

# Reading of French Dialect Poem Called Ethnic Slur

By MEG DENNISON MONTPELIER (AP) — A poem written in dialect and read on the House floor has upset a group because it portrays the Franco-American in Vermont as a "dumb Frog."

Solange Beaucage, president of La Societe des Deux Mondes, said the poem is a slur on the 37 percent of Vermonters of French descent.

In the poem, former Rep. Keith Wallace says goodbye to legislators through the voice of Batiste, a character created by Daniel Trombly of Isle La Motte in the early part of the century.

Batiste is a caricature of an uneducated French-speaker who can't spell well or speak proper English.

Wallace, who served as a lawmaker for 10 years before he was defeated in the last election, meant his poem "Contentment" to be a comical farewell to the Legislature.

But to Beaucage and members of her society, it touched a sore spot.

"The character of 'Batiste' is, sadly enough, not new to New England literature or humor. He

symbolizes the all-too-easily-accepted stereotype of the Franco-American as an uneducated bumpkin — a 'dumb Frog.'" Beaucage said in a letter asking legislators to remove the entry from the House Journal.

Legislators entered the letter in the journal last week but did not remove Wallace's poem, which was delivered last month.

Beaucage said negative images of Franco-Americans thwart the efforts of groups, such as La Societe des Deux Mondes, to promote knowledge of French culture and history in Vermont.

"This type of Batiste may have existed in the 1920s, but it's been long gone from our society. Nobody talks that way anymore," she said.

This is the first time La Societe has formally objected to the dialect poems, she said, adding that the Legislature is not the place for affronts to Vermonters.

"I should think that intelligent people like they are should find something else to entertain themselves with," Beaucage said.

Wallace picked up the style of

Trombly's work several years ago, writing his own verses and recording readings of the originals for friends.

In the poem in question, Wallace addresses the Legislature's current issues and his ostensible happiness at not being there.

"Batiste, he set inside, feet atop the fire.

Crossover, she come an go, nice to be retire..."

No wury bout heducachun aid nor foundation plan.

Don never shed a tear wen surplus tax money hit the fan..."

Wallace, a Waterbury Republican who claims French blood "a ways back," said most people enjoy the poems.

"Most of them take it in the spirit that it's given — in good fun. If people can't have fun then what's the use of living," he said.

Rep. Paul Poirier, D-Barre, said his parents — French Canadians — were visiting the Legislature when Wallace read the poem. They were not offended, and neither was he, Poirier said.

"I'm French-Canadian," he said. "I'm proud of it. But I

never took it personally."

However, Poirier said he entered Beaucage's letter in the journal because "I think members should be aware that some people were very upset about it."

Trombly's original pieces, which he sold in pamphlets to ferry passengers crossing Lake Champlain, detail the adventures of Batiste and poke fun at the Legislature. One poem begins:

"Once more dem legislatures are coming to de front,

I spoze to mak sum more fool laws, or pull off sum beeg stunt.

Why we should need so many laws ees more as I can tell,

To keep de half of dem ba gosh, would puzzle me lak hel."

"It's just fun," Wallace said.

"A number of writers have taken it up, and it's always been enjoyed by French people themselves."

Barney Bloom, assistant librarian at the Vermont Historical Society Library, said dialect writings are common, but invariably raise questions of bigotry. He pointed to Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" and debates over whether the

use of dialect, the word "nigger," and portrayal of blacks in the book makes it racist.

Bloom contends that words and jokes poking fun at an ethnic group are acceptable as long as only the group uses them. When outsiders use the phrases, they become a slur, he suggested.

Peter Woolfson, professor of anthropology at the University of Vermont and a scholar of French influence in Vermont, believes La Societe is right to protest the writings.

"Certainly there's been enough negative stereotyping of French-Canadians for a long time," he said. "I don't think it does them any good to have them continued."

He acknowledges, however, the issue of interpreting the use of dialect.

"I think that there are worse kinds of slurs," he said. "I don't think there's any intent in this case to put the French down."

Wallace said he would not be reading any more poems in the Legislature.

"That was my finale because I'm no longer a member, and I wouldn't make fun if I'm not a member," he said.

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