



French Canadian Nicknames

If you have any French Canadians in your family tree, there is a good chance that you will encounter a family nickname. At one time, about 30% of French Canadian families had one. Most of these nicknames derive from a custom of the French army whereby soldiers (not officers or gentlemen) were given or selected a *nom de guerre*, or warrior name.

This name was separated from their family name by the word *dit* (called). It would appear as Pierre Brissac dit Bienvivant and he would be known in the army as Bienvivant. The custom became regulatory in the early 1700's but the method of selecting the *nom de guerre* was left flexible.

Sometimes the name was their own name preceded by *Saint*, as in St-Louis. It could also be based on their home town, their trade, or personal traits. Military historian Luc Lépine, who has done more than anyone else to unravel this phenomenon has found such classics as *dit Prettaboire* (Ready to Drink). Plants and animals also figured largely in *noms de guerre* as in Latulippe, Larose, Lafleur.

Some regiments adopted their own plan. The Régiment de Tourraine, which fought with the American rebels during the Revolution used a different first letter in each company. If you encountered a soldier called Bouleau, you knew he was from Company B. In the Régiment de Boulonnois, the Company of Casaux used the names of vegetables.

In France, the soldiers did not pass these *noms de guerre* on to their children. If their sons entered the army they received their own *nom de guerre*. In French Canada, however, they did pass them on and in many cases the *nom de guerre* has replaced or superceded the original family name. The sons did not adopt a *nom de guerre* because they served in the militia, which did not use them, rather than in the regular army.

There was a deliberate effort by the government to encourage soldiers who were serving in New France to remain here after their period of enlistment was completed. Four hundred men from the Carignan-Salières regiment chose to remain. Hundreds from other regiments did the same and they represented a sizeable proportion of the population, bringing their *noms de guerre* to the forefront of French Canadian family names.

Where this makes things interesting for the genealogist is in finding a person in the church or civil records. A researcher asked me to track down Zephirin Lachapelle and his descendants and that search highlighted how careful we have to be because of the nicknames.

Zephirin was born in 1864 as Zephirin Langlois dit Lachapelle. He married in 1887 as Zephirin Lachapelle. Most of his children were baptised as Langlois Lachapelle but one of them was buried as Victor Langlois in 1898.

It is a good guess that if you have a double-barreled French Canadian family name, there was a *dit* in there at one time and, to be on the safe side, you should check for all possible variants and combinations of the name.

Genealogical Dictionaries

I recently visited a very interesting site on the internet at: www.yourdictionary.com. It is a portal to an unimaginable range of dictionaries and is organized by topic. If you select <Specialty Dictionaries>, then <Genealogy>, you will see a list of 13 dictionaries and glossaries on genealogy, old medical terms, kinship, etc.

These can help you to better understand some of the old documents and some of the more recondite literature. It can also do wonders for your social standing. Imagine being able to impress your friends with this tidbit from the kinship dictionary: 'Adelphic Polyandry'; the marriage of a woman to two or more of her brothers. Surely you can bring that into a conversation with no difficulty.