

French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL

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Berthe Brodeur

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 2

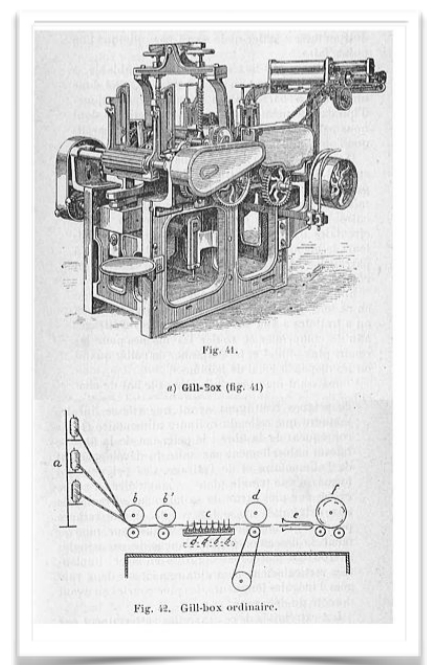
THE STORY OF A FRENCH-CANADIAN WOMAN, THROUGH NEW ENGLAND AND QUEBEC

In the Spring 2022 article, I introduced you to my great-grandaunt Berthe Brodeur. We covered her youth, in her native home of Ste-Hélène, Bagot County, Québec, where she was born in October 1907. She was the “benjamine,” or youngest, of ten children, (of whom only six grew to adulthood), of Stanislas Brodeur, a farmer, and Alexandrine Bouvier. Her mother died when Berthe was only ten years old, leaving her husband struggling emotionally and with all the hardship of raising the family and attending to the many needs of the farm. Her father then married a widow, who was really stern and not nice to the family, probably pushing poor Stanislas to commit suicide in his barn. Berthe became an orphan at age 17. She went to live with her paternal aunt and uncle until her majority and then moved to Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in 1928, following in the footsteps of her brother Alphonse and sister Germaine. She, too, went down south in New England to work in the cotton mills like thousands of other French Canadians in search of a better life and future.

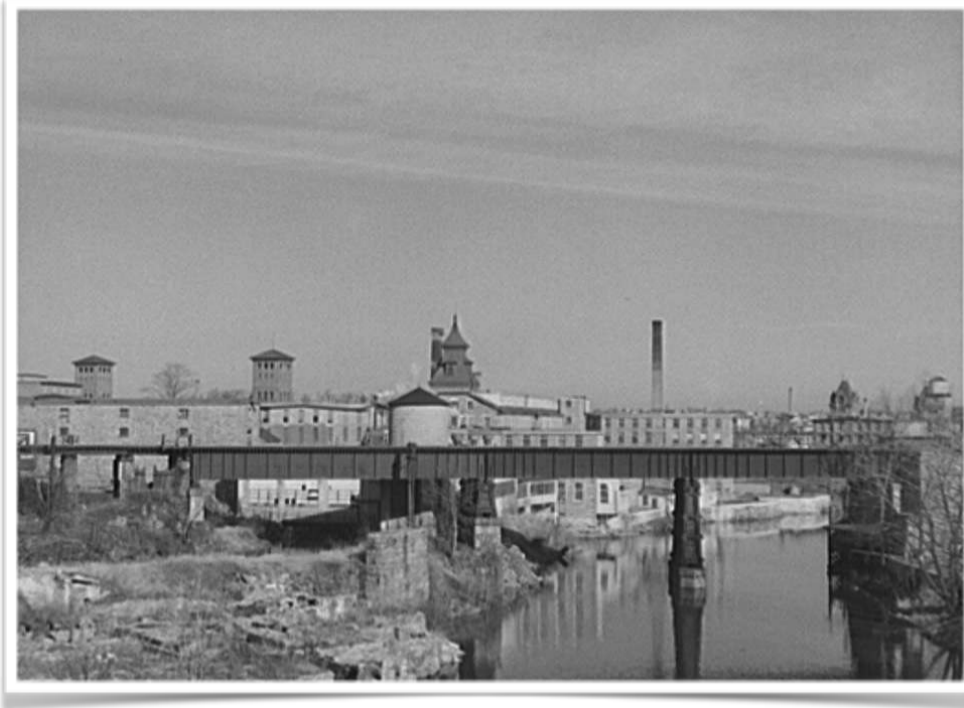
I finished the previous article, noting that Berthe was living in Woonsocket, around 1935, and working as a gill box tender at the Riverside Worsted Company.

Woonsocket, RI (1928-1938) Continued

In 1930, it was the time of the Great Depression, that needs no introduction from me. Like thousands and thousands of other men and women, Berthe was affected by this era. On the 1930 census, Berthe lived with her sister Germaine, her brother-in-law



Gill-Box Image



Woonsocket Mills, 1940
Library of Congress

Joseph Taillon, and their first-born Fernand. If we look under the “Employement” section of the schedule, we see that she was not employed by the mills at that time and neither was Joseph. Times were hard. She found work where she could. She told her grandniece, Nicole Meilleur, that she once worked for a lady who owned a fabric store in town. Berthe was an excellent seamstress. She was also skilled in drawing dress patterns.

During her years in Rhode Island, Berthe dated a man named Henri

Thibault. Like was noted, in the previous article, they met because they lived on the same street in the mill workers’ tenements. Henri must have been a friend of Joseph Taillon, because Joseph and Germaine chose him to be the godfather of their daughter Lucille in 1931. Berthe was the godmother. I am not sure when they started to date. What I know is that Berthe broke up with Henri around 1938. Henri was very much in love with her. He said that she was the love of his life. What caused the break up? You will soon find out... Berthe would live in Rhode Island for about 16 years. She would later say that she had a rich life and work experience during her time there.

Scranton, Pennsylvania (1938)

At 31 years old, Berthe decided to go to the town of Scranton, Pennsylvania, to pursue her education. There she got her diploma in “arts domestiques,” or domestic skills, in the year of 1938. Back when she was living in Woonsocket, she had a friend. This friend got herself a train ticket and left to enter the Congregation of the Religious of Jesus and Mary in the city of Sillery, a suburb of Québec City. This friend wanted Berthe to come with her and do the same thing and become a nun. However, Berthe told her: “If you like it, let me know. But, if you don’t like it, don’t tell me about it.” Sometime later, it was the Mother Superior of the convent who wrote a letter to young Berthe to tell her to come and experience the Congregation for herself. What if? Berthe thought about it profoundly. She thought about her relationship with Henri. Henri was a good man that she could count on for sure. She loved him, but to take the extra step and get married, didn’t you have to love way more than that? She followed her heart and decided to end her relationship with Henri

and then go to Sillery. Poor Henri had his heart broken and he never married, still hoping that his dear Berthe would come back to him one day.

Sillery, Québec (1938-2004)

The Sillery convent of the Congregation of the Religious of Jesus and Mary was an established and prestigious one in 1938. They were renowned for their boarding school and college for young girls. Their mission was to teach them to become women leaders and, as of 1925, the Collège Jésus-Marie of Sillery was the first and only to teach a complete curriculum to prepare young women to go to a university. In that sense, they were feminists. Two of their co-founders were the first women to earn a bachelor of arts degree from the Université Laval in Québec City when it was just an all-men university. I am pretty sure that Berthe was attracted by that feminist aspect of the convent, being herself a woman who was working on her own and pursuing an education.

Therefore, after receiving the invitation from the Mother Superior, Berthe moved to Sillery and started at the Novitiate, in about August 1938. She was a “postulante” in this training and preparation period in order to experience and see if this life of devotion could be hers. According to Sister Louise Turmel, R.J.M., archivist for the Congregation in Sillery, Berthe became a “novice” in February of 1940 (about a year later). She was then wearing the novitiate uniform, which consisted of a black dress and white veil. Then, on February 6, 1941, Berthe pronounced her temporary vows (for five years) and exchanged the white veil for a black one.

After the first five years, she finally pronounced her perpetual vows and received her cross and her ring. (See picture below.)



Berthe with Black Uniform
Circa 1970



RJM Cross and Ring
Picture from www.rjmgeneral.org

As soon as Berthe entered the convent, and because she was of outstanding maturity for her age, she started work as a teacher in the dressmaking process: pattern, cutting out, assembly, finishing and quality control. She proudly practiced this profession over the next 30 years.



Cutting Room, Convent of Jésus-Marie, About 1920
 Québec City Archives, N031347

Even while Berthe was a working nun, she continued to perfect her skills by studying and earning diplomas. Here is her curriculum:

- 1942-1944: Hand-weaving classes, Québec City School of Fine Arts
- 1944: Cutting and sewing classes, Québec Government Program
- 1944-1945: Domestic Studies, Family Institute of Loretteville
- 1947: Domestic Competencies, Family Institute of Trois-Pistoles
- 1948: Special weaving techniques, Family Institute of Trois-Pistoles
- 1948: First Aid course
- 1961: Typing course

After fifteen years of religious devotion to her community, Berthe was promoted to the important task of sub-novice mistress in the Novitiate between 1956 and 1969. Berthe knew how to teach, with grace and kindness, the art of sewing.

In 1969, Berthe is now 62 years old and it was time for her to cut down on her work and move to the provincial house called "Villa Sous-les-Bois," at 2033 Chemin Saint-Louis, in Sillery. This house is where we would go and visit her every time we went to Québec City.



Villa Sous-les-Bois, Religieuses de Jésus-Marie
Québec City Archives

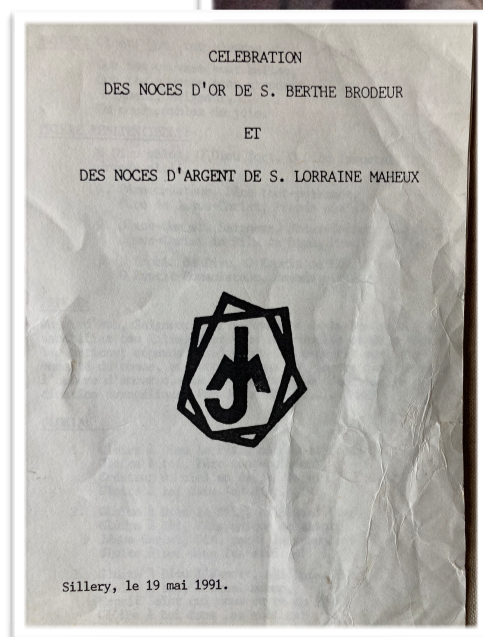
The original villa was built in 1843 for the Pemberton brothers who were ship builders. Here's a picture of the villa in her prime years. You can notice the villa that is now embedded within the provincial house (central part).



Villa Sous-les-Bois
Sillery Historical Society, Fonds Lamontagne

Throughout her years of religious life, Berthe was a semi-cloistered nun, which means that they were able to go outside the convent and not live behind “bars.” She would mostly stay at the convent, but could get special permission to go visit her family, like she did in 1976, in Providence, Rhode Island, to visit her brother Albert, who was a retired priest at the Saint-Hyacinthe Seminary, or to take classes. At the Villa Sous-les-Bois, tante Berthe had different occupations between 1969 and 1975 such as: working in the linen room with the white (meaning bleaching technique) and in the vestiaire with the black dresses, various parish activities, helping the poor and the prayer group. In 1975 and until 1977, she was sent as a superior of a residence of five nuns in Cookshire, Québec. According to her niece, she did not really like being in Cookshire. That is why she came back to the provincial house in Sillery where she was a receptionist and worked again in the linen room and vestiaire.

On May 19, 1991, tante Berthe was the guest of honor at a celebration of her 50th anniversary of religious life. A big event was organized and many family members from all over came to celebrate this great moment in her life, with her. In the following picture, you can see her sitting in the middle with her sister Germaine (left) and myself (right). Her nieces, nephews, grandnieces and nephews and great-grandniece (me) were there.



Noces d'or de Soeur Berthe Brodeur Family Picture
Collection of Caroline Meilleur

On November 16, 1994, she entered the last phase of her long and faithful life and moved to the infirmary of the convent. Her health was fragile and she remained there until her death on February 21, 2004. She was 96 years old. Her burial was on February 25th and she rests in the cemetery of the convent. Below is the last picture of tante Berthe and me taken in 2002.



I will be forever grateful that I had the privilege of knowing, visiting and exchanging handwritten letters with her. Her happiness, kindness, patience, true devotion and hard work made her a "saint" to me. This is what she wrote in the last years of her long life that I have loosely translated for you:

"This stage of life is important. Life is a gift, a vocation, and it must be lived with gratitude until the very last moment. We should not live this part as a preparation for death, but as growth within love. We need to learn to grow old and accept it, but also keep working hard in helping others the best we can. It is a time where we must live our spirituality of detachment with the joy of remembering all that the Lord has allowed us to do in this life that was entirely consecrated to Him. The importance in this final phase of life is not to do it, but to be. During our existence, we say our goodbyes to the ones who go away, without thinking, that one fine day, it will be time to say our goodbyes to the ones who are staying."

- Sr. Berthe Brodeur, R.J.M. (1907-2004)