

Songs of Silence and the Bellowing Elders

by Catherine Rivard

My father didn't sing much. If he ever attempted it, he was off-key. Like me, he learned early to keep his mouth shut in that department. Maybe he stopped singing as a community service, but I think now there was another reason. It took me a long time to figure it out.

He didn't talk much, either. When he did, it was often with considerable volume accompanied by a raised hand. As a child and teenager, I attributed his stubborn silence and dark moods to a cantankerous nature and the disapproval all parents felt towards the approaching threats of the New Age.

But there were other times—rare ones—when he came out of his cave and shared stories with us about times long past—his childhood, so far distant we kids could barely imagine them—life on the farm in the very early part of the century. Horses, buggies, outhouses. Our dad seemed like a relic that was not very vintage charming. But on these occasions, he entertained us with funny French words and tales of maple syrup on fresh snow.

It is no longer an unusual tale. I first learned I was half French Canadian when I was in adolescence, and it meant nothing to me. (In Minnesota we do not use the term “Franco American.” To us that was a can of spaghetti.) I learned it over time, slowly and through a fog of nearsightedness and the general dimwittedness of youth. It didn't settle in with any real clarity until my mid-20s. Why would it? In Minneapolis, where I was raised, most of the ethnic groups that had immigrated to the area were well assimilated, celebrating their heritage only once or twice a year with a slice of tourtière or a hunk of lutefisk.

The French had been the first Europeans in the area, with the help of the Native Americans, but once the New Englanders saw the potential for the Mississippi, control of the river was theirs, the logging mills went up, and the French who stayed settled into communities like Little Canada in St. Paul, and the NE section of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I now live. Like all the ethnic groups—the Swedes, Norwegians, Russians, Germans—we had many newspapers in the early days, telling us who to vote for, where to pray, what to cook. As the generations wore on, the newspapers became fewer in number until one scraggly newsletter or church bulletin sufficed. By the third generation most people spoke English and only memories of grandparents reminded them of their heritage.

My father, Joseph, was nearly 50 when I was born, the last child of his second family. He was second-generation American from the line of Rivards that gave us Adjutor Rivard, the author of *Chez Nous* and heroic defender of the language, who was my grandfather's first cousin. Frère Andre Bisette, who would one day be canonized, was also a relative and

friend to many of my family members. But this was unknown to me as a child and young girl. I was much more interested in John, Paul, George and Ringo. By that time, we lived in Richfield, a suburb that was then as white as my father's fresh snow, and a child's ethnic heritage was evident only in the surname. Plenty of Andersons, Johnsons, and Swensons, and for a time quite a few French names, too. Rivards were not so common in the Twin Cities at that time. They tended to stay amongst themselves in the small farming communities of Wisconsin, where they had settled after leaving Quebec during the Civil War.

In 1904, the year of my father's birth, they were snug in Amery, Wisconsin, near Somerset, the family stronghold. There Dad grew up with no running water or heat, tucked into bed each bitter winter night with several siblings all sewn into their long johns. In the spring, after the melt, they'd be plucked out of their long johns, deloused, scrubbed, and set free to run the lovely rolling hills of the farm. Dad attended a one-room schoolhouse called the Beaver Brook School, which is still in existence, though not in its original location. There he had his lessons in both French and English. In his old age he spoke fondly of the sweet scent of his mother's lilacs, which had surrounded his childhood home, and when he and I roamed the cracked old foundation of the house in the mid-1970s, he could recall where each room had been. I watched him wander the spot knowing that, while I saw only a grey slab open to the hot Wisconsin sun, covered with weeds, his eyes were perceiving ghosts that still moved upon it, he still smelled the baking of bread and heard the squeals of children. And the family get-togethers—loud, funny gatherings that began in the kitchen and spilled out onto the front porch, featuring those squealing children, scolding parents, good food, coffee and corn cob pipes, and the inevitable talk of their church and who was up to what in the parish. And song. The bellowing of old French songs, led by the elders (for whom English was still a strange thing yet to be embraced), would permeate the dark Wisconsin night.

Somewhere in the family archives we have an ancient tape of these elders bellowing. Listening to it is unnerving, for it feels as though that thin mystical film which separates us from the past has been peeled away and we are being given a brief glimpse, just this once, of what was. They sound far, far away, calling to us. Their voices are rough, no nonsense, even in song. They bark more than they sing. One can hear in their voices that life has been hard, cruel. There are no lilacs in these voices. But still they sing.

What stories the elders must have shared with kids like my Dad. His grandfather Théophile left Quebec in 1864 to go to Wisconsin, where many thriving French communities were already in gestation. (Théophile's brother Ludger, the father of Adjutor, opted to remain in Quebec.) By 1875 he was in Somerset, with his bride, Marie-Anne Lemire. Théophile was a handsome and proud Frenchman and something of a showman, putting up the steeple on Ste. Anne's Church with a bit of bravura, the town watching from below. Identity as a family

and as a community was as much defined by the local church as it was by DNA. Ste. Anne's of Somerset was their touchstone for all things cultural and spiritual.

A family touchstone *from* Ste. Anne's was Father John Théophile Rivard, my father's cousin, long the parish pastor and everyone's favorite relative. He had studied for the priesthood in Quebec and had become close friends with Adjutor Rivard. From him he inherited a passion for his heritage that his own father, Louis Honore Rivard, had not passed down to him with quite the same *vivre*. He returned to the States determined to preserve the family's heritage.

John was everything my father was and yet was not. When John sang, he bellowed like the elders, but with *joy*. He did not allow the ache of life to take the upper hand and was always there to help you fight the demons. When I was publicly shamed at a conference in Burlington, Vermont for speaking English on a panel, I took to my hotel room bed and wouldn't come out. I locked the door. My husband couldn't pry me out. John got a key and yanked me out of the bed and just held me while *he* wept. He could not bear seeing me suffer. "I've been kicked down," he said. "You have to get up. You have to get *up*." And later he got us all a table in the center of the dining room to show that I hadn't been defeated.

John loved to reenact history. He insisted on making life an adventure. "We'll make *history*!" he'd cry, whether we were doing something actually historic or just digging into a pile of pancakes. John adored life, where my father seemed to tolerate it. When John left the priesthood after 25 years, he became director of seven historic sites in Minnesota. He also became a much better priest, with no doctrine or region to restrict him. When he entered a room, his arms were always extended—everyone dropped everything and ran to him.

So, when he informed me in 1977 that he and I were going to form a group for French Canadians, I knew there was no way out—it would happen. And that is when my father began to come alive.

Our monthly meetings at La Société Canadienne Française, which were held at St. Louis Parish in St. Paul, weren't exactly the Mardi Gras, but they were meaningful to the now elders and the few youngsters like me who attended. Most were the old Somerset and Turtle Lake people my father had grown up with, plus a few new folks from the Twin Cities. The meetings had all the trappings of the average church hall gathering—Styrofoam coffee cups, cookies and bars, squeaky metal chairs. We began each meeting with a few French songs, led by our chanteuse in residence, the marvelous Francine Roche. Like John, she had and still has the gift of revitalizing even the most dead-to-the-world audience.

The hardy old grandsons and -daughters of the pioneers would sing and clap. I can still see their sensible shoes, and those Styrofoam cups, with their coffee rings and lipstick stains, positioned on the floor while they sang. Their faces had a been-there-and-back weariness but also a pride in who they were. I was dedicated to La Société, yet I was the only person

in the group under 30—hell, under 70—and it all might have been a dreary sight to me had the faces not been so happy while singing.

One face was *not* happy during the singing. My father struggled with the words. He had forgotten most of his native language. I didn't realize until I saw tears roll down his face during our singing sessions how much it had meant to him, how much he missed it. His anguished face as he labored to remember the songs, next to the smiling faces of his friends and cousins, was a jarring juxtaposition that I have never forgotten.

Dad sat in that squeaky church chair hearing the ghosts of the ancients sing, just as he had *seen* them while walking the foundation of the old homestead in Amery, smelling his mother's lilacs and fresh baked bread. He could no longer pick those lilacs or taste the bread, and he could no longer sing the songs. That was the day I began to understand his silence and the extent to which it had affected us in his little family in Richfield, where he had seemed inexplicably out of his element. I was to learn much more in the years to come when I met a great many old Franco Americans in New England, so like my father.

In the mid-80s, while I was on a visit home, Dad told me with excitement that he had signed up for French classes to recover his language. But, before they could start, he had a stroke and before long was in a nursing home. In the next few years, he was unable to communicate in English, but every so often a French word popped out.

Now he's singing with the bellowing elders. His croaky old voice must fit in well. John is there too, no doubt leading the chorus with gusto and urging them to remember that they are making *history*, insisting that they remember the *joy*.



**FAMILY OF FERDINAND ("FRED") AND
MARIE-JEANNE (NÉE CARPENTIER) RIVARD
WITH JOSEPH RIVARD AS A BABY ON HIS
FATHER'S KNEE, 1905**



LAST PICTURE WITH MY FATHER, 1988



**L TO R: WILFRED, ELSIE OR ELIZABETH, RITA,
JOSEPH**



JOHN THEOPHILE RIVARD, c. 1990



**THÉOPHILE ONESIME AND MARIE-ANNE (NÉE
LEMIRE) RIVARD AROUND 1865**