

## The First Canadian Free-lance Conference Interpreter

**With a career of some thirty-five years to her credit, Andrée Francoeur, the doyenne of interpreters, is still in full swing!**

**I** NTERPRETERS have been overheard explaining at great length, even to those who have merely indicated polite interest, how they quite naturally “fell” into their languages and ultimately into their careers, because of their globe-trotting diplomatic parents, or because of population migrations or some other dramatic, spectacular, romantic or highly unusual circumstances. This is particularly true of interpreters having come to North America from Europe. Not so for Andrée Francoeur. On the contrary: Andrée came into this world as the youngest of the eight children of Joseph Achille Francoeur and Léonie Francoeur, née Francoeur (not a typing mistake). The family lived on Papineau Street in Montréal’s east end. La rue Papineau is not exactly bilingual territory and hardly the ideal spawning ground for future interpreters, I am thinking to myself.

### Beginnings

I asked Andrée how she got started as an interpreter. It’s a long story, as it turns out... and it all begins with Andrée emerging, *bac.* in hand, from the Collège Marie de France on Queen Mary Road (whither, incidentally, she had travelled daily from Papineau by tram for four years!) and enrolling in first-year medicine at the Université de Montréal, at the age of 17. Her second year as a medical student, at McGill, also saw her forced and fiery baptism into the English language. Second-year medicine having a somewhat more hands-on focus than the first, Andrée soon discovered that blood and gore were not for her. She decided to drop out of medical school and spend a year as a fashion model, in an attempt to “find herself,” a concept that enjoys great popularity among contemporary youth!

Fortunately she found herself very quickly when she heard about a two-year Master’s program in translation and interpretation at the Université de Montréal. There, she also found Jean-Paul Vinay, who was to have a profound influence on some of her later career choices. Their meeting was, in fact, the beginning of a long and rewarding professional relationship which endures by correspondence to this day. Jean-Paul Vinay was eventually to become Andrée’s thesis director and encouraged her to develop her talent and pursue her studies and training at the École des Interprètes in Geneva, Switzerland.

### Across the Atlantic

Andrée proudly shows me a letter signed by Paul Sauvé (as in “Arena”), Québec’s Minister of Youth and Social Welfare (Union Nationale) at the time. The letter informs Andrée that she has been selected as the recipient of one of two annual scholarships awarded to worthy students. And so she was able to go to Geneva!

During the voyage over the Atlantic on the Île de France, she met none other than Marlon Brando, who had recently completed shooting *On the Waterfront* with Eva-Marie Saint. Andrée recalls that he was extremely nocturnal, very slim, slight, short and thoroughly unremarkable. Of course she got his autograph while they stood on deck one moonlit and starry night. Hmm...

Now, out comes the scrap album, vol. 1. A black and white shows a bevy of youthful beauty and handsomeness, attired in strapless evening gowns and black ties, posing in relaxed abandon on a grand curved staircase in an historic hotel (Andrée does not recall its name) in



Andrée  
Francoeur,  
1958

Geneva. This picture was taken at the annual ball of the Geneva school. Holding up the newel post are Victor Yakovlev, one of her teachers, and Eric Simha, one of the Nuremberg greats (9 languages or thereabouts). These young men and women, about 60 of them, were among the 700 or so who enroll at the Geneva school every year. I express surprise at that number and ask her how many can expect to receive their diplomas. Then as now, she says, the ratio was 100:1!

The work was grueling, particularly since she had to cram two and a half years of study into one academic year, after which her scholarship would run out. It is almost reminiscent of Cinderella. While in Geneva she interpreted at conferences such as La Jeunesse européenne and the Young Farmers Association which took her to Germany and Denmark. Between her two semesters, she spent time brushing up her Spanish at the University of Madrid.

### Back in Montréal

Andrée returned to Montréal in 1955. To keep the wolf from the door she began teaching at the Université de Montréal while working on her thesis, “Étude lexicologique des instruments de musique.” Actually, Andrée had initially intended to do a study on plumbing equipment and instruments until Jean-Paul Vinay suggested that the musical subject held greater potential for mass appeal... Reader of her thesis was Jean Papineau-Couture, Canadian composer and head of the music faculty at the Université de Montréal at that time. Would Monsieur Papineau-

Couture have been as eager to review Ms. Francœur's work on plumbing instruments? The world will never know...

Another of Andrée's projects at that time involved work as editorial consultant for Jean-Paul Vinay's *Dictionnaire canadien*.

### A career unfolds

Out comes scrap album, vol. 2. The first picture shows Ms. Francœur delivering an interpreted message at her first Canadian assignment, while still a student, working for the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews in 1955. We turn the page and witness Ms. Francœur standing behind a tower of cans of B.C. apple juice. She was on assignment for the Jay Cees, who became regular clients thereafter. Talk about a varied career!

The demand for conference interpretation was not brisk in those days, she muses. The profession was in its infancy in Canada and the technique of simultaneous interpretation had only recently emerged from the experience of the post-war Nuremberg Trials in Germany. A number of the photos show Andrée using headsets the



1960

size of wagon wheels, wiring for an industrial kiln and sound boxes straight out of a World War I battleship. Back in those pioneer days, says my interviewee, it was not uncommon for interpreters to receive a good electrical jolt whenever they attempted to "pump up the volume"!

Andrée reminisces that, between 1955 and 1960, she only worked at one or two conferences a year, supplementing her income by teaching, translating and working at the Canadian Press. However, she did meet other translators and became a founding member of the Corporation des traducteurs professionnels du Québec (C.T.P.Q.) in 1957. In 1959, she had her first contacts with some of the European staff interpreters at I.C.A.O., the U.N. agency for civil aviation headquartered in Montréal. Through them she learned about The American Association of Language Specialists (T.A.A.L.S.), of which she also became a member, serving at its Council meetings in Washington D.C. as Canadian representative in 1961-62. Again through the ICAO staff interpreters, Andrée Francœur joined AIIC (Association internationale des interprètes de conférence) in the mid-sixties. Much later in her career, but still in keeping with her

enduring interest in professional issues, she also became a founding member of the conference interpreters' section (Inter-section) of STQ when it was formed in 1978.

As she looks back, Andrée points to 1960-62 as the pivotal period when her career really took off. She traces some of her faithful clients back to those days: the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Medical Association and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, to name a few.

Some early highlights include a UNESCO sponsored event: the World Congress of Universities, held in Mexico City in 1960. In the same year, Andrée's voice could be heard (and, indeed, a little corner of the television screen was devoted to her head and shoulders in action) on the CBC program series called "Dialogue," interpreting from English into French interviews with such personalities as René Lévesque and Daniel Johnson. Also in the early sixties, there was more television work with Nicole Germain, Henri Bergeron and Louis-Martin Tard, on the program "Point d'interrogation."

In 1962 she interpreted (live), for the French-speaking viewership of Montréal, the reports delivered by John Glenn from space. She performed an encore when she did the same for Alan Shephard Jr. in 1963. Actually, for that latter assignment, Andrée recalls arriving at the studio in a wheelchair straight from the hospital, having undergone surgery barely 36 hours before and actually returning there afterwards. She points out, quite casually, that the vocabularies she prepared for those broadcasts came in very useful in September 1991, 29 years later, when she had the honour and the privilege of interpreting Canada's first woman astronaut, Dr. Roberta L. Bondar.

1964 saw Andrée on tour with the Dorion Enquiry into the Rivard affair, a drug, sex and violence extravaganza that was scheduled to last three weeks but dragged on for six months.

The big boost for the profession in Canada came with Expo 67 in Montréal... and the big bang came shortly thereafter, with the Federal *Official Languages Act* of 1969. Expo brought mounds of business to Montréal and for Andrée, things just have not slackened off since. After Expo she worked at the preparatory meetings, held in Kyoto, Japan,

for the 1970 Osaka Exposition. Altogether she travelled to Japan seven times in the seventies, for those and other major international meetings. Another trip even took her to the Philippines.

A particularly hectic time in 1973 began with a two-week conference on anthropology in Chicago, where Andrée had the honour of interpreting Margaret Mead. From Chicago, it was off to the Laurentians for another meeting and then straight on to a series of medical conferences, shuttling between Tokyo and Kyoto, during which she received a telegram from IATA (International Air Transport Association) asking her to work in Auckland, New Zealand... an offer too good to refuse.

Andrée even tells me about an assignment from Latin to French! I picture her in the Vatican... "No, no, nothing like that," she says; it was on one of these crazy programs starring Denise Filiatrault and Dominique Michel. These two ladies were sitting in church and when the priest held forth in Latin, they reached for their headsets to listen to the interpretation into French: Andrée's voice, action in the corner of the screen... a take-off from "Dialogue"!

### Never a dull moment

Well, the present is quite action-packed also. Apart from the apartment in St-Laurent where she and her sister Gilberte live, there is the Floridian hideaway. Every mid-November since 1980, the sisters Francœur pack up, lock up and head on south, returning like clockwork when the last speck of snow has melted, generally by mid-April. Down in Florida, Andrée has taken up painting in a big way: seascapes, animals and portraits, mainly. She also reads and keeps up with current events so that she can jump right into her interpreting work as soon as she returns to Canada in the spring.

Of course, 35 years is not a lifetime, but Andrée Francœur has packed a lot of living into that number of years as a conference interpreter and looks forward to quite a few more.

We salute you, Andrée Francœur! ■

Eva Richter-Wilde