

French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL

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*Brodeur Siblings: Alphonse, Joseph, Albert, Berthe,
Alexandrina and Germaine*

Picture Collection of Albert Brodeur



Mission Statement: To preserve and promote the French-American heritage in Minnesota through education and community events.

Website: fahfminn.org. YouTube: FAHF Minn.

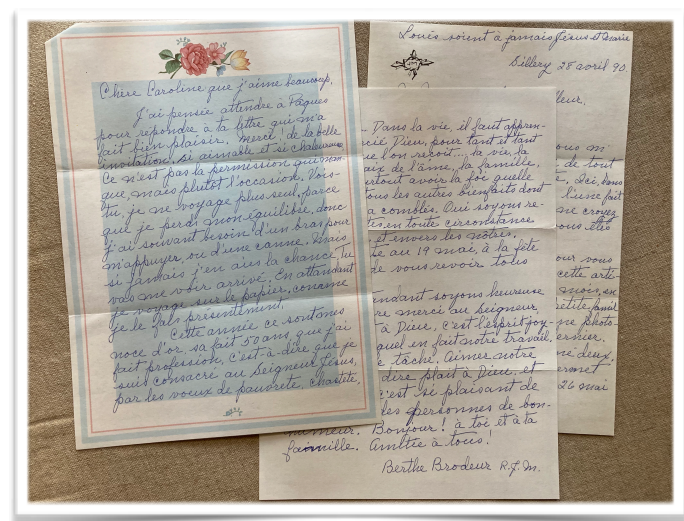


FROM FARM, TO WOOLEN MILL, TO LIFE DEVOTION – PART 1

THE STORY OF A FRENCH-CANADIAN WOMAN, THROUGH NEW ENGLAND AND QUEBEC

Happy Spring everyone! For this quarterly article, I couldn't help but write the life story about someone who was very dear to me: my great-grandaunt "tante¹ Berthe." She lived a long and fascinating life. She died at 96 years old.

When I was young, every Easter weekend, my family would make the six-hour drive from our hometown of Kiamika in the Laurentians region to Sillery (a suburb of Québec City) to go visit this special aunt. She lived in a convent and was a semi-cloistered nun in the Congregation of the Religious of Jesus and Mary. Tante Berthe, or Sister Marie-Albert, her religious name, had a radiant aura. Her whole being was extraordinarily kind and loving. When she looked at you, she was totally there for you even being the young girl that I was. She had nothing, but yet was so wealthy with love, compassion and peace. You couldn't help feeling good in her presence. Her cheeks were soft and body warm when we hugged her or sat next to her. She would give my siblings and me treats her fellow sisters made for the celebration of Easter. I would play piano for her and she made me feel as if I were a piano prodigy (not! ha! ha!). When our parents would tell us that we would be going to visit tante Berthe, we had to wear our nice clothes and be on our best behavior to make our parents proud. Throughout my teenage years, I would correspond and confide in her and she would always respond on nice letterhead paper. I



Letters from Tante Berthe

¹ "Aunt."

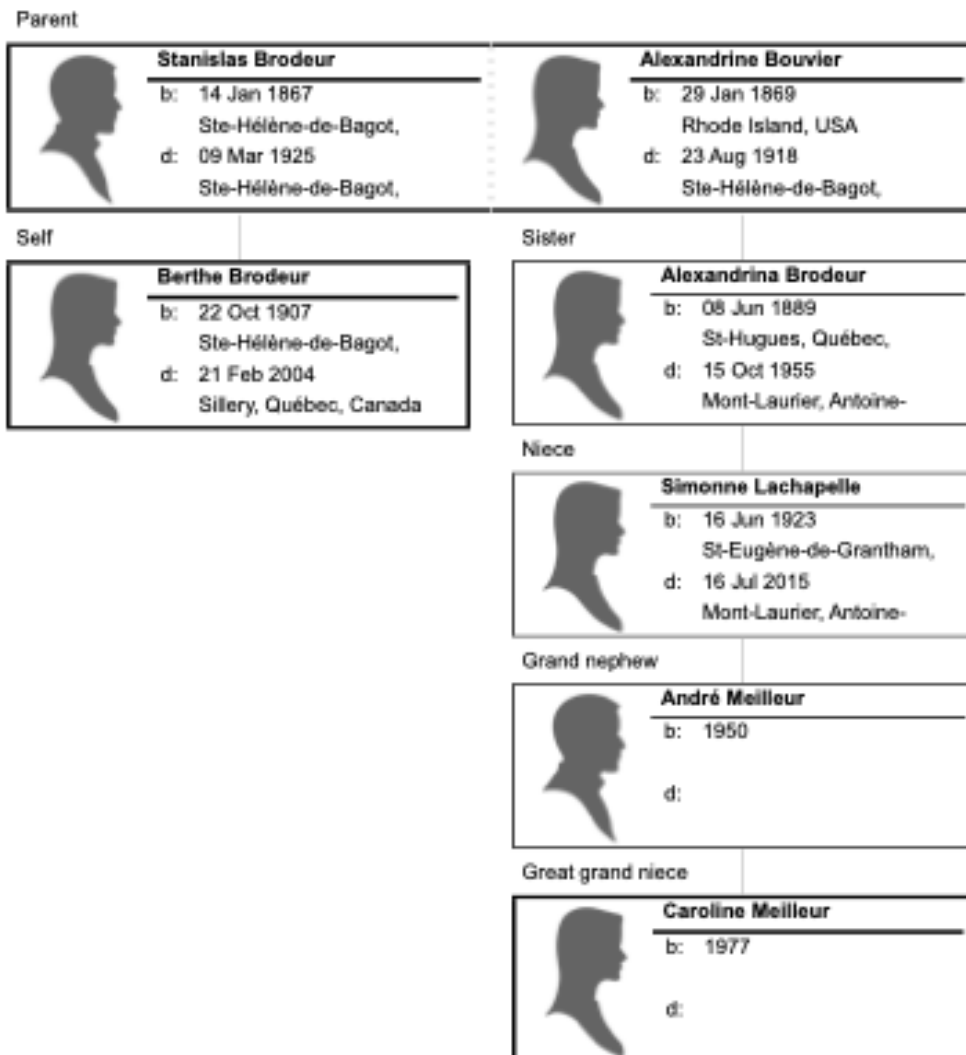
was so happy when I received a letter from her. We had a 70-year age difference but it didn't feel like it. As I grew up, each time I passed through Quebec City, I would stop by her convent and pay her a visit until the very end.

Years after her death, I wanted to know her before she became Sister Marie-Albert, before she was 90-something years old, when she was young. Who was she? How was her life? What made her take the veil (in other words, become a nun)? Thanks to my aunt Nicole Meilleur, to Lucille Taillon (Berthe's niece who is still alive to this day) and to all the genealogical resources available online, I was able to find her throughout her life.

Tante Berthe was, in fact, my paternal grandmother's aunt. Here's a quick tree to show her relationship to me in my family tree.



Tante Berthe and Me
Photo by Caroline Meilleur



Ste-Hélène, Bagot County, Quebec (1907-1928)

Marie Berthe Brodeur was born on October 22, 1907, on the family farm in the town of Ste-Hélène, Bagot County, Quebec. Her parents were Stanislas Brodeur and Alexandrine Bouvier, my great-great-grandparents. She was the youngest of ten children, of whom only six grew up to adulthood:

- Alexandrina (1889-1955)
- Joseph (1891-1985).
- Alphonse (1895-1973)
- Albert (1900-1985)
- Germaine (1905-2002)
- Berthe (1907-2004)



Brodeur Homestead - Ste-Hélène-de-Bagot, QC
Photo by Caroline Meilleur

By the time of her birth, Stanislas and Alexandrine had already lost four children: Florina (1893-1901), Claudia (1898-1901), Émile (1902-1902) and Émilien (1904-1904). The two daughters died of diphtheria five days apart in July of 1901. Alexandrine, Berthe's older sister and my great-grandmother, told her that their mom was rocking Florina who was very feverish and she heard some kind of singing, but it wasn't singing, it was the poor child who was probably having convulsions. She died a few hours later. These early deaths must have been devastating to both Stanislas and Alexandrine. I can only imagine my great-grandparents at the burials of their beloved children. The family picture (to the right) was taken in the summer of 1903. You can see the sombre look and the black dress of Alexandrine.



Berthe spent her childhood in Ste-Hélène going to school and doing her chores on the family farm. Her father was even the mayor of the village in 1912. However, happiness didn't last for the Brodeur family as Alexandrine died at the end of the summer of 1918, perhaps of the Spanish flu. Her burial record does not specify the cause. She was 49 years old. Her death left Stanislas and the kids overwhelmed. Berthe was only ten. Over a year later, Stanislas married Marie-Louise Pelland, another widow of the same parish. Later, Germaine Brodeur recalled that their stepmother was not nice and did not treat her husband nor his children like she should have.

Then another tragedy occurred for young Berthe. This bad second marriage combined with all the previous deaths might have pushed poor Stanislas to the edge and he was discovered on the morning of March 9, 1925, hanging lifeless in his barn. The coroner gave a verdict of suicide in a moment of mental irresponsibility. Because of that verdict, Stanislas was able to get a proper Catholic burial. This crucial information was kept hidden from the family until 2017, 92 years later, when I made the discovery of a tiny insert in the newspaper *Le Courrier de St-Hyacinthe* mentioning this terrible death. His son Albert, who became a priest and the family historian, wrote numerous pages about the family genealogy but never mentioned this episode and rarely mentioned his father. Back then, mental health was not talked about and there was no help. At the time of the discovery, we asked his granddaughter Lucille Taillon if she knew about this. She confided that her mother told her the terrible cause of death only once after becoming a widow. She told Lucille that the evening preceding his act, he kissed his daughters one last time. His decision was made.

New England

After the passing of Stanislas, things went quickly. It was decided that the farm land would be purchased by Stanislas' son-in-law and daughter: Wellie Lachapelle and Alexandrina Brodeur. Alphonse and Joseph, who were married and had families of their own, were thinking of immigrating to New England for work opportunities. Farming lands availability, in particular in the St-Hyacinthe region, were way in decline and almost unavailable and fast-growing industrial towns in New England had lured hundreds of thousands of hard-working French Canadians in the previous decades. On top of that, their own mother, Alexandrine Bouvier (1869-1918) was born in Rhode Island. On the Bouvier side, they had relatives living in Woonsocket and Grafton, MA. Also a big plus for the Brodeurs is that, in the 1920s, Woonsocket had a population of about 70% French, or French-Canadian descendants!²

² Rhode Island Historical Society data.

Albert was studying at the Seminary of St-Hyacinthe to become a priest. The only two left were Germaine and Berthe who were underage and single. They became pupils of their uncle Samuel Houle, married to Imelda Brodeur (sister of Stanislas). Everybody seemed happy with the sale of the land to Wellie and Alexandrina.

The same year, 1925, Joseph and his family moved to the town of Troy, Orleans, Vermont. Troy was a convenient choice as it is located just on the other side of the border about a two-hour drive nowadays. He found work on a dairy farm there and later in a cheese factory. Alphonse, his wife and their children chose to move further away to Woonsocket in Rhode Island. He found work as a construction worker.

In 1926, it's Germaine's turn to move south of the border to join Alphonse and his family. She said that she went to a worsted mill to find employment. The hiring person asked her if she had any relevant experience and she replied yes, but it wasn't true. She just wanted to work. Another lady worker sitting beside her said to her in French: "Don't worry, I'll show you everything you need to know." Later, the boss came back and asked how it was. Germaine replied that it was good, just that the machines were different than what she "knew." Germaine married Joseph Taillon, another French Canadian, who was from nearby her hometown of Ste-Hélène, at the Precious Blood Church on December 27, 1927.



Precious Blood Church & Rectory, Woonsocket, RI
(Sanford Neuschatz Collection)

Woonsocket, RI (1928-1938)

That was already half of the Brodeur family who moved to the New England states in search of better opportunities. In 1928, when Berthe was 20 years old, she followed her siblings' path and moved to Woonsocket. She moved in with her sister Germaine and husband Joseph Taillon in a rental apartment at 244 Paradis Avenue located just across the corner from their brother Alphonse and his family³ (see picture to the right). Those three-story apartment buildings would host big families that came to work in the mills of Woonsocket.



222 & 244 Paradis Avenue, Woonsocket, RI
Photo from Google Maps 2022

Almost everybody living on Paradis Avenue had a French-Canadian last name (see census). A big advantage is that they were only a short ten-minute walk from the Precious Blood Church where they attended mass. French Canadians are a tight-knit community and they would recreate their way of living from back home in the States. That's where the Little Canadas originated. The heart of those places was the church, where everybody met, with the grocery or general merchant store and so on. I am myself an immigrant in Minnesota and my close friends here are also French-Canadian transplants like me. We do not just understand each other with our language and accent but with who we are and where we are from. As I was watching a video on the French in Woonsocket, Mr. Paul Bourget was saying that three things were essential to the French-Canadian community: their faith, their language and their traditions which he called "La Survivance."

Back to Berthe. Soon she found work and was drawing patterns in a woolen mill. Sometime after her arrival in Rhode Island, she met Henri Thibault. Henri was the son of Thomas Damase Thibault and Mérance Plante. He was born in Massachussets and was ten years older than Berthe. He was living on the same street (Paradis Avenue). He soon became the "ami de coeur" (boyfriend), as they said in those days, of Berthe. In 1931, Henri and Berthe became godparents of Lucille Taillon, daughter of Joseph and Germaine Brodeur. Henri was working as a beverage truck driver.

In 1933, Joseph, Germaine and the children moved back to Canada. They had lost their jobs at the manufacturer. Times were hard. They went to help Joseph's father on his farm

³ Source: 1930 United States Federal Census.



Left to right: Joseph Gosselin, Rose-Alma Lajoie, Henri Thibault and Berthe Brodeur, Woonsocket, RI
Photo from Lucille Taillon

in St-Guillaume-d'Upton. With Joseph and Germaine gone, Berthe moved in with Joseph Hilaire Gosselin and his wife Rose-Alma Lajoie. Mr. and Ms. Gosselin never had children and they considered Berthe like their own daughter. They took care of her. They lived at 36 Summit in Woonsocket.

In 1935, Berthe made the long trip from Woonsocket to the village of Chute-Victoria in Labelle County, Quebec, for a special visit. Her brother Albert, now a priest, had been chosen by the diocese to found the new parish and build the church for this village. The new name was Chute-St-Philippe. With the earnings from the mill, Berthe had generously contributed to lend the money to the parish in order to purchase a furnace for the new church the year prior. She came to help Albert settle in his new quarters. She stayed for a month and then returned to resume her job in Woonsocket.⁴ That same year, Berthe changed jobs and worked as a gill box tender at the Riverside

Worsted Company owned by Mr. Jules Desurmont et Fils (France). The manager of the

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|--|---|---|---|---------|--|
| NAME BRODEUR, BERTHE | | STREET ADDRESS 36 SUMMIT | | 1571710 | |
| 1 CENSUS TRACT 29 | 12 CITIZENSHIP U.S. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 NAT. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 PA. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 AL. <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | 19 USUAL OCCUPATION 109 GILL BOX TENDER | STATE OF RHODE ISLAND CENSUS LICENSED FOR USE UNDER PATENT 1,772,482 | | |
| 2 CITY, TOWN OR VILLAGE WOONSOCKET | 13 IF AT SCHOOL - NAME OF SCHOOL | 20 INDUSTRY 21 WORSTED | ADDRESS FAIRMOUNT ST. | | |
| 3 TOWNSHIP WOONSOCKET | 14 GRADE | 21 WORKER W. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 N.P. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 E. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 S.E. <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | DATE FEB 5 1936 | | |
| 4 COUNTY PROVIDENCE | 15 ANY PHYSICAL DISABILITY BL. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 TB. <input type="checkbox"/> 4 EP. <input type="checkbox"/> 7 DF. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 HTD. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 OTHER. <input type="checkbox"/> 8 MEN. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 CRP. <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | 22 PRESENT OCCUPATION 109 GILL BOX TENDER | INITIALS J.B.C. | | |
| 5 IF HEAD OF FAMILY - NO. IN FAMILY | 16 EVER HAD MEAS. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 S. FVR. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 DIPT. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 SCHICK TEST. <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | 23 INDUSTRY 21 WORSTED | 25 IF NOT AT WORK - WHY NOT 1 AT WORK 4 PART TIME 2 INCL. DISP. 5 NO WORK 3 SICK 6 INCAP. 7 RELIEF PROJECT | | |
| 6 SEX MALE <input type="checkbox"/> 1 FEMALE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 | 17 USUALLY WORK AT GAINFUL OCCUPATION YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 NO <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | 24 W. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 N.P. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 E. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 S.E. <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | 26 IF NOT AT WORK - HOW MANY MONTHS IDLE | | |
| 7 COLOR OR RACE WHITE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 NEGRO <input type="checkbox"/> 2 OTHER <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | 18 IF NO-IS HE SEEKING WORK YES <input type="checkbox"/> 1 NO <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | 25 NOT AT WORK - WHY NOT 1 AT WORK 4 PART TIME 2 INCL. DISP. 5 NO WORK 3 SICK 6 INCAP. 7 RELIEF PROJECT | 27 NO. MONTHS EMPLOYED IN 1935 5 | | |
| 8 COUNTRY OF BIRTH 65 CANADA | 19 READ OR WRITE ENGLISH YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 NO <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | I.B.M. 130419 FORM P.C. 1 003 | | | |

Rhode Island State Census Card for Berthe Brodeur (1935)

⁴ Souvenirs de Chute-St-Philippe, 50e anniversaire, Albert Brodeur, curé-fondateur, 1983.

plant was Mr. Eugene Bonte. The mill was bordered by the Blackstone River to the southeast. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places, but was destroyed by a fire in 2011. It was located at 84 Fairmount Street in Woonsocket. An interesting fact is that it is there that the first International Textile Union Strike took place in 1931. I wonder if she went to protest on that day? Each day, Berthe had to walk about 1.2 miles from her home on Summit to the mill. In order to find which mill Berthe worked at, I had to research through censuses available on the [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) website. I found her card in the 1935 Rhode Island State Census and found the street name of her workplace. With the help of Google, I found the name of her mill. While researching, I asked myself, what is the difference between a woolen and a worsted mill? I learned that they are fabricated with different techniques; one has long fibres and the other one short and "hairier."⁵

Genealogy
tip



Desurmont Mill, Woonsocket, RI
Picture from Public Archaeology Laboratory

To be continued...

Stay tuned for Part II in our next quarterly article.

⁵ Source: www.thedreamstress.com, "Terminology: What's the difference between worsted & woolen wools fabrics?"; published on August 9, 2014.