Daily Life in New France

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The Seigneurial System

Because New France was an agrarian, rural society with almost four out of every five people living on a farm, one of the roots of daily life was the seigneurial system. A land distribution and holding system patterned on European feudalism, it created a highly distinctive settlement pattern.

The system was originally developed by Cardinal Richelieu but significantly extended and refined by Jean Talon. The king owned all land in New France. Seigneuries were grants of land made by the Crown to members of the nobility and varied in size from ten square kilometers to close to two hundred square kilometers. The seigneurs, or lords, in turn, then parcelled out the land and rented it to the habitants who worked it. By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were over two hundred seigneuries extending laterally on both sides of the St. Lawrence.

Two factors caused the narrow strip farming running away from the rivers that became characteristic of New France. First, everyone needed water access for irrigation and transportation. Second, the French had an inheritance system that called for all children to inherit equally, as opposed to the English system of primogeniture whereby the eldest male got everything. As one generation gave way to the next, the farms were divided lengthwise, always with water access. As a result, the landscape of New France was an endless series of narrow farms running to the water's edge.

In 1634, Robert Giffard and Jean Juchereau, both of Percé, were the first to hold the title of seigneur. The seigneurial system, much like feudalism, was based on a series of a series of mutual obligations. The King only granted the land to the seigneur in the first place on condition that he met certain requirements. The seigneur had to build a manor house, a place of worship, a fort, and a mill.

They had to live on their land or hire a responsible individual to do so on their behalf. The seigneur was responsible for defense as well as for acting as judge in matters of dispute.

Initially, almost all seigneurs were male but by the establishment of Royal Government in 1663, more than half were women. This resulted from the French equal inheritance system as well because many men joined the fur trade or military. Also, given the fact that New France was a violent, frontier society, many men died prematurely bequeathing their land to their wives.

The habitant had his own unique duties under the system as well. An important difference between the seigneurial system and feudalism was that the habitant owed no military duty. Also, all duties were specified in a written contract so they could not be arbitrarily changed at a later date. There was, however, a work duty, a corvée, that called for the habitant to work the seigneur's land three days per year. He also had to pay the seigneur a percentage of his harvest.

In addition, there were further taxes that had to be paid. Lods et ventes was akin to today's inheritance taxes. Whenever the habitant sold or gave part or all of his land, other than upon his death, the seigneur claimed one-twelfth of the land as a tax. Another tax was the cens, which was a small annual cash payment. Because they paid it, habitants became known as censitaires, a name they themselves preferred. One-thirteenth of his crop went to support the priest and church in the seigneury, although that was cut in half at the start of the seventeenth century. Another obligation of the censitaire was that he had to use the seigneur's mill, and then pay him one-fourteenth of the flour milled. Finally, he had to
give a share of any fish caught or wood cut on the seigneury.

**Habitant Life**

All in all, the seigneurial system provided the major underpinning for the lives of the great majority of the population. It was not necessarily an easy life. The taxes were burdensome. Work was from sun-up to sundown. The pattern and rhythm of life, daily and annually, was determined by the seasons. There was a seemingly never-ending series of tasks. First a homestead had to be built.

Then the land had to be cleared of rocks, boulders, and trees. A crop had to be planted, nurtured and cared for, and harvested.

Repairs to home, barn, and equipment were constant jobs. The habitant had to cut and haul firewood. Then there were the more domestic routines, cooking, cleaning, making furniture, and educating children. Enduring a brutal climate, with virtually no outside assistance, the self-reliant habitant made a new life for himself and his normally large family.

However, judged in a contemporary context, the habitant, despite his trials and tribulations, was not badly off. In fact, he did substantially better that his European cousin. As noted, the habitant had no military obligation. His tax burden, while it might appear burdensome by modern standards, was in fact, less than those who lived under feudalism. Further, again as noted, the censitaire's obligations were specified, and limited, in a written contract. The habitant could earn extra income through carpentry, woodcarving, or fishing.

The habitant's diet, augmented by aboriginal specialties, was significantly better and as a result their life expectancy was greater than serfs in Europe. Further, the land that the habitant held was normally much larger, and often of better quality, than European farmers. In addition, there was much greater social mobility within New France whereas Europe was extremely socially stratified. It was not uncommon to see a seigneur working alongside his censitaires. A habitant, if circumstances were right, could within a generation aspire - and indeed become - a seigneur. Finally, try as much as the Crown might to turn New France into a rigidly hierarchical and authoritarian society, it really was not possible. If the pressures and demands ever got too onerous, the censitaire could simply leave and become a courier des bois.

Family was another institution in the daily life of New France. Families were usually large. For example, close to one out of every five eighteenth century families had ten children or more. This was both to provide more hands to divide up the labour on the farm, as well as to provide security for the parents in their old age. Although they may not have been as intimate as the romanticized view depicted in later eighteenth century Cornelius Kriegoff paintings, habitant families were tightly knitted and self-sustaining.

Children usually remained with the family until they married. It was not uncommon to have extended families with grandparents, uncles and aunts, and nieces and nephews living under the same roof.

There was usually a fairly defined set of roles. The father was the head but everyone had important roles. Everyone, regardless of age or gender, worked in the fields and tended the animals. The father, along with his eldest sons, repaired the house, barn, and tools as well as cutting and hauling firewood. He would also normally build the family's furniture.

Meanwhile, his wife cared for the vegetable garden beside the homestead and handled the household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring and educating the younger children. However, she was far more than a domestic helpmate. Rather, not only was she responsible for the domestic side of the household, but she also worked side-by-side with husband in the fields. In addition, because far more women than men at the time were literate, she often looked after the business side of the farm.
Habitant families were self-sufficient. From the wheat they grew, they produced their own bread that was the staple of their diet. Because they were engaged in hard, physically demanding labour, they needed a diet that would provide them with energy. On average, each person ate about a full kilogram (about two full modern loaves) of bread daily. Milk, cheese, and other dairy products came from their cows while their chickens kept them supplied with eggs. They obtained protein from pigs and cows that they butchered as well as from wild game, such as rabbit, they hunted or fish they caught. Peas and corn were the most popular vegetables. Maple syrup was a welcome spring treat. They normally ate four meals a day, with the main meal being in the evening. The lunch and afternoon snack were usually eaten in the fields where they were working. Holidays and festive times called for more lavish meals that might include ham or duck or perhaps even moose or deer.

Habitant families were self-sufficient in other ways beside just their diet. The wife and her daughters made all the family's clothing, which tended to practical and hard-wearing. They also made a long list of necessary household items, such as curtains, blankets, towels, rugs, soap, and candles. The family fashioned all their own furniture, tables, chairs, desks, and the like. They provided their own amusement and recreation. They played parlour games such as cards and checkers as well as entertaining themselves with singing and dancing. Popular outdoor activities included skating, tobogganing, and going for sleigh-rides. There were religious holidays as well as communal events such as barn-raisings, weddings, and corn huskings.

Their celebrations, indeed their entire lives, had a consistent rhythm to them. For example, two of the biggest holidays, aside from religious ones such as Christmas and Easter, were November 11th and May 1st. The former took place at the seigneur's manor house after all taxes were paid and accounts settled, marking the end of the harvest. The latter, called May Day, announced the coming of spring as habitant families decorated a pole with colourful streamers and danced around it on the seigneur's property.

The Role of the Church

Religion was another vital aspect of life in New France, and in fact, formed one part of the great trinity of family, the land, and religion in the la survivance tradition. If the family was the basic social unit of New France and the land sustained it, it was religion that provided the spiritual and moral context. New France was almost totally peopled by Roman Catholics so the impact of the Church was immense. The Church was there at the beginning of their lives with baptism, at the end of their lives with the performing of the last rites and burial, and all the way throughout, with ceremonies such as confirmation and marriage.

Religion provided not only moral and spiritual instruction, it was also the center of the community life. Everyone attended church on a weekly basis so much social interchange could take place both before and after the service. It was the site of many celebrations through the year. The Church also maintained hospitals, ran schools, and provided charity. Further, it became the principal patron and supporter of the arts by employing a variety of artists and musicians. Finally, the Church became a major economic power through its ownership of considerable tracts of land as well as the annual tithes it received.

Town Life

While more than three-quarters of the population lived in the countryside, not everyone did so. Almost one in every four people in New France lived in one of its growing towns.

The main ones were located on the St. Lawrence River, often at the site of a former fur trading post. Quebec, the capital and largest town, had a population of about two thousand in 1700 and grew to more than five thousand by mid-century. Divided into the more affluent upper and more
squalid lower sections, it was the colony's principal port.

Merchants and artisans located their places of businesses near the waterfront in the Lower Town while the wealthy, the church, and government institutions located in the Upper Town.

Montreal, founded as Ville Marie by Paul de Chomedey Maisonneuve and Jeanne Mance in 1642, rapidly developed into the second largest town in large part because it became the center of the fur trade.

By 1750, it had four thousand inhabitants. Conditions in these towns and other towns were fairly primitive. By mid-eighteenth century, most of the houses were made of stone, as result of several disastrous fires. However, many of the buildings were tenement lodgings with the great majority of the population renting rather than owning their homes because of the high cost. Garbage was thrown into the streets. The dirt streets were narrow and bustling with people and animals. In the heat, they turned incredibly dusty and after a heavy rain, into a mud bowl. There was considerable violence, fire, and petty theft.

Transportation within New France was very limited. That, in fact, added to the need for self-reliance on the part of the majority living in the countryside. The water highway, the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries, provided the best transit system as well as being a source of irrigation. The aboriginal peoples instructed the French on the use of birch bark canoes, which became widely used in three out of the four seasons of the year.

They transported heavy loads in a cajeu, which resembled a large raft.

In winter, the French borrowed another invaluable aboriginal device for getting around on land, the snowshoe.

Carioles were sleighs with runners that were pulled either by horses in the case of the wealthy or dog teams for the poor. In summer, well to do townspeople favoured a light, two-wheeled buggy called a calèche.

Daily life in New France was different and freer than the lifestyle of Europe at the same time. Determined by the setting, daily life was distinctive and unique. While some things were borrowed from Europe, such as the feudal system and the Roman Catholic Church, they were all adopted to the New World context. And in adapting to the new circumstances, they produced an altered lifestyle. Into that mix were added important aspects of the aboriginal lifestyle, whether diet or transportation devices. So while it was anything but an easy life, it was unique. The habitant emerged as a self-reliant figure attempting to build a better life for he and his family. The challenges were certainly there - the backbreaking labour, the harsh climate, the insecurity and uncertainty, the taxes, and the disappointments. However, through it all, the habitant persevered and as he did so, successfully created an enduring symbol of New France.