

MINNESOTA HISTORY

# He was French Canadian to his core

CURT BROWN



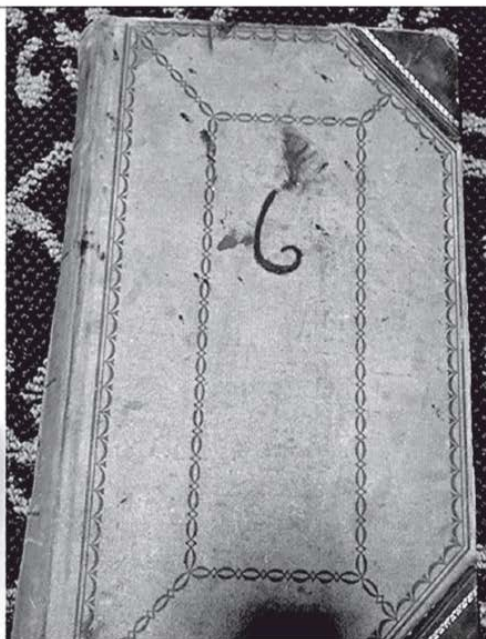
Dr. Nancy Ott-Pinckaers keeps a gray ledger from an 1890s-era Minneapolis grocery store tucked in a fabric bag in her Edina den.

The 130-year-old relic belonged to her husband's French Canadian great-grandfather, Zephirin DeMeules, who arrived in Minnesota at 17 in 1855 and became a prominent merchant and civic leader. A cousin cleaning out her mother's south Minneapolis house unearthed it a few years ago and gave it to Ott-Pinckaers, an allergist and genealogy buff.

She found out that DeMeules' general stores, selling hardware and groceries in 19th-century Osseo and Minneapolis, "went in and out of business" due to his generosity in extending credit. When scouring the ledger, she said, she laughed "because most of the entries are for purchases and very few payments. No wonder he went broke."

The old ledger is a portal of sorts, illuminating the largely forgotten life of an early Minnesotan and fervent Francophile who became an influential politician and published *Echo de l'Ouest* (*Echo of the West*), a French-language Minneapolis newspaper, from 1883 to 1929. DeMeules ran the paper for 15 years before his son, Augustin, took over upon his death in 1898.

By then, more than 70,000 French Canadian immigrants had migrated to Minnesota and neighboring states. Many lived in Little Canada, Dayton and Osseo, originally known as Bottineau Prairie, and some 5,000 of them sub-



Courtesy of Nancy Ott-Pinckaers

**ZEPHIRIN DEMEULES 1837 - 1898**

The general store owner and newspaper publisher became very influential among French Canadian immigrants living in Minnesota at the time. He urged his readers to proudly speak French and resist assimilation. His ledger is pictured.

scribed to *Echo de l'Ouest*, which fought to sustain a distinctive French Canadian community.

DeMeules was born in Quebec in 1837. His father died when he was 12, but he nevertheless made his way to Montreal for a college education. After moving to Minnesota, he spent six years working for Capt. Louis Robert (pronounced *Roh-bare*), a French Canadian fur trader and riverboat pilot in early St. Paul and the namesake of Robert Street in downtown St. Paul and the West Side.

DeMeules worked at Robert's trading posts in New

Ulm and Osseo. The historical record is mixed on whether he played a role in the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War; his 1898 obituary says he "took a prominent part in the fighting," but the Minnesota Historical Society says he left New Ulm in 1861 just before the war erupted in the area. DeMeules opened his own Osseo store in 1861 and moved operations to Minneapolis a decade later. He fathered eight children with his first wife, Marguerite. When she died after childbirth at 40 in 1876, DeMeules wasted no time in marrying his Belgian-born, French-

speaking housekeeper, Alphonsine Julia Haulot. She gave birth to the first of their six children 10 months later, and their youngest child, Yvonne, was born just before he turned 60.

DeMeules was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1871, representing Osseo as a Republican for two single-year terms, before spending a decade as Osseo's postmaster and serving as president of the city's trustees in 1877-78. He was presented with a silver-headed cane after being voted Minnesota's most popular Frenchman at an 1872 Fourth

of July celebration in Osseo. He later was elected to the Minneapolis Park Board, ascending to board president in 1891.

Though DeMeules' stores "built up a lucrative trade," he made his mark at *Echo de l'Ouest*, which the Minneapolis Tribune called "a Republican weekly paper of great influence among the French people in the Northwest."

The Minnesota Historical Society website says *Echo de l'Ouest* typically included in its four pages a serialized novel, a who's who of French Canadians involved in Minneapolis public affairs and

news from French Canadian communities across the state. The paper urged readers to avoid assimilating by speaking French, lobbied against Anglicizing French family names (such as Dubois to Wood) and insisted English-speaking Irish Catholics were not better Americans than those speaking French.

Ott-Pinckaers said DeMeules' passion contributed to a bitter rift in Minnesota's French Canadian population around 1890. The dispute boiled over at the Lafayette-Papineau Club, a social club for French Canadians, when a Minneapolis alderman hatched a scheme to make the club president a streetlight inspector in exchange for the delivery of French Canadian votes to Democrats.

"Zephirin opposed the deal tooth and nail. Then the row began in earnest," according to a family history. Not only was DeMeules ousted from the club, he was hung in effigy from a lamppost at Main Street and Central Avenue in northeast Minneapolis.

"I find Zeph's determination, resilience, kindness and work ethic to be amazing," Ott-Pinckaers said. "I only wish I could have met him." Instead, she's gone to see his picture at Osseo City Hall, which shows a slender man with a long beard.

"I admire him because he had lots of positive energy and was a hard worker," she said. "He wasn't afraid to try something new and venture into a new land."

Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at [mnhistory@startribune.com](mailto:mnhistory@startribune.com). His latest book looks at 1918 Minnesota, when flu, war and fires converged: [strib.mn/MN1918](http://strib.mn/MN1918).