

French colonial empire. Although the use of French has decreased since they became independent, Laos and Viet Nam are members of ACCT and attend summit meetings of La Francophonie.

• In Europe, besides France, French is spoken in Luxembourg, Monaco, parts of Switzerland, and in bilingual Belgium.

The language started its long history in the north of France in the ninth century A.D., when it developed as a blend of Latin and Celtic-Germanic tongues. French was exported to England by William the Conqueror in 1066, and Norman French became the language of the English court.

In the 17th century, Samuel de Champlain founded the first permanent French settlement in North America at Québec City. Other French communities were established along the St. Lawrence River and in Acadia (now New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.) The voyageurs extended the influence of New France to the Rocky Mountains and down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico.

During the 18th century, French was used in the great courts of Europe: in Prussia, Sweden and Russia. Yet, ironically, only about half the population of France spoke French. The rest used the regional languages of Brittany, Alsace, Gascony, etc. These didn't give way to French until the next century.

In Africa, French got its first foothold with the founding of Saint-Louis du Senegal in 1659. But it wasn't until the mid-19th and early 20th centuries that the French and Belgians established colonies in northern and sub-Saharan Africa.

African countries became independent from France and Belgium during the same period that British colonies became independent members of the Com-

## NORTH AMERICAN FRANCOPHONIE

“ci on parle français.” You might see that sign in a store window anywhere in Canada, or even in the United States. There are francophone communities scattered across the continent.

In Québec, French is the mother tongue of five million people, or more than 80 percent of the population. Montréal is the world's largest French-speaking city after Paris. French is the only official provincial language.

In New Brunswick, 34 percent of people are Acadian, or of French descent. English and French are both official provincial languages. The Acadians have maintained a strong culture and several of their writers and singers are known throughout La Francophonie.

Ontario also has a French-speaking population of half a million. The largest communities are in eastern and northern Ontario. In Manitoba, there is a small but vocal francophone community.

In the United States, some 13 million people say their origins are either in France, Québec, or Acadia. That includes 1.2 million Californians and another million in Louisiana, where about 300,000 still speak French. The textile mill towns of New England also attracted many Québécois during the last century, and their descendants live there today.

Faced with the dominance of English, many small French-speaking communities, especially those that are far from Québec, are having a hard time maintaining their language and institutions. Education is a key. The Supreme Court of Canada recently ruled that francophone-run school boards must be established in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.

Internationally, March 20 is La Francophonie day. In Canada, a whole week is set aside to promote the French language. This year, the second annual Semaine nationale de la francophonie will be held March 20-26, and the theme will be literacy. Literacy is fundamental to the survival of the language, yet there are high levels of illiteracy in many francophone communities.

The week is designed to make Canadians, especially those who live in areas where francophones are in the minority, aware of the advantages of using French, and to find ways of improving the quality of written and spoken French.

Activities focus on education. There are cash prizes for teachers in primary and secondary schools for the best class projects on the theme of the French language and community. College or university students can win money for ideas on how to increase the use of French in their environments.

monwealth, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. In some, French remained the official language, or shared that status with other tongues.

French coexists with many other local or national languages. Often, the majority of the population speak African languages, while only an elite minority in large cities speak

French. In some countries, notably in Arab Africa, French has no official role, yet it is still spoken by many people and is taught in school.

Today, about 120 million people worldwide have French either as their first or second language. It is an official working language of many international organizations, such