

FRANCE'S LAST FOOTHOLD

IN NORTH AMERICA

St. Pierre et Miquelon

by

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SHROUDED in fog, lonely and forgotten, the French colony of St. Pierre et Miquelon lies just 12 miles off the south coast of Newfoundland.

But few Canadians realize that the islands exist, and even fewer could explain that they form the oldest and smallest of France's colonies and are all that remain of the Republic's once-vast North American holdings.

In hard, cold facts the colony is little more than a fishing base.

But the people are a happy collection of fishermen and merchants who live with a gay abandon, secure in the knowledge that the government's vast social benefits will keep them well fed and warm no matter how hard, or how little, they work.

It all makes for a happy, carefree island where the visitor will feel that he has entered a bit of old France tucked for some incomprehensible reason close to the Canadian shore.

I went to St. Pierre et Miquelon for a visit and like the vast majority of tourists, I'd like to go back.

Britain owned these islands twice in bygone days and there are some of the 5,500 St. Pierrais now who say they would rather join Canada than remain a French colony. But the majority opinion is that such a move will never come.

France gained final possession of the islands under the Treaty of Paris in 1814. And then, as now, fishing was the mainstay of the colony's existence.

It is far from self-supporting and depends heavily on foreign fishing boats for business. There was one brief flurry of prosperity—during the United States prohibition when St. Pierre became the liquor warehouse of a nation.

The big, concrete warehouses which still stand were filled with top-name liquor that found its way into the



Washing can be seen today as it was done in France of the Middle Ages.

speakeasies of the States aboard the sleek rum-runners.

There was nothing illegal about the trade as far as St. Pierre was concerned because once the liquor left the colony it was out of French jurisdiction. But the liquor was cheap and the colonial regulations few, so the rum-runners did a roaring business.

Bill (The Real) McCoy, generally credited with being the first of the Rum Kings to establish St. Pierre as a base, is still remembered with respect. His famed schooner *Arethusa* which helped him run 175,000 cases of liquor through

the prohibition blockade, is pictured still on a St. Pierre stamp.

But the prosperity has gone now and the fishing industry alone can not support the colony. There are pessimists who think the colony is doomed, but others say France will never abandon the islands because of "practical and sentimental reasons".

One business man told me frankly that he wished the islands would become part of the Dominion.

"But then again," he shrugged, "why would Canada want us? We have nothing."

But another civic leader said there are two big reasons why such a move would never come about.

First, there is sentiment. "It's hard to break the ties of 300 years.

"And secondly, we are treated like a favoured son and given more liberal treatment by France than Canada could afford."

There are some economists who have called the colony the complete island welfare state.

Government aid schemes are numerous, and have to be, because of the insecure economic position of the islands. The 1954 budget, for instance, showed local revenue accounting for only 20 per cent of the three-million dollar budget. There are hundreds of civil servants to increase the cost of government and some of the natives resent their numbers.

There is no class distinction on the islands, but there are very definite levels of social life based on wealth. Government officials appointed from France are in a different sphere altogether from the natives.

The government aid, in many cases, is based on the individual case rather than under any set pattern.

There was one destitute woman, for instance, who received aid on the stipulation that she not "be seen" at the week's top social event, the Sunday night ball. She accepted the aid, then solved her problem neatly by attending the balls in a mask.

Subsidies keep the price of food down. The many stores—there is one for every 40 persons—carry a weird mixture of Canadian, American and French supplies and while prices appeared reasonable to me one merchant said it costs three times more to live in St. Pierre than in France.

Liquor, which flows free and easy, is cheap by any Canadian standard and twice as strong in proof content. A bottle of rum costing \$1.26 is twice as strong as the \$4 brand sold in Nova Scotia.



"The people live off the fishery, the many stores, or the government."



Rocky coast line of a fog-girt rugged island.

Wine, in the French tradition, is served with meals in the hotels and the charge is included in the six-dollars-daily rate for room and board.

The visitor will find the natives a hospitable people who like to make friends and treat him to drinks.

But behind all this there is a hard, never-ending battle against the elements for a living and survival.

These are rugged islands, and life is tough.

They consist of 93 square miles of hills and bogs which France retained under the Treaty of Paris as a fishing base.

The people live off the fishery, the many stores, or the government.

They live hard, and play hard, but the people of these lonely little islands in a cold and foggy sea are happy.

When times are bad, and they often are, they look only to the future and hope for better times. When times are good they enjoy themselves to the full.

St. Pierre et Miquelon actually consists of three islands. The largest is to the north, Miquelon, with its 600 people who over the centuries have maintained a strange aloofness from the rest of the colony.

Most of the residents of Miquelon are fishermen-farmers and a good number have never bothered to visit the capital town of St. Pierre. They inter-marry almost without exception.

Langland is connected to Miquelon by a narrow sand dune which first poked above the sea between the two islands a hundred years ago.

Residents of the two islands once made a business of salvaging cargoes of ships wrecked on the treacherous seven-mile sand strip and many became prosperous.

There are tales that on dark, stormy nights they would erect false lights on the shore to lure passing ships to their doom so they could claim salvage rights.

All told an estimated five hundred ships have been wrecked on the dune.

St. Pierre is the smallest of the islands, but the heaviest populated with 4,900 persons. Here, too, is the town of St. Pierre, a collection of unpainted wooden homes clinging to a gentle hillside sloping down to the harbour.

This is the centre of the colony's life.

Here are the fish plant, the wharves and the odd little combination customs house and post office with its top-heavy gabled tower.

It's not a pretty town in the true sense of colour, but it has a unique charm that holds a visitor and makes him want to come back.

It's a town that makes you feel it has been there for a long time—and it has—and expects to be for a long time to come.

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Barrister, etc.

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