The habitant’s life

Excerpt from Canada: The story of our heritage, a Canadian history textbook for Grade 7 students, published in 2000.

The habitants’ battle in life was, in many ways, as important as that of the soldiers and leaders of New France. The habitants played an essential role in creating a permanent, settled population along the St. Lawrence River. But it was not an easy life ….

The habitants had to clear the land, build a homestead, and plant and harvest a crop. The first task was never-ending, while the last one was annual. Building and repairing the house and barn were continual tasks. So were cutting and hauling firewood. The habitants had to be largely self-reliant in looking after all routine tasks such as cooking, baking, making furniture, and repairing tools. They had to attend to the educational and medical needs of the family. They had to endure the harsh physical climate and rough terrain, largely unaided by government support. The habitants had to pay taxes to the seigneurs and the church.

Usually families want to bed early, right after the evening meal. Families crowded into their small, two-room farmhouse. A wooden ladder led to one large room upstairs, where more than a dozen children might sleep. Heated only by a single fireplace, the children could huddle together in bed to keep one another warm.

Just as the daily schedule was dictated by nature, the habitants’ work was related to seasonal cycles. After the habitants completed the initial task of constructing the family home and clearing the first tracts of land, they erected other buildings, such as a barn, shed, and a stable and dairy barn if the family became prosperous enough.

Habitants spent the wintertime cleaning and repairing tools and tending the animals. In spring they planted crops, took animals to pasture, and fixed fences. They ploughed the land with a team of oxen, then seeded it. They also cultivated a vegetable garden. In summer the entire family worked in the fields from sunrise until sunset. In late summer, they harvested grain crops and took them to the seigneur’s mill for grinding. In the autumn, they put up preserves, chopped and stacked firewood, brought in animals, butchered and salted the meat, which they put into barrels, and prepared the soil for next season’s crop. Their lives, both in the short run of days and in the long run of years, had a very natural rhythm.

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