

# IN THE SPIRIT OF '68

YOUTH CULTURE,  
THE NEW LEFT, AND THE  
REIMAGINING OF ACADIA

Joel Belliveau

Translated by Käthe Roth



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## Introduction

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### The Acadian Student Movements of the 1960s – A Leftist or Nationalist Force?

Overall, the 1960s were a good decade in the history of New Brunswick Acadians – a decade of optimism, during which the Maritime province’s Francophone citizens felt that they had finally earned a place in the sun after two centuries of being relegated to the background, of simply surviving. The election of the first Acadian premier, the creation of a modern French-language university, the progressive and egalitarian reform of the province’s tax system and public services, the assertion of a political will to accelerate economic development in rural regions – many of which were predominantly Acadian – and completion of the French-language school system were all indications that a better future was in store for Acadia.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, despite these ostensibly positive changes, and despite the expectations they raised, or because of them, Francophone New Brunswick had its “1968 moment,” a time of protest comparable in scope – in proportion, of course – to the crises disrupting Quebec and “English Canada” at the time. What connections might there have been between a few hundred activist students in Moncton demonstrating in favour of linguistic and cultural rights for Francophones, on the one hand, and the struggles of the North American New Left and the French 1968 movement, on the other hand? Were the Moncton students newly minted Acadian nationalists, or were they leftists marked by the realities of their generation and the ambience of the 1960s?

Here are the highlights of the student mobilizations in New Brunswick. In February 1968, the Association des étudiants de l'Université de Moncton (AEUM) organized a strike that would last two weeks, to protest against imminent tuition increases. During the same week, a group of students organized a demonstration in favour of bilingualism at the municipal level; about two thousand people – mainly university and high school students – marched in front of city hall during a council meeting.<sup>2</sup> It was the first-ever demonstration of its size in Moncton. A delegation of four students presented the elected officials, who were less than receptive, with demands inspired by the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, made public some weeks before. Skirmishes between the students and the mayor, a notable Francophobe, ended with the delivery of a pig's head to the door of the mayor's home and the arrest of two students. Another demonstration was held the following week in the provincial capital, to demand free tuition. About twelve hundred of the three thousand demonstrators were Acadians from Moncton and Collège de Bathurst, and a delegation from the AEUM met with the premier. However, he promised the students nothing, and they left disappointed.

In January 1969, frustrated that the pressure they had exerted the previous year had failed to produce results, a group of students – smaller and not elected this time – raised the tone a notch by occupying a large building on the main campus of the Université de Moncton “for an indeterminate period,” demanding a freeze on tuition and additional funds for the university from the federal government. The occupation lasted eight days and ended badly: the university administration asked the municipal police to evacuate the building, abolished the sociology program (considered subversive) outright, and used various pretexts to fire seven relatively activist professors – a move that shocked many observers. Finally, it chose not to readmit thirty students, among them the organizers of the occupation and most volunteers on the student newspaper.

The Acadian students' “1968 moment” aroused much interest when it was underway, and the “events” have gained mythic status in Acadia, and even beyond.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, however, few history or sociology studies deal explicitly with the Acadian student movements of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Many more studies have included these events within a broader macro-sociological perspective, or in research with a theme related to student movements.<sup>5</sup>

The first important narrative documenting the activist students' undertakings in Acadia was a film, which seems appropriate given the role that the mass media played in the proliferation of student movements throughout

the world at the time. A production by two well-known Quebec filmmakers, Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault, the *cinéma vérité* classic *L'Acadie, l'Acadie!?!*, captured live then recounted major student demonstrations that took place between February 1968 and January 1969.<sup>6</sup> Despite the filmmakers' editorial position, which was that Francophones outside of Quebec had little chance of surviving, the events documented nevertheless went down in history as a symbol of the new type of collective affirmation by Acadians. This is even truer because these events took place in an environment little accustomed to activism, or even to political or cultural questioning.<sup>7</sup> Although the means of public action used by students were assessed in different ways by commentators of the time, the contrast with the discreet tactics of the nationalist elite was invariably emphasized. This contrast – visible, even striking, in the film – certainly gives a partial explanation of what the “events” represent in Acadian historiography: the beginning of renewal of forms of Acadian nationalism, or, to use the term in fashion at the time, the inception of the neo-nationalist movement.

Jean-Paul Hautecoeur, one of the sociology professors fired by the Université de Moncton in 1969, led in advancing the idea that the neo-nationalist movement had its source in the student movement – first in his doctoral dissertation in sociology, under adviser Fernand Dumont, and then in a book, *L'Acadie du discours*, published in the mid-1970s, when the neo-nationalist movement was at its apogee, swept along by new organizations such as the Parti acadien (founded in 1972) and the Société des Acadiens du Nouveau-Brunswick (SANB) (formed in 1973), and hopes were still riding high.<sup>8</sup> Hautecoeur describes the student struggles of 1968–69 and situates them in the intellectual, cultural, and political environment of postwar Acadia. In his analysis, which constitutes the earliest proposal for a history of political ideas in Acadia, he includes a detailed examination of the ideology of the Acadian cultural and nationalist elite and describes its more recent forms as being irremediably compromised through accommodations with the majority Anglophone group in the name of a modernity that would be, in reality, only a path to cultural alienation. In the first chapter of the book, he presents the events of 1968 as the point of departure for a new nationalism, more democratic and open than that of previous generations. Although agreement is not unanimous regarding Hautecoeur's assessment of the vision of the elite – I shall return to this – no subsequent author has contested his general reading that the Moncton student movement would essentially be the wellspring of the Acadian neo-nationalist movement.<sup>9</sup>

We should now note an important difference from the situation in Quebec, where it is generally considered that neo-nationalism appeared in the early 1960s, or even the late 1950s, and that Jean Lesage's reformist Liberal government was one of its main vectors. In New Brunswick, a reformist Liberal government was elected within one week of Lesage's taking power. It was, of course, the government formed by Louis J. Robichaud, who appointed a cabinet one-half of whose members were Acadians. These neighbouring and contemporary provincial governments have often been compared due to the ebullient nature of the reforms that they undertook contemporaneously. And yet, according to historians of Acadia, neo-nationalism did not emerge under Robichaud's government; it was manifested later, toward the end of the decade, and it was asserted, in part, *against* the Robichaud government. In other words, in the majority Francophone society of Quebec, neo-nationalism was generally considered compatible with liberalism; in New Brunswick's Acadia, it was necessary to break, at least partially, with liberalism in order to adopt a firm neo-nationalist position.

The fact that student activism and the reaffirmation of cultural autonomy – in a less traditional mould – developed simultaneously in Acadia might lead one to believe that the mass student activism there was fundamentally neo-nationalist. The wave of demonstrations would have occurred just at the time when it became urgent to have the Acadian elite pay attention to a new narrative, to show where and how it had erred by not further casting off tradition in order to offer greater resistance to the integration of Acadians into the political and economic spheres of New Brunswick and Canada.

There is no doubt that the appearance of neo-nationalism was in part the result of a conflict between generations each of which claimed Acadian leadership. It is perhaps Joseph Yvon Thériault who has expressed this clash most clearly and concisely:

Meanwhile, however, a neo-nationalism had developed within the ranks of young Acadians, prompting them to challenge the integration initiative, which was the previous generation's idea, and to restore the issue of Acadia's institutional autonomy to the foreground of Acadian concerns ... The children of [the] frustrated reformers would not be demanding equality, but rather duality.<sup>10</sup>

But was the reality this simple? In an article published in 1986, sociologist Bernard Gauvin, a former student protester and one of the organizers of the February 1968 demonstration, warned against too "national" a reading

of the students' motivations, recalling that they thought they were also – and perhaps mainly – part of a planetary protest movement, their generation's progressive wave:

Contrary to common knowledge, the Acadian question was not the primary trigger of the events that occurred on the Université de Moncton campus in 1968–69. In fact, [in October 1967] about two hundred students organized a small demonstration in the streets of Moncton for peace and against American intervention in Vietnam ... To start with, we were proponents of the vast Western youth protest movement.<sup>11</sup>

Eighteen years earlier, Gauvin's classmate Raymond LeBlanc had described the events in Moncton in 1968 very similarly: in his view, this was a "protest" movement that aimed to "challenge a system or a society directly," to formulate a "global critique of the Establishment" of that society in order to finally "claim or demand something else." The student protest phenomenon of 1968, LeBlanc stated, had a "global dimension."<sup>12</sup> The primary characteristic of the demonstrations was thus their belonging to a vaster movement. LeBlanc also highlighted the fact that many of the demands made by the Moncton students followed the same themes as those of their colleagues elsewhere in the West and around the world; tuition fees, co-management of universities, the Vietnam war, and other issues were the pillars of this global "student solidarity." LeBlanc also felt that the demonstrations, meetings, sit-ins, class boycotts, barricades, and the strike lasting almost two weeks in Moncton were stirring examples of the spirit of student protest of the time: "In 1968, in Canada, student demonstrations broke out mainly in Quebec and New Brunswick, as well as at Simon Fraser, in British Columbia. In New Brunswick ... it was mainly at the Université de Moncton that demonstrations were organized."<sup>13</sup> Far from emphasizing the uniqueness of the situation in Moncton or Acadia, these activists tended to link it directly to other student movements that were breaking out all over the planet at the same time. However, few writings on this subject dwell on the generational phenomenon and the historical context for an understanding of the events that took place in Moncton in 1968–69.

The film *L'Acadie, l'Acadie!?!?*, for example, made no connections between the events in Moncton and the global student movement.<sup>14</sup> The wave of demonstrations is presented as the result of Acadian youths' despair about their parents' traditions and, above all, their perception of their parents' subjection to Anglophone domination. The film thus posits a wrenching

generation gap, but one that was linked specifically to the minority situation of Acadians and disagreement on the type of nationalist strategy to favour. Starting with this focus, Perrault and Brault present the student mobilization essentially as an expression of nationalism by a dominated, minoritized French Canadian population.

Like Perrault and Brault, Hautecoeur situates the Moncton students' actions in a resolutely local context. In his view, the New Brunswick Acadian milieu and its culture contained basically all the elements needed for comprehension of the phenomenon. No parallel or comparison is drawn to other student movements, even though the Quebec students on campus are given somewhat of a facilitating role. Hautecoeur sees the Quebec neo-nationalist movement as the main source of inspiration for the Moncton students.<sup>15</sup> He also feels that the birth of a real student movement in Moncton cannot be explained independently of the simultaneous emergence of an Acadian "neo-nationalist project." There would be no student movement without neo-nationalism, and vice versa.<sup>16</sup>

Alain Even, another sociology professor who was fired following the "events," was the only figure at the time to propose a dualist interpretation of the movement: in his view, it was both "inspired by international models" and the result of "students' growing awareness of their ethnic group."<sup>17</sup> However, Even does not try to explain how these two elements are connected.

Although later publications teach us much about the deeper meaning of the social transformations of the 1960s in Acadia, none really brings to light the question of the identity of the Moncton student movement.<sup>18</sup> Who were the young people who brought neo-nationalist discourse into the world? Why did they do it? In whose name? Although research has brought to light certain factors that favoured the development of neo-nationalism, no authors, to date, have explained *how* – by what means – the transition occurred from an ideological context that was above all liberal and reformist to another context, still reformist but also marked by neo-nationalism.

It seems to me, after reading everything there is to read about the "events," that our comprehension is limited by the fact that existing analyses are in large part "Acadian-centric": the authors try to understand the student movements by looking almost exclusively at the social, political, and economic situation of the region. Yet, the social movements of 1968 are generally considered to have been transnational and global in nature, provoking explosive student protests that swept through cities as diverse as Paris, Montreal, Chicago, Mexico City, Prague, and Tokyo, to name only a few.<sup>19</sup>



Could Acadian students really have been living in a bell jar, isolated from all of this? The historiography gives this impression, despite the accounts given by participants in the movement.

In this book, I will revisit this episode in the history of Acadia, situating it within the vaster context of the student movement. An analysis of sources has enabled me to establish numerous links between student mobilizations in Moncton and those elsewhere in the West. As we shall see, the different phases that can be defined in student political life at the Université de Moncton correspond, in almost every detail, to the chronological divisions established by a number of authors for the United States, Canada, and Quebec.<sup>20</sup> The striking similarity of the temporal divisions on the North American scale testifies to the incredible strength of the “youth culture” developed during the *Trente Glorieuses* – the thirty years of uninterrupted economic growth that followed the Second World War. The synchronous development of various student movements is also attributable to the immediacy of the social debate made possible by the electronic media.

Similar, of course, does not mean identical. Not all student mobilizations that took place during these phases were equivalent, nor did they all address the same problems. That is precisely the goal of this book: to try to untangle how the global and the local fit together, influenced each other, and were articulated to form, in a specific environment, a student movement that was both original and linked to broader trends. How did the global dynamic and energy influence local issues? How did they change terms and perceptions? How did they affect outcomes? The fundamental question behind this investigation therefore has to do with the identity of the Acadian student movement of the 1960s. Did it represent the local embodiment of the world student revolt, or was it the expression of an internal protest within Acadian society? Or was it a bit of both – and, if it was, how did these two phenomena combine?

The adoption of a transnational point of view has enabled me to explore a second original approach. Unusually for research on Acadia, my study does not deal explicitly with the “national question” or the collective identity. For many reasons, research on linguistic minorities is often oriented toward what most obviously distinguishes them from the majority: their nationalism. In this book, I hope to take an additional step back and observe the recent evolution of Acadia from a more global perspective by documenting and describing all cultural influences that Acadian students exerted on their society, beyond their contributions to the renewal of nationalism. Of course,

there is no question of shrugging off the theme of ethno-cultural identity to the extent that it concerned the students; any study on Acadia that did not mention this aspect would certainly miss the mark. However, we must not lose sight of the forest for the trees. Cultural identity was not the students' only concern; during vigorous debates, they continually adopted new points of view and developed ideas on a multitude of political subjects. Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, their political values were undergoing major transformations. These values affected facets as fundamental as legitimate sources of authority, individual rights and duties, and acceptable means of political action. I feel that it is useful to reposition students' national conceptions in this broader framework, which formed the evolving political culture at the time. This will be the guiding line of this investigation: the evolution of students' *political culture* during the period from the late 1950s to the threshold of the 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

Each individual's political culture is different, at least in part, from that of his or her neighbours; nevertheless, "those who experience analogous concrete living conditions ... will share a common culture."<sup>22</sup> It therefore follows that the students' shared situation forged their shared political culture – or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, conferred upon them a similar *ethos* with regard to politics.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the students' situation changed over time and student political culture evolved with succeeding cohorts. To paraphrase Bourdieu, one could speak of a *generational ethos*. By following the evolution of the political culture of student cohorts at the Université de Moncton between 1958 and 1969, I will attempt to discern the significant changes that emerged in this respect over the period. When did such changes occur? How many changes were there? Based on the data I collected, I divided the students into distinct cohorts, each one representing a generation in the sociological or historical (rather than demographic) sense of the term.<sup>24</sup> In fact, historians who theorize on this subject generally define a generation as being "an age group shaped by history" or by a "social moment."<sup>25</sup>

For each of these cohorts, I propose to build a portrait of student leadership, including, obviously, members of the official student associations (on campuses and in faculties and schools) and of the editorial committees of the student papers. I also closely scrutinize campus activities; all individuals who showed political, para-political, and cultural engagement – by organizing activities, clubs, demonstrations, and so on – will be included in the leaders' group. I am not attempting to build a complete portrait of the political culture of all students; rather, I focus on the activist minority that had an effect on the student population as a whole.

Starting from the opinions, actions, and behaviours of these leaders, I sketch out the contours of their common political culture for each period. I have conducted a content analysis on all of the texts available to me. The students' actions and the reactions of those around them (the university administration, the city administration, the Francophone and Anglophone newspapers, and the provincial government) will also flesh out the understanding of the many and different student discourses and what influences they had on Francophone and Anglophone civil societies in New Brunswick. The analysis starts with the beginnings of the Acadian "Quiet Revolution," in 1957, and extends to the aftermath of the best-known Acadian student mobilizations, in 1969. I concentrate on students who attended institutions in the southeastern part of the province – that is, Université Saint-Joseph in Memramcook (from 1957 to 1963) and its heir, the Moncton campus of the Université de Moncton (from 1963 to 1969). I also look occasionally at the actions and positions taken by students in other regions of the province, in order to point out the specificity of Moncton. I made this choice not only because of the wealth of documentary sources on the Moncton institutions but also because of the central role they played in the sphere of Acadian post-secondary education. The student papers open a very useful window on student life and on the concerns of politically engaged students, and I used them to help build the chronology of important events. They also offered me a large quantity of texts to analyze. Indeed, I inventoried and analyzed 167 articles published between 1957 and 1969 that corresponded to my topics of study: 67 from *Liaisons*, 35 from *L'Insecte*, 58 from *La Moustache*, and 7 from *Le Microbe* (the last three being descendants of the first).

Newspapers were also very useful. During the period under study, the city of Moncton had one French-language daily, *L'Évangéline*, and two English-language dailies, the *Times* and the *Transcript*. *L'Évangéline* was mainly the organ of the Acadian elite or, to use Marc Johnson's expression, a "national newspaper-enterprise."<sup>26</sup> I performed a targeted assessment of this newspaper, starting from the dates of major events. The *Times* and the *Transcript* addressed mainly the Anglophone leadership of Moncton and southeastern New Brunswick. These newspapers' coverage of the student movements and subjects relative to the university helped me understand the relations between Francophones and Anglophones during the period, and they were also subjected to a targeted assessment.

*L'Acadie, l'Acadie!?!* has an inestimable documentary value for the 1968–69 period. But above all, the archival fonds of the film's director, Pierre

Perrault, conserved at the Division de la gestion des documents administratifs et des archives, Archives historiques section, of Université Laval has been a gold mine. In it I found the equivalent of many hours of transcribed dialogue, totalling twelve centimetres of archived hard-copy documents.<sup>27</sup> These texts gave me access to the opinions and perceptions of a wide range of people active at the time, including people from every stratum of the student population. This trove freed me from dependence on student newspapers from 1968 and 1969, which, as even Hauteceur admitted, were controlled by a single faction of student activists – those following Michel Blanchard, the editor-in-chief of those newspapers.

I also had access to documents conserved at the Centre d'études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson of the Université de Moncton, particularly the Clément Cormier fonds. *La Revue économique* completes my list of principal sources. Founded by professors at the Université de Moncton in 1963, this magazine was a forum for intellectual and editorial exchanges that offered a wealth of information on the social debates in Acadia at the time. I assessed them in their entirety for the period from 1963 to 1969.

Of course, this study has its limitations. As is almost always the case in history, one must first consider the question of the representativeness of sources. I relied above all on texts written by students and professors – in newspapers, magazines, and theses – as well as on transcriptions of discussions captured in Perrault's film. In both cases, I can say that they represented a minority of students, those who took the time to write and those chosen by the filmmaker, who edited his film around four or five main characters and a dozen secondary characters. With regard to the student newspapers, there is no reason to believe that the currents of ideas uncovered and analyzed do not correspond to the real malaise and concerns of the student body as a whole in Moncton. All currents of ideas expressed with a certain amount of regularity were carefully analyzed. If currents of thought other than those that I have taken into account were manifested on campus, I did not find them in the pages of the newspaper, in another type of leadership within the student association, or in any concrete manifestations. It is possible that there was a "silent minority," but it did not make history in those years. With regard to Perrault's documentary, as I have mentioned, I had access to transcripts of several hours of film. These transcripts resembled documentation rather than art; because they were raw, unedited materials, they featured a wide variety of views. In addition to the chosen protagonists, numerous participants expressed themselves during public student meetings that were recorded by the filmmaker, and it is likely that all

opinions issued by students of the time were heard at one moment or another. In short, my analysis of the Moncton student movement was based on a comparatively rich variety of sources. In addition, I reconstructed and analyzed the events of the period under study by consulting, often systematically, the main Acadian daily, *L'Évangéline*, and, in a more targeted way, regional Anglophone newspapers. Initially, I planned to enhance the sources with interviews, but given the great quantity of documentary sources that had never been dealt with, I decided to stick to the task, already considerable, of committing to paper a first overall interpretation of the student movements, leaving room to adjust my focus later. I did take the liberty, however, of having informal – though sometimes lengthy – discussions with some former student activists, including Bernard Gauvin, Ronald Cormier, Régis Brun, and Irène Doiron.

As we shall see, students played a significant role in Acadian history during the *Trente Glorieuses*, and their mobilizations are closely linked with the continent-wide student movements of the time. The three phases of Moncton student movements that I have established – formative, liberal, and radical – correspond roughly to [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) of this book.

[Chapter 1](#) paints a portrait of the economic, political, and ideological situation of New Brunswick Acadians during the postwar period (1945–60). I describe the institutional network of the “traditional” Acadian “defining elite” and bring to light the pressure exerted on it by political, social, and economic changes that were accelerating over this period. I also delve into the world of classical colleges.

In [Chapter 2](#), I document the growing autonomy of the Acadian student environment between 1957 and 1964. During these years, students created institutions – representative, media, and others – that were increasingly autonomous from the “adult world” and that belonged to certain national student networks. The result was affirmation of a student identity, largely self-referential, that provoked the birth of a social group capable of formulating its own vision of the world and not afraid of confronting the authorities. This evolution marked an important step in the internal “pluralization” of the Acadian community, as it constituted the first serious threat to the symbolic authority of the national elite. In this chapter, I establish that in Acadia, the growing autonomy of the student body and its first revolt against authority took place more or less at the same time as elsewhere in North America. The years 1962 to 1964 were pivotal in this regard. Acadian students therefore seemed to be evolving in step with Western youth in the

early 1960s. I also observe in this chapter that, contrary to the narrative of Acadian historiography, the birth of the Moncton student movement preceded the appearance of the neo-nationalist current by a number of years. Its basis was solidly established before the *Ralliement de la jeunesse acadienne* in 1966, the first “youth” event mentioned in the historiography of the 1960s in Acadia.

In [Chapter 3](#), I define and describe the ideology of the student movement during the years following its formation – from 1964 to 1967. An examination of sources reveals that these years, largely ignored by historiography, represent an important moment in the history of Acadian student activism. The ideology propagated during this first phase of the movement was fundamentally liberal. It expressed a strong desire for breaking with tradition, which was perceived as an obstacle to progress, democracy, and openness to the world. The students wished to shake off the shackles of particularism, were allergic to all nationalism, unreservedly supported the development of the welfare state, and depicted themselves as full members of a planetary-scale generational movement. These orientations conform with what the historiography reveals about North American student movements: between when they were formed and 1967, the vast majority of them had an early liberal, reformist, nonviolent phase. They tended to adhere to relatively common values; they were not so much protesting against the ideals professed by society as they were defending them. Obviously, the Moncton students were “plugged in” to the realities of their generation. My analysis of this first phase of the student movement challenges the idea that mobilizations of the period were simply a “dress rehearsal” for the neo-nationalist student movement that would roll out in 1968. As Thériault suspected, in the middle of the decade students were adhering, rather, to a variant of the dominant liberal ideology.

In [Chapter 4](#), I examine the “radical” phase of the student movement between 1968 and 1970. At this point, Acadian students rejected postwar optimism and challenged the notion of “progress” and technocratic management of society. This shift was conveyed by the appearance of a new ideological current: communitarianism. Abandoning liberal ideology, which had held sway since the beginning of the decade, the students demanded collective cultural rights and special treatment for the Francophone community. This was the embryo of Acadian “neo-nationalism.” I propose here that the adoption and adaptation of this new ideology was, in a way, the local response to the spirit of the “1968 moment.” Elsewhere during the same period, other student movements that had also been liberal and

humanist became radical, turning toward increasingly globalizing theories and arriving at conclusions increasingly critical of the status quo. Neo-nationalism was therefore not solely the product of the local socio-political and economic situation; it also had to do with forces sweeping the Western world and extended beyond the context of Acadia and New Brunswick.

In the final chapter, I describe how the ideology of the second phase of the student movement spread to society at large, giving rise to the neo-nationalist movement of the 1970s. This movement, though electorally marginal, would profoundly shape New Brunswick politics in the 1970s and can be considered the impetus for the important legal and constitutional changes made to the status of French language and culture in the province in the 1980s and '90s. Even today, the political language brought forward by the students in 1968 permeates Acadian public discourse. Therefore, understanding the period covered in this book is key to understanding contemporary New Brunswick.

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