



Soucy Insurance celebrates 100 years of service and heritage

By Bonnie Smith/Sitting in

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Today, 100 years later, the Soucy Insurance Agency (which bears the name of Francois's married daughter and her offspring), represents 10 insurance carriers and serves approximately 7,500 customers - many of them second- and third-generation clients.

"Not only are we still here, but we have been chosen the No. 1 Reader's Choice for many years," says Paul K. Soucy, the agency's president. "I am proud of that achievement and I know my great-grandfather would be as well."

According to U.S., Canadian and Salem records, Francois X. Voyer was born in 1867 to Christine Ouelette and Alfred Voyer, a "laborer" (farmer) living in the St. Cecile Parish of the town of Bic, Rimouski County, Quebec, Canada. Francois first immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 11. He likely resided with his uncle Jean Baptiste Voyer in Salem, who worked as an "operative" in the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company (or the "Pequot Mills").

Soon, other young men from the Voyer family settled in Salem as well, in "The Point" neighborhood, responding to the demand for workers that resulted from the end of the Civil War, the rise of industrialized factories, and the need for imported labor to replace thousands of fallen soldiers. Scouts from these factories actively recruited workers from the Quebec region. While Pierre Caisse is credited with being the founder of Salem's French American community since first arriving in 1856, by the time the Voyers settled permanently in Salem the community was firmly established.

In 1887, Francois (whose name was soon Americanized to "Francis" and then "Frank") listed his occupation as a "clerk" when he married Adelina Caron, a mill worker. He was 20; she was 19. By 1888, Frank was working as a "boot and shoe dealer" for Arthur Feenan, a storeowner at 83 Harbor St. in the Point. By 1893, Frank was running the boot and shoe department, publishing his own name in Salem City Directory display ads and building his own reputation.

Frank listed his occupation as a "grocer" in 1899. He was now working for Paul N. Chaput, the most prominent French Canadian resident in Salem at the time - a prosperous business owner and city alderman. Frank was a "driver" for justice of the peace Eben N. Walton in 1903, and by 1906 was back again working for Paul Chaput as an auctioneer while Paul focused on real estate and insurance.

Finally, in 1907, Frank X. Voyer opened his own business as an auctioneer and insurance provider - putting to use the many skills he had learned since first arriving in Salem. His son, Eudore, age 20, joined his father as an insurance agent. "Francis X. Voyer & Co., Real Estate and Fire Insurance," opened at 51 Harbor St. That same year, the mayor of Salem made Frank a constable for the city.

In 1907, the year Frank X. Voyer opened his business, Salem was a bustling urban community with a thriving downtown, a steady influx of newcomers, and a population of about 38,000. Plans were underway to spend \$800,000 on a new courthouse facility. The 400,000-foot sewerage system had been completed. Daniel Low's was

celebrating a record year for business. "The Sorceress" was playing at the Salem Theatre, and Julius Cahn had unveiled plans to build a new Empire Theatre on Essex Street. The East India Marine Society was celebrating its 107th year. A new armory for the Salem Cadets had been proposed. A full 818 households were using electricity. Ragtime music was all the rage. Salem residents could purchase an Edison photograph, upright pianos, cod liver oil, fresh fish from the Salem Bay for 8 to 10 cents a pound, and a hot Huyler's Chocolate at Price Drug Co. for 5 cents.

As Frank X. Voyer's prominence grew, Paul Soucy recalls the family story that describes Frank translating Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge's speeches into French during the 1910-1911 election when he was trying to win votes from the French Canadian community.

"Putting all of these clues together," says Paul Soucy, 'I think my grandfather was smart, hardworking, forceful, good with and good to people, and knew how to spot an opportunity.'

The Great Salem Fire of 1914 devastated the French Canadian community on the Point with its multiple-decker wooden houses, and the fire burned down the Naumkeag Mills. Luckily, by then, Frank and his growing family were living on Ocean Avenue in Salem's "Castle Hill" neighborhood (where their son Lucien was the first baby baptized in the new St. Anne's Church), and away from the path of the fire. His business was safely located at 203 1/2 Washington St. Still, friends, family and customers were left homeless, their jobs evaporated, or their businesses ruined. The mills were quickly rebuilt, but personal and financial recovery, especially for the French Canadian community, was slow. Many left Salem for nearby towns, or returned to Canada.

Frank's business changed locations over the years, but the company always remained in Salem's Washington Street business district. At the same time, a young man named Joseph Soucy, who was born in Salem in 1892, took employment as a shoe worker in Salem's productive leather and shoe industry.

A lady in a "Yankee man's world"

Frank and Adelina Voyer had 14 children, 11 of whom survived, including a daughter named Alberta. As a young woman, Alberta took an interest in her father's business and spent many hours assisting him with administrative tasks. In 1921, Alberta Voyer joined hundreds of other women in Salem who registered to vote for the first time. By 1926, she had married Joseph Soucy and listed her occupation as "notary public and insurance" - two highly unusual occupations for a woman at that time.

As Paul Soucy tells the family story, "my grandmother, Alberta Soucy, was the only child to have an interest in continuing what had become a small, part-time insurance company. My great-grandfather one day told an insurance agent that 'no one' - meaning, none of his sons, wanted the company. The insurance agent remarked that each time he visited, Alberta was working. Why not let her take the reins? And of course that's what she did. She jumped at the chance, and she was uniquely qualified to understand both the business and customer service sides of the company. She really served two masters - the customers and the insurance companies. She was good at both, and had to sell herself in an essentially Yankee man's world."

During the Great Depression of the early 1930s, Alberta and Joseph Soucy ran the business from their home on Elm Avenue. "But there was no doubt that it was *her* company," Paul Soucy explains. By 1936, she had changed the company's name to the "A. Voyer Soucy Agency" offering "general insurance" in what we now call the old Salem News building on Washington Street. Alberta also gave birth to two children while running the company.

"Her children would come directly from school to the downtown office to have a hot meal. She made sure of that," Paul points out, "and on Fridays there was extra money for ice cream at the local soda fountain."

"I think my grandmother made her mark by the manner in which she treated her customers," Paul Soucy continues. "She had a Morris Chair outside her office (the most comfortable, best chair in the house, invented by William Morris during the Arts and Crafts Movement), which was often occupied by a customer telling my grandmother of some personal problem and seeking her advice. She extended credit and provided insurance to many people when

nobody else would. She also had a soft spot for the boys who came home from the war."

"I remember an older customer of mine," Paul Soucy goes on to say, "who upon giving up his driver's license, came to my office in tears telling me that even 50 years later he remembered how kind my grandmother had been when she helped him get that license. She was a strong believer in becoming a citizen of this country, and she helped many Canadian immigrants achieve that goal. She helped them get a driver's license, a job, obtain a mortgage, assistance with income taxes, and on and on. Even after she retired, she was the best salesperson I had up until the end."

Alberta Soucy was also a graduate of the well regarded Salem Commercial School on Washington Street, a notary public - among the first women in Essex County - and a member of the Women's Republican Club of Salem, which used to meet in her beautiful gardens on Elm Avenue or at the Hawthorne Hotel.

Alberta's son, Charles B. Soucy, worked for his mother's company at a young age, graduated from Salem High School and Babson College, served in the U.S. Navy, was married, and had three children by the time he was 25. His name is first listed with the company in 1948. By 1954, he was president of the A. Voyer Soucy Insurance Agency, Inc.

Paul Soucy credits his father with "bringing the business into the modern age. He was able to compete with other local agents as the Salem economy expanded in the post-World War II era. He moved the office to the street level on Washington Street, became an active part of the Salem business community, added new products as the insurance industry itself was expanding, improved internal systems, placed display ads, and gave everything a modern appearance. He was active with the Kiwanis Club, serving as president and Lt. Governor of the District, and the Salem Chamber of Commerce. He was involved with the Knights of Columbus, the Elks, and other fraternal organizations. He was active and visible, and truly established himself and the agency as a fixture in town. He always said his goal was to make one new customer a day - and he probably did!"

Charles Soucy also encouraged his son Paul to attend business school, which he did, at the Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania. Paul K. Soucy joined the family business in 1977 as vice-president, treasurer, and eventually president in 1989.

"This was a great time to begin my career," Paul recalls. "It was the advent of the computer age, and it seems that each generation has been able to bring something new and effective to the business as the world around us has changed."

Since 1977, the Soucy Insurance Agency has continued to expand and now serves business and personal customers from Salem, the North Shore, and beyond as people have moved away. Paul Soucy continues his father's community activities. Over the years, he has been involved with the Kiwanis Club, Salem Rotary, American Red Cross, Salem Visiting Nurse Association, Salem Hospital, the House of the Seven Gables, the Essex Institute/Peabody Essex Museum and Historic Salem, Inc.

"It is important to me that we make meaningful charitable contributions to this community that has given my family so much," Paul concludes, "and I am truly grateful to those who came before me for the opportunity to work in this business that I truly love."

The Soucy Insurance Agency, Inc. is located at 201 Washington St., where it's been since 1970. The agency was founded as Frank X. Voyer & Co. in 1907 at 51 Harbor St., offering fire insurance, real estate and collecting services, and money to loan on mortgages. Today, Soucy Insurance has 10 employees and offers complete personal and business insurance. They consistently receive high rankings in customer surveys and business profiles.