

Collecting French Folksongs in the Shadow of Motor City

Marcel Bénéteau, Département de folklore et ethnologie
de l'Amérique française, Université de Sudbury

The Windsor-Detroit border region may not be an area that springs to mind as fertile ground to research traditional French folksongs. The city of Detroit, lately fallen on hard times, was for much of the twentieth century an economic and cultural powerhouse that exerted tremendous influence on the mental and physical landscape of the surrounding countryside. Type in “Detroit” and “Music” on your favourite search engine and what will come up will be jazz, blues, motown, hip-hop, and electronica. Ask people of my age and they may wax nostalgic about the MC5, Frigid Pink, The Amboy Dukes, and Bob Seger and the Lost Herd. They will remember CKLW, The Big 8, which actually broadcast from Windsor, but which was the biggest rock station of them all—and trust me, they didn't play much Gilles Vigneault and Félix Leclerc at that spot on the dial.

Detroit River French? Half-buried in some people's trivia pile might sleep the fact that the city was founded by a Frenchman named Cadillac over three hundred years ago, and that *le Détroit* originally meant “the strait”, that is to say, the narrow body of water separating Lakes Erie and Saint Clair. *Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit* was eventually shortened to Detroit as a town grew up around the old fur-trading garrison. Detroit was once part of New France. After the battle of the Plains of Abraham it became a British possession, until the Americans arrived in 1796 and the river became the international border between Upper Canada and the new republic to the south. (Make that ‘to the north’, as by a quirk of geography Canada is actually south of the United States at this point.)

By this time, French settlers were firmly established on the south shore as well. Until the War of 1812, the Detroit River remained essentially a French river, on both sides of the border, from Lake Erie to Lake Saint Clair. Cut off from other French centres in the Saint Lawrence River Valley, French language and culture evolved on their own in this far-flung enclave. Throughout the British régime, inhabitants of *le Détroit* maintained links with several other French outposts in the American Midwest, places like Fort Miami (now Fort Wayne), Ouiatenon (Lafayette) and Vincennes in Indiana, Prairie du Rocher and Kaskaskia in Illinois, Saint Geneviève, Old Mines

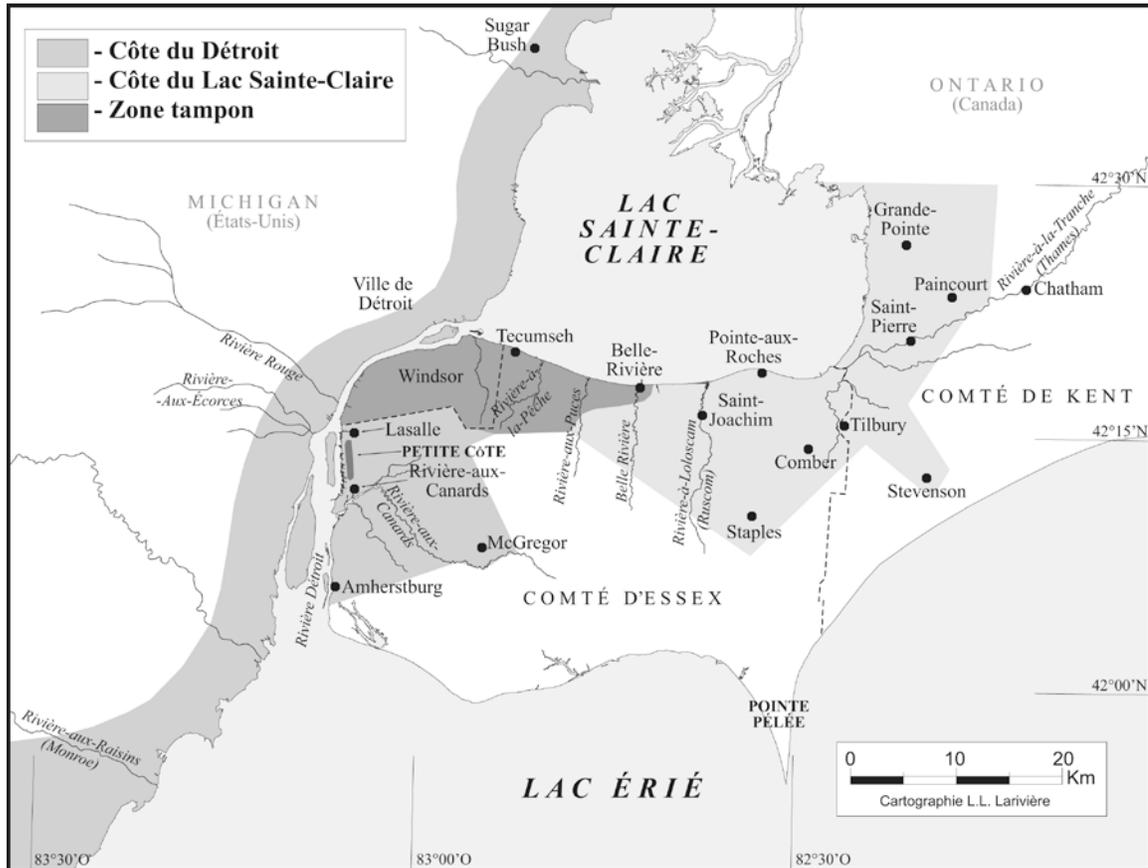
and St-Louis in Missouri. Detroit became the headquarters and staging-post for the vast and wild area that Richard White described in his fascinating study *The Middle Ground*, an area in which French traders and settlers and various Native groups maintained cultural, political and commercial alliances outside the jurisdiction of either British or American governments.¹ Once this area was definitively opened up to American settlement after the War of 1812, the old relationships broke down and French gradually disappeared from the landscape. Detroit itself maintained a fairly important French presence until early in the twentieth century but, for all intents and purposes, the great melting-pot absorbed what was left of it shortly after Henry Ford's revolution kick-started Detroit's amazing growth throughout the last century.

The old Midwestern French culture survived in part on the Canadian side of the Detroit River, where slower development and more accommodating government policies allowed the language to hang on in Windsor and a few villages to the south and west—LaSalle, Rivière-aux-Canards and McGregor. These Detroit River settlements were the first permanent European communities in what is now Ontario; Petite Côte (now part of LaSalle), established in 1749, is the oldest continuous French settlement west of Montreal. Needless to say, the language and culture that evolved in this remote area did not follow the developments that took place in the Saint Lawrence River valley. The Detroit River French community remains unique among Canada's francophone cultures. Northern and Eastern Ontario, populated in the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries, were at least originally outgrowths of Quebec population expansion and migration and as such remained much closer culturally and linguistically to the home province.

These later migrations did, however, contribute to South-western Ontario's overall francophone population. From the 1840s to the beginning of the twentieth century, hundreds of French-Canadian families left the overcrowded farmlands of the Saint Lawrence River valley to come and settle in the fertile lands east of Windsor, along the south shore of Lake Saint Clair, founding agricultural communities around

Belle Rivière, Pointe-aux-Roches, Saint-Joachim, Tilbury, Pain Court and Grande Pointe. These new settlers brought with them elements of nineteenth-century French-Canadian culture and ideology and did not mix readily with the older Detroit River French inhabitants. Over time, the two groups grew

closer in order to ensure their cultural survival. Yet even today linguistic differences between them are still easily discernible to anyone with an attentive ear. As I was to find, these differences are also readily apparent in the oral traditions passed down by each group.



Francophone Communities in the Windsor-Detroit Region

It was in this unique environment that I began collecting French folksongs around 1988. Born and raised in Rivière-aux-Canards, a small village about ten miles south of Windsor, I grew up watching Detroit television and listening to Detroit rock and roll. My family was French, the parish was French and so was the school. Keeping my mother tongue was never an issue. But French culture was a different matter. Outside of our small family/parish circle, everything happened in English (and given Windsor's location, mostly in American English at that). French music, French literature—French history as taught in school, even—came from Quebec or France. No one thought in terms of a local French culture. The agricultural community my parents had grown up in was changing into a suburb of Windsor where people worked for the auto industry. Traditional lifestyles

and ancient customs had no place in this modern fast-paced world. What traditional French folk songs we knew were learned at school, from *Les Cahiers de la Bonne Chanson*, a collection of standardized and sanitized songs designed to promote a rather syrupy French-Canadian patriotism and loyalty to the Catholic Church.

As a budding musician in my late teens and early twenties, I became quite interested in folk music, in both its generic Bob Dylan—Gordon Lightfoot—Neil Young—John Prine contemporary singer-songwriter manifestations and the more authentic modes contained in what I could find of original field-recordings, British broadsides, music from the Maritimes, and such. I especially liked what groups like Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span were doing with traditional English music, or, closer to home,

what the rock group Garolou was doing with French-Canadian folksongs. Then I met John Cousins in Prince Edward Island. This was my first exposure to a real live person who had collected traditional folksongs from his area and was now performing them himself. But it seemed the sort of thing you could do in West Prince County, P.E.I., but not in Windsor, Ontario. Another significant event was discovering the Acadian group 1755. Although most of the songs they played were not traditional, the pride with which they sang in their own local accents, the way they proclaimed themselves to be “not québécois” and sang about things that were real in Moncton and Chéticamp made me wonder—why cannot somebody do that with Detroit River French? I knew groups like CANO were doing similar things in Northern Ontario. So when Paulette Richer from Radio-Canada in Windsor asked me to come up with a few popular French songs to sing at a local talent night I said no, I would come up with some *local* French songs.

But *were* there any? I knew enough about folklore to know that Marius Barbeau had collected many songs in Quebec—thousands, in fact. I found out about Anselme Chiasson, who collected Acadian songs. Then there was Father Germain Lemieux, who collected thousands of songs in Northern Ontario. Surely *one* of these worthy gentlemen would have taken an interest in the oldest French settlement in Ontario? I discovered Conrad Laforte’s *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*, with its listing of over 60,000 versions of folksongs from all over the French-speaking world, and was disappointed again: Detroit? Windsor? Southwestern Ontario? Not a word. How could this be? Why would the Detroit River French be the only francophone group in North America not to have had folksongs?

My mother came from a big French-Canadian community that had settled along the Detroit River in the 1750s. Her clan was not adverse to partying and celebrating. But she didn’t know any songs either. Oh sure, she told me, we used to know all kinds of songs, but we don’t sing those any more. Things change, you know, people don’t get together anymore, everybody’s moved away or dead. Kids have their own music. People listen to records. But a couple of her sisters dug up an old notebook from a great-aunt (an old *scribbler*, as we called it). The scribbler was dated 1924 and contained the handwritten words to about fifty songs. My aunts remembered the tunes to about a dozen of them. So I had my first inkling of what kinds of songs people used to sing in the old Detroit River communities.

Someone hearing of my quest sent me to see Richard Bastien, who was known locally as an old-time fiddler. He had even built his own fiddle from scraps

of wood around the farm. But he knows songs too, I was told. I made an appointment and told him what I was looking for. When I arrived, we sat down in his living room, I turned on the tape-recorder and he started with a drinking song that in fact turned the question around to me: why was I interested in these old songs?

Vous voulez me faire chanter,
 Quel est donc votre envie?
 Vous voulez vous faire ennuyer,
 Aimable compagnie-e.
 Vous savez que je chante fort,
 Mais vous allez le voir-e.
 Vous excuserez mes défauts,
 Si je fais mon devoir-e.²
 [English translation in endnote]

To this day, I believe he chose his first song deliberately. Richard was 79 years old. His own kids had no interest in these old songs. What would a young fellow like me possibly want to do with them? Learn them and sing them for people? What a strange idea... As for me, I was hooked right then and there. Richard sang me a couple of dozen songs – drinking songs, love songs, children’s songs – and not one of them from *La Bonne Chanson*. Better yet, he gave me names of other people who might know songs. I believed I had found my vocation.

Over the next ten years I was to interview and record close to a hundred people in all the French-Canadian villages in South-western Ontario. Some of them gave me (or allowed me to photocopy) nearly two dozen song scribbles, some dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. But only too often the owners knew no tunes to accompany the lyrics in their notebooks. However, I would then show these scribbles to some of my better informants; sometimes the words would trigger something and they would be able to recall a melody from the depths of their memory. Other people gave me recordings they had made themselves of their parents who had long since passed away. Informants usually apologized for not knowing as many songs as their parents and grandparents had. “My dad could sing all night long and never repeat the same song twice,” was a common refrain. Many of my source singers were 70, 80, even 90 years old. Most of them had children older than me who had never heard their parents sing these songs. The wealth of material was astounding—in all, I collected more than 1,700 versions of about 750 different songs. In this way, I was able to reconstitute a good part of the original repertoire of the Detroit River and Lake Saint Clair French communities.

What started as a casual quest for a personal repertoire turned into a full-time avocation. I recorded

three CDs of *Vieilles chansons du Détroit/Old French Songs of the Detroit River Region*. My research eventually led me to pursue and obtain a doctorate in ethnology at Laval University. An important part of North American French culture that had been missed by earlier twentieth-century collectors was now part of the public domain. Although all francophone folklorists since Marius Barbeau have believed (sometimes erroneously) that they were rescuing folk traditions on the edge of oblivion, in the particular geographic and demographic context of Southwestern Ontario this was probably true.

But what is the point of adding yet new songs and versions to an already vast corpus of French-Canadian music? Quite apart from the satisfaction of seeing my own region now increasingly included in any discussion of French folk music in North America, I believe that the Detroit River repertoire brings qualitative as well as quantitative additions to the North American corpus. The differences between songs I collected in the older Detroit River communities and the ones from the more recent Lake Saint Clair villages make the unique contributions of the Detroit river repertoire quite obvious. The Lake Saint Clair repertoire is very close to what you find in Eastern and Northern Ontario, as well as in Quebec. What you find in the old Detroit River settlements is very different. The nearby Lake Saint Clair communities act as a convenient natural control group that allow for meaningful comparisons.

Anyone with a passing familiarity with the traditional French-Canadian music scene will be aware of the overwhelming place *la chanson à répondre* occupies in the current repertoire of groups like *La Bottine souriante* and their numerous progeny. This type of rhythmic call and answer song has become almost synonymous with French folksong. The professional scene reflects what you would hear at any informal francophone gathering where songs are exchanged, whether in Quebec or Northern Ontario. This type of song, with the images it conjures up of voyageurs paddling in rhythmic unison, woodcutters toiling in the lumber camps, and large family gatherings sitting around the hearth, has become part of francophone identity in North America. From the earliest folklorists, such as Ernest Gagnon, to Germain Lemieux, this type of song has been highlighted above all others. Francophone media played a large role in propagating this repertoire throughout the twentieth century. Professional musicians have found a ready market for its upbeat and infectious character. With their consistent rhyming schemes and repetitious structures, these are the easiest for an audience to learn and remember. *Chansons à répondre*—which Conrad Laforte properly classifies as *chansons en laisse*—

belong to an ancient form, which includes many songs that go back to medieval times. The way these songs keep renewing and adapting themselves is indeed one of the most fascinating aspects in French folksong studies. But they are far from the only type of song in the repertoire. Only in Quebec (and areas settled directly as a result of the nineteenth-century Quebec diaspora) did they succeed in almost completely replacing other types of song.

This did not happen at *le Détroit*, which, as we have seen, was largely cut off from cultural developments in *la belle province*. (Nor did it happen in the Acadian repertoire or among the Métis in the West or the Cajuns in Louisiana or—judging by the few collections that were made there—in the French enclaves in the American Midwest.) The singalong aspect is not entirely absent from the Detroit river repertoire, but actual *chansons à répondre* only make up around 13 percent of it (the proportion is more than double that in the Lake Saint Clair communities). This may seem surprising, considering the importance of Detroit as a fur-trading centre throughout the eighteenth century and the high proportion of voyageurs among the area's early inhabitants. But *canadien* iconography notwithstanding, voyageurs no doubt sang many other types of songs when they were not rowing; what they sang around their campfires at night was surely more varied than the lighthearted love songs that make up most of the *chansons à répondre* repertoire. The gradual supplanting of these other songs by *chansons à répondre* is a cultural development that spread out from Quebec from the end of the nineteenth century as French-Canadian identity took root in various locations. The songs preserved in remote areas like the Detroit River no doubt reflect an older, more diverse repertoire that is much closer to that sung by the original French settlers in New France.

The Detroit River repertoire is characterized by an overwhelming preponderance of strophic songs—that is to say, songs with regular stanzas whose main purpose is to tell a story. Many have no chorus; the narrative function of these songs overwhelms the participatory and identity-building aspects that predominate in the better-known types of song sung elsewhere. The most common themes, though not out of place in the wider North American repertoire, carry a greater weight here, and reflect subjects popular in the French colonial period: there are a great number of love songs featuring shepherds and shepherdesses, soldiers and sailors, songs very critical of marriage, tragic *complaintes* and obscure historical remnants. There are a great number of songs that Laforte classifies as Dialogue Songs which have all but disappeared in other areas. Almost totally absent,

however, are such French-Canadian standards as *À la claire fontaine*, *Alouette*, *Trois beaux canards* and *Un Canadien errant*, as well as songs celebrating “traditional” French Canadian subjects such as large families, habitant life and forestry/voyageur themes.

This is not to say that the Detroit River repertoire is unrecognizable to francophones from other areas. Most of the songs which I have collected are indeed sung in other parts of *la francophonie* (although the versions sung here are often quite different from those collected elsewhere). It is the particular make-up of the repertoire which stands out – the types of song most prominently featured – as well as the role they play in the community that kept them alive. Instead of singing songs that connect them to a wider francophone identity, Detroit River francophones seem to prefer songs that connect them to a distant

past: identity through memory rather than through participation.

At the level of individual song types, there are however a great deal of rare and unique songs in the Detroit River repertoire. Nearly one-fifth of the repertoire consists of songs collected only once or twice in North America, or only in France, or else nowhere at all. Aside from the new perspective it brings to French folksongs in North America, it is the sheer number of new songs the repertoire adds to the corpus that speaks to its true value. For example, the following song, in which a young woman starkly advises her sisters to marry for love and not for money, as she did, is found nowhere else in the French-speaking world. It was sung to me by Evelyn Paré (née Meloche) on August 30, 1990; she had learned it from her mother:

C'est a vous autres mes jeunes soeurs

Anon

Voice

C'est a vous autres mes jeun-es soeu-rs, Sur moi pre-n-ez l'ex-em-ple. Ne vous ma-
riez pas sans aim-er, C'est un' longue an-nee. Vous vous sou-vien-drez tou-jours
bien de vous etre ma-ri-e-es.

C'est à vous autres mes jeunes soeurs,
Sur moi prenez l'exemple.
Ne vous mariez pas sans aimer,
C'est un' longue année.
Vous vous souviendrez toujours bien
De vous être mariées.

J'ai pris un homm' que j'aimais point,
Je l'ai pris pour son bien.
Si l'on m'avait donné celui
Que mon coeur aime tant,
J'aurais passé toute ma vie
Dans le contentement.

Cruel père, mère trop lâche,
Vous qui m'a tant poussée.
Vous qui me poussez tous les jours
Dans une vie infâme;
M'avoir fait épouser un homme
Que mon coeur aimait point.

Au lieu de chérir mon mari,
Plus je vas, je l'hais.
Si j'avais un peu d'amitié
De pouvoir l'embrasser,
Peut-être je lui ferais passer
Toutes ses duretés.

Si l'on m'avait donné celui
 Que mon coeur aimait tant,
 Quand même qu'il aurait une chemise

Et un habillement,
 J'aurais passé toute ma vie
 Dans le contentement.³

The theme and style of the above song indicate that it is of French origin, although no one has come across it in that country.

The next song, sung to me by Stella Meloche, is no doubt a North American composition and is in fact almost certainly associated with the Midwestern French area, as it features the Mascouten Indians, a Nation originating west of Lake Michigan and traditionally hostile to French traders in this area.

They were also part of a group that laid siege to Detroit in 1712. In the song, which is no doubt only a fragment of a longer ballad, the Mascoutens employ a ruse to distract the French and steal their furs. At least one word in the song, *patago*, is an authentic Native word, from a root meaning bad or evil in Algonquian languages:

Les Mascoutens

anon

Voice

Un sauv- age chas-sant dans ces bois Ay-ant faim de man-ger du pain. Des-sur
 un Fran-cais il s'est en al-le, tout e - pou - van-te, dis-ant, "Sau-ve toi. _____ Il lui a dans ces
 bois beau-coup d'Ir - o - quois qui vont mettre a ya - yor les Fran -cais." _____

Un sauvage chassant dans ces bois,
 Ayant faim de manger du pain,
 Dessus un Français il s'est en allé,
 Tout épouvanté, disant: « Sauve-toi.
 Il lui a dans ces bois beaucoup d'Iroquois
 Qui vont mettre à *yâ-yor* les Français. »

Bourdignon qui est un homm' sans façon,
 Il dit: « Camarades allons. »
 Tout en continuant vers le commandant,

Z-il s'est en allé, disant: « Monsieur Roi,
 Faites rassembler tous vos *garnadiers*,
 Un homm' pour interpréter. »

Aussitôt qu'le commandement fut donné,
 Tout à chaquin fut rassemblé.
 Et les sauvag's contents avec leur butin,
 Il s'en allaient tous, i' criaient: « *Ya oin!* »
 Oh, les Mascoutens *patago* malins,
 Tout chargés de ce bon butin.⁴

As mentioned, there are no doubt verses missing from the song, but this is the only version that has come down to us. I have no doubt that Stella was the only person in the world who knew this song. She was 90 years old when she sang it to me, and she had learned it from her grandfather, who was born in 1828. I am always amazed at how quickly and immediately living oral tradition can transport one back in time.

Stella was without a doubt my star informant, singing for me over a period of two years nearly 150 songs. Born in 1902 on Turkey Island, in the middle of the Detroit River, brought up within sight of the Detroit skyline, she nevertheless had a knowledge of traditional French songs second to none. In our wide-ranging interviews she shared with me folktales and legends, hunting and fishing lore, folk medicine reci-

pes and all sorts of customs and traditions of the Detroit River French. Dredging her memory for old songs was a pleasure for her and not a chore. *C'est comme si on était dans le noir*, she told me once. *On avait tout oublié toutes nos chansons. Astheur on commence en s'en souviendre.* "It's like we were in the dark. We had forgotten all our songs. Now we're starting to remember them." It was thanks to people like Stella that I came to see the Detroit River as a unique cultural area and realized the insights folklore research in this region could bring to our understanding of French language and culture in North America.

I will conclude with another song from Stella's repertoire, one of her rare *chansons à répondre* that is sung all over the French-speaking world. There are

hundreds of versions of this song, with dozens of different melodies and refrains. The core of the story is always the same: a young girl is married off to a man who is so small she loses him in her bed on their wedding night; after a series of misadventures the cat mistakes him for a mouse and carries him off, leaving the girl to declare that if she ever gets married again, she will choose a man six-and-a-half feet tall. This is one of the oldest songs in the French repertoire; according to some researchers, versions of it go back over a thousand years. This is one of three versions Stella sang me; the song has remained a favourite in my own repertoire:

Tout d'travers tout a l'envers (Le petit mari)

Anon

Voice

Mon pa - pa m'a ma - ri - e, Tout d'tra - vers, tout a l'en - vers, Avec un
ma - ri si pet - it, Tout d'tra - vers, tout a l'en - vers, Ja - mais d'plai - sir. Avec un ma - ri si pet -
it, Tout d'trav - vers...

Quant' mon papa m'a marié,
Tout d'travers, tout à l'envers,
Avec un mari si petit,
Tout d'travers, tout à l'envers,
Jamais d'plaisir.

Avec un mari si petit,
Tout d'travers, tout à l'envers,
Première nuit j'couche avec lui,
Tout d'travers, tout à l'envers,
Jamais d'plaisir.

Dedans mon lit je l'ai perdu.

J'ai pris les draps, j'les ai s'coués.

J'ai pris h-un' match j'ai mis le feu.

Mon mari a sorti tout' routi.

Dans un gros plat blanc je l'ai mis.

Un gros chat gris est v'nu le qu'ri'.

Gros chat, gros chat, tu y es maudit.

T'emport' mon mari tout' routi.

Et si jamais je m'y r'marie,
Tout d'travers tout à l'envers,
J'en prendrai un d'six pieds et d'mie,
Pas d'travers, ni de l'envers
*J'aurai du plaisir.*⁵

[**Editors note:** We regret that we were unable to place accents where they were required on French words in the song transcriptions. The transcription software employed is unfortunately unilingual.]

Notes

¹ See Richard White, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

² You want to make me sing –
Whatever for?
Dear friends –
You want to be bored?
You know I sing loudly,
You'll soon hear it.
I hope you will forgive my faults
As I fulfill my obligation.

³ Here's to you my young sisters,
May you learn from my example
Don't marry without love,
It makes for a long year.
You'll never forget
Having married this way.

I took a man I didn't love,
I took him for his wealth.
If I could have had the one
My heart truly loved,
I could have spent
My whole life happy.

Cruel father, cowardly mother,
You who pushed me so hard,
You who push me every day
Into a life of infamy,
You made me marry a man
I did not love.

Instead of loving my husband,
I hate him more each day.
If I had a little bit of love,
Enough to kiss him,
I could help him get through
All his suffering.

If I could have had the one
That my heart truly loves,
Even if he had but one shirt
And one suit of clothes,
I would have spent
My whole life happy.

⁴ An Indian hunting in these woods,
Hungry for some bread,
To a Frenchman's house he went
In great fear, saying: "Run away!"

The woods are full of Iroquois
Coming to throw out the French."

Bourdignon, who is a blunt man,
Says : "Comrades, let us go."
Continuing on to the commander,
He went in and said: "Mr. Roi,
Assemble all your grenadiers
And get a man to interpret."

As soon as the command was given,
Everyone stood assembled.
And the Indians, happy with their spoils,
They went away shouting "Ya oin!"
Oh, those bad *patago* Mascoutens,
All loaded down with their spoils.

⁵ When my father married me off
All crooked and upside down
To such a small husband
All crooked and upside down,
Never any fun.

To such a small husband

First time I slept with him

I lost him in the bed.

I took the sheets, I shook them.

I took a match, I made a fire.

My husband came out roasted.

On a big white platter I placed him

A big grey cat came and got him.

Damn you, big cat!

You've taken my roasted husband!

If I ever get married again
I'll get one six-and-a-half feet tall.
Not crooked or upside down
I will have some fun!