



UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTHERN MAINE**  
Lewiston-Auburn College

FRANCO - AMERICAN  
**COLLECTION**  
FRANCO - AMÉRICAIN



**Oral History Interview**  
**Alice Bisson-Barnes**  
**Interview with James Myall**  
**May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013**  
**Franco-American Collection**

**James Myall:** Alright, so, this is an interview with Alice Bisson-Barnes, this is James Myall; and it's May 31<sup>st</sup> 2013, we are at the Franco-American Collection in Lewiston. So we're going to be interviewing you about your father. Do you want to start off by giving me his full name, and his date of birth, some of that information?

**Alice Bisson-Barnes:** My father's name was Joseph Felix Theodore Bisson, and he was born 11/30/1900 in Chartierville.<sup>1</sup>

**JM:** And that's in Québec?

**AB:** In Québec, yes.

**JM:** Do you know his parents' names?

**AB:** Absolutely. My grandfather's name was Evariste Bisson<sup>2</sup> and he was born 15 February, 1872. What's rather interesting about this is my family goes all the way back to Gervais Bisson in 1674. Gervais was my seventh great-grandfather. And a lot of Franco-American families can trace their ancestry back to Gervais. He came over from France, of course. From Normandy, I believe.

**JM:** Were the family always in Chartierville?

**AB:** Was the – I'm sorry?

**JM:** Were they always in Chartierville?

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<sup>1</sup> A village 4km from the border with New Hampshire.

<sup>2</sup> Evariste's wife, Theodore's mother, was Josephine Martin, born 8 September 1877 in Chartierville. She died 23 November, 1953, in Auburn, Maine.

**AB:** Oh no; no, no, no, no. Gervais, Renée, and all of those? I – no. And I don't know enough to answer that.

**JM:** They moved around a bit?

**AB:** But Chartierville was founded in 1870, so there were at least two generations there.  
[coughs] Excuse me.

**JM:** Was your father one of many children?

**AB:** Yes. My father was one of twelve children, but we know of only about seven I think. Two, four, six, seven that grew to become adults, I think.

**JM:** And they spoke French as their first language, I assume?

**AB:** Of course. They didn't speak English!

**JM:** Did your father always speak French, throughout his life, or did he learn English, once he was here?

**AB:** He was mostly a French-speaker. We went to St. Peter's Church and St. Mary's Church, where masses were in French, and he did not really get into English until about 1935, when he married my mother who surreptitiously knew how to speak French. Because she took it in college in Minnesota. But she didn't tell anybody, so when the relatives were – I can say this, can't I? – my grandmother and one of my aunts were talking in a room, one time, with my mother, in French, and they were talking about *la vache*. For those who don't know French, my mother was very heavy. And so my mother had a quip back about her being a cow. You've got be careful if you're gonna pull stuff like that. But that's okay, they're all dead.

**JM:** And what was your mother's name?

**AB:** My mother was Gertrude Thiel. T-H-I-E-L. She was German and came from – she was born in Rock Island, Illinois, 1904. And eventually we'll get to the story of how she and Ted Bisson met up. "Romance." [Snickers].

**JM:** That sounds like an interesting story there. So when did your – when did Ted come to the United States?

**AB:** Okay. That is – that's a fun story, and I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the Franco-American families have a similar story. And that is they came illegally into Vermont. That's a story from one of my uncles. Let me get back to Canada, real quick.

**JM:** Sure.

**AB:** My grandfather Evariste owned a store – like a small mom-and-pop store of sorts. I have a photograph of it that was in a centennial brochure. My grandfather was the mayor of Chartierville. And he died in 1917 and he had a prosperous business, but then it fell apart. He died – they bought some woods, got a government contract to clear the woods, and he died shortly thereafter, in 1917. So my grandmother Josephine and the six children came to the United States. They didn't come together. As we've seen, Regina was here [in Lewiston, according to the City Directory] – that was one of my aunts – one of the daughters –she was here in 1916, and others came, but my father came in 1918, and that's according to his immigration papers. He went back to Canada and came back in legally. He became a citizen though, in 1920-something.

**JM:** When you say they came across the border illegally to Vermont, do you know how they came across the border? Apparently the woods were right there. Some of the woods – there was no line.

**JM:** So they just walked across?

**AB:** Apparently, that's what they did, and it was no great problem. I don't think it was like today's immigration from Mexico, where they have to climb a wall and go through desert, things like that. But so many Canadians were intent on getting down to the woolen mills and my father's family was one of those. Several of my aunts and uncles worked in the woolen mills. My father didn't.

**JM:** So his parents had operated the store in Chartierville, and then they had – was it a lumbering business, or something?

**AB:** They got a contract – this is according to my aunt who's a nun – who was a nun, she's deceased now – the store sold yarn, foodstuffs, flour, sugar, crackers, cookies, all kind of similar things, even a little bit of medicine. Those who were most popular at the time. But they had some bad luck. They took a contract with the United States to clear the lumber, and they got cheated out of that somehow. But then they picked up and they started coming into the United States, like so many others.

**JM:** Sure. And do you know, did they have any family here, or did they just come?

**AB:** Oh yes. Thank you for asking. According to my aunt, Soeur Jean-Marie, they – her uncle, Josephine's brother, my grandmother's brother, brought them to Manchester, New Hampshire, provided them with safety, and from there they came to live in Lewiston. They could more easily find work here. She wrote here "during the war" – 1917. The uncle, Joseph Martin, Manchester, New Hampshire. I'll bet you that story was repeated tens of thousands of times. But there's a twist to my dad; he did not come in on the Grand Central – the Grand Trunk

Railroad—so many did. He came in, according to his papers, on the Maine Central! Anyway, his family, his siblings, real quick were: the aunt who became a nun, Soeur Jean-Marie; and the others were Aurore, Louis, my father, Alphonse, Patrick, and Regina. All deceased.

**JM:** Right. And so when your dad came in 1917, how old would that make him?

**AB:** That would have made him 16, because his birthday was 30 November. Give or take, you know.

**JM:** So did he come straight to work when he was here? Did he finish any more schooling?

**AB:** That I don't know. But in 1919 he was a pastry chef at the Court Street Restaurant or Café.

**JM:** In Auburn.

**AB:** In Auburn, on Court Street.

**JM:** And do you know how he got started in that work, then, as a pastry chef?

**AB:** No idea.

**JM:** And you don't know if there was a connection between the family and the people who owned the restaurant, or anything like that?

**AB:** I don't think so. I suspect he just went in there and asked for a job, and got it. And he proved himself probably very quickly. He got married in November of 1920, and so – I have a photo of it, and I have a photo of his first wife, Madeleine Poirier. And they got married in Old Town. I have no idea why. But one of my older brothers, one time, said Madeleine Poirier had been a dancer at the music hall on Lisbon Street in Lewiston. I have no idea.

**JM:** So she didn't seem to have a connection to Old Town, as far as you could tell?

**AB:** I have no idea. I suspect her family, the Poiriers, if you checked into it, you'd find a lot of them in Old Town. But she was born in Canada.

**JM:** Interesting.

A lot of them were.

**JM:** So where else did your dad work, apart from the Court Street Restaurant?

**AB:** Okay, that's difficult to track, apart from through the City Directories. The next thing I have – it always said Court House, throughout – Court Square Restaurant – throughout the twenties. The next thing I pick up on, apart from having children, is in 1933. But it sounds like he was – okay, if my father was a pastry chef, and he was good at it, and he was doing it in 1920 and

1918 and whatever, by 1928, St. Mary's Church opened the upstairs portion. And my father in 1928 catered that celebration. You have the menu here at the Franco-American Center?

**JM:** Collection.

**AB:** Collection.

**JM:** And did he – was he still working at the Court Square Restaurant – or Court Street Restaurant?

**AB:** I don't know. The reason I know he catered it is that it was in the newspaper.<sup>3</sup>

**JM:** And it's just a mention there?

**AB:** I'm sorry?

**JM:** It's just mentioned there?

**AB:** That was one of his big selling points at the time was that he had done that.

**JM:** Okay, interesting. And do you know of any restaurants that he went on to after that?

**AB:** Okay, well, there you're coming back to my family, okay. I have no idea of any other restaurants he worked in. And the best I could find – I checked a lot of city directories for the twenties and thirties – and for those in the future who are listening to this – back in those days, they listed you by name, where you lived, and where you worked. And that's how we can tell today where he was living and where he was working. But he seems to remain there at the Court Square Restaurant. But in 1993 – I did a lot of research on this, reading the microfilms from the Lewiston paper.

There's a funny thing from 1923 which applies to my family. It says "Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Lajoie of Maple Street, Lewiston, had fourteen children living at home." It was the largest unseparated family in the city. You know that was not very unusual. Okay, so, shall we – where do you want to go?

**JM:** Well, let's carry on with the restaurant business, because your father I think he opened some of his own; the Maple Inn, in Auburn?<sup>4</sup>

**AB:** To keep the story continuous: my father and his first wife, Madeleine, had ten babies. Now when I was growing up, we didn't know about three of them. There were seven in the first family, and six in the last; that's thirteen. But there were three babies, and the only way I

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<sup>3</sup> *Le Messenger*

<sup>4</sup> Actually on Main Street, in Lewiston.

found out about this – and it was a tremendous surprise to my siblings – was, Anita was the first child, and on her birth certificate it said it was the second pregnancy. And on the fourth it said it was the sixth pregnancy, and that’s how we knew there were sixteen children altogether; I consider those children. A crazy little thing is – I grew up being the last of thirteen and I had a lot of bad luck. But once I found I was the last of sixteen, my luck changed! And then we went back to the guy who was thirteenth and his luck started to change – I don’t understand it!

Anyway. Madeleine Poirier or Bisson, died in 1933, giving birth to her tenth baby, the seventh child, named after her, Madeleine. So then my father’s brother Louis, owned this property, a rooming house, on Middle Street [Lewiston], right next to the Elks Club. Louis purchased that and then turned the deed over to my father. And my father was looking for another wife. He had seven children. Here’s another name that a lot of Franco-Americans might remember. He shipped the children to Saint-Ephrè̄m [de-Beauce] in Québec Province.

**JM:** And that was to live with family?

**AB:** That was the first family, seven children. Then he met my mother. I’d like to say she was a waitress at *Dunkin’ Donuts*, but that’s not the way it worked. The only story I ever got out of my parents was, he advertized in a Catholic publication. They had classifieds for men looking for wives.

**JM:** Interesting.

**AB:** Let’s back up a little, if you don’t mind, and I’ll tell you about my mother. My mother, Gertrude, was born in 1904.<sup>5</sup>

**JM:** What was her maiden name?

**AB:** Her maiden name again was Thiel, T-H-I-E-L.

**JM:** Oh, sorry – you said that.

**AB:** Her father died before she was born, and her mother died before she was a couple of years’ old. So the uncle and aunt raised my mother and her brother. And they were successful in a book-binding firm in Rock Island Illinois. But wouldn’t you know it, my mother’s stepmother and stepfather whom she called mom and dad, both died within a few months of one another in 1920. So now my mother was an orphan for the second time. But there was a trust fund.

Anyway, she was sent to the Catholic high school, and then she was sent to the College of Saint Theresa’s in Winona, Minnesota.<sup>6</sup> She became a nun, and she was teaching math, would you

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<sup>5</sup> 15 September

believe, at the College of Saint Theresa's. This is all according to the records. Her name was Sister Chiara – C-H-I-A-R-A – isn't that funny? She was a nun and ready to take her final vows, and walked away. She never explained why she walked away. Her brother did not know why she walked away. Uncle Carl told me one day, she called him up, and she said "I'm leaving, can I come stay with you." Uncle Carl said "Sure" and that was it. I don't know why she left the convent.

So, anyway, she went to Rock Island, Illinois – she went back there – and from 1929 to 1935, she worked for a doctor. And in those days, doctors worked out of their homes. Then she saw my father's ad. In it, he said he had children. So she took off; they met up in upstate New York. I guess "love at first sight" – it wasn't like that in those days. So she went back to Rock Island, told her brother she was moving to Lewiston, Maine, and marry this man who had children. And my uncle told this story. "How many children does he have?" "[mumbling]...seven." My uncle thought she was nuts! But, anyway, she moved to Lewiston and they got married – 1935.

**JM:** Wow, that's quite a responsibility to take on.

**AB:** She brought her own dowry. So this made it easier for my father to expand his empire. You know, he's just a pastry chef. They got married at the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at St. Partick's Church and I never knew that when I was going to St. Peter's School and St. Dominic's School on Bartlett Street, St. Patrick's Church was on my way to and from school. I used to love to stop off there, and I never knew my parents had got married there. But that's what the record says – July 27<sup>th</sup>.

Oh! Would you like to hear a surprise that I just found out? I picked up a copy – they gave me a copy – at St. Patrick's Church, of my parents' registration for marriage, and I had not read it, twenty years ago. I was just reading it in preparation for this. It says – it's all in Latin – it says that my father was baptized on 2 December, 1900, in Chartierville. St John's – there was only one church. My mother was baptized in Sacred Heart Church in Rock Island, Illinois, 16 March 1913. She lived nine years as a non-Catholic. I'm going to have to assume she was Lutheran, because most of the Germans were Lutheran. I did not know my mother was not baptized right after her birth.

**JM:** That is interesting.

**AB:** Family history like this can be fascinating and you remember something so well on that stairwell, in that house for so long, and you do some research and you find out that was a one-story building! Okay, anyway, you wanted the diner. I'm long-winded! That's the historian in

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<sup>6</sup> 220 miles north of Rock Island, IL. The College of Saint Theresa was a women's college run by the Sisters of Saint Francis of Rochester, MN, from 1907-1989. The order was founded by a Luxemburger, Maria Catherine Moes, who came to the United States to minister to the German-speaking immigrant community.

me; the story-teller. And I do not apologize for it. So, my mother married him in '35, and according to one of my brothers, she told my father, "no children for a couple of years."

**JM:** Did they bring the children back from Saint-Éphrem?

**AB:** They brought them back from Saint-Éphrem like one or two at a time and it was not very long before my mother and father were living with seven young children on Middle Street; one who was no more than two, you know? So they had this empty lot next door, across the street from the post office loading ramp, and he built a diner; he built his own diner. It was shaped a lot like the trolley cars. I have to believe this was my mother who promoted this, but he built it, and it was announced in the paper on April 15, 1938, and he had a grand opening, and in the grand— they had a full page ad – and in it, it said "free souvenirs" but it also said something - I'm trying to find it, here it is – "among the many important banquets for various clubs, societies and churches, he will be remembered as having served the banquet at the formal opening of St Mary's Church in 1928, and there's a photo of the restaurant. It was built by Joseph Blais, all of those people. And he had the same ad in the *Messenger*, which was in French: "*Ouverture de plus beau et plus sanité restaurant de nous devait[?]*."<sup>7</sup> How's that for French pronunciation?

**JM:** Very good. *Très bien!*

**AB:** "*C'est avec plaisir de nous annonçons le grand ouverture.*"<sup>8</sup> I don't speak French anymore.

**JM:** Wow, you've got a great accent.

**AB:** Yes, yes. So anyway, we had an Elks club on the corner of Middle Street and Ash, and we had a rooming house next door, and then my father built the diner.

**JM:** And your parents operated the rooming house as well?

**AB:** Yes, and I have photographs if you want to put them in the file, or whatever. Interesting little tid-bit so we can throw in some other names – Harry Gusse (G-U-S-S-E)<sup>9</sup> owned the three-story apartment building next door to our diner. And Harry Gousse took my father to court because of the grease smells. Gousse's was a three-storey building and the diner was one. So my father had to put these two smoke stacks so the smoke would go all the way over the Gousses' home. And another cute little thing from people who go way back – one of the little emblems on the front of my father's restaurant said "booth service - for ladies!" We had booths and we had a counter.

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<sup>7</sup> "Opening of the most beautiful and sanitary restaurant..."

<sup>8</sup> "It is with pleasure that we announce the grand opening."

<sup>9</sup> The correct spelling is Gousse.



The amazing thing about my father the pastry chef, when he opened the diner – in my opinion, this is one of the reasons he stands out in Franco-American history in Lewiston – the year he opened that restaurant, according to the city directory there were 80 eating establishments and I did my survey from memory – when I was growing up, within one city block in each direction of my father’s restaurant, there were 17 places that you could grab a hamburger or something, yet my father’s Middle Street Diner was remembered by people in this town 20 years ago.

When I did my research, in 1993, I went to Dingely School and I asked if they had a copy of my grades. It’s now the administration building for the school district, I think. And I asked the secretary “Hey, do you remember the Middle Street Diner?” And it had been closed for over forty years. And she said “Are you kidding me? We used to go on dates on weekends, and after we went to the movie or bowling, the place to go was the Middle Street Diner for a pecan pie. Your father made the most delicious pecan pies!”

[Robert] Bonenfant, who was a photographer in Lewiston – you see, our family did not grow up with a marvelous respect for what my parents did. And when I would ask questions about my youth, nobody wanted to say anything, and it was a different generation. So I had to reach out into the community. “Do you remember Ted Bisson?” “Do you remember the Middle Street Diner?” Bonenfant said you couldn’t get into the restaurant sometimes. It was amazing that that diner was so busy with 79 others around in the area. I’m not lying! The facts are there. So it gave me a form of realization for how important it was for him to have been Franco-American. But I didn’t need this to stand up for *Ô Canada*. I get tears when I hear the national anthem, *Ô Canada*, in French. It just sticks in you, and I’m very proud to have that heritage.

**JM:** And do you know if your father - if the diner had any – if it had a Franco-American flavor at all, or was it all American food?

**AB:** [Nods to indicate it was all American food].

**JM:** So he obviously catered the St. Mary’s Church opening; do you know if he had connections with other people in the Franco-American community? Was that part of his success?

**AB:** Yes, lots. He had to have had lots of them. And I’m sure that a lot of the people – we’re getting ahead of ourselves a little bit – I’m sure that the reason he was so danged busy was that he had a lot of friends who knew his reputation. Wednesday always was Spaghetti Day – I understand it still is at Sam’s Italian Sandwich Shop in Lewiston – Thursday was boiled dinner; Friday, obviously, it’s fish. And he had his specials, every day of the week, but he had the standards.

I'd like to share a very small story about my dad, who may or may not be in Heaven. But I was told, in the diner, there was a little open window with a shelf where the waitresses would come and pick up their meals. Nowadays they have that hot light on 'em. My brother said if someone came in and hit him up – hit my father up – for a free meal, there was never any questions asked. The only stipulation was the guy had to stand at that window, next to the window. Now, that may sound discriminatory, but when you consider that every stool and every booth was money-making, it made a lot of sense for that to happen. But they walked away fed. And I heard from my Uncle Alphonse – they're all deceased now – with one of his daughters used to work in the Bates Mill. He said whenever they stopped by the Diner, Papa fed them, gratis. Is that French, "gratis."

**JM:** *Gratuit.*

**AB:** *Gratuit.* Okay. But my father was that kind of person.

**JM:** Do you think that had anything to do with his experience in the Depression?

**AB:** I don't know. My father believed what you gave to the Church, you got back tenfold. Period, end of story on that one. My parents were both very spiritual, and I grew up that way. It was a good place to grow up. I'm sorry Lewiston has changed so much, but anyway, let's continue with my father's story. My father was doing so well, after the [Second World] War, 1945, October 30<sup>th</sup>, there was a little article in the Journal, the afternoon paper, then, and it said "a twenty-four room brick building, located at 603 Main Street was purchased by J. F. Theodore Bisson, proprietor of Middle Street Diner and Middle Street Boarding House for a reported \$10,000 from Mrs. Florence Hunter." And that house – a twenty-four room brick house – it had been advertized as a possibility for a nursing home: "it would be a perfect arrangement for a convalescent home." So he bought it. And then, the story comes from the newspapers, because nobody remembers it. The next day my father ran an ad : "we have sold the Middle Street Diner and wish to take the opportunity to thank our many customers for their kind patronage." Franco-Americans – can you pronounce the letter "J" in French? "Gee" – this ad said his name was "G. J. Theodore Bisson." There's more to that story later.

Anyway, the next day, there's an ad in the paper: "we're reopening the Middle Street Diner under new management." I don't know who got it. But the diner didn't stay closed for very long; that's the point.

So my father bought this beautiful 24-room brick house up at 603 Main Street and he called it the Maple Inn "featuring home-cooked food. Open 11 am to 1:30 and 5-7 pm except Sundays. Maple Inn at 6 – on Main Street – was on the highway. And so it was not at all unusual for people travelling to stop there for food. But the business was local. He had people going up there, on the bus – it was near a bus stop. But I want to add, it said "special parties and

banquets by appointment,” [it was a] big house. Ads were in French in *Le Messager*. In *Le Messager* they got his name right, “Mr. J. F.”.

Anyway, my father took out a building permit and he was going to turn this into a bunch of apartments. I don’t know why it never happened. But anyway, he started doing business up there and didn’t have the diner. In Lewiston-Auburn at the time there were eleven halls where one could have their wedding reception – eleven. How do I know that? Because when there was a wedding announcement – yes – it always said where the reception was. And I counted eleven in these stories. But here’s Beatrice Plante “the reception followed at Maple Inn, July ’46;” “Stella Pellman, July ’46;” “Ms. Murray.” They had their reception at the Maple Inn. And I could bore you to death with these, but one month my father’s Maple Inn had sixty-eight percent of the wedding receptions in Lewiston-Auburn. To me, that was stunning, because I was there but I don’t remember them; I was under five. You know, his diner was not the only important business in this town; that Maple Inn was doing it, too.

**JM:** Sure. And you were – the family was living there at this time, too?

**AB:** We were living there; there was nine of us at the time. Okay. 1946, August 3<sup>rd</sup>. Guess what? The diner is open again, “under new management” – Alan Bornstein. I think that’s the second guy after my father, at the Middle Street Diner.

The wedding receptions continued on and on. Yvette Beaudoin, Margaret Butler. You know, in 1993, I got a phone directory for Lewiston and Auburn, and I got addresses for about four of these couples, and I wrote to them and I – to ask if they remembered their Maple Inn reception. I never got answers.

You’ll never figure this one out! November 15<sup>th</sup>, ’46 – Bisson was back at the Middle Street Diner. I love the ad – it says “The cleanest home-cooked food.” Well, I’m glad he cleaned the food before he cooked it!

**JM:** So did he buy the diner again, or he was just working there?

**AB:** I don’t know. I think he never got rid of it at that time. At Thanksgiving, there was an ad in the paper, “Thanksgiving Dinner – the Middle Street Diner and the Maple Inn.” And the wedding receptions just continue – Antoinette Fraser, Galipeau – but now, this is why it’s so important to do your history, especially if you want to be accurate. There is not one person in my family who would tell you that Bornstein had that restaurant, and he was the second one. And they wouldn’t tell you that in 1947, the Middle Street Diner was operated by Donat Gallant – that’s my third one, isn’t it? They weren’t making a go of it. Anyway, that’s 1947. And – let me – okay. ’48, 1948. “Middle Street Diner – Leased by Roger H. Moore for five years, at \$20 a week.” That’s our fourth one isn’t it?

**JM:** Yes. Fourth. Wow. That's four in as many years.

**AB:** My father made it run; these people couldn't. And the story goes on. But here's my last one. 1954 – Silk's Grill opened up the new diner. He bought it out. That's five. There was a sixth one after that. Can I tell you about my Franco-American Family?

**JM:** Sure.

**AB:** Truly, truly, Franco-American story. Gordon Windle wrote to me twenty years ago. He had been a bread-deliverer. When we did not have the diner, he delivered bread to us. And he wrote, in 1993, "the most memorable thing I can remember about your family was walking into the dining room – and remember I'm a Protestant – and all of your family were on their knees, praying, probably at midday. I stepped outside until someone came out and rescued me." We said the rosary, every day, on our knees. Typical Catholic family. And this guy from the outside of the family walked into it and noticed it. I found that – you see how if you –

**JM:** Did your father ever used to do the New Year's Blessing, in French?

**AB:** I don't remember a New Years' Blessing as much as I remember *Reveillon*. After midnight mass, with the tourtière. But I don't remember a New Year's Blessing. But then that was another tradition, wasn't it?

**JM:** Yes, I know some families they didn't have that when they came to the States, it was something that stayed in Canada.

So did your – would your dad used to cook – do you remember him cooking French or French-Canadian food at home? Were there particular things he used to cook?

**AB:** I don't remember anything French. I remember salt pork. Is that French? It's New –

**JM:** It's used a lot in French cooking, or Canadian cooking.

**AB:** It's New England.

**JM:** But yes, it's used a lot in New England, too.

**AB:** We don't get that in California! But I remember that. It's probably the reason we were all dying young. Salt. Pork.

**JM:** Hold on; let me turn the tape over. So you were saying you remember the salt pork?

**AB:** We're kind of waiting for the cameraman to get his<sup>10</sup> – so where were we? We were talking about food?

**JM:** Yes.

**AB:** I don't remember him cooking anything special. Every Sunday at Noon, in Maine we call that dinner, it was boiled chicken. And I have not had any boiled chicken in forty years –

**JM:** I can't blame you!

**AB:** And I am not going to have boiled chicken any day the rest of my life! Eugh. My father did something that I've never seen before . He used to butter the bread and put it in the toaster. And the toasters were the kind with the flaps on the side, not the pop-up, okay. And the butter would melt in the bread, and [noise] all over the counter, and whatever. Then he would slice it in three parts. Oh! To die for!

**JM:** I've never heard that before.

**AB:** I was in the hospital for over a week when I was about five, and my mother would bring me those toasts and French fries from my father's restaurant. Had a lot of good greasy food those days. Not vegetables.

**JM:** Yeah, right. A different kind of food. And so, do you remember, I don't know if you found anything out about this –because your father was here and working at I guess the Court Street restaurant during the Prohibition era. Did you come across any stories about that at all? Because I know some of the French Canadians were – ?

**AB:** No. Matter of fact, he didn't mention it very often, that he had been at the Court Street – Court Square. One of the things which I'm trying to change with my own children is making them aware of my own history before it's too late. That family never did that. There was no pride in it.

**JM:** Yes, that's not uncommon.

**AB:** It would have been bragging. But when you look at it 30, 40 years later – 50 years later – and you look at it, you've got to be fair. These people worked hard.

We took a tour at one of the mills and I could just feel those people that I knew, working in there. And there's a tremendous – I'm not doing you a promo – but there is such dedication, work, that the Franco-American community produced in the Twin Cities that I don't think you

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<sup>10</sup> Alice's son was present, videoing the interview. His name is withheld at his request.

could build a big enough museum, or enough monuments to accurately honor what those people did.

You look at St Peter's Basilica today. I went into that church every Sunday for eighteen years. I served mass there every day, practically, for four years. I never saw the grandeur of that building! No matter where you are in the Twin Cities, and you look at that church, it is huge! It is impressive! Our relatives built that, on nickels and dimes. And unfortunately the Catholic Church is working on improving it, but they sure stink at public relations. That church needs regularly scheduled tours and they can charge for them, and they could have people at that front door to do it every day. It is worthy of it. And I believe the Catholic community – I've just got off on an editorial stand – but I believe the Catholic community in the state of Maine is trying. It's lower-case trying. They could do so much more, with that church. I'm so pleased that such a great part of my life was there, and I still dream of it. But I never realized growing up what a great gem that was.

**JM:** Yes, you often don't see it until you come away – go away and come back.

**AB:** And you – I would say that no matter where I go.

**JM:** So finally, like, what did you – when you were researching this, how much did you find out after he – you know, doing this research? Was there a lot that you knew already, or were you doing this from scratch?

**AB:** I found out a tremendous amount about my parents in doing my research. And I think everybody should try to do a little. But we are so overburdened with anger and humiliation for having grown up, and I think a lot of people having an attachment to Lewiston and Auburn – it's a unique community. I have lived in several others and I don't think I've ever met, or been in a community that's so humiliated – that the people are so humiliated to say they're from. And that is an enormous tragedy. It's a terrible, terrible shame. And I read the Sun-Journal online, every day in California, and I can see where you're burning down neighborhoods, and you've got crime in a neighborhood I grew up in and I was totally safe. And parts of downtown don't look the same.

And I can see why someone living here – let me tell you a little story about my parents. In the rooming house we had the Lancaster family, and they had a little boy and a little girl. And they were Black, back in the fifties. And my parents were probably one of the very few places in the Twin Cities where the Lancasters could live – on Middle Street. And little Geta, who was about three years old – my mother and I used to sit on the front porch, right next to the Elks Club, and we'd watch the Elks go by, to go upstairs to the club, and it was always "Hi," and it was always a first-name basis with these men – little Geta was sitting on the front step between my mother and myself, and this guy went by and stopped. And little Geta said to they guy "that's my

mémère”, meaning my mother, and there was a reception there, in my family. But the Lancasters were probably the only Black family at the time. I don’t know if I would live with that experience today, in Lewiston.

But there was so much - there was so much love in this community. It was the village that raised a child, and if someone saw you doing something wrong in 1955, you knew before you got home Papa or Mama would know, and you know Papa would take care of it. May I not gloss over a piece that a lot of these families like mine would remember. My father was very poorly educated – I don’t think he passed the third grade – but I remember the time in the Diner when he broke a broomstick over my brother’s back on my brother’s twelfth birthday. I remember that vividly, after all these years. Today that would be prison. But in those days that was not so frowned upon. My father was not a saint, but now that I’m a parent, thinking, “you know, if you’ve got nine kids at home, trying to feed them and one of them is smarting off and not doing the dishes he’s assigned to do – I don’t think I’d break a broom over his back but –.” There had to be some discipline. I’m not excusing what my father did; he was not a good man in that respect. But you’ve heard the stories about the Diner, the Maple Inn, and that was not all he did in this community that was worthwhile and honorable.

I think a lot of Franco-American families are like that. I wish that they could go – you know, come in, and look at your books. Do you have any idea what it is like to walk into a museum and see your picture in an exhibit? We did that yesterday, at Museum L-A. It was the first time I ever saw my photograph in a museum. And you know, our heritage – and I so thank you for doing this, and the University of Southern Maine, because it’s so valuable. If you don’t do it today, we’re not going to do it.

**JM:** Sure, you’ve got to do it while you’ve got the people around to remember it.

**AB:** While you’ve got people around. I wish every senior citizen now who still has a parent, who’s probably eighty, would take them down to the mill and tape their reaction. That was hard work, stinking work, low, low pay, and those people would go in that mill every day with a smile on their faces; they would come out eight hours later, and I saw them do that every morning. I’m not kidding about that; those were nice people. I remember Sandsy and Tony, and a whole bunch of people who worked in those mills; those were good people. It almost makes me want to cry, for this community, and the Franco-American heritage.

Anyway, my father lost the diner; my father lost the diner.<sup>11</sup> He just couldn’t find another taker. It was cheaper to get rid of it, and rent the parking spaces. So my father sold the diner to this guy, George Sampson, who ran – I forget what – anyway, he needed a building to store the materials, he was tearing down buildings. He bought that for a dollar, as long as he moved

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<sup>11</sup> The family also sold the Maple Inn in 1950.

it, and then filled the cellar. Six of my brothers' names are on the memorial to service here in Lewiston, six of them. Five were in the service at the same time, Robert, Lionel, Dennis, Evariste and Arthur and also Danny. We did our share. We did our share; we didn't lose any.

I wanted to say one other thing. I had written to E. Phillip Saint Pierre. He used to own Victor News. And I asked him what he remembered of my family; we were in there all the time. He said, he wrote – it's very short – "I liked and respected your mother very much. She had quite a job handling all of you lively people. She seemed to be a no-nonsense but caring person. I don't think I heard any of you guys complain about excessive discipline or diligence from her." But here's where my mother stood out: "I recall an incident during our Christmas rush at Victor News." I lost my place. There it is. "We were short-handed," he wrote, "And I was putting on extra hours. She must have noticed how tired I was. Your mother offered to let me take a nap in your apartment – your rooming house – and I accepted. I enjoyed her kindness for several days until the rush was over, and I've always remembered how thoughtful she was. When that happened – " We don't need any more. For my children, that's your grandmother; for Franco-Americans, that's my mother, Gertrude.

**JM:** Was there anything – ?

**AB:** That's people out of the family, saying these things about you. My father died in Berlin, New Hampshire, and were he still alive – there's six of us still alive; thirteen of us grew to be at least 32. There are now on the list thirty-nine grandchildren and fifty-seven great-grandchildren that I know of, and I don't know any more after that. But anyway, that's my father and mother. There's buried up here in St. Peter's Cemetery, and I hope to be buried with them.

**JM:** That's it? We're all set? Anything you want to add about your father?

**AB:** He was very active in the church and all that, but so were we.

**JM:** Great, okay, thanks.

[End of interview]