

The Immutable Power of *Printemps*

by Peter A. Albert

In 1971, my father was transferred by IBM from Essex Junction, Vermont, to San José, California. The Santa Clara Valley was in the throes of transformation from apricot orchards to Silicon Valley. Dionne Warwick was on the radio, asking us if we knew the way to San Jose, and my father, like computer scientists all across America, replied with a resounding “Yes!”

I wished he didn’t.

I was very happy in Vermont. From the vantage point of our old stone home, surrounded by forests, ponds and streams, life was an idyll. My five siblings and I were enthralled by the change of seasons. We knew all about the varying textures of snow over the course of a winter. We savored the springtime fragrance of lilacs and apple blossoms, the buzz of bees in the summer clover, the incandescent scarlets, crimsons and ambers erupting in the forested hillsides, leaf-by-turning-leaf, each fall.

Most indelible was the icy-fresh, subtle sweetness of the clear liquid dripping into the buckets that hung from our maple trees. That “plunk-plunk” noise and that taste of raw sap marked the magic of spring. Coaxed by the warming sun to flow from the roots beneath the melting snow to the uppermost branches in the sky, the maple’s sap surged through the trunks and filled the buckets, which Mr. Potvin, the local sugar farmer, collected and boiled into syrup.

My mother thought Vermont was a fine a place to raise a family. She loved the village school, the local ski-bowl where we met on winter weekends, and, of course, the free gallon of syrup Mr. Potvin gave us each year for letting him tap our trees.

But it was my father who was making us leave, and who should have loved Vermont most. When IBM transferred him from New York, he pitched Vermont as a step closer to “home.” Much of his family still lived in Québec. In moving to Vermont, we were now only two hours from the border of Canada.

We spent the summer of 1970 exploring the still-jaw-dropping relics of Expo ‘67. We took ferries across the St. Lawrence and scanned the waters for whales at Tadoussac. When we’d visit the four elderly great aunts who lived together in Ste-Hyacinthe and spoke no English, they’d ask us to sing French folksongs, and we’d respond with “*Sur Le Pont d’Avignon*,” “*Frère Jacques*,” and “*A La Claire Fontaine*” to their enthusiastic applause.

My father's family owned a fishing cabin in the Charlesvoix region of northern Québec, tucked under white birches beside blue Lac Deschênes. No one there spoke anything but

French, so my father nodded approvingly as we greeted the swimmers we'd meet on the beach with a "Bonjour," and ask the old caretaker who ran the *dépanneur* for "*les bons-bons*."

My father actually grew up in the border town of Van Buren, Maine. His father, Dr. Armand Albert, was New Brunswick-born and educated in Montréal, but set up practice—as did his father, Dr. Louis Noé Albert, who was now retired—in the St. John Valley, where a French-speaking doctor was needed. In this remote, French-speaking part of Maine, an English-only doctor from "Down East," no matter how smart and energetic, just wouldn't fit the bill.

By 1971, however, my father's parents had passed away, and all his siblings left Van Buren for Canada or more southern parts of New England. His family home had been demolished to make room for a motel parking lot. My father drove us through Van Buren after a summer at the fishing cabin. He'd hoped to show us some of the town landmarks that loomed large in his childhood: as recently as seven years ago, his parents were both still alive, his house still standing.

Instead, we were looking at a parking lot and former homes of people he knew who had since grown up, moved away, or died. We did not stay in Van Buren very long.

Perhaps the finality of all these changes made living in nearby Vermont less compelling for him. And now IBM had a job for him to do—involving a promotion, in California. That mattered—not just as an opportunity, but as a responsibility, as my mother was now expecting their seventh child.

"The State of California runs some of the world's finest universities," he explained to my mother, "and they are inexpensive to students from California."

Education was critical to our parents. The math of seven tuitions certainly made a persuasive case to move to California.

And so we moved, and I was immediately disoriented by my new home, its odd weather and weird plants, its effusion of people who all seemed to have arrived from far-away places themselves only minutes before we had arrived from Vermont.

We let go of some things we'd known back East—snowy winters, humid summers, fireflies, thunderstorms. We had to learn new expressions, new fashions, new sports, and how to duck under tables during an earthquake, which we never seemed to actually get to feel, but always had to be prepared for.

I adjusted. I graduated from high school, and decided to study Architecture at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, on California's bucolic Central Coast. Being away from home only made one point clearer—part of me had never left Vermont. College students typically get homesick, but I was longing for my home 3,000 miles away, which I'd last seen when I was ten.

Cal Poly promoted its third-year architecture exchange programs for students who craved travel. The programs were located in Copenhagen and Florence.

I applied, but proposed that my third year be in Montréal.

“Why Montréal?” my advisor asked. “Why not Italy or Denmark?”

I mumbled something about the world-class architecture of Buckminster Fuller and Moshe Safdie in Montréal. I cited the challenge of blazing new trails, acknowledging the State of California already had an exchange agreement with the Province of Québec. I kept the real reason—unabashed sentimentality—to myself.

The advisor seemed impressed. We agreed on McGill University—world-famous, and Anglophone. I wouldn’t have a problem with language. I figured that I’d pick up more French, but gently, on my own terms, perhaps as an elective, to round out what I’d overheard as a child or learned in high school.

All was set to go, then. And one month before I was to leave for Canada, I got a letter from the Province of Québec, entirely in French.

It explained that I’d be attending the Université de Montréal, since McGill University didn’t have the compatible courses for Cal Poly. The letter ended with a cheery “*Nous vous souhaitons le bienvenue à Montréal.*”

I read and re-read the letter, walked it over to my father in his recliner and asked: “Does this letter say what I think it says?”

My father read the letter silently and then laughed.

“If you don’t know French before you leave for Montréal, you will when you come back!”

I’d already paid the tuition. I’d already given up my apartment in San Luis Obispo. I really had no choice.

And it was thrilling. In 1981, the whole province of Québec was engaged in debating Bill 101, the law that gave French priority over English in public signs, government business, etc. I went to Sunday Mass at the same church Pierre Trudeau attended as a rebellious teenager. I bonded with my cousins, uncles, and aunts. I visited my two surviving great aunts in Ste-Hyacinthe, and finally could have an extended conversation in their own language.

I skied Mt. Tremblant, Mt. Ste-Anne, and Stowe. I canoed across a lake surrounded by birches, and scaled the promontory outside the ancient citadel walls of Québec City.

And I visited a *cabane-à-sucre* at Mt. St-Grégoire, and rolled *la tire* into a lollipop with my fork. The Vermont boy in me was in my element.

In fact, I wanted to take it a step farther. On one afternoon in March, I borrowed a wood drill from the architecture lab and hiked up the forested hillside outside my dorm window. I studied the bark patterns of the naked trees, picked one that was thick and deep in the woods, drilled a hole, fashioned a tap out of foil, and hung a glass jelly jar.

No one could hear my work, except a hissing raccoon who, scampering away from my footfalls in the snow, picked the wrong tree to climb.

“Patience, monsieur le raton-laveur,” I grumbled, drilling into the bark as he glowered down at me and spat. *“C’est ta faute...t’as pas choisi le bon arbre pour m’échapper!”*

The next morning, the sun came out glorious, warming our faces as we tilted them skyward on the walk to class, smiling, eyes closed. After studio, before dark, I sprinted up the hill to find the glass jar overflowing with what looked like solid ice. I detached it, ran it up to the room of a dorm-mate with a hot plate. A few others gathered, and we watched as the jelly-jar-shaped cylinder of clear ice melted, slowly, into liquid, and then, finally, began to boil and evaporate. And then to smell sweet, to turn from clear sap to amber syrup.

“Ça, c’est du sirop!” one cried, and I was ear-to-ear grins.

I learned a lot about architecture that year, and I certainly mastered French. I learned much about my family history, and could appreciate the legends and myths in a new light.

But most emphatically, I learned about my blood: that it surges in exhilaration at the tilt of the earth toward the sun at winter’s end. I’ve tapped West Coast bigleaf maples growing above the snow-line, and made what may be the only maple syrup from California trees.

“Your great-times-eight-grandfather was Pierre Boucher,” my father often told his children. “He wrote the first natural history book about the New World that was ever published, *“L’histoire véritable et naturelle des moeurs et productions du pays de la Nouvelle-France vulgairement dite le Canada.”*”

What a mouthful, I thought. And I opened my father’s copy and found this observation, written by my ancestor in 1664:

“Il y a un autre espèce d’arbre, qu’on appelle Herable (sic)...Quand on entaille ces Herables au Printemps, il en dégoûte quantité d’eau qui est plus douce que de l’eau détrempé dans du sucre; du moins plus agréable à boire.”

There you have it—this passion for things maple (or “*herable*,” as they said in New France) is hereditarily present in my blood, which, I imagine, runs sweetest in the spring.