

## Lake Champlain Quadricentennial builds up steam

By **JERRY McGOVERN**, School Ties

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— In July, 1909, President William Howard Taft and New York state Gov. Charles Evans Hughes attended Plattsburgh's 300th anniversary celebration of Samuel de Champlain's arrival on and exploration of the lake that he named after himself.

In 1959, New York and Vermont celebrated the 350th anniversary with a festival of what the two states called "the cradle of American history."

Now it's the 400th anniversary, and people again are organizing events highlighting this wonderful lake and the Frenchman who barely survived a Quebec winter before coming south in a canoe with a group of Native Americans.

One of the people working on the de Champlain celebration is Celine Racine Paquette, vice chair of the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Commission. The commission marks two 400th anniversaries: Champlain's exploration and Henry Hudson's voyage to Albany on the river that bears his name; and one 200th anniversary: Robert Fulton's steamboat.

Paquette has spent six years on the commission — without salary or an expense account — to bring 400 years of history and her lifelong interest in de Champlain to students, educators, business people and tourists.

Her experience in those six years might be a bit like Champlain's canoe ride down the St. Lawrence River and eventually into Lake Champlain: a little choppy with a lot of unknowns and surprises.

The commission was created by Republican Gov. George Pataki, but in 2006, Democrat Eliot Spitzer was elected. The change in administrations brought predictable changes on the commission. Then the unpredictable happened — Governor Spitzer resigned in disgrace, and David Patterson became governor. Then the economy fell apart, and the funding was cut more than in half.

Despite the difficulties, the Quadricentennial Commission has achieved much of its mission to "focus local, state, national and international attention on the history, culture and natural resources of New York state."

For example, the Press-Republican is publishing a 10-part series of New York State history features, with a lesson plan for each installment that is the product of the commission.

Last week, Clinton Community College asked Paquette, in her role as vice chair, to launch the college's own celebration. Paquette, who has a doctorate in education and spent years as a teacher and administrator, gave a brief and effective slide-show presentation on what we know about de Champlain, what we don't know and what will happen in the anniversary year.

The college, of course, is an appropriate spot to kick off any de Champlain celebration. Some of the 1909

festivities took place at the Hotel Champlain, the building that became Clinton Community College 60 years later.

In July, Clinton Community will host events centered on Native American and French Canadian culture, and the history of the last 400 years in the Champlain Valley.

While she worked on the commission dedicated to Hudson, Fulton, and de Champlain, Paquette created a more locally focused group.

"About three years ago, Margaret Gibbs, the Essex County historian, and I began the Lake Champlain Quadricentennial Commission. We meet monthly in Westport, trying to pool the resources of Clinton, Essex, and Washington counties in this effort," she said.

Paquette is especially appreciative of the help they've received from SUNY Plattsburgh economics professor and Press-Republican columnist Colin Read.

"It was through him that we started our Web site and created a brochure. An intern from his office, a young lady from Sri Lanka, put it together for us." ([www.discoverlakechamplain400.org](http://www.discoverlakechamplain400.org))

As I mentioned in an earlier edition of School Ties, this is just a great time to be an educator in the Champlain Valley. There are so many opportunities to teach children important local information.

But the anniversary is not just for teaching kids. For example, Hill and Hollow Music in Saranac has devoted its season to music related to the "French exploration and settlement in North America."

And on Feb. 18, Plattsburgh Public Library will host Plattsburgh State professor Dr. Kevin Dann, who will present a slide show entitled "Parades, Pageants, and Patriotism: Celebrating Champlain in 1909 and 1959."

But if there is a clearinghouse for anniversary information, if it has a center, I think it's Celine Paquette. Remember the young lady from Sri Lanka who worked on the Web site? I suspect she learned a lot about de Champlain and became enthusiastic and curious about him.

That happens if you sit with Paquette for a time in the Champlain History Center, an old bank building that she's renovating. If you look with her at the Champlain memorabilia she's collected, the history books in French and English that she reads, if you listen to her commitment to this French explorer and the Champlain Valley, you're going to learn and be glad you did.

And if she gets a chance to talk to President Obama and Gov. Patterson, they'll probably be here for the festivities.

For more information, check out the Quad's Web site: [www.exploreNY400.com](http://www.exploreNY400.com).

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