THE GREAT RECRUITS OF 1653

It was in the year 1653 that Monsieur de Maisonneuve brought to Montreal a very interesting group of settlers including the illustrious Marguerite Bourgeoys, founder of the Congregation of Notre-Dame. The historian Paillon related these facts as follows.

"The strategy of Monsieur de Maisonneuve being to push back the Iroquois and firmly establish the Colony of Ville-Marie, he wanted only young, robust and courageous men, every one well trained in the use of arms, each one proficient in some profession or trade necessary or useful to the new establishment, and all sincere Catholics. Moreover, he insisted that they should have good breeding and irreproachable morals for fear of corruption among the group. In the latter, reports Sister Morin, he was extremely successful. Monsieur de la Dauversiere helped him in the selection of these men; between them they picked candidates from the districts of Picardy, Champagne, Normandy, Isle de France, Touraine, Bourgogne, but principally from Maine and Anjou, mostly from around la Fleche where Monsieur de la Dauversiere found the greater number. During the months of March, April and May 1653, in the presence of a Notary these men officially became members of La Campagne de Montreal: a total of 118 men who joined in this manner came from la Fleche. The original pledges are still intact today and can be found in the minutes of Notary de Lafousse who wrote them at the time. Thirty-six more drew up similar contracts at other points so that the entire number of enlisted men totalled 154, every one ready to bear arms. However a few withdrew, others died in the crossing so that according to the testimony of M.de Belmont only 105 arrived at Ville-Marie.

...The 'Compagnie de Montreal' contracted to provide transportation to its private island, maintain food and lodging for five years and furnish tools and effects necessary to each profession or trade. There was no clothing allowance, but the Company guaranteed wages to every one in proportion to the importance of professional service or work rendered. One hundred and three of the members who didn't own suitable togs and objects which could be more easily obtained in France, received an advance on wages before embarking, in excess of eleven thousand pounds even though the wages of the recipients would not amount to 7000 pounds per year.

...The recruitment sailed June 20th, on the ship named Saint-Nicolas-de-Nantes under the command of Captain de Besson. They noted very early in the voyage that the boat was rotted and taking in water at various places. However with over a hundred men on board as well as the usual crew, they hoped that all that strength would keep the boat dry. Unfortunately, even though the men were at the pumps day and night, it was evident that provisions were becoming damaged and therefore after covering 350 leagues at sea, they were forced to return to Saint Nazaire, their original point of departure."
"Sister Bourgeois reports the incident: As we approached land, we would have perished, but, for the grace of God, the local people rescued us. I was very distressed during this time of peril; we were 120 passengers without a priest and our people were ill-prepared for death. Upon landing, M. de Maisonneuve restricted the soldiers to an island which was escape-proof, otherwise all would have vanished. In desperation some even tried to swim to mainland, they believed they were doomed and had become discouraged. It took a long time to find and outfit another boat as well as gather new provisions but finally we set sail again after attending Holy Mass, on July 20th, the feast day of Saint-Marguerite.

Indeed, the Villemarie project, to which this recruit was devoted with such resolution and courage, was a noble cause for which eventually many were happy to offer their lives. God prepared them for this great sacrifice by further difficulties and chose to recall the elite of this illustrious group. Sickness soon spread on the boat, many were ill and of the 113 men inlisted in the service of the Montreal Company by M. de Maisonneuve, 8 died in transit. It was an occasion for Sister Bourgeois to display great charity by providing all services she could manage and by helping them toward a saintly death. Day and night she remained at their side, she consoled them in their troubles and shared among them everything she received in generosity from M. de Maisonneuve and the Captain. She refused to eat at the Captain's table, but accepted portions of food which could be conveniently distributed among the ailing, keeping a very modest ration for herself. The entire trip, for her, became a mission of mercy. She diligently instructed the sick and the soldiers, taught them catechism, recited the morning and evening prayers and often conducted spiritual readings and other religious services in spite of suffering the usual discomforts of a novice sea voyager.

While the recruitment was still at sea, the settlers of Quebec, Three Rivers and Villemarie were vividly concerned for their own welfare, extremely conscious of their lack of protection against the fury of the Iroquois; although a tentative peace was being promoted, trouble with the barbarians could erupt at any moment. The anxious settlers were unaware that M. de Maisonneuve had been obliged to return to Saint Nazaire causing a forty day delay and therefore worry and anguish prevailed as their vigil brought no sight of the boat. Sister Bourgeois relates: "They were finally giving up hope of our arrival" To plead their cause for survival, the people of Quebec prayed publicly and even had the Exposition of The Blessed Host for adoration until God was stirred by their fervor and answered their prayers. "We arrived at the site of Quebec on St-Maurice day (Sept 22nd)" writes Sister Bourgeois "but unfortunately a bit of careless navigation overlooked an obstruction which pierced the vessel so deeply that even high tides could not dislodge it and the ship had to be burnt on the spot. Our arrival, she adds "brought joy to
all." Father leMercier gives a similar account in his journal. "The extraordinary assistance sent to us through the recent embarkment brought happiness to everyone. The people gave thanks to God with profession of deep faith by singing, on this occasion, the Te Deum in the church of Quebec.

The very joyfulness that swept the Country on the arrival of this recruit points out the discouragement of the settlers at this point in time, in spite of many overtures from the Head Company to give the colony self-reliance. But it is also to be noted that this same Company had lacked foresight in measures that would have improved and enlarged this group. Eight years previously, the Company had transferred the fur trade to the settlers, a transaction which saved Company funds but threw a great financial burden on the pioneer whose resources were already depleted by continual wars and threatened to crush the Country completely. The Quebec residents could foresee the impossibility of ever increasing their number of settlers when nothing but privations, extreme poverty and continuous alarming situations could be offered to newcomers.

This state of helplessness induced M. de Lauzon to attempt various measures to keep this new recruit in Quebec City even to the point of threatening to halt their journey except that M. de Maisonneuve firmly established the necessity for every man to reach Villemarie in order to protect this very strategic settlement. Besides the Company of Montreal felt it had already invested too much money in these individuals to leave even one man behind. M. de Lauzon could not insist as M. de Maisonneuve carried the King's Orders giving him complete authority for the government of Villemarie. By the decree of 1648, the King had declared that a governor general would have a mandate of three years and could be re-appointed only once. Regardless M. de Maisonneuve had been governing the Isle of Montreal for almost twelve years. Consequently colleagues and associates fearing M. de Lauzon would further embarrass M. de Maisonneuve by disputing the title of governor therefore obtained an order with the King's seal, addressed directly to M. de Maisonneuve before his departure from France. By this order, Louis XIV approved once again the decision of the Lords of Montreal to select their governor and gave him full charge of the colonization of Villemarie. The rivalry between the two leaders was truly manifested when M. de
Maisonneuve required small boats to continue the journey, none were made available, and the enlisted men were obliged to spend considerable time at Quebec while M. de Maisonneuve looked for other transportation.

The recruitment had arrived on September 22nd and had waited around most of October and were finally obliged to march to their destination with M. de Maisonneuve at the rear to be absolutely certain not one man would be left behind. The arrival of these hundred men brought untold rejoicing to the settlers of Villemarie and they expressed their gratitude to the Virgin Mary, patroness of the nation, with many prayers of thankfulness for the providential conservation of the colony founded for her greater glory.

Most of these recruits had intended to remain in the country for the mere duration of their five year contract, however, impressed by the leadership of their governor and happy to become part of a closely knit group of people who were helpful, cordial and dedicated to promote religion, many soldiers elected to settle permanently in Villemarie. M. de Maisonneuve had anticipated these decisions and was prepared to make concessions. During December, he asked the priest to include in two consecutive Sunday homilies an invitation to all who wished to become settlers to see him personally. He proposed to write off the amount of money which had been advanced to the men while still in France and since their arrival, also intended to donate to each a good piece of land for cultivation, as well as another acre at the proposed city site where homes were built. Moreover, he offered additional financial help with the understanding that this money be returned if the candidate chose to leave the Isle of Montreal and established his home elsewhere unless of course circumstances obliged the French to abandon the Isle completely. The first man to accept this proposition was Andre Demers. On New Year's day 1654, he received four hundred pounds. A few days later, Jean des Carryes and Jean le Duc received nine hundred pounds, all accepted the conditions of the loan. On the 22nd, Antoine Primot, Jacques Massier and Charles Le Moyne announced their decision, Lemoyne received four hundred pounds and was already provided with a place for a warehouse. The following: Jean Lemercier, Mathurin Langevin, Yves Bastard, Simon Galbrun, Pierre Vilain, Toussaint Huneault, Jacques Mousseaux, Bertrand de Rennes and Simon Despres declared themselves settlers after having each received a grant of five hundred pounds. Many more took advantage of the offer and received the sum of five or six hundred pounds.

...This is the plan that M. de Maisonneuve provided for the settlement of the first pioneers.

Immediately following their agreement, they each acquired thirty acres of land, which was to be cultivated, situated mostly on the hill side of St Louis or in the region of St Joseph, and in addition an acre or half acre on the site chosen for the town, where, as we mentioned before, each farmer would build himself a residence.

- above from Drouin, volume III.