

## Ex-politician's dialect poem causes controversy in Vermont legislature

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MONTPELIER, Vt. — A poem written in dialect and read on the House floor has upset a group that says the poem negatively portrays the Franco-American in Vermont.

Solange Beaucage, president of La Société 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 Dania 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 being defeated in the last election, says he 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, but did not remove Wallace's poem, which was delivered in April.

Beaucage said negative images of Franco-Americans thwart the efforts of groups such as hers 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 the group 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.

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 passen-

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gers crossing Lake Champlain, detail the adventures of Batiste and poke fun at the legislature.

"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 debates over Mark Twain's "Adven-

tures of Huckleberry Finn."

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 Société 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 won't 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.

