Episode Three | TRANSCRIPT

Camille Lessard Bissonnette | 1883 - 1970

HOSTED BY:
League of Women Voters of Maine
Featuring Rhea Côtés-Robbins

MARKER LOCATION:
223 Lisbon Street
Lewiston, Maine

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0:21 You're listening to the "Road to the 19th Amendment" podcast, and we're telling the story of Maine's suffragists, and bringing this history the recognition it deserves. This project is made possible by the Maine Suffrage Centennial Collaborative, chaired by Ellen Alderman, led by Anne Gass, and with support from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation and other donors like you.

0:48 This episode covers Camille Lessard Bissonnette, the story told by Rhea Côté-Robbins.

1:01 My name is Rhea Côté Robbins, and I am... My work has been over several years, focusing on the Franco-American women's contributions. And I'm the founder and director, well, founder with several other women of the Franco-American Women's Institute, which focuses on the contributions, and that is online at fawi.net. I am also author of "down the plains" and editor of "Canuck and Other Stories," which we'll be talking about Camille Lessard Bissonnette. And that is her piece that she wrote for the French-Canadian, French Franco-American women's immigration stories.

1:47 Where was Camille from? And when did she come to Maine? So Camille was a Canadian immigrant, and she came to the United States in 1904 in the early Canadian immigration. She came from Sainte-Julie, the Mégantic, in Quebec. And she was born in 1883. And she died in 1970 In Long Beach, California. She was a rural school teacher, which was a regular event in Quebec at age 16 in 1899.

2:24 So when she immigrated in 1904, she was already very mature and ready for work in the mills, and she worked in the Continental Mill in Lewiston for four years. In 1906, she joined the staff of the Lewiston's Le Messager, which was a French language newspaper. There were

several many many French language newspapers in the French culture throughout New England. And she wrote pro-feminist articles, which was also her pro-suffrage pieces, which appeared in the Messager [in] 1910 and 1911.

3:03 The thing that... it really helped — because I spoke to my husband, and he said, people might not know there was a huge French language press for the Franco culture. So I think that's a good point to bring out that that was a normal event. And there were several many French women who were journalists writing for these papers.

3:25 So the fact that, that she was doing this, I think, although, you know, like the thing that she was doing back then was the the *Page Féminine*, which was a normal thing back then, you know, the "Women's Pages," which is, you know, when I was growing up that existed in newspapers, you know, that there was a lot of segregation, because the Want-Ads, well, you know, women — whatever, you know that whole stuff. So that she was a correspondent for the paper...she was writing from 1906 to 1938 for the newspaper. And her book was serialized after she had left the U.S., she had gone back by then, she had all this other stuff that she did, I won't get into that.

4:06 So the fact that she was doing that, I'm not sure if that was the case for the U.S. newspapers. But you know, the-the research that I've done with the Canadian women journalists that came to the U.S., because this was a bicultural, bi-border conversation, you cannot just look at her work, you'd have to look at the fact that Quebec was very much against it, and they did not get the vote until 1940. She was like...the unusual part of it, probably for this, if I'm going to address that, is how and I probably say that when she, you know, like the response, but that her stance was very unusual in that culture, because of, the, you know, like what happened in Quebec, you know, like being super impose, when I say Quebec vote, they were given the national vote. But the provinces had different times when they came in, and Quebec was 1940 [when they won the vote]. In France, was what 44?...45. [French women won the vote in 1945.] So the French men were living their dream.

5:32 For me, the one thing I want to do, is to counter the-the definitions that are imposed, in that she was seen as working class, but the fact that she was breaking and busting the stereotypes that is usually imposed on Franco-American women. So the fact that she was a

teacher in Quebec said that she was of a class that was a different point of view than one that was imposed on her when she came to the U.S., as a result of, you know, opportunities not being available here. So for me, one of the things I actually want to say about the fact is that though she was working in the mills, she was on an upward mobility trend, because she's the one that approached the newspaper to, you know, work and write for them. I mean, that's not a working class, not, you know, woman's standpoint, per se.

6:31 The marker for Camille is located at 223 Elizabeth Street in Lewiston, Maine. And this is the location of the second iteration of the former offices of Le Messager. And Camille began working, writing a column, even though she was working in the mills. For the column that she wrote, *Pour les Filles de Moulin*, [translates to] *For the Girls That Were Working in the Mill*. She began in 1906. She approached the newspaper and offered her services to write this article.

7:06 Her stance was proto-feminist. She wrote articles pro-the-vote for women, pro-suffrage, in 1910 and 1911. Quebec, which is, you know, if you're going to talk about the suffrage movement with the Franco-Americans or French-Canadians, you have to take into consideration what was happening across the border in Quebec, because this was a bicultural, bi-border conversation. And Quebec was extremely against the vote, and they did not get the vote until 1940 in the Quebec province.

7:39 So Camille's unusual stance was that: one, she offered her services as a writer to the newspaper, and two, she took up women's issues. Her book "Canuck" was also serialized in Le Messager. The thing about Camille is that she busted up the stereotypes. She challenges the idea as to who are the French-Canadian, Franco-American women in the state of Maine, and her life, her entire life, is, if one wants to look at her biography, which was written by Janet Shideler, "Camille Lessard Bissonnette: The Quiet Evolution of French-Canadian Immigrants in New England."

8:24 Camille was completely someone that was way beyond and ahead of her time. And so her columns represented her voice. And she, what she did was, she recognized what was going on in New England, in terms of the suffrage, and that's where she got her inspiration. The other part of it is the response to her writings, and she also gave a speech on...January...I forget the date, two seconds, let me just see... January

30th, I think. She gave a talk to the Institut Jacques Cartier, and immediately Monsieur Joseph Poulet gave a response. And Camille was writing at the time for Le Messager, and when she gave her speech, *Pro Suffrage for Women*, it was published in the newspaper, but it was buried inside the newspaper, and her her bio appeared a few days later, not attached to her article.

9:25 Monsieur Joseph Poulet's article — front page billing — picture of him. His bio appeared. So the thing that happened was, and it's interesting the stance that Le Messager took in regard to suffrage, because they did have Monsieur Poulet's response to her talk [on] pro-suffrage, but at the same time, they did-they published a translated in French *English Women's Tour of the U.S.*, you know, giving speeches across the U.S.

10:03 So, you know, I think that there was a mixed review. And what happened in the end is that there were Franco-American men that did publish letters, you know, agreeing with the fact that women should have the vote. But the reason that the Franco or the French Canadian women were deemed, you know, not to have the vote-the vote-was because of how, what they were to be in charge of was the, the-the culture, the language, the heritage, the religion of the Franco culture.

10:37 And so, so if you are to maintain the identity of the French Canadians in this English speaking country, *la fois de langue*, [translates to *the faith of language*] you know, the respect. The fact that the religion was attached to, if you didn't have your language, you didn't have your religion, therefore, you were bound to hell. So in effect, Camille was a heretic. So she was preaching and saying, when she was, you know, preaching as a preaching, but you know, writing in and saying women should have the vote, but what she was really, in the Franco understanding of this, in the cultural understanding of this, was that that was the undoing of the homefront, for them.

Bio.

Camille Lessard Bissonnette | 1883 - 1970

Camille Lessard Bissonnette was born in Ste-Julie-de-Mégantic, QC, and moved to Maine from Laurierville, Quebec, CA in 1904. She was a feminist in the early 1900s, before the concept of feminism was more widely known.

At age sixteen while still living in Quebec, Camille became a schoolteacher, one of the few jobs available to women. When she immigrated to Lewiston she began working in the Continental Mill and, two years later, she joined the staff of

Le Messager, Lewiston's French language newspaper. Camille was a correspondent for the paper until 1938. In 1910 and 1912, Camille wrote columns in support of the suffrage movement. On February 4th, 1910 Camille wrote in the Le Messager: "You say, sirs, that it is the woman who lights up your home. You compare her to a ray of sunshine. You exclaim that women must not be dragged into the mud of politics. But sirs, when a ray of sunshine falls on the mud does it dirty itself, or does it dry up and purify the mud?"

As a French heritage woman Camille's pro-suffrage views were unique and daring. French-speaking cultures, world-wide, were reluctant to grant women the vote; Quebec women didn't win the vote until 1940 and for women in France it was 1945. Camille's unique suffrage contribution was her bi-cultural, bi-lingual, cross-border conversation with the women in French Canada as well as with the immigrant working women in Lewiston for whom she wrote her Le Messager columns.

Camille struggled against the thinking and beliefs of the larger and more dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in Maine. Her courageous stand in support of votes for women took place during a time when Maine had little interest in cultural diversity, and perhaps even less in suffrage.

Her views ran counter to many women and men in her own culture, as well. Under the pen name, Liane, Camille made the case for why women should be able to vote. Arguments against enfranchising women centered on their place in the home, and their role as guardians of French-Canadian culture. She continued to support suffrage over the objections of the French-Canadian community, the clergy, and other journalists.

Eventually, Camille's columns helped persuade Canadian women to favor suffrage; in 1912, women in English-speaking Canada began working for the vote, but it would be 1922 before the movement for suffrage got underway in Quebec.

Camille was the lone voice speaking for suffrage action in the Maine French heritage women's public space in the early 20th century. Her marker is located at the former offices of Le Messager.

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