Weather: A Formidable Foe for the French-Canadian Pioneers

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(Includes excerpts from various parts of *Hélène's World: Hélène Desportes of Seventeenth-Century Québec*, a book by the same author)

The weather most certainly affected the lives of the French-Canadian pioneers who crossed the Atlantic to settle in New France on the shores of the St. Lawrence River in the seventeenth century. Transportation, food, shelter, communication – all were significantly impacted by the weather in the early years of the colony and in ways we might not think about today. While Mother Nature could certainly bring pleasant days, she was often a formidable opponent.

In the first place, weather was an important factor in travel to the New World. It determined when travelers could set sail and when and if they would arrive in the New World. One could travel across the ocean only in the spring and summer months. Even then the weather in the North Atlantic was unpredictable; the journey was often plagued by stormy conditions. The Jesuit missionary Father Paul Le Jeune described his experiences crossing the Atlantic in the spring of 1632 in his report to his superiors in Paris that fall (the *Jesuit Relations* of 1632). The ship in which he and other Québec-bound passengers were sailing left the port of Honfleur on April 18. The travelers enjoyed fine weather at first, but it quickly turned ugly. Their sailing vessel encountered one tempest after another and was continuously buffeted by winds and angry seas. Le Jeune noted that he

> had sometimes seen the angry sea from the windows of [his] little house at Dieppe; but watching the fury of the Ocean from the shore is quite different from tossing upon its waves . . . The vessel was left to the will of the billows and the waves, which bore it at times upon mountains of water, then suddenly down into the depths of the sea. You would have said that the winds were unchained against us. Every moment we feared lest they should snap our masts, or that the ship would spring a leak. It is one thing to reflect upon death in one's cell . . . but quite another to think of it in the midst of a tempest and in the presence of death itself. . . . We had encountered two icebergs of enormous size, floating upon the sea. They were longer than our ship and higher than our masts, and as the sunlight fell upon them you would have said they were Churches, or rather, mountains of crystal. . . . When a great number of them are encountered, and the ship finds itself caught among them, it is very soon broken into pieces.[1]

[1] *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents(The): Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France.* Ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites. (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co, 1897. *Internet Archive: Canadian Libraries*. Web. 22 Oct. 2009) V:11-17.

Even though it was May, Le Jeune reported that the weather was cold and wintry; at times, the sailing vessel had been completely enveloped in a chilling fog. Accommodations on board were most uncomfortable. The travelers arrived in Québec on July 5, two months and eighteen days after leaving Honfleur. Québec in July of 1632 was still very cold. There was snow in the woods and the deciduous trees were just beginning to leaf out.

Weather affected the ability of the colonists to sustain themselves through the year. As noted above, the wind, snow, and cold could last well into spring. Autumn food stores would be exhausted, leading to a great scarcity of food in the late winter and early spring and near-starvation in the colony. The winter of 1628-29 was particularly long and brutal; there had been little food in the colony over many wintry months.[2] The colony's founder, Samuel de Champlain, wrote that in the spring of 1629, as soon as the weather permitted and the ground had thawed sufficiently, the colonists occupied themselves with sowing crops. The widow Hébert and her son-in-law planted six to seven *arpents* of land (about 5 acres) in peas and other grains. The four Récollet missionaries had four to five *arpents* of their land sown with various grains, vegetables, roots and herbs. The four Jesuits and their servants, twelve men in all, had planted enough to meet their own needs. By June, these crops had still not ripened. Champlain would record that

> While awaiting the harvest we went every day to look for roots for food, which was very fatiguing; for we had to go six and seven leagues [eighteen to twenty-one miles] to get them at a cost of great trouble and patience, and without finding enough to live on. The others did their best to catch fish but, owing to the lack of nets, lines, and hooks, we could not do much. [Gun] powder for hunting was so precious that I preferred to suffer rather than to use the little that we had. . . .[3]

There was discord among the settlers. People in the Lower Town and on the farms had been reluctant to share with the men in the fort. Champlain would complain that he and his men were the last to receive any food. The colonists had exhausted what remained in their storerooms. Even with strict rationing, the supply of peas had run out by June. The settlement at Québec had had to make do with a few sacks of corn purchased from some natives, edible roots and acorns from the woods, and fish from the river. Though minimal, these provisions kept the colonists alive. [4]

The lack of sufficient food was an ongoing issue. In letters written in 1645, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, founder of the Ursuline School for girls in Québec, wrote of the difficulties in establishing a presence in the New World. The school, as well as the colony in general, was completely dependent upon receiving annual foodstuffs and other supplies from France. Mother Marie would echo this sentiment many times in many letters over the years. In letters written in

[2] Tanguay, Cyprien. Á *Travers les Registres*. (Montréal: Librairie Saint-Joseph, 1886. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2009) 15.
[3] Champlain, Samuel de. *The Works of Samuel de Champlain in Six Volumes*. Ed. H. P. Biggar. Trans. H.H. Langton. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1932. *Internet Archive*. Web. 23 July 2011) VI:40-41.
[4] Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain in Six Volumes*. VI:40-52.

1650 and 1652, she advised that the Ursuline School would not be able to continue without significant assistance from the mother country. Without help, they had the choice of dying or returning to France. She noted that people in New France worked hard and they did produce some food, but just not enough. Québec had a short growing season; generally, there were only about 115 frost free-days. Mother Marie would argue that the Ursulines were suffering more from poverty and lack of food than at the hands of the unfriendly Iroquois natives.[5]

Even the act of obtaining water for household needs could be an arduous task in the winter, when all bodies of water were frozen solid. Settlers would have to haul most water in a wooden bucket to their cottage. This was often the task of women and children. Water was stored in wooden barrels which might also be pressed into service to catch rain water. In winter, snow and ice were melted to provide for household needs. From Father LeJeune comes this description of the work required in obtaining water at this time of year:

> As we have neither a spring nor a well, we are obliged to go for water every day to the river, from which we are distant about 200 steps. But to get it, we must first break the ice with heavy blows from an axe; and after that we must wait until the sea comes up, for when the tide is low you cannot get water because of the thickness of the ice. We throw this water into a barrel, which is not far from a good fire; and yet we must be careful to break the layer of ice every morning, otherwise, in two nights, it would be one mass of ice, even if the barrel were full.[6]

Shelter for the colonists was often minimal. In a letter written in 1640, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation described the initial living quarters of the Ursuline nuns, noting "this tiny house is so poor that at night time we can see the stars shining through the [roof] and can barely keep a candle alight because of the wind."[7] Two years later, the nuns had a proper and substantial school built in the Upper Town of Québec. The Ursuline monastery was an impressive stone structure: a three-story building measuring ninety-two feet by twenty-eight feet, featuring four chimneys and constructed of a dark-colored limestone quarried locally. It opened on November 21, 1642.[8] Unfortunately, the builders of the Ursuline monastery had underestimated the severity of winters in Québec. It was impossible to heat the building adequately. Even though 175 cords of wood were burned in a winter, the nuns and their resident students suffered from a numbing cold. When the Ursulines and girls first moved in, the building was like a barn. As soon as possible, the interior was finished. Each nun had a cell or cubicle; this was as much to protect

[5] Mahoney, Irene, O.S.U., ed. *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings*. (NY: Paulist Press, 1989) 241-248.
[6] *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, V:147.
[7] "L' Exposition L'Académie des demoiselles." *Musée des Ursulines de Québec*. (Québec, Canada) 2 Aug. 2011.
[8] Mahoney, *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings*, 139-40; *Glimpses of the Monastery: Scenes from the History of the Ursulines of Québec during the Two Hundred Years 1639-1839*. (Second ed., Québec: L.J. Demers & Frère, 1897. *Google Books*. Web. 20 June 2011) 38.

against the cold as to provide the nun with a degree of privacy. Her bedstead was enclosed like a box and entered through doors which swung open like a cupboard.[9]

Marie Morin, first native-born Hospitaller of Montréal, would describe winter thus:

> you must know that the cold of this country can be understood only by those who are subjected to it. Their house [Hôtel-Dieu of Montréal] having holes in more than 200 places, the wind and snow easily pass through them ... So that when there had been wind and snow during the night, one of the first things to be done in the morning was to take wooden shovels and the broom to throw out the snow around the doors and windows. . . . And the water that was put on the table for drinking froze within a quarter of an hour.[10]

The harsh weather would be an indirect cause of some of the fires that devastated the French colony in the seventeenth century. On December 30, 1650, the young charges at the Ursuline Monastery had gone to bed, wondering excitedly what New Year's treats they might soon receive. Two hours after midnight, the Ursuline Monastery, completed in the Upper Town of Québec only a few years earlier, burned to the ground.[11] Mother Marie de l'Incarnation described the unfortunate accident in her *Relation of 1654*. She noted that one of the novice nuns was in charge of making bread for the community. The bakery was in the cellar. As the monastery foundation and walls did little to keep out the bitter cold, this sister feared that the dough might freeze. So she put a few hot coals in a pinewood trough, along with the bread dough, and covered the assembly. The sleepy girl forgot to remove the coals later, as was her intention. As this manner of keeping bread warm was not the custom in the monastery, no one else checked on the bread. At around midnight the coals kindled the wood in the trough. Pinewood was highly flammable and the fire spread quickly from the cellar to the rest of the convent. Mother Marie described the situation thus:

> Our provisions for the whole year were down there, both those which had come from France – lard, oil, butter, brandy for our servants - and domestic products such as fish, etc. When the fire had consumed everything down there, it rose to the ceilings which were double with earth packed between them. Had not one of the mistresses of the children been sleeping in this area and heard the crackling and noise of the fire, we would all have been destroyed by fire within half an hour. The fire had already broken through and the place was collapsing and about to fall.[12]

Fortunately, the nuns and their young charges all escaped without serious injury.

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[9] *Glimpses of the Monastery: Scenes from the History of the Ursulines of Québec during the Two Hundred Years 1639-1839*, 41; Mahoney, *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings*, 140 (footnote).
[10] As quoted in Bernier, Hélène. "Morin, Marie." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.* (Canada: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2000. Web. 25 Aug. 2008.)
[11] *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents(The): Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France.* Ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites. (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co, 1897; Creighton University. Web 9 Dec. 2009) XXXVI:167.
[12] Mahoney, *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings,* 163.

Other accidents were also related in some way to the weather. Storms came up suddenly. The windblown waves on the rivers became treacherous. There were a number of deaths due to drownings in the early years of the colony. Louis Hébert, Québec's first farmer, died in January of 1627 when he slipped and fell on the ice.[13]

Transportation was severely limited during the winter months. The rivers were the primary avenue of transportation. They froze during the winter. No one could get in; no one could get out. With the exception of an occasional band of indigenous natives, there was no communication with the outside world for six months of the year – or more.

The early colonists had only their fellow French settlers for company and support. In the first twenty years of the colony's existence, there were never more than 100 settlers. The vast majority of them lived within the confines of Champlain's *Habitation*, which was little more than a rustic trading post. The colony grew slowly but remained isolated from the outside world for many months each year. One can imagine family and friends spending many hours huddled around the fireplace hearth during the long, bitterly cold winters. The men might be fashioning a crude piece of furniture or repairing a farm implement. The women had meals to prepare and children to care for. One can also picture the women in the colony sitting by the hearth at day's end quietly engaged in sewing, knitting, mending clothing, or embroidering a fine piece of cloth. Here at the fireside, men would discuss the events of the day and would repeat stories heard from others. The women might well have participated in the discussions. As one historian noted, "Much as the Parisian esteemed good eating and drinking, he loved talk even more."[14] Certainly, the French settlers along the St. Lawrence river enjoyed conversations and storytelling no less. Particularly in the winter, opportunities for other recreation were limited. The experience of the settlers, isolated and shut up in a small space for days on end, gives new meaning to the phrase "cabin fever." No doubt these pioneers longed for more agreeable weather and the chance to be outdoors.

What joy and excitement must have been felt by the colonists when at last they spied a vessel coming up the river towards Québec in the late spring or summer! It meant that the weather had at last turned warm enough to thaw the ice on the St. Lawrence. It meant that there would be replenishment for their greatly diminished stores of food and other supplies. It meant that there would be news from the outside world. It meant that they had survived another winter!

Even now at the beginning of the 21st century, weather is a frequent topic of conversation. However, it generally doesn't impact our lives in the same way that it did for the early settlers of New France. They were brave and hardy men and women!

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[13] Tanguay, Cyprien. Á *Travers les Registres*. (Montréal: Librairie Saint-Joseph, 1886. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Sept. 2009) 13.
[14] Lewis, W.H. *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV.* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1953) 209.