

The Dionne Quintuplets
and their Entourage:
Student Papers on
Media Representation

Introduced and Edited by

Françoise Noël
Professor of History, Nipissing University

With an Epilogue by Amy Bennett
Director of the Dionne Quint Museum

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Elzire Dionne with her five identical daughters, born 24 May 1934. This was just the beginning of the media attention they would receive as the Dionne quintuplets or simply the “Quints”. Photo by Dick Railton. Dionne Quint Museum. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

Introduction

Françoise Noël

The Dionne quintuplets were born seventy-six years ago on May 24, 1934. Annette and Cécile are the only two still living. Very few people know them or knew their sisters as individuals. Their personal life for the last sixty years or so has been very private. Yet millions of people know of the “Quints” and many of them visited Quintland in its heyday and saw the Quints in person. Others have heard about them from their parents or grandparents and may have, while driving through North Bay on the Trans-Canada highway, stopped to visit their birth home which is now operated as a museum. In North Bay, the memory of the Quints is still very much alive and the impact of their birth on the growth of a tourist industry around Quintland is an important part of North Bay’s history.

The history of the quintuplets themselves, however, is a more difficult question to answer. Despite the thousands of articles that have been written about them, the photographs of them that were splashed in the media at every major holiday and on their birthday, the ads that were endorsed by them, and the films they made, the real story of the Quints may never be fully known. Their own books present one perspective on the story as does the books written by some of their nurses. Pierre Berton’s history of their early life attempts to provide a balanced perspective, but he did not have access to all the players. The viewpoint of Oliva and Elzire Dionne, the parents of the Quints, and of their siblings, is particularly hard to document as it was seldom represented in the media or in the histories of the Quints written to date. Academic historians have been remarkably reticent to approach this topic. An article by Veronica Strong-Boag in 1982 first approached the

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subject with regards to the role of Dr. Blatz in the Dionne nursery. A special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies* in 1994-95 approached several aspects of the question. The most recent book by Gervais, *Les jumelles Dionne et l'Ontario Français*, examines the place of the Quints in the French-Canadian community, a previously neglected question. In my study of community life in Northeastern Ontario in the 1930s, I was unable to deal with the history of the Dionne Quints more than peripherally, but it was impossible to not be aware of their great impact on area, particularly the boost they gave to tourism, and all the repercussions this on this area.

At the time, and since, those writing about the Dionne quintuplets have tended to favour one side or the other in the great question of their early life, their removal from their parents and their display to the public. Particularly in view of their later life and the difficulties they faced in adjusting to “normal” life, it is difficult to not find fault with the way they were placed in an artificial environment and restricted in their ability to learn about the world. And yet, the Quints themselves have stated that life in the nursery was the happiest period of their lives. To avoid passing judgement on the actors involved and the actions that were taken is one of the most difficult tasks of those who move into this field of enquiry.

How then, can historians, particularly student historians just learning the field of history, approach the history of the Quints. This was the challenge which faced the students of my honours history seminar on the Dionne Quintuplets and Quintand at Nipissing University in 2009-10. By and large, the answer was to look at media representations of the Quints and the people who surrounded them. The students were all aware that behind the facade presented in the media lurked the “real” story of the Dionne girls which they could not uncover with the sources available. What they were looking at was the constructed image of the “Quints” and the tourist attraction called Quintland and media representations of the other actors in the story. The media, for example, tended to be much more favourable to Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe, the Quints doctor and guardian, than to their parents, Oliva and Elizire Dionne, who fought to regain custody of their children. How

the media constructed images of those involved for public consumption is a valid historical question which can be studied from available sources, largely newspapers, magazines, and advertisements.

From its inception, this course was envisioned as one which would contribute research which would be useful to the Dionne Quintuplet Museum and of interest to a more general audience. Under the directorship of Amy Bennett, the Museum is very conscious of its responsibility to present the Dionne Quintuplet story to a modern audience in a sensitive and responsible way. While the nursery photographs of the Quints still have an emotional appeal, understanding that these images and the many articles which were published about the Quints were part of a media construction of “the Quints” and not their reality, contributes to our ability to construct a meaningful public history of the Dionne quintuplets and their importance to the local area’s history.

The student papers presented here have been edited but without altering the students’ viewpoints. Editor’s notes have been added when necessary to clarify a point or to counter an argument. A common bibliography of published books and academic articles has been provided. References to archival sources and the newspaper and magazine articles can be found in the footnotes. That the students faced both the time constraints and limited access to resources should be kept in mind when reading these papers. There is no question, however, that the topic was approached with enthusiasm and that the students gravitated to a question which was of particular interest to them. As most of them had very limited exposure to the story of the Quints when they began this course, the questions they wanted to answer are probably the same as those a general audience would ask.

The first part of the collection brings together those papers which look specifically at media representations of the Quints and Quintland. The opening article by Rory Currie on the Quints as memory and as history provides an interesting introduction to the subject. Allison Tryon compares local, national and international coverage of the Quints in newspapers in 1936. Stephanie Logan examines the portrayal of the Quints in terms of holidays and family rituals and using Noël’s study of family life in Northeastern Ontario, contrasts this with

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the experience of the Quints. Leesa Church looks at Quintland as a tourist attraction. The following five papers focus on some of the personalities associated with the Quintuplets. Stacy Tremain looks at the nurses who raised the Quints and argues that many of them were in fact surrogate mothers to the Quints. Danielle Beaulieu is interested in Elizire Dionne. Because of the nature of the sources available, however, she cannot find the “true” Elizire so much as present the various public perceptions of her which were presented in the media. Amanda Seiler is interested in the image of Doctor Dafoe. How did he go from “Zero to Hero”? Her interpretation tends to be more negative than what has been published to date on him. Annie McIntyre’s paper is an examination of the visual images of the Quints taken by their official photographer, Fred Davis. Given the important role he played in their early life, it is noteworthy that Fred Davis is not better known. While this essay is also about representation, it examines the original images, not their published versions, and by focusing on Davis as much as she can, helps to bring him to the foreground. Lauren Wagner writes about “collecting” the Quints, based on an analysis of several scrapbooks which are part of the collection at the Museum. While the contents of these scrapbooks are the media representations of the Quints, the collector is representative of that group of people who made the whole Quintland phenomenon possible, the interested general public.

The reflections of Amy Bennett, Director of the Dionne Quint Museum, concludes this collection. While the memory and history of the Dionne Quintuplets remains relevant today, particularly, but not only in North Bay, the museum faces the difficult task of telling the story in manner which is respectful of and sensitive to the Dionne quintuplets and their family.

The Dionne Quintuplets: Assessing Obituary Newspaper Coverage

Rory Currie

Introduction:

It would be a gross understatement to say that the Dionne Quintuplets were popular. At the height of the Depression, five identical babies from the backwoods of Northern Ontario became international sensations. Exhibitionists wanted to host them, the government wanted to own them. The various media outlets employed legions of journalists to report on every mundane happening throughout the sisters' childhoods. The Quints were under the constant surveillance of nurses, doctors, security personnel, and the general public. The sisters graced the covers of magazines, endorsed every commodity under the sun, and starred in Hollywood motion pictures. Their voices could be heard on radio broadcasts spanning the entire North American continent. The physical and cognitive development of the Quintuplets was documented by renowned physicians and subsequently printed in medical journals. Their home on the outskirts of Corbeil became a Mecca for tourists and adventurers. Celebrities of the highest stature, from actors to monarchs, all wanted to see the miracle babies. So to reiterate, it would be a gross understatement to say that the Dionne Quintuplets were popular.

In itself, the vast coverage of the Quints makes for an interesting case study. If the sisters were to grow an inch, rest assured that newspapers far and wide would report on such an event.¹ The amount of media exposure was completely unprecedented. But despite this period of absurd fascination, the popularity of the Dionnes gradu-

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ally subsided. Remarkably, the girls who generated millions of dollars through endorsements lived their adult lives straddling the poverty line.² When did the world stop caring about the Quints? The descent of the Quintuplets is a subject matter warranting further investigation. To my knowledge, there has never been a study on the decline of Dionne newspaper coverage.

The 1934 birth of the Dionne Quintuplets was widely acknowledged as a miracle. As described by acclaimed historian, Pierre Berton, the Quints became the fairytale feel-good story of the Depression.³ The five sisters from Corbeil lifted the spirits of the downtrodden and underemployed. The lucrative Quint tourist industry revitalized the diminishing Ontario economy. And naturally, three million visitors to the Nipissing District inadvertently saved the entire region from financial straits.⁴ Setting aside their vast endorsements of various commodities, it is clear the Quints had a meaningful influence over the lives of thousands. From the highway construction worker, to the Callander shopkeeper, the Dionnes were responsible for the livelihoods of many Ontarians. Upon Parliament's declaration of war against Nazi Germany, the Quintuplets contributed to the Canadian war effort. Along with charitable performances and radio broadcasts, the Quintuplets also made donations to the Red Cross, and christened naval ships.⁵ Donning authentic oriental gowns, the "star-power" of the Quints was used to address the struggle of the Chinese against Imperial Japan.⁶ Suffice to say, aside from Hollywood movies and product endorsements, the Dionnes were influential people. They were historically significant.

Considering the influence of the Quintuplets, I wanted to explore the decline of their celebrity. For one reason or another, be it their lack of cuteness or their adherence to the French language, adulthood marked a turning point in the sisters' prevalence in the media. The Quints themselves admittedly protected their privacy and have consistently shunned the limelight.⁷ Upon analytical study of three distinct newspaper publications, I argue that over the span of six decades, the Dionne Quintuplets have lost their international allure but have nevertheless remained popular and influential in the Nipissing

District. Incorporating the language of Pierre Nora, to the residents of the Near North, the Quints are a memory, as opposed to a history. A memory is not fixated nor entrenched, while a history is just that. A memory shapes our world view and culture, while a history is static and unimposing.⁸ Memory is a sense of remembering by a societal group. It is a “cultural recall in the present.”⁹ By comparison, “history” is made through the disenfranchisement of memories – the erosion of memories.¹⁰ Upon examining the obituaries of Emilie, Marie, and Yvonne, I argue that the world remembers the Dionne Quintuplets as history, but we the inhabitants of Nipissing think of them as memory.

The amount of scholarly research on the Dionne Quintuplets is surprisingly limited given the vast fame of the five sisters. Sir Charles Tupper, a man who served barely two months as the Canadian Prime Minister, receives more “hits” on JSTOR than the world renowned Quints. Despite all their publicity and notoriety, there simply is limited scholarly research on the Dionnes. The most extensive academic publications on the Quintuplets are confined within the 1994/1995 edition of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*. The subject matter of these sources varies greatly. One article by Katherine Arnup explores the influence the Dionnes had on the promotion of scientific motherhood.¹¹ Another prominent article by David Welch exposes the involvement of the French Canadian community during the heated custody battles.¹² Aside from these few articles, scholarly material is very scarce. General audience books provide some academic prospects. Pierre Berton wrote an entertaining biography on the Dionne mania. For the purpose of this study, Berton’s *The Dionne Years* will prove the most helpful. Because the author resorted to media coverage for much of his material evidence, his book provides a backdrop on the state of Dionne popularity. The surviving Quints themselves have released three autobiographies with the enlisted help of authors James Brough, Jean-Yves Soucy and Ellie Teshler.

The basis of this study is three newspapers, the *North Bay Nugget*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *New York Times*. The rationale for this selection is that each of these papers should provide a different point of view. The *North Bay Nugget* (previously entitled the *Daily Nugget*) is a

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local paper in the Nipissing District. Please note that I use terms Nipissing District and North Bay region interchangeably. The North Bay coverage was notably the most extensive due to the city's proximity to the Dionne Quintuplets' home. The *Globe and Mail* is a Toronto-based national media outlet and presented a different spin on the Dionne coverage. Finally, the *New York Times* was chosen for this study to reflect a broader world view. As a foreign newspaper with an international following, the *New York Times* is uniquely positioned to provide news coverage with a global standpoint. To summarize, these three newspapers offer a local, national, and international perspective on the Quint's saga.

To standardize the comparisons of coverage between the three media outlets, specific dates were chosen. These dates correspond with significant events in the Dionne Quintuplets lives. Typically I scanned the newspapers for ten days following each event. The goal was to scrutinize and compare just exactly how these newspapers cover these specific events. In addition to being eventful, the chosen dates are also chronologically spread out over several decades. Given the time-lapse in between each event, the coverage will naturally coincide with the different life stages of the Quints.

All told, there are four specific Dionne events used for this project. The first event revolves around the Mother's Day radio broadcast on May 11, 1941. The second event is Emilie's death on August 6, 1954. The third event is Marie's death on February 23, 1970, and the fourth event is Yvonne's death on June 23, 2001. The first event is meant to provide a baseline reading of the Dionne coverage. In 1941, the girls were campaigning for the war effort and their fame was still immense. The later three subsequent events were chosen specifically because they deal with similar subject matter over the span of four decades. No three events could be more standardized for this study than the deaths of Emilie, Marie, and Yvonne.

There were many variables to evaluate when comparing and contrasting the three newspapers over the span of the four chosen Dionne events. The most obvious variables to record were naturally the word count of the vast articles and their location within the newspapers. For

example, was the article a measly fifty-word blurb on the last page or was it headline news? I also considered which heading the article fell under, be it national news, general interest, or obituaries. The actual content of the articles was scrupulously dissected. I questioned if the articles' alluded to the current or past popularity of the Dionne Quints. I made note if the articles themselves were exclusive coverage or if they were simply reprinted material borrowed from other sources. In addition to the articles, I analysed the photographs (if any were provided).

After recording all the variables and assessing the audience (local, national, international), each of these three newspapers provided a different perspective. Each article was treated akin to a piece of an integrate jigsaw puzzle. After reading Pierre Nora's literature on history and memory, I formulated an argument regarding the different newspapers' perspectives. Examining the state of Dionne relevancy was the objective. Over the span of sixty years, the newspapers proved to be revealing on the manner in which we as society remember the five miracle babies.

The format of this essay is chronological. Analysing the newspaper articles in sequential fashion allows for subtle comparisons to be made more convincingly. To this end, the essay will first establish the contemporary popularity of the Dionnes in 1941. The second section makes note of a change in the Dionne media coverage. While the sisters are still contemporary in 1954, the death of Emilie is akin to that of "history in the making". The third section involves the passing of Marie and Yvonne. The newspaper articles on their deaths are compared and certain distinctions are made. The final section of this essay draws on evidence from the four events to illustrate the extent to which the Dionne Quintuplets are a memory for some, and a history for others.

Mother's Day Radio Broadcast

The Dionne Quintuplets were very popular and relevant in 1941. After analysing the newspaper coverage of the Mother's Day incident, it is clear that the girls were contemporary, controversial, and adored. The articles reveal that the editors, and presumably the readership,

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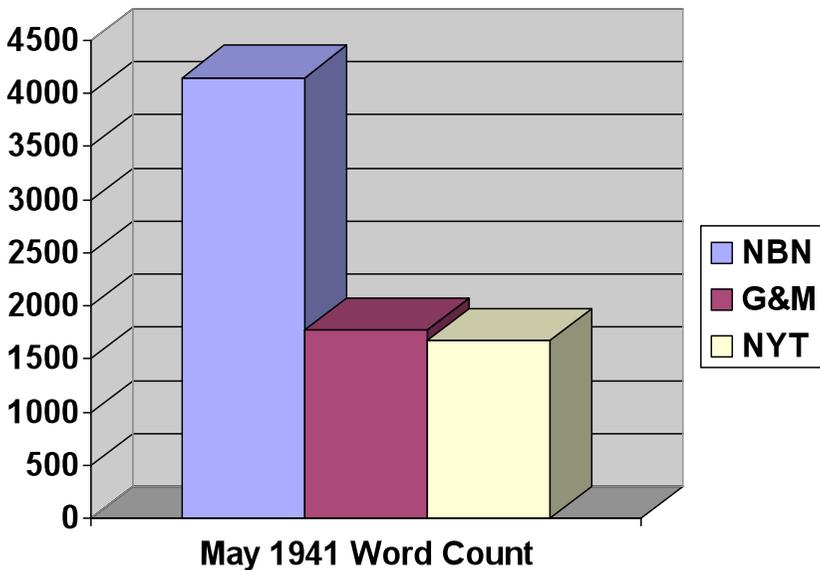


Figure 1: Coverage of the Mother’s Day Broadcast of May 1941. The *Nugget* had 15 articles 5 of which appeared on the front page. Dr. Dafoe’s hospital recovery was covered in a few. Of 5 articles in the *Globe* only one was on the front page. The 9 articles in the *Times* were short and about the Quints’ upcoming birthday and Dr. Dafoe’s recovery. None of the articles appeared on the front page.

regarded the Quints as current-affairs, as an on-going saga.

The “famous five” from Corbeil were a fixture in the newspapers in 1941. Even though the world was at war, the Quints were constantly featured in articles. While the Nazis invaded Crete, news of the Dionne girls joining Brownies was still published in the *New York Times*.¹³ As Figure 1 shows, there was no shortage of Dionne newspaper coverage during this period. The *North Bay Nugget* would even briefly report on the Quints’ first encounter with chewing gum.¹⁴ It is as if anything Quint related was published, no matter how mundane or insignificant the news may have been. Such obsessive reporting reveals just how contemporary the girls were. Much like how in the twenty-first-century, Barack Obama eating at Burger King is deemed newsworthy,¹⁵

the same is to be said of the Quints prior popularity.

The word “contemporary” does not even fully describe the Dionnes’ 1941 popularity. More than just being newsworthy, the Quints were part of the societal framework. Along with acting as spoke models for everything from pancake syrup to Ontario tourism, the Quints were a presence that bounded people together, like a common shared experience. Indeed not only did viewers read the same incidental Quint stories all around the world, but the people would actually comment on these meaningless articles. After printing fifty words about the arrival of the Quints’ seventh birthday, the *New York Times* published one of the response letters to the editor. In the letter, a reader professed that the age of seven was the best year for a girl, and that Monsieur Dionne was the luckiest farther alive for having five girls at this particular age all at the same time.¹⁶ More than just being popular, it is as if society was a product of the Quints, and not the other way around.

Along with their identical cuteness, product endorsements, and charitable contributions, there is another factor that explains the Quints contemporary popularity in 1941, controversy. In journalism jargon, “if it bleeds, it leads.”¹⁷ When it comes to newsworthiness, controversy equates relevancy. Controversy sells. Simply put, controversial subjects are contemporary subjects. They are discussed, supported and/or denounced. The controversial subject does not stagnate nor easily fade away. Anything that is controversial is inherently the “here and now”. In 1941, the Dionne Quintuplets were no strangers to controversy. On May 11 1941, affiliates of the Columbia Broadcasting Corporation descended upon the Dafoe Nursery. Just prior to their seventh birthday, the Quints were to participate in a Mothers’ Day radio broadcast. While the rehearsals proved to be productive, the sisters inexplicably refused to co-operate an hour prior to the start time. As one *Globe and Mail* editor described, what ensued was an “insult to the American audience”.¹⁸ The five girls refused to speak English on the air, and proceeded to converse in French for the entire duration of the broadcast. After this fiasco, there were allegations that patriotic songs were banned from the nursery, and that father Oliva Dionne was responsible for coaxing the children to be noncompliant.

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The *Globe* reported that supposedly the provincial government considered revoking the Quintuplets Act in retaliation, denying the girls' the continual existence as "wards of the King".¹⁹ Even in the *New York Times*, Mr. Dionne gave exclusive interviews to denounce his personal involvement with the rash decisions to forgo the English language.²⁰ In his biography, Berton makes note that the French language dispute in 1941 inadvertently sabotaged Hollywood's interest in producing a fourth Quint movie.²¹

Not everyone was so outraged over the Mother's Day incident. It is very peculiar that the staff of all three newspapers would provide subtle, positive feedback on the event. Within the May 16 edition of the *Globe*, a letter to the editor described how many French-Canadians lived in the United States and that the Quints' broadcast would have surely encouraged them to travel back north for a holiday.²² While denouncing the refusal to speak "the King's Language", the editors of the *Nugget* did lament the fact that the parents were prevented from participating in the management of the girls' day-to-day activities.²³ In the *Times*, the girls are abruptly referred to as "French-Canadian", as if to excuse the Mothers' Day language incident.²⁴ The editors of the *Globe* made a conscious decision to publish a favourable Quint letter, just as the staff of the *Times* sought to underplay the incident. The articles reveal that while the controversial incident was indeed newsworthy and reported on heavily, the editors nevertheless did not want to tarnish the Quintuplets. Three weeks after the Mothers' Day, the *Times* published a Toronto tourism ad. The caption described Toronto as the closest city to Callander, home of the Dionne Quints.²⁵ Clearly the five sisters were too financially important for the newspapers' to allow them to become unpopular.

During this period, the *Nugget* reported on the Quints more than any other publishing syndication. Considering that the Dionnes lived in the Nipissing District, it is not surprising that the local newspaper dished out ample Quint coverage. It is interesting to note however that the Dionne coverage in the *Globe* and the *Times* was equal in terms of column space as were the number of articles.²⁶ In May 1941, the *Globe* was the national newspaper during a time of war, and the *Times* was a

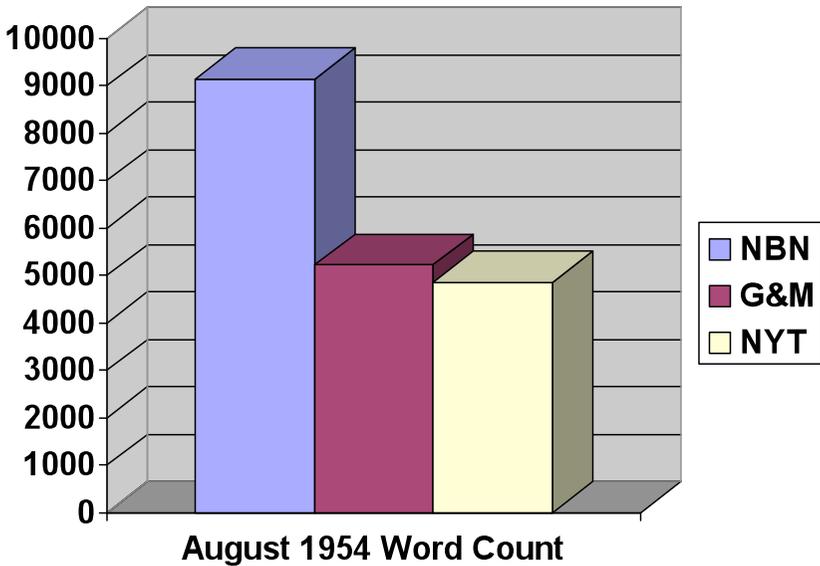


Figure 2: August 1954 Coverage After the Death of Emilie. Of 26 *Nugget* articles, 13 appear on the front page. In the *Globe* 5 of 13 articles appeared on the front page. Of the 19 *Times* articles, 5 referred to epilepsy; 2 appeared on the front page.

foreign media outlet of international stature. To be sure, both papers reprinted material originally from the *Nugget*, but they also partook in original material coverage. On the front page, the *Globe* reported on education officials after the Mothers' Day incident, and the *Times* own Lillian Barker released a biography of Elzire Dionne that was predictably featured in the *New York Times* Book Review, May 25 1941.²⁷

Death of Emilie Dionne

The death of Emilie in 1954 was "history in the making", or at least that is how the newspapers reported on the matter. The "shyest" of the Quints had died (unknowingly at the time) of asphyxiation on the morning of August 6, 1954. On August 7, all three newspapers dedicated their respective front pages to the untimely death. The death

of a Quint was very compelling news. Figure 2 shows that this event received more coverage than the 1941 incident. Predictably, the *Nugget* printed fifteen front page articles on Emilie's death, whereas the *Globe* and *Times* only printed five and three respectfully. Nevertheless, while the *Globe* did surpass the *Times'* coverage in terms of front page articles, the latter published nineteen separate articles, five more than the Toronto newspaper. Ultimately, the actual amount of words used to report on Emilie's death was virtually identical in the *Globe* and the *Times*.

The *Nugget* described her death as the "end of an era",²⁸ while the *Globe* declared, "the fairytale world crumbled today".²⁹ It is important to understand that the Quints were a package, as opposed to five separate individuals. Even the name "Quint" implies that the sisters were a unit. All the marketing of the sisters, and all the press coverage highlighted this distinction. They shared a common identity, and indeed they were always dressed alike and taught to perform in unison, be it song or dance. Now that only four remained, the Quintuplets were no more. Thus, Emilie's death was "history in the making" because the Quintuplet era was ending. This language insinuates that a new leaf had been turned over, to coin a phrase. The Dionne Quintuplets were being transformed from current-events into historical events.

The newspapers reported that 5000 people attended a one-day open-house wake on August 8. As Berton stated, the number of cars again driving up the old "Quint Road" was reminiscent of the early Dionne years.³⁰ However, the difference in 1954 was that instead of traveling to see miraculous new lives, people were going to pay their last respects. Traditionally, the amount of people attending a funeral was reflective of the status (or popularity) the deceased held within their community.³¹ Commenting on the Quints popularity, the *Globe* editors reported that "interest in them remained strong, although in twenty years they [had] become a familiar factor in our social lives".³² In other words, the sisters remained popular even though society had become acclimatized to their existence. Suffice to say, the article implies that since one of the Quints had fallen, the famous five would gradually cease being a familiar, given, societal factor. If the girls were no longer

a given societal factor, then they would cease to be contemporary.

The accidental death of Emilie was a historical event. The *Times* reported on many cases of condolences. An Argentinean Quintuplet family expressed their bereavement in a telegram. New York City Cardinal Spellmen noted that while he regretted not being able to attend the funeral, he himself would hold a mass in Emilie's honour.³³ Ontario premier Frost publicly mourned the Dionnes' loss, as did the residents of Near North, and Dr. W. A. Dafoe.³⁴ On August 7, while the hearse was stopped in Pembroke, nuns unexpectedly began to pray over Emilie's body, and some by-passers kneeled down in respect.³⁵ Twenty-one priests participated in the service, a number reminiscent of a twenty-one-gun salute. All this information was published in the newspapers, giving the readership the impression that this event was historic.

In their 1995 tell-all biography, the surviving Quints described the eerie unsettling feelings they suffered throughout the whole ordeal of Emilie's funeral. The wake was very public, and the sisters had to pose for their father's contracted photographer, Arthur Sasse. The *Times*, *Globe*, and *Nugget* all published Mr. Sasse's photograph of the four girls standing over Emilie's open coffin. This picture became iconic of the funeral. The Quints later recalled that while taking that particular portrait, the notion crossed their minds that this moment would be the last time the five of them would ever be together.³⁶ It was the end of an era indeed.

On the same day as the wake, Elzire allegedly remarked that it was good that Emilie had not died in the Big House, because there would have been an "inquiry".³⁷ Much to her chagrin, an inquiry did unfold. Emilie's death was controversial, and this made the event all the more newsworthy. Even though her death was described as "history in the making", the controversy and the sheer amount of media coverage ensured that the Quints remained contemporary and relevant, at least for the time being.

Speculation on the cause of Emilie's death was almost instantaneous. Headlines in all the newspapers at first attributed her death to a stroke. Then older sister Rose Dionne leaked to the reporters that

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Emilie had been infected with polio as a child and consequently suffered periodic fainting.³⁸ A day after the initial reports, newspapers revealed to the unsuspecting world that Emilie Dionne was epileptic. Following this revelation, the newspapers reported that seizures had killed the Quint. While the surviving Quintuplets blamed their father for not adequately seeking treatment for Emilie,³⁹ Oliva Dionne proclaimed in the press (after the story had broke, naturally) that he had consulted medical officials and “nothing could have saved her”.⁴⁰ What ensued was an avalanche of epilepsy articles in the *New York Times*. Specifically in response to the Emilie Dionne case, medical professionals commented on the rarity of deaths caused by epilepsy, and noted that her recent death had only added confusion to the already misunderstood disorder.⁴¹ The experts informed the readership that aside from pure lung exhaustion induced by forty-fifty consecutive seizures, epilepsy more commonly influenced death through a falling injury or suffocation. In addition to the inquest reports from Montreal, the *Times* published no less than five separate articles on epilepsy. Writing very prolifically in the *Times*, the Epileptic Association of New York, and the Variety Club Foundation, both described epilepsy as the last of the “hush hush” diseases.⁴² Indeed, prior to this particular article’s publication, Oliva Dionne told journalists that they [the family] had not disclosed Emilie’s condition because they felt it was “a purely personal matter”.⁴³

The *Globe and Mail* would republish some of the epileptic articles printed in New York City. It is interesting to note that for once, major Quint-related information was moving from the South to the North. Through the death of Emilie Dionne, the readership of the *Times* and *Globe* learned that 80% of epileptic cases were treatable, and that the disorder was nothing to be ashamed of.⁴⁴ Upon examination of the two newspapers, it is worth noting that they both devoted an almost equal amount of coverage to the event.⁴⁵

The death of Emilie Dionne marked a turning point in the Quint saga. After analytical study of the three newspapers, it is clear that all the editors regarded this event as news, but also as historical. However, the Quintuplets still remained contemporary and relevant in 1954. The

death of Emilie sparked a wide discussion of the role of epilepsy in society, this reflects how influential the sisters were. In 1935, by merely getting their diphtheria shots, the infant Quintuplets subsequently encouraged vast amounts of parents to follow suit and seek treatment for their own children.⁴⁶ Similarly, in 1954, the exposure of Emilie's epilepsy helped society to progress. In this regard, in the newspapers, the Quintuplets were influential in the advancement of medical treatment. Thus, while it is clear that society felt an era had ended, the truth is that the controversy of Emilie's death ensured that the sisters remained contemporary. However, their current contemporary status was fleeting. Consider that while Emilie's death encouraged discussion of epilepsy, Oliva Dionne was telling journalists of his intentions to transform the old farmhouse into a shrine for his deceased daughter.⁴⁷ I think this statement reveals that the girls were being transformed from celebrity figures into historical figures.

Death of Marie and Yvonne Dionne

After the death of Emilie, the remaining Quints went into seclusion. Taking up permanent residence in Quebec, the four girls attempted to live "normal" lives. Both Cecil and Yvonne completed nursing studies, and Marie unsuccessfully operated a flower shop in downtown Montreal. With the exception of Yvonne, the sisters married and had children. While a rift between the Quints and the rest of the Dionne family had developed before Emilie's death, attempts were made however to repair the relationship. In 1957, Cecil invited the entire family to her wedding,⁴⁸ and Marie's husband Florian Houle was well liked by Oliva Dionne.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the sisters temporarily recapture the limelight with the publication of the provocative *We Were Five* in 1965. The tell-all account of their childhood certainly did not help improve the strained family relationship. Despite earning over \$100 000 from the book,⁵⁰ Marie Dionne suffered from depression after her marriage failed and she reluctantly placed her two daughters into foster care. On February 27 1970, Annette's husband broke into Marie's Saint-Bruno flat, only to find her deceased. She was 35.

The media coverage of Marie's death was notably different from

that of Emilie. Upon analytical study of the Marie obituaries, there is a notably distinction between the local, national, and international newspapers. While the *Times* and the *Globe* presented a cold historical narrative of the Dionne saga, the *Nugget* provided an obituary that allowed for questions and curiosity. The memory of the Quints was explored like an excavation.

In 1970, the February 28 edition of the *Nugget* announced Marie's death on the front page in ultra bold lettering. The article described her passing as "another sad chapter".⁵¹ This choice of words is interesting. Rather than claim the further deterioration of the Quintuplet legacy, the *Nugget* professes that Marie's death was a "sad chapter". The word "chapter" implies story, and it also implies that more remains still to come. In other words, the chapter is sad, but the story does not end. The article does recap on Marie's life, from childhood to motherhood. But the article is nevertheless rooted in the present. The unknown author discusses Oliva and Elzire Dionne, both still living in Corbeil. The parents are presented as grieving the untimely passing of Marie. The article noted that despite the strained family relations everyone would attend the funeral.⁵² All of this reporting insinuates that the Quint saga is not over, and that while the family is divided, the situation is not hopeless.

On the day prior to the funeral, the *Nugget* published a front page article entitled "In Silent Memory".⁵³ Under the article's title, there was a picture of Nipissing Manor (Big House). The photograph depicted a wreath and a portrait of Marie carefully attached to the chain-wire fence. Taking in context with the photographs, the word "memory" implies warm reflections, of affection and adherence. The title of the article is actually a quote from the writing on wreath's sash, clearly visible in the pictures. While it was traditional during the interwar years for north eastern Ontario families to hang wreaths on their doors upon the death of a loved one,⁵⁴ since the Dionne family no longer lived at the Big House, perhaps a grieving member of the community arranged for the wreath in Marie's honour. Also, the writing on the Nipissing Manor wreath was in English, so presumably the Francophone Dionne family did not personally construct the ornament.

In stark contrast to the *Nugget* coverage, the *Globe* and Mail article on Marie's death is far more impersonal. Buried in the obituary section on page ten, author Ronald Lebel described the recent death, and then jumps into a historical recount of the Quints' birth, fame, and controversies. The author described Marie's life, but he wrote the article as if it were an entry into an encyclopaedia. Marie is described as "the second Quint to die. The first was Emilie, in 1954. Surviving are Annette, Cecil and Yvonne".⁵⁵ The *Nugget* did not provide such blunt statements, maybe because the North Bay readership did not need to be told that Marie was the second to die, nor which of the sisters remained alive. Lepel presented Marie's life story, but implies that the story had ended. There is no mention that the parents were

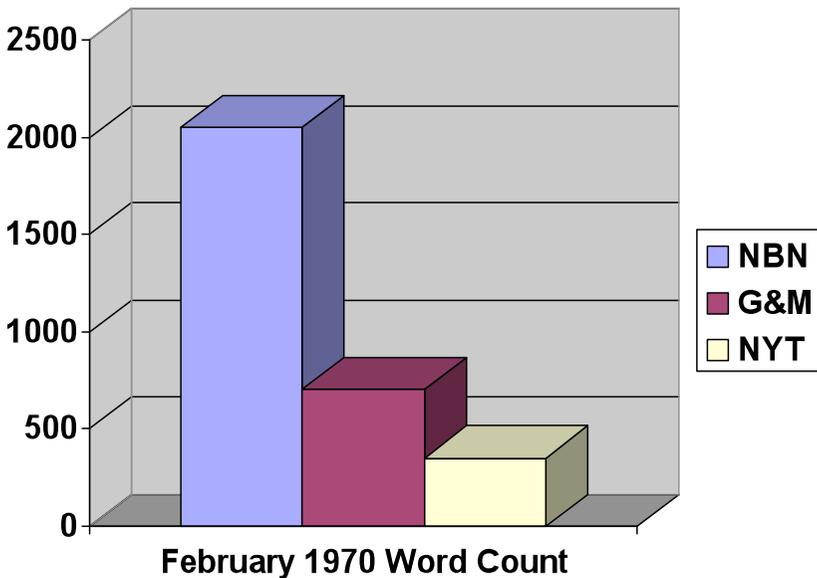


Figure 3: February 1970 Coverage After the Death of Marie. The *Nugget*: 4 articles in total; 3 on front page. The *Globe*: 2 articles in total; 1 article appears on the front page, but only to inform the reader to turn to page 10. The *Times*: 1 article, appearing on page L29.

still alive. In fact, the last half of the article is dedicated to retelling of the nursery and their childhood. In keeping with my notion that the focus of the *Globe* was history rather than memory, Lebel's last paragraphs abruptly ends with move into the Big House. The obituary ends vaguely discussing an occurrence that happened thirty years prior.⁵⁶

The *New York Times* account of Marie's death is even more impersonal than that of the *Globe's*. On page L29, a thin portrait is printed over top the one lonely column designated for Marie's obituary.⁵⁷ Figure 3 depicts the comparatively miniscule coverage the *Times* publishes on Marie. The article itself is a duplication of an article from Montreal, Canadian Press. Unsettling, though Marie's existence had impacted the lives of millions, the *New York Times* could not even be bothered to

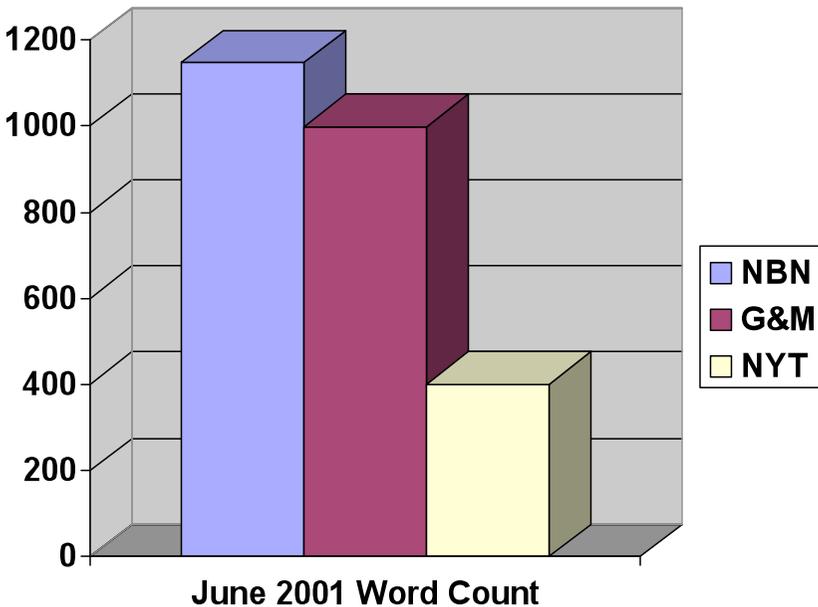


Figure 4: June 2001 Coverage After the Death of Yvonne. In the *Nugget*: 4 articles in total; 2 appear on the front page. In the *Globe*: 1 article on page R5. In the *Times*: 1 article on page E16.

craft an original obituary. As such, when reading the article, the word “here” is utilized thoroughly. Obviously referring to Montreal, the article articulates that Marie “died here” and “lived here”.⁵⁸ There is no hint of memory within this publication.

The remaining three sisters never did reconnect with their estranged parents. Following Marie’s death, Quint media coverage was sparse. Annette separated from her husband, and Yvonne unsuccessfully tried to join a nunnery. Unknown to the public, the surviving Quints anguished in poverty, forced to cohabit ate with one another in a Saint-Bruno apartment. With the release of *Family Secrets* in 1995, Yvonne, Cecil, and Annette began a legal crusade against the Ontario government. After winning a handsome settlement, Yvonne Dionne was overtaken with cancer after suffering a decade of assorted ailments, June 27 2001. The news of her passing was predictably front page material in the *North Bay Nugget* and received the most coverage there. (See Figure 4.) To begin with, journalist Jennifer Hamilton affectionately detailed the latter years of the Quint’s life. Yvonne’s nephew Bertrand Dionne-Langlois gave the *Nugget* an exclusive telephone interview.⁵⁹ The article informed the readers that the bereaved could make charitable donations in Yvonne’s name to the Kids Help Phone – a national hotline for child abuse. In mourning, the family understandably asked for privacy. But the Nipissing community was also in mourning and they expressed their sorrow. The flags at the Quintuplet museum were flown at half mass, Mayor Jack Burrows went on the record detailing his sadness at the passing of another Quint, and as depicted in the one of the article’s adjacent photographs, residents signed a remembrance book.⁶⁰ The overall message of Hamilton’s writing insinuates that the Quints had remained very much apart of the North Bay region.

The articles’ title alone deserve close examinations. On the front page, the June 28, 2001 edition of the *Nugget* proclaims that the “Community Mourns Yvonne”. The act of mourning is an extension of memory.⁶¹ In the *Globe*, the Yvonne article lacked a decisive title, using her name as the topic heading.⁶² The *New York Times* article was entitled, “Yvonne Dionne Dies at 67: A Quintuplet Who Made History”.⁶³ This particular article reiterates the typical historical account of the

sisters, born to a “poor farming family” who instantaneously captured the world’s attention. Considering the *Nugget* and the *Times* two articles, no two other titles could have as favourably shown the distinctive division between Nipissing’s memory and the world’s history. North Bay residents “Mourn Yvonne” while New Yorkers review the story of how a Quint had “Made History”.

Much like the Marie obituaries, the *Globe* and *Times* engaged in a regurgitation of Dionne mythology. Aside from the charitable donations to the Kids Help Phone, there was no discussion about the meaningful impact of Yvonne. In fact the *Globe* article ends with a recent quote of Yvonne stating that her sisters did not need her anymore, and that accepting this truth was painful.⁶⁴ It seems rather insensitive to end the last paragraph of Yvonne’s obituary on such a depressing note. On the other hand, the *Times* presented inaccurate information, clumsily stating that the three Quints sued the Ontario provincial government because of the state’s role in forcing the young girls to live in the nursery, separated from their parents.⁶⁵ In reality, the Quints sued the provincial government because of misappropriated funds and back-dated royalty payments. In their biographies, the Quints stated that life in the nursery was the happiest time of their lives, while life with their parents in the Big House was the worst.⁶⁶ In the *Times* article, even though the objective was to simply present the history of the Dionnes, the author still manages to present inaccurate information.

During the 1930s and 40s, everyone claimed ownership of the Dionne Quints. Dr. Dafoe claimed responsibility for their survival, and Dr. Blatz claimed authority over their upbringing. The province enacted legislation that turned the girls into wards of the King. Newspaper subscribers wrote to the editors describing the Quints as “our Quints”. Once Emilie died in 1954, the *Times* editors commented that because the girls were regarded as miracles, it was as if “we all felt they belonged to us”.⁶⁷ It is strange to think that the Americans would claim these foreign Francophones as their own, but considering the millions of tourists who travelled up north to Quintland, it is not so surprising that the world felt the girls were a blessing. The Quints were a miracle for all to revel in. People nowadays living in New York would not per-

sonally consider the Dionne Quintuplets a blessing, but the Nipissing community clearly still maintains this distinction.⁶⁸

On the eve of Emilie's death, Premier Leslie Frost describes the Quints as "so identified with Ontario, and Canada".⁶⁹ They were the Canadian princesses. They were ambassadors of their province, and instrumental in the national war-effort. This notion of being "identified" insinuates that the Quints belonged. They had a family, and it was the entire country.

Within the country, "ownership" of the Quints was highly disputed. Oliva Dionne launched two lawsuits against Dr. Dafoe, which were only withdrawn after the good country doctor had removed himself from the guardianship.⁷⁰ In their biographies, the Quints lament the fact that their father was such an overbearing and possessive figure.⁷¹ In adulthood, the famous five struggled to free themselves of this patriarchy. There was also the French-Canadian community that claimed the five as their own. During Ontario's "regulation 17" era, the struggle to ensure the girls received a French upbringing helped unify the province's Francophone population.⁷² And then were Catholics from New York who hosted the famous five on one occasion. Clearly many different segments of society claimed ownership of the Quints.

While it appears as if the Quints belonged to everybody in their early years, this changed as the twentieth-century progressed. As I have already noted, the world relinquished ownership of the sisters. The Quintuplets became historical figures, and ceased to be relevant contemporary celebrities. In 1954, New Yorkers described the Quints as their own, but such possessive language was notably absent in the 1970. When describing the later life of Marie, the *Times* commented, "happiness was only an occasional thing".⁷³ To be sure, by forsaking the ownership of the Dionne Quints, the responsibility was also forfeited.

The Nipissing District however retained ownership over the Quints. As previously mentioned, the *Nugget* obituaries suggest of a deep-rooted connection to the former residents. Rather than retelling history, these articles expressed the adherence to a collective memory. And memory naturally implies ownership. In Yvonne's obituary, the *Globe* describes the Dionne industry as remaining still very involved

in the North Bay economy.⁷⁴ And the *Nugget* instructed the community to make donations to Kids Help Phone specifically in “Yvonne’s memory”.⁷⁵ It is clear the North Bay region will never relinquish ownership of the Quints. To relinquish would entail a transition of point-of-view, from memory into history.

French historian Pierre Nora developed the theory that physical places served as memory sites, whereas a specific culture is perpetuated.⁷⁶ For the French national identity, Nora identified cathedrals as memory sites. They remind people, and create collective memories rather than history. In the case of the Dionne Quintuplets, all the “memory sites” are localized in the Nipissing District. Many commuters cannot drive to work without passing the old Dionne farmhouse. Days after Yvonne died, the *Nugget* published advertisements for the Quint Museum and the Dr. Dafoe Museum.⁷⁷ These specific sites of memory ensure that Dionne Quintuplet mythology will remain a collective memory of the region.

In a section entitled “Our Opinion”, editors of the *Nugget* assessed the recent death of Yvonne Dionne. The authors deliberately discussed her last visit to the region, in 1998. The article details that she attended a Chamber of Commerce dinner, thanked for the support of the community, and even signed autographs.⁷⁸ The North Bay region supported the Quints during their lawsuit campaign, and likewise the Quints showed their gratitude. The editors of the *Nugget* proclaimed that, “Yvonne’s death was a cause for reflection”.⁷⁹ Reflection is an interesting word choice. While the rest of the world remembered the Quints in a purely historical way, the residents of Nipissing were actually reviewing their memories. They were evaluating the history, but more importantly, they perpetuated the Dionne saga, and incorporated it into the cultural identity of the region.

Conclusion

Upon analytical study of three distinct newspaper publications, I argue that over the span of six decades, the Dionne Quintuplets have lost their international allure but have nevertheless remained popular and influential in the Nipissing District. Incorporating the lan-

guage of Pierre Nora, to the residents of the North Bay region, the Quints are a memory, as opposed to a history. A memory is not fixated nor entrenched, while a history is just that. A memory shapes our world view and culture, while a history is static and unimposing. Upon examining the obituaries of Emilie, Marie, and Yvonne, I argue that the world remembers the Dionnes as history, but we the inhabitants of Nipissing think of them as memory.

The essay first established the contemporary popularity of the Dionnes in 1941. After analysing the newspaper coverage of the Mother's Day incident, it is clear that the girls were contemporary, controversial, and adored. The articles reveal that the editors, and presumably the readership, regarded the Quints as current-affairs, as an ongoing saga. The second portion of this essay highlights a change in the Dionne media coverage. While the sisters were still contemporary in 1954, the death of Emilie is akin to that of "history in the making". Even though her demise sparked a wide discussion of the role of epilepsy in society, Emilie's death was labelled as the watershed of Quintuplet relevancy. The third portion involves the departure of Marie and Yvonne. The newspaper articles on their deaths were compared and certain distinctions were made. Namely, the *Times* and the *Globe* presented a cold historical narrative of the Dionne saga, but the *Nugget* provided obituaries that allowed for questions and curiosity. The memory of the Quints was explored. The final portion of this essay draws on evidence from all four events to illustrate the extent to which the Dionne Quintuplets are a memory for some, and a history for others. Harking on the once popular notions of "who owned the Quints", the obituary articles reveal that after Emilie's death, the sisters increasingly ceased to be the world's miracles, and faithfully transgressed into the embodiment of Nipissing's collective memory. Though they were once the epitome of celebrity, the Dionne Quintuplets are now presented and perceived as history in the prevalent media outlets, but they have retained a perceived state of memory in their native Nipissing region.

Endnotes

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- 2 Teshler, *The Dionnes*, 2.
- 3 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 2.,
- 4 *The Dionne Years*, 194.
- 5 Don Deleplante, “5000 View Emilié’s Body: Funeral Today at Corbeil” *North Bay Nugget* August 9, 1954: 2.
- 6 Unknown, “Quints in World Premier For ‘Fashions of Mercy’ ” *North Bay Nugget* May 12, 1941: 1.
- 7 Soucy, *Family Secrets*, 176.
- 8 Amato, 931.
- 10 Lipstadt, 244.
- 11 Arnup, “Raising the Dionne Quintuplets,” 65.
- 12 Welch, “The Dionne Quintuplets,” 36.
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- 28 Unknown, "Emilie Dionne Funeral Monday" *North Bay Nugget* August 7, 1954: 2.
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- 31 Noël, *Family and Community Life*, 95.
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- 37 Teshler, *The Dionnes*, 123.
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Who Cares About Caterpillars?

Media Representations of the Dionne Quintuplets in 1936

By Allison Tryon

Introduction

Caterpillars. What interest would New Yorkers have in reports of caterpillars eating away at trees and crops in remote Northern Ontario, Canada? It would seem, perhaps, that the International news was lacking on June 14, 1936, for such an obscure story to have been written, however, that was not the case. The reason for the publication of this story in the *New York Times* is clearly stated in its closing sentence which reads, “The district around Callandar, home of the Dionne Quintuplets, reported heavy crop damage.”¹ The rest of the information in the short article becomes secondary as readers realized that the damage happened around the home of the famous Quints. Suddenly, a seemingly obscure story becomes a popular interest piece, which may be read by men, women and children, simply because of its connection to the famous babies. Media coverage of the Quints was often based on simple stories that could be connected to them in order to make the subject matter more interesting to a wider variety of readers. To fully understand the impact of the Dionne Quints on the world, it is important to return to the beginning of the story and the context in which they were born.

In the depths of the Depression years in Canada, a miracle which

demonstrated hope to a struggling world would become the top news story. On May 28, 1934, in the small French Canadian town of Corbeil, Ontario, the lives of Elzire and Oliva Dionne, as well as those of their children and community members changed forever. The Dionne Quintuplets were the first set of quintuplets in the world to live into adulthood. The media pilgrimage began almost immediately following the first reports of their birth and the presence of reporters in the small towns of Corbeil and, later, Callander would not subside for more than a decade. By May 29th, only a day after their birth, stories about the miracle Quintuplets were sent around the world and published in newspapers from Canada to the United States and London. Within 60 hours of birth, while the babies were still believed to have minimal, if no, chance of survival, not only had *The Nugget* picked up their story, but so had the major American newspaper chain, Hearst, and two newsreel companies.² Canada had never before seen such media frenzy as the one surrounding the Quints. They were portrayed as royalty, as miracles, as freaks, as mistakes, as accomplishments and as consumer pawns. Their portrayal in newspapers around the world is the focus of this paper. It will argue that the Dionne Quintuplets were used by newspapers in 1936 to elicit popular interest among readers. In order to assure that the Quints would remain popular the public was constantly reassured about the Quints' health and well-being. The way that the Quints were reported on around the world changed depending on place, connection to the Quints and the community they lived in as well as target audience. The overall goal of newspapers around the globe, however, was to provide the public with stories that elicited feelings of happiness, joy, security and hope in the bleak Depression.

[Editor's note: A short summary of the the Quint story, a section on historiography and part of the methodology section have been removed.]

This study is based principally on primary sources. Specifically, Canadian, American and European newspapers were used to understand what was printed about the Quints in 1936. I limited my sources to seven newspapers including Canada's: *The Globe*, the *Toronto Daily*

Star and the local source of *The Nugget*. *The Nugget* was an obvious and necessary choice as it was the closest paper and the one with the greatest access to the Quintuplets solely based on proximity. *The Globe* and *The Toronto Daily Star* were chosen because of their national popularity and because, at the time, they were the largest newspapers in Canada. The *New York Times* was chosen as a large American paper. As a newspaper outside the United States or Canada I chose the *London Times*. The *Daily Register* from Illinois and the *Milwaukee Register* were chosen because of availability and because they could show how smaller American newspapers portrayed the Quints to the American population. Both of the former newspapers were studied from a collection of articles present in scrapbooks at the North Bay Dionne Quintuplet Museum. As it is impossible to know if scrapbook makers had clipped most or all the articles about the Quints, the sample of articles from these newspapers may not be complete.

The next step in my research consisted of going through the seven newspapers. First, I determined important dates that I would look at. These dates were pulled mainly from my research of secondary sources, especially Pierre Berton's *The Dionne Years: A Thirties Melodrama*. Primarily, I looked at dates revolving around holidays like Christmas and Birthdays. Additionally, I looked at the starting date of each feature film in which the Quints starred and the date of the release of each film. The beginning and end of tourist season was also an important period of the year that I looked at. When looking at specific dates I limited my search to about one week's time which would include two days previous and two days following the event. Once I determined these dates, I created a database which would allow me to organize the data that I found. I entered each article of my study into this database which listed page number, title, date, summary, theme, article type, article goal and length of each article. This system allowed me to compare the articles very easily and to find similarities and differences along the way in which events were covered and how each paper decided to cover them. These are all very important aspects of my study.

Aside from looking at certain events in isolation, I also feel that it is

important to look at the overarching themes within the newspapers which I have selected to study. In this study, I have tried to identify, on what, if anything, each publication tended to focus, and the view of the Quintuplets that they portrayed in their articles in 1936. To answer these questions, I have looked at a wide variety of articles which are about the Quints but may not contain a chosen event or an article which has contrasting articles in other publications.

Apart from these aspects I found it important to note where articles were published. As cooperative news agencies the Canadian Press (CP) and the American, Associated Press (AP) allowed newspapers owned by one company to share journalists and, thereby, reduce their costs. The CP had journalists stationed in Ottawa, for example, and a few foreign capitals who would report on all the news where they were or, perhaps, on a specific topic in the area and, then, send their reports back to all the newspapers which the publishers owned.³ The CP also bought much of its foreign news from the Associated Press (AP) changing it to fit the Canadian context.⁴ With this in mind it is obvious when analyzing newspaper articles on the Dionne Quintuplets, that many are suspiciously identical. If readers look at the beginning of the articles, they will more than likely find that they were written from Callander and then sent to the Canadian or Associated Press as indicated by the (CP) or (AP) listed after the place from which the story was written. Pierre Berton describes the actions of *The Nugget's* editor, Eddie Bunyan, when he heard about the birth of the Quints in 1934, stating that, "Bunyan then sent off a one-paragraph dispatched to Canadian Press, which relayed it to Associated Press in New York."⁵ Berton goes on to describe that each Canadian and American paper's editor made individual decisions as to how to run the story. The Telegram, for example, wrote a new article debunking the news when initially running the story of the Quints birth.⁶ The appearance of an article about the babies sleeping outside on their veranda for their afternoon nap at 30 below zero, is another example of how the CP and AP were important in circulating articles about the Quintuplets. This article appeared accompanied by a short growth and health update in *The Nugget*, *The Toronto Daily Star*, *The Globe*, *The New York Time*, *The*

Milwaukee Journal, *The Daily Register* and *The Times*. Seven newspapers all published the Canadian Press article between January 25th and 29th, 1936. Although the articles vary in length and content, they all report that the Quints enjoy their outdoor naps and were doing well. The existence of the Canadian Press and the Associated Press provides one explanation for the lack of variety in the articles written about the Quintuplets. This helps to understand the different tones when comparing articles in the last section of my paper.

Most simply, I have tried to answer five questions in my study of the media's coverage of the Dionne Quintuplets: 1) What themes were associated with the Quints? 2) How did individual newspapers represent the Quints differently? 3) How do like events compare in terms of their coverage by different newspapers? 4) Was there an all encompassing tone used as a strategy when writing about the Quints?

What themes were important to the media?

The question that seems to be the most important to address first is, what were newspapers around the world publishing about the Quintuplets? There seem to be a variety of recurring themes in the news articles about the Quints. The most popular theme was the nursery. Within a selection of 218 newspaper articles from seven newspapers, 45 were primarily dedicated to talking about life in the nursery (Figure 1).

The theme of the nursery is prevalent for many reasons. Obviously, the greatest reason is that the Quints existed only in the nursery; however, there also seemed to be a fascination about the idea of normalcy in their lives. Many articles which are classified in this study as 'nursery' articles are written about the Quints' daily lives. For example, on March 29, 1936 the *New York Times* published, "Yvonne Dionne celebrated her twenty-second month of life today by climbing from her bed and awakening the Dafoe Hospital staff before sunrise. This is her newest trick and her sisters watched and soon followed."⁷ The article went on to describe that the Quints were developing normally and were taking on characteristics of average children. These types of articles were quite commonly published about the Quints. On February

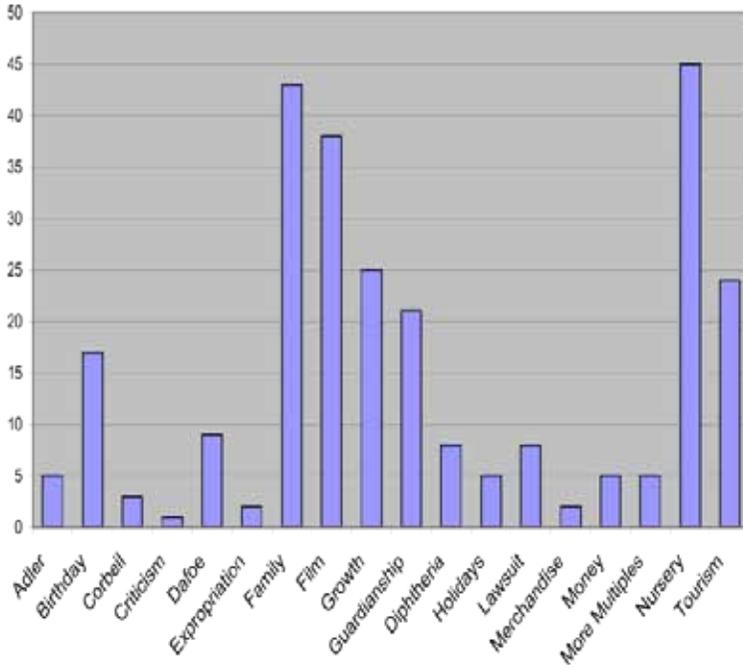


Figure 1: Frequency of Themes in Articles about the Dionne Quintuplets published in 1936.

14, 1936, *The Nugget* published, “Babies Shake Slight Head Cold.” This article was quite short but reported that the Quintuplets had recovered from a cold and had returned to their regular schedule. The article detailed that the girls slept outside on the front veranda of the nursery for four hours each day.⁸ Although these articles seemed to be about unimportant matters; they were some of the most interesting things that happened to the Quints, as they were isolated and regulated with strict daily routines inside of the nursery. In order to maintain media coverage, stories such as those about new tricks and daily naps had to be published and they had to be published in a way that made them seem like important news. They were, in fact, turned into the period’s top requested human interest stories.

Family is the second most frequent theme that was present in the

newspaper articles examined in this study. Forty-three articles were based on a subject having primarily to do with the Dionne family. These articles may have been about the family in isolation but, usually, they had to do with a visit to the Quints, their feelings about the Quints' lives in the nursery or other areas in which the Quints were really the main focus. *The Nugget* published many articles in 1936 covering Oliva and Elzire Dionne's visits to see their daughters. Often, the parents would bring one or two of their other children along to visit Annette, Cecile, Yvonne, Marie and Emilie. These visits seemed to be highly important to describe to the public and the descriptions were always upbeat and portrayed Papa and Mama Dionne as having an excellent relationship with their five most famous daughters. An example of such an article was entitled, "Petite Pauline Romps with Quintet." This article was published in *The Nugget* on August 31, 1936 and began by stating, "Baby hands ruffling her blonde locks and baby feet dancing in delight at her coming little Pauline Dionne paid her first visit to the Dafoe hospital nursery."⁹ The flowery and cute language is a staple in most articles published about the Quints. The article portrayed a wonderful family visit and ended by stating that, upon their leaving, Nurse Noël gave Pauline a cart, toys, a doll and, most importantly, an invitation to come back.¹⁰ Articles such as this show how hard the media was trying to portray the situation of the Dionne's as a happy one in which the Quints were well connected to the rest of their family and, because each visit was described in such grand detail, it seemed like the visits happened much more often than they actually did, and that they were very cheerful occasions for both the Quints and their family.

The films, *The Country Doctor*, and its sequel, *Reunion*, were extremely noticeable in the news articles printed about the Quints in 1936. While *The Country Doctor* received considerably more attention than its sequel, both films were described in greater detail than one would assume most Hollywood productions would have received during the same period. (See Figure 2.)

Not only were the films written about upon the signing of contracts and the reviews of the finished product but, because of the Quintu-

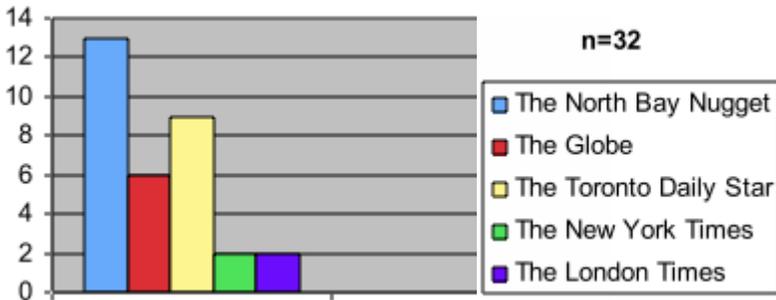


Figure 2: Articles about the Quints and Film in 1936

plets' participation, the films were written about throughout the filming process in an effort, it would seem, to describe what was happening, how the Quints were doing and, perhaps less visibly, to promote the films once they were finished. Not only did each of the seven papers in this study publish articles about the films, but *The Nugget* published a 20 page 'Special Feature' supplement booklet to accompany its March 16, 1936 issue celebrating the release of *The Country Doctor*.

Articles relating to all aspects of the film were printed in various newspapers. The commonality between them, however, was the way in which they were turned into popular interest pieces based on their focuses and the 'cutesy' language used to describe the Quints. (What is referred to here as cutesy-language is that type of story-book-like language which was so popular when speaking about the Quints.)

Articles surrounding the theme of the growth of the Quints are some of the most interesting to look at. One of the first things that most people ask when a baby is born is, "How much does he weigh?" As a society, even in the twenty-first century, there is a large value placed on the weight of a developing baby to determine the overall health of the child. The Quints were no different. From their miracle birth, their weights were of paramount importance. This is shown clearly in the articles which were written about them. In *The Nugget*, for example, the weights, heights, development of new teeth, and any other promi-

ment development in the lives of the babies was published monthly. Throughout 1936 and, likely, beyond, an article was written around the 28th of each month, the day which represented the Quints' birthday. These articles usually began with a short anecdote about Quints; for example, the famous five sleeping outdoors at 30 below zero or beginning to learn their prayers with the help of their nurses. These articles provided an update on the health of the Quints from Dr. Dafoe and, then, a chart was given listing each Quints' weight and height, as well as the amount of gain or loss in weight. As the Quints became of age to acquire teeth, updates were included as to how many teeth each Quint had, and stretched so far as to specify if the teeth were canine or molar for each child. Both *The Globe* and the *Toronto Daily Star* also published various reports about the growth and development of the Quintuplets. American newspapers, as well as *The Times*, also printed information describing the babies' growth, but it was to a much lesser degree. The articles in other newspaper were often less detailed while still getting the message of growth updates across.

Tourism is the final of the most prominent themes that articles surrounding the Quintuplets displayed in 1936. Obviously, the Quintuplets were highly commercialized, especially in their very early years. In the years between, 1934 and 1943, close to three million people travelled to Callendar to get a peek at the famous Dionne Quintuplets.¹¹ To the Ontario government they represented a five hundred million dollar asset, at their peak of popularity.¹² In 1936, the new observation playground was built beside the nursery so tourists would be able to walk through a mesh hallway and view the Quints from behind a screen while the supposedly oblivious sisters engaged in their daily outdoor playtime. This event was highly publicized as it allowed for greater numbers of tourists to see the Quints. Along with the new playground, increased shops and stalls were set up to cater to tourists' desires to purchase memorabilia, food and drink. One scholar, Mariana Valverde, argues that the Quintuplets were viewed by the Ontario government, not as children, but as natural resources which had to be publicized, sold and regulated by the state.¹³ The mere economic value that they were creating for Ontario during the Great Depression would

have been reason enough to inspire many articles about their impact on tourism. It was primarily the Canadian newspapers which wrote about the Quints' ability to draw tourists north, but two out of three American newspapers in this study also noted the Quints' impact on tourism in Canada and Americans' desire to journey across the border to get a view of them. In 1936, for example, the *New York Times* printed that, "...at least 500,000 Americans have visited the Demoiselles Dionne so far this year.\$20 per head spent in Ontario alone, or a total of \$10,000,000." The article continued by explaining that the draw was that fact that they were a wonder of nature just as much as Niagara Falls. Within the same article, a description of the playground was given as well as an endearing tale about Yvonne throwing off her mitts while playing as they were, clearly, too much of an encumbrance to her.¹⁴ Within this anecdote lies the popular interest piece of the media puzzle which was so important to the Quints' success.

Themes of articles published in newspapers during the period of study were extremely important in discovering what was being written about the Quints. Almost all of the articles which were examined were able to be placed into a category very easily without analyzing intensely or creating a new theme by which to categorize them. The few themes that exist lead to the conclusion that most newspapers were publishing the same things about the Quints. It also furthers the argument that what was available to the media public was regulated and, thus, most people obtained the same information about the Quints because of such regulation of their public image by the decisions of Dr. Dafoe and other guardians.

Individual Newspapers representations

The Nugget really provided a jumping off point for many other publications as it was the closest to the Quints and its journalists knew many of the people involved with them and their guardians. It is not surprising to discover that *The Nugget* published the most articles about the Quintuplets of any paper in this study and, very likely, any paper in the world. In terms of the other newspapers in this study, the Canadian newspapers published the second highest number of articles, followed

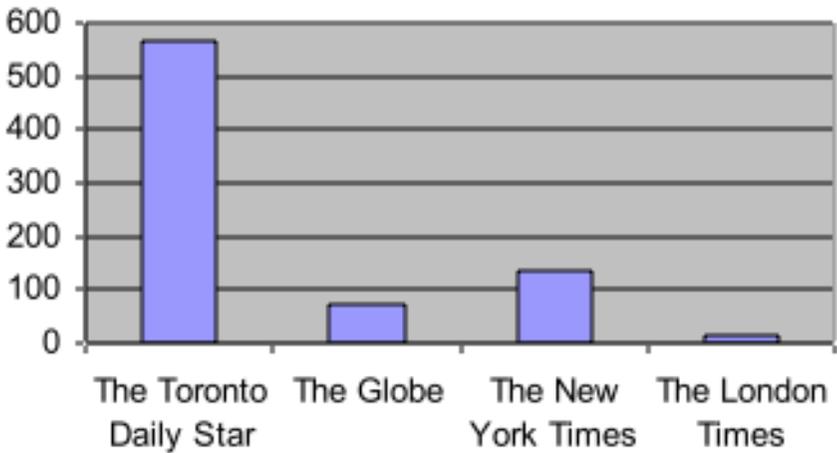


Figure 3: Number of Hits for 'quintuplets' in Newspaper Databases

by the American and, then, European newspapers. Figure 3 provides an example of the number of 'hits' that the search term, 'quintuplets' collected when entered in the databases of four of the most popular newspapers' archival websites. 'Hits' refers in this case to the number of articles which included the term 'quintuplets' at least one time.

As is indicated by the graph in Figure 4, in 1936 the *Toronto Daily Star* published over 500 articles with the term 'quintuplet' in them. It would be a fair to assume that most of these articles were representing the Dionne Quintuplets, as they were the only set of Quints in the world at the time. The sheer volume of articles written about the Quintuplets, even after two years of life, attests to their gigantic popularity.

Aside from the volume of articles published from each newspaper, this study has also determined what the major focus of each newspaper was. As stated previously, *The Nugget* was the newspaper that was geographically closest to the Quints. *The Nugget* published considerably more articles than other papers as well. The major focus of its publication in respect to the Quintuplets seemed to be on everyday occurrences. Articles containing criticism of the Guardians of the Quintuplets or of Mr and Mrs Dionne can be found. While most articles focused on events surrounding the Quints only, articles which

described a difference of opinion about the Quints or their treatment were written with care to show both sides of the disagreement. For the most part, *The Nugget* focused on specific anecdotes describing the everyday lives of the Quints and subjects which directly related to the surrounding communities. Family, nursery life, growth and development and tourism were the top themes present in the publication's articles about the Quints. There was a prideful tone when describing the Quints and their milestones; however, there was also an effort to maintain an attitude which allowed for popular interest, yet, was informative and unbiased. The smaller American newspapers used in this study, *The Milwaukee Journal* and *Illinois, Daily Register*, proved to be most like *The Nugget* in terms of content. Although fewer were published, both papers included many more popular interest articles about life in the nursery, birthday celebrations, growth, and film prospects. These three newspapers provided this study with a community paper's view of the Quintuplets. This community view was one which thrived on cuteness and interesting anecdotes about the babies.

The *Toronto Daily Star* was the second largest publisher of Quint articles included in this study. In 1936, it was not an overly political newspaper like, *The Globe*, for example. It was available across Ontario and would have been read daily. Many of the articles published in the newspaper were similar to those published in *The Nugget* and, likely, they were shared between papers. The *Toronto Daily Star* also depicted a relatively unbiased view of the Quints but, when forced to make a decision, the paper commonly sided with Dr. Dafoe and the guardianship of the Dionne parents. One of the most popular topics written about in the *Toronto Daily Star* during this period was the making of the films, *The Country Doctor* and *Reunion*. The newspaper detailed the progress of the filming sessions involving the Quints and actor Jean Hersholt, as well as reviews from a variety of critics, including, Mr and Mrs. Dionne, once the film was released. As had been the common practice with the majority of articles written about the Quintuplets, *The Toronto Star* printed the film review of *The Country Doctor* on its front page. Even in the depths of The Depression the Quintuplets' film performance trumped many other world issues to end up on the front

page almost weekly.

The Globe was an interesting paper to look at because the way that it portrayed the Quints was slightly different from that of other Canadian newspapers. Although it did publish a variety of cutesy popular interest stories about the Quints, it only published a fraction of the number that papers like *The Nugget* and the *Toronto Daily Star* did.¹⁵ Articles published in *The Globe* regarded the guardianship of the Quintuplets, their film prospects and the tourism that their fame had brought to Ontario. Most articles were relegated to the second section rather than given prime placement as were articles in *The Nugget* and the *Toronto Daily Star*. Another feature of *The Globe* articles was that, unlike the majority of *Toronto Daily Star* articles, which were written by reporters in the field, most of them were from the Canadian or Associated Press. A typical article published in *The Globe* regarding the Quintuplets was one which was entitled, "Oliva Dionne to Open His Souvenir Stand." This article, although about family, was published specifically for its connection to growing tourism surrounding the Quints, rather than to describe a father's connection to his daughters.¹⁶ *The Globe*, in general, had a much more detached tone when describing the Quints, although there was still a sense that the Quints were special, they were not as idolized as in other Canadian publications.

The portrayal of the Quints in American newspapers was similar to that of Canadian publications. Canadian stories were picked and chosen in terms of what would best interest American readers, although the larger *New York Times* did tend to print articles more akin to those printed in *The Globe*. The most popular *New York Times* selections on the Quints referred to popular interest stories and their life in the nursery, as well as their films and their encouragement of tourism to Ontario, particularly from Americans. Articles referred to poignant developments in the lives of the Quints such as: the beginning of their education with Jacqueline Noël, their father's appeal to the King to have them returned to his sole custody, the debate over their diet, their second birthday, lawsuits involving their names and merchandise, as well as tourism, the opening of their films and, of course, the popular cutesy moments. For the most part, the New York

articles were augmented from the Canadian Press and were straightforward and slightly detached from the community feeling which was at the forefront in *The Nugget's* articles.

A search for the famous Dionne five in London, England's, the *Times*, produces few results. In fact, only 12 articles were published about the Quints in 1936, excluding a handful of advertisements. With the exception of an article which described the Dionne dolls as a good Christmas gift and articles reviewing their films, all of the articles were printed in the "International News" column and were provided by the 'Ottawa Correspondent.' All of the articles were quite short and kept to about 100 words or less. Themes included the Quints' birthday, anecdotes about life in the nursery, and updates about the status of the Guardianship. Interestingly, while almost all North American newspapers included at least a short article discussing Oliva Dionne's letter to the King in which he asked for help to have the guardianship of his daughters returned to him, there was no mention of this letter in *The Times*. Perhaps it was not deemed interesting to the public or, perhaps, it would not be popular to report that the King had sent the letter back to Canada's Governor General for him to deal with instead of taking action himself.

The Quints were globally known in 1936 and, thus, the *Times* would have been remiss in leaving them out of the paper completely; however, they were definitely not revered in the UK as they were in Canada and the U.S. The Quints' second birthday was the most reported theme in *The Times*. A longer than average article ran in the 'International News' column for two consecutive days, May 28th and 29th. Londoners were told of the celebration that was to be held at Callandar and were given an update as to the Quints' health, the status of their guardianship and their wealth, as well as plans for the future. Even so, the article remained under 200 words.¹⁷ The *Times* article is a good example of the types written about the Quints world wide because, although it printed few articles, it covered many themes. The major events were covered but, even across the ocean, it was important for newspaper editors to publish stories such as that of February 21, 1936 reading in its entirety, "The Dionne quintuplets, in spite of the severity of the CANADIAN

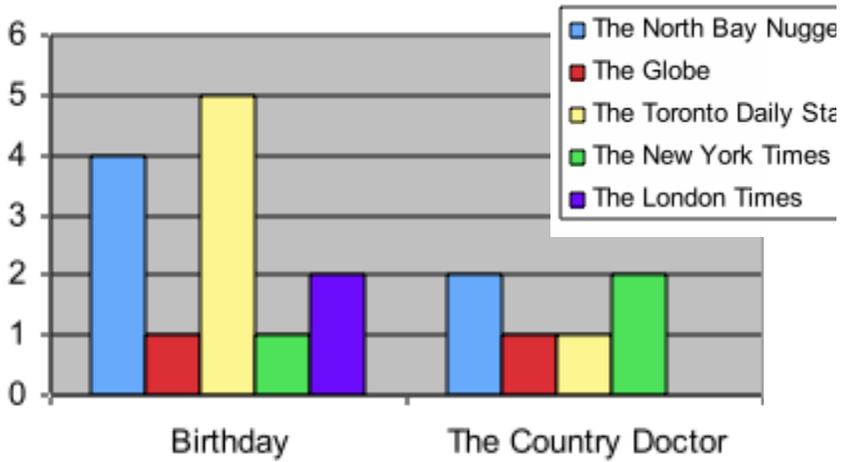


Figure 4: A comparison of the number of articles about the Quints' second birthday and the release of *The Country Doctor*.

winter, continue to thrive. They are now 20 months old, and have been allowed to romp in the snow this week for the first time in their lives.”¹⁸

Figure 4 demonstrates the number of articles which were written in five newspapers about the topics of the Quintuplets' second birthday as well as the release of the film, *The Country Doctor*. The survey of these newspapers counted a period of two days before the event and two days after. The total number of articles from May 26-30, 1936 was counted to compare the coverage of the Quints' birthday and the dates between March 21-25, 1936 were used to calculate the number of articles which covered the release date of *The Country Doctor*.

This graph illustrates how Canadian newspapers *The North Bay Nugget* and *The Toronto Daily Star* published a higher number of articles for the Quints' Birthday than did the other papers. *The Nugget* and the *Toronto Daily Star* often published many articles about the same event so that they could cover a variety of angles. For example, *The Nugget*, wrote articles about the what the Dionne family did on the Quintuplet's birthday, what the Quints' did in celebration, as well as a kind of year in review to recapitulate the Quints' second year. This

was common for the more casual publications which relied on popular interest pieces to intrigue their readers. When writing about the film, however, it appears that the *New York Times* was more on par with *The Nugget*. This is likely because the film was an event that garnered more international attention specifically at the time of its release on March 23rd, rather than at other times during its filming.

As has been examined above, place made an important distinction as to how the Quintuplets were portrayed in the media. In Canada, especially in North Bay, they were described in endearing terms. Articles about seemingly unimportant romps in the snow were drawn out for paragraphs and then continued as the sisters' heights, weights, and even tooth count, was described in almost nauseating detail. Popular interest was still at the heart of most of the stories printed about the Quints. This conclusion is supported by the fact that, even in American newspapers where, despite a limited number of articles published about them, reports about the Quints' daily adventures were a top sell. Internationally, as well, the Quints were written about both to describe the progress of the world's miracle babies and to provide light hearted stories of five identical sisters who were waking up their nurses during early morning hours at the hospital built just for them.

Coverage of Important Events

To understand fully the way in which the Quints were portrayed differently by the seven papers in this study, an analysis of like articles was completed. The Quintuplets' second birthday was one which was looked at in isolation as it received a lot of attention by all of the newspapers in this study. *The Nugget* led the crowd by publishing five articles particularly speaking about the Quintuplets' second birthday, as well as a two page spread of their lives. The *Toronto Daily Star*, on the front page of the second section of the May 28th issue, pictured the Quintuplets with a birthday cake and continued on to offer an overview of the events which took place at Quintland to celebrate. The article also provided a brief history of the Quints' lives and of their growth and development up to that date.¹⁹ The tone of the article was quite straightforward. There also seemed to be quite a celebratory tone in

the way in which it suggests that all Canadians should take pride in the fact that the Quints are doing well. The *Toronto Daily Star* also published an article the day after the birthday celebrations were complete in which it commented on what reporters had seen in Callendar the previous day. That article was entitled, "Quints Could Have Fortune of \$3,000,000." The article detailed that if the guardians had been greedier, they could have earned the babies' trust fund a great deal more money; however, the article seemed to conclude that because of the guardians' intent on not turning the Quints into mass market freaks, they were doing an excellent job in protecting the babies' welfare.²⁰ The tone of the article was congratulatory towards the guardianship, especially Dr. Dafoe. There was also an emphasis on the fact that, although the celebration took place, the Quintuplets' regular routine would begin again the following day, thereby maintaining that the Quints' best interests were always at heart.²¹ The parents were mentioned only in passing, as they were spotted attending church in the morning. This contrasts with an article published on May 29th in *The Nugget*, entitled, "Oliva Denies Being Bid to Party." This article was told completely from the Dionne's perspective as they were quoted as stating that all they knew of the party was what they heard on the radio and that they were never invited to take part. Oliva Dionne also rebutted Minister of Public Welfare, David Croll's, statement that the family received a \$1000 cheque as a gift from the Quints to mark the anniversary of their birth. Dionne objected, stating that no cheque had been given to him as of 29 May.²²

The Nugget and *The Toronto Daily Star* showed quite a contrast in the material that was published surrounding the second birthday of the Quints. The Star demonstrated a typical larger newspaper perspective by publishing the major topics which would have been likely to interest the province as a whole. The celebration itself, the Quints' wealth, as well as their health, were the most important features. *The Nugget*, on the other hand, seemed to have attempted to give a more balanced story by reporting on both the goings on at the Dafoe Nursery, as well as the opinions of the Dionne family surrounding the birthday celebration. In *The Toronto Daily Star*, the parents were spoken for by

the guardianship; in contrast, in *The Nugget*, they were sought out and interviewed about their own personal views.

Contrary to the usual pattern, it was *The Times* which published the second largest number of articles about the Quints' birthday after North Bay and Toronto. Although the articles were short, they were published in the 'International News' column regularly from 27-29 May. The articles on 27 May were quite to the point, simply stating that the Quints would be celebrating their second birthday the following day and that they were developing normally and bringing great prosperity to the town of Callander.²³ Subsequent articles were written after the celebration took place and briefly detailed the Quints singing on the CBC National Broadcast, as well as the guest list. Each of the Quints' weights were listed and it was stated that monetary presents were given to a number of the guardians including Oliva Dionne. *The Times* reported that the Dionne's had declined their invitation to the birthday celebration.²⁴ The identical article was printed on 30 May.

The Globe printed only one article about the Quints' birthday. The focus of this article was not even the birthday celebration, but the announcement of the contract signing for a new film in which the Quints were to star. Before printing any news about the birthday celebration, *The Globe* printed information about the movie contract such as, how much money the Quints would make, the life insurance policy which had been signed by the guardians in case one of the Quints died before the filming was completed, the potential release date for the film and the fact that Dr. Dafoe would be in charge of regulating the Quints' work. Once all of the film logistics were detailed, a shorter description of the birthday celebration was given, including the \$1000 cheque which was reportedly given to the Dionne family. David Croll was quoted as stating that the government had not forgotten that the Quints were the Dionne's children.²⁵ This article was sourced as being from the Canadian Press and, therefore, it is likely that *The Globe* edited the article for its audience base to emphasize the economic news.

Two of the American newspapers in this study published articles to mark the Quints' birthday. The *New York Times* printed what seems to have been quite a special two page article describing the Quints' lives

up to their second birthday and noting that, although Dr. Dafoe still counted their lives in days, they were in the best health that they had ever been. The article, written by John MacCormac, also stated that the parents of the Quints visited them five *Times* a week although they continued to be at odds with the guardianship and the government. This is all that was written of the parents except for the critical statement, "...their parents have remained peasants, while the sisters will be refined and cultured products of an expensive environment and education."²⁶ The article definitely sided with the Ontario government and the Quintuplets' nursery upbringing. The article unquestionably congratulated the work of Dr. Dafoe in keeping the sisters alive and giving them the best life possible. The Quints were portrayed as having everything that they could desire.

Although *The New York Times* used the birthday as an opportunity to make a strong statement about its feelings surrounding the 'Quint saga,' other American newspapers were less concerned with political elements and more interested in celebrating two years of childhood for the sisters and in providing a fun-loving, triumphant story to readers. Illinois' *Daily Register* printed two large photos, one of the Quints and Dr. Dafoe practising at their piano for their birthday radio broadcast on CBC, and another of Emilie who looked like she was playing peek-a-boo. The articles accompanying the photos were over-the-top in their cutesy writing. The author stated that as they play on their piano they are, "'Perhaps thinking over amazing events of the two years she [they] have been on earth."²⁷ Obviously, this is not likely to have been what any of the Quints were thinking; on the other hand, the childish language and fun-loving tone provides a warm feeling to readers as they learn that the miracle babies are still developing normally even after two years of life.

Coverage of the films, *The Country Doctor*, and its sequel, *Reunion*, also provide an opportunity to contrast the seven newspapers, one against the other. For example, *The Nugget* provided many articles about and alluding to the filming of the movies. Articles were written about the arrival of the movie stars in North Bay, the atmosphere on set at the Dafoe Nursery and how the Quints were progressing with

their acting abilities, as well as multiple articles reviewing and advertising the film upon its completion. Most of the articles were based primarily around the Quints rather than the money that they were making, or even the other actors in the film. For example, one August 19th article described the filming from the previous day as going very well and that Emilie in particular was quite taken with her co-star, Jean Hersholt. The article went on to describe how the crew was filming the Quints and their co-stars in a large playhouse in the Quints own playground. Also mentioned was the fact that the Quints, as per Dr. Dafoe's request, were only filmed for one hour per day and, otherwise, were busy with their regular daily routine.²⁸ This article had no real purpose other than to update, primarily the surrounding community, on the progress of filming and to provide a cute anecdote. Many articles such as this one were published from North Bay surrounding the production of both films. These types of articles contrast with articles such as those from other larger newspapers like *The Globe* which printed a short article on August 25 stating that filming on that day had been cancelled because of rain, but that tourists were still able to view the Quints from their veranda.²⁹ This was one of the only articles by *The Globe* not having to do directly with the release of the film. Clearly, the publication was more interested in providing information about the logistical elements of the filming rather than the more popular human interest pieces.

Although it may seem that even a larger Canadian paper like *The Globe* was not interested in the film, American newspapers did not publish anything having to do with the films aside from the initial contract signing and a review of the film once it was released. The reviews were, for the most, part quite good. The focus was definitely on the Quints' performances rather than on the film as a whole, since many reviewers were of the opinion that without the Quints, the movies would have flopped, but because of the Quints' presence, audiences would be quite pleased with what they had seen.

As has been shown through the previous examples, the trend surrounding media attention around the Dionne Quintuplets was one of proximity as well as the targeted audience of a specific newspaper.

While newspapers which were located closer to its subjects may have been less subjective, there are also other reasons as to variations in articles written about like events. One of the best examples to describe this is a debate which took place in the media between Mrs. Elzire Dionne and Dr. Dafoe concerning the diet of the Quintuplets. The debate began when two differing opinions were published in columns beside one another on the front page of *The Nugget* on April 27, 1936. Mrs. Dionne was reported to have been concerned about the diet of the Quints, stating that she didn't believe that they were receiving enough hearty food such as meat, potatoes and milk. She disagreed with the green 'mush' [oatmeal] her daughters were being fed and was concerned that they were not receiving enough milk or bread. Mrs. Dionne also believed that the children were not being allowed to sleep long enough in the morning and that it caused them to be tired and lazy for the rest of their day. Another concern of Mrs. Dionne was that the toys the Quints played with were constructed of hard materials, like wood and metal, and were too dangerous as the girls often threw their toys around. Finally, the article reported that both of the Dionne parents were very concerned about the Quintuplets' speech as, at almost two years old, they spoke very little.³⁰

The contrasting article described Dr. Dafoe's opinion about Mrs. Dionne's concerns. For each concern the doctor had an answer that seemed to have some sort of medical backing. Dafoe stated that the girls' diets were kept lean because fatter babies were less able to fight diseases. He also stated that fatter babies would not be attractive to the public. In terms of the sleep allowed to the Quints, Dafoe stated that the girls were not permitted to sleep more than two to three hours in the afternoon; otherwise, they woke up too early in the morning. Dafoe stated that the girls were being trained in French. Although he did not comment on the toys with which the Quints played, he did mention that they exercised daily by dancing.³¹ To this, Mrs. Dionne remarked, "There are a number of things that they need to be taught before dancing."³²

The debate was first published in *The Nugget* and was soon read in many other publications around the globe; however, the way in which

the situation was portrayed differed from newspaper to newspaper. *The Nugget*, as described, published two articles stating the opinion of each party. This demonstrates the paper's desire to show an unbiased and fair view of the debate.

Although the local *North Bay Nugget* may have taken strides to give a dual sided account of this controversy *The Globe* took a different approach. On April 28, the paper published an adapted version of the two columns printed in the paper which had been provided through the Canadian Press. The columns were combined and the debate was described in one medium length column. Each point was introduced from Mrs. Dionne's perspective and then Dr. Dafoe's reasoning was given as to why a particular routine existed. Essentially, each element of Mrs. Dionne's argument was followed with a strong rebuttal from Dr. Dafoe which acted, essentially, to discount Mrs. Dionne's concerns for her children. For example:

The parents said they thought the children were hungry, and this accounted for restlessness in the afternoon and their failure to sleep well in the morning, as they formerly did. Dr. Dafoe, asked his opinion after the parents' interview, said any restlessness was directly attributed to the children's plentiful store of energy that they must work off. Their daytime sleeping periods have been reduced, he said, now totalling two and a half to three hours daily. If they sleep longer during the day, they wake too early in the morning for their own good.³³

In this excerpt, it can be plainly seen that any concern felt by Mrs. Dionne is directly shut down. What shows an even greater bias towards Dr. Dafoe is the fact that the next day, April 29, another article on the same topic of the Quints' diet and health was printed; however, in the subsequent article, only the thoughts of Dr. Dafoe were provided. This 'Dr. Dafoe knows best' article seems to conclude the debate once and for all in *The Globe* as Dr. Dafoe explains the dietary routine of the Quints.

To compare the coverage of this debate in Canada to that in America provides even more fuel to the argument of this paper as it clearly

demonstrates how different newspapers relayed media coverage of the Quintuplets. The *New York Times* also ran a version of the article provided to the Associated Press. This article, however, was edited to just over 100 words. It only included concerns over hunger and left out the issues of sleep and toys as was detailed in *The Nugget*. As in *The Globe* article, Mrs. Dionne's concern was stated and followed with a strong counter by Dr. Dafoe which ostensibly minimized the mother's concern.

Why each of the newspapers decided to print the articles as they did is unknown. It was likely linked to both their own and the readers' beliefs about the Dionne family and Dr. Dafoe. For example, had *The Nugget* printed both opinions in one combined column, the writers would have had to decide which opinion to list first. By separating the arguments, the readers were able to read each one without a direct counter argument for each point of concern. One could argue that readers within the communities where *The Nugget* was circulated may have been more sympathetic towards the family and, therefore, the editors were cautious as to how the arguments were presented. *The Globe*, as an Ontario based newspaper, likely also had concerns about whom they should favour in the debate; however, it is clear that throughout English Canada, Dr. Dafoe was a heroic favourite and, therefore, promoting the Dionne family might have disconcerted readers. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, was far detached from the political aspects of the argument and simply desired to relay to their own readers, in much more black and white terms, what was going on. What this example demonstrates, then, is much like what Bill Reader has argued about mass media. Depending on small and large newspaper and the community contexts, news stories can become more or less important, or can take on a differing tone.

A similar example is the way in which the Ontario Health Board used the Quints as a campaign for the Diphtheria toxoid. Articles about the Quints receiving the toxoid were prominent in Canada. Throughout late 1936, all three Canadian newspapers in this study published articles about the Quints receiving the toxoid. When examining the situation closely, however, it is clear that articles relating to the toxoid and

the Quints were much more prominent in the *Toronto Daily Star*. This is likely because the toxid was readily available in Toronto because of the number of deaths caused by the illness at the time. The Ontario Department of Public Health was attempting to make an example of Toronto and, therefore, The *Toronto Daily Star* was responsible for having residents take part in the anti-diphtheria campaign. Many parents were afraid to give their children a treatment, but, the day after the Quintuplets were shown on the front page of the *Toronto Daily Star* receiving their first of three doses of the toxid, the Toronto anti-diphtheria clinics registered the highest ever attendance. Commenting on the news of the Dionne Quints receiving their dose of the toxid, Toronto's Dr. Gordon Bates was reported to have stated, "I think that is the best propaganda for toxiding I ever saw."³⁴ This example demonstrates the ability of a large newspaper to use the Quints as an example for the purposes of its own region. As the toxid was less available in other parts of Canada during the time, those places did not need the Quints to be poster children.

Conclusion

Two things are overwhelming when reading newspaper articles published about the Quints in 1936. One is the reassuring voice of most articles and the other is the cutesy, child-like language which was used to describe the Quints. Both of these things seem to relate directly to the evolution of mass media, the desire to publish popular interest pieces and the craving for miracles in a dark time.

Many articles describing an event concerning the girls were written as if they were for children and, perhaps, they were, to some degree. The following excerpt is the description given by John MacCormac of the *New York Times* upon observing the Quints at their playground in October 1936.

Five tiny forms emerge from the former hospital (now a nursery because, as Dr. Dafoe says, there are no longer any sick children there). Yvonne and Annette, although the sturdiest of the five, insist on being drawn by the little doctor in their wagon. Cecile and Emelie tooter along

sturdily on their own active but wayward legs. Marie, small by full of individuality, finds something to divert her attention at the nursery door. "Come Marie, viens ici," calls the doctor, and Marie, obedient but gravely contemplative, obeys the bilingual imperative.³⁵

MacCormac's description is flowery and extraordinary. He could have written much more simply, "The Quints emerged from the nursery, Yvonne and Annette were pulled by Dr. Dafoe, while, Cecile and Emelie tottled along together. Marie was reluctant, something seemed to catch her eye, however, came as Dr. Dafoe called her." This second description is simply not as interesting as the first. The Quints, it must be remembered, were miracle children. Therefore, when people read about them they were continuously in awe that the five sisters were still alive. To talk about them in lesser terms may have depleted their value; it also may have made their story duller. It was, perhaps, not so much the Quints who drew the readers in as much as the chosen topics and the way in which those events were described that added to their ability to captivate audiences. The Quints seem to have been portrayed as storybook figures. It is almost as if tourists who were travelling to see them in Callendar had to gain proof that they were real little girls. It is not surprising that a series of children's story books were published about the Quints as storybook language was the medium through which they were described anyway.³⁶

Reassurance was also an important element which was present in most, if not all, articles written about the Quints. Even as the Quints were turning two years old, Dr. Dafoe publicly stated that he still counted their lives in terms of days rather than months or years. Dafoe was extremely cautious when it came to putting the Quints into any kind of situation which may have jeopardized their health. Even Hollywood producers ensured that a life insurance policy was signed at the same time as the Quints' film contracts to guarantee that they would not lose any money if one of the Quints passed away. Because of the miracle they represented, there was always a fear that they were too good to be true and that, to the world, five identical sisters could not exist. Articles published in newspapers reflected this fear absolutely.

This is evident as well in the multitude of articles published all over the world about their growth and health. It is also reflected in the way that newspapers often emphasised the fact that the daily routine developed by the Quints' own miracle worker, Dr. Dafoe, was rarely interrupted for any long period of time. The Quints' health was always the first and foremost concern. The filming of *The Country Doctor* and *Reunion* provided many occasions for newspapers to reassure the public that the girls' health was not being put at risk because of their new 'job.' The following excerpt is one example of Dr. Dafoe's reassurances to the public after the filming for August 25th was cancelled because of rain:

Dr. Dafoe announced Yvonne, Emilie, Cecile, Annette and Marie were all in the best of health, and did not like the idea of not being able to have their usual play periods in the open air. He said Marie's thigh tumor, a problem in the early days of her life, was now completely cured. There was still a slight red stain on the flesh, but nothing to worry about.³⁷

In another example, *The Nugget* printed, "Work before the 20th Century-fox movie cameras during the past few days has not interfered with the healthful routine of the famous babes and to prove it Emilie caught up with her sisters in the matter of teeth-cutting."³⁸ The public was even reassured after a snow storm hit Callendar that Dr. Dafoe was delayed by no more than a few hours to visit the Quints.³⁹ Even *The Times* reassured Londoners that the Quints' guardianship was choosing the right kinds of business opportunities for them by reporting: "Many opportunities had been offered for making more money for them, but that great care had been taken in selecting contracts, and many had been rejected."⁴⁰ Such attempts to maintain feelings of security from readers and fans of the Quints demonstrate the importance that their health and well-being had to people around the world. By ensuring that the public perception of the Quints was one of healthy and happy little girls, the media was able to maintain the guise of 'the perfect little princesses,' that worked so well for Quint publicity.

"Why tell this parable?"⁴¹ This is a question that is posed to scholars by historian Ian McKay. This study seems to answer, "because it made people happy." Step into the North Bay Dionne Quintuplet Museum

and you can see hundreds of scrapbooks created by people all around the world. People opened up their local newspaper each day and hoped to see even a short column on the Dionne Quintuplets. The five miracle babies born to Elzire and Oliva Dionne in the small town of Corbeil, Ontario were a light in the darkest days of the Depression. Their existences signalled hope and promise where before there had been none.

The goal of this paper has been to identify The Quints were portrayed by newspapers and how different newspapers may, or may not have, portrayed them differently. It was to identify what events newspapers were interested in and what types of content were published. What can be concluded, most certainly, is that the Quints were portrayed differently around the world. Proximity was a factor in determining how newspapers would write about the Quints and their story as was the political focuses and target audiences of newspapers. Smaller and larger newspapers wrote about the Quints differently and what was written about the Quints depended highly on what their guardians wanted to be printed about them. The Quints themselves were not free to do as they wished and, although the public was invited to view them through a mesh fence, their lives were not as public as the media may have made it seem. Reporters were invited to view certain aspects of their lives which is why so much of what was printed about the Quints from their early days in the nursery was similar. What this paper has distinguished, however, is that, although many of the stories were the same, the ways that newspapers and individual authors wrote about the Quints was very different. These differences depended on readership, place and popular interest. Further still, even though individual papers could pick and choose what they would print, the overarching themes of fairy tale lives and reassurance remain. The articles written about the Quints often seem unimportant and blasé; however, why were New Yorkers interested in the caterpillars of Northern Ontario? It was because of the Quints. It was because the Quints could be imagined sleeping on their veranda as film crews worked around them and caterpillars invaded the North. Even caterpillars could be made famous if placed in the right article with the right sisters.

Endnotes

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- 2 Vipond, "The Million Dollar Babies and the Media," 2.
- 3 Vipond, *Mass Media in Canada*, 77.
- 4 Vipond, *Mass Media in Canada*, 77.
- 5 Berton, 47.
- 6 Berton., 48.
- 7 "Dionnes Rouse Hospital," *New York Times*, March 29, 1936, sec. N9.
- 8 "Babies Shake Slight Head Cold," *North Bay Nugget*, Feb.14, 1936, p. 1.
- 9 "Petite Pauline Romps with Quintet," *North Bay Nugget*, Aug. 31, 1936, p.1.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Berton, 3.
- 12 Berton, 2.
- 13 Valverde, "Families, Private Property and the State,"15.
- 14 John MacCormac, "Quints Play for Gallery," *The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1936.
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- 17 "Quintuplets' Second Birthday," *The Times*, May 28 & 29, 1936.
- 18 "Telegrams in Brief," *The Times*, Feb. 21, 1936, p.13.
- 19 Gregory Clarke, "Quints Celebrate Their Second Birthday," *Toronto Daily Star*, May 28, 1936. p.1.
- 20 "Quints Could Have Fourtune of \$3,000,000," *Toronto Daily Star*, May 29, 1936, p. 1.
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- 24 "Quintuplets' Second Birthday," *The Times*, May 28, 1936.
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- 26 John MacCorrmac, "Two Candles for the Dionnes," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1936, SM 13.
- 27 "This is Baby's Birthday Party Day," *The Daily Register*, May 1936.
- 28 "Quints in Playhouse for Film Shooting," *The Nugget*, Aug. 19, 1936.

- 29 "Quints Movie Stops Because of Weather," *The Globe*, Aug. 25, 1936, Sec. 2.
- 30 "Dionnes say Change in Food Necessary; Find Toys of Dangerous Type," *The Nugget*, April 27, 1936, p.1.
- 31 "Physician say Weight Kept Down Purposely; Sleeping Periods Reduced," *The Nugget*, April 27, 1936, p.1.
- 32 "Dionnes say Change in Food Necessary; Find Toys of Dangerous Type," *The Nugget*, April 27, 1936, p.1.
- 33 "Given All they Want," *The Globe*, April 28, 1936, p.2.
- 34 "Toxoiding of Quintuplets is Seen as Big Boost To Work of Clinic," *Toronto Daily Star*, January 15, 1936, Sec. 2.
- 35 John MacCormac, "Quints Play for Gallery," *The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1936.
- 36 A series of books were published in the United States. The books were about the Quintuplets and consisted of Fairy Tale books, Nursery Rhymes, as well as storybooks about the Quints' everyday lives. Photographs of the Quints to match the text were included as well.
- 37 "Quints Movie Stopped Because of Weather," *The Globe*, August 25, 1936, Sec.2
- 38 "Four of Quintet Gain Weight," *The Nugget*, March 23, 1936, p. 3.
- 39 "Famed Babies Shake Slight Head Cold," *The Nugget*, February 14, 1936, p. 1.
- 40 "Quintuplets \$32,000 Trust Fund," *The Times*, April 15, 1936, p. 9.
- 41 McKay, "Why tell this parable?" 144-151.

Cakes, Candles, Trees and Toys: The Dionne Quintuplets, Celebrations, and Family Rituals

Stephanie Logan

The Dionne Quintuplets were born on 28 May 1934 into a French-Canadian farm family in the small community of Corbeil, Ontario. This was a period of Canadian history when two very distinct identities were shaping the nation. The majority of the Canadian population consisted of English-speaking Protestants, followed by the marginalized French-speaking Catholics. Both groups held very strong identities, each with their own customs, traditions, and beliefs. These beliefs did not coincide with one another, and the 1930s were a time when these two separate ethnicities grew further apart. The journey of the Quints lives from the moment that they were born was affected by the clash of these two nationalities.

Separated from their family when they were babies, the Dionne Quintuplets were in the public eye from a young age. As a consequence of their unique situation, the Quints were raised quite differently than if they had been left in the home of their parents Oliva and Elzire Dionne. It is important to note that the Quints were raised in a nursery, completely separate from their family and entirely unlike a normal family dwelling. In the nursery Dr. Dafoe and the nurses were a surrogate family to them. The Quints did not have a traditional home, living with their parents and siblings. This paper focuses on the importance of holidays and rituals to family life during the period the Quints were born into. At an early age, the Quints did not seem to participate in any holidays or rituals that would be common during the period. Subsequently, because the Quints were raised separately from their families, any holidays or rituals that they did technically participate in were cel-

celebrated differently than if they had been raised within the confines of a traditional French-Canadian home.

The Dionne's came from a French-Canadian background. Just like many other cultures, French-Canadians participate in holidays and rituals that pertained to their culture. Certain holidays held more significance than others and some were celebrated completely differently. The Quints would not have had the opportunity to experience any holidays or rituals that were supposed to be a part of their heritage. In fact, the Quints were portrayed as celebrating major holidays that would have been important to English-Canadians. I also say, "portrayed" because the reality that the Quints were actually celebrating these holidays is suspect. The majority of their holidays were 'celebrated' weeks before the actual date in order to capture the images for the awaiting public. It could even be said that the Quints were living 'photographic' holidays. It would appear that the realities of the life the Quints were living and the image presented to the public were very different. As well, the image presented seems to have reflected English cultural traditions, rather than, those of French-Canadians.

Furthermore, holidays and rituals celebrated by the Quints seem to have been moving toward American ideals, rather than remaining traditionally Canadian. Americans invested a lot of interest into the Quints; therefore it is natural that the Quints image would be created to satisfy their interests. Some American holidays at this time were more commercialized than the Canadian equivalent. As the Quints celebrated Christmas, birthdays, and especially Thanksgiving, their merriment became grounds for promotion more than an actual celebration of holidays themselves.

Holidays and rituals are an important part of establishing a family identity. They create memories and are based on traditions and routines. They help to create a sense of kinship, family solidarity, and community within the family.¹ Although the Dionne Quintuplets were portrayed as participating in and celebrating these important events, the fact is, they did not. The image of the Quints was used to celebrate English cultural traditions. Thus, the Quints were denied the opportunity of establishing a traditional family identity.

The Dionne Quintuplets and French-Canadian Identity

The story of the Dionne Quintuplets is one that has been told many times over. Everything about them has been recorded and shared, almost from the day that they were born. We know how they lived, what they ate, how much they weighed, as well as, their relationships with each other, their family, their guardians, and the famous Dr. Dafoe. English-Canadians embraced the Quints at a young age and subsequently the English-Canadian viewpoint has dominated discussions of the Quints over the past years.

Historian David Welch seeks to bring a different perspective to the story of the Dionne Quintuplets. He points out: “What most of these stories have failed to do, except in a passing fashion, has been to place the Quintuplets in the context of their own evolving ethnocultural community – French-Canadian or Franco-Ontarian society in the Ontario of the 1930s and 1940s.² Welch’s study seeks to place the Quintuplets as members of a specific community. By placing the community at the centre of the Quints’ story, within its own period in history, a better understanding of how the Dionne family participated with the larger French Canadian community can be reached. More important, the implications surrounding the removal of the Quints from this community can be revealed.³

Welch explains that by 1901 approximately 42 percent of the total population in the Nipissing District was French-Canadian. They tended to settle in culturally homogenous communities where often up to 90 percent of the population was French-Canadian although, it was not uncommon for a village a few miles away to be almost exclusively English speaking.⁴ This was certainly the case for Corbeil and Callander, where Callander, four miles away from Corbeil, was an English-speaking town with a minority French-speaking population. The differences between Callander and Corbeil reflected some of the social and ethnic divisions that were so common in the region. Even today, people tend to speak of the Dionne Quintuplets as having been from Callander, rather than from Corbeil, where they were actually born.⁵

The Dionne's were part of a typical rural French-Canadian community. Religion, as well as ethnicity, was a significant characteristic of the population.⁶ They were part of an agricultural French-Canadian family, with life closely centered on the parish.⁷ Even though French-Canadians had been among the first white settlers in northeastern Ontario, they held little influential power, except within their own communities. English-Canadians held the majority of the decision-making power within the country and generally ignored the minority presence of French-Canadians in northeastern Ontario. Leading up to the 1930s and thereafter, the birth of the Quints, hostility towards the French-Canadian in Ontario flourished. This was due in part to the French-Canadians' increase in population, along with their unwillingness to assimilate. In Canada, there was an increased anti-Catholic and anti-French feeling.⁸ This was the atmosphere into which the Dionne Quintuplets were born.

Also, it is important to consider the fact that the Quints were born during the Depression era. The family was an important support system during that time and the first place individuals would go for help. Rural life offered minimal opportunities for entertainment, so for those who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s, visiting family was essentially their only option for leisure. The family was clearly the focus of the social life.⁹ The Depression affected the way that most families celebrated holidays and special occasions. For most, the consumer aspect of holidays such as Christmas was unattainable due to their lack of spending money.¹⁰ The entire dynamic of family celebrations and rituals would have changed because of this.

Françoise Noël's *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario* was used here to examine the practices of holidays and rituals in Ontario around the time that the Quints were born. Sources that portray the Quints as celebrating certain holidays and rituals were also looked at. The reality could then be compared to the image. Understanding the communities and family life in the area that the Dionne Quints were born is important because it establishes a sense of where they were coming from. Holidays and rituals are an important part of family life and the establishment of community. At the

same time, different areas cultivate diverse communities and celebrate various holidays in different ways. Noël gives a detailed overview about what life would have been like in the Quints' community and how holidays would have been celebrated within it. By examining holidays and rituals in the Quints' community a correlation or tie can be produced between them and the community.

Elizabeth Pleck's *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture and Family Rituals*, provides a great understanding of the progression of holidays and rituals in the United States. She displays the evolving culture surrounding holidays and their shift to more commercialized forms. Americans tended to place more importance on certain holidays over others. This is especially true of what we have come to know as Thanksgiving. It is significant to understand the culture that surrounded American holidays because it aids in displaying the shift of Canadian holidays to resemble holidays more like those in the United States.

This paper will cover the time period from May 1936 to May 1937 and follows the Quints from their second birthday through to their third, the period of their peak 'cuteness.' During this period, the world claimed the Quints as their own. People simply could not get enough of them. Every little thing they did was reported upon. By looking at this media coverage, particularly *The Toronto Star* and *The North Bay Nugget*, an "image" of the Quints can be formed and drawn out. *Time Magazine*, along with mass-produced picture books of the Dionne Quintuplets which provided special features on the Quints for such celebrations as their birthdays and Christmas were also examined. The coverage of the Quints during the holiday seasons has been examined to show the holidays they celebrated, along with how they celebrated them. By using these sources along with Noël and Pleck, the importance of holidays and rituals during this period and how the Quints fit or did not fit into these significant events will be shown. While this paper only looks at one year, it is important to understand that all the nursery years were similar to this. While the Quints were presented to the public as participating in certain rituals and holidays, the reality continued to be that they

did not. Media sources both display the “image” of the Quints and reveal the reality of the situation.

Family Rituals, Celebrations, and Holidays

Pleck defines a family ritual as “a highly stylized cultural performance involving several family members that is repeated, has a formal structure, and involves symbolic behaviour...”¹¹ Although rituals have a distinct and recognizable structure and sequence to them, families often personalize them.¹² Rituals were a large part of the family identity. They brought families together. For example, Noël points out, “The recitation of the rosary and the family prayers were important rituals which denoted French Canadian identity as well as devotion.”¹³ Of course, celebrations, holidays, and rituals were also very personal. Each family had their own set of rituals, as well as, traditional ways of celebrating holidays. One individual that Noël interviewed by the name of Rita Landriault belonged to a French-Canadian family. She stated, “During the month of May [they] had to say the rosary after supper before they could go out and play. In their family, this took place immediately after supper, but in a neighbouring family they did the dishes first and then the rosary.”¹⁴ By no means did all French-Canadian families celebrate the same holidays or partake in the same rituals universally.

Family rituals were part of a structured family life. They provided stability, rooted the family, and provided a united family identity. Noël demonstrates:

Her [Rita’s] father was a mechanic for the CPR and left for work everyday at 8:00 a.m. On his return home around five, the children used to go and meet him as he walked up the street... He always kept a treat from his lunch ... to give as a reward to the first of his progeny to reach him. He even joked with his children, asking them if they came only for the apple.¹⁵

This was a good example of an individual family ritual. It was repeated

daily and it followed a set pattern.¹⁶ These children knew that every day they could rely on their father, on his return home to be walking up the street. They could always run to meet him. It was a moment shared among all of them. It brought the family closer together, and created bonds between the parent and their children. The Dionne Quintuplets never got to experience a moment like the Landriault family. By removing the Quints from their original home, even though they were still technically part of the Dionne family, they had no sense of the family rituals. Therefore, it can be said that the Quints were denied a part of who they are and sense of where they come from.

Holidays and family celebrations are an important part of any family. They represent their culture and backgrounds. Even the meals that are consumed at these family celebrations take on special meaning; they create a sense of kinship and community.¹⁷ The French-Canadian community celebrated some holidays differently from other ethnic groups in Canada. These holidays and rituals, such as Christmas, which included a celebration referred to as the *réveillon*, were a large part of the French-Canadian identity.¹⁸ The family played an important role in maintaining cultural traditions and in its members a sense of ethnic identity.¹⁹

The Dionne Quintuplets never truly got to experience these family celebrations. When looking in the newspapers, the *Toronto Star* and *The Nugget*, along with magazines such as *Time Magazine*, there is something printed about the Quints almost every day. Unfortunately, there was not a substantial amount covering major holidays that the Quints partook in. The most popular celebrations covered by these sources are the Quints' birthday and Christmas. Other holidays included St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. However, what had been printed about the Quints reflected the reality of their situation. For the most part, the Quints celebrated these holidays separately from the Dionne family. The absence of their family deprived the Quints from establishing cultural traditions as well as a sense of ethnic identity.

The Quintuplets Celebrate Their Third Birthday

The Quintuplets were featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* on May 31, 1937. (See Figure 1). They were celebrating their third birthday and appear to be intrigued and delighted by the enormous cake that is set before them. However, the Quintuplets were not being candidly captured as they blow out the candles of their third-birthday cake. In fact, at the time this photo was taken, it was not even their birthday. The article that follows this full-page photo of the Quints conveys what was happening with the birthday festivities. The article states:



Figure 1: The Quints with a large birthday cake on their fourth birthday. The *Times Magazine* photo is not included for copyright reasons. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book41, p. 27a. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

Unlike any other children, the Quintuplets had to have three birthday parties. For besides belonging to Canada, the Crown and Medicine, they also belong to a tremendous public who agents pay good money to witness their doings. Three weeks ago for still cameras and four weeks ago for newsreels, this week's party was fully dress-rehearsed.²⁰

Just like the article points out, the Quints were unlike any other children. They were having multiple birthday parties but they were not real celebrations. The Quints were merely portrayed as celebrating. This article suggests that these staged celebrations were the same for other holidays as well, even Christmas and Thanksgiving. In addition, a caption explaining one of the many pictures featured in a three page spread celebrating the Quints' birthday in *The Nugget* was titled, "Birthday Party Rehearsal." It reads, "Knowing that they can't have their cakes and eat them, too, the Dionne Quints are satisfied simply to examine their birthday cakes which are all ready for tomorrow."²¹ The Quints, although young, did not seem to have any notion that it was their special day. They would not have had a concept of a 'real' birthday because everything would have been just dress up and pretend. In fact, because the Quintuplets were photographed everyday, getting dressed up was much like their everyday routine. The Quints put on pretty dresses and had their hair done on a daily basis in order to be photographed, as well as, presentable for the audience that came to visit them. The most noticeable absence from these celebrations though was their family.

The Dionne family was allowed to celebrate the Quints' third birthday. However, it was not a family occasion. They had to follow the strict rules of Dr. Dafoe. The feature in *Time Magazine* adds:

Medicine has controlled their every moment ever since Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe delivered them. Their birthday party this week will be a strictly hygienic affair. They will wear special party dresses with embroidery and ribbons, but their parents Oliva & Elzire Dionne, their five older brothers and sisters who are to eat most of the birthday

cake, will be obliged to wear white cotton hospital gowns over their everyday clothes. If any one of them has a cold or even looks ill, he will lose his invitation to the party.²²

This statement was intended to assure the public that every precaution was being taken to ensure that the Quints were receiving the best possible treatment. Nevertheless, it is plain to see that this was not a family celebration and it was orchestrated in a way to exclude the Dionne family from the celebration. The Quints were dressed up to look cute; they were the ones being photographed and the ones that the public wanted to see. The family was not a part of this celebration, they were just bystanders to an event and could easily be removed if deemed necessary.

The family was featured in *The Nugget* on 28 May 1937, in an article which it clarified exactly what the remainder of the Dionne family were doing for the Quintuplets' birthday. "The family, except for Oliva Jr., and the quintuplets, marked the third birthday of the "Famed Five Sisters" by attending mass at the Corbeil Church at 8 o'clock this morning. Because of the fuss attending the birthday broadcast from the quint's nursery the "family at home" did not expect to celebrate with the quintuplets today.²³ Clearly, the excerpt from *The Nugget* displays that the Quintuplets' birthday was certainly not a traditional family celebration. The Dionne family did not even attend the Quints' celebration. The "image" of the hygienic, happy celebration is contradicted by absence of the Dionne family. Conventionally, the family played an important role in fostering this sense of identity and helped maintain cultural traditions.²⁴ Therefore, excluding the Dionne family from such celebrations as the Quints' birthday eliminated any cultural traditions that could have been formed. Any sense of ethnic identity was deprived from the Quints.

Time Magazine seems to have taken an English viewpoint when writing about the Quints, reflecting the popular attitudes of the period. The caption to the full-page picture featuring the Quints read: "THE QUINTUPLETS. In bodies their mother, in minds their father." The article explained: "The stock from which the Quintuplets come may not be promising for keen intelligence but it is competent enough for

its rustic environment, is sturdy, earthy, profile... According to a popular generalization, they therefore should resemble Oliva Dionne in mind and spirit, and this they apparently do.²⁵ At the height of their popularity, the Quints were torn between the French-Canadian and the English-speaking worlds. Oliva, knowing English and having more education than most people in the Corbeil area, would be considered more 'English' than his partner, Elzire, who only spoke French. Thus, the Quints' intelligence would be compared to their father's. Heaven forbid that a French-Canadian, especially ones from such a 'rustic environment,' be more intelligent than an English-speaking person. The majority of the public did not want to be reminded that the Quints came from a rural French-Canadian family.

The Quintuplets Celebrate Christmas

For many families Christmas was a "domestic occasion" that put the emphasis on getting together. A "domestic occasion" was a celebration of home and family.²⁶ Pleck states, "Christmas was supposed to be a special time for youngsters, when parents took pleasure from the delighted squeals of children as they opened presents and gazed wide-eyed at a tree lit with candles."²⁷ For others, particularly French-Canadian families in the country, more emphasis was placed on community than the domestic nuclear family.²⁸ Noël explains, "Traditionally, French-Canadians celebrated Christmas as a religious holiday with a midnight mass, followed by a meal with family and perhaps a few neighbours called the *réveillon*."³⁰ Urban English-Canadians seemed celebrate more of the "domestic occasion." Christmas for these families included attending church, putting up a tree, distributing gifts bought by Santa Claus, and sharing family dinner.³¹

The front page of *The Nugget* on 28 December 1936, captures the image of Dr. Dafoe and the Quints caught up in Yuletide excitement. (See Figure 2.) Dr. Dafoe is dressed up as Santa Claus himself. The tree is trimmed and decorated festively. Stockings are hung for each little girl and an abundance of toys are just waiting to be played with. This image seems to capture the perfect Christmas or at least, the perfect English-Canadian Christmas. This image reflected what the awaiting



Figure 2: The Dionne quintuplets with Dr. Dafoe as Santa Claus. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 12, p. 38a. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

public wanted to see, not what was actually happening.

The public celebration of Christmas tended to represent the dominant culture, rather than various ethnic groups.³² The dominant culture during this period was English-Canadian. Thus, the Quints were captured as celebrating a traditional English cultured Christmas. Just like their birthday, the Quints' Christmas was 'staged.' One article in *The Nugget* explained: "Dolls, toys, clothing and cards are pouring into the mail-box at the hospital... however, most of these toys will be stored away or given to the older children."³³ The Quints were presented as having the 'perfect' Christmas. They even had their very own Santa Claus. However, the reality was that the Quints were not truly

celebrating Christmas. They did not keep any of the toys. Furthermore, the Dionne family was absent from the 'Yuletide Excitement' that is captured in this photograph. *The Nugget*, in an article titled "All Dionne Family Feast In Hospital" described the Christmas celebration actually held at the nursery:

There were two Christmas trees, two Christmas parties, and two Christmas dinners at the Dafoe Hospital Wednesday, one for the Quintuplets themselves, and one for Mr. and Mrs. Oliva Dionne and their five elder children who were guests at the hospital... But one flaw was present in Christmas for the elder children. They went to the hospital anticipating a romp with their younger sisters, but fear of cold and germs prompted a decisions that this was not allowed. However, five Dionnes on each side of the glass wall of the nursery, there was a merry old time of flirting and grinning. While the dinner party for the elder Dionnes was going on, the blind over the nursery window was left drawn... the quints were having a meal of another sort. Their diet was the same [on] Christmas as any other day...

While the title of the article suggests that the entire Dionne family, including the five Quintuplets came together to celebrate Christmas, the details show that they were separated by a glass wall. The Quints did not receive any special meal, which at their age is understandable. However, the Quints did not even get to sit around the dinner table as their family ate their Christmas feast. The Quints were unaware that this day was different from any other. They followed the same routine that they did everyday in the nursery. There was no sense that they were a part of anything special. Celebratory meals take on special meaning. They help in creating a sense of kinship and community.³⁴ Meals tend to bring the whole family together. It symbolizes the unity of the family.³⁵ The Quints did not partake in any celebratory meal with their family. This example shows that the Quints and the Dionne family were not united, especially as a family.

Shamrocks, Ghouls, and the Easter Bunny

The Quints celebrated most holidays without the rest of the Dionne family. In actuality, the Quints did not ‘celebrate’ in the traditional manner. Just like their birthday and Christmas, holidays such as St. Patrick’s Day, Halloween, as well as Easter, were rarely celebrated by the Quints. They too were ‘photographic holidays’ in which the Quints posed for cameras in order to please the demanding public. On St. Patrick’s Day for example, each Quint received a tiny religious medal with a green ribbon. The small write up that covered this event explained, “Although French-Canadian by birth, the Corbeil quintet marked the feast day of Ireland’s patrons by wearing the medals from the Emerald Isle.”³⁶ St. Patrick’s Day was not considered a traditional Canadian holiday, let alone a traditional French one, but the Quints were discussed celebrating it, in at least a modest fashion, in order to please the worldwide public that adored them. The “image” of the Quints was meant to satisfy everyone and if nothing else, the Quintuplets at least looked cute running around with their green ribbons and medals.

One holiday that the Quints definitely did not participate in was Halloween. The *Toronto Star* reported on 2 November 1936 that “Hallowe’en Spooks Don’t Disturb Quints.” The small article that followed stated: “Hallowe’en spooks were not allowed to interfere with the sleep of the Dionne quints. While other tiny tots roamed abroad wearing false faces and asking for treats, Marie, Annette, Emille, Cecile, and Yvonne went to bed as usual Saturday night, Dr. Dafoe said tonight.”³⁷ It is understandable at the young age of two that the Quints would not be out roaming with other children. French-Canadians in this area were ambivalent about celebrating Halloween which was not a French-Canadian tradition. However, this article seems to imply that, even if they were older, the Quints would not be allowed out because it may disrupt their usual routine. Just like at Christmas, the Quints were not permitted to break from the daily routine of the nursery. The Quints had a structured schedule and routine that they followed each day in the nursery. They followed a specific diet and were not permitted to eat ‘treats.’³⁸ Halloween would not have been an exception to this. The

Quints went to bed every night at the same time, including Halloween night. Halloween, like other holidays, can be seen as a community event. People celebrated much more as communities rather than as nuclear families.³⁹ The carnivalesque nature of it allows for freedom, fun, and a communal spirit as children run from door to door asking for treats. In a small way, it brings communities together with fun and festivities. Even as the Quints got older, they did not go out into the community and trick-or-treat like other children their age. While the community claimed the Quints as their own, the Quints were actually denied being a physical part of the greater community.

Easter was another holiday that the Quints celebrated simply. They did not hunt for Easter eggs or play with the Easter bunny. They did not even attend church. But, according to *The Toronto Star*, “Dressed in their Easter finery with their bonnets filled with Easter flowers the Dionne quintuplets are all ready to lead the Easter parade.”⁴⁰ Pleck points out, “... Easter has retained a dual meaning as both a religious day and a time for family gathering.”⁴¹ On top of this Pleck adds, “... Easter placed as the third most important holiday for taking photographs...”⁴² Naturally, there was no shortage of photographs taken of the Quints. The Quints did not celebrate Easter as a religious holiday or with their family. It provided another opportunity for the Quints to be dressed up and paraded around for the public. Easter, like other holidays was just another day.

American Celebrations and Commercialization

The Quints celebrations can also be viewed as an example of Canadian holidays modeling themselves after American holidays during this period. In the United States holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, Mother’s Day, and even Easter, were much more commercialized than in Canada. They were a means for promoting products and consumer goods.⁴³ Holidays moved away from sentimental family occasions to ones based on gifts and gift giving. The Quints were not frequently presented as celebrating holidays with their family. In addition, celebrations such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, as well as, their birthday, were used as promotional tools for the Quints themselves

and the lifestyle they led. Christmas, for example, was an ideal time to show the world that the Dionne Quintuplets were treated like royalty and were indeed the Canadian princesses. The image of the Quints at Christmas displayed the 'perfect' Christmas, complete with numerous toys (Figure 2). This was a Christmas that most families during the Depression could not afford. The Quint Christmas represented a commercialized holiday that could only be afforded by a few. These were five little girls who received everything the public thought they could want or need. Regarding Thanksgiving, Pleck points out, "In the Thanksgiving issue of the Saturday Evening Post for 1931, an advertisement for Camels touted the cigarettes as 'something to be thankful for'"⁴⁴ Holidays like Thanksgiving were used to promote many products including cigarettes. Thanksgiving was a particularly important holiday in the United States. In fact, Pleck states, "... more Americans travel just before and after Thanksgiving than at any other time of the year."⁴⁵ The majority of Canadians, French or English did not celebrate Thanksgiving. At least, Thanksgiving was not celebrated to the same extent as it was in the United States. Yet, the Quints were captured celebrating Thanksgiving festively with a giant turkey as their centerpiece. All five Quints surrounded a giant turkey, much like they surrounded their birthday cake on the cover of *Time Magazine*. This staged photo was published in. Produced by Americans for a mostly American audience, this picture book was a souvenir for the adoring public. Displaying the Quints celebrating Thanksgiving was meant to please their American audience who might then be even more likely to come to see them for themselves. Thus, the American public played a large role in shaping the 'staged image' of the Dionne Quints during this period.

The celebration of the Quints' birthday was used to promote the Quints themselves. Their second birthday was used to promote the Quints new contract with Twentieth Century Fox and the release of the film, *The Country Doctor*. In *The Toronto Star*, a two-column description of the Quints' birthday party was followed by four columns dedicated to the Quints latest lucrative deals and film contracts. Celebrating the lives of the Quints provided the best opportunity to promote

related products such as the film *The Country Doctor*. The Quints were considered a miracle and every year they celebrated a birthday was another miracle. The public interest in everything “Quint” meant that anything to do with them would be read. Their birthday therefore provided the perfect opportunity to promote anything that the Quints were associated with. The Quints were a “hot” commodity.

Conclusion

Unlike most children during the early years of their lives, the Dionne Quintuplets “belonged” to a large adoring public. They never truly belonged to a family. Each world had a hold on them and wanted or needed them for numerous reasons. Being born to a French-Canadian family did not stop English-Canadians from embracing the Quints. In fact, during a period of hostile feelings towards the French-Canadians, those that were part of the English-speaking community seemed to feel that they needed to save the Quints from the situation they were born into, especially their rural French-Canadian family. As a result, the Quints grew up torn between two very distinct identities.

The Quints never got to experience the simple patterns and rituals of daily life that bonded families and helped create a unique family identity. The same can be said for celebrations and holidays as well. Most celebrations and holidays for the Quints were not spent with their families but rather without them. On a larger scale, celebrations and holidays became “staged” events for the Quints. Images and film of them was captured days or weeks before the actual event. These images were staged, created for an admiring public that felt that they had a claim on “The Famous Five.” In fact, the Quints did not experience most of these events in the usual sense. They were not given the opportunity to establish memories, traditions, or even the sentimental feelings that develop around celebrations and holidays. Furthermore, these celebrations were used to promote the Quints as the ‘princesses’ of Canada. Although not a large shift, the Quints’ “image” contributed to the Americanization of Canadian holidays. This was especially relevant in their portrayal of Thanksgiving.

Family rituals, celebrations, and holidays aid in shaping an individ-

ual's identity. They create a sense of where you come from and help form traditions that can be passed on through the generations. One's heritage and sense of belonging are all wrapped up within the family unit and the celebrations and holidays that they observe. Removed from their home and separated from their family, the Quints did not develop a sense of community and they certainly did not develop a sense of what it meant to be a domestic nuclear family. Essentially, the Quints were deprived of a large part of where they came from.

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Quintland and Coney Island: Tourist Attractions that Weathered the Depression

Leesa Church

May 28, 1934 was an extremely important day for the small town of Callander, Ontario, Canada. The five identical girls who were born that day, better known as the Dionne quintuplets, became the first identical set of quintuplets to survive for more than a few days. Although Annette, Cécile, Emilie, Marie, and Yvonne were born in Corbeil, they were more often associated with Callander, the home of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe, the doctor who attended their birth. Shortly after their birth, the girls were made wards of the state. They were then removed from their home and placed in the “Dafoe Hospital” across the street, ostensibly to ensure a positive and healthy environment for them.¹ It is quite obvious, however, that the government realized that the profound interest in the Dionne family could spark a much needed tourist industry. The following spring, the Dafoe Hospital became the centre of an emerging tourist attraction known as Quintland. This paper will explore how Quintland became such a successful tourist attraction and its similarities with the circus-like conditions and atmosphere at Coney Island, an amusement park which included displays such as freak shows. The focus of this study is May 1934 to the closure of Quintland in 1943, as well as the mid-twentieth century when Coney Island’s freak shows became a regular and popular tourist attraction. In order to get a better understanding of tourism in general, the origins of twentieth-century tourism are first explored. Since Canada and the United States were heavily influenced by the Great Depression, a close examination is necessary to discover why millions of people still made the journey to

the small town of Callander, Ontario, Canada, which had little to offer except a glimpse of the Dionne Quintuplets.

Traveling did not seem to be a great priority in the 1930s as Canada was hit extremely hard as a result of the Great Depression. The people of Ontario, on average, had seen a forty-four percent decrease in their per capita income. “Tens of thousands of people were dependent on government relief, charity and food handouts for daily survival,” and the Federal Department of Labour stated that a family “needed between \$1200 and \$1500 a year to maintain the minimum standard of decency. At the time, [1930s] sixty percent of men and eighty-two percent of women made less than \$1000 a year.”² The values of stocks were dropping quickly and as “the demand for goods and services dropped business firms ceased to exist. Even the Canadian Pacific Railway, considered one of the world’s most reliable income earners, had financial problems in 1932.”³ Work opportunities were few and many Canadian families were without a steady income and therefore struggled financially in the ‘dirty thirties.’ With most people not having the time or money to travel, how was it possible for over three million people to travel to Callander for no other reason than to see the miraculous Dionne Quintuplets?

Historian Michael Dawson recognized the 1930s as an era of economic restraint and sacrifice but he argued that tourism promoters still remained active throughout the Depression and the Second World War. Tourist promoters “were instrumental in creating postwar consumer demand for tourism,”⁴ but they had to be extremely strategic in order to expand the industry. In April 1932, Winnipeg’s mayor, Colonel Ralph Webb delivered a speech with hopes of convincing Canadians to help insulate the country. His ideas seemed simple enough to grasp; he advocated minimizing the expenditure of tourist dollars outside the country. Keeping the Canadian dollar circulating within Canada was heavily encouraged. Webb led by example when he announced he had chosen Victoria, British Columbia, Canada as his holiday destination. He believed that Canadians should learn more about their own country instead of opting for places like Hawaii or California for vacations.⁵ Two years later, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett also publicly encouraged

tourists to travel within Canada. In November 1934 he proposed: "let it be easy for them [tourists] to come, pleasant for them to stay, and difficult for them to leave."⁶ Bennett's comments indicate that in the depth of the Depression tourism was still garnering the attention of even the most powerful politicians.

In a period when cars began to replace trains as the mode of transportation for tourists, good roads were vital to Quintland's success as a tourist attraction. In 1931, Minister of the Ontario Department of Public Highways, S. Henry, stated that the Highways of Ontario had reached an advanced stage of improvement. He recognized that Ontario was inviting motor tourists to visit Ontario and acknowledged the successes of creating easier roads to travel on. He explained:

For the past twenty-nine years, the Provincial Government has been interested, financially in the improvement of Ontario's roadways, and the beneficial result of this interest, coupled with local endeavour is clearly demonstrated from the fact that out of a total of 70,695 miles in all, 37,721 are improved gravel, 6,947 are paved. Thus over sixty percent of all roads have been improved and surfaced - a greater percentage than is found in any other Province on the North American continent. Today good roads, not always paved, but smooth, safe roads which the motorist can use with comfort, stretch from one end of the Province to the other, and lead to many beautiful spots where rest and health are found for all who seek.⁷

Henry was deeply concerned with the improvement of the roads in Ontario as he went on to suggest that Ontario's roads would be free from detours and patrolled by officers' whose responsibilities included giving direction as well as information to motorists, making highway travel more enjoyable and less hazardous. There was also an increase in government tourist booklets, available upon request, that informed the reader about Ontario conditions, including fish and game regulations, outstanding points of interest, and providing lists of hotels and resorts.⁸ Records indicated that over three and a half million motor

cars entered Ontario from the United States in 1930. Road conditions therefore needed to be accommodating to the travelers. The government was quick to improve the roads leading to Quintland. “Visitors driving over the fine modern road to the hospital have the Ontario Government to thank for its present good condition. When the Quintuplets were born the road was little more than a trail. Today it is a fine wide road. Upwards of \$75,000 had been spent on this road and it was the ultimate intention to continue the artery through Corbeil, three miles beyond the hospital, and from there join up with the Ottawa-Toronto link of the TransCanada highway, making of the ‘Quintuplet Trail’ virtually a one-way street with traffic eastbound only.”⁹ Numerous images from the period show that large numbers of motor vehicles



Figure 1: “Daily Crowds Visiting the Dionne Quintuplets.”
Dionne Quint Museum.

were accommodated at the Quintland site. (See Figure 1.) The birth of the Quintuplets had pushed the Ontario Government to make Callander an easily accessible destination.

North Bay was also interested in using the birth of the Quintuplets to its advantage. An ‘Old Home Week’ celebration was planned for 1935 and the city had every intention on capitalizing on the presence of the Quints only a few miles away. Old Home Week celebrations previously included traditional holiday elements such as parades, fire-

works, sports, pageantry and ritualistic entertainment.¹⁰ Placed “in the summer calendar to include a holiday such as Dominion Day or the August municipal holiday, [and] these events were designed to attract tourists, especially ‘Old Boys,’ for the holiday as well as celebrate an anniversary or other events.”¹¹ However, in 1935 the Dionne Quintuplets were to be the major attraction. North Bay was only about twelve miles from Callander and North Bay’s “Old Home Week” organizers knew that this would help promote tourists to Northern Ontario. In the Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week, there were not only car advertisements claiming “Room for a big family to ride in comfort” and “A Chevrolet takes Dr. Dafoe Each Day – Winter and Summer to Attend the Precious Quintuplets” but there was also a larger than average section dedicated to the Dionne Quintuplets.¹² The introduction for the “World’s Sweethearts” stated that even though visitors were discouraged at first from seeing the hospital, “Today, arrangements have been made which permit visitors to the hospital to secure an excellent view of the babies, at specified hours in each day.”¹³ The fact that ‘Old Home Week’ planning had to be done well in advance of the summer months in 1935 suggested that the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets was an immediate addition to the week of celebration in North Bay. The feature continued on to say that just a few days after the birth, a board of guardians “had been established by court order, and they made immediate preparations to erect a suitable building in which the babies could be housed. A start was made on the present building, across the road from the Dionne homestead.”¹⁴ Although the health and safety of the girls was a major concern, it was also recognized early on that these ‘model babies’ would need a suitable living space that allowed them to be publicly displayed. In North Bay’s local newspaper, an 11 January 1935 caption read “Executive Plans Annual Session Tourist Traders.” The story informed the city that “with representation from various parts of the province, the executive of the Ontario Tourist Association are convening in the Empire hotel today to plan.”¹⁵ The Quintuplets as a tourist attraction was most likely discussed. In February 1936, a draft plan for the Quintuplet playground was published in the *Toronto Star*. The short article accompanying the plan concluded

“These children are the treasures of the world. Why should they not be seen?”¹⁶ The impact for tourism spread far beyond Callander and North Bay. Toronto was also interested in sharing some of the generated wealth. Under the headline “Big Hotel Planned Near Dionne Girls” the *Toronto Star* reported that a Toronto company was going to erect a hotel, acting as a tourist resort and costing around \$75,000.¹⁷ Much of Ontario had an interest in the success of Quintland.

North Bay’s approach to tourism promotion was to couple the new accessibility to the Quintuplets with the constructed image of North Bay as a ‘Tourist Paradise.’ It was said that “sparkling health is wrapped up in its clear airs, in its long hours of sunshine, its even climate, its pure Laurentian waters, and its unlimited opportunities for diverting and interesting outings and sport by lake and river.”¹⁸ As people began to have more appreciation for scenery and landscapes, North Bay promoted its clean air and healthy city to make it an inviting tourist destination for those who made the journey to visit the famous Dionne sisters.

Local residents as well as government officials were interested in seeing the growth of tourism in North Bay. *The Nugget* offered a column entitled “What’s your view on improving the city?” where local North Bay residents offered their input on catering to the tourist industry. On 9 January 1935, Ray Moyer, a well known merchant and active member of the Rotary Club wrote: “Beautification of North Bay by means of trees, is a suggestion... Since North Bay has so many boulevards, this method of giving the city a symmetrical beauty, which catches the eye of every tourist could be used to great advantage.”¹⁹ Two months later, W.M Flannery wrote for the same column dwelling on the city’s ever increasing tourist trade and stated “North Bay needs a new tourist park and camping ground. If they saw a really attractive camping ground, secluded and quiet, clean and beautifully planted with shrubs and flowers, they would be tempted to stay here.”²⁰ Provincial and local officials along with residents of North Bay were working to beautify the city so it could transform into a welcoming destination and increase the likelihood of residing tourists who were visiting the Quintuplets.

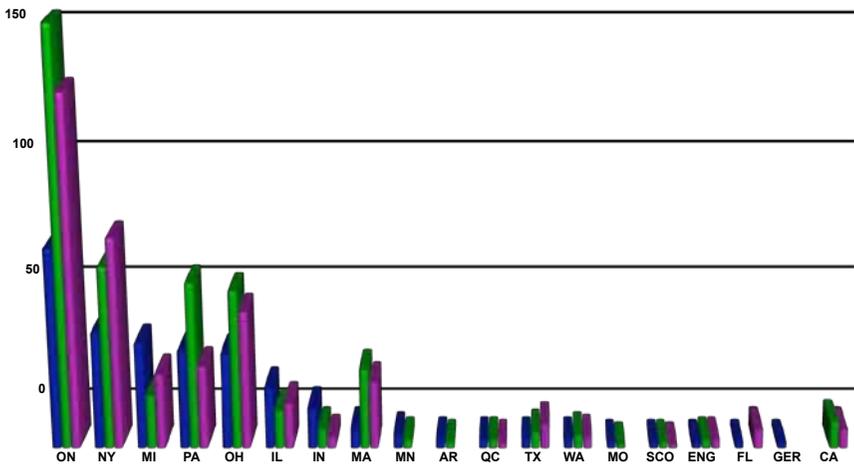


Figure 2: Number of visitors from different provinces and states to Quintland the first week of July in the years 1937, 1938, 1939. Dionne Quint Museum, Guest Books.

The tourists that came to view the Quints were from all over the world. The information found in Quintland guest books for the first week of July in 1937, 1938, and 1939 shows that people from Ontario made up the bulk of tourists, but there were still large numbers of people from the United States making the trip (Figure 2). It is important to remember that not everyone passing through would have signed the guest book and therefore these statistics were not used for calculating the daily number of tourists but rather to show the relationship between their origin. States such as New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio were listed often in the guest books for all three years studied. Transportation and geography would be a factor in this as all these states are situated close to the Canadian border, increasing the level of comfort their people would have in making this trip. Also, looking at vacation brochures in this period offers insight as to why so many Americans from these places were able to afford the trip to

Callander. One vacation brochure titled "Vacation Motor Tours: New England and Canada" promoted two different tours. A twelve-day bus tour from New York City and Boston went to the Thousand Islands, Toronto, Niagara Falls, Callander, Ottawa, Montreal and Vermont for a cost of \$145.00 per person for two in a room, or \$156.00 for a single room. A second eleven-day tour was also offered that left from Boston or Albany and cost \$135.00 per person for two in a room, or \$145.00 for a single room. The first tour was offered every Saturday from June 26 to September 18, while the Albany tour was offered every Sunday from June 27 to September 19.²¹ The visit to the small but booming town of Callander fell on the seventh day of the tour which seems to suggest it was one of the climaxes of the trip. "This tour covers the most scenic portions in Ontario," as "the bus rides along the famous Gorge route to Niagara Falls, visits the Dionne Quintuplets, and [stops for] sightseeing in Niagara Falls."²² The fact that Callander was included in a tour that focused on largely populated and culturally rich areas exemplifies how popular the Dionne Quintuplets were, even outside of Canada.

The headline of the *Detroit News Pictorial* for 14 September 1941 read: "Five Good Reasons the Dionne Quintuplets have made Callander, Ontario the Biggest Little Town in the World!" In an interview Dr. Dafoe remarked "We expect hundreds of visitors every day until the final exhibition in October...Even when the snow is a yard deep people will still come -- just to look things over from the road."²³ The article also highlighted that Callander, a previously obscure saw-mill community was transformed into a 'sightseers Klondike,' whose cash registers' tinkle increased as visitors from Hawaii, South Africa, Alaska, Newfoundland, Mexico and every other point of the compass in America came to bear witness to the miracle birth.²⁴ Transportation accessibility and affordability were definite factors in the success of Quintland as tourist destination.

The whole point of going to Quintland was to be able to see the Quints in person. The Dafoe Hospital was a low, modern building with a garden and a high fence. In the early days, the nurses caring for the girls would bring the children out one by one onto the balcony and show them to the crowds below. The Dionne girls were not

even a year old when they began to be put on display. The nursery was later modified to accommodate viewing by tourists. The nursery itself was “flanked by a staff house and a guardhouse. Beyond it lay the horseshoe-shaped playground building and observatory gallery.”²⁵ The entire unit was heavily secured. There was a seven-foot fence of meshed wire and police guards at the gates. The playground was “surrounded on three sides by a U-shaped roofed passageway with window facing inward and fitted with a silvery screen of wire. From this dark tunnel the five toddlers could be seen playing”²⁶ by the thousands of tourists that watched daily. In 1936, when the girls were two years old, video footage shows two nurses dressed in white with their right arm raised, twirling around.²⁷ Their actions prompted the Dionne sisters to do the same as they were clearly putting on a performance for their visitors. The world’s most famous little girls were identically and fashionably dressed for playing outside at the nursery. Dorothy Millichamp, who supervised the Quints understood that “every eye was on the babies and that the babies themselves were aware of it.”²⁸ She continued, “The children became very aware. They’d get up on the jungle gym and they’d pose. They knew perfectly well what they were doing”²⁹ Nurse Cecile Michaud recalled similarly “[The Quints] were little mimics, beautiful actors. They just loved to pose for pictures. There were no problems with that at all...At the shows they co-operated very well. We’d keep them on their tricycles so they’d make the rounds so everybody could see them”³⁰ It was apparent that the nurses tried to engage the girls in staged activities to win over the hearts of the tourists.

Since millions of people came to Callander, Ontario during the early years of the Dionne sisters’ lives, it would only seem logical for the girls themselves to benefit from their success; however, this was definitely not the case. An article written in *Maclean’s* in 1998 stated that “according to some estimates, the Quints generated nearly \$500 million in tourist revenues for the province...But by the time they were 7 in 1941, there was only \$1 million in the trust, and 14 years later... the sum had fallen to \$800,000.”³¹ It was evident that the Dionne Quintuplets financial future was less important than the town’s economic status. Everyone who was involved with Quintland seemed to pros-



Figure 3: Tourists inside Papa Dionne's Souvenir Store. *Detroit News Pictorial*, 14 September 1941, Dionne Quint Museum.



Figure 4: Oliva Dionne's souvenir shop. Dionne Quint Museum

per from their popularity. “Papa” Dionne undoubtedly benefitted through his Souvenir Shop where many people came looking for his autograph, which cost 25 cents, and other Dionne Quint souvenirs (Figure 3 and 4). Pierre Berton concluded that his store “netted about eight thousand dollars during the tourist season.”³² Ultimately, however, the largest financial gain was experienced by those who were not related to the girls. Hotel companies, gas stations, and travel agencies were among the many that benefited from the Quintuplet’s popularity. The Callander hotel added another floor and doubled its accommodation while plans for a new hotel, the Red Line Inn, were being developed. Another restaurant opened and by 1937 “there was no need for a relief office; every able-bodied man was working.”³³ Tourist camps and lodges were also very popular. Berton stated there were “almost two hundred of them – strung out along the highway to North Bay for four miles; they employed nineteen hundred people each season.”³⁴ Even the post office got into the act: “A staff of three yesterday [July 5, 1936] was very busy, and it was announced last night that almost 5,000 postcards had been sold.”³⁵ (See Figure 5.) Chief Harold Goulais also



Figure 5: Working at the Callander Post Office. *Detroit News Pictorial*. 14 September 1941. Dionne Quint Museum.



Figure 6: Chief Harold Goulais Posing with Tourists. *Detroit News Pictorial*, 14 September 1941. Dionne Quint Museum.

operated at Quintland. He can be seen posing with tourists for a photograph in one photo (Figure 6). The caption stated: "Harold Goulais, an Indian chief, also 'cashes in' on the Quints by posing for tourists for his business partner, a photographer."³⁶ The cost was likely twenty-five cents.³⁷ Many people received an income from the Quint tourists if they had something unique to offer.

Some comparisons between Quintland and Coney Island, New York, seem warranted. During the early 1900s there was "hardly a town or village on Long Island, from Brooklyn to Babylon, [and] from Patchogue to Montauk Point."³⁸ The component parts of Coney Island were sand, hotels, and promiscuous humanity. But by the mid-1920s, the place had achieved what Bruce Watson called "mythic status in American culture." It became so popular, he points out, that although there were well over 1500 amusement parks across the country, each did what it could to be similar to Coney Island. Even though the Depression caused many amusement parks to close, Coney Island managed to persevere through the extremely tough times. "By the late 1930s, Coney's five-month season was drawing 25 million people, more than all the major league baseball games around the country. By then, this small strip of sand held the world's two largest fun parks, 60 bathhouses, 13 carousels, 11 roller coasters, 2 waxworks, 6 penny arcades, 5 tunnel rides, 20 shooting galleries, 3 freak shows, and 200 snack bars and restaurants."³⁹

How did Coney Island remain so popular even in the Depression era? First, Coney Island was known as the "Nickel Empire." A "nickel subway ride would get you there. A nickel bought a hot dog...A nickel for a milk shake and a nickel for most rides."⁴⁰ Some things even cost less than five cents; a soda was only three cents. In 1939, a city editor sent a cub reporter to Coney. He was told to take his wife and go on every ride in the place, eat as much as they liked and write a piece on their experience. The reporter followed his instructions and after he returned home sent in an expense account for only \$5.50.⁴¹ Coney Island was miraculously able to avoid the effects of inflation for two decades. Inexpensive prices were definitely a pull factor and many took advantage of such low costs. At Quintland, admission to see the

Quints was free, but as we have seen, there were souvenirs and many other things to spend money on.

Second, around the time of the Second World War, landscapes became less important because people wanted to go places that had contrived environments. This meant that people were seeking destinations that were not solely based on natural resources but on material objects. These contrived destinations had the amenities of home, such as food and accommodations.⁴² War had heightened the country's need for excitement, and Coney Island seemed like the perfect place to go for a fun filled, yet inexpensive day.⁴³ Even though the park had suffered from dim lighting because of the blackouts and war, "still the crowds grew...[as] servicemen hurled baseballs at cartoons of Hitler and Mussolini."⁴⁴ Tourist promoters at Coney Island used the war context and depression era to enhance their status as an escape from life's worries. The tourists arriving at Quintland underwent a very similar thought process. The birth of the Quints reignited the belief in miracles, in hope, and in a brighter future. Ultimately, both Coney Island and Quintland relied on the context of the Depression and the war for their success.

Finally, the freak shows that were present at Coney Island and which profited from being there are comparable to what occurred at Quintland. Samuel Gumpertz was widely known for his collection of freaks, a "Congress of the World's Greatest Living Curiosities," that he discovered while making many trips around the world. He brought back the oddities he discovered to display them to the crowds at Coney Island. The 'freaks' that were most common in the sideshows at Coney Island included little people, giants, hairy people, human skeletons, armless and legless wonders, fat people, albinos, Siamese twins, people with extra limbs, half man half woman, people with skin disorders and tattooed people.⁴⁵ Even though as Scott Martin suggested, "people who are different have always provoked the imagination of their fellow human beings,"⁴⁶ I would argue that the idea of the 'freaks' at Coney Island, were socially constructed. As Rachel Adams wrote, "freak is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. They are enactments of tradition and a performance of a

stylized presentation.”⁴⁷ Most importantly, the idea of the ‘freak’ is not an inherent quality, but an identity realized through gesture, costume and staging. This fabricated image was created by the promoters of the freak shows who used images and symbols they thought the public would most likely respond to. They “created a public identity for the person that was being exhibited that would have the widest appeal and thereby would collect the most dimes”⁴⁸ through newspaper advertisements, handbills, couriers, and posters. That was why it was extremely important for the ‘freaks’ to offer the crowd a reinforcement of their created image. For example, an armless woman would be expected to sign autographs with her feet, while a wild man had to play his role by pacing up and down a cage while looking ferocious. People were told about the great popularity of the exhibits and they needed to go see this unforgettable chance of a lifetime. This was similar to Quintland, as the girls were expected to fit their persona of “the World’s Sweethearts” as they partook in fun loving activities that received many ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ from the crowds. Although the atmosphere differed at Callander and Coney Island, the important comparison that can be made is that both the freaks and the Dionne sisters were exploited for visiting crowds in order to produce an income for their respective economically troubled areas.

Pierre Berton raised the issue of Quintland as “Canada’s Coney Island” but believed that there was no connection. He argued that since there were “no nightclubs, no motion pictures, no neon signs, no side-shows, no huge billboards heralding the nearness of the spectacle, no taverns, no carnival rides [and] no conducted tours in fancy vehicles,”⁴⁹ Quintland could not be compared to New York’s thriving theme park. However, Dan Ronan believed that the story of their childhood was tragic as they lived like they were part of a circus show.⁵⁰ This began when they were less than a year old. As tourists were told in the 1935 Old Home Week souvenir book, each morning at eight o’clock “the babes [are] placed on the covered and enclosed verandah of their hospital home for a three-hour airing. At eleven they are taken in for their noon feeding, and are placed on the verandah again at one.”⁵¹ Once the public observation playground was built, they continued to be shown

at least twice a day. Their life was very structured from when they were young as they lived on a strict routine. This is very much like at Coney Island, where the 'freaks' performed their acts two to three times a day.

Both these attractions were exploitive, and for the benefit of others. This is not to say that the Quints or the stars of the freak shows were treated cruelly. Most of the girls' happiest memories come from their lives in the nursery.⁵² Similarly, in many instances, the 'freaks' were satisfied with their position. They were making money and some felt a strong sense of belonging as they were surrounded with people that could relate to them. After all, they were only required to 'act' for specific times in the day and then had free time to live their lives.⁵³ In both cases, however, the attraction was people whose oddity or uniqueness was exploited by surrounding businesses.

Quintland was a highly successful tourist attraction and was even able to surpass the popularity of Niagara Falls, Ontario during the early years of the girls' lives. Even though the country was hit extremely hard by the Great Depression, improvements in transportation contributed to the growing success of the tourist industry in Ontario. What is very ironic, however, is that while the sideshow exhibit which Oliva Dionne had agreed to with the Chicago World Fair, was "NOT to be tolerated," and that "Ontario [was] to Guard [the] Quintuplets" as a North Bay newspaper headline proclaimed,⁵⁴ it is extremely apparent that the government of Ontario was actively involved in using the girls as economic saviours. The government portrayed itself as protecting the Dionne sisters from their family, who were portrayed as simply interested in making money off of their birth. The tragedy of the story of the Dionne Quintuplets is that their distinction was exploited, much as that of the men and women featured in the freak shows at Coney Island, New York.

Endnotes

- 1 For more detail on the two guardianships established and their motivation, see Berton, *The Dionne Years*.
- 2 Morton. A Short History of Canada.
- 3 Morton. A Short History of Canada.
- 4 Dawson, "Taking the 'D' out of Depression."
- 5 Dawson, "Taking the 'D' out of Depression."
- 6 Dawson, "Taking the 'D' out of Depression, 57.
- 7 Ontario Road Map Association, "Road Map of Province of Ontario," <http://www.ontarioroadmaps.ca>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 37.
- 10 Noël, "Old Home Week Celebrations as Tourism Promotion and Commemoration."
- 11 Noël, "Old Home Week Celebrations as Tourism Promotion and Commemoration."
- 12 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*.
- 13 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 31.
- 14 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 35.
- 15 *The North Bay Nugget*, 11 Jan. 1935.
- 16 *The Toronto Star*, 15 Feb. 1936.
- 17 *The Toronto Star*, 3 Nov. 1936.
- 18 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 41.
- 19 *The North Bay Nugget*, 9 Jan. 1935.
- 20 *The North Bay Nugget*, 25 March 1935.
- 21 "Vacation Motor Tours: New England and Canada" (Travel Brochure).
The Dionne Quint Museum
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 *Detroit News Pictorial*, Sept. 1941.
- 24 *Detroit News Pictorial*, Sept. 1941.
- 25 "The Structure of Quintland," Quintland.com.
- 26 "The Structure of Quintland," Quintland.com.
- 27 The Dionne Quintuplets at Callander Ontario. Pathe Gazette, 1936.
- 28 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 158.
- 29 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 158.
- 30 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 164.
- 31 Tom Fennell, "Justice at long last," *Maclean's*, 16 March 1998, 26.

- 32 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 152.
- 33 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 155.
- 34 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 156.
- 35 *The Globe*, 6 July 1936.
- 36 *Detroit News Pictorial*, September 1941.
- 37 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 157, refers to visitors having the opportunity to stand with a single Indian in a tepee for twenty-five cents but he does not say if this was Goulais.
- 38 Haug, "Coney Island."
- 39 Watson, "Three's a crowd, they say, but not at Coney Island."
- 40 Watson, "Three's a crowd, they say, but not at Coney Island."
- 41 Watson, "Three's a crowd, they say, but not at Coney Island."
- 42 Sean, O'Hagan. Lecture: Patterns of Tourism. Nipissing University, May 08 2009.
- 43 Watson, "Three's a crowd, they say, but not at Coney Island."
- 44 Watson, "Three's a crowd, they say, but not at Coney Island."
- 45 Martin, "Review of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*."
- 46 Martin, "Review of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*."
- 47 Adams, *U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*.
- 48 Martin, "Review of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*."
- 49 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 157.
- 50 Ronan, "The Dionne Quintuplets."
- 51 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 33.
This actually meant they were viewed four *Times*.
- 52 Berton, *The Dionne Years*.
- 53 Martin, "Review of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*."
- 54 *The Nugget*, 7 Jan. 1935.

Nurses to the Dionne Quintuplets as Surrogate Mothers

Stacy Tremain

Introduction

On May 28, 1934, worldwide history was made as the first ever surviving quintuplets were born in Corbeil, a small northern Ontario town, just outside of North Bay.¹ A short time later, the Ontario Provincial Government established the Quints as wards of the state and it was decided that the quintuplets were to be moved from the Dionne farmhouse into a nursery across the street. The purpose of this nursery was originally to keep the Quints healthy in a clean environment. However, the area of the nursery became the centre of what became known as Quintland. Quintland became one of the best-known tourist attractions of its time. It consisted of a variety of stands selling souvenirs related to the quintuplet's birth, and most importantly, it provided daily showings of the quintuplets. When the Quints were babies, the nurses held them up in front of the viewers and when they were old enough, they were placed in a playground compound, where they were on display for the public, two to three times a day.

When the Dionne Quints were moved into the Dafoe Hospital, they were cared for by a team of nurses, under the leadership of Dr. Alan Roy Dafoe. The accounts of the nurses examined here demonstrate that the nurses cared for and loved the Quints as they would their own children. This paper will therefore argue that the nurses were surrogate mothers to the Dionne Quintuplets while they were present in the nursery and that Elzire Dionne did not have a traditional relationship with her five identical daughters.

Nurses as Surrogate Mothers

From the time they were born, the Quints were cared for by a team of nurses. Over the course of their nine-year stay in the nursery, there were a total of 14 nurses who cared for them on a daily basis. Table 1 lists all of these nurses, how long they were present at the Dafoe Hospital, their reason for leaving and whether I consider them to be surrogate mothers or not.

Those nurses present for one year or more were defined as surrogate mothers. This included ten out of the fourteen nurses. It is interesting to note that the four nurses who were present in the nursery for less than one year were there between 1934 and 1936, the first two years of the quintuplets' life. I would suggest that there was a higher turnover at this point because the phenomenon of the Quints was still relatively new at this time, which meant that public and media interest was still high.

The first nurse to care for the Quints was Yvonne Leroux. She was a recent graduate from Toronto and was called upon to work with the Quints because she was the first Francophone nurse on the registry.² On May 28, 1934, when she arrived at the Dionne farmhouse, she described the Quints as "five, premature, scrawny, rickety, hungry mites."³ Dr. Dafoe's advice was that all of babies be kept warm and left alone and if they were to live, they were to receive a drop of warm water every two hours.⁴ On June 3, 1934, a more experienced nurse, Louise de Kiriline arrived, taking over as head nurse.⁵ The team of nurses now consisted of Yvonne Leroux, Louise de Kiriline and Marie Cloutier who covered the night shift.⁶ In early August, Patricia (Pat) Mullins took over for Cloutier who had to tend to other patients in the area as the night shift nurse.⁷ On 14 September the Dafoe Hospital opened and on 21 September the Quints left the farmhouse and their family and moved into the nursery where they would remain for the next nine years.⁸ Right from the beginning the nurses had an influence over the Quints. In a scrapbook presented at a "Quintvention" in 1989,⁹ Nurse Leroux claimed that "the biggest of the five seemed to have a name picked from the start. Because I worked with her more

Table 1: List of Nurses Caring for the Dionne Quintuplets

Name	Arrived	Departed	Time spent	Head nurse	Reason for leaving	Surrogate mother
Yvonne Leroux	29-May-34	1-Dec-36	2.5 years	X	Got too attached to the Quints	YES
Louise de Kiriline	3-Jun-34	1-Jun-35	1 year	YES	Had an argument with Mme Dionne	YES
Patricia Mullins	Summer of 1934	23-Mar-35	8 or 9 months	X	Night shift nurse	X
Marie Cloutier	30-May-34	3-Jun-34	4 nights	X	Relief nurse	X
Eva Gagne	15-Jul-35	15-Aug-35	1 month	X	Relief nurse for Leroux	X
Cecile Lamoureux	1-Jun-35	1-Feb-36	8 months	YES	Married	X
Jacqueline Noel	4-Feb-36	Feb or Mar 1938	2 years	X	Dismissed	YES
Claire Tremblay	1-Dec-36	1-Feb-38	1.5 years	X	Dismissed	YES
Mollie O'Shaughnessy	1-Dec-36	1-Dec-39	3 years	YES	Married	YES
Cecile Michaud	June 1937	June 1939	2 years	X	Married	YES
Louise Corriveau	May-June 1937	1-Jan-39	1.5 years	YES	Married	YES
Leona Dubeau	19-Jan-39	April 1941	Almost 2.5 years	YES	Caught tuberculosis	YES
Gertrude Provencher	April 1941	Nov1943	2.5 years	X	Big house reunion	YES
Doreen Chaput	April 1941	1-Nov-43	2.5 years	YES	Big house reunion	YES

that first night, I called her Yvonne.”¹⁰ This demonstrates that some nurses formed attachments right away after beginning to care for the Quints.

Like a traditional mother, attachment occurred between the Quints and the nurses. In an article written on November 5, 1934 titled “Handsome Infants are Dionne Babies,” there was a quote which stated: “the

nurses and other members of the staff have become greatly attached to the little ones, and could not be persuaded to leave their present employment.”¹¹ In her diary Yvonne Leroux also recorded how quickly nurses became attached to Quints. This is demonstrated when Leroux went on a short one-month vacation in July of 1935.¹² Like a mother leaving her child for the first time, Leroux commented that “I have a foolish feeling that they are too precious for me to leave.”¹³ While she was on vacation, Nurse Eva Gagne was her replacement¹⁴ Gagne was present in the Quintuplet nursery from 15 July to 15 August 1935. This was not enough time for her to form a secure attachment with the Quints.¹⁵

Roughly six months after Leroux returned from her vacation, Cecile Lamoureux left the nursery and on 4 February 1936, Nurse Jacqueline Noel arrived.¹⁶ Just prior to the switch in the nursing staff, psychologist Dr. William Blatz and Miss Dorothy Millichamp arrived at the nursery to fingerprint the Quints and take moulds of their teeth.¹⁷ Dr. Blatz developed a program for the Quints that would monitor every aspect of their development. Blatz argued that “children should be able to encouraged to fit happily into the adult society for which they were destined, adapting to the world as it was and not as it ought to be.”¹⁸

In “Raising the Dionne Quints: Lessons for Modern Motherhood” Katherine Arnup discusses how the child-rearing of the Quints became very scientific. This was true, however, the nurses did not always comply to the requests of Dr. Blatz. Blatz had a scientific way of dealing with children when, for example, they had a bad dream. He wanted the nurses not to comfort the children nor to make a big deal about it. However, the nurses took on a more nurturing, maternal role and comforted the children like a loving parent would.

Blatz and Dr. Dafoe persisted in imposing their behavioural program but this was met with a lot of criticism within the nursery. Claire Tremblay, a nurse and teacher, and nurse Jacqueline Noel were dismissed in the winter of 1938 because they would not comply with the Blatz program.¹⁹ Both women underwent an investigation where they made written statements about their time in the nursery. Berton, who interviewed them, writes: “Dafoe had told them that the parents were

not to kiss the children, nor could they join them for a meal.”²⁰ Berton makes it very clear in his book that both Tremblay and Noel were not in favour of the efforts of Dr. Dafoe. According to Berton, “Noel urged O’Shaughnessy to keep a book against the doctor, ‘because he is in league with the Devil to get the children.’”²¹ This statement demonstrates that there were nurses who did not support Dr. Dafoe and his methods for raising the Quints, and were willing to make attempts to prove that.

The role of the nurses changed within the nursery as the quintuplets aged. In the beginning, the nurses were there to make sure that the girls stayed healthy. One of the most prominent items in the newspapers was weight charts of the Quints, demonstrating who had gained weight that week. As the Quints grew into childhood, Dr. William Blatz from Toronto put the girls on a strict routine. The role of the nurses in this instance was to observe and record their behaviour. As evident in Yvonne Leroux and Leona Dubeau’s diaries, every step on the day was recorded. For example, they would record what they ate at each meal, how they slept, the toys that they played with and any developmental strides that they made.

Despite their joyful attachment to the Quints, there was a high turnover of nurses for the reason Berton attributes to the “growing attention between two cliques” (the parents and Dafoe).²² Cecile Michaud, one of the nurses to the Quints, recalled: “we were with them, took care of them, bathed them, fed them.”²³ We were constantly with them and you couldn’t help but love them, they were so affectionate.”²⁴ Michaud even remembered that “we’d put them to bed at night, and they’d grab you around the neck and kiss you,” which is something many children do with their biological parents when saying good night.²⁵

After looking at the nurses’ personal accounts of their time in the nursery, it is quite evident that many of them did form secure attachment with the quintuplets. A reason for this would be because the nurses were present on a daily basis and participated in routines that would typically be completed by a biological mother, such as a good night routine.

Elzire Dionne's relationship with the Quints

According to Yvonne Leroux's diary, when the Quints were first moved into the nursery, the Dionne parents were understandably less than thrilled. On 1 January 1935 Leroux recorded that "there is an undercurrent of unrest over the control of the children."²⁶ It seems as though there was little communication with the parents when the Quints first moved into the nursery. The reason I suggest this is because Leroux recorded in her diary "I hear that mother and father are going to tour to the states – they never tell us anything."²⁷ It also seems that there was no relationship between the parents and the Quints at this time. At this point the Quints were only eight months old. When the parents visited they did not seem to pay close attention to any of the girls. On 4 February 1935 Leroux noted that the Dionne's "came over before leaving for Chicago – they paid no particular attention to the Quints."²⁸ In this period the Quints were displayed for one hour a day and visitors were coming by the hundreds. In early April, Leroux recorded that Mr and Mme Dionne were visiting more frequently. Leroux even commented that "Mr and Mme Dionne have come over one or twice and sat on the floor with them."²⁹ This demonstrates that there was a small relationship forming at this point, but nothing like a bond between a mother and child.

It seems as though there is a large amount of jealousy between the Dionne's and the staff at the nursery. Nurse Leroux wrote in her diary on 28 April 1935 that "the parents are suspicious of nursery staff and want to replace [us] with nuns – they have gone to the media."³⁰ I suggest that this was motivated by jealousy because efforts had been made to meet the Dionne's desire for a Francophone upbringing for the Quints. The nurses were all French-speaking except for one (Mollie O'Shaughnessy), which suggests that there was no basis to the idea that the Quints were being stripped of their French heritage.³¹ In fact, Nurse Provencher was the first nurse to not be bilingual, although she did commit to learning English when she took the job at the Dafoe Hospital.³²

In early May 1935, there seems to have been a shift in attitude from

the Dionne parents. Nurse Louise de Kiriline was scheduled to leave on the first of June due to the fact that she did not get along with Mme Dionne.³³ Her replacement was Cecile Lamoureux, a French-Catholic nurse who got along very well with the Quints and the Dionne's.³⁴ Leroux commented in her diary that ever since Nurse Lamoureux had arrived "the parents are coming over more often and are behaving as well as being more pleasant."³⁵

Contrary to popular belief, the Dionne parents and siblings were involved in the Quints' life. Though secondary sources generally suggest that the parents had no involvement in the lives of their daughters, both Yvonne Leroux and Leona Dubeau recall a number of times when the parents came over to visit in the nursery. It was also assumed that the Quints had no relationship with their eight other brothers and sisters. However, Leroux and Dubeau recall certain instances where there was a bond between the Quints and these other siblings. One example is the first church service that the Quints attended. They did not have to go anywhere because it was held in the Dafoe nursery, but the Dionne parents and three of the siblings did attend. Daniel, the fourth eldest was the alter boy and their eldest sister Rose-Marie sent them crucifixes because she was studying at a convent in Montreal.³⁶ This event was also an opportunity for the biological grandfathers, Moise Legros and Olivier Dionne to bond with their granddaughters.³⁷ An example of when the Dionnes were all together was when five month old Oliva Jr. came to visit. This visit occurred around Christmas in 1936 because there was mention of a Christmas tree in the nursery. This visit was documented in the article "Quintuplets share one doll - that Baby Brother of Theirs" and it was suggested that all of the Quints loved their new baby brother.³⁸ In May of 1936, Yvonne Leroux recalled a time when the Dionne family came over to visit. Leroux recorded that the "Babes love Victor [the 12th born out of all the Dionne children]. They dance to music with him."³⁹ This is evidence that a relationship existed between the Dionne Quints and the rest of the Dionne children.

Despite what the media portrayed as the truth, there was a meaningful relationship between the Quints and the rest of the Dionne

family. I would suggest that the relationship that existed was not a traditional relationship between parents and child(ren), however, it was something to be desired. Pierre Burton in *The Dionne Years: A Thirties Melodrama*, described the Dionne's relationship with the Quints as "a visiting Aunt, Uncle and Cousins."⁴⁰ I completely agree with this statement because it seems fitting for the situation. The Dionne parents were not present at the nursery on a daily basis and when they did go the nursery for a visit, it was relatively short (one to two hours). The lack of time spent with the Quints would have made it hard for Elzire to form a traditional attachment with her daughters. In Nurse Marie Louise Corriveau's book *From Quints to Queens*, Corriveau stated: "there was rarely a day that went by that one member of the family did not visit them."⁴¹ It was typically perceived through the media that the Dionne parents were only allowed scheduled visits, but, Corriveau expresses the opposite. She recalled that "with the exception of the times when the [Quints] were ill, the parents of the Quints and their brothers and sisters, were always welcome."⁴² Corriveau implied that there was an effort by the nurses and the rest of the nursery staff to accommodate to the Dionne family. Corriveau recalled that "the parents of the Quints were given every opportunity to enjoy the five little girls in their own environment. [They catered to this by] having little parties with their family."⁴³ An article written in the *St. Louis Star Times*, quoted one of the nurses stating, "they know their parents and are quite fond of them."⁴⁴ Nurse Mollie O'Shaughnessy recalled that she sympathized with Mme Dionne. It was clear that Mme Dionne wanted to be involved in the Quints lives and O'Shaughnessy declared that she would visit in a graceful and respectful manner.⁴⁵

[Editor's Note: a short section on photographic evidence has not been included.]

Conclusion

The childhood of the Dionne quintuplets was very complex and unlike anything else before their time. As soon as the Quints were born, they were cared for by a team of nurses that loved them as if they were their own children. For the nine years that they lived in the Dafoe Hos-

pital where there continued to be a high turn-over of nurses, but each one cherished the time that they were able to spend with the Quints.

The roles that the nurses held within the nursery were very maternal and even though Dr. William Blatz implemented a strict routine which he claimed was crucial to their development, the nurses continued to care for the Quints in a motherly manner. The nurses were in charge of caring for the Quints on a daily basis, interacting with them as if they were their own children and strictly observing their development while recording their every step. The Quints also exhibited certain characteristics and mannerisms that would resemble a healthy mother-daughter relationship.

Based on the unpublished personal accounts from Nurse Yvonne Leroux and Nurse Leona Dubeau, this paper has shown that the nurses acted as surrogate mothers to the Dionne Quints. Leroux describes many instances in her diary where she and other nurses acquired maternal feelings and instincts, which demonstrates that there were a secure attachment between many of the nurses and the Quints. Leona Dubeau also alluded to the fact that the nurses were surrogate mothers because they were present on a daily basis, unlike the Quints biological parents who only dropped by for visits. I would like to suggest that just because the nurses were surrogate mothers to the Quints, this does not mean that their biological mother Mme Elzire Dionne did not have a relationship with her children. It is evident that the relationship between Elzire and the Quints was not a traditional mother-daughter relationship; however, there was a bond there while they remained in the nursery. This is demonstrated through frequent visits by the Dionne family, including their older and younger siblings. I have provided a number of examples where the Dionne family had visited the nursery, participating in activities such as their first church service, holiday meals and actively interacting with their brothers and sisters.

In conclusion, it is evident that in the Dafoe Hospital the Dionne quintuplets lived a life where they were surrounded by care and love. This is demonstrated through the public interest in the Quints, the attachment that was provided by the nurses as well as their relationship with their biological mother, Elzire Dionne.

Endnotes

- 1 Editor's Note: most of the introduction and a section a discussion of motherhood from secondary sources has been removed.
- 2 Berton, 39.
- 3 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, May 28, 1934.
- 4 Berton, 38.
- 5 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, Sunday June 3, 1934.
- 6 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, Sunday June 3, 1934.
- 7 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, Wednesday August 5, 1934.
- 8 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, September 21, 1934.
- 9 The Scrapbook that was presented contained information about the North American tour that Yvonne Leroux did after she had left the Dafoe Hospital. Within this scrapbook, there were quotes taken from her diary as well as interviews with Leroux that had been conducted.
- 10 Dionne Quintuplet Museum. Nurse Yvonne Leroux on Tour, 1937. This was a scrapbooke presented by Bob Atkinson at a "Quintvention" in 1989, 2.
- 11 Dionne Quintuplet Museum. "Handsome Infants are Dionne Babies," November 5, 1934.
- 12 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, July 15, 1935.
- 13 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, July 15, 1935.
- 14 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, July 15, 1935.
- 15 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, July 15, 1935.
- 16 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, February 1, 1936 and February 4, 1936.
- 17 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, Sunday January 26, 1936.
- 18 Berton, 123,
- 19 Berton, 168.
- 20 Berton, 170.
- 21 Berton, 171.
- 22 Berton, 115.
- 23 Berton, 117.
- 24 Berton, 117.
- 25 Berton, 117.
- 26 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, January 1, 1935.
- 27 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, February 1, 1935.
- 28 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, February 4, 1935.
- 29 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, April 10, 1935.

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- 30 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, April 28, 1935.
- 31 Leona Dubeau Collection. Untitled newspaper clip and unknown newspaper.
- 32 Leona Dubeau Collection. Untitled newspaper clip and unknown newspaper.
- 33 Berton, 115.
- 34 Berton, 115.
- 35 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, June 1, 1935.
- 36 "It's Church Time for the Quins, and they can't be late!" Leona Dubeau Collection
- 37 "It's Church Time for the Quins, and they can't be late!" Leona Dubeau Collection
- 38 "quintuplets Share One Doll – That Baby Brother of Theirs" Leona Dubeau Collection
- 39 Diary of Yvonne Leroux, Thursday June 11, 1936.
- 40 Berton, 111.
- 41 Corriveau, *From Quints to Queens*, 23.
- 42 Corriveau, *From Quints to Queens*, 23.
- 43 Corriveau, *From Quints to Queens*, 27.
- 44 Lyla Hertslet, "Dionne Quins can Speak 400 Words, their Nurse Says" *St. Louis Star Times*. Dionne Quint Museum, Scrapbook.
- 45 Berton, 166.

Public Perceptions of the World's Most Famous Mother: Elzire Dionne Danielle Beaulieu

Elzire Dionne was the woman behind the curtain of the show that was the Dionne quintuplets. The mother of Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Emilie and Marie was torn from her right as their legal guardian when in July of 1934, the Red Cross and Dr Dafoe forced her to assign them custody. Because of the patriarchal world she belonged to, her voice has seldom been heard in the description of the tragedy that surrounded her babies. Her story has not gone completely untold. Lillian Barker, a reporter from New York wrote her biography as well as a number of other books describing the story often left untold in other media - that of Mr and Mrs Dionne. The media representation of the Dionne parents varies. Unlike the trend in English newspapers, French newspapers were inclined to tell the story of the quintuplets with consideration and sympathy for the Dionnes. I will argue that the French-Canadian heritage of the Dionnes has much to do with their public perception by examining the time period within which this event occurred.

This paper will seek to understand who Elzire Dionne was. This involves not only her history, but a history of French Ontario, for this would have been immensely relevant to her identity. Understanding the tension that existed between French and English in Ontario is also relevant to her history. How she was portrayed in the media will also be discussed by looking at important events in the life of the Dionne family as this will allow for a more systematic approach. The events examined will include the birth of the quintuplets, their move to the Dafoe Hospital and Mr and Mrs Dionne's trip to Chicago. It will also

examine the time period when the Dionnes were fighting to be reunited with their children. The *Nugget*, the *Globe*, and *Le Droit* will be examined to understand the variety of media representations of Mrs Dionne. The *Nugget* is North Bay's local newspaper and thus provides a local perspective. It reported stories on the Dionnes most frequently and is sometimes lacking support for them likely because of their culture and religion. The *Globe*, a conservative southern Ontario newspaper, originated as a political vehicle in Upper Canada in 1844.¹ George Brown launched the newspaper to support reform efforts for responsible government. His pronouncement against church-state ties drew favour within the primarily English Upper Canada, but received animosity from the predominantly French Lower Canada.² The long history of tension between *The Globe* and French Canadians meant that the newspaper tended to lack support for the Dionnes largely because of their culture. The English superiority of southern Ontario is evident in this source. Finally, *Le Droit*, a French nationalist newspaper out of Ottawa, Ontario, was established in 1913 as a tool to condemn Regulation 17, an Ontario legislation that restricted education in French. It is most supportive of the Dionnes based primarily on their culture. It reports on them less frequently because of its geographic location relative to North Bay. These three newspapers will allow for an effective comparison of how Elzire Dionne was portrayed. It is worth noting that the ways in which the stories surrounding the Dionnes were reported will vary. Bill Reader explains that there are inherent differences between how small and large newspapers report a story based largely on their desire to protect their communities.³ Small-town journalists have stronger ties to their communities and the people within it than do journalists in larger cities. As a result, small-town journalists, in this case, *The Nugget*, may represent a certain bias as they aim to protect community values and reputation. They are likely to approach topics with particular sensitivity when compared to *The Globe* and *Le Droit*.

After establishing what the media says about Elzire, this paper will seek to describe her reality and tell her story by focusing on resources such as Lillian Barker's books. Barker is the only person to have attained

detailed interviews with Elzire Dionne and is therefore used to represent Elzire's voice. Because of the patriarchal world in which she lived, her voice is seldom heard by the public. Ultimately, this paper will seek to understand the effect of Mrs Dionne's heritage on her public perception. This heritage will be discussed using secondary sources.

Life in Northeastern Ontario

In the 1870s, settlement and resource exploitation moved further and further north. Lumbermen in particular "pushed against the boundaries of this frontier" in search of timber.⁴ The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1882-83 through northeastern Ontario opened the land further for white immigration. Thousands of French Canadians in search of land accompanied by the Catholic Church flooded into the area.⁵ Welch claims that French Canadian families could, to a large extent, reproduce existing socioeconomic forms from Ottawa and Quebec.⁶ By 1901, a land that has once been heavily dominated by working men now had a relatively evenly divided population with the ratio of men to women sitting comfortably at 133:100. Also by 1901, French settlement consisted of 42% of the total population of the Nipissing District- an estimated 15, 384 people.⁷ They tended to settle in homogeneous communities often within close proximity to English-dominated communities.⁸

Welch claims that the mixed agriculture/lumber-based communities were reflective of the pattern known in eastern Ontario and Quebec, with life closely centered on the church. Men owned the land and women were, in practice, subordinate to men. A woman's economic role remained based in the family- they married, gave birth, raised children, and worked on the farm.⁹ Through an examination of census data in the late 18th century, Goltz indicates that only 32 women in all of northeastern Ontario were engaged in work outside of the home. Among these were servants, teachers, and housekeepers.¹⁰ There also likely existed an informal workforce consisting of midwives, nurses, and housekeepers. This economic role expected of women dominated well into the twentieth century. It is within this model that Elzire was raised and would raise her own children. She, like nearly all her neigh-

bours and community members, was expected primarily to play the role of wife, mother and homemaker. The needs of women were subordinated to the needs of their family and community.¹¹

Although French Canadians made up a significant proportion of the population in northeastern Ontario, they were not the majority. Goltz shows this by explaining that the number of adherents to non-Catholic faiths (Church of England, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist) far outweighed the number of Roman Catholics.¹² The Roman Catholic Church was the centre of the French community. It was through the parish that nearly all other social structures were developed. This included schools, charitable organizations, support groups and so on. These social institutions were essential to cultural preservation especially in the isolated rural communities of northeastern Ontario. Through its preservation of culture, the Catholic Church also acted as a perpetuator of the patriarchal system found within the homes and communities of French settlements. The Catholic Church infiltrated all aspects of society and through this process was able to maintain French culture in Ontario.

Martha C. Howell claims that property systems and marriage customs are key to building patriarchal structures of male dominance.¹³ As the twentieth century progressed, property systems and economic trends persisted alongside a structure of patriarchy. This hierarchical structure dominated not only within the family, but within the community and the district more generally. While the male dominated the household, the English settlers tended to dominate economically. Even though the French population had been among the first settlers in northeastern Ontario and had significantly contributed to its economic development, their economic power did not stretch beyond their immediate communities. Noël also explains that even in areas dominated by French populations, their influence outside of the parish was limited. The structural and cultural divisions considerably reduced the impact of their presence.¹⁴

Although English reactions towards French populations in Ontario had varied up to the twentieth century, by the interwar period, relationships between French and English Canadians had become a national

issue. The increasing numbers of French Canadians and the increasing presence of the Catholic Church were challenging the vision of Ontario as an English province.¹⁵ Noël points out that French Canadian traditions and customs persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century and faced increasing hostility from English Ontarians.¹⁶ Welch attributes the increasing hostility towards French Canadians to their greater and more concentrated numbers, an unwillingness to assimilate, and a generally increased anti-Catholic and anti-French sentiment.¹⁷ Ontario reacted increasingly harshly through the development of policies to curtail the social dominance of French Canadians in Ontario. Language and culture reinforced boundaries between the French and the English majority and began isolating and displacing French communities. This encouraged French Ontarians to distrust and often reject many of the cultural practices of the English majority. Instead, they survived by creating distinctive economic structures and building their own social institutions.¹⁸

The hostility of English Canadians towards French Canadians outside of Quebec is key to the public perception of Elzire Dionne. Her French Ontarian heritage affected the way English Canadians perceived her. The popular questioning of her ability as a competent parent arose from the more general hostility towards her culture and religion. The increasing hostility towards French Canadians sparked a strong defense from French Canadians. This factor acts as an explanation for the extraordinary support received by the Dionnes from French Canadians both within and outside of Quebec.

A Brief History of Elzire

Elzire was very much a product of her time. She was born in 1909 to Moise Legros of Masham, Quebec, and Falome Demers Legros of St-Joseph d'Orleans, Ontario. She was raised on a farm concession in Corbeil. She had been forced to leave school at age 11 after only three years of attendance because of the sudden death of her mother.¹⁹ She was expected to look after her five older brothers which would isolate her to the home from a very young age. As a result, she had little education or experience outside of her home. Elzire spoke no English,

although she understood it.

She was married to Oliva Dionne in August of 1925 at age 16.²⁰ Contrary to popular belief, they were not a “dirt poor” farm family. They owned land and a home, had no debt and drove a car. This was an uncommon occurrence during the depression years. They were a patriarchal family, with Oliva owning their assets. He, in practice, made important economic decisions for the household. This organization combined with the fact that Elzire spoke no English, had little education, and very limited exposure to the outside world increased her dependence on her husband, who would become the spokesperson for their family. It is for these reasons that we see very little representation of Elzire in the media. Her viewpoint is often represented through her husband, and only through rare interviews such as the ones performed by Lillian Barker, can we gain insight into her side of the story.

May 28, 1934: The Birth of the Dionne Quintuplets

At the birth of the quintuplets, no hostility had developed toward the Dionne parents. Rather, onlookers were consistently amazed. Where the discrepancy lays is in the credit attributed to the survival of the quintuplets. From the beginning, newspapers, even the local *Nugget*, placed all credit in the hands of Dr Dafoe. What tends to be left out is the credit that is due to midwives and nurses, specifically Mmes Legros and Lebel who attended the birth. Mrs Dionne’s commitment to her faith during this ordeal and her claim that God is ultimately to thank for their survival is frequently ignored. By comparing the true story to the story told by the media, a trend becomes evident. The Catholic faith and the French midwives are often ignored, while Dr Dafoe is placed front-and-centre.

It is through the first stories of the Dionne quintuplets that the indifference towards the Dionne parents becomes visible and relevant. All three newspapers initially (and logically) link the new babies to Elzire Dionne, their mother. “Quintuplets Born to Farm Wife- 24-Year Old Corbeil Mother Establishes Canadian Mark,” headlined *The Nugget* on May 28, 1934.²¹ The incredible news was reported with nothing but glory in the days immediately following their arrival. As Berton

notes, nobody tired of the story of the birth of the girls because it was so miraculous.²² Similar to *The Nugget*, *Le Droit* reported on May 30, 1934 that “Les 5 jumelles de Mme. Dionnes veullent Vivre.”²³ However, over a relatively short period of time, there was a change and the quintuplets became publicly linked to Dr Dafoe- the person so often accredited for their survival.

An early distinction arises in the English reports of the *Globe*. Although English Ontario was as intrigued and pleased with the birth of quintuplets, the focus shifted immediately away from the Dionne parents. It instead became focused on Dr Allan Roy Dafoe and often, the Red Cross nurse he appointed, Louise de Kiriline.²⁴ On May 30, the *Globe* referred to the birth of the quints as amazing to the medical world and emphasized the immediate importance of Dr Dafoe and other English speaking nurses.²⁵ Welch explains that the tendency of French Canadians to have large families was regarded as an archaic cultural practice and was treated with particular hostility by English Canadians. This prejudice was linked to the middle-class preference for smaller families who regarded having large numbers of children as primitive.²⁶ A *Globe* opinion writer recognized the astonishment of this event: the author discusses the problems the parents are likely to face, especially since, “these latest arrivals will arouse afresh apprehensions regarding French Canadian ascendancy in Northern Ontario.”²⁷ Thus although *The Globe* tended to recognize that the birth of quintuplets was miraculous, the role of the French Catholic mother was immediately downplayed as the role of English medicine received all the credit.

Essential to the story of the birth of the quintuplets is the role played by Mme Legros and Mme Lebel. These two women wrote a pamphlet describing their role in the birth of the quints. Mme. Legros, Elzire's aunt and a local midwife arrived first on the scene to find an ailing Elzire. She noted that Elzire was both physically and spiritually weak and was becoming increasingly nervous. She immediately requested her rosary, and the two prayed together as Mme Legros prepared for the birth. Legros emphasized the role played by Elzire's faith through the night by explaining:

As she continued to pray, a more cheerful expression came over her face and she began to show greater courage, and did not mention any more words of spiritual weakness or any fear of dying. Madame Dionne continued her praying all through her sufferings until after the first child was born and she continued to count her beads in prayers quietly as her voice weakened all throughout the births of the five babies.²⁸

Mme Lebel who arrived shortly after Mme Legros places the same emphasis on the role played by faith during the birth. This is one part of the story not usually reported by newspapers- especially English newspapers- who felt increasing resentment towards the Catholic Church. Barker's version of the story of the birth is very similar to this one told by the midwives, with a strong emphasis placed on religion and the role played by the midwives.

Le Droit, unlike most newspapers examined, discusses the role played by Mme Legros and Mme Lebel in the birth of the girls. Although the relatively short reports of 30 May 1934 do not provide much detail, they, unlike *The Globe*, discuss the fact that these women had and were still caring for the mother and the babies. The story of Legros and Lebel in most reports as well as the story of faith is often replaced by heroic tales of the country doctor saving the mother and all five babies. While the need for an exciting, heroic story may be the cause for this discrepancy, it is also likely that English hostility towards French culture and religion were influential in deciding what story would be reported.

As Legros, Lebel, and even God were left out of the headlines, Dr Dafoe was placed front-and-centre. Although Dafoe only arrived after three girls had already been born, and only continued the treatment already administered by the midwives, he became an instant hero. His English background and a generally increasing faith in medicine over tradition inspired an instant love for the doctor. This trend is not surprisingly, most evident in *The Globe*, who, from their first report on the quintuplets, discussed the role of the Doctor. This is accomplished by reporting the story through the voice of Dafoe with headlines such as "Corbeil Babies Steadily Gain, Doctor Reports," or "Quintuplets Con-

tinue to Hold Their Own and Doctor and Nurses Cheerful.”²⁹ This, rather than reporting the story from the voice of the family, became the way in which the story of the quintuplets was reported.

What stories were told about the Dionne family were portrayed in a less-than-favourable manner. In a June 26, 1934 *Toronto Star* article entitled “Father of Quintuplets says he Still Doesn’t Think Much of it,” the newspaper reports Dionne’s reaction to the birth of his quintuplets by stating, “I’m the sort of fellow they should put in jail.” Apparently, claims the article, he still felt the same way a month after the birth. They reported that he did not say much but indicated that he did not consider the arrival of the five altogether a blessing. Instead, they reported his complaints regarding the visitors and invasive reporters.³⁰ Although very little of this report actually derived from the words of Mr Dionne, stories like this were published across the nation, quickly framing the Dionne family unfavourably.

The story of the birth introduces the idea that from the very beginning, what was being said, who was saying it, and how it was being said would become increasingly important considerations in the story of the Dionne quintuplets. From the day of their arrival, the Dionne family took a backseat to the instantly famous Dr Allan Roy Dafoe. The differing headlines of the English and French newspapers, as well as the story they reported introduces the fact that the French Catholic culture of the Dionne family heavily influenced the way newspapers and thus the public perceived them. This factor alone became influential in deciding how the story of the Dionne quintuplets would be told. With Dr Dafoe rising to hero status, it wouldn’t be long before the media picked a villain - a role the Dionnes were unwillingly assigned.

September, 1934: The Move to the Dafoe Hospital

After the birth of the quintuplets, Dr Dafoe, along with an increasingly large medical staff, came to play a large role in the survival of the babies. The country rallied together to ensure that the precious miracles would receive everything they needed including breast milk, incubators, and constant medical surveillance. Unfortunately, as this process evolved, Elzire and Oliva Dionne were slowly pushed into the

backseat. While headlines across the country described the weight gains and increasing health of the babies, their mother longed to play a role in their daily lives: "I long to hold my little jumelles and sponge them off just like the nurses."³¹ As upsetting as this may have been, the real blow came when Dr Dafoe threatened to quit and have all medical support revoked unless the parents agreed to surrender the custody of the quints to the Red Cross.³² This threat was a result of Oliva's early and hasty decision to put the quintuplets on display at the Chicago World's fair. Canadians responded with outrage and the Dionne parents were publicly slandered for their hasty decision. The *Globe* reported on July 27, 1934 that custody had been granted to a guardianship after "An exploitation scheme that meant certain death to one or more of the quintuplets was circumvented by the Ontario Attorney-General's Department when it broke the contract for exhibiting the Dionne babies at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition."³³ The entire country responded with outrage to Dionne's decision which provided the perfect opportunity for the Ontario government to step in. Although Oliva was instantly regretful of his decision and ultimately had no intention to hand over his babies, he instantly became the villain the media was searching for.

Elzire instantly refused to hand over custody of her babies, but faced with the threat that medical services would be revoked, including the supply of breast milk (the very food keeping her babies alive) she was given no other choice. With this signature, custody of the Dionne quintuplets was torn away from the parents and handed over to a board of guardians. This first board of guardians, who were to serve for two years, consisted of W.H. Alderson, chairman of emergency commission of the Ontario Red Cross, Dafoe's closest friend, Ken Morrison, Dafoe himself, and Olivier Dionne, the quintuplet's grandfather.³⁴

Once custody of the quintuplets had been taken away from the parents, it was decided that the girls would be moved to a hospital built especially for them. It was built across the street from the Dionne family home and had all modern amenities said to be necessary for the Quints' long-term survival. This hospital, named after Dr Dafoe, was bitter-sweet for the Dionne parents as it ensured the continued

survival of their infants, but also meant that they would be removed from the Dionne family home. Newspapers reported on the grandeur of the hospital and many Canadians, still recovering from Oliva's misjudgment, anxiously awaited their transfer to the Dafoe hospital. The *Globe* reported in July of 1934 that the quintuplets were growing tired of their current home and anxiously awaited their transfer in a story entitled "Babies Grow Tired of Incubator Home Yearn for Change."³⁵

Headlines across the nation splashed the news of the grand opening of the Dafoe Hospital for the Dionne Quintuplets on September 14, 1934. The quintuplets were transferred to the new hospital on September 21, 1934 even though construction was not altogether complete. Lillian Barker explains that nurse de Kiriline realized the risk involved and requested a delay, but once Dafoe made up his mind, there was no arguing.³⁶ As the nurses began packing the babies and all their things, Elzire asked Oliva to drive her off somewhere because she could not bear to watch them take away her children. When they returned home, the babies were gone and so they watched the hospital dedication ceremony from their upstairs window.³⁷

While the dedication ceremony drew over 800 people to Callander, Mr and Mrs Dionne were not among the attendees.³⁸ Alongside reports describing the size, colour, and amenities of the new hospital newspapers mentioned the absence of the Dionne parents. After reporting the presence of important guests, including the guardians, *The Nugget* noted the absence of the Dionne parents, explaining only that they did not attend. It seeks no further explanation, but rather reports of the structural magnificence of the hospital and the presence of prominent guests.

Le Droit approached the story very differently with the screaming headline, "Pourquoi les parents Dionne n'étais pas présents."³⁹ This article claims that the parents were not invited (contrary to *The Nugget* who claims they were invited) and that it was an insult to the French Canadian population. It claims that reports claiming they did not attend because they were shy were false, but rather no French Ontarian would be surprised to hear that they were simply not invited. Not only, it explained, were the parents not invited, but grandfather

Dionne, Father Routhier, the parish priest who baptized the five children, Mme Legros and Mme Lebel were also excluded from the event. As planned, not a single French word was spoken at the ceremony.⁴⁰ *Le Droit* argued: “Ce que le monde voulait voir c’était les parents des enfants et non pas les grosses légumes de Toronto et d’Hamilton.”⁴¹ By the time of this event, the Dionne parents were receiving overwhelming support from French Canadians, especially those in Ontario.

Lillian Barker explains that it was at this point that French Canadian leaders, politicians, and editors took up the fight for the Dionnes, “the honest, honourable, Roman Catholics,” who were unable to defend themselves against the Protestant doctor and powerful British-Canadian government.⁴² The English press, Barker explains, was relatively quiet, but “an undeclared war was on.” The Dionnes were to become an example in a battle between French and English speaking Canadians.⁴³

February, 1935: Mr & Mrs Dionne’s trip to Chicago

Although it is certainly true French and English newspapers tended to portray Elzire and her family differently, the “undeclared war” found in the discussion of the opening of the Dafoe hospital was not always so evident. A discussion of the Dionnes’ trip to Chicago is an effective way to examine the variation of representations because they spent this short trip under the spotlight. By February, when this trip began, much of the nation had forgotten about Oliva’s misguided decision to put his new babies on display in Chicago. The quintuplets had been placed safely in the Dafoe hospital many months before, and “Our Quints” were no longer endangered by their “backcountry” parents. As a result, there was less need for strong scrutiny of the Dionne parents.

Although the Dionnes were facing less public hostility, Elzire was dealing with increasing anxiety about the quintuplets being separated from her and her family. Dr Dafoe often kept her other five children from seeing the quintuplets claiming they “might bring germs.”⁴⁴ The longer her quintuplets were separated from her family, the more there was a chance for them to feel superior to their family. Above everything, Elzire wanted their children to be brought up as equals, a mission quite impossible in the current arrangement. Thus she and her

husband anxiously awaited the day when the quintuplets would return home at the age of two years and two months. The problem though, was how they would raise enough money to make their house suitable to the needs of the quintuplets. Although Oliva had been offered many times over a ticket to 'Easy Street', he had been so put out by the Chicago contract that he feared any further commitments.⁴⁵

However, knowing that they would need to find a way to raise sufficient funds, in February of 1935, the Dionnes accepted an invitation from vaudeville booking agent Max Halperin who organized a tour of Chicago, Detroit, and South Bend, Indiana.⁴⁶ After being assured that they would need only to give a few words of thanks to the American people for their help with the quints, the Dionne parents reluctantly headed to Chicago. As they spent much of this trip in the public eye, newspapers had much to say about the travelers. Of course, the perceptions of the trip varied significantly.

The *Globe* reported that Mr and Mrs Dionne "were the same modest farmers they have always been as they boarded the train tonight on a good-will trip that will take them to Chicago."⁴⁷ Perhaps for the first time, this newspaper reported a story from the mouth of the Dionne family. Oliva had the chance to address a number of rumours that had been circulating, including those claiming that he was making a fortune off of his children: "All we have received since signing the contract with the guardians is \$111," he explained.⁴⁸ An interview on February 7, 1935 once again told the Dionne story from their viewpoint but this time asked different kinds of questions. They asked the parents who their favourite child was (since there were *ten*, there must be a favourite!), how much money they would make from this trip and how they felt about the big city.⁴⁹ These questions, although not incredibly harsh help to solidify the image of the Dionne parents as French backcountry money grabbers. Thus although outright hostility was initially absent, *The Globe* never rescinded their negative perception of the Dionne parents.

This portrayal of the Dionnes was evident in a February 11, 1935 report entitled "Dionne Tour a Flop." Promoter Max Halperin claimed that the tour was more than \$900 in the red because the Dionnes had

picked out more expensive clothes than they had ever worn, the meal ticket for the entourage had run up over \$400, and Oliva wouldn't even buy his own cigarettes but would instead borrow from Helperin. The same report claimed that the Dionnes missed Sunday morning mass as they "enjoyed a lazy breakfast in their rooms in mid-morning and loafed until time for the next "merci beacoup" at the theatre."⁵⁰ This report added to the portrayal of the Dionne parents as lazy money grabbers. They were shown to be lazy French people taking every advantage of their unique opportunity.

Although the *Globe* continued to paint Elzire and Oliva Dionne in a negative manner, *The Nugget* spoke mainly words of praise for the Dionnes during their American tour. As the Dionne parents were representing northern Ontario on an international stage, *The Nugget* attempted to portray them as positively as possible. This can be seen in a February 13, 1935 report which claimed that "through it all they have maintained a stoical calm, merely waiting the time when they will be able to return to Northern Ontario and the ten who await them there - five famous quintuplets and five almost-forgotten older children."⁵¹ However, *The Nugget*, much like *The Globe* continued to frame the Dionne parents in a particular manner, with their French, rural, backward culture remaining emphasized. This can be seen in a February 3, 1935 report which claimed that the Dionnes were happy to let their supervisors take charge: "Oh we are leaving that up to Mr Helperin. He knows more about the bright lights than we do," claimed Oliva when asked about their plans.⁵² This, alongside a claim that although Mr and Mrs Dionne were not the least bit excited about their trip, Mr Dionne was most excited about seeing Chicago's stockyard because of his background in dairy farming, act to enforce the picture of the Dionne parents as French, rural, slightly backward farmers.

Le Droit had comparatively little to say about the Dionne parents visiting the United States. When they did report, it was a brief explanation of their timetable alongside a few short words of praise. This is likely because like the two English newspapers, *Le Droit* was not particularly impressed with their behaviour. Rather than publicly disapprove of the trip, *Le Droit* said nothing. They were supportive

of the Dionnes and did not let on that they were unsupportive of this decision.

February, 1935: Beginning the Battle for Custody

Although Mr and Mrs Dionne had only agreed to the American tour as a means to raise funds for the return of their quintuplets, they soon learned that it had only hindered their success. Barker explains that it gave politicians something else to blame them for and newspapers something else to harp on.⁵³ As fresh headlines slandered the parents for their “readiness to cash in on their unique parenthood,” the Dionnes learned of a bill introduced in the legislature by Minister of Public Welfare, Mr Croll, to make the quintuplets wards of the state until their eighteenth birthday.⁵⁴ The parents immediately stepped into action and vehemently protested the action.

The Globe reported on February 23, 1935 that the claim being made by the Dionne parents that they had been forced to sign over custody of the quintuplets after being threatened with a denial of relief was false. Although this was in fact the truth, Premier Hepburn instead accused the parents of being ungrateful for all that the government had done to ensure the safety of their children, not the least of which was saving them from the greedy grasp of Oliva who was anxious to display them for a profit any chance he got.⁵⁵ Headlines like “Ontario Prepares to Protect Babies,” were splashed across the newspaper emphasizing the province’s intentions to protect the babies from exploitation by parents who were more interested in gaining access to the trust fund than regaining custody.⁵⁶

While *The Globe* slandered the Dionne parents as greedy exploiters, in reality they were doing everything they could to regain custody, a fact *Le Droit* was quick to recognize. Detailed coverage of the custody battle was reported, including interviews with Mr and Mrs Dionne. A March 11, 1935 report allowed Oliva Dionne the chance to explain:

Tous ce que nous voulons c'est la chance de montrer que nous sommes capables d'élever nos bébés. En vertu du projet de loi actuel, elle deviendront des enfants de l'Etat et il y aura deux familles distinctes. Nous ne veulont pas de cela. Nous voulons donner un chance égale á tous nos enfants.⁵⁷

He further explained that he and his wife offered to sign a guarantee that they would not place the quints on display, since this was continually given as the reason for maintaining custody of the babies. The article details the fact that they were forced to hand over custody in the first place because they were threatened with a removal of all medical aid being given to the quintuplets. While the *Globe* described them as greedy, Mrs Dionne explained to *Le Droit* that “nous voulons pas beaucoup d'argent. Tout ce que nous voulons ce sont nos bébés et la chance de vivre.”⁵⁸

Much as the English newspapers had accused the Dionnes of being interested only in money, *Le Droit* accused the Ontario government of wanting custody because of their interest in the money the girls brought in. They claimed that if something happened to one of the girls, the government would happily give them back to their parents because they would no longer be profitable.⁵⁹ Interestingly, this is the exact opposite of a claim by Mr Hepburn in the *Globe* explaining that Oliva Dionne would be nowhere should one of his babies die.⁶⁰ This battle between the two newspapers illuminates the “undeclared war” described by Barker.

Unsurprisingly, *The Nugget* had the most to say about the custody battle. On February 22, 1935, they praised Dr Dafoe and the provincial government for their role in the caring of the quintuplets, but recognized that the guardians may have been inconsiderate of the rights of the parents.⁶¹ Three days later, however, they reported that Oliva Dionne intended to upset the proposal at “the behest of United States theatrical promoters.”⁶² *The Nugget*, much like *The Globe* portrayed the Dionnes as money-hungry and continued to support the idea that Oliva would be a threat to them because of his desire to place them on exhibit. However, *The Nugget* also provided the Dionnes the oppor-

tunity to make their case. On March 6, 1935, Oliva Dionne explained to *The Nugget* that although they were very grateful for the help they received from the Ontario government, they desired only to be reunited as a family. He explained that he and his wife had no intention of taking any tour with the quints to place them on display. He also emphasized that “le bon Dieu” chose them to be parents to the girls and they sought to do just that.⁶³

While *The Globe* worked hard to maintain perceptions of the Dionne parents as greedy, irresponsible money grabbers, and *Le Droit* defended them vigorously, *The Nugget* sat somewhere in between. As the local newspaper, it reported on the issue most frequently and provided viewpoints from both sides. It was considerate and sympathetic of the Dionne parents, but was not completely opposed to having the quintuplets remain under the custody of a guardianship. Ostensibly, *The Nugget* was truly concerned about the safety and well-being of the babies and thus supported both groups of people battling for custody. The Dionne parents did not win the custody battle. Rather, on April 1, 1935, the Dionne quintuplets were named wards of His Majesty King George V until their eighteenth birthday.⁶⁴

The first board of guardians was dissolved, and Croll appointed a new board which included Judge Valin, Dr Dafoe, Mr Croll, and Oliva as “the natural guardian”. This new arrangement would ultimately lead to “the greatest exploitation of children ever known and the greatest custody fight in history.”⁶⁵ The English press generally applauded the bill, the French press criticized the legislators for breaking apart a family and ignoring the rights of the parents, while the local newspaper, *The Nugget* remained somewhere in between as supporters of the bill, but also as sympathizers to the family.

Conclusion:

The true story of the Dionne quintuplets as told by their mother, Mrs Elzire Dionne, is often quite different from the story told by the public press. Most notably, she and her husband Oliva were long perceived as villains in this story, when in reality, they were victims who had at times been left to feel helpless. This had much to do with their heritage.

They were French Ontarian farmers, a rather unpopular group in English Canada. As a result, English newspapers such as *The Globe*, often perceived them unfavourably, especially when compared to the English hero, Dr Dafoe. This is even evident in North Bay's local newspaper, *The Nugget*. Although *The Nugget* often more closely resembled the reports of *The Globe* than those of *Le Droit*, it became a relatively neutral party. This is likely the result of an occurrence identified by Reader stating that smaller newspapers approach sensitive issues particularly carefully and aim to protect community values.⁶⁶ French newspapers, in this case, *Le Droit*, took a very different approach when telling the story. Because of the hostility towards French Canadians felt around the country, there was a strong sense of a national bond between them. As a result, *Le Droit* defended the Dionne parents vehemently.

Because of the patriarchal society that Mrs Dionne was a part of, it has become clear that it is impossible to separate her story from her husband's. Although Lillian Barker took the time to tell the story as it was told by Elzire, Oliva often acted the spokesman for the family. Many newspaper interviews (especially English ones) describe the words of Oliva and the agreement of Elzire through a nod of the head. This, however, was not always the case. There were rare instances when Elzire was very much a part of an interview (most often in French newspapers, as this was the only language she could speak) or a story.

These trends have become evident through the examination of *The Globe*, *Le Droit*, and *The Nugget*. The May, 1934 birth of the quintuplets were the first stories to have discrepancies between the English and the French newspapers. Although *Le Doit* recognized the role played by Mme Legros and Mme Lebel, *The Nugget* and *The Globe* almost instantly began praising the English doctor. Elzire explained the event slightly different from both papers as she emphasizes religion above all else. This trend was intensified during the opening of the Dafoe hospital and in February of 1935 when Mr and Mrs Dionne took a short tour of the United States. These particular events have allowed for a systematic examination of *Le Droit*, *The Globe*, and *The Nugget* in an effort to understand how the public perceived Elzire Dionne. It has become evident that these three newspapers perceive her and her

family in very different ways. This can, to a large extent, be attributed to her heritage, and how the majority of Canadians felt about French Canadians (especially those outside of Quebec) at the time. As a result, they were often publicly slandered and humiliated, making way for the government to step in and remove them of the right of being parents to their own children. The hostility that existed between French and English Canadians at this time is not only essential to understanding the ways in which Elzire was publicly perceived, but are also partially to blame for the fate of the Dionne quintuplets.

Endnotes

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- 4 Noël, *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario*, 14.
- 5 Welch, "The Dionne Quintuplets," 36-64.
- 6 Welch, "The Dionne Quintuplets," 36-64.
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- 16 Noël, *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario*, 104.
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* Berton claims that the quintuplet's trust fund had reached a quarter of a million dollars by the time they were two, and had risen to six hundred thousand dollars a year later. This represented their net profit after all expenses (hospital upkeep, staff salaries, nursing care, police protection...) were paid.

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From Zero to “Hero”:
Country Doctor Allan Roy Dafoe’s
Rise to Fame as a Result of the
Birth of the Dionne Quintuplets
Amanda Seiler

In the early hours of the morning on Monday May 28, 1934, in the small, largely French-Canadian town of Corbeil, Ontario, just south of North Bay, five baby girls were born to Oliva and Elzire Dionne. Almost immediately, word of the quintuplets’ birth hit the newsstands and the world fell in love with the tiny miracle babies: Yvonne Edouilda Marie, Annette Lillanne Marie, Cécile Marie Emilda, Émilie Marie Jeanne, and Marie Reine Alma. [Editor’s Note: The use of the term miracle to describe to birth of the Quints was common at the time. Modern writers often place this in quotes to indicate that it would not be considered so today. It has not been changed here as the author uses it throughout the paper without critical comment.] The world followed the five little girls’ weight gains and losses, holidays, birthdays, new food experiences, and guardianship battles. Although the girls’ story began as a miracle and true blessing, it eventually became one of strife and conflict. The Quints were moved from their family’s farmhouse to the Dafoe Hospital, which had been built across the street especially for them. For nine years the girls lived separately from daily family life and in relative seclusion with surrogate mother nurses and with Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe as a regular visitor. The Quints quickly became a tourist attraction, drawing thousands of admirers from around the world. The birth of the Quints became a lucrative phenomenon, as

their exploitation filled the pockets of those such as the government and Dr. Dafoe. Ultimately, the confusing and complicated story of the Dionne quintuplets is devastating in retrospect: the girls were deprived of valuable time with family, traditional French-Canadian holidays, and growing up as normal northern Ontario backwoods children.

Despite the difficulties the Dionne family faced, the quintuplets grew up as healthy young girls. Although their health and unexpected survival was attributed to the country doctor, Allan Roy Dafoe, many others contributed to the miracle of their survival. The two midwives, Madame Legros and Madame Lebel, the multiple nurses who attended the Quints, and pediatric specialists all played important roles in the Quints' health. Nevertheless, it was Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe who won the heartstrings of the world and was recognized as the sole person who saved the Quints' lives. Moreover, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was thrust into the spotlight as the country doctor who brought the famed Dionne quintuplets into the world. Mme. Legros and Mme. Lebel, the attending midwives, were virtually ignored for their triumph in delivering three of the five babies. Ultimately, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was established and venerated as a superhero by the media, while the midwives were rejected and ignored despite their significant roles in the Dionne quintuplets' survival.

Before demonstrating that Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe did not deserve the media superhero status he attained, this paper will delve into the history of midwifery and will examine the shift from midwives to doctors in childbirth. It is important to establish the cultural attitudes surrounding the debates between midwives and doctors and between the home and the hospital in order to understand the context in which Dafoe was deemed a hero. After a brief history of the cultural beliefs regarding midwifery, this paper will explore the life of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe before the miracle of the Dionne quintuplets. [Editor's Note: This section of the paper has not been included here as it is difficult to do justice to the large literature on this subject in a brief overview.] Through an examination of Dafoe's character, the paper will offer a more thorough understanding of his actions, as well as question his superhero status. In the historiography of the Dionne quintuplets, very

little is written specifically about Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe, and everything that is written about Dafoe pertains simply to his role as the country doctor who was the Quints' physician. Berton's *The Dionne Years* which covers the Quint saga from the eve of their birth to the sad separation of the three living sisters from their doomed marriages, takes a sympathetic viewpoint on all those involved in the story, but Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was one person whose character Berton questioned. On occasion, Dafoe was depicted as 'the bad guy,' and on others he was simply a victim. For example, the chapter entitled "The men behind Dafoe" suggested that Dafoe was ultimately a puppet of other doctors, including his brother. On the other hand, there were moments in the book that suggested Dafoe truly cared for the well-being of the quintuplets. Overall, Berton's perspective with regard to Dafoe was negative, or at least skeptical of Dafoe's take on raising the quintuplets. This was illustrated in the chapter "Manhattan merry-go-round." Whereas Dafoe was publicly hailed as the "country doctor," Berton ridiculed this through his suggestion that the "fortune from commercial testimonials" Dafoe promoted was a money grab and was not solely in the interest of the quintuplets.¹ With the exception of Hunt's biography, *The Little Doc*, there is not a single history devoted to the country doctor. This is incredibly ironic, considering he was at one time seen as the greatest hero in the medical world. This will be used to scrutinize Dafoe's life and journey in becoming the famed doctor of the Dionne quintuplets.

After a brief biography of Dr. Dafoe, the birth of the quintuplets will be explored using contemporary sources including the booklet published by the midwives, Madame Legros and Madame Lebel, *Administering Angels of the Dionne Quintuplets*, and newspaper articles from *The New York Times* and the *North Bay Nugget*. The use of both *The Little Doc* and *Administering Angels* can be problematic, as each represents a conflicting bias. *The Little Doc* glorifies Dafoe, while *Administering Angels* was written by the midwives and sold in their gift shop at Quintland. While neither can be used as solid resources on their own, they will be used to demonstrate the construction of Dafoe as a hero, and to argue against it. Newspaper articles for various years, including

Dafoe’s many trips to New York, will also be used to demonstrate the superhero status Dafoe eventually reached.

The research methodology for this topic consisted of searching the archives of the *New York Times* for hits on Dafoe around the Quints’ birth and his death, along with any interesting headlines concerning the doctor. The corresponding dates in the *Nugget* were searched, as well as a thorough day-by-day scan of the first two years of the Quints’ lives. These newspaper articles will demonstrate that the midwives were virtually absent from the story presented in the papers, as well as explore the media’s construction of Dafoe as a hero. The final part of the paper will argue that Dafoe’s heroic status was not warranted and concludes that he was in fact a mere puppet in the media circus surrounding the Dionne quintuplets.

With regard to the study of Dr. Dafoe, it was interesting to discover that he, like many doctors, was not properly qualified to deliver babies. Frazier Hunt states: “In some strange and unaccountable way, [Dafoe] had skimmed through his obstetrical courses, and actually had never seen a baby born. He’d always get to the hospital a little too late, and though he got his name down on the roll book – or he had some classmate sign up for him so he could prove that he had been in at least the required three births – he never actually had seen one.”² Ironically, the man who became world-renowned for delivering the famous Dionne quintuplets should not have passed obstetrics in medical school. How then did Allan Roy Dafoe become the physician of the five little miracle girls from Corbeil, Ontario?

Frazier Hunt’s *The Little Doc* ultimately characterizes Allan Roy Dafoe as a recluse and an unambitious young man. When he was just a small boy, Dafoe was struck over the ear by a wheel from a carriage, smashing his head against a rock and leaving him unconscious and bleeding from deep wounds on each temple. From this incident, Dafoe was left with “deep scars just above his ears and a vivid memory of the accident. Soon after this it was noticed that he began to stammer when he was the least excited or tired.” His father attempted to quell his son’s stammering by either laughing at him or insisting that he repeat the troublesome word or phrase over again slowly. This trau-

matizing event and the ridicule from his father which resulted caused the young boy to develop into a shy and introverted individual. Allan Roy Dafoe took to reading books as the main activity of his childhood. Dafoe stated that he was “most interested in the historical books of the Bible...[as his family] had very few books.” There was one book that Dafoe reread many times and often got himself in trouble for relaying its content: Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Dafoe’s love of reading created a boy who was sheltered from large groups of people and preferred the company of old and familiar leather-bound books. However, as a young man, Dafoe made a friend, Archie Cameron (six years his senior). At Archie’s house Dafoe “could smoke and talk books, and play... euchre. Old Dr. Dafoe soon became suspicious of Roy’s nights away from home, and in a brave attempt at appeasement the little mother invited Archie to the house for supper so that they might look him over. When the tall, gaunt, Scotch boy appeared, his simple honesty and kindly interest in Roy immediately won the whole family to him.” Dafoe’s homosocial and exclusive relationship with Archie was often of concern to his father. However, their relationship seemed to be one of equals, as Dafoe and Archie shared common interests and intellectual stimulation. In the end, Dafoe was quite content to while away the time with such odd and old misfits around town and seemed devoid of pride in his schoolwork.³ Moreover, Dafoe’s unwillingness to focus on schoolwork stayed with him as he entered medical training.

Despite receiving a Provincial Second Class, Grade ‘A,’ with the highest marks in the country, Dafoe failed in Latin when trying for his matriculation from university.⁴ During his third session of university, in 1878, he took his final examinations as a Gold Medalist, then proceeded to Edinburgh to complete his thesis for his M.D. on “Antiseptic Treatment of Wounds.”⁵ However, Hunt noted that Dafoe never felt the need to excel in his medical classes and was satisfied with making passing grades to keep out of trouble.⁶ In fact, a classmate of Dafoe stated that Roy “wouldn’t do anything, except go on puffing his pipe, or munch away at his baloney and crackers while he read some book that probably didn’t have a thing to do with his regular school subjects.”⁷ This behaviour was caught on camera in his later years of life as well

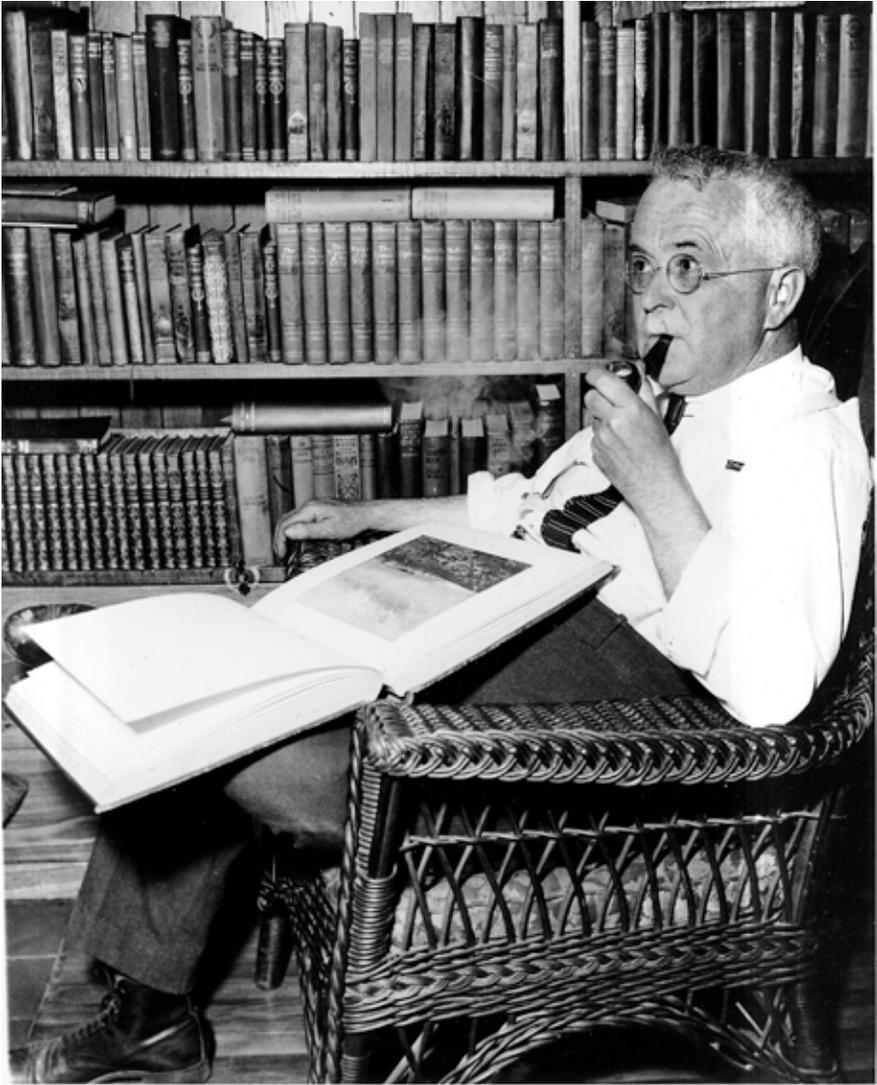


Figure 1: Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe in his library. Dionne Quint Museum. Book 11 p.6a.

(see Figure 1). Allan Roy Dafoe, therefore, noticeably lacked ambition, and was more than content to skim through medical school. Furthermore, as discussed above, Dafoe went out of his way to miss live births, which was a requirement for obstetrics. Ultimately, Dafoe's character was not that of a role model, as he showed little interest in using his obvious book smarts to become a great doctor.

However, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe did become a doctor, and one who was hailed as one of the best of his time. Like his father, Dafoe believed in being a natural healer rather than a dispenser of drugs, and espoused "plenty of fresh air, good pure water, internally and externally, and faith" as effective treatments. With few tools of the trade, and with meager supplies of medicines, Dafoe found himself fighting death and disease "on their own terms."⁸ That is, Dafoe used natural remedies of his own conjuring and allowed nature to take its course. Dafoe never "failed to give nature every possible chance."⁹ Dafoe, with his wife (who died from a brain tumor in 1926), moved to Callander to practice medicine.¹⁰ In the backwoods of northern Ontario, and battling what seemed impossible odds at times, Dafoe became even more of a recluse: "He was too much the lone wolf, the detached and self-contained individual battling his own way through life, ever quite to lose himself in a complete union. In a way he remained forever the bachelor; there were secret hiding places in his mind and heart that not even his beloved wife could enter."¹¹ As Hunt points out, this shy, stammering man was one of few words, yet everything changed in one morning: "For a full quarter of century he had been quietly living in [his] humble community, healing his flock and creating for himself an imaginative life within his books. He had made his terms with life. He wanted neither fame nor fortune. He wanted only the quiet obscurity of this North Country."¹² However, Dafoe gained fame and fortune through the miracle of the birth of the Dionne quintuplets, and the quiet obscurity of northern Ontario was forever disrupted.

The miracle of Monday May 28, 1934 varies depending on who told the story and when the story was told. The only fact that seems to be consistent in the story of the Dionne quintuplets' birth is that three of the five girls were born before Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was present in the

Dionne farmhouse. This section of the paper will examine different versions of the story in order to show that the fame Dr. Dafoe received for the birth of the quintuplets was unjustified. [Editor’s Note: Here the expression “the unnecessary fame” which is not clear was used. Seiler takes a strong stand on this issue throughout, using language such as “wrong” or “unjust” best avoided by historians. This language has not been removed completely, as this was clearly the intent.]

Madame Legros and Madame Lebel, the two midwives who delivered three of the quintuplets, wrote *Administering Angels of the Dionne Quintuplets*. In this booklet, Legros and Lebel document their involvement, along with Dr. Dafoe’s, in the birth of the Quints. At one thirty in the morning on 28 May 1934, Mdm. Legros was wakened by Oliva Dionne and rushed to Elzire, who was in a serious and painful condition of labour. Madame Lebel arrived at 3:15 a.m., and the two women successfully delivered the first of the five babies, Yvonne, at 4:10 in the morning. The women massaged Yvonne’s back and chest and drew their breaths in at the mouth of the baby’s in order to force her lungs to work on their own. The women then gave her a conditional baptism, for they were not certain she would survive. Fifteen minutes later, Annette was born, and the two midwives gave her the same treatment and baptism. After another fifteen minutes, Cécile was born. Somewhere between Cecile’s birth and the fifteen-minute span before Émilie was born, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe arrived at the Dionne household. Finally, two minutes after the birth of Émilie, Marie was born.¹³ Thus, Madame Legros and Madame Lebel delivered three babies before Dr. Dafoe’s arrival, which was not contested in any primary sources. However, the media ignored the involvement of the two midwives, and the distinction given to Dafoe for his involvement in the Dionne quintuplets’ survival became the problem. [Editor’s Note: This comment is problematic but has not been edited.]

According to Madame Legros, she went home for cloth to wrap the babies in and, on her return to the farmhouse, had to summon Dr. Dafoe from the yard when she found Elzire unattended and in a weakening condition. Interestingly, Elzire herself credited Madame Legros for saving her: “Once more, Auntie, you have saved my life.”¹⁴ Once

he had seen to Elzire's stability, Dafoe left the two midwives to their own devices in caring for both the mother and the quintuplets. When Madame Legros asked Dr. Dafoe why he had stated the babies would not live, he simply replied that he was "basing his opinion on what had happened in the past with regard to quintuplets, that they had never survived."¹⁵ Thus, on the most crucial day of the quintuplets' lives, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe did nothing to extend the possibility of survival for the infants. He left the midwives to work tirelessly on keeping the premature Quints alive, as he deemed them a lost cause.

Nevertheless, the two women continued to work to keep the quintuplets alive: they warmed flannels to wrap them in, warmed irons to place at their feet, sponged them with warm olive oil, wet their lips with warm water, pried their mouths open in case their noses were blocked so they could breathe, and dropped warm, sweetened water into their mouths. After a successful day had passed, thanks to the devotion of both Madame Legros and Madame Lebel, Dafoe reappeared with a registered nurse and was "surprised to find the five babies all still alive, and the mother also doing as well as could be expected."¹⁶ According to the midwives, Dafoe therefore had very little to do with the survival of the quintuplets. In fact, his presence seemed unnecessary to the lives of the Quints on that day. Dafoe surely felt the same, as his decision to leave the infants to die at the hands of Madame Legros and Madame Lebel reflects.

Evidently *Administering Angels* does not paint a heroic picture of Dafoe's involvement in the survival of the Dionne quintuplets. However, other contemporary material suggested a much different image of the doctor. Hunt's *The Little Doc* argued that if it were not for Dr. Dafoe, the babies and their mother would have died.¹⁷ Furthermore, an aspect of the incident that was left out of the midwives' account of the quintuplets' birth was that the last two babies were born with their amniotic sacs still intact and that Dafoe quickly "tied the cord of the third born, ruptured the sacs of the last two, and worked over them."¹⁸ This account of the birth of the last Quints was much more dramatic and the timing was portrayed with much more urgency than the one given by the midwives. The description given by Hunt was much more

thrilling and depicted Dafoe as a kind of hero capable of multitasking in an unusual and dire situation. Furthermore, Hunt alluded to the necessity of Dr. Dafoe in the situation. Through statements such as the two provided above, Hunt suggested that the midwives were ineffectual caregivers for the birth of the quintuplets, and that all would have perished if Dafoe had not been available to oversee the births and tend to the mother and infants. However, Hunt did not completely diminish the role the midwives played in the survival of the quintuplets. He praised their devotion and success in keeping the babies alive by pointing out Dafoe’s shock, upon his third trip to the Dionne household, to find all five girls alive.¹⁹ Ultimately, this contemporary work fed into the idea of Dafoe’s brilliance and essential role in the quintuplets’ survival.

Other contemporary pieces written on the quintuplets’ birth and survival were newspaper articles. Immediate coverage of the Dionne quintuplets’ birth is very factual and did not initially propel Dafoe’s superstardom. On 29 May 29 1934, *The New York Times* announced in a simple headline: “Frail Mother of 6 Gives Birth to Five.” The article was short and to the point and did not give any indication of the midwives’ struggle to keep the five girls alive. It did mention that the births were attended by a doctor and a woman assumed to be a midwife. However, the article did not suggest that either person did miraculous things to keep the babies alive: “Mrs. Ben Lebell [sic] attended the mother at birth and reported all five girls were born between 4:30 and 5 A.M. Three of them arrived before the doctor did, she said.”²⁰ Similarly to *The New York Times’* article, the local *North Bay Nugget* announced in their headline on 28 May 28 1934: “Quintuplets Born to Farm Wife.” In this article, there was no reference to the struggle and determination of the midwives nor any indication that Dafoe did anything out of the ordinary. On the second page section of the story, the article alluded to the midwives’ constant attention: “Mrs. Ben Lebell rushed to the residence from Corbeil last evening. She was in attendance constantly, and three of the babies had been born before Dr. Dafoe arrived on the scene. She is still nursing the youngsters.”²¹ Although *The Nugget* was a local newspaper and thus had more accurate information, it still did not emphasize the care given by the mid-

wives nor the absence of Dafoe at the Dionne home. Therefore, neither paper placed emphasis on Dafoe's role in their initial coverage of the quintuplets' birth. However, later coverage in both papers leans more heavily in favour of Dafoe and undermines the midwives who kept the five girls alive in the critical hours following their births.

On 11 December 1934, *The New York Times* ran an article entitled "Dr. Dafoe's Story of the Quintuplet's Birth." In Dafoe's account of the birth, he romanticized the event and, as with Hunt's version, created a sense of urgency for his services:

I was astonished to find two babies had already been born, and a third one was arriving. Two neighbors were acting as midwives and doing excellent work...I scrubbed up in the best way available, and took over the situation... In the early hours of the morning, and still sleepy from a previous obstetrical case that night, the whole situation seemed to be unreal and dream-like, but I mechanically went about the business of looking after the babies...I didn't see how all of them could possibly live... The mother, in the meantime, was not reacting in a normal fashion. She was showing signs of an increasing condition of shock... During this time of great worry the five babies were almost forgotten, but their kitten-like cries reminded me of their presence.²²

Dafoe's story of the quintuplets' birth was much more elaborate and there were many discrepancies. First, he noted the presence of the two women, but used the phrase "acting as midwives" as if they were simply passersbys who had helped in the best way they could at the time. Although he did state that they were doing an excellent job, it reads more as an afterthought than genuine praise. Second, Dafoe stated in the article that he was present for the birth of the third baby. While *Administering Angels* and *The Little Doc* and early newspaper article agree that three babies were born before Dafoe arrived, he changed or embellished the story to emphasize his role in the quintuplets' birth. Furthermore, Dafoe made certain to remind readers that he was a busy doctor and that the Dionnes' birth was not his first that night. Also,

the way in which he described the mother’s deteriorating condition demonstrated the heroism of his actions in this account. However, if one refers back to Madame Legros’ account of finding Elzire in a weakened condition and calling Dafoe in from the yard, this contradicts the account found in this newspaper article. Ultimately, The New York *Times*’ account of the Quints’ birth printed only a few months later already supported the idea that Dafoe was the hero in the story and discredited the midwives’ role in their survival.

In a special edition of *The Nugget* in May 1939, the midwives were again denied the credit they deserved. The article “Fame, Fortune Fail to Touch Midwives” noted that the “two neighborly women who volunteered their assistance in the time of need have achieved little fame.”²³ This article not only undermines the women’s credibility as midwives by suggesting that they were merely volunteers, but it also placed heavy focus on the roles of Dafoe and the nurses who were brought to the Dionne home. Moreover, a second article with head-shot images of both midwives simplifies their involvement and suggests that Dafoe came to their rescue when he arrived.²⁴ While the midwives were not entirely excluded, they were essentially pushed to the side in order to allow room for Dafoe’s heroism.

When examining Dafoe as a hero in the media, it is important to explore how doctors were regarded in general. As Barbara Myerhoff and William Larson asked in their article, “The Doctor as Culture Hero: The Routinization of Charisma,” “Is [the doctor] regarded as a saviour, following a call and endowed with unique and super-human powers – or is he but an ordinary mortal, highly trained in a complex technology?”²⁵ This question is particularly relevant to this study. Was Dr. Dafoe regarded as a saviour, following the call and endowed with unique and super-human powers? Or was he but an ordinary man, highly trained in childbirth? The media’s portrayal of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was the former: Dafoe was regarded in the media as the quintuplets’ saviour. From newspaper articles to his prominent presence in *Old Home Week* 1935, Dafoe’s status as a hero is undeniably evident.

A first example of this can be found in a New York *Times* article (15 December 1934) which includes a quote from Professor Henderson,

who had attended one of Dafoe's seminars in New York. "The results show what a splendid man that Canadian country doctor is, in that he used the latest and most effective means of keeping these five premature babies alive and won for medical, science and humanity this great triumph."²⁶ In quoting a person of influence, the *Times* contributed to the constructed image of Dafoe as a hero. Henderson's high praise illustrated the uniqueness and super-human qualities many believed Dafoe possessed. A second example of Dafoe growing renown can be seen in the *Nugget's* special Quintuplet Edition, in 1939. In it, Dafoe is described as a new man, bearing many distinctions and commanding worldwide respect.²⁷ The article went on to state, "Within a few weeks after the arrival of the quints, Dr. Dafoe became the personification of the country doctor. Happy in the survival of his precious charges, the grey-headed little man was amused to find the world at his feet."²⁸ In other words, Dafoe's heroism in the birth and survival of the Quints was emphasized so heavily that the country doctor was thrust to the forefront of the profession and regarded with universal fame and awe. When the quintuplets had their tonsils removed, an article stated, "Dr. Dafoe's great experiment demonstrated in part what is being done, in part what can be done for children everywhere."²⁹ This statement demonstrated the kind of praise Dafoe received for his work in the field of pediatrics. He was hailed in this article, as in numerous others, as the saviour not only of the Dionne quintuplets, but also of all children across the globe. Moreover, when Dafoe died from pneumonia, the papers carried on the construction of his persona as a hero: "His name will go down to posterity as one who resisted great temptation and remained absolutely true to the highest and best in his profession."³⁰ Therefore, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was regarded in newspaper articles as a person with super-human powers and a unique gift in the field of pediatrics. He was hailed as the hero of the Dionne quintuplet story and as a hero in the medical field.

This can also be seen in *Old Home Week*, a 1935 souvenir book. It featured Dr. Dafoe as the hero in the story of the Dionne quintuplets' birth and survival. As Noël states, the greatest coverage in the 1935 English souvenir books was the birth of the quintuplets and in it, the

"facts" of the Dionne situation at the time are portrayed in a way that shows Dafoe's involvement as essential to the Quints' survival.³¹ Old Home Week also featured a one-page portrait of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe to begin the section on the quintuplet story.³² Interestingly, two reasons given in the souvenir book for the miracle survival of the Dionne quintuplets were their descent from the hardy stock of French-Canadians and the fact that "even in the most critical early stages of their existence, they were under the care of a quiet, unassuming country doctor."³³ The souvenir book went on to praise Dafoe's work as a doctor: "In the work of the country practitioner, the unusual case is common, and he must be prepared to diagnose and treat anything and everything from a simple toothache to a major ailment. Years of contact with the resident of his locality make him their friend and confidant, in sickness and in health."³⁴ This praise of Dafoe appeared in the souvenir book before the actual story of the quintuplets' birth, which demonstrated the importance placed on Dafoe by the media. The emphasis on Dafoe was further solidified through the advertisement found on the next page, which featured a picture of Dafoe standing beside a car. The advertisement stated, "A Chevrolet Takes Dr. Dafoe Each Day – Winter and Summer – To Attend the Precious Quintuplets: It is Dependable."³⁵ Chevrolet not only capitalized on Dafoe's fame and importance, but they also furthered it. In addition to promoting the car, the ad suggested that Dafoe was dependable and necessary to the quintuplets' daily survival. In essence, they required his presence in order to survive. In the Old Home Week version of the birth of the quintuplets, the midwives Legros and Lebel are named as the women who attended Elzire Dionne, but there was no significance placed on their roles whatsoever. In the one and only paragraph on the midwives, the souvenir book stated, "Until the arrival of a trained nurse, these two attendants did everything possible to assist in the momentous event which, all unrealized, was unfolding itself."³⁶ Their devotion and hard work was downplayed and all but forgotten in the book, while Dafoe's face was continuously represented as a reminder of his superior involvement and importance to the Quints' lives. Ultimately, Dafoe occupied a central place in the Old Home Week souvenir book,

which constructed him as the hero of the story.

However, the image of Dafoe as a hero was not only constructed in newspapers and *Old Home Week* through the emphasis on his superhuman powers as a doctor, but it was also created through the plethora of attention given to Dafoe in the media. Dafoe was reported in the newspapers almost as frequently as the quintuplets were themselves. Humorous tidbits of Dafoe's person and life which seem irrelevant now were printed in newspaper stories. For example, the *New York Times* reported, "Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe, concerned about his somewhat pudgy figure, has joined the Dionne quintuplets in physical training exercises."³⁷ One may well ask why this article, found on page four of the *Times*, was important to the people of New York. Ultimately, the significance of such an article is not why people were interested to know Dafoe was concerned about his figure, but rather that people were interested to know. Another similar example of unnecessary snippets of Dafoe's life printed by the media was during one (of many) trips Dafoe made to New York: "He was at the Music Hall about two hours, and it was there, in a small preview room, that he saw himself in the newsreels. He said that he looked just as he expected to look, but he was a little fearful that he may have spoken too loudly. He chuckled all through the showing of the film."³⁸ This article had no real purpose and was not newsworthy in my opinion. However, the fact that the *New York Times* felt it was illuminates the extent of the interest in Dafoe. This type of coverage is comparable to present-day reports on celebrities, but more importantly, it shows that the celebrity status held by Dafoe was comparable to that of the Dionne quintuplets themselves. Just as every inch or pound of growth the girls made was reported in the papers, insignificant, even intimate details of Dafoe's life were readily shared with the masses. The sheer extent of media coverage of Dafoe solidified the image of him as a superhero because people were interested in small details of his life in order to reaffirm the fact that he was a fellow human being. This type of media coverage may have helped maintain his appeal and status as the "good ole country doctor." Certainly these articles contributed to increase his popularity as a media personality especially when combined with his char-

acterization as a hero.

Newspaper stories helped to construct Dafoe as a superhero in part by neglecting the midwives. While little could be found in the *New York Times* on the midwives,³⁹ the *North Bay Nugget* tended to either minimize their significance or print false information. Within days of the Quints' birth, the *Nugget* began to minimize the midwives' importance: "Congratulations! To the parents, Dr. R. A. Dafoe, attending physician, and others, who assisted at the birth, The *Nugget* extends congratulations and with that expresses a hope that mother and babies will survive the precarious period."⁴⁰ In this article, Legros and Lebel were given neither the credit nor proper congratulations their involvement deserved. Instead, the reader had to infer that they were included in "the others" category of "helpers," if the reader thought of them at all. This was not only degrading to the women who had spent much of their lives attending to births, but it also demonstrated the significance already placed on Dafoe's involvement. Furthermore, the same paper mistakenly labeled a picture of Lebel as Legros with the caption: "Mrs. Alex Lagros, Corbeil, who assisted at the birth of three of the Dionne quintuplet's before Dr. A. R. Dafoe, Callander, arrived. Mrs. Legros is an aunt of Mrs. Dionne and has been a foster-mother to the now-famed mother since the death of her mother."⁴¹ This was corrected in the next issue of the paper: "This picture, carried in Wednesday's issue, reappears today for the reason that it is a likeness of Mrs. Ben Labelle, Corbeil, and not Mrs. Alex Legros, also of Corbeil, as the explanatory lines stated. Mrs. Labelle assisted, along with Mrs. Legros, at the birth of the Dionne quintuplets, and helped to bring three of the little lassies into the world before Dr. Dafoe arrived."⁴² Despite the fact that the paper took the time to correct their mistake, the fact that it was made in the first place was significant. Furthermore, both the articles and the pictures are exceptionally small and off to the side, which suggests that they were essentially of little importance. Moreover, the use of the word "assist" in both articles de-emphasizes the actual roles of the midwives in the Quints' birth and, perhaps more importantly, their survival. Thus, through the exclusion and insignificance (when actually presented) of the midwives in the newspapers and souvenir book,

Dafoe's status as a hero in the Dionne Quints' story was heightened.

Despite the media's construction of Dafoe as a superhero in the Dionne quintuplet story, Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was not the hero. There were many individuals who contributed greatly to the Quints' survival. As discussed earlier, the midwives were two individuals who kept the five girls alive in the most crucial hours of their lives. Although not every account of what was said and done during those exciting thirty-six hours of the Quints' lives correspond,⁴³ the role the midwives played was unacknowledged by the media. The midwives were essential to the survival of the five premature infants, as discussed in their account from *Administering Angels*. When Dafoe left the Quints in the care of the women, he expected them to perish. Although the midwives believed the babies would not survive more than a minute or two,⁴⁴ they diligently tended to the five girls until relieved by Yvonne Leroux, a nurse.⁴⁵ However, arguing that the midwives were the heroes in the story would not be credible either, and that is not the intention of this paper. Although the midwives were only present in the Quints' lives for hours while Dafoe was for years, the minimal attention given to their involvement was unjustifiable. Through illuminating the insignificance placed on the midwives, who were essential to the survival of the Quints, and the heavy emphasis placed on Dafoe's "expertise," the media's representation of Dafoe as a superhero was clear. However, it was also wrong, as Dafoe did nothing heroic in the birth and survival of the Dionne quintuplets.

The construction of Dafoe as super-human, or perhaps even superior in the field of obstetrics and pediatrics, was incorrect, as Dafoe did nothing new or unusual to nurture the health of the Quints. In fact, Dafoe had many specialists behind him, who suggested and steered him toward the scientific methods in which the Quints were raised. Despite the fact that Dafoe never completed the qualification of attending three live births in his obstetric courses, Dafoe had delivered more than five hundred infants by the time the quintuplets were born. In fact, the bulk of Dafoe's practice consisted of delivering babies.⁴⁶ Therefore, to state it simply, it was not unusual for Dafoe to deliver a baby. Of course, quintuplets are unique and most doctors are rarely

presented the opportunity to deliver that many at once, the process is no different from delivering one, or even two. Furthermore, Dafoe only delivered the last two girls, as the midwives had delivered the first three before he was in attendance. Thus, the actual delivery of the girls was not superhuman and his involvement was not completely necessary, as the midwives were competent enough to deliver the first three without a hitch.

Secondly, Dafoe did not introduce any new way of caring for the infants, despite the media’s portrayal of his efforts. On her first night of caring for the five girls, Dafoe instructed Leroux to “keep them warm; feed them nothing but a few drops of warm water from an eyedropper; bathe them occasionally in olive oil; apart from that, leave them strictly alone.”⁴⁷ This was sensible advice considering the state the premature infants were in. Common sense prevailed and the instructions given by Dafoe were not earth-shattering or medically intrusive. In fact, Dafoe believed in letting nature run its course as a general rule: “In a way, Roy was a chip off the old block. His father, too, was far more a nature healer than a dispenser of drugs. Plenty of fresh air, good pure water, internally and externally, and faith – this was the cardinal trilogy both Dafoe’s believed in.”⁴⁸ In fact, “neither snow nor zero weather could dissuade The Little Doctor from his belief in the magic power of fresh air... All his professional life, he had clung to the theory that fresh air and rest were nature’s own cures and health builders.”⁴⁹ Fresh air, sunshine and rest were hardly new ways of curing the ill or breathing life into infants. Therefore, when the media sensationalized Dafoe’s role in “saving” the Quints and constructed him as the hero of the story, this was not based on fact.

Dafoe not only failed to contribute something new to child rearing, but he was also easily swayed into following the suggestions and orders of other prominent doctors of the time. He regularly would call on his brother, Dr. William Dafoe, a Toronto obstetrician, to seek advice.⁵⁰ Berton noted that Dr. Alan Brown was the “man whom Dafoe consulted regularly and who, more than anybody else, was responsible for the quintuplets’ physical care. It was certainly Brown who allowed the children no candy or ice cream... who watched the weight charts with

a hawk's eye, checked the milk formulae, ordered their tonsils out."⁵¹ From the day of the Quints' birth, Dr. Brown was called on by Dafoe to attend to the infants and more than once he drove all night to answer an emergency call from Dafoe.⁵² While Brown attended to the physical and dietary needs of the Quints, Dr. William Blatz organized their daily routines and disciplinary "guidance." Berton noted that Blatz "planned the quintuplets' routine on an almost minute-to-minute basis" and enforced the isolation room as punishment.⁵³ Until 1938, when work was turned over to the Department of Education, Blatz was of "inestimable value to The Little Doctor."⁵⁴ With other doctors dictating the ways in which the Dionne quintuplets should be raised, Dr. Dafoe actually became a more marginal figure.⁵⁵ His dependence on doctors W. Dafoe, Brown, and Blatz contradicts the image of A. R. Dafoe as the hero of the situation. However, the media did not attribute the routines, diets, or caring of the Quints to the men behind Dafoe. Rather, the media credited Dafoe for this work, which led to the construction of him as a hero... wrongfully.

A superhero can be defined as a "type of stock character possessing extraordinary or superhuman powers [who is] dedicated to protecting the public... [and combats] threats against humanity."⁵⁶ In 1934 to well past his death, the media hailed Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe as a superhero: he was the typical stock character of a country doctor. However, the media endowed him with extraordinary superhuman powers that he simply did not possess. Although Dafoe was dedicated to protecting the Dionne quintuplets' lives, as "ten thousand times he [had] said the babies come first" and meant it,⁵⁷ Dafoe was no more than a physician to the miracle Dionne girls. However, what many failed to realize was the lucrative profit Dafoe collected through his stardom. While his sole income consisted of his two hundred dollar monthly payments for looking after the Quints, Dafoe amassed \$182, 466 by 1943 (almost exactly what each of the Quints was worth at the time). Dafoe acquired this kind of revenue through lectures, endorsements, radio broadcasts, and articles in professional publications.⁵⁸ The purpose of stating Dafoe's financial gain in this paper is to illustrate the fame Dafoe received through being the Quints' doctor. The quintuplets, a

source of tourism and advertisement, were worth the same amount as the simple, quiet, shy country doctor. The hero role he was attributed gained him the status of a celebrity and made him of equal value to the quintuplets in the world of advertising.

There is no question that Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was a major influence in the Dionne quintuplets’ lives and survival. He was their attending physician until 1942. The world, because of the media’s portrayal of him, thought of Dafoe “as their real father, and doubtless he himself had felt a similar bond.”⁵⁹ He became the saviour who removed the Dionne quintuplets from their parents’ potentially harmful influence: “Most popular journalists continued to portray Dionne as an ignorant and shiftless farmer. It was widely believed that he could not handle money and that if the quintuplets ever went back to the farmhouse, they would quickly lose their fortune.”⁶⁰ Even Dafoe himself contributed to the media’s negative perception of the parents in stating to a reporter that Dionne changed cars every six months.⁶¹ Through the media’s portrayal of Dafoe as the “saviour” of the quintuplets, Dafoe was further placed in the superhero role, as he now protected them from implied familial harm.

Over a decade after Dafoe’s death, Clark Kinnaird, the head of King Features Syndicate, summed it all up in a one-sentence epitaph: “He fostered the whole country doctor literary, movie and radio industry and his story should be told.”⁶² This paper’s intention is to tell the story of Dafoe – both the one established in the media and the one behind the façade. The media fostered the country doctor literary, movie and radio industry, but Dafoe was just the lucky backwoods country doctor who achieved fame because he was the physician in the area of the miracle birth of the Dionnes. As this paper has demonstrated, Dafoe did nothing out of the ordinary to earn the praise and attention he received. While his services as a physician cannot be disregarded or undermined, he was simply present at a miracle: the birth of five identical baby girls.

Other individuals were involved in the same miracle of the quintuplets’ birth. Both the parents and the midwives played integral roles, yet the media focused their attention and praise on the English-speak-

ing, male doctor. Coincidence? Perhaps. One cannot ignore the fact that Dafoe was an English-speaking professional who delivered five French-Canadian girls. In the patriarchal society of the thirties, one could suggest that gender and/or ethnicity biases were factors which help to account for Dafoe's rise in the media and the little attention given to the women involved, particularly the two French-Canadian midwives. However, this would not accomplish anything. The fact of the matter was that Dafoe was wrongfully constructed as a hero. That is not to say that the midwives were the heroes in the story, nor does it vilify anyone. The media unjustly recognized and constructed the superhero or celebrity status of Dafoe. The country doctor was not solely responsible for the birth or survival of the Dionne quintuplets, as there were many individuals who, from the first few hours of the quintuplet's birth to the end of the nine years they spent in the Dafoe hospital, contributed to their growth, development and survival. Ultimately, the Quints were the miracle, and not Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe.

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 Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe
 Callander, Ont
 whose great work
 has placed the whole
 medical profession
 in his debt.
 with appreciation
 & the regards of
 Herbert Bruce

Government House
 Toronto Apr 29. 37

A copy of *Our Heritage And Other Addresses* by Herbert Bruce originally in Dafoe's library has the above inscription to Dafoe in it. Bruce was Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario from 1932 to 1937. Courtesy of David Eves Books.

Endnotes

- 1 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 93.
- 2 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 115.
- 3 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 115, 47, 48, 61, 92, 96, 97.
- 4 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 63-64.
- 5 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 64.
- 6 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 104.
- 7 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 111.
- 8 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 142, 145.
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- 10 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 31.
- 11 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 169-170.
- 12 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 283.
- 13 Legros and Lebel, *Administering Angels*, 7-10.
- 14 Legros and Lebel, *Administering Angels*, 11, 13.
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- 16 Legros and Lebel, *Administering Angels*, 13.
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- 18 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 17.
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- 22 *New York Times*, 11 Dec. 1934, “Dr. Dafoe’s Story of the Quintuplet’s Birth,” 19.
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- 32 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 34.
- 33 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 35.
- 34 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*.
- 35 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 36.
- 36 Lottridge and Fitzgerald, *Souvenir of North Bay Old Home Week*, 35.
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- 39 *New York Times*, 1934-1943.
- 40 North Bay *Nugget*, 30 May 1934, "Congratulations," 4.
- 41 North Bay *Nugget*, 6 June 1934, "Mrs. Alex Legros," 2.
- 42 North Bay *Nugget*, 8 June 1934, "Mrs. Ben Labelle," 3.
- 43 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 39.
- 44 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 37.
- 45 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 40.
- 46 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 31.
- 47 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 40.
- 48 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 142.
- 49 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 270-271.
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- 51 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 114.
- 52 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 226.
- 53 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 120.
- 54 Hunt, *The Little Doc*, 279.
- 55 Kari Dehli, "Fictions of the scientific imagination," 96.
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Fred Davis as Visual Storyteller: The Construction of two Antithetical Images of the Dionne Quintuplets

Annie McIntyre

The Dionne Quintuplets have decorated the pages of books, magazines, newspapers, posters, calendars, and souvenir items since their arrival in 1934. The world craved photographic images of these five little girls who defied the odds simply by surviving. A close examination of the photographs which were taken between 1934 and 1939, however, raises some questions, most particularly about the impact of these images on the public's perception of the Dionne Quintuplets. Fred Davis was the man behind the camera, and the one responsible for the vast majority of photographs of the quintuplets. Interestingly, he is rarely discussed in the media despite the critical role he played in the development of the quintuplet's image. The few sources available relating to Fred Davis will be explored here in an attempt to understand his thoughts and techniques while photographing the five little girls who stole the heart of a nation.

The photographs of the quintuplets themselves indicate that at least two antithetical images of the Quints were constructed. The first shows them as rural rugged Canadians who mirror the life of the everyday citizen living through a major economic Depression. This is evident through photographs of the girls cooking, cleaning, carrying shovels, and doing housework. In contrast, other photographs show them as Canada's little princesses, a Canadian version of royalty. Many photo-

graphs were circulated of the quintuplets outfitted in royal attire. They always wore the most fashionable clothing available for a given period, season, and for their gender and age. It is important to note that the quintuplets' French-Catholic background was blatantly ignored in the photographic record of this period.

Fred Davis & Photographing the Dionne Quintuplets

Fred Davis, who worked for the Newspaper Enterprise Association, was the sole photographer of the quintuplets for the first six years of their lives. The Davis Collection, which is currently housed at the Dionne Quintuplet's Museum consists of over sixty books of photographs. After a preliminary examination of these, sixteen books which document the girl's lives from infancy through to their sixth year were examined more closely. The photographs include birthdays, events, dressing up, and playing with Dr. A.R. Dafoe. Of these, only those which contribute to the two antithetical images of the five girls are included here.

Fred Davis (Figure 1) was working for the *Toronto Star* when the story of the birth of five baby girls struggling to stay alive broke. The *Star* did not act immediately; it called upon a part-time news correspondent living in North Bay, Art Hill, to cover the story. He was directed to interview the quintuplet's father, Oliva Dionne and to write a two-hundred word paragraph about the birth of the five infants. In the process, Hill succeeded in angering Oliva Dionne. It was Art Hill who sent the *Toronto Star* the phrase that would help turn public opinion against Oliva Dionne. He was quoted as saying, "I'm the kind of guy who ought to be put to jail." Dionne later refuted this and claimed that he actually said, "The way you talk, people would think I ought to be in jail." ¹ This inaccuracy on the part of the media is one of the factors that helped influence Dionne to make the decision to exclude the media and refuse interviews. This drove the media to Dr Dafoe who quickly assumed the role of the leading authority on the quintuplets and was willing to answer all questions.

Gordon Sinclair, well known to most Canadians, was a writer at the time who was dispatched to Corbeil. He recalls, "The *Star*, which had



Figure 1. Fred Davis with the Dionne quintuplets, wearing their Hudson Bay blanket coats. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 21, p. 16. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

almost dismissed the original dispatch as of no importance, next day decided to make up for the lapse and sent a team of Keith Munro and myself as writers, Fred Davis as photographer and a nurse.² These were the *Star's* top men, and nurse Jean Blewett was brought along more for appearances than her actual nursing skills. This inaugural trip was Fred Davis' first journey to the small French-Canadian community of Corbeil, and his first introduction to the Dionne Quintuplets. Pierre Berton describes Davis as "a cigar-chewing veteran of the Great War."³ This is one of the few descriptions of Fred Davis that is not based solely on his career as the quintuplet's photographer.

Pierre Berton contends that the *Star*, "was not content to merely cover a story; often it *became* the story. The newspaper tended to write about its own exploits as much as about the news it was reporting."⁴ This meant that the people involved in the reporting, writing, and pho-

tography were also part of the stories themselves. This explains why many writers, including Gordon Sinclair, were known to the public. The *Star*, learned from Dr. Dafoe what was needed in the little farm house, and gathered and expanded the list. Not only were water bottles, diapers, clothing, and bottles bought, but also a basket full of food and fresh fruit.⁵ The newspaper acted to assist in saving the lives of the five little girls. Conveniently, the newspaper also created an opportunity to establish positive relations with the doctor and the family, and in hopes of securing future interviews and photographs. As stated previously, Dr. Dafoe readily assumed responsibility for the quintuplets including the dissemination of information. A mutual friendship between Dr. Dafoe and the *Toronto Star* was established. Berton explains, "it was a relationship that would put the newspaper squarely in the Dafoe camp and two of the *Star's* top men - Fred Davis and Keith Munro - in the quintuplets' employ."⁶ It is evident that the *Toronto Star* made its connections quickly and immediately. These relations were maintained for a substantial amount of time and extremely advantageous to the media.

It is unfortunate that Fred Davis never wrote about his own experiences with the Dionne Quintuplets, or even discussed that first day of photographing the girls. Perhaps later in their life he valued their privacy and wished to protect them? Or, perhaps Davis was solely a photographer and had no interest in writing. It is therefore Gordon Sinclair's account of their arrival that we have. Upon arriving in Corbeil, Fred Davis and Gordon Sinclair were the first to enter the house. They found the mother, Elzire Dionne, alone in the house with her five little girls. Sinclair explains:

There were no flash bulbs in those days, and Fred was loading magnesium powder into the trough he was to hold above his head to fire so he'd have light for his pictures. One flash... one picture... and he needed several. This increased Madame Dionne's fury and no wonder! I told Fred to cool it while I went for the father. He spoke English.⁷

Mrs. Dionne was not comfortable with her five premature babies being photographed with flash powder, as it created an extremely bright flash. Davis, however, needed to have photographs of the girls. With Mrs. Dionne's permission, Davis and Sinclair took the babies onto the veranda where there was daylight. Here Davis could successfully photograph them.⁸ This was the first time that Davis photographed the Dionne Quintuplets, but it would not be his last.

Fred Davis initially had a one-year contract to photograph the Quints. He then successfully negotiated for exclusive rights to photograph them. This was a two-fold proposition: the photographs taken were exclusive to the *Toronto Star* which held the Canadian rights. However, the news syndicate, Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA), held the world rights. Davis was now the only person permitted to photograph the girls, but his contract excluded photographs of the quints with their family. This explains why the only photographs of the quintuplets with their family were taken before 1935, when Davis did not have a contract.⁹ The NEA paid ten thousand dollars a year for the first two years of their exclusive rights to the photographs of the Dionne Quintuplets. In 1937 however, this was changed to fifty thousand dollars when bidding for the rights to the photographs were initiated.¹⁰

As the quintuplets official photographer, Davis had an endearing and complex job. He visited the Dafoe Nursery almost every day to photograph the quintuplets and became a leading figure in their lives.

While 2 or 3 years old, the girls saw Fred Davis, the photographer who had exclusive rights to their pictures, much more regularly than they saw their parents. While the right of the government to control the girls was often contested, the 'natural' right of the media (usually spoken about as 'the right of the public') to direct the girls' lives went unchallenged. The quintuplets' own account criticizes everyone from parents to doctors to government officials, but not the media.¹¹

It is evident that the public demanded to see the quintuplets and photography was one of the quickest and easiest ways for that demand

to be met. The popularity of the Dionne quintuplets was recognized worldwide. Newspapers and magazines were highly motivated to offer their readers pictures and articles of the quintuplets. These photographs allowed people to feel a sense of warmth and wonder. They also offered a viable distraction from the everyday life of the Great Depression. A nursery rhyme written about them in 1937 reflects this:

Who are the girls whose pictures appear in the papers for
us to see-
Annette, Emilie, Cecile, Yvonne and Marie
And who are the girls who are knocking them dead with
popularity?
Annette, Emilie, Cecile, Yvonne and Marie
They'll win the fight we know and their names and fame
will live in history
Now their bottles and their battles and their games and
Nursery rhymes
Are depicted in *The Telegram, The Journal, News and
Times*¹²

It indicates an awareness that the media played an integral part in creating the popularity of the quintuplets.

Fred Davis was described as a man who looked like he was compatible with children and extremely patient. It goes without saying that these were essential qualities for the photographer who was exclusively responsible for capturing the everyday activities of Canada's sweethearts. Admittedly, Davis' **job was not always an easy one.** Photographing five babies who cannot move very far was one thing. Capturing five walking and excitable toddlers was quite another:

At best, the task of getting five lively little girls to assume reasonably interesting poses, in positions where they all will show in the same picture, is bordering on the impossible. The babies cannot be forced to do anything. The photographer must wait patiently until they voluntarily assume satisfactory poses; or else employ some sort of strategy, as in the case of the cake of soap.¹³



Figure 2: The Quints in matching outfits in the playground. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 19, p. 29b. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

Davis was unwilling to force the quintuplets into poses. If he received directions to have one of the quintuplets reach into a basket, he would place an object like a cake of soap in a basket. He would then wait and hope that a tiny hand would reach into the basket and retrieve the soap. Davis received specific requests from the newspapers regarding their preference for photographed poses or selected activities. These specifications could not always be met. Often it was not possible to have the girls reenact them, or, the quintuplets were simply uninterested in doing what Davis was trying to influence them to do.

After patiently waiting for the quintuplets to take complimentary compositions, Davis then had the task of operating cameras, lighting,



Figure 3: Four of the Quints with Dr. Dafoe. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 19, p. 17b. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

and exposures. As discussed previously, dangers were involved with the use of flash powder. Davis sought every opportunity to photograph the girls outside where the natural light would not cause them any harm. Both Dr. Dafoe and Davis were concerned about the effects of the photography upon the girls. As a result, a multitude of photographs were taken in the play yard (Figure 2). Curled hair and matching outfits became the order for the day, as the quintuplets played in their contained backyard for the world to see.

It is interesting to note that Dr. Dafoe was included in many of the photographs with the girls. Davis made it a rule that he would not photograph the quints when Dafoe was not present, and this resulted in Dafoe being in many of the pictures.¹⁴ (See Figure 3.) Both Davis and Dr. Dafoe were constantly mindful of the physical, mental, and emotional states of the quintuplets. They carefully assessed the girls level of

fatigue, and were cognizant of potential eye strain caused by photography. Some days Davis would set up to photograph the girls, and end up not taking any photographs at all if the quintuplets were in this state.¹⁵

The availability of electricity and the limited abilities of photography equipment also impacted Davis' work. "When the quintuplets were very young, and before electric power lines were extended to their home. Davis had to use photoflash lamps. Later, when electric power was available, better mean of lighting were employed. Taking a lesson from Hollywood motion-picture technicians. Davis adopted 2,000-watt movie flood lamps as standard light sources."¹⁶ Davis made a point of never using more than three of these lamps, and this made a significant difference. An examination of the photographs reveals that all harsh shadows were eliminated due to the use of these lamps. In addition to this, the lamps were never used 'raw.' "Each bulb is covered with a silk diffusing screen and a piece of blue glass that makes the light more like natural daylight." This made photographing the little girls a much safer task, as they could look directly at the lamps, and didn't even notice when they would be turned on.¹⁷

Davis experimented with many cameras until he found the one that he referred to as the "standard quintuplet camera." Initially, he attempted to use a miniature camera. High quality negatives were produced from this camera, however, it was difficult to enlarge the photographs for use in newspapers and magazines. The quintuplet camera was a reflecting one, that allowed Davis to work at a low angle.¹⁸ This gave Davis the advantage of being at eye level with the girls.

Davis did not follow a schedule when photographing the quintuplets. The girls were described as the bosses of the photo shoot. Davis' job was to capture what the girls were doing. Often the quintuplet's spontaneous play acted as inspiration for future photographs or activities. "Part of his task is to invent interesting and story-telling poses. Costumes help a great deal at times. Birthday-cake and Christmas-tree pictures are always interesting to the public."¹⁹ It is apparent that many of the photographs were the creative designs of Fred Davis. He was the one in charge and influential in the portrayal of the quintuplets. Davis constantly had the onerous task of seeking photographs requested by

his editors, taking photographs of what the public wanted to see, and acquiring pictures of things the quintuplets were willing to do. The images the public saw were usually staged and taken weeks before the actual event.

Meeting the marketing demands of an economy ready to cash in on the popularity of the quintuplets increased the complexity of Davis' job. A writer from *Popular Science* magazine recalled that Davis lamented about the images customers wanted for ads and magazine. Such images were not always obtainable. Companies wanted very specific photographs of the quintuplets and this placed a great deal of undue strain on Davis. Requests for the quintuplets to be dressed alike, pouting, open-eyed, and laughing, were common.²⁰ Davis complained that the specifications from one customer may take a full week to accomplish, due to the girls never coming together cohesively and following the specifications.²¹ It became even more challenging when the quintuplets began to walk and separate from each other. The solution to this problem was for Davis to take individual photographs of the quintuplets and piece them together for the customer. A Quaker Oats cardboard display of the the quintuplets is a good example of this. They were photographed separately as a group pose was not obtainable. At times, Davis had to be creative in order to satisfy customers who paid a great sum of money for photographs of the quintuplets endorsing their products. Quaker Oats had a contract for the use of the quintuplets in their advertisements from May 1935 to June 1939. The company paid a flat rate of \$15,000, a substantial amount during the era of the Great Depression.²²

The general belief at this time was that any monies paid for such photographs would be directed to the Quintuplet's fund. It was presumed, incorrectly as it turned out, that the girls would grow up to be very wealthy women. Based on this assumption, the guardians of the girls placed extensive restrictions on who and what could be photographed. The designation of Fred Davis as the official and only quintuplet photographer was partly to protect the girls and their potential wealth. Prior to restrictions being put in place, anyone could photograph the quintuplets. Visitors to the nursery were able to photograph the babies.

However, this privilege was soon revoked when professional photographers took photographs and sold them to the media. The guardians reacted by instituting strict restrictions. The observation playground, for example, was created with this in mind. Tourists were directed to walk along the horseshoe shaped structure, but were forbidden to take photographs of the girls. All cameras were confiscated by the guards and returned once the tourist left the building.

The play yard of the quints can be seen from the observation galleries only through windows covered, on the outside, with aluminum-coated wire screen of fine mesh. The babies, in the well-lighted play yard, cannot see their visitors because the aluminum wire reflects so much light that it appears opaque. When an attempt is made to take a picture through the windows from the gallery, the wire screen acts as a diffusion screen that effectively kills detail.²³

The only photographs that people could possibly smuggle out of the observation playground would have to be taken with small cameras. Davis, using his good standard quintuplet camera, experimented within the playground, and even he could not get a decent photograph of the girls.²⁴ The visitor information and instructions at Quintland explained to the public that photography was not permitted. It is evident from this sign that the guardians of the quintuplets were determined to enforce their regulations. The sign read:

Any Person In Possession Of A Camera Will Be Refused
Admission To Playground Building
Please Maintain Silence And Keep Moving
Do Not Speak to Children
You May Enter As Often As You Wish During Visiting Period
But In Order To Be Fair To Visitors You Must Keep Moving
Towards Exits
9:30 AM TO 10:00 AM
2:30 Pm To 3:00 Pm Weather Permitting²⁵

Fred Davis was therefore the visual storyteller who shared the quintuplet's life with the rest of the world. Although Davis was rarely rec-

ognized, he played a significant role in the portrayal of the girls, their influence upon public sentiment, and the archival documentation available. It is highly probable that Davis developed strong attachments to the quintuplets. His care in taking the actual photographs, his patience, and the sweetness of the compositions indicates a bond of attachment between Davis and the quintuplets.

On a personal note, the birth of the quintuplets led Davis to meet his prospective bride. Yvonne Leroux was the one of the first nurses to arrive at the Dionne farm house. She was instrumental in keeping the small babies alive. Together, both Davis and Leroux witnessed firsthand the quintuplets struggle to survive, the interest of a nation, and the joy of five loving little girls. Sources that discuss Fred Davis describe him as a likeable man, who was good with children, while also “hard as nails with grown-ups.”²⁶ Davis was both influential as a photographer, and savvy as a businessman, who successfully negotiated becoming the official photographer of the Dionne Quintuplets. His professionalism and commitment never faltered.

Rural Canadians: The Dionne Quintuplets

The depiction of the quintuplets as rural and rugged Canadians from northern Ontario, was a reoccurring theme from a photographic point of view. Initially, the quintuplets were presented in colorful and identical dresses. However, an examination of archival photographs reveals a penchant for symbolic pictures displaying the quintuplets’ rural Canadian heritage.

This presentation of one of the quintuplets dressed in overalls, wearing a bonnet, and holding a shovel eliminates any association with royalty (Figure 4). One then wonders why depictions of the quintuplets as rural Canadians was so popular? The probable answer is linked to the economic status of the country at the time. By playing up the rural connection, people were more able to relate to the hardships that they endured during the Depression. The quintuplets were not envied, but rather adored by the North American populace. People began to love the five little girls as if they were their own. They constantly sought photographs and information from newspapers and magazines. “Despite



Figure 4: The rural look. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 18, p. 60a. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

this feeling of familiarity, however, most people did not, in fact know the quintuplets. Rather, they saw and heard about and read stories of the Quints, stories created by journalists, advertisers, and child-care experts. How accurate those depictions were is a subject of considerable dispute.”²⁷

It is apparent that public sentiment and economics influenced those around the quintuplets to consciously manipulate stories and photographs. It is also obvious that the money making potential of these innocent and adorable children played a significant role in the images that were released to newspapers and magazines. Figures 5 and 6 provide additional photographic evidence of the deliberate attempt to portray the quintuplets as distinctly rural and Canadian. Children having to do help with outside work such as raking or carrying hay may have been familiar to many families during the Depression. How-



Figure 5. A small Quint with a large rake. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 19, p. 4b. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

ever, in Figure 5, the quintuplet shown is no older than 3 years old. She is holding a rake that is much too big for her. It is doubtful that this tool was self-selected, as unlike most children during the Depression, the Dionne Quintuplets had numerous toys at their disposal. Figure 6 is similar in nature. Both reflect an attempt to show the quintuplets as having to help out, like other children.

Although ironing, sweeping, and cooking were not appropriate activities for this age group, such shots were set up as a means to appeal to the masses. Such an image, now on display at the Dionne Quints Museum, was distributed in a calendar in 1937. The quintuplets were portrayed as normal rural Canadians who contributed to the household as much as possible. Nothing could be further from the truth:



Figure 6: Helping out. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 18, p. 61b. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

Although Fred Davis was continually photographing them with toy brooms and dustpans, they were never taught the rudiments of housekeeping. Their siblings practically lived in the Dionne kitchen, but the quintuplets at the age of nine could not even boil water. They knew nothing about sewing, knitting or mending clothes. Shopping was as much a mystery to them as astronomy. Royal children can overcome such handicaps because they remain royal, surrounded by servants and equerries who handle mundane matters.²⁸

It is apparent that the image of the Dionne Quintuplets as rural Canadians was contrived. Essentially, there was an overall effort to “maximize the wilderness character of Quintland,” while also making it accessible and comfortable for the large numbers of tourists who came to see



Figure 7: The Dionne quintuplets wearing Hudson Bay coats, a quintessentially Canadian and northern image. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 45, p. 8. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

the girls.²⁹ Even the nursery that was built for the Dionne Quintuplets was strategically designed with Canada's rural heritage in mind. The nursery was made of stained logs, and resembled many of the houses in the Northern region of Ontario.³⁰ In addition, photographs were circulated of the quintuplets wearing the classic Hudson Bay Company jackets. This is an iconic Canadian image and one that would imply Northern Canada to the viewer. (See Figure 7.) This rugged and ordinary representation of the girls was quite a deviation from the depiction of the quintuplets as regal, royal, and aristocratic.

Canada's Little Princesses: The Dionne Quintuplets

Canada's little princesses were watched, measured, weighed, dressed, groomed, discussed, analysed, painted, and photographed as Canada's own royalty. Most sources on the Dionne Quintuplets address their



Figure 8: The Dionne quintuplets, with curled hair, fashionably dressed, and riding new tricycles. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 46, p. 29. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

royal status. Pierre Berton in *The Dionne Years* provides ample evidence of the royal treatment the quintuplets received. In fact, he even hypothesizes that such regal treatment worked against the quintuplets when they were returned to their family. Their aristocratic upbringing in no way prepared them for the transition to becoming an ordinary citizen. It seems fitting that the cover for Berton's book would be in royal purple. After all, the general public had the opinion that the girls lived a luxurious and rich lifestyle throughout their entire lives. It wasn't until the elderly and remaining quintuplets wrote their own version of their life story that this opinion changed.

Most children during the depression had very few toys. The ones they did have were shared amongst siblings. Figure 8 depicts five, fashionably dressed little girls sitting on brand new tricycles. It is interesting to note that in this photograph the quintuplets are indoors. It was a

probably a staged photographic opportunity. Even if it were not, such a photograph would have supported the publicly held view that they led the highly desired life of the rich. The paintings created by Andrew Loomis are another noteworthy example of the construction of this royal image. They are of special interest because Loomis portrayed the quintuplets living a life of luxury as adults, not as the young children they were. The quintuplets are painted riding horses, sailing, camping, picnicking, and preparing to go on dates. Even the titles of the paintings carry names that imply their royal status such as, “Queens of the Kitchen.”³¹ These depictions couldn’t be farther removed from the portrayals of rural girls living in Canada. A professional painter was commissioned to complete individual portraits of each quintuplet. A picture of the girls gathered around the portrait of one of these portraits is shown in Figure 9. Very few people during the Depression could afford



Figure 9: The Dionne quintuplets shown admiring one of their portraits by Willy Pogony. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 50, p. 18. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.



Figure 10: One of the quintuplets dressed in a royal cape. Photo by Fred Davis. Dionne Quint Museum, Book 50, p. 18. With the expressed permission of A. & C. Dionne.

to spend precious money on a portrait. This too would have added to public's perception of them as rich and regal.

Even people who interacted with the quintuplets on a daily basis perceived them as royal. Dr. Dafoe is quoted as saying,:

They must have special training of Royalty, to give them reserve and stamina and calm acceptance of the interest and curiosity of the multitude. They must learn to be looked at, talked about, written to and studied, without losing their sense of proportion or their ability to enjoy life. And because they will always have to buy their privacy and pay dearly for it, as all people in the glare of publicity must do.³²

During the height of the quintuplet's popularity no one believed, including professionals like Dr. Dafoe, that the quintuplets popularity would ever dwindle. Their perceived regal status as children was expected to remain. It did not shock anyone when Canada's princesses had the opportunity to meet the royal couple. Their upbringing was

even based around the belief that they would have to buy their own privacy. Many of the photographs of the quintuplets helped to create this image and belief, some more obviously than others (Figure 10). This quintuplets is playing dress-up, and wearing the outfit of a queen. Although this could only be a game, the fact remains that images like this were circulated to the public, and the idea of the girls as regal figures was reenforced as a result.

It is also noticeable in the photographs of the Dionne Quintuplets, that they were always cheerful, never overtly upset, perfect little girls. This is what the public wanted to see. They were described as having colourful chairs, hot water bottles, and play pens.³³ The girls were also portrayed as perfect babies who were not bothered by anything. Even teething for the quintuplets was “a natural and comfortable process.”³⁴ Moreover, the quintuplets were also discussed on numerous occasions as being like Shirley Temple. Like her, the Dionne Quintuplets were “known to millions, beloved in every civilized place on the globe, and earned thousands and thousands of dollars a week.”³⁵

Conclusion

It is evident from an analysis of the images in the Davis collection that Fred Davis was a visual storyteller who played a significant role in the portrayal of the Dionne quintuplets. This portrayal which juxtaposed a rural, rugged Canadian image with the quintuplets as Canada's own royalty, sparked public interest. Fred Davis contributed significantly to this representation. He was instrumental in spreading the joy associated with the quintuplets. The antithetical nature of these two portrayals seems to have increased their appeal with both the media and the masses.

End notes

1 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 52.

2 Sinclair. *Will the Real Gordon Sinclair Please Sit Down*, 106.

- 3 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 54
- 4 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 54
- 5 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 54
- 6 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 66.
- 7 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 107.
- 8 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 55.
- 9 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 76.
- 10 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 141.
- 11 Valverde, "Representing Childhood," 137.
- 12 Valverde, "Representing Childhood," 137-138.
- 13 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 14 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 15 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 16 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 32.
- 17 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 18 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 19 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 33.
- 20 Hoffman and Bailey, *Mind Society and Fads*, 87.
- 21 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 134.
- 22 For an image of the display see <http://www.mythings.com/viewitem.aspx?itemid=291040>. Segrave, *Endorsements in Advertising*, 198.
- 23 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 134.
- 24 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 134.
- 25 Hoffman and Bailey, *Mind Society and Fads*, 87.
- 26 Burton, "Photographing the Dionne Quins," 32.
- 27 Cook, McLean, and O'Rourke, *Framing Our Past*.
- 28 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 124.
- 29 Valverde, "Representing Childhood," 130.
- 30 Valverde, "Representing Childhood," 130.
- 31 Zillner, *Hollywood Collectibles*, 62.
- 32 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 131.
- 33 Marshall, "The Private Life of the Dionne Quintuplets June 29th 1935" in *Liberty: A Liberty Classic*, 20
- 34 Marshall, "The Private Life of the Dionne Quintuplets June 29th 1935" in *Liberty: A Liberty Classic*, 21.
- 35 Adela Rogers, "Shirley Wants the Quintuplets for Christmas," *Photoplay* (December 1935), 23.

Collecting the Quints: An Analysis of Dionne Quintuplet Scrapbooks

Lauren Wagner

Introduction

A respectable, French-Canadian family with five children and another on the way. A quiet and reserved country doctor. A region in Northern Ontario that was suffering through the Great Depression. There was nothing extraordinary about life in Corbeil or Callander, Ontario in the beginning of the 1930s and there was nothing particularly interesting about the lives of the Dionne family or Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe. As Pierre Berton pointed out, “The people of Corbeil were a private people, a little shy if not downright suspicious of the outside world.” Large families such as the Dionne’s, Berton continued, kept to themselves even more so, using their own resources to get by. Oliva Dionne, patriarch of the Dionne family, stood out a little, however, as he was one of the only people in the community to own a car.¹ Oliva Dionne’s largest concern in the spring of 1934 had been the well-being of his wife, Elzire, who was beginning to struggle through her pregnancy. Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe was called upon for a consultation and prescribed bed rest for Elzire. After the doctor’s visit life in the Dionne home continued as usual. This quiet, private, country life of the Dionnes, Dr. Dafoe and the people of Corbeil and Callander was about to change. On 28 May 1934, two months earlier than expected, Elzire Dionne gave birth to five identical girls. The birth notice of the quintuplet babies (Yvonne, Annette, Cecile, Emilie and Marie) was first printed in the *North Bay Nugget* but was later printed in newspapers around the world including the Toronto Daily Star, the London *Times*,

and the *New York Times*. The outpouring of media attention began almost immediately as reporters traveled to the Dionne residence to document the birth of the quintuplets while all five were still living. Despite Dr. Dafoe's grim prognosis that not all of them would survive, the quintuplets continued to live through each day and earned the title of the "World's first surviving quintuplets." With the survival of the quintuplets, the subsequent guardianship battle between the Dionne family and the Ontario government, and the creation of Quintland, the Dionne Quints continued to be at the centre of media attention from around the world for years. A Quintuplet 'fever' broke out as news reports covering every aspect of their lives filled the papers each day. Throughout their childhood, the Dionne quintuplets became the face of many products such as Palmolive, Quaker Oats, Carnation and Karo. They starred in their own feature films, were the example of Dr. Dafoe's Guidebook for Mothers and had countless photos of their life in the nursery printed in newspapers and magazines. The popularity of the Quints drew tourists to Callanderto see them at the Dafoe Hospital which was the main feature of the Quintland park. Pierre Berton states that the Dionne quintuplets were even more well known than figures such as Shirley Temple and princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose.² Collectable dolls, spoons and other items were also sought after by the many admirers of the Dionne quintuplets. Overnight, the Dionne quintuplets had become a popular culture sensation and Canadians soon referred to the girls as "Our Quints".

How were the Dionne quintuplets received on a more personal level? With such a large response, it is evident that the story of the Dionne quintuplets reached a number of people. Why did the story of their birth connect so strongly with individuals from across the globe? How were people choosing to remember the story of the Dionne quintuplets? One of the ways people chose to document the story of the quintuplets was through keeping scrapbooks of collected newspaper and magazine articles and photos. The Dionne Quints Museum, in North Bay, Ontario, holds a collection of such scrapbooks donated by individuals from various parts of North America. It was through the research and analysis of these personal scrapbooks that I was able to

draw conclusions about the most common types of Quintuplet media the public was collecting and explore why the Quintuplets were so significant to the general public. For this study, ten scrapbooks of various sizes and appearance were analysed. The identity of the creators of these scrapbooks is not known but many of the scrapbooks appear to be from Canadian donors based on the publication information found on some of the newspaper articles. One was recorded as having come from the United States, and another includes newspaper articles from American publications. It is clear from the range of materials used to construct these scrapbooks that they were produced by people of various socioeconomic status. The collection and organization methods varied among the scrapbooks. [Editor's Note: The Appendix which includes a photograph and description of each of these books is not included here.]

How to analyse these scrapbooks was a challenge. In a first examination, the scrapbooks were simply described as to their content. Using this information, the exact number of times certain articles and photos appeared in the scrapbook was then recorded. The articles within the scrapbooks were categorized according to eighteen topics of interest. The photographs were divided into groups based on their subject and location and the most frequently collected photos were identified. While media type was originally considered important, most scrapbooks consisted primarily of newspaper clippings. Only the number of magazine clippings and advertisements was counted. An article and photo count was recorded for each of the ten scrapbooks. Once all of these observations were recorded, patterns within individual scrapbooks and the group as a whole began to emerge. Before looking at the scrapbooks themselves, however, it is important to place them in context.

Northern Ontario Life During the Great Depression

Pierre Berton takes special note of the fact that the Dionne quintuplets were born in the middle of the Great Depression. He attributes their enormous fame largely to the timing of their birth. He claims that if the quintuplets had been born any earlier, in the twenties perhaps,

they would not have survived to become the sensation that they were. Berton explains that they would have “expired swiftly - one-day wonders to be headlined briefly and the case for the only other two cases of quintuplets in medical history.³ Part of the initial burst of interest in the quintuplets stemmed from the fact that they might not survive long enough for any other story opportunity. Even Dr. Dafoe, the eventual ‘hero’ of the Dionne quintuplets story, was not planning for the lives of the quintuplets to last very long. This was clear when the doctor was asked for advice on whether or not the babies could be taken to the Chicago World’s Fair as an exhibit. In Dafoe’s opinion, Dionne should “make what he can; there wasn’t much chance the babies would live.” Berton continues to explain that if the quintuplets had have been born just a generation later, the story would not have been as significant either. In a later period, “the spotlight would have been softer and the melodrama muted.”⁴ This too is a fair argument on Berton’s part because, as we know, the news of the following decades would progress from the Second World War into subjects such as the Cold War, the space race and other more modern phenomena. As Berton claims it seems the perfect time for the birth of the quintuplets, to maximize the interest of the population, was exactly when the event occurred. The Dionne quintuplets were born at a time when the province, and the country for that matter, were struggling through a period of economic downturn. Unemployment rates grew to record levels in the early thirties. The region in Northern Ontario where the Dionne family lived was suffering particularly high levels of unemployment due to the types of work that were dominant in that area. For example, in North Bay the unionized railway workers were at the peak of unemployment in 1934, the year the quintuplets were born.⁵ Many of the families in the region were on relief while others, who were more desperate, resorted to illegal activity such as bootlegging and theft to keep some sort of money flowing into the home.⁶ The area also experienced increased rates of child neglect. However, as we have seen from the status of the Dionne family, there were some families who were coping through the depression. While some families had more than others, families who had less learned to cope with what they had. During this period fami-

lies had to be more resourceful, in order to maximize the resources they had. For example, there are many reports of children having to wear hand-me-down clothes. This is a practice that still occurs today, but it seems to have occurred much more often during the thirties. Another way women stretched the resources within the home was to use old clothing to make new clothes.⁷ Altering outfits was one way women could make clothes appear to be new without having to spend extra money on clothing. Another way in which people extended their resources was the use of catalogues as an alternate paper source. For instance, some families would use the pages of an old catalogue when they had run out of toilet paper. This reuse of materials is evident in the scrapbook collections in the Dionne Quintuplets Museum. Three of the scrapbooks were created using old catalogues. One was a rather small agricultural catalogue. It had only a few pages but provided a thicker background to display the newspaper clippings on. Two of the catalogues appeared to be from clothing or tailoring companies. These books were much larger in size and were also hardcover. These examples of scrapbooks demonstrate the common occurrence of reusing household items. The fact that approximately one third of the collectors that were researched were created by reusing items to make scrapbooks highlights the importance of the Dionne quintuplets to certain individuals.

Hobbies in the Great Depression

During the Great Depression hobbies became an acceptable leisure activity. Steven Gelber discusses the noticeable increase in the number of hobby shows, hobby articles and hobby programs that were available and enthusiastically attended during the years of the depression. Gelber uses strictly American information, however, trends are often comparable between the United States and Canada.⁸ During the depression, hobbies became classified as a more specific subset of leisure activity. Gelber argues that the development of this special classification was a sign of approval and that hobbies were deemed to be a “good” pastime. These included a large variety of hob-

bies such as stamp collecting, music making and, of course, collecting.⁹ The increase in the number of people who took up hobbies could possibly be explained by the fact that there were such high levels of unemployment. For those who were underemployed, or unemployed a great deal of free time opened up and needed to be filled. Hobbies were encouraged among the unemployed as a way to maintain a certain level of work ethic. A small publication in 1933 entitles "A Job You Can't Lose" suggested that hobbies were the source of eternal work. Involvement in hobbies provided a level of structure for those who had lost their jobs, as well as an outlet or release for those who were still experiences the stress of unemployment. Support for hobbies also came from the desire to maintain some level of social order. It was found that people who were involved with hobbies were much less likely to participate in crime and juvenile delinquency. While hobbies did reinforce work habits, they were also chosen voluntarily by the participants. These individuals were getting involved with hobbies that struck their interest and so for many had some similarities to childhood play. Many hobbies also involve the creation of some type of product. This creative aspect gives the hobbieists something to be proud of. This is significant, especially among the unemployed during the depression as it gave them a sense of accomplishment during a period in which they may have unusually low self-esteem.¹⁰ This exact effect was noticed by the National Safety Council of the United States who endorsed hobbies because they were a way to "retain thin mental balance when life or business seems to be going wrong."¹¹ Positive thinking and good mental health can be considered when judging the value of the Dionne Quintuplets story to the public. The event was widely described as a "miracle" birth and in a time of such disparity in social conditions, an event like this would have seemed like a symbol of hope. Gelber cites a 1933 study which argued that hobbies helped replicate and reinforce patterns and attitudes.¹² This would also apply to collecting Quint material. The collection and preservation of articles featuring the quintuplets served to both replicate and reinforce the feeling of life and hope that emerged along with their story.

Classification of the Scrapbooks as Collections

The Dionne quintuplets scrapbooks combine two hobbies, scrapbooking and collecting. The material within the scrapbooks represents a collection of various news articles and pictures from many different newspapers and magazines. Marjorie Akin refers to Michael Schiffer's definition of collecting which states that when items are preserved, but no longer serve their intended purpose, they become part of a collection.¹³ Newspapers and magazines are intended to provide current information to the masses. The production of these publications is typically daily, weekly or monthly. Whatever the case, the information is printed with the knowledge that it will be left behind the next day. Therefore, according to Schiffer's definition, each scrapbook may be classified as an independent collection. In a period of economic restraint such as the Great Depression, collecting is one hobby that was largely accessible to all as socio-economic status made little difference to who could collect.¹⁴ Class differences would appear in the items that were being collected. Gender also was a factor in what types of things people collected. Susan Pearce explains that males are more likely to collect mechanical or military items while females collect items such as jewellery, household items or ornaments. The reason she gives is that men collect for the purpose of organizing materials and women collect for the purpose of remembering and having these memories surround them.¹⁵ Based on this theory, it is likely that the creators of the Dionne quintuplets scrapbooks were women. The method of collection for the scrapbooks was fairly simple and accessible to people from all backgrounds since most people were able to get a copy of the newspaper, even if not every day. The socio-economic differences are noticeable in the methods of displaying the Dionne quintuplets material. As mentioned earlier, about one third of the scrapbooks were constructed with reused materials. While some people had purchased typical scrapbooks, others had to make do with what they had access to. Marjorie Akin highlights five major reasons for private collecting: to satisfy a sense of personal aesthetics, for profit, for control of sense of completion, to make connections with the past and for the thrill

of the chase. Making connections to the past appears to be the dominant motivation for the collection of the photos and articles within the scrapbooks. Akin argues that people also like to possess things that will connect them to historical record.¹⁶ This is very clear in the case of the quintuplets. We have already suggested that the collection of media publications about the Dionne quintuplets was done specifically to capture the memory of the quintuplets, not any feeling of the atmosphere of the thirties. Akin's classification can be supported by another example provided by Gelber. In his discussion of hobbies Gelber notes that one of the most popular hobbies among adults and children was to record the activities of the royal family.¹⁷ This interest in the royal family can be seen in Book 5 which features a full page picture of the King on the cover. The scrapbook focuses primarily on the royal family's visit to Canada. The first article in it relating to the quintuplets was the story of the girls going to visit the King and Queen in Toronto. After this introduction of the quintuplets they appear a few more times toward the end of the scrapbook in popular photographs such as those taken on their birthday. Book 5 represents the creator's efforts to connect to the record of both the royal family's visit to Canada, as well as to the Dionne quintuplets. This book is also significant in showing the importance of the quintuplets to individuals. Since Book 5 is largely devoted to the royal family, and the only non-royal news coverage that is collected within it is the the Dionne quintuplets, the collector has clearly placed a high value on the quintuplets, placing them on a level with royalty. Financial means and collection opportunities are listed by Akin as motivational factors for a collector. The resourcefulness shown by some of the creators of the Quint scrapbooks shows that there was little financial restraint when collecting newspaper articles and photos. The overwhelming media coverage of the quintuplets also provided plenty of collection opportunities.

The Dionne Quintuplets Scrapbooks

While little is known about the backgrounds of the individual creators of the scrapbooks, it is safe to assume that no two of them were exactly alike. Each person would have been drawn to articles for

slightly different reasons and each person would have had their own unique way of collecting and organizing their materials. The same is true for the scrapbooks themselves. Each scrapbook is unique to itself, and while there may be a number of qualities that are shared, or can be compared, each book is different. The outer appearances of the scrapbooks varied. As previously stated, about one third of the scrapbooks were made from old catalogues. Four were made using store-bought hobby scrapbooks, two were hardcover scrapbook albums and one photo album was also used. The scrapbooks made from old catalogues show the reuse of materials in order to document the Dionne quintuplets lives and indicates how strongly some people connected to their story and how individuals came to value the quintuplets. The content of the scrapbooks was predominantly photographs. This supports the common assumption that the quintuplets popularity was driven by their 'cuteness'. Articles were collected by some of the collectors but at varying levels. One scrapbook (Book 3) had no articles whatsoever.

The topics of the articles collected have been divided into 18 categories. The most popular articles among scrapbook creators were those relating to the Quints' growth and development as well as their life and activities within the nursery. Their birthdays were also a common article topic. Article subjects from the time of the Quints early childhood are the most common while subjects from the Quints later life were not as prevalent. For instance, article topics from the nursery years appeared much more than from the years in the Big House. (See Figure 1.)

The subject matter or articles was also divided into "good" stories versus "bad" stories. "Good" stories were those which discussed the everyday life of the quintuplets, such as their growth, activities, holidays, and the making of the feature films. The "Bad" stories were those with controversial topics such as the guardianship battle, the Chicago World's Fair, and family disputes. The collectors displayed an overwhelming tendency to feature the "good" stories while leaving out the "bad". However, controversial article topics were present within some of the scrapbooks.

The number of times each quintuplet was featured alone in an article

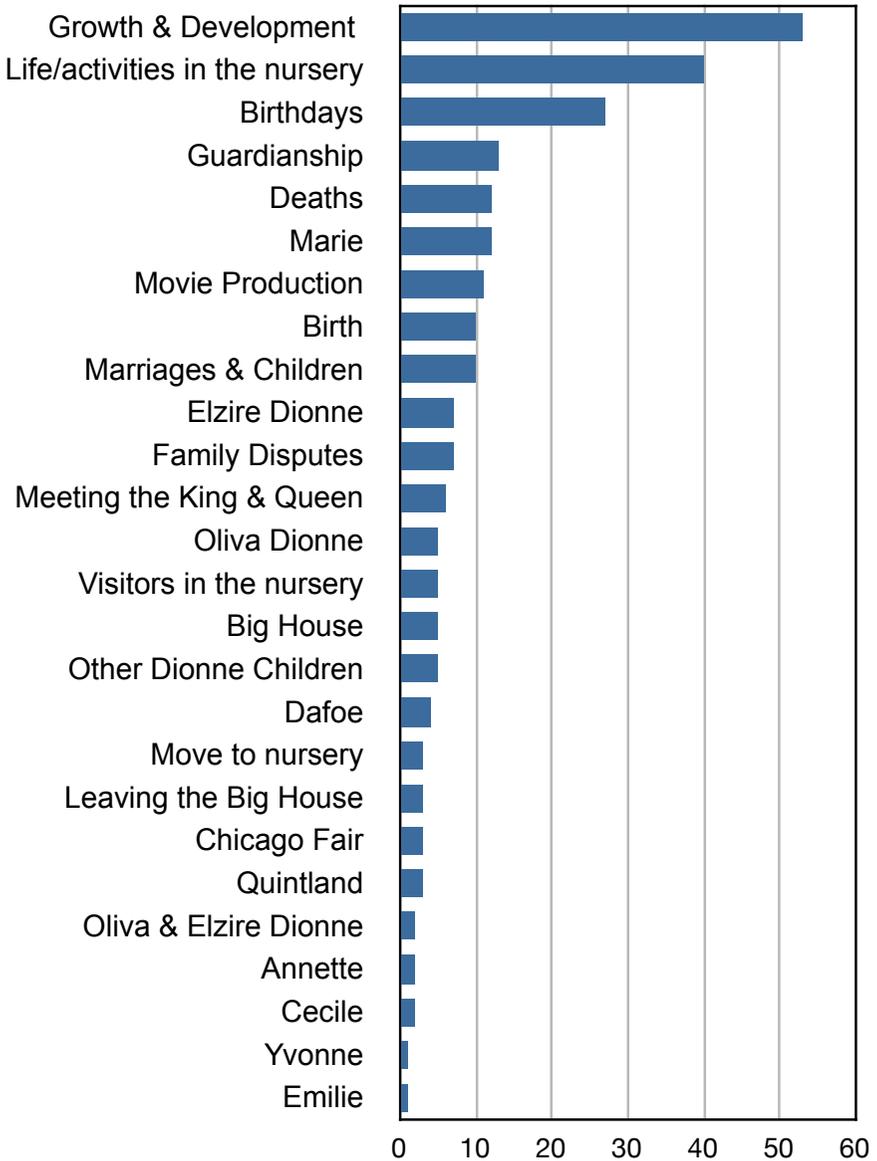


Figure 1: Subject of Articles Collected.

was also recorded. There were very few articles that focused on a single quintuplet, but the ones that did were generally about Marie. The reason for this is due to the tumour Marie had during infancy. The health of the quintuplets was reported frequently throughout their infancy and childhood and Marie's tumour drew considerable media attention. Overall, the subjects of the articles were from the first five or six years of the quintuplet's lives. The majority of the stories were positive and centered primarily around their growth and development and their life in the nursery.

For the analysis of the photographs, a record made of the location they were taken, the occasion, and people within the photograph. A record was also kept of the most common photos appearing in the scrapbooks. The first category to be observed was the location of the photo. These are divided between photos taken in the Dionne Home, the nursery and the Big House which also corresponds to immediately after birth, early childhood, and late childhood-adolescence. Photos from the nursery dominate throughout the scrapbooks with 782 images compared to 53 from the Dionne home and 21 from the Big House. Once again it is evident that the creators of the scrapbooks were primarily interested in the early childhood, or nursery years, of the quintuplets. It could be argued that the lack of photos from the later life of the quintuplets was because they were not as accessible to the public as the photos from the nursery years. However, the majority of the scrapbooks contain very few of the images from later life that were present in other scrapbooks.

Special occasions or events in the quintuplets' lives were almost guaranteed to be present in the media, which is why a selection of common events were analyzed within the scrapbooks. It was not surprising that the most common occasion depicted in the photos was the birthday celebrations. Birthday photos included group photos of all five quintuplets as well as individual photos of each girl. The number of photos from the making of the feature films is not surprising either as the quintuplets became even more iconic in popular culture as a result of these films. The number of Easter photos that appeared within the scrapbooks was initially surprising. Easter, however, falls into the same

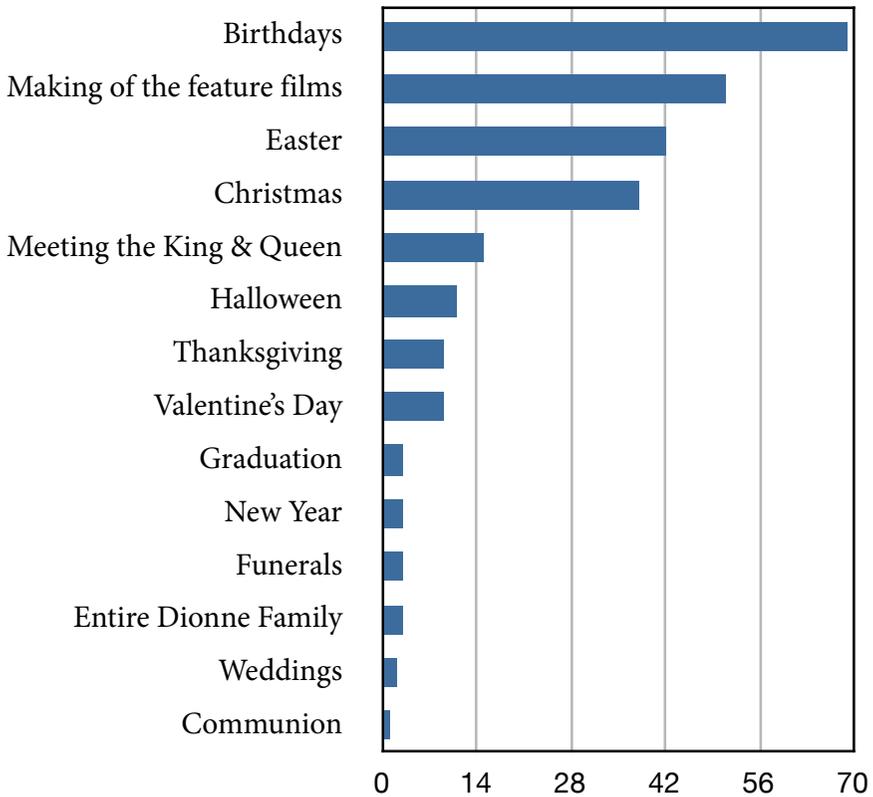


Figure 2: The Occasion of Photos Collected.

time frame as the quintuplets' birthday and the opening of Quintland for the summer tourist season. Therefore, the presence of quintuplet photos in the media was likely increased to attract public attention during this time. This context makes the number of Easter photos more understandable. Again, we see here a correlation between the approximate age of the quintuplets and the number of photos present in the scrapbooks. The holiday photos and photos from events such as the feature films and the visit with the King and Queen are from their early childhood. Graduation, wedding and funeral photos, from the quintuplets' adult life were far less prominent. (See Figure 2.)

The presence of of people within the photographs refers to individ-

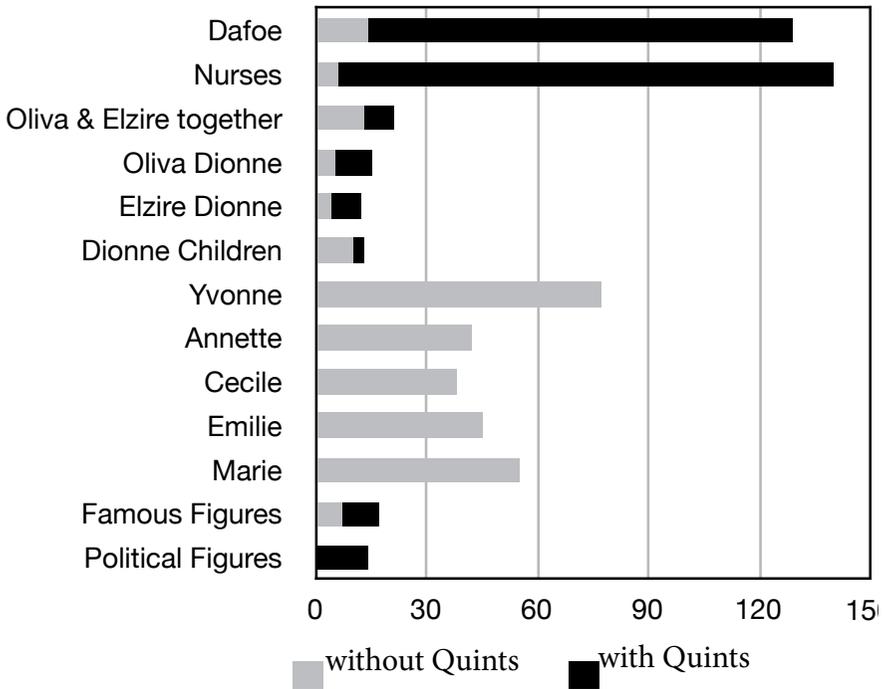


Figure 3: People in the Photos Collected, with and without the Quints.

uals other than the quintuplets such as Dr. Dafoe, the nurses, Elzire and Oliva Dionne, the other Dionne children, political figures, and famous figures. The appearances of these individuals alone as well as alongside the quintuplets were recorded. The individual appearance of each quintuplet within scrapbook photographs was also recorded. This category was studied to determine whether collectors favoured certain figures in the Dionne story (eg. Dionnes vs. Dafoe) or if they favoured one quintuplet in particular. In Figure 3, both the number of times an individual or group appeared in photographs with and without the Dionne quintuplets is shown. In every case there were a greater number of photos of people accompanied by the Dionne quintuplets than alone. Political figures were only featured in photographs alongside the quintuplets. Oliva and Elzire Dionne, as a couple, and the

Dionne children appear in photos without the quintuplets just as often as Dr. Dafoe. This indicates that collectors were not necessarily favouring one group over the other. The fact that Dr. Dafoe and the nurses appear far more frequently in photos with the quintuplets is consistent with the fact that the majority of photos in the scrapbooks were taken during the nursery years. Overall, Oliva Dionne appeared more often than Elzire Dionne in scrapbook photographs. This is likely because

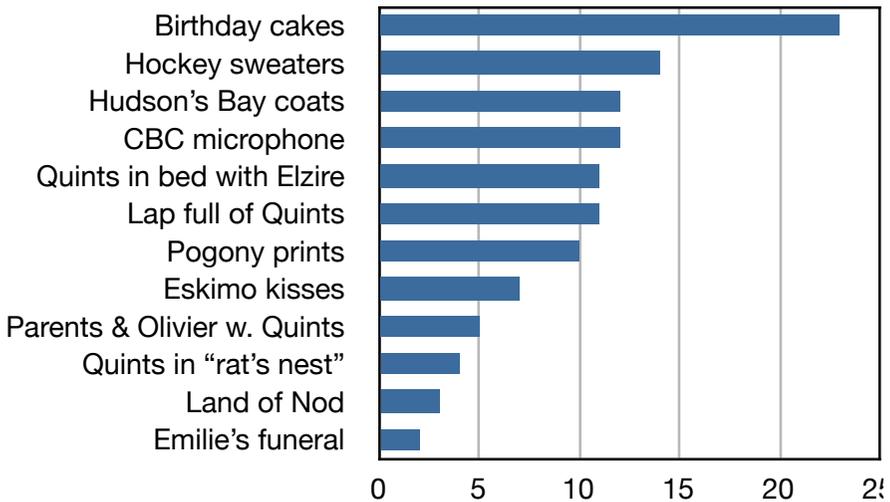


Figure 4: The Most Common Photos Collected.

Oliva was more present in the media as he was the head of the household and could speak English while Elzire could not. It must be noted however, that Book 1 and Book 10 seemed to have a slightly greater focus on Elzire Dionne.

Favouritism for an individual Quint was not unheard of during their years in the public eye. Quaker Oats, for example, held a contest asking participants to write a short essay about which one of the quintuplets they would choose to adopt and why.¹⁸ For the most part, each quintuplet was featured alone in scrapbook photos a similar number of times. There was one exception. Yvonne appeared most often on her own in the scrapbook photos. A possible explanation for this could



Figure 5: This birthday photo of both the first and second birthday was the picture most collected by scrapbook creators.



Figure 6: The quintuplets in National Hockey League sweaters must have appealed to Canadian and American collectors as it was the second most collected photograph.



Figure 7: Also very popular was this photo of the quintuplets wearing the iconic Hudson Bay coat, with Fred Davis behind them.

be that there were simply a greater number of individual photos of Yvonne taken. Fred Davis, the official photographer for the quintuplets confessed a fondness for Yvonne over the other Quints in an article featured in the *Globe & Mail*. “I supposed Yvonne is my favourite,” he said. “She photographs well. She’s the leader of the quints, too, and whatever she does the others do. So she’s my pal when it comes to taking pictures.”¹⁹ Fred Davis’ relationship with Yvonne and success in photographing her more easily than the other quintuplets is likely the reason she appears alone most often in the scrapbooks.

Certain photos appeared more frequently than others within the scrapbooks (Figure 4). Some photos even appeared a number of times within one particular scrapbook. Just as birthdays were the most numerous occasion of all photos collected, the most common photograph appearing in the scrapbooks was from a birthday photo shoot (Figure 5). This particular image brought together a pose from both

their first and second birthday. Other prominent photos included those which displayed the quintuplets in ways which were complimentary to Canadian culture. This included the photos of the quintuplets in National Hockey League jerseys and in coats from the Hudson's Bay Company (Figure 6 and 7). The first ever photo of the quintuplets taken just hours after their birth with their mother Elzire was also one of the most common. It appears frequently in the media throughout their lifetime.

Conclusion

The majority of the scrapbooks examined focus on a visual display of the Dionne quintuplets from their birth to the age of five or six, the nursery years. This corresponds to the quintuplets' popularity and prominence in the media showing that the public and private interest in the quintuplets coincided. Scrapbooks that provided both photographs and articles provide a broader perspective on the Dionne story. These scrapbooks often covered a longer age range as well, extending into years after Emilie's death in 1954. They also depict stories that deviate from the happy, carefree life in the nursery that was prominent in both the media and the scrapbooks. Other figures in the Dionne Quintuplets story such as Dr. Dafoe, the nurses, Oliva and Elzire Dionne, the Dionne children, and other public figures appear most often in the presence of the quintuplets. When looking at the number of times these individuals appear without the quintuplets, there is no indication that collectors chose one side over the other in the Dionne vs. Dafoe controversy. Instead, scrapbooks were kept to document the life of the quintuplets and preserve the image of five identical, healthy, adorable little girls. The most common photographs reflect the high points in the quintuplets' lives, such as their birthday, as well as those that featured symbols of Canadian culture, such as the hockey sweaters and Hudson Bay coats. The materials collected for preservation in the scrapbooks were common among all collectors and were pulled from newspapers and magazines. That some collectors used store-bought hobby scrapbooks, while others used photo albums, or reused catalogues from within the home simply reflects the time frame in which

the quintuplets were born, just after the height of the depression. The importance of the Dionne quintuplets can be seen as people made do with what items they had in order to document and preserve the story of the quintuplets. Through the examination of personal scrapbooks we can see that individuals made a personal connection to the Dionne quintuplets that extended beyond viewing them in the media. People collected media publications and photographs in order to save and remember this “miracle birth” for themselves.

E n d n o t e s

- 1 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 24-7.
- 2 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 11.
- 3 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 11-12.
- 4 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 11, 60, 12.
- 5 Noël, *Family and Community Life*, 35.
- 6 Noël, *Family and Community Life*, 35.
- 7 Noël, *Family and Community Life*, 47.
- 8 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 741. A similar article with Canadian information could not be found.
- 9 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 741.
- 10 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 742-7.
- 11 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 746.
- 12 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 758.
- 13 Akin, “Passionate Possession,” 102-103.
- 14 Pearce, “Collections and Collecting,” 50.
- 15 Pearce, “Collections and Collecting,” 51.
- 16 Pearce, “Collections and Collecting,” 111.
- 17 Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose,” 741.
- 18 Book 6. The Dionne Quints Museum.
- 19 “The *Globe and Mail*’s Quint Photos Smart But Blanks to Babes: Famed Dionne Children Don’t Even Recognize Their Own Pictures, Reports Photographer Fred Davis,” *Globe and Mail*, 13 Jan. 1937.

Epilogue

Amy Bennett

A small log farmhouse sits on the corner of Seymour Street and Highways 11 and 17 in North Bay, Ontario. The significance of this building may not be immediately apparent, but a tour of this small log house reveals the important story this museum has to tell. It was in this house, then located in Corbeil, Ontario, about a ten minutes drive from North Bay, that the Dionne quintuplets were born on May 28, 1934. Their birth had a profound impact on the people of their community, and for more than a decade, focused the world's attention on this area of rural Northern Ontario. As a result, the story of the Dionnes and their quintuplets is important to our understanding of Ontario history, as well as to the community history of North Bay and area. The museum, its director, and its employees have an important task to perform: to tell this amazing story in a respectful, honest and sensitive way.

The birth of the Dionne quintuplets was paramount to the survival of the North Bay area during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The wonder of having five identical babies at once, and their incredible survival despite the odds, captured the hearts and minds of people all over the world. So much so, that during the Depression, over three million people travelled to the area to visit the Quints, and see the little girls for themselves. Because of the Dionne quintuplets and Quintland, hotels, resorts, restaurants, shops and other tourist-related services survived and even prospered during tough economic times. The city of North Bay used the Quints to promote their city, including the 1935 Old Home Week celebration.

The Ontario government played a key role, not just as guardian of these five remarkable little girls, but by promoting Quintland as a tourist destination which mediated between the public's eagerness to see the Dionne Quints and their well-being. At the height of their popu-

larity, the value of the Dionne Quints as an asset to the Province of Ontario was estimated to be five hundred million dollars, according to Pierre Berton in his book *The Dionne Years: A Thirties Melodrama*¹. The Quints received intense media coverage in newspaper articles, debates, radio presentations, film and photo magazines. All eyes seemed to be focused on the events transpiring in Corbeil, Ontario. Whether by curiosity, concern or adoration, the Dionne Quints were an important fixture of the 1930s and 1940s.

A modern audience finds it difficult to find the actual story of the Dionne quintuplets by navigating through this tangle of published material, much of it contradictory. Most visitors who know about the Quints before stepping into the museum claim to know the villain of this history. Some say it was the doctor, some blame the government, and others claim the father was to blame for allowing these events to transpire. The story of the Dionne quintuplets, however, is too complex to fit it into a simplistic hero/villain scenario. After all, it is not just the story of five little identical girls who were removed from their family and placed on display as a tourist attraction by the Ontario government. Many other people influenced this decision including the people of Ontario at the time. Furthermore, the history becomes convoluted because many of the resources used to piece it together are third party accounts. The Dionne Quints Museum and its staff have taken on the challenge of putting this story together based on careful research. When presenting the story, the Museum seeks a balance between teaching the history of the Dionne Quints in a meaningful way, and ensuring that the story presented is sensitive to the surviving quintuplets and all other parties involved in this complicated history. Simply put, the museum presents the history of the Dionne Quints with less focus on who is to blame, and more focus on what actually happened. The result is a more meaningful history that presents the people, events, and context in a way that allows the visitor to understand how and why events unfolded, and the impact of these events, in order to form a broader understanding of this particular history.

The Dionne home and the collection it contains plays an important role in the interpretation and presentation of the Dionne quin-

tuplets' story. From display cases of little matching dresses hanging in the parlour room to the little glass feeding bottles in the parent's bedroom, visitors who enter the museum are immediately surrounded with photographs, clothing, souvenirs and furniture. Each item on display provides a tangible reminder of the people and context of the time for the visitor. Every visitor is given a guided tour through the exhibits which emphasizes the context of the Great Depression and the complex way in which events unfolded. The social, cultural, political and economic factors that contributed to the decisions that were made at the time are explained so that the visitor can fully comprehend how these events were possible.

Much of the work of the museum involves dispelling the myths that have been perpetuated since the birth of the Dionne quintuplets. Stepping inside the museum, the visitor is transported back in time. The house is set up with much of the original furniture, and the visitor can imagine the family living there. Standing inside the small log home, it is easier for the visitor to understand how the reporters from the big cities to the south could see this rustic home as a hazard to the quintuplets. The visitor can then understand how the readers of those newspapers reacted to the reports given about the Dionnes. As the tour progresses the visitor learns that the history of the Dionne quintuplets involved more than a few people in the Ontario Government, the Dionne family, and a doctor from Callander. The responsibility of the museum is to educate the visitor on this history, and for the most part, this means helping the visitor understand the context of the time. Our audience is a modern audience, and as people who lived during the Depression are fewer and fewer each year, creating context for the past is more important than ever. Surrounding the visitor with tangible items from the past makes it easier for them to, not only understand the actual events which took place, but to take a step back and understand the context as well.

The story of the Dionne Quints it is an important one. As Pierre Berton declares, "it is not possible to trace the social history of the Thirties without reference to the Dionne quintuplets. The reverse is also true."² The museum places this history within the context of

the Depression through the artifacts as well as the tour given by the museum guide. This is not a straightforward story, and we will never have the 'true' and complete version. Myth and reality are too intermingled to completely untangle. Yet, the history of the Dionne quintuplets is too important to avoid, as Berton has so keenly pointed out, even though we cannot know all the details of what really happened. Thus, students and historians of this story must tread carefully. As is evident from the work of the students within this collection of papers, as well as historians elsewhere, there is not one single telling of the story of the Dionne quintuplets. Over the years, their story has been constructed into a mythic and melodramatic saga. The mythology of the Quints is really just as important to understand, as it is what has kept this story alive for so many years. As well, the interpretation of this story is often motivated by a search for responsibility. It is natural to want to find the villain or evil-doer who allowed the division of a family and the exploitation of five innocent little girls. As a result, the historian becomes responsible for balancing the emotional aspect of the history with the facts. For the Dionne Quints Museum, this means recognizing that this story has a real emotional impact on, not only the visitors, but especially on the two surviving quintuplets and their relatives still living in the area. At the same time, it is important that the integrity of research and history not be compromised, and that the visitors' experiences bring them insights into this complicated story, not just entertainment.

Endnotes

1 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 156.

2 Berton, *The Dionne Years*, 11.

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