

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

LOUIS ZEPHIRIN JONCAS

"FRIEND OF THE FISHERMEN"

- . President of the GASPÉ FISHING CO.
- . Sheriff of the County of Gaspé.
- . Federal Member for Gaspé - 1887-1896.
- . Delegate to International Fisheries Expositions in London and Chicago.
- . Superintendent of the Québec Dept. of Fish and Game.
- . Journalist and Editor.

KEN ANNETT

LOUIS ZÉPHIRIN JONCASFOREWORD

In a relatively obscure file of the Québec Archives was found the following account of the noted Gaspesian, Louis Zéphirin Joncas, by the journalist, Ch. Robillard, and published in the newspaper, l'Événement. It provides further evidence, to that already included in GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY articles, that sons of Gaspesia have held positions of high trust and responsibility second to none.

TEXT OF CH. ROBILLARD (Free Translation)

With your permission I propose to recall today a compatriot of Gaspesia who deliberately entered the hurly-burly of politics in order to better serve the cause of the fishermen of his land. He was born at Grande Rivière amidst a population of courageous men who went to sea daily to earn their living and to draw from that sea the riches that might lie therein.

For long, the men of this vast and beautiful region had been almost exclusively fishermen. When the fish were abundant the homes knew comfort and gaiety. But it was quite another story when the fishery failed; then unease and concern spread among the people, particularly because they neglected to till the soil and harvest crops for subsistence. Then the only alternative was to be found in the lumber camps.

In former times the fisheries of the Gulf and the Bay Chaleur appeared to be inexhaustible. Cod, herring, lobster, and mackerel abounded. Every day the fishermen returned from their morning fishing with their boats filled to the gunwales. They had ready sale for most of their fish but didn't make the profit that might be expected. Facilities for transporting and exporting fish were primitive. Too often the fishermen were at the mercy of the few large companies who had an absolute monopoly over the fishery and the sale of the fish. The fishermen thus suffered enormously.

Today, the products of the sea are not, perhaps, as considerable as formerly but thanks to the protection measures adopted by the

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public authority and the encouragement offered to the fishermen in various ways the fishing industry still enjoys prosperous days. Freezer plants established here and there provide incalculable service. In all larger centers it is now possible to buy fresh fish daily throughout the year thanks to improved rail transport and other forms of transport.

It is Louis Zéphirin Joncas that I am concerned with today. Born in Grand-Rivière in 1846, the son of Leon and Esther Beaudin Joncas, he grew up among the fishermen of his village. He learned their demanding vocation and the memory remained with him always as a vivid and permanent part of his life. On graduation from College Masson of Terrebonne he studied accounting and then went into business. For several years he worked in Gaspesia where he rose to become the President of the Gaspé Fishing Company.

In 1875 he was appointed Sheriff of the County of Gaspé by the Government of Québec.

In the Federal election of 1877 he was a candidate and won election to the House of Commons as a Conservative by a majority of 74 votes.

Meanwhile Louis Z. Joncas had married Emérentienne Blouin, daughter of Francois Blouin of Saint-Vallier and a sister of the Abbé F.A. Bloiun, curé of Carleton and vicar of the Diocese of Rimouski.

The Federal Government entrusted to him, in 1883, the mission of representing Canada at the International Fisheries Exposition in London, England. M. Joncas carried out that task to the great satisfaction of the government and country. He gave several remarkable conferences on the richness of the Canadian fisheries - speeches that were praised in the principal London papers and that drew the attention of the business world of Europe. The Canadian Minister of Fisheries printed and circulated copies of the magnificent work of his able and eloquent delegate to the London Exposition. Subsequently the American Government invited M. Joncas as President of Jury and Judge at the Chicago Columbia Fisheries Exposition.

Later, the Hon. E. J. Flynn as Minister of the Québec Department of Fish and Game would appoint M. Joncas as General Superintendent. In that role he was undoubtedly the real creator of that Department.

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M.Joncas was re-elected by Gaspé County in 1891 by acclamation but in 1896 he was succeeded by Rodolphe Lemieux who, as a member of the Laurier government, would represent Gaspé for some time to come

Louis Zéphirin Joncas was one of the most sincere supporters of Sir. John A. Macdonald. His support of the successors of the Great Statesman was less ardent. Under the government of Sir Mackenzie Bowell he exhibited an independence that disturbed his long-standing colleagues. He even had recourse to the Press to voice his complaints. He found that the deputation of the Province of Québec was not always well treated, that too many sacrifices were required, that patronage was badly distributed, etc., etc. In 1894, a February issue of L'Événement of Québec published a violent letter of the Deputy for Gaspé. Here are some extracts:

"For long enough we have been humiliated, for long enough we have accepted compromise, in the hope that our good nature will be recognized.

Our adversaries and our enemies should know and understand that we will no longer yield to the unjust demands of a handful of fanatics and to the persecution systematically organized against us for no other reason than hatred of our nationality and our religion.

Our leaders must give proof of energy and not yield before the painful necessity of breaking certain political bonds if that is necessary.

They have a duty to perform and however painful it may be they must not shrink from accomplishing that duty"

Needless to say, M.Joncas was not in a good mood when he wrote the above. Perhaps he was preparing the way for the

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general election that was expected shortly. Perhaps he sought to sound out public opinion. However that might have been his attitude of independence failed to increase his popularity with his electors of Gaspé with the result that the young Rodolphe Lemieux, who had already won a name for himself as a rising Liberal orator, was elected to succeed him in 1896.

Out of the active political arena as a Member of Parliament. M. Joncas turned to journalism in Québec City. Taking up residence at 179 Grande Allée he associated himself with the newspaper, "L'Événement", and became its Editor. For several terms he was the President of the Québec Press Association. He was a member of the Québec Garrison Club.

M. Joncas always had the greatest interest in the fisheries of Canada. He did not hesitate to state that Canada had the greatest and richest fishery in the world and that it would expand further in the future if it was exploited with care. Reforms and improvements were called for. Not only should the fishermen be helped to acquire more appropriate fishing gear and better vessels but measures were necessary to increase the export of fish and to greatly increase local consumption. The cod fishery was the most important but that of herring held second place. However the Province of Québec exported only some 2000 barrels of herring per year.

M. Joncas remarked as follows:

"The fishermen are satisfied when they have taken enough fish for their own use and all the cod that they can sell; they could, however, make considerably more profit from this fruitful industry."

The author reproached the merchants of Québec for giving all their attention to the cod fishery and for neglecting the profit that they could realize from the sale of mackerel, a fish both abundant and excellent. He wished equally that the seal hunt be more vigorously exploited. He recommended that the Federal Government supervise more closely the lobster and the salmon fisheries. Without the adoption of appropriate

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regulations these two important products of the sea and rivers are menaced with disappearance.

M.Joncas ended his interesting paper with these words:

" The fisheries are not only important by virtue of the wealth that they can furnish, without apparent diminution or exhaustion of the source, but because by this means a body of sailors with experience will exist to promote the maritime commerce of the country in times of peace and to be its valiant defenders at sea in time of war."

The death of Louis Zephirin Joncas occurred in March, 1903.