

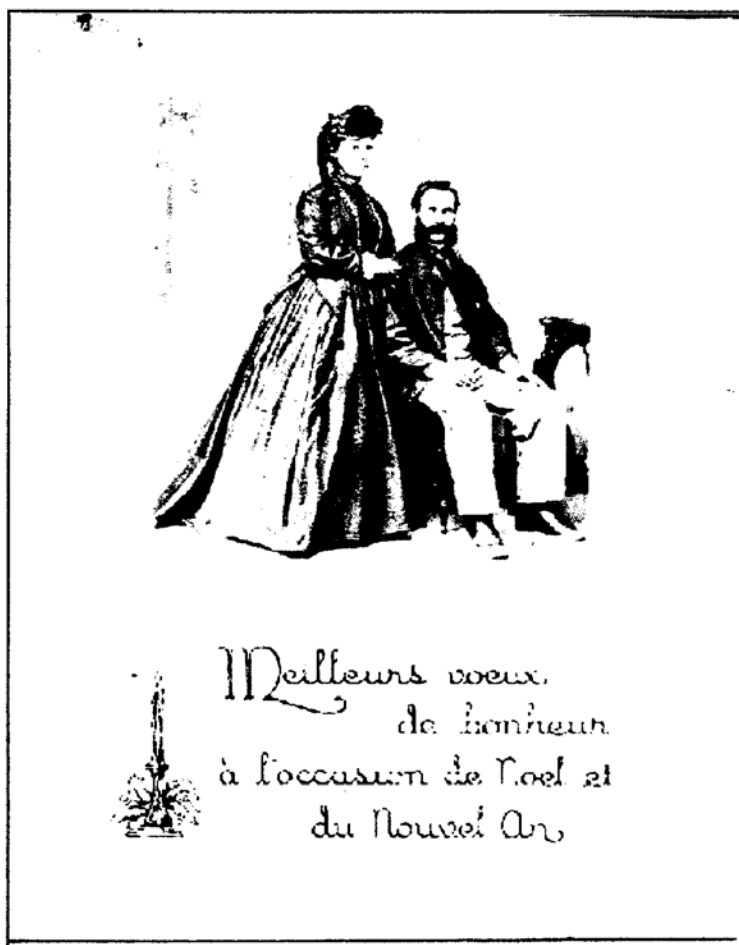


THE FRIGONS

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF FRIGON FAMILIES

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Greetings card c1800s. Compliments: Kathleen Klein (140)

Greetings card of Joseph Alphonse Frigon and Eugénie Gérard, married in Saint-Prospère in 1867, great grand parents of Kathleen Klein (140) and John J. Pepper (149) of Montreal, children of William Pepper and Blanche Frigon, married in Shawinigan in 1918 whose parents were Joseph Auguste Frigon and Annette Massicotte, married in Saint-Prospère in 1891.

TO

OUR FRIGON COUSINS:

BEST WISHES

FOR THE

NEW YEAR

2000

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François Frigon voyageur

Pierre Frigon (4)

VI

The occupation of the trading voyageur

A trading expedition was a complex and risky undertaking. To begin with, one had to see a notary. Often three legal documents had to be drawn up before the departure.

First, the voyageurs had to sign an agreement of association. This “society” or association consisted of at least three men, the minimum of manpower required to maneuver a canoe. Thus it was that on May 26, 1686, François Frigon, Antoine Desrosiers and Jean Desrosiers signed such a contract with the merchant DeFay, represented by François Poisset de LaConche. You will be able to read this contract in a future article.

Then, a second notarized document was signed if more manpower was needed to assist the members of the association to carry out the expedition: a contract for the hiring of helpers. François Frigon and his associates signed such an act on August 15, 1686.

Finally, they signed the document which made the voyageurs responsible for the trade goods that had been entrusted to them by the merchants. François Frigon and his associates signed such a document on August 16, 1686 with the merchant DeFay of Quebec. It stipulated that DeFay “assumes the risk for one sixth of the agreement made between them on last May 26th”. Should there be losses, the merchant would claim compensation from the voyageurs. In 1688, François Frigon participated in such a lawsuit concerning the loss of a canoe at the hands of the Iroquois.

In the three contracts mentioned above, François Frigon was always the first to sign, and he did so with a firm and determined hand. This leads us to presume that he was the leader of the group.

Once the legal formalities were settled, the trip had to be organized. We can hardly begin to imagine what was involved in the planning of such an adventure which would last many months and cover thousand of miles. When the canoes were loaded with merchandise and the departure finally took place, the worst was yet to come. François Frigon sweated his way over portages, endured swarms of mosquitoes that assailed him day and night, did night watches to protect the group from the Iroquois, ate peas (beans) day after day; suffered because he had forgotten a tool, an article of clothing, a certain food; put up with back aches, sore arms and legs, wounds, bruises and other accidents; endured the burning rays of the sun, the lashing of the wind and the rain; overcame currents, bolstered the morale of his men, maintained his leadership in difficult situations, kept on in spite of defections among his hired help, unloaded the canoes each evening, repaired them almost daily, etc.

To keep from being eaten alive by the mosquitoes during the night, they constructed make-shift tents : “Every night we make “cradles” (shelters) to protect ourselves. That is to say, we plant small branches two feet high in the ground in a semi-circle, equally spaced one from the other, and under which we spread a small and narrow mattress, with sheets and a blanket. Then, we cover the “cradle” (which we make as long and as wide as we wish) with a large shroud which goes all the way down to the ground, thus preventing the insects from entering.”⁽¹⁾

When they arrived at their destination, there was palavering and exchanging of gifts; then they treated themselves to a feast. Each one put on his best clothes to impress the Indian chief who did likewise. The next day, they unbundled the furs and the merchandise, and trading began.

In order to create ties and to be effective, the voyageurs had to go West for several consecutive years. It took tact, a knowledge of the Amerindian languages, an innate sense of negotiation and certainly good nerves. These tasks were difficult and far different from what we might imagine them to be today. All in all, they worked liked slaves and encountered risks of all kinds, especially regarding financial responsibility. An unsuccessful trip meant misery for years to come.

Why, then, did these men pursue such an occupation? Primarily because it was more lucrative than agriculture, at least until the 18th century. At that point in time, the voyageurs became simple employees of the companies and their salaries were more modest, in the range of 100 to 150 “livres” per year. Before that time, the voyageurs received a percentage of the profits. Their net gain could attain 12%⁽²⁾. But it seems they were rarely given that amount. They also pursued this occupation for its psychological compensations. Because the economy was based on the fur trade, these men were at the center of the system. It gave them a certain prestige, for they were entrusted with important responsibilities. Do we not often find the names of notaries and people of renown among those who participated in these expeditions? Lastly, they were drawn by the freedom of this occupation. As a matter of fact, the atmosphere in the colony was stifling. Everybody knew everybody else. Each person watched his neighbors. The parish priests reprimanded their people from the pulpit. For people who were attached to their freedom, the very air they breathed quickly became heavy.

Trading took place in a context of liberty, of enormous physical effort and of exchanges. In spite of the difficulties involved, all of this, along with the lack of routine, made it a very interesting occupation. These men were obviously endowed with a spirit of curiosity and creativity. They loved freedom and human contacts. They were ambitious and courageous, proud and adventuresome and certainly were explorers at heart.

In the next article we will talk about the “congés” de traite.

1- Lahontan, Oeuvres complètes I, édition critique par Réal Ouellet et Alain Beaulieu, PUM, 1990, p. 295

2- Louise Dechêne, Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII^e siècle, essai, Boréal, 1988, p. 164.

A genealogist's letter to Santa

All I want for Christmas is a new surname

Dear Santa: Don't bring me new dishes,
I don't need a new kind of game.
Genealogists have peculiar wishes
For Christmas I just want a surname.

A new washing machine would be great,
But it's not the desire of my life.
I've just found an ancestor's birth date,
What I need now is the name of his wife.

My heart doesn't yearn for a ring
That would put a real diamond to shame.
What I want is a much cheaper thing;
Please give me Mary's last name.

To see my heart singing with joy,
Don't bring me a real leather suitcase,
Bring me a genealogist's toy;
A surname with dates and a place.

Author unknown

A word from the President

In the next issue, Winter 2000, I expect to describe the highlights of the program for the coming year. Meanwhile, I should like on behalf of the Board of Directors to extend to all our members and friends of the Frigon family, best wishes for the new year 2000.

Gérald Frigon



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