

As in most Northern Ontario communities, the arrival of the railway in Hearst marked the beginning of European descent migration to the area. The National Transcontinental Railway (now Canadian National [CN]) arrived in 1912 and the Algoma Central and Hudson Bay Railway (ACR) in 1914. From then until the 1930s, Hearst was an important railway hub.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ontario government promoted colonization by boasting the merits of Northern Ontario agriculture and forestry. The publicity attracted many migrants from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, as well as many others of both British and French Canadian origin. The French Canadian Catholic Church encouraged members of its flock to spread their religion and the French language by moving to Northern Ontario.

However, regardless of these migrants' ethnic backgrounds, most moved to the area for economic reasons. They were attracted by the possibility of obtaining a settler's lot, which the government sold at a good price. Many of the French Canadians who settled in the area earned their living in what is now known as the agroforestry system. This system, where one worked as a lumberjack in the winter and practiced subsistence farming during the summer, was well known in Québec's rural regions, which is where most of the French Canadians came from.<sup>1</sup> Even the migrants who planned to live as farmers in the Great Claybelt earned their primary income by selling the wood they had cut on their settler's lot.

The ACR, as the largest landowner in the area, also encouraged the development of the forest industry in a number of ways. The railway company owned the neighbouring Way Township, which it divided into lots and sold to those interested in buying woodlots. The railway also sold entire townships to American companies like Newago Forest Products. Generally, the pulpwood produced from these lands was shipped to the United States via the ACR railway.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, Hearst's economy was driven by the forest industry, which provided work to a large segment of the population.

When it was incorporated in 1922, Hearst's population numbered 573 persons.<sup>3</sup> During the 1930s, small contractors commonly called "jobbers" obtained minuscule cutting rights on Crown land. Noé and Zacharie Fontaine (1936–1937), Adelard Haman (1939), Arthur Lecours (1940) and Georges Lecours (1941) were the first ones to acquire such cutting rights. They used the timber they harvested to run small (often quasi-portable) sawmills for a few months during the year. They also sold a part of their production to American papermakers or mining companies in Timmins.<sup>4</sup> Until the 1950s, the economic viability of Hearst relied first and foremost on the export of pulpwood.

The Ontario government then prohibited the export of raw logs harvested from Crown land. This policy allowed the lumber industry to gradually expand and give Hearst its special character. During the 1960s and 1970s, the family-owned sawmills (Fontaine, Gosselin, Lecours, Levesque and Selin) developed and thrived. Levesque Plywood (now Colombia Forest Products) was founded in 1962.

From the post war years until the 1980s, Hearst was also profoundly transformed. Between 1941 and 1981, the population increased from 995 to 5533<sup>5</sup> and became a predominantly French-speaking community. To this day, it is still has one of the highest concentration of Francophones in Ontario (88,1% in 2001). During the first few decades of the town's existence, most business owners were Anglophones and new migrants. However, as of the late 1960s, Francophones have been dominating this economic sector.<sup>3</sup> In 1944, a group of Franco-Ontarians founded la Caisse populaire de Hearst (a credit union). St. Paul's Hospital, managed by the United Church since its founding, was sold in 1953 to the Sisters of Providence and renamed Notre Dame Hospital. The same year, Mgr Louis Levesque, bishop of Hearst, founded Le Petit Séminaire of Hearst, now known as l'Université de Hearst. While training professionals that the region strongly needs, this educational institution also contributes in several ways to the character of the Francophone community. For example, it was very active during the cultural boom that marked the entire Franco-Ontarian community during the 1970s. *Le Nord*, a weekly Francophone newspaper, was founded in 1976, le Conseil des arts in 1977; the community radio station CINN-FM hit the airwaves in 1988 and two publishing houses, Le Nordir and Les Éditions Cantinales, arrived on the scene a few years later. In 1982, l'Association Parmi-Elles founded La Maison Verte, a social business aimed at offering jobs to women.

Since 1985, with the sale of family businesses and the closing of mills, the forest industry in the Hearst region has been transformed, but still remains an important economic engine for the town.

First called Grant, the hamlet's name was changed to Hearst, in honour of William Hearst, the former Minister of Natural Resources (1911–1914) and premier of Ontario from 1914 to 1919. Although William Hearst was part of one of the most Francophobic governments—the instigator of Regulation 17 (1912) that officially banned the teaching of French in the schools of Ontario—the town has become a vibrant Franco-Ontarian community.

Danielle Coulombe  
Archivist and Professor  
Université de Hearst  
October 2015.

1. Roger Bernard, *Le travail et l'espoir : Migrations, développement économique et mobilité sociale Québec/Ontario 1900-1985*, Hearst, Le Nordir, 1991.
2. Danielle Coulombe, « Hearst, une région exportatrice de bois à pâte », in *Forest History Society of Ontario*, vol. 2, no 1, Spring 2011, p.5.
3. Roger Bernard, « Hearst : Migration et Société », *Revue Atmosphère*, vol. 1, no 1, p.14.
4. Danielle Coulombe, *op. cit.*, p.6.
5. Roger Bernard, *op. cit.*, p.14.
6. Statistique Canada. 2012. Hearst, Ontario (Code 3556076) and Cochrane, Ontario (Code 3556) (table). Profil du recensement, Recensement de 2011, product n° 98-316-XWF by Statistique Canada. Ottawa.

Published on October 24, 2012. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dppd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=F> (accessed on October 20, 2015).