

Reclaiming Our Hugo Heritage

When my mother was a small child, Grandma would occasionally send her with a bucket to a neighboring farm to ask for some milk, “du lait.” Those were two words of the very little French that my mother remembered. During her childhood in Hugo, French was commonly spoken at home and on the street. The early settlers in Hugo were mostly families of French-Canadian immigrants. But the identity of Hugo as a French-Canadian enclave disintegrated as the older generations passed away, the younger generations stopped speaking French, married those of other nationalities, moved away, and were replaced by newcomers looking for homes in an affordable bedroom community close to St. Paul.

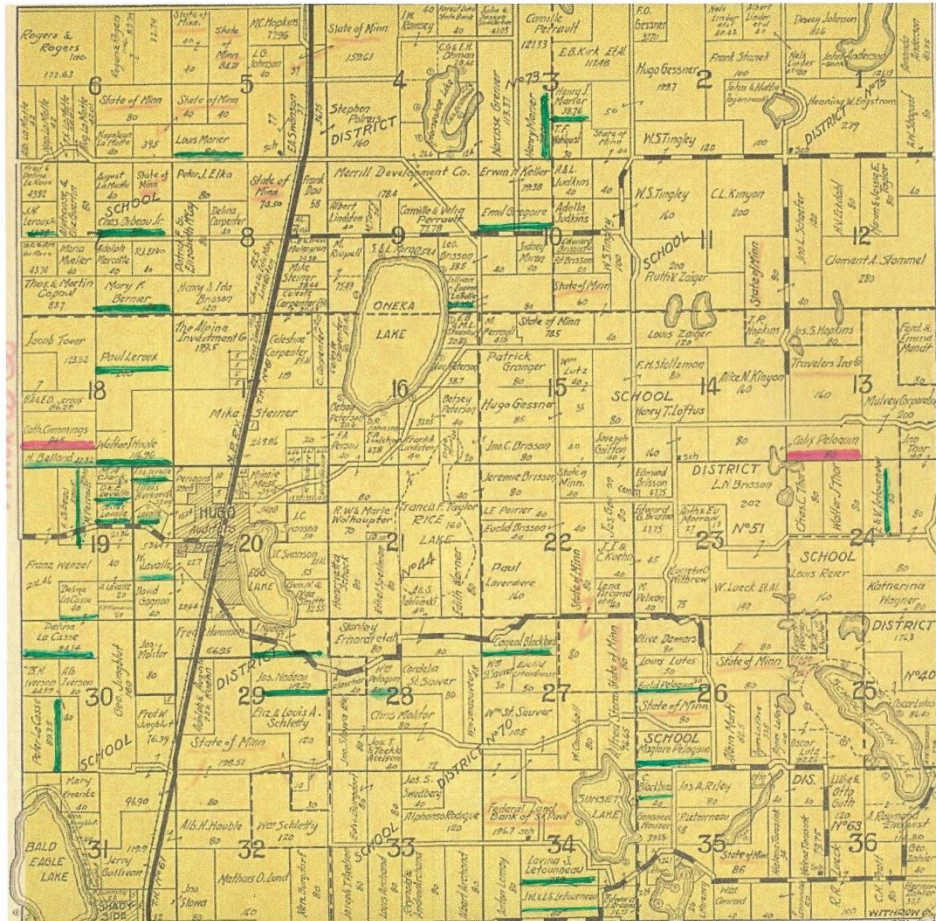
The challenge we face as the descendants of the early settlers of Hugo is how to “reclaim” our Hugo heritage if little of it remains currently to be seen. A good first step is to understand how the Hugo community was shaped by its French-Canadian heritage.

In one sense, Hugo is the culmination of a centuries-long migration of immigrants from France who came to populate and ultimately thrive in communities they built along the St. Lawrence River Valley, beginning with Quebec City, then Three Rivers, Sorel and Montreal. When opportunities for the descendants of the immigrants became sparse, they moved on to trade and settle along the rivers and lakes in Minnesota, Michigan, and other states.

French-Canadian voyageurs and fur traders arrived as early as the 1600's. The geography of Minnesota created an ideal habitat for animals that produced high quality furs sought by the fur traders. Etienne Brule in 1622-23 became the first European to reach Lake Superior. In the 1650s, Medard Chouart des Groseilliers and Pierre Esprit Radisson made it as far as present-day Duluth. Fur trader Louis Joliet and Father Louis Hennepin explored and mapped the northern part of the Mississippi River in 1673. In 1679, Pierre and Jean Pepin traveled up the Mississippi River from the south and traded with the Indians on the Wisconsin side of Lake Pepin. In 1682, René Robert Cavalier de La Salle claimed the entire Mississippi River basin for France. The names of other famous explorers and fur traders echo in various locations throughout the state: Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Lhut, Pierre Charles Le Sueur, Nicolas Perrot, Joseph Nicollet, and Jean-Baptiste Faribault.

Early in the 19th Century, the growing population in the province of Quebec and a string of crop failures made life increasingly difficult for the farmers. With less arable land to pass to children, some became landless, wandering laborers. By mid-century, the situation along the St. Lawrence River was becoming dire. Land scarcity, crop failures, and economic depression forced even full-time farmers to find seasonal work to meet their families' needs. More Canadian men moved south to search for work in the United States. After 1850, an economic depression in Canada drove thousands of migrants to industrial centers in the American Northeast. Our ancestors found their way to Minnesota.

lived close by. The small village of Hugo also exemplifies this pattern with the following families who were either cousins or families our relatives married into: Peloquin, Cummings, Lavelle, Nadeau, Parenteau, Cartier, Lacasse, Letourneau, Peltier, and Marier.



Plat Map of 1938

