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The Acadians 2

Farming

There was little that influenced the development of the Acadian way of life quite as much as their method of farming. Fortunately, among the people who settled in the Annapolis Basin area, there were some who were already familiar with methods of dyking practiced in France, and they recognized the agricultural potential of the tidal salt marshes.

The new settlers moved quickly to build dykes along the outer marsh areas. Sometimes these dykes were built by driving five or six rows of logs into the ground, laying other logs one on top of the other between these rows, filling all the spaces between the logs with well packed clay and then covering everything over with sods cut from the marsh itself. Sometimes dykes were built by simply laying marsh sods over mounds of earth.

The Acadians devised a system of drainage ditches combined with an ingenious one-way water gate called an aboiteau. The aboiteau was a hinged valve in the dyke which allowed fresh water to run off the marshes at low tide but which prevented salt water from flowing onto the dyked farmland as the tide rose.

After letting snow and rain wash away the salt from the marshes for between two and four years the Acadians were left with fertile soil which yielded abundant crops.



The Acadians were sometimes called lazy by the French and by settlers from other communities. They were referred to as défricheurs d'eau (clearers of water) because they built dykes and cultivated the natural meadows and marshes, rarely clearing the upland forests for agricultural purposes. But today we can appreciate the wisdom of their approach because we now know that, with the agricultural methods employed at the time, the marshlands were more productive than the uplands would have been.

Their use of salt-marsh hay as feed for cattle is a good example of this. When the Acadians settled on the marshlands, they discovered a coarse salt hay (spartina) that grew there naturally even when the marshes were covered twice daily by the tides. Their use of this hay proved to be very important for the stability and self-sufficiency of their communities.



You have to remember that the agricultural revolution had hardly begun in Britain when the Acadians settled in Nova Scotia and that effective techniques for sowing grass seed to raise hay as a field crop had not yet been developed. In fact, the common practice of many settlements in the New World was to

butcher most of the farm animals in the fall, because of the difficulty of gathering enough fodder to keep them over the winter. As you can imagine, such settlements were very much at the mercy of external sources of supply for new animals in the spring.

The Acadians overcame this problem by their exploitation of the natural marsh grasses. After they had built dykes, and drained and dried the marshlands, finer grasses gradually replaced the coarser spartina which had thrived on the tidal flats.

But the Acadians continued to cut their salt hay on the seaward side of the dykes, where the land was covered by the tides as least in the spring and fall of the year and sometimes twice daily throughout the year. They harvested this hay with scythes and stacked it to dry on wooden platforms called staddles in English. These staddles were usually built just tall enough to raise the salt hay above the level of the highest seasonal tides.

The Acadians were thus able to maintain large numbers of cattle throughout the winter months, a feat which would have been impossible without salt-marsh hay.

Before 1755 the Acadians lived largely self-sufficient lives on their marshland farms. They tilled the soil and it yielded abundant crops of wheat, oats, barley, rye, peas, corn, flax and hemp. They also kept gardens in which they grew beets, carrots, parsnips, onions, chives, shallots, herbs, salad greens, cabbages and turnips. Cabbages and turnips seem to have been particularly important in their diet.

The Acadians kept cattle and sheep. Pigs roamed freely in the forest behind the houses and also fed on kitchen scraps and, in winter especially, on leaves and peelings from the cabbages and turnips which the Acadians often stored covered with straw in their gardens until they were needed. They seem to have eaten a lot of pork but relatively little beef, preferring to keep their cattle for milk, as working animals (i.e. as oxen), and for trade.

The Acadians supplemented what they produced on their small farms by hunting and fishing. They even brewed their own spruce and fir beer.

Theirs was a hard life but a good one, lived in a landscape which they understood and which they made work for them.



The illustrations in this INFO were painted by Azor Vienneau for use in the production of an educational film series on pre-expulsion Acadian life called Première Terres Acadiennes. Very careful attention was paid to detail in these paintings; they are based largely on both historical research and on the results of an archaeological dig which the Nova Scotia Museum conducted at a pre-expulsion Acadian farm-site at Belleisle, N.S. in 1983.

Some of the illustrations painted for Premières Terres Acadiennes are available at the Museum as full-colour posters.
