

Census Mining in Old Mines, Missouri: Reconstructing a French Community

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Abstract: The existence of an isolated community of French speakers in the Ozarks of Missouri is documented in the works of Miller (1930), Carrière (1937), and Dorrance (1935). Although the Old Mines French (OMF) language had largely died out by the 1970s, a small population retained fluency into the later period of literature (Thogmartin 1979; Thomas 1970). The present paper attempts to reconstruct the language situation just prior to the early research of the 1930s. Utilizing data available in the 1910 U.S. Census, this study provides a linguistic profile of Old Mines, Union Township. Although self-identified French speakers did exist in the community, the raw numbers are surprisingly low given the accounts of the 1930s and 1970s; just 31 community members of over 1,300 total individuals surveyed claimed French as their spoken language. Upon closer examination the findings illustrate the extent to which confirmed (i.e. self-reported) French speakers were involved in domestic and economic life in Old Mines. This reconstruction suggests that French was widely underreported in the 1910 Census.

0. Introduction

Prior to the 1930s the existence of a small French village in the Ozark hills of Missouri (Figure 1) was largely undocumented (Miller 1930). Following Miller's visit to Old Mines, Carrière (1937, 1939) and Dorrance (1935) documented the language and culture of the isolated village of approximately 600 families. Although the variety of French spoken in Old Mines (hereafter Old Mines French or OMF), which had evolved distinctively from both Canadian and European French¹, was relatively stable into the 1930s, Carrière (1939) observed erosion of the lexicon and grammatical structures reflective of increased contact with English.

Figure 1. Map of Missouri counties. Old Mines is located in Washington County.



By the second wave of research, the PhD dissertations of Thogmartin (1970) and Thomas (1979), OMF had become stratified by age such that the only fluent speakers were the oldest of the community, while middle aged adults retained a passive knowledge of the language, and

¹ The debate in the literature regarding the true origins of the settlers is beyond the scope of the present paper.

younger adults and children knew few, if any, phrases. A number of social changes and technological advances that had already begun by the 1930s allowed for increasingly intense contact with English and, ultimately, a shift away from OMF. Thomas described the addition of public roads, compulsory English education, English enforcement by fathers², and eventually intermarriage with English speakers as all being key factors in the language shift. Thogmartin focused on the influx of English media, the conscription of locals into the World Wars, and economic opportunity away from traditional mining as contributions to the loss of French.

Much of the previous literature, including my own research of the situation in Old Mines, relies on anecdotal evidence from past and present inhabitants of the area. The purpose of this paper is to move beyond these qualitative statements toward a more quantitative reconstruction of the history of the French community in Old Mines. Using the methods pioneered by Salmons (2005) I provide a demographic sketch of the population based on the data available in the 1910 U.S. Census. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I provide a brief review of literature relevant to the data collection methods employed in this study; from there I outline the methods including coding procedure and justification for analysis; in section 3 I present the findings of the study; the discussion section analyzes these results and their implications on the language situation; following the discussion I briefly describe further research; and the final section concludes the paper.

1. Background

Salmons' (2005) chapter was the first in a series of publications to illustrate the benefits of employing historical documents to reconstruct language situations of past generations. Salmons used data from the 1890 U.S. Census to illuminate the large proportion of native Germans in Wisconsin. The findings revealed a strong likelihood that roughly 32% of the statewide population spoke German, often in everyday life. One hundred years later, in the 1990 Census, the population of German speakers was just over 1% in the state. Salmons broadly argues that language shift is not motivated by national attitudes external to a given social community, but rather the result of changes in economic and political structures from the local (horizontal structures) to regional/state (vertical structures) levels (see Warren 1963 for a full description of social structure shift in communities).

Building on Salmons' (2005) model, researchers have analyzed census data to refute popular and political opinions of American immigrants in past generations. Wilkerson and Salmons (2008) combined findings from the 1910 Census with qualitative evidence such as court records, newspapers, and literature to show that German was spoken monolingually in Wisconsin well into the 20th century. In a later case study the authors quantify the degree to which German-Americans were ingrained in Hustisford Township and the possibility of stratified bilingualism in the area (Wilkerson & Salmons 2012). Taken together, these studies pose a strong challenge to the common notion that early immigrants arrived in the United States and quickly shed their native language in favor of English.

Bousquette and Ehresmann (2010) drew on census data to reconstruct the language profile of Randolph Township, Wisconsin, an area with multiple languages represented in the 1910 Census. In addition to showing the change in immigration patterns and its consequential implication on the linguistic community around the turn of the century, the authors discuss the limitations of relying on census. Citing Labov (1998), Bousquette and Ehresmann point out that census methods require subjectivity of both the community members being questioned and the

² This statement has also been expressed to me by elderly members of the community.

enumerator eliciting the information. The members' reluctance to admit monolingualism in a native language due to a perceived expectation of English proficiency and the enumerator's inability to evaluate language fluency leads to the strong possibility of over-reporting of English in immigrant communities. By analyzing immigration patterns and household language reporting to establish demonstrably (self-reported immigrant language) vs. likely (such as children of immigrant language speakers) language ability, Bousquette and Ehresmann found that, even with the expectation of underreporting, Frisian was likely in a stable situation in 1910. With this methodological review in mind, I now turn to the present study.

2. Methods

For a quantifiable language profile of Old Mines, which would have closely represented the community just prior to the early research (i.e. Miller, Carrière, and Dorrance in the 1930s), I turned to the 1910 U.S. Census. In addition to the chronological benefits of 1910, this Census was the first to inquire about language use allowing for an objective analysis of the linguistic situation. The 1910 Census has the added advantage of sampling every adult (including children over 10 years of age) for language background unlike later publically available censuses of 1920 and 1930. The data was extracted from www.ancestry.com's library addition via the University of Georgia's library edition (1910 Census).

Figure 2 highlights the village of Old Mines and its position in Washington County, Missouri. An unincorporated town, the map shows that the Old Mines occupies much of the northwest quadrant of Union Township, but also extends slightly into Kingston Township. A preliminary survey of the Census showed that the French population was proportionally much higher in Union compared to Kingston Township; with this knowledge, I focused on Union.

Figure 2. Old Mines, Washington County (from Missouri Secretary of State website).



As mentioned above, the 1910 U.S. Census recorded self-reports of language proficiency typically for anyone over the age of ten. Specifically, the question asked, “Whether able to speak English, if not, give language spoken” (see column 17, highlighted in Figure 3). In addition to coding for language background, I extracted the following from the Census: given and surnames, relation to household (e.g. Head, Wife, Daughter, etc.), age, ethnicity, nativity (birthplace of member and their parents), job, and industry (all highlighted in Figure 3).

The census categories analyzed here were chosen as they were expected to be most relevant to reconstructing the language profile contemporary to the census collection. For example, if we find that a teenage daughter reported speaking French but her parents both

reported English, we can infer that in all likelihood at least one parent spoke French. The inclusion of job and industry also carries implications for the language of the community. A high proportion of French-speaking laborers, a job which would require communication with fellow workers, would indicate that others in the field may have spoken French as well. Individuals with French ancestry (one or both parents born in France) may have spoken French in spite of a census recording of English in the language section. In total, 1,711 individuals across 362 families were included in the analysis. In the next section I present the findings of the study.

Figure 3. Example of the 1910 Census in Union Township. Relevant information is highlighted.

3. Findings

Of the 1,711 individuals recorded in Union Township in the 1910 Census just 31, slightly less than 2% of the population, self-reported as speaking French as opposed to English. In contrast, 1,362 (79.6%) claimed an ability to speak English (recall the wording of the Census question: "...able to speak English..."). One individual identified as speaking German. The remaining 317 individuals (18.5%), mostly children, lack information on language ability (see Table 1). In addition to the language background, the Census reveals that 1,663 community members (97%) were born in Missouri though 51 (~3%) of these had an ancestral connection to France according to the census questions regarding birthplace of parents.

	English	French	German	No info.
Raw total	1,362	31	1	317
% of pop.	79.6	1.8	.001	18.5

Although a wide range of jobs were reported in the Census including store clerks, household servants, railroad and public workers, the vast majority of employed persons in Union worked either in farming or mining. In total, 252 identified as working on "general" or "home" farms, predominantly as "farmers" or "farm laborers." The ambiguous industry terms "general" and "home" likely overlap as the census shows several cases of one individual claiming to work in general farming while another in the same family identified home farming (these were often a parent and child, respectively). Of the 122 identified mine workers, 120 were laborers (one, recorded as "miner" is included in this count). The census shows that one mine worker was a "manager" while another was a "supr." interpreted here as supervisor. In addition to the dominance of farming and mining in the community, the census shows that 97 individuals identified their industry as "odd jobs." Finally, 1,084 individuals were recorded as having no job, or this section was left blank; these were primarily elderly people, women, and children (see Table 2).

	Farming	Mining	Odd jobs	Other	None/blank
Raw total	252	122	97	159	1,084
% of pop.	14.7	6.9	5.6	9.2	63.3

4. Discussion

While the general findings reveal a strikingly low number of self-reported French speakers in the Union sector of Old Mines, a closer look at the data with the previous Salmons-based analysis reveals that it is highly probable that the language situation was more complex than the data would suggest. In the remainder of this section I scrutinize the findings for language, ancestry, and industry, all expected to have implications on the language of the community. In addition to analyzing this quantifiable data, I provide a brief discussion of the history of Old Mines surnames using non-authoritative evidence provided by the Old Mines Area Historical Society (OMAHS).

4.1 Language

As noted, only 31 individuals (29 females, 2 males) in Union Township were recorded as speaking French in the census column “Whether able to speak English, if not, give spoken language.” This number is surprisingly low given Carrière’s and Dorrance’s descriptions of the village in the 1930s as having roughly 600 French-speaking families. An examination of the demographics of the self-reported French speakers shows an age range of less than 12 years old to as high as 90 years old (see Table 3). We see a fairly balanced distribution across the range: five individuals were under 12 years old; one was 17; eight fell between 25 and 37; six were 45 to 55; seven were 65 to 75; and four were 82 to 90. These numbers are evidence that at least some working-age adults in the community were French-speaking, and a handful of children were acquiring French as their first language.

Age	< 12	17	24-37	45-64	65-75	82-90
Count	5	1	8	7	6	4

A close look at the households with French speakers provides evidence that many of the Old Mines residents who reported speaking English lived with those who identified as French. As an example, I highlight household #21, one of several Boyer, even today pronounced *Boo-yah* by locals (personal communication with OMAHS), families in the Census (Table 4). In this family of ten, two sons, ages 10 and 8, were identified as French speakers. Surprisingly, their three teenage sisters were recorded as English speakers as were both parents. Although unrecorded, it is reasonable to assume that the three youngest children (6, 4, and 0) would have at least been exposed to French. This subset of the data suggests that French was the language of the home. The Boyer family is likely a case of underreporting of French in the case of the parents and older siblings.

Table 4. Household #21, the Boyer family, adapted from the 1910 U.S. Census					
Surname	Given Name	Relationship	Language	Gender	Age
Boyer	Agustus	Head	English	Male	48
Boyer	Luisa	Wife	English	Female	38
Boyer	Maggie	Daughter	English	Female	16
Boyer	Pearlie	Daughter	English	Female	14
Boyer	Jimmy	Daughter	English	(Blank)	12
Boyer	Walter	Son	French	Male	10
Boyer	Burnham	Son	French	Male	8
Boyer	Susie	Daughter	(Blank)	Female	6
Boyer	Jerome	Son	(Blank)	Male	4
Boyer	Huval	Son	(Blank)	Male	0

In contrast to the Boyers, I present the Coleman family of household #14 (Table 5). Here we see an inverse effect compared to that of the Boyers where only the wife is identified as French speaking; her husband and five of eight children were recorded as English-speaking. It is possible that Lewis Coleman at least spoke some French. Additionally, each of the children in this home would have been exposed to the French language of their mother. The Boyers and Colemans are not unusual in the census data: in total, 88 Old Mines inhabitants lived with an identified French speaker.

Table 5. Household #14, the Coleman family, adapted from the 1910 U.S. Census					
Surname	Given Name	Relationship	Language	Gender	Age
Coleman	Lewis	Head	English	Male	49
Coleman	Mary	Wife	French	Female	46
Coleman	Andrew	Son	English	Male	17
Coleman	Frances	Daughter	English	Female	15
Coleman	Eda	Daughter	English	Female	13
Coleman	Ferdinand	Son	English	Male	10
Coleman	Charles	Son	(Blank)	Male	8
Coleman	Lorrinne	Daughter	(Blank)	Female	6
Coleman	Lana	Daughter	(Blank)	Female	3

Adapting the model of Bousquette and Ehresmann (2010) I have categorized the 119 residents of Old Mines in Union Township who either identified as French-speaking or lived with a confirmed French speaker (Table 6). The first category, “Confirmed”, represents the 31 French speakers who were recorded in the Census. The category “Probable” includes children of confirmed parents, parents of confirmed children, and siblings of confirmed individuals. This labeling is justifiable in that with such an immediate relationship to a confirmed member there is a reasonable probability that these individuals spoke French. In the third category, “Likely”, I have included husbands of French speakers and the lone nephew apparently being raised by his French aunt. The final category, “Possible”, includes the ten grandchildren living with a French grandmother and the single daughter in-law living with a French mother-in-law. In total, even

when remaining conservative in the estimate, the number of OMF speakers increases from 31 to 119. From this analysis of the language category in the 1910 Census I now turn to the data involving nativity of the residents and their parents.

Category	Confirmed	Probable	Likely	Possible
Count	31	64	13	11

4.2 Ancestry

The 1910 Census reveals that 51 residents of Old Mines in Union Township had an ancestral connection to France (defined here as having one or both parents born in France). While having a parent born in France does not necessarily prove that the parent (and by extension the 1910 community member) spoke French, it does increase the likelihood that these individuals spoke the language. The fact that none of the 51 individuals were recorded as French-speaking further illustrates the likelihood of underreporting in the census.

Providing extensive examples of these French-ancestry community members is beyond the scope of this paper, but one individual stands out as noteworthy. Wm[sic] E. Nephew, a 60-year-old farmer was born in France to two parents also both born in France. He immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 24 in the year 1874. His language was recorded as English, though all the evidence would indicate that he certainly had French as a first language. The census recorded each of his children (ages 20, 18, 16, 14, and 12) as English speaking. Again, due to the verbiage of the Census question regarding language we cannot rule out the possibility that these individuals spoke French. The case of the Nephew family would again suggest underreporting of French. We may conservatively categorize the 51 French-ancestry Union residents as likely French speakers, bringing the total to 170. By examining the Census for job and industry information we gain perspective on how the confirmed French speakers interacted in the community.

4.3 Industry

As mentioned above, the primary sources of industry in Old Mines, Union Township were farming and mining (the ambiguous term “odd jobs” is excluded from this analysis). Mining is of particular interest when proposing a language profile for a given community because these workers, mostly laborers, would likely have worked in groups and therefore communicated with one another. In the census data we find that 3 confirmed, 11 probable, and 2 likely French speakers worked in mining. Two confirmed French speakers were recorded as farmers, while 17 more had French speakers in their households (8 probable speakers, 9 likely speakers). These relatively small numbers should not be taken as a conclusive statement of the language proficiency of the mining and farming communities, but rather as an illustration that French speakers worked within them. These findings support the argument that underreporting of French was probable in the 1910 Census.

4.4 Surnames

The final focus of analysis pertains to the general pattern of surnames found in the 1910 Census in Old Mines, Union Township. I compare the common surnames of the Census to a list of historical names for the community provided by the Old Mines Area Historical Society

(OMAHs 1982). The name list provided by OMAHS outlines various spelling changes dating back to the 18th century. I acknowledge that the accuracy of the list has not been verified and only intend here to show that a number of residents recorded in 1910 may have been descendants of the original French settlers. In total, 36 of the 206 distinct surnames have roots in the 1700s according to OMAHS (1982). It is highly likely that many of these are the families encountered by Miller, Carrière, and Dorrance during their visits two decades later.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that, while French speakers were identified in the 1910 Census in Old Mines, Union Township, the records underrepresent the degree to which the language was spoken at the time. In total, only 31 of 1,711 residents self-identified as French-speaking. This contradicts the findings of Miller, Carrière, and Dorrance that French was still robustly spoken into the 1930s. Furthermore, the 31 French speakers spanned a wide age range from under 12 to over 90 years old. Such a range is evidence that OMF was spoken in homes and passed on to children as a first language.

When more carefully examined we find that 119 (and possibly as many as 170) community members had regular exposure to French in their respective households. These individuals likely had at least some command of French. The relationship of the arguably French speakers varied from spouses to children and grandchildren of confirmed French speakers. Such a dynamic degree of relationships is evidence that the French language situation was far more complex than the raw data reveals.

A review of French speakers, both confirmed and arguable, found that these individuals were well immersed in the local community. French speakers existed in the mining and farming communities, the two dominant economic fields in Old Mines, Union Township. The existence of miners is especially important as these workers would have had regular communication outside the household in their daily lives.

The finding that a large proportion of surnames in 1910 date back to the 18th century is evidence that these families were likely the descendants of early settlers. There is also a fair probability that many of these were the same families encountered during the first wave of research in the 1930s. Although this subset of the data has not been peer reviewed it should not be ignored as it comes from the present-day curators of Old Mines French history.

The methods employed in the present paper are certainly open to scrutiny. I have taken precautions to apply only the most conservative numbers to the four categories of French speakers. As such I have claimed that only 170 of 1,711 residents of Union Township had any possibility of speaking French at all. This is clearly an understatement given the research of the 1930s which found approximately 600 French families (supported by the existence of French into the 1970s). A reexamination of these classifications might consider factors such as traditional French names (according to OMAHS 1982), households neighboring confirmed French speakers, and relationship of households sharing surnames with one another. Additional documents such as church, military, and death records as well as plat maps would further substantiate any more liberal claims regarding language. All of this is crucial to making more assertive claims regarding Old Mines French in the early 20th century.

The results of this study are important for showing the relationship between confirmed French speakers within their households and across the community at large. These findings, however, only raise questions for further research. Salmons' (2005) model argues that language shift is the result of a change in socioeconomic and political factors from the local level to more

state/regional structures. The anecdotal evidence detailed in Thogmartin's (1970) and Thomas's (1979) dissertations, as well as my own contact with the Old Mines community would support Salmons' view. Thus far, I have found little quantifiable evidence to support the Salmons' social-structure shift hypothesis which would suggest that socio-economic changes were rapidly taking place in Old Mines in the early 20th century; however, the 1910 Census does reveal that two individuals of apparent authority in the mining industry (one "manager" and one "supr.") were non-native to Missouri and had no ancestral ties to France. A geography article by Gold (1979) discusses changes in mining technology and its effect on the French community. Unfortunately, Gold does not give details of the management structure relevant to Old Mines. Such information, to be found in contracts, newspapers, or possibly government documents, would prove fruitful in uncovering the diachronic picture of language contact and shift from French to English.

Finally, it should be noted that the importance of Salmons' (2005) model of record collection in reconstructing historical-linguistic profiles cannot be overstated. Previously anecdotal and impressionistic data can be quantified by examining information not typically considered relevant to linguistics. While much of this research has centered on German in Wisconsin, the model can and should be extended to other communities with rich linguistic history.

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