

## BOYHOOD DAYS 1913 – 1924

As far back as I can remember, I was four years old. I went across the road with Irene Marquis, my oldest cousin and coming back I heard a man swearing at his horses. It was in the summer and after supper my oldest brother was teasing me and I repeated what I had heard earlier; my mother did not approve, of course. I had not realized that it was wrong. A few months later my oldest brother, Emile, died of diphtheria. The family was really upset, I saw dad crying. Three older sisters had died before him. The parish priest, Father Antoine Comeau, came and told my parents as a consolation that he was a good candidate for Heaven. That boy was eight years old and was the favorite of the neighborhood. In those days when somebody died they were not put in their box right away but were washed and dressed and put on boards covered with white sheets. The wake would last three days and three nights in the house where they had died. I remember one evening, my father's oldest brother, Uncle Ernest, walked out of the room where my dead brother was exposed and he was crying. A few days after the burial I walked across the road to the hillside where my grandfather was cutting buckwheat with a cradle scythe. I went to him, he hugged me, saying, "Now grandpa has only you for a boy."

A few weeks later I fell sick with diphtheria too. Dad was in the woods. Father Comeau came and promised my mother that he would pray for me. "I am going home," he said, "and I will read the beginning of the Holy Gospel according to St. John for him. If the good Lord has anything good in store for him in this world, he will recover." I don't remember hearing him say that, but my mother told me later. Of course I recovered. I have learned that in the beginning of the Church after Mass was over, it was a custom to bring the sick forward and the clergy would read the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John over them and it would help them. When I was a young priest, that page of the Holy Book was included among the prayers for the sick. And all the priests said that page called the Last Gospel at the end of every Mass, for the sick. I imagine that started in the cold countries where it was impossible to bring the sick to church. Anyway, when a sick asks for prayer, I repeat that holy page by heart. I have said it so often that I don't need a book anymore.

At six I went to school, which was about ¼ mile from our place. I remember one of my classmates: Ulric Nadeau. He went to college later and became a successful businessman. I remember my first teacher, Marie Daigle, who later became a nun and is dead now. She had an assistant, Annie Cyr, and she was in charge of my class. There were four

rooms in our school, but there were more than four grades, so it is why there was more than one teacher in at least one of the classrooms. I went to that school until I was 15 years old and graduated. There were only three students in my grade then; Loraine Cyr, my second cousin and Rose Anna Marquis, a distant relative. She entered the convent to become a nun and died shortly after.

Loraine went to the teacher's college in Fredericton. She taught school for many years. I went to college on my way to the priesthood.

What did the kids do for fun when I was a boy? Well, dad was just a day worker and he had a family of eight children to take care of. So we could not hope to have bicycles or 4-wheel wagons. We got rubber balls and made our own bats. There were always enough players in the neighborhood. Anyway, there was a ball game that needed only four players. There were only two bases occupied by one player each with a bat. The two other players were stationed behind the batters. They were the pitchers' catchers. One of them would throw the ball to the batter on the opposite base. If he failed to hit it and the catcher behind him caught the ball before it touched the ground, the batter was out and he changed place with the player behind him. If he hit the ball and it was caught in the air, he was out and the one who caught the ball took his place at bat.

If the ball was hit and not stopped the batters had to change bases which were about 30 feet apart. If one of the catchers could retrieve the ball and touch one of the batters before he reached his base the batter was out and gave his place to the man who had put him out. A lone player sometimes would stand about 20 feet from a wall, throw the ball at it and catch it before it touched the ground. To play cat and mouse we needed many players standing in a circle and holding hands tightly. Of course, the two other players were the cat and they tried hard to catch the other who was the mouse. They would run in and out of the circle and we would try and make it hard for the cat, who always managed to catch the mouse. We had another game. Only two players were needed. We needed a stick about three feet long and a short one about seven inches long and pointed at both ends. One player would stick the short stick in the ground and hit it with the long one. Then he would lay his stick on the ground and the other player would retrieve the short stick, make three long steps from the spot where he picked it up and threw it, trying to hit the long stick. If he did, it was his turn to hit and the other player did the retrieving. Of course our life was not always play. We had to help around the house. Bring the water in from the pump on the well; bring in wood for the cook stove. I even learned to wash the floor and of course sweep it once a day. Outside we helped weed the garden, picked wild strawberries and raspberries, hazelnuts.

When I was a boy about 10 years old, there lived across the road from our house an old maid in an old house. Her mother died when she was young and later when her father was dying, their dog was heard howling. Now, it was not often that dogs howled in our neighborhood and if they did, the people took it as an omen (advertisement); before long, someone would die in the family. When their dog howled, the neighbors knew that the old man would die soon and he did. A few months after on a dark November evening the old maid who was living alone in the old house came running to our place and said that there was a ghost in her house. She could hear moaning but could see nobody. My mother, who was alone with us, sent her to my uncle's. He was living next door to her house and he went with her. She was right; there was someone moaning in the house. It seemed that the ghost was upstairs. But from there the voice seemed to come from downstairs so they came back downstairs. After listening carefully, they realized that the voice was coming from a little storeroom built under the stairs. They opened the door to the little place and now the moaning was real loud but they could see nothing. There was an old empty liquor bottle without a stopper in there and in the bottle there was a big fly that could not find its way out. The noise it made was amplified by the bottle to a loud moaning. They filled the bottle with water to get the fly out and the ghost was gone!

When I was young I was afraid of the dead. I don't know why because I never heard of anyone being hurt by a dead person. I am sure that the dead still exist in a different way and I know that they help us. In some cases we can help them and the custom of praying for them is wise and a good way to show our gratitude to them. When I was young I read a book of testimonies about dead persons who had come back asking for prayers. All the testimonies were certified by a Justice of the Peace. I have tried for years to find that book without success.

If a priest was called for a dying person and came too late, somebody else in the neighborhood would die soon. A cousin of mine died when he was around ten. He had been sick for a while when his mother one day saw a white ball rolling on the floor in front of her and disappeared in the basement. She told us about it and said that she knew then that he would die.

At the table, it was forbidden to turn a knife and of course, if you spilled the salt, it would bring a quarrel. I presume it was a souvenir of the hard years when the first white men came to the valley. It sure was not the best way to make friends with the man who had to tote that precious salt miles and miles to his kitchen. If you spilled the milk the cow would be less generous with precious liquid. My grandmother would not plant her garden after a new moon but always after a full moon. It seems that the time after a full moon is wetter than the time around the full moon. The

moisture would be a blessing to the vegetables. The old-timers believed that a real hot spell would be followed by rains and that a very cold spell would be followed by a snowstorm. I never could find that one wrong. Northern lights meant a change in the weather. True. They are said to be caused by magnetic storms from the sun and influence the weather.

A halo around the moon meant bad weather. Usually in those circumstances even if the sky was not cloudy the stars were barely visible. They were said to be deep (creuse). If the cattle were restless and the cat was too playful; same thing if the pigs were itchy or the kids were too noisy and restless.

The ladies saved herbs for cooking and medicine too. Practically every home had a bunch of catnip, caraway, savory, sasparilla, etc.

The green leaves of the burdock and the plantain were used for medicinal purposes. One summer my godmother asked me to collect dandelion roots, her doctor had told her to make tea out of these and drink it for a skin disease she had. It took care of her problem. It is in the records that when the first white men came to Montreal, they had a doctor with them. An Indian was brought to him who had been in a fight and had his belly cut open. That was around 1670, long before Pasteur found out about sterilization. The doctor said that he could do nothing to save the Indian so his friends brought him back to his tepee and the medicine man nursed him back to good health. He did not know about sterilization but he knew that some plants are antiseptic and he used them.

