
Unpublished Works

Charlotte Michaud

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Life in Little Canada

Charlotte Michaud

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An Auburn resident, who moved to that city in 1920 when he informs us that he was born in ^{the} Little Canada section of Lewiston in 1893, and that, instead of attending parochial school, then located in the Dominican block, he attended a private school maintained in their home by three women: a Mrs. Leblanc, Miss Beliveau and a ~~Mr~~ Miss Elise Fournier. The latter is the ^{one} whose first name he ever knew.

The school, now since demolished, was on Oxford street, the second house from the corner of Lincoln street. It was two and a half stories high.

He attended that school during his sixth and seventh year; recalls that boys sat at one side of the room; girls on the other. Lower grades were on the second floor; the others, on the first. The garret--as the top floor^o was identified--was where the teachers lived.

After two years at this school, this youth was sent to Canada to live with grandparents, remaining there five years, during which he attended school, reaching the sixth grade. When he returned to Lewiston, in his 12th year, he was sent to the same school he had previously attended. When he reported home that he knew all that was being taught there, his parents sent him to public school.

There were then three public schools on Lincoln street, said he, and he went to the middle one. Not knowing a word of English, he was sent to the school superintendent at city building, where, again, no communication was possible--so, he went to work, first at the Wesley ^{Hutchins} ~~Box~~ Box Factory on Minot Avenue, Auburn, where wooden boxes were made for the shipment of shoes, also others of varying sizes including one small enough for a watch. That employment paid him \$3.50 a week, and he remained there two years.

An uncle of his, working in an Auburn shoe factory, told him of an opening there, where he could stain shoe heels and be paid \$6.50 a week--an amazing raise for a boy then aged 14. During his noon hours, he learned to use machinery to buff the soles of shoes, was promoted to that at \$16 a week and continued to do so for over 50 years, so that when he retired at 65, ^{was earning the top salary of \$55 a week.}

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The only bitter remembrance of his employment years was the 1914 strike during which he was ill and out of work. He had to sell a prized coin collection to ~~meet~~^{pay} his bills.

During World War I, this man was drafted for military service, and recalls that he was sent overseas after only five weeks of training at Camp Devens (Ayer, Mass.) as it was then known. He was member of a Maine division, but, later, was transferred to a New York division where he and another soldier by the name of Blanchard from Gardner, Mass. were the only French-speaking soldiers. In France, they were occasionally called on to serve as interpreter, and he recalls seeing Germans on the other side of the Meuse river, ^{joyfully} throw their rifles in the air ~~Sunday~~ on Armistice Day.

He, too, was happy that day. An only son, he had been favored at home, where food delicacies were always ready for him. He found it difficult to eat army chow and to shoulder 87 pounds on marches.

His father and his grandfather also served in the same war, but on the Canadian side. His father, aged 44, tried to enlist in the American army, but was refused because of his age. The man merely crossed Lisbon street where the British were recruiting, too, and he was accepted. The grandfather enlisted in Canada, but saw no active service, only administrative. Our informer tells us his four sons served in later wars, and one retired after 22 years in the U.S. Navy.

Youthful years in Little Canada were happy ones, though Lincoln street was considered a "tough" area. He says four police officers patrolled it regularly, and Cedar street to the Gas Patch was essentially Irish, and no French dared venture there alone. Oddly, though of the same faith, these two ethnic groups fought on sight through those early years. Our informer recalls ^{an uncle who lived nearby who used to tell of} one Sunday conflict, as the French-Irish were leaving the Lincoln street chapel that ^{became} so intense ~~that~~ the priest joined the fray ^{to} ~~and~~ interfered.

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The Gas Patch--so-named for its proximity to the Gas Works, bordered the river. It was deep at that point, and gas refuse was dumped there, resulting in an overpowering smell. Elsewhere, the river was clean enough to swim in, and one could catch eels, hornpout and perch. *Many rounded bottles to the rhythm of their songs.* The canal would be emptied weekends, and children earned pocket money by picking up the discarded bottles therein. Once, our informer ventured on the river ice with a sister who was pulling a sled to carry the bottles he would salvage. He broke through the ice, catching a skate on the rim, but, though he grabbed his sister's arm, she fell in. Older boys playing polo nearly saved them both.

Another money-making scheme of children in those days was to collect ashes from housewives. Everyone burned wood in those days, and a barrel-full of those ashes would sell for 15¢. Farmers were ready buyers, using the ashes for soap-making and fertilizer.

Asked how he ever got to learn English, our informer said he went to night sessions at the Lincoln school in Auburn after ~~was~~^{he} married, and there learned to speak, read and write the language. Students then paid \$5 for the privilege to attend, and if they missed no sessions their money was refunded.

Despite the low wages this man earned, his four sons graduated from high school, and, 20 years after his marriage, he was able to buy his own home which he still occupies. "One could buy much for a nickel then", he recalls: "a loaf of bread was five cents; milk, six cents; one could go to Lake Grove (long an Auburn recreation center) for five cents; to Sabattus for 10 cents... Elders smoked a pipe, which wasn't expensive, but a cigar, though it could be bought for a nickel, was a Sunday luxury."

This man also recalls that where St. Mary's church is now located, there was a livery stable used by officials of the Continental Mill, called "Porteur", by the French-speaking, a deformation of its preceding owner: Porter.

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Another livery stable, operated by a man named Verreault, was located where the Pastime clubrooms now are. Horse and buggy could be rented there for fifty cents an hour.

In his youth, one attended Sunday Mass in the upper hall of the Dominican Block, which Dominican monks offered as an accommodation, ^{to save} ~~the long uphill walk to~~ Little Canada residents ~~from~~ ^(the long uphill walk to) SS. Peter and Paul's on Bartlett street. ~~the church~~

That same Dominican Block served for closing exercises of parochial schools with formal distribution of prizes, ^{also} all kinds of entertainments and fund-raising undertakings. He recalls a presentation of the operetta, "The Chimes of Normandy", in that hall.

Families in Little Canada numbered 16, 18 and up to 24 children, this informer states. His wife was one of 16 children, and they only learned in adulthood that they had lived across the street in their Little Canada childhood.

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