers and lakes. The hub of French-Canadian settlement in Minnesota was at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers where Fort Snelling assured local safety.

When the Fort Snelling Military Reserve evicted the civilian squatters in 1840, many moved downriver to begin the community that later became known as St. Paul. Settlers then began to move north of St. Paul. By 1850, 116 Canadian-born persons were living in the village of Little Canada. Then, immigrants moved northward again to Vadnais Heights and Centerville, where in 1857 the Catholic congregation reached 190 members. In 1887, the population was 2/3s French Canadian. Centerville was given its name by the French Canadians who founded it because they viewed it as a central location between St. Paul, Stillwater, and Anoka.

Hugo

The area just east of Centerville had also begun to be settled in the 1850s. It was organized in 1870 as the 36-square-mile Oneka Township. The name "Oneka" comes from the Dakotan word "onakan," which refers to the process of harvesting wild rice by knocking it into a canoe. The nearby Oneka Lake and Rice Lake bear testimony to the abundance of wild rice harvested by the Indians. French natives Louis and Françoise Kuchli arrived in 1872 and built the first businesses -- a store and hotel. When the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad was built to connect St. Paul with Duluth, a station built three miles east of Centerville in 1875 provided a stop for the trains to take on wood. This station, called Centerville Station, stimulated the population growth of Oneka Township, which reached 379 by 1880.



The first United States Post Office was established in 1882, and the postmaster requested a name change from Centerville Station to keep its mail from going to Centerville. The civic leaders came up with the name of Hugo in honor of the French writer Victor Hugo. And in 1906, the community around Centerville Station, population 258, incorporated as the village of Hugo in 1906. By 1910, Hugo had a bank, lumber yard, feed mill, telephone office, stores, bars and blacksmith shops. The village of Hugo and the Township of Oneka merged into the 36-square-mile city of Hugo in 1972.

To this day, Hugo remains an agricultural community. The Cummings and Peloquin extended families of my mother were mostly farmers. But family members also worked in the local economy. Many families earned extra cash by cutting wood for the trains that stopped to refuel. Grandpa Alfred Cummings used to help his father cut blocks of ice from the lakes during the winter to service the ice boxes in local homes. My great uncle Theodore Peloquin owned a grocery store, and my great uncle Erving Cummings was a postman. My uncle Al Cummings was a lineman on the railroad.

Immigration from Canada for the most part ended in the early 1800s, but the French-Canadian culture and language lived on for generations. There has been significant suburban development in recent years, more than doubling the population from 6,300 to an estimated 14,000 in 2013. The close-knit "French-Canadian" village of my grandmother's youth has passed into history.

Sources: "An Historical Geography of Centerville, Minnesota," The Hugo-Centerville Citizen, August 2, 2006, "Washington County History Guide," They Chose Minnesota



Hugo Telephone Exchange



Marier Grocery 1947



Hugo School