

Senator Joseph Willie Comeau

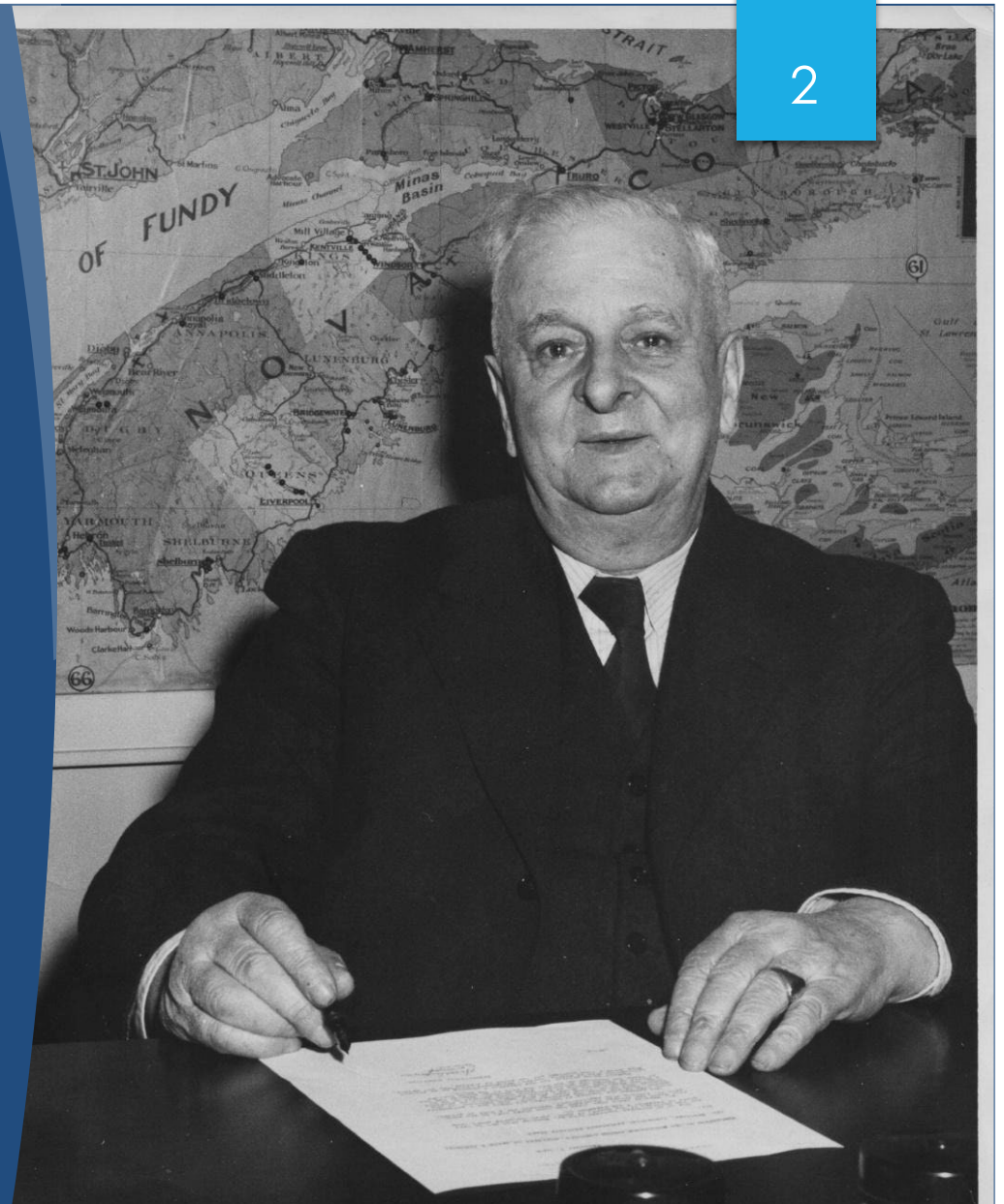
HERITAGE DAY HONOUREE
2026

Senator Joseph Willie Comeau

Joseph Willie Comeau (1876–1966) was an educator, entrepreneur, legislator and Senator from Digby County, Nova Scotia. A graduate of Collège Sainte-Anne, he worked as a teacher, operated several businesses and served nine terms as a Member of the Legislative Assembly before being appointed to the Senate of Canada in 1948. He is recognized for his long-standing advocacy for Acadian language, culture and education in Nova Scotia.



[\(More information\)](#)



Early Life and Acadian Roots

► Joseph Willie Comeau was born in Comeauville, Digby County, Nova Scotia, on March 12, 1876. His ancestors were among those who returned to Nova Scotia following the Acadian Expulsion of 1755 and settled in the Baie Sainte-Marie region.

► He was the eldest of twelve children and attended school in Comeauville. At age fourteen, he was invited by the priests to study at the new Collège Sainte-Anne, which was being established by the Eudist Fathers to educate young Acadian men. He was part of the first cohort of students in 1890. Family history notes that, due to limited financial means, his family paid for his first three years of tuition with a heifer.



Willie with siblings and parents, ca 1896. Willie is in the back row, 2nd from left.



Photo Willie Comeau St. Anne's College December 1890
Willie: 2nd row from back, 2nd left (next to white-haired man)

Degree in Commerce: 1898 – Completed a degree in Commerce, the highest degree offered by the College at the time.



Photo of JW Comeau – Graduate
Willie borrowed shoes from his cousin for this picture as he did not own a good pair.

Education and Early Career

- ▶ After completing his studies, Comeau worked as a schoolteacher from 1896 to 1900 in Meteghan River and Collet La Butte. With what he earned, he assisted in paying for his younger brothers' education, who in turn helped support the education of the remaining siblings.
- ▶ During his time teaching in La Butte, he learned of the position of Assistant Commissioner for the Canadian Pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Owing to his bilingual abilities and strong recommendations, he was appointed to the role and spent a year in Paris, travelling and gaining broader international experience.

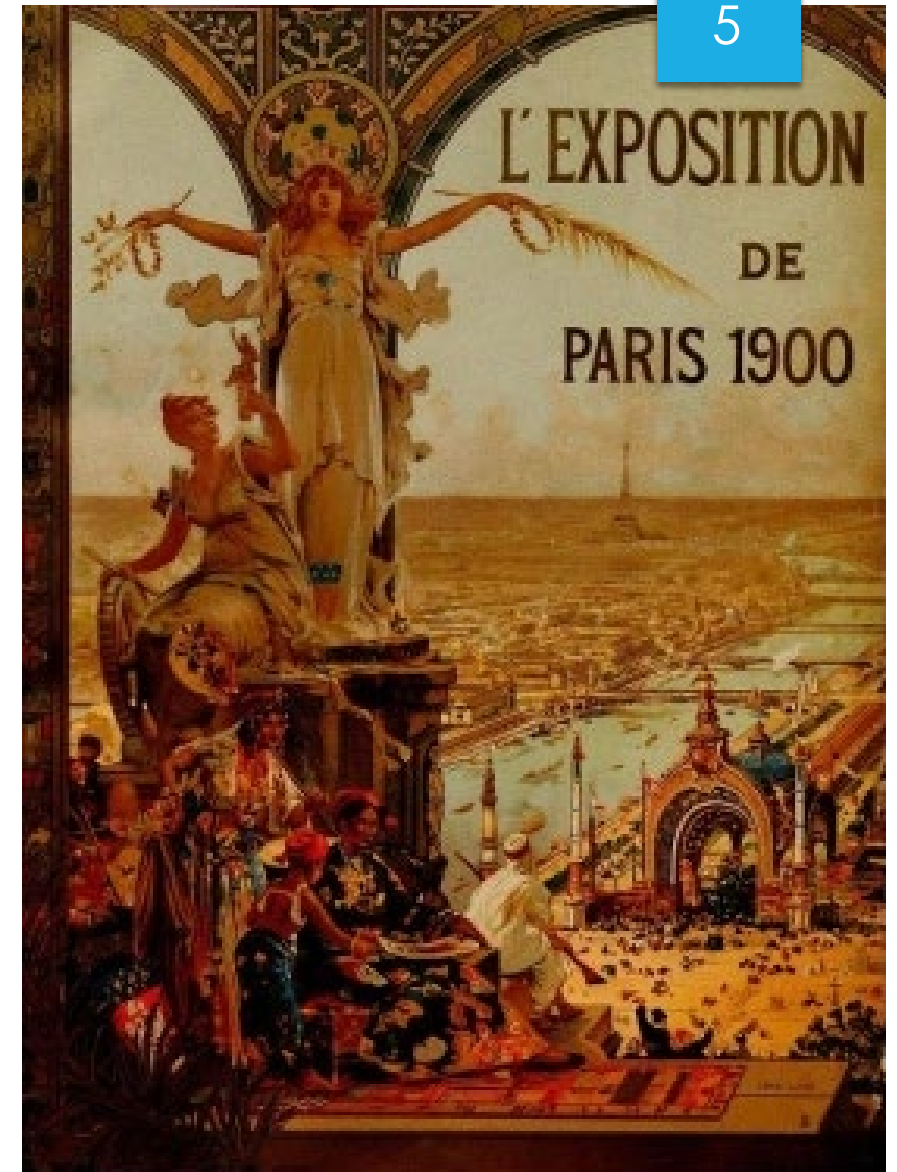
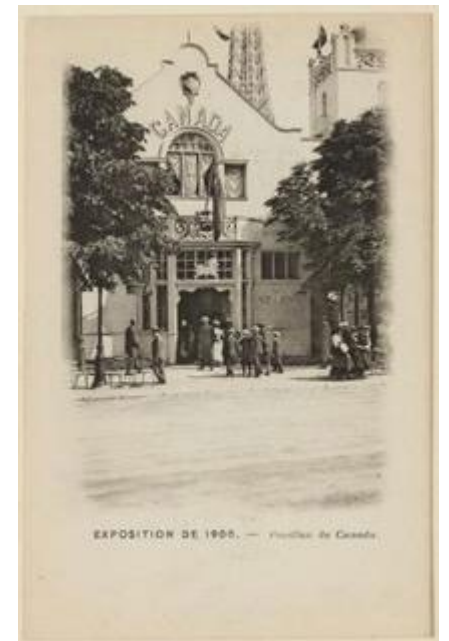




Photo Willie Comeau
Service Card - Expo



Photo of Willie Comeau
-with top hat



Canadian Pavillion: <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/exposition-de-1900-pavillon-du-canada#infos-principales>

Family Life and Entrepreneurship



Upon returning to Nova Scotia, Comeau arranged the construction of a new home for his parents. He married Grace Sheehan in 1902, and together they raised six children.



Alongside family life, he pursued several business ventures. He became a partner in a shipyard, operated a lobster cannery in Comeauville and owned a fish plant in Petit-de-Grat. He resided in Comeauville for the remainder of his life; in the home he had built.



(1901) House built commissioned by Willie for his parents with part of money from his year in France to replace the old homestead.

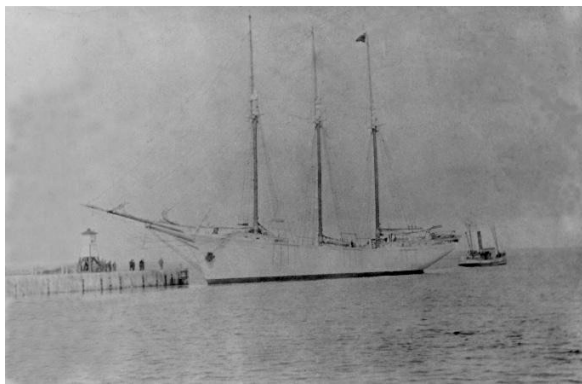


Photo file: «Racewel»

Dried fish (before refrigeration, fish exported were salted and dried). Photo taken in Westport, Briar Island, Digby Co, or Tiverton, Long Island, Digby Co. Willie was a partner in the fishing industry.

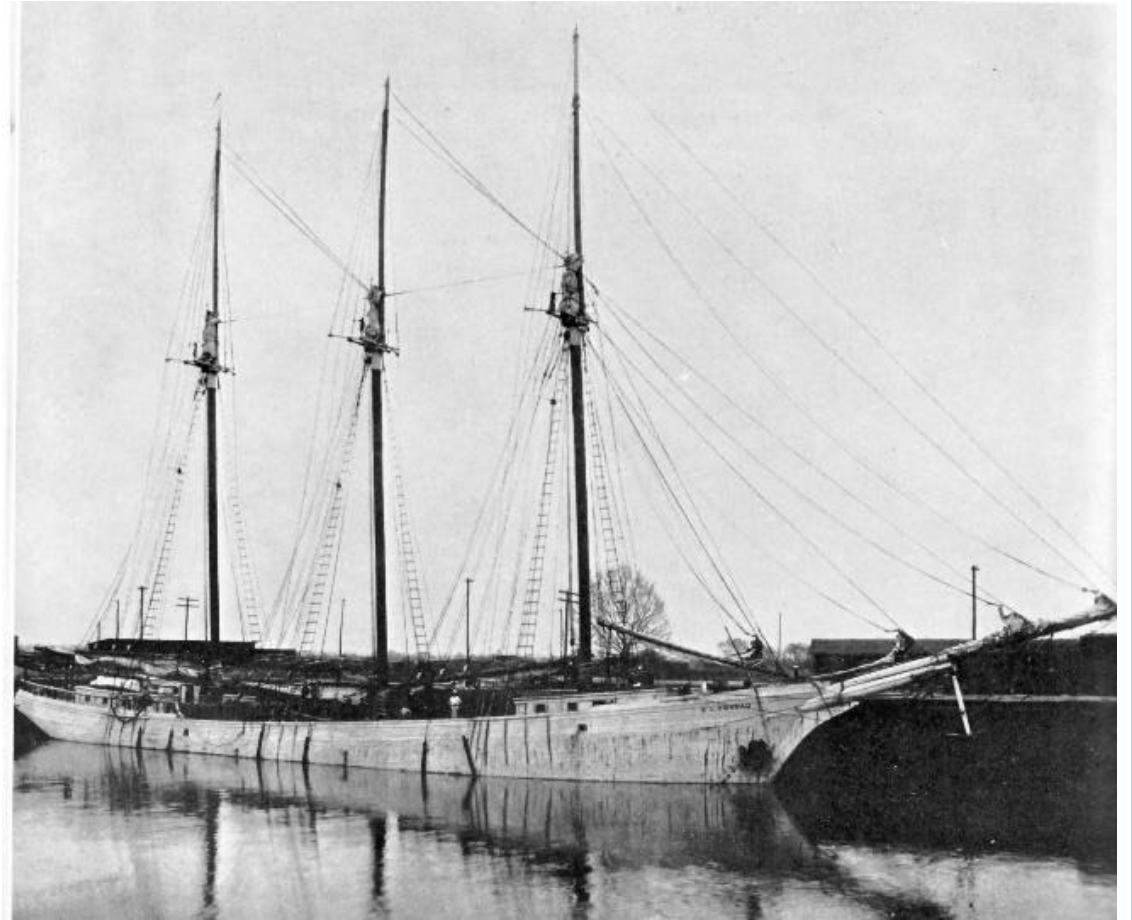
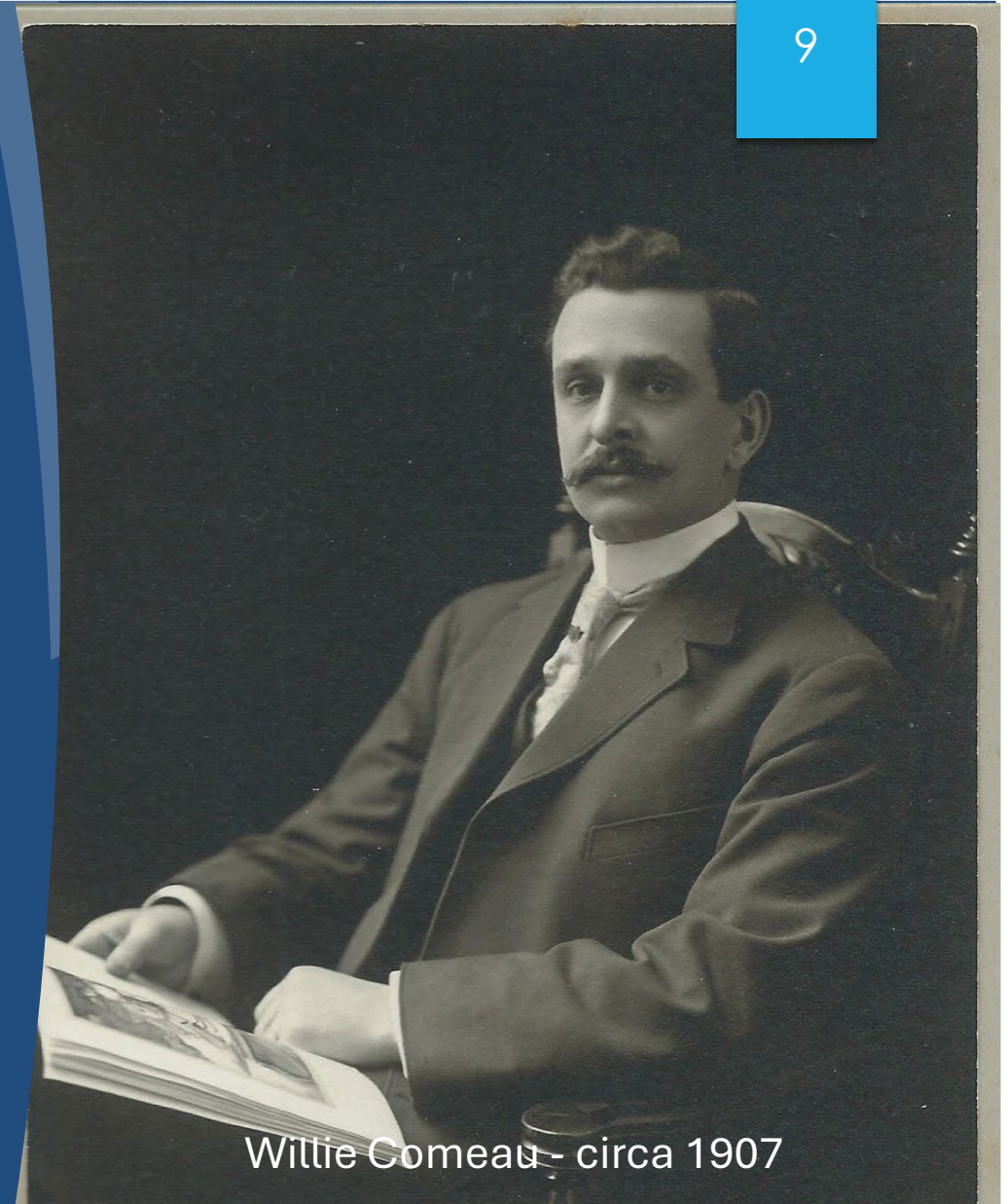


Photo file: EL Comeau

(Ship photos with permission from Delbé Comeau)

Political leadership and advocacy

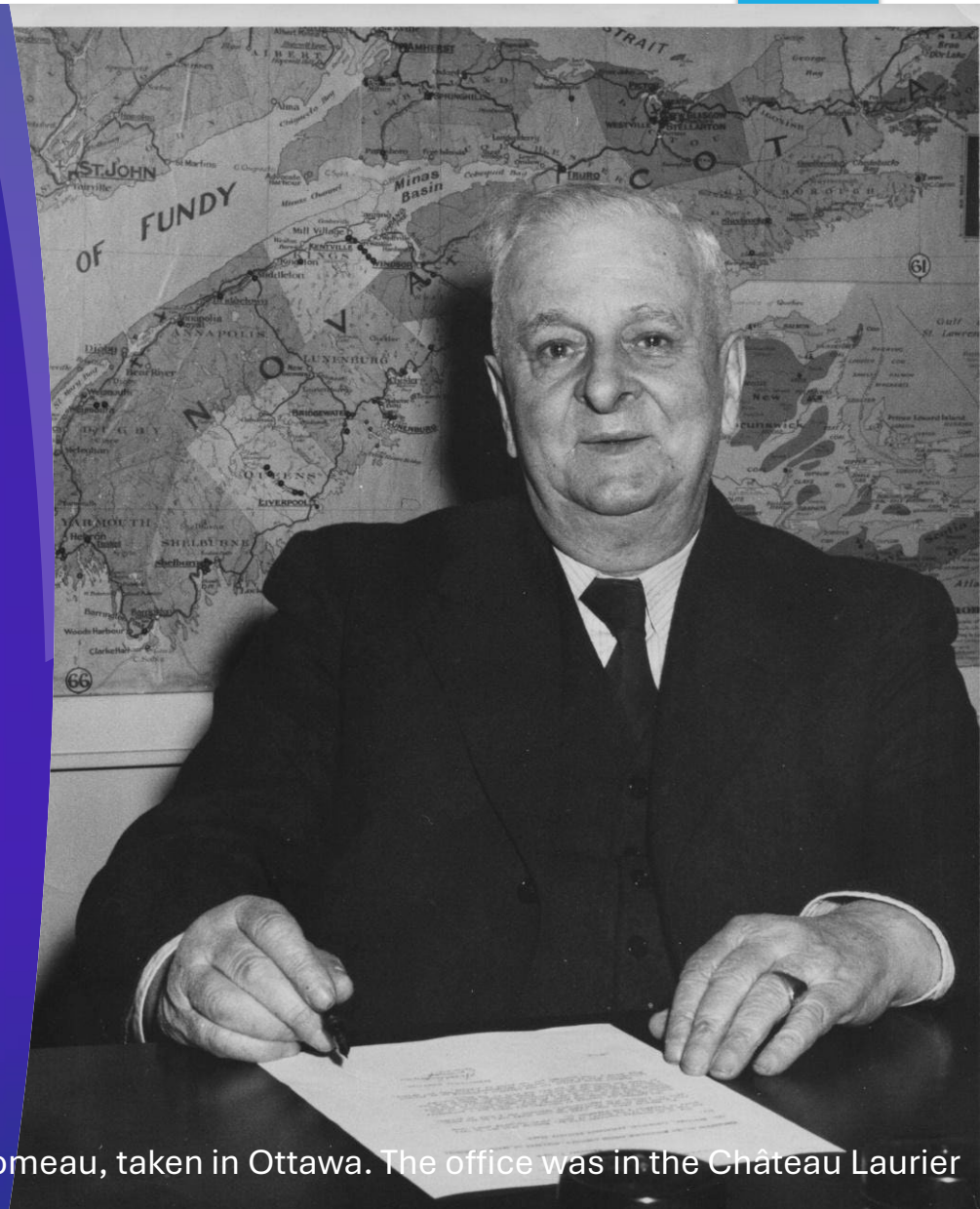
- ▶ Comeau entered provincial politics and was elected in 1907 as the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Digby County. He used this position to advocate for Acadian communities and culture.
- ▶ His efforts included:
 - ▶ -supporting the development of a French-Canadian history textbook for schools in Acadian regions
 - ▶ -encouraging French-language training for teachers through Université Sainte-Anne
 - ▶ -He was elected nine times, reflecting sustained confidence in his leadership and commitment to his constituents.



Willie Comeau - circa 1907

Senate Appointment and Later Years

- ▶ Comeau represented Digby County in the Nova Scotia Legislature until 1948, when Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent appointed him to the Senate of Canada. He served as Senator until his death in 1966.
- ▶ First Speech in the Senate: [Senate Debates, 20th Parliament, 5th Session : ... - Image 34 - Canadian Parliamentary Historical Resources](#)



Willie Comeau, taken in Ottawa. The office was in the Château Laurier

LEGACY AND TRIBUTES

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Throughout his life, Comeau was widely recognized as a strong advocate for Acadian culture and public service. This was reflected in the many tributes delivered following his death, including:

"He was tremendously proud of the fact that he was an Acadian... 'I am equally proud that I am an Acadian, a Nova Scotian, and a Canadian.'" – Senator Frederick M. Blois, January 19, 1966.

"He... was very wise... always grounded in sound common sense." – Senator Thomas A. Crerar, March 30, 1966.

"Few men in Canada had as interesting a career as Senator Comeau." – Senator Alfred J. Brooks, January 19, 1966.

Sen. Joseph W. Comeau, 90, Of the Canadian Parliament - The New York Times New York Times January 12, 1966



Photo was taken on Comeauville wharf, in a small canteen. Willie is the only one in a suit, therefore easy to spot. He liked to visit the wharves and businesses to take the pulse of his community. He kept his community at heart.

LEGACY AND TRIBUTES CONT'D

"We cannot ignore all that the Honourable Willie Comeau did in Cabinet to defend our educational rights. Although during his time in office we did not have the linguistic rights in education that we have now, it must be said that without Mr. Comeau's strong presence in Cabinet, ...ministers would have succeeded in curtailing the few rights we had at the time. It must be remembered that bigotry was rampant in certain circles for much of the Honourable Willie Comeau's political career. It must also be remembered that the summer courses at Collège Sainte-Anne, starting in 1940, were recognized by the province for credit and licensing purposes."

From: Clare, The French Town Volume III,
Prominent People, J. Alphonse Deveau

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First French courses offered to educators,
Collège Sainte-Anne (summer courses)

How a Heifer Changed my Grandfather's Life (Willie Comeau)

by Gisèle Thibault, Willie's grand-daughter

This story is about my grandfather, Willie Comeau, or more specifically Willie à Louis à Pierre à François à François Maza. It begins in 1890, when he was 14 years old. Father Blanche and another priest from France came to his home and spoke to his mother, Catherine. They were recruiting students for Collège Sainte-Anne, the school they were in the process of establishing to educate Acadian boys.

One of them said, "Madame Comeau, we've heard your son Willie is quite intelligent, and we'd like him to come to our college. Would you be interested?"

"Oh yes, Father," she replied. "I would like that very much, but we can't afford to send our son to your college."

Catherine and Louis Comeau could barely feed their 12 children; they certainly didn't have the means to pay for a college education for Willie.

The priest reassured her, "Madame, send us your son. We'll worry about the money"

Then she remembered the young heifer that was in their field and asked whether they could use her to help pay for Willie's studies, to which the priest agreed. And so, at the age of 14, my grandfather left Comeauville with a bag of clothing and a heifer and walked to Church Point to begin his studies.

After three years at the College, Willie took a year off to teach in a neighbouring village, then returned to his studies. With his savings and the money he earned teaching evening classes to adults, he was able to pay his fees, and also those of his younger brother, Edouard. Over the years, he and his brothers funded the education of their younger brothers. The heifer that had financed the first part of my grandfather's studies changed the course of his life completely. Everything he became was thanks to the College, the priests who recruited him, and that heifer.

Willie graduated with a "Diplôme en Études commerciales", the highest qualification Collège Sainte-Anne granted at that time. It's interesting to mention that he had to borrow a pair of shoes to attend his graduation. In those days, very few people in the region owned shoes. They wore "caristeaux", the knees of cows or deer which hadn't been tanned and which molded to the shape of their feet. (It is said they were comfortable and quite warm...) Willie borrowed a pair of shoes from a cousin to go to his graduation.

After completing his studies, Willie got a job teaching in Meteghan River. While he was there, he heard of a job opening for a bilingual man as assistant to the Commissioner of the Canadian Pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition. With the support of the Eudist Fathers and local politicians, Willie got the job and at the age of 24, he set off for Paris. It was quite an adventure for a young man who had probably never even been to Halifax! He spent a year in Paris and was able to do some travelling in Europe. (I remember my grandfather telling me about visiting Pompeii and climbing to the summit of the volcano, Mount Vesuvius.)

When he returned to Comeauville, Willie had some money in his pockets, and he had a house built for his parents. Later, he had another built for his wife, himself, and their growing family. The education he had received and the experience he had gained in Paris gave him the confidence to venture into the world of business. Over the years, he was part owner of a shipyard that built three-masted ships, a lobster cannery, and fish plants in Petit-de-Grat, Briar Island and Long Island. He also had a company which built wharves and later owned a fox ranch and then a mink ranch.

in 1907, Willie entered the political arena and had a long political career, always with the Liberal Party. (In my family, if you vote other than Liberal, you keep quiet about it.) He was an MLA almost continuously until 1948, when he was appointed to the Senate of Canada. He served until his death in 1966 at the age of 89.

And that is how a little heifer had a big impact on my grandfather's life and on the life of my entire family. She undoubtedly changed the course of our family's history.



Heritage Day

Nomination Campaign



Heritage Day Nomination Campaign – Grades 3-9

Students are invited to submit nominations for future Heritage Day Honourees—individually, in small groups, or as a class. Nominate a person, place, or event, tell us why they are significant and deserving of this honour.

Please find the **NS Heritage Day: Teacher Handbook**(français). This activity aligns well with a number of curriculum outcomes; connections are made in the teacher handbook.

The deadline for submission is **May 15th, 2026**. Check out the NS Heritage Day website to learn more. For questions, please contact HeritageDay@novascotia.ca.