August 27, 1991, an interview with Arthur Deschamps on the history of the Frenchtown area

Dale Johnson: Okay why don't you tell us a little bit about the history that you know of Frenchtown?

Arthur Deschamps: First off, Dale, I think it would be proper for me to tell you that those people who came here from eastern Canada in the 1800s, starting about 1858, have never considered themselves as from France. We always considered ourselves as Canadians. If one stopped to consider that our families came from Canada, from Normandy in the 1600s, one begins to realize that it's been so long ago since we left France that whenever we relate to our ancestors, whenever we relate to the areas from which we came, we think of Canada. That's natural enough because it was so long ago that we came from France.

So to tell you at the outset, how did this all begin, and why is it the Canadians from eastern Canada decided to come to western Montana and make a settlement there? I must tell you that in order to get into the significance of all the things that happened over the years, it would be well to start at the outset and mention the expedition of Jacques Cartier, who was sent by Francis I, king of France, to get in on the action in North America. That happened in 1534. So he sailed and finally landed on the coast of eastern Canada, explored the Gaspe Peninsula, sailed up the St.
Lawrence River a ways, and then he planted a cross with a placard at the foot of the cross with a sign reading "Vive la roi de France." Loosely translated, that means "Long live the king of France."

So they got underway finally, the French. The English had been at it with John Cabot's explorations. So then we have to talk about the Jesuit influence in Canada. Francis Parkman wrote some very interesting volumes about eastern Canada, about those people, about the Indians- the Mohawks, the Hurons, the Algonquins, and the Senecas, which were a loose confederation of Indians talked about as being Iroquois. Well, they were loosely jointed to be sure. Anyway, in 1632, Father Pierre La Jeune and two companions, after learning the need for the Christianization of the Indians, came to Quebec and established an Indian mission, ostensibly, of course, to indoctrinate those Indians in Christianity and of course the Catholic faith.

I must tell you an interesting sideline here: in teaching these Indian kids about Christianity, it took a bit of persuading from time to time because they were, as you might well imagine, reluctant to come to class, so they thought it would be a good idea to treat these kids every day with a huge bowl of pea soup. Now if anybody ever questions you about this business of pea soup, I can only tell you that it's a delicious dish. It is part impartial of French-Canadian history and tradition. Those kids really loved that soup, so they would come back to class. To get to the point, I think that is probably the first time that pea soup was ever served on the North American continent. So there's enough of that.

Now the Jesuit influence was of such significance that in the early formative years of the 1800s, there was a band of Iroquois (I don't know how many, not many eight or ten) who had
been indoctrinated in the Christian faith. They found their way into the Bitterroot Valley and settled there with the Salish people, intermarried with them, and stayed there. So as time went on there in the Bitterroot Valley, these people from eastern Canada thought it would be well for the Salish to have a black robe to come to them and do the necessary indoctrinating to cause them to become Christians and Catholics. It took about three expeditions back to St. Louis and finally the job got accomplished. And Father Peter DeSmet came to the Bitterroot Valley in 1841.

Now why all this discussion here at the outset? Because these are the first inklings, the first stirrings of civilization here in this wild country of western Montana. This was a wilderness, believe me. It must have been something huge, remote, and wild. So word gets around and these people, among others, the Canadians started to migrate out here. Then we have to talk a little bit here about the treaty, the Louisiana Purchase, rather. Before I do that, let’s talk about something that took place in 1759, which was a huge fight, the Battle of Quebec. The Battle of Quebec between General James Wolfe, who headed the English army, and General Montcalm for the French. They had this fight. The English won the day. I want to tell you this because it was the sort of thing, to me, that is sort of a manifest destiny occasion. It set the stage for modern Canada culturally and demographically as we know even to this day. So that’s the way it happened.

Now the reason for this being important is because the French identified themselves back there in those provinces of Quebec and Nova Scotia. Word got back that there was a Jesuit out there. Those people were steeped in Catholicism out here. It was an encouragement for them to think of coming to this country of western Montana. Now we have to think, I think, about President Jefferson and his negotiating for the great territory of Louisiana. First off, Jefferson thought it would be possible to get the French under the first council, Napoleon, to get a leg up
on the Mississippi River by a kind of easement, I think, and possibly control of the Port of
Louisiana, of New Orleans. So he sent an emissary by the name of Stevenson. Shortly, a few
days after that, he also sent James Monroe to Paris to negotiate with Napoleon for the possibility
of getting access to the Gulf of Mexico for shipping.

So one thing led to another and, finally, after some discussion... At this time, Napoleon
was strapped for money. He was fighting and had some fought some rather strenuous battles on
the European continent, and his cash drawer was becoming depleted. So finally, he directed his
foreign minister, Mr. Talleyrand, to attempt to negotiate with the American emissaries for the
entire purchase of Louisiana, the whole thing. So it was 900,000 square miles. That was a shock.
They didn't bargain for that. They didn't expect that to happen at all. Mr. Stevenson had the
courage and the vision to sign up, and they bought it with the help of Mr. Monroe. What are we
going to do now? Well, the deal was simply $11,250,000 on six percent bonds to be paid over a
certain period of time, along with some accounts that were due from the United States to France.
Those were taken care of, making the total package of $15,000,000.

We have something here to tell you about a certain Secretary of the Treasury by the name
of Gallatin. To digress momentarily into the geography of Montana, there are the Gallatin, the
Jefferson and the Madison Rivers that form the head of the Missouri River. At any rate, Mr.
Gallatin was such a fine keeper of the public purse that when it came time to make the first
payments, he had the money. He didn't have to go to Congress for one red cent. Now that was a
nice thing. It's too bad that we don't have a Gallatin of Washington today, in D.C. We could use
a fellow like him with our deficit and all that. So it goes. Now what are we going to do now?
Well, we're going to have to take a big trip, and probably in taking this big trip we're going to experience (those who went) probably the greatest wilderness that ever was man privileged to take, namely the exploration of Louisiana up the Missouri River, across the northern Great Plains, across the Rocky Mountains- several ranges- and finally to the Pacific. So in 1804, Jefferson talked to a fellow by the name of Lewis. Mr. Lewis talked to a fellow by the name of Clark and they put together an expedition, some 42 men. Now out of that compliment of 42 men, there were nine French-Canadians, such names as Drouillard, Cruzatte, and Charbonneau and so on, and more. There were nine of them. And there was another one by the name of Baptiste Deschamps. I think we ought to scratch him because he didn't make it all the way. He got as far as the Mandan villages in the upper Missouri and he quit. You might say he was a "party pooper", and he went back to St. Louis. So we'll just scratch him out.

The rest of them got all the way to the Pacific coast. Well, you know on their way across this vast country of some 93,000 square miles- 900,000- square miles of territory. That doubled the size of the United States to 1,800,000. What a chunk of land. It was probably the greatest real estate deal that was ever made in modern times, without a doubt. So crossing across this vast country, this wilderness, this beautiful place, the Canadians along with others- this trip was not lost on those fellows. They looked around, and they saw things. They saw the plains teeming with wild animals. They saw buffalo by the thousands. They saw rivers and streams teeming with fur-bearing critters to say nothing of the beaver. Well you know word gets around. And at that time, beavers were in great demand because of the vogue that was in style in Europe that had to do with beaver hats. So what?
After they got back to St. Louis back in 1805, a lot of people thought they'd never see them again. They didn't think they'd ever make it. They did get back. Some of these fellows were so taken with what they saw in this great wild land that they decided to come back and do some trapping. One of these, of course, was George Drouillard and another fellow by the name of (?), both French-Canadians, and John Colter (who, incidentally, discovered Yellowstone Park; he was not a Canadian). So they came back. Drouillard was murdered in the Beaverhead country by the Blackfeet. That's another story and has to do with what happened with Captain Lewis and the Blackfeet people up there.

Anyway, they came and that information was disseminated back East. And now we have the event of the big companies. First off, that company of adventures trading out of Hudson Bay known as the Hudson Bay outfit. Then there was the Northwest Company. And there was also the American Fur Company with John Jacob Aster who was in the Oregon country. Anyway, those people decided to send expeditions out and get a hold of this fur-trade business, because there was some money to be made, lots of it. So they came, and it was such people as Alexander Ross, Finian McDonald, Captain Richard Grant, and David Thompson. Those fellows came out.

Incidentally, David Thompson was the first fellow to get high as to see Flathead Lake. That was in 1810. They started out underway about 1807, and they brought with them these voyagers, as they call them. These were the people who were Canadians, who did the hard work. They were superb woodsmen. They were good with an axe. They were good shots with their rifles. They were superb trappers. So they came out here with these companies. There were three of these fellows who were so taken with the Missoula-Frenchtown valley that they decided to stay, acquire some land, and start to do some farming. Their names were Baptiste: there was
Louis Brun, Joseph Brown, Moise(?) Reeve and Baptiste Ducharme. There were three fellows that came and stayed. They married Indian wives and began to farm and raise families. That got back to the French provinces. That brought more Canadians out here.

We have to stop here and start talking about something that happened that was a concern of Governor Isaac Stevens, who at that time, in 1855, was the governor of Washington Territory, of which western Montana was part. So they had some treaties. He had one with the Nez Perce in eastern Washington and Oregon and then with the Salish, the Kootenai and the Pondera at Council Grove, which is west of Missoula about four or five miles. They had a treaty there with these Indians. You know there were things about these treaties that were contentious, dishonest, and in other words, not good. They were bad. So what to do with the Indians? Well the first thing we ought to do with them is pin them up in reservations, get them out of the way, have them deed 27,000 square miles of western Montana to the federal government and get on with civilizing this wild country.

That got back to Canada, and we have some more people coming down. So by 1863, Frenchtown became quite a lively place with people coming. And they were prospering, and they had a gristmill. And they finally, in 1883, they had their own secular church that's still there, named after the patron saint of French Canada, St. John Baptist. And before that, of course, the Jesuits were down there with Father Hoecken and Brother Peter McGean and built a little missionary church up on the hill back of the cemetery in 1863. So the Jesuits ran all through this business. So things were going pretty well.
We've got something here to do with a military road. Isaac Stevens, about this time, prevailed upon the federal government to build a military road from Walla Walla, Washington territory to Fort Benton on the Missouri, which was Montana territory. Now this road, of course, created a lot of lively interest in this country including our relatives, our remote ancestors the Seres(?), the Deschamps, the Terrios(?), and the Paulines(?). So they started to come out here. That was the start of our family tree, if you will. You know, this road was quite something. It wasn't built without difficulty. There were mountains to cross, rivers and streams to bridge, and deep snow in the mountains to contend with, with which they had to contend. So it was built finally, and they finished in 1856. And Captain Mullan, who was a graduate of the trade school on the Hudson River known as the United States Military Academy, this work was turned over to the engineering department of the army. Captain Mullan was given the job of supervising the crews. So he did this and did it very well. He was an experienced and practical fellow.

So, finally, he thought that after the road was finished that he should draw up a list of specifications or instructions that had to do with people who would come to the road to travel, the miners and the travelers. And he gave them some instructions on how to do this. First off, he told them that they should always make camp about two o'clock in the afternoon, then leave the packs and the saddles on the horses for 15 minutes to let their backs cool off so their backs wouldn't scorch in the hot sun. Then of course they should get off the next morning by dawn at least. And then finally he admonished these people who would travel the Mullan Road that they should treat their animals with kindness and gentleness as you would a woman. Then they would be rewarded by the docility and easy management of their animals. Now I suppose in lay circles that would be considered slightly chauvinistic, but what the heck, that's what the guy said. I'm quoting the fellow. That's the way it was. So at any rate, they built the road. Now where are we?
Well in 1869, of all things, there was gold up Cedar Creek. There was a fellow by the name of Louis Barrette and his partner Monsieur Lanthier who got to scrounging around those hills up Cedar Creek. And they found some very promising placer possibilities, so much so that they thought they would stay and explore further. Well it was late in the summer, early September, but they needed some food. They needed some provisions, groceries, to tide them over for a while so they could stake out additional claims. They wanted to do this right, so that they could keep as many people as possible away from the good claims. So what to do? Well, there was a gentleman by the name of Lozeau who lived there in that area in magnificent solitude, isolation: he and his Indian wife bothering nobody, getting along very well, living off the land, if you will. They hit upon the magnificent idea that they would have Lozeau go to Frenchtown and buy their food for them with a pack horse and bring it back to Cedar Creek. So I suppose we could entitle this chapter of this little session by calling it "Mr. Lozeau goes to Frenchtown."

Well he did indeed. He packed the groceries on the pack horse and he got everything all fixed up and started out of town back up the creek. He got past that saloon there on Main Street and some of his buddies were out there and they saw him go by. He said, "Well, it's my duty." He had to come in and commiserate with his old buddies. So he did. He tied up the stock with the hitching rail and proceeds into the saloon. It wasn't too long that they had plied this fellow with whiskey. They loosened his tongue, and the secret was out. They found out those enterprising gentlemen in the saloon that encouraged Mr. Lozeau that they should go to Cedar Creek. In fact, they even beat Lozeau back home. They didn't even wait until the next morning. Well, you know there were a lot of live wires there in that municipal colossus of Frenchtown at that time. So away they went.
When Lozeau got back, some of those people were already at his house demanding supper from his Indian wife and his daughter. That's enough of Cedar Creek other than there was about...I had a fellow tell me, who was quite knowledgeable about the Cedar Creek diggings, that as far as he could tell it was about $20 million taken out of there all together. By 1870, that was the tops of the thing. A lot of the gold was taken out. As a matter of fact, our grandfather Gaspard Deschamps took out about $1,800 and came back to Butler Creek in the Grass Valley area and started to set himself up farming. So that's the way it went. And Frenchtown became prosperous and progressive. And it was the start of that community all so long ago that started with those French Normans that came from France back in the 1600s, so many of them that did that.

So now we find ourselves during the Modern Era, how it is today in Frenchtown and the Frenchtown community. Well at one time there were about 36 French-Canadian families in that community. Now, as far as we can determine, there are only about six left. The rest of them are of various races. There are people there who, with coming of the pulp mill in 1957, have moved in. So we have a group of people who are of all nationalities and of all things. I never thought I would live to see the day when we would have a Mormon community with their own church in the happy village of Frenchtown, but there it sits. We have to take that in stride, but we'll survive some way or another.

I suppose that there's not much more to say. It's my sincere hope that our relatives who are here presently and those who will succeed us will revere the memory of those venerable ancestors who came here in this beautiful land when it was wild and primitive and took land and settled here and were responsible for our family roots that are grounded so deeply. I might say
that it reminds me of something an English essayist said, by the name of Lord Macaulay, that, "A people do not take pride in the noble accomplishments of remote ancestors will do little that is remembered with pride by remote descendants." Well, we can take that with a grain of salt. Take it or leave it, whatever.

Finally I think what we've said here has to do with a story of a people who came here to this beautiful country, settled down, and helped do their part in the wonderfully exciting and dynamic saga of the building of the west. That's about all I can say. Thanks for listening and that's the end.

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