

Spring 3-2017

À LA MAISON

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~ À LA MAISON ~

Lorraine Dutile Masure

(An abstract of *Growing Up Franco-American*, detailing the general “at-home” culture enjoyed by the author in Sanford, Maine and by many far-reaching New England Québécois immigrant families — especially across the years 1940s and 1950s)

Until WWII and within the fierce pride of their Americanization, the descendants of the Québécois emigrants are reputed to have preserved their identity better than did most other ethnic groups. “Little Canada’s” were established in some districts of towns and cities as they attempted to maintain and reproduce the native culture of their families and organizations. Parts of these enclaves survive to this day in the mill cities of many New England villages.

Not at all a political statement, but rather an efficient delineation usually stated in French, all non-Francos were called by us “Americans” (Américains). We continued to call ourselves “Canadians” (Canadiens) until time gradually evolved the appellation (usually spoken in English now) to “French.” Which I consider as egregiously false. I do not consider myself French; I am a proud American who happens to be a proud first-generation Franco-American.

Aware that we children would quickly learn English when we interacted with the outside, our parents required always and ever that we speak French “in the house.” Although this edict felt like capital punishment at the time especially since I did not learn to speak English until I entered the first grade at age 6, today I can gratefully claim that my English and French have enriched my life, have facilitated travel all over the world. My French never impaired my English; it enhanced it.

As I consider my life at home as a child, I conclude it was a rather typical Franco upbringing. Were we poor? If so, we didn’t know it. Enough to eat? Absolutely! And my mother was a master chef at transforming/combining random leftovers into delicious entrées enhanced by sauces, spices, and the like. We were required by our parents to eat evenly, i.e., each portion on our plate, along with bread and butter, given democratic attention.

True to most Franco families then, breakfast (“déjeuner”— contrary to *Petit Larousse*) was consumed immediately upon arising, lunch (“dîner”) as close to noon sharp as possible depending on schedules, and supper (“souper”) at a punctual 5:30 after we’d come home from school and my dad from work.

Well do I remember my dad's usual breakfast: juice, two eggs, thin slices of salt pork spread on toast. Hearty meals carried over from his youth and his days on my grandfather's farm, then metabolized in part, I believe, because of hard, physical labor.

Especially during the depression, on Sunday's my mom would cook a piece of meat (beef or pork favored) for our main meal which was usually eaten at noon. Complemented by potatoes and variegated veggies, my mom magically re-introduced each meal's remnant meat as a different species every "diner" until Thursday when it would mercifully all be consumed. How so? Whatever was left in the refrigerator was artistically transferred to a baking dish, strategically covered with pie crust and baked at 350 degrees until done! Observing meatless Fridays was infinitely more appealing to me (mackerel, haddock, or salmon with whipped potatoes and two vegetables) than the beans and franks Saturday fare. It seemed then we were served tons of vegetables, including onions. (Cannot enjoy, say, stringbeans today without first cooking them under onions and a generous piece of salt pork.) Delicious, usually warm, baked desserts that often included fruit, but little "still life" fruit. I remember promising myself as a child that I would someday grow a watermelon garden!

Supper (souper) too was a hardy meal that might be further categorized as a meeting. That's when my parents discussed their day and inquired about ours. These were not always festive Ozzie and Harriet events, believe me!

Although my mom sometimes catered to some of our finicky-ism, a favorite line of hers when we put up our nose at some planned or tabled dish was, "If it's good enough for your father who earns it, it's good enough for you."

As I wrote above, pork roast was a favorite. Sandwiches with pork butt meat saturated with delicious home-made ketchup were assembled between thick white bread slices the night before, and kept in the fridge until we fetched them the next morning for school or work. Exposed to room temperature all morning and lacking today's "kill dates," they were consumed with gusto at lunch. No one died.

Other frequent. non-Weight Watchers foods we enjoyed:

- **Pork pies (*tourtières*) especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas**
- **Hash (du hashie) diced potato, meat, onions in a brown sauce to use up leftovers**
- **Crêpes (especially on Fridays as lunch or dinner; with butter and/or syrup)**

- **Salt pork (*grillades the lard*) often sliced or diced and used as a butter substitute**
- **Pork spread (*cretons*) again around the holidays**
- **Blood pudding (*boudin*) sausage-like, pan-cooked in bacon and onion bits**

By the way, my dad lived to be 90, and my mom to 94!

In short, this whole business of the culinary can be summed up with the adjective “frugal.” And “waste,” after all these years, is still not part of that vocabulary. According to our parents, it wasn’t that there were “children starving in China”; the reasoning given here was that no matter if we had eaten *boudin* (blood pudding) or *hashie* (hash) God had thus given us “our daily bread.”

Most of our clothing were products of a collaborative feat: mom and I used to go to the Salvation Army Friday evening and carefully select used garments that she would later launder or have cleaned. Then she would unstitch and press them flat to yield yardage. Following this, my dad would then gingerly trace a pattern (some home-drawn, others either Simplicity or McCall’s) a prospective piece of apparel on that cloth which my mother would later stitch together. And voilà! A coat or dress or even a brim hat... As I said, “frugal!”

My dad used to remark that there were only three food items they were required to outsource from the farm where he grew up: tea, flour, and sugar. Likewise, when it came to clothing in our own immediate family, the only purchased items were underwear, some stockings, and shoes.

In Juliana L’Heureux’s column, “Les Franco-Américains,” that appeared weekly in the *Portland Press Herald* (Maine), she quoted Connie Castille and her 25-minute documentary, “I Always Do My Collars First; a Film About Ironing.”

It is a tribute to the pride French-Acadian women took in doing daily tasks. There was pristine pride and a meticulous attention to appearance and cleanliness. If so, most Franco-Americans relished giving it. Laundry day was usually Monday. Whites were soaked in a bluing solution to make them whiter. Collars, sleeve cuffs and other likely apparel were soaked in pots of cooked starch, either light or heavy, depending on the stiffness you wanted. Then the clothes were hung out to dry, even in the coldest weather, and that event had its own protocol too. Underwear was hung on the inside lines where they were not obvious from the street. While still damp, clothes were brought in, rolled up in a pillow case, sprinkled with water (*humecter*) and placed into the ice box until it was time to iron.

Although we clung to our original Franco-American customs, it took the writing of this ethnic memoir to realize that my parents relocated from Goffstown, New Hampshire to Sanford, Maine in October of 1947 (my 13th year) and transplanted us to the west side of our town (as opposed to the more-Franco-populated east side), not at all considered a purely Franco-American conclave. Our so-called “middle class” neighborhood provided a rich *milieu* for growing up during those hormone-popping years. Due only to serendipity, we played baseball, hide and seek, even spin the bottle (now it can be told) with many harlequin ethnicities: Jews, Italians, Irish, Scotch, French, etc. If I screwed up, it was likely some knowing adult in that neighborhood cared enough about me to diplomatically inform my parents. (At least this is my reasoning today.)

One summer a town policeman who had stopped my teen brother earlier because of incredibly loud muffler action on his souped-up car appeared at our front door and asked my dad for his parental cooperation in taming the car’s decibels — and my brother! I remember many situations when the neighborhood singularly or collectively sheltered us. And several sequential winters when an invincible pea jacket was shuttled around to whatever child fit it that year!

My parents absolutely reveled in hosting relatives, friends (theirs or ours). It was usually at our home where many holiday celebrations occurred that included lavish decorations, delish food (my mom, the Elsa Maxwell of our family who could also deftly morph into a comic via a hilarious monologue about life with my father), beverages, quiz games, music sing-a-longs, and just plain jubilant fun! Likewise, many of our friends were heartily welcome to surround the piano in song while I accompanied them: “Peg Of My Heart,” “Moonlight Bay,” “Mockingbird Hill.” When one of my brothers was cast in a high school play, full rehearsals were held at our house. Our friends loved to be with our parents, especially when they (my parents) would demonstrate the jitterbug or waltz dancing they were learning at the Arthur Murray Studio in the city!

Because they had never had the luxury of much formal education and they realized it was the “ticket,” Francos highly valued learning. Here my mind often leaps back to the contractor who built our home and his telling me how pleadingly he begged his friend to teach him square root so he could calculate the pitch of a roof. Wow! A sign in my dad’s office proudly proclaimed, “Success is one happy wife and five children with a sheepskin.” (He was successful on all counts.) Mark Twain’s adage about education was not just a staid bromide to them; every day they lived it: “If you think

education is expensive, try ignorance.” Yet their common sense, courage, and lifelong desire to learn imbued my parents with a confidence that seeped through the many arenas of their life, easing the void of what might be called “book learning.”

One other value, barely a subset of education, was Music! Four of us were gifted with the ability to play the piano — “three by ear,” but immediately after supper our piano stool — wherever in our home — was reserved seating for my dad who moseyed to it and serenaded us with both piano and voice as we cleared the table. At other times, my mom who favored more classical music, my brother or I would take turns at that same busy piano. Again, some of these songs were played/sung with considerable gusto in English, French or Latin (hymns).

Absent computers and television sets, most groups had sub-cultures, many church-related. These were opportunities for socialization as well as for spiritual interaction. The Daughters of Isabella for women/the Knights of Columbus for Men; le Club St. Jean Baptiste (furthering the Franco language and causes); Children of Mary for women only — along with the more Anglo civic groups such as the Rotary, Elks, Lions, and others.

There was a great deal of respect accorded relationships: not only would we have never called our parents by their first names, we even prefaced the names of persons older than us according to their relationship identity to us: aunt Anita, uncle John, Mrs. Binette. Even though they were about the same age, my parents early on were prone to address their friends as either “Madame,” “Mademoiselle,” or “Monsieur.”

Every single time we left the house bound for a date, my mom would wisely warn in French, “Remember that for one moment of pleasure (*un petit moment de plaisir*), you can ruin your whole life.”

Our parents were strict although retrospect informs me today that, in my case—being the only girl—there was truly a double-standard. Another Franco adage (or was it Confucius’): “It’s the girl who carries the little package.” Across my high school years, I was allowed to join school activities only two nights a week: once for Tuesday basketball practice and once for the Friday night hop. Not so my four brothers whose theme song might have been “Don’t Fence Me In.”

Today I understand that my parents’ helicoptering behaviors (yea, B49 behaviors) were really what is called “tough love.” (But even after all these years, that’s one heck of an oxymoron to swallow!)