

My Family History, begun in the 1990s and now at 300 plus pages, and counting, includes memories about:

Superstitions and Beliefs

My mother and father left the Province of Québec in the 1920s so that my dad could obtain work in Detroit, Michigan. Eventually, they became United States citizens after World War II was declared. They brought with them and preserved the traditions and songs that filled my childhood. In particular, the religion and culture of turn-of-the-century French Canada influenced many of my mother's and father's beliefs and practices. Here are a few.

Mom jealously guarded a container of Holy Water obtained from Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré on one of our visits there, applying it sparingly to her aches and pains. During thunderstorms (and World War II blackouts), local Holy Water would be sprinkled on doors and windows in the sign of the cross and on all of us as a protection. Candles would be lit, often candles blessed on February 2, Candlemas Day, and we would kneel to pray together. Palms blessed on Palm Sunday were looped or woven and positioned, usually behind pictures in the house, to protect us. They were not to be disturbed the whole year, no matter how dusty they became. These palms were to be burnt each year as new ones were blessed to begin the cycle again during Easter Week.

Dad repeated his father's traditional paternal blessing on New Year's Day. From oldest to youngest, we all knelt before him in turn. I was fortunate to be able to record his blessing a few years before he died. It was first recorded on eight millimeter film and is now on video tape and a CD. All of his surviving four children, the spouses of those who were married, and the twelve grandchildren filed in one by one, the baby carried in last by his eldest sister. I must say there was much jollity as well as solemnity in Dad's version of the traditional paternal blessing!

When Mom had misplaced or lost an item, she would recite this verse:

Bon Saint-Antoine, qui a brulé sa bedaine
sur le bord de son chaudron, exaucer moi!

Good Saint Anthony, who burned his pot-belly
on the edge of his cauldron, answer my prayer.

I am sure I understood the word "bedaine" to mean his belly-button, *nombril*, and an old dictionary agrees; but the printed translation I found uses the term "pot-belly." Censorship??

Other sayings and beliefs punctuated our lives. Robert-Lionel Séguin, a folklorist, discussed some of the sayings current in his family and found they had deep roots in France.¹ His family believed that killing a spider foreshadowed abundance, and his research discovered that in the French countryside, spiders were revered. My mother's belief was that we were not to kill spiders because even seeing one meant we would come into money. Meeting a black cat and spilling a salt shaker presaged bad luck, two more beliefs Séguin traced to France. He cites several others that are familiar to me.

If your nose itched, you would kiss a fool. A dog howling at night predicted the death of a loved one, as did a clock that stopped by itself. Séguin reports that, in Bretagne (Brittany), the clock was said to stop at the precise hour of death of someone who lived in the house. My parents also

allowed this belief to influence their thoughts. While most of my friends looked with pleasure on pulling the wish-bone of the turkey at Thanksgiving, my mother never seemed to enjoy this game. She had been indoctrinated to believe that the one who held the side of the bone that cracked would be first to die, a belief held in the Séguin family as well. Both my mom and my dad used to speak of the thickness of an onion's skin as a prognosticator of winter: A thin skin meant a mild winter, a thick one a long and cold winter. This belief is current in Dauphiné, Séguin says, and cites a popular saying:

Oignon bien habillé
Verra forte gelée

A well-dressed onion
will see a hard frost

My mother's mother's most distant ancestor in France was from Dauphiné, André Jarret, *sieur de Beaugard*.

Frogs that “rib-bit” more loudly than usual signify rain to come, also believed in Languedoc, and flies that are more aggressive than usual indicate the same thing in the old provinces of Berry, Beauce, and Perche. If the moon is surrounded by a cloudy halo, that also means rain, a saying found in old Provence.

Hair had special significance. Pierre DesRuisseaux reports that the longer a baby's hair was allowed to grow without being cut, the more intelligent that child would be.² Is this why Mom did not cut my brother's hair for such a long time? (He was six when he had his first haircut.) My aunt, Sister Marie-de-Saint-Florian (Marguerite Boivin), fashioned cuttings of hair from family members—my grandparents, aunts and uncles—into a framed display that included pieces of blessed palm formed into circles and anchors. I still have it. Each bit of hair is identified by a number, although time has caused some of the numbers to break loose. Mom also saved swatches of hair from me and my brother and sisters. I still have these, also. And she believed seriously the saying that plucking one white hair would cause ten more to grow!

Several beliefs concerned pregnancy. One that affected me personally held that a pregnant woman frightened by something would bear a child with a birthmark in the shape of the source of the fright. I was born with a birthmark resembling a mouse! It is gone now. I also had marks on my face which my mother assiduously rubbed with cream to make them disappear. She never told me the shapes of these marks. She did say, though, that she was so concerned about them she did nothing about the others, including a dark brown one below my left knee that became my emblem, as a child, to learn how to tell left from right.

Other beliefs caused Mom much worry and some inconvenience. When we left the house and she had forgotten something there, she would refuse to return to get it, saying this would be bad luck, especially if we were beginning a long trip. I guess she never heard the “fail-safe” provision current in Gaspésie and other sections of Canada. Supposedly, if one must return home, staying there for a few minutes or even long enough to say an “Our Father” before again setting out is enough to nullify any calamity.³ Mom also believed that happiness and joy presaged sadness and tragedy. Often in the middle of laughter, she would stop and say she would be crying tomorrow.

Dad spoke of planting during moon cycles. Root crops entered the soil in the dark of the moon, others at full moon. Cucumbers were to be planted about the time of Uncle Albert's June birthday, and Dad would remind Uncle Albert of this during his birthday calls. Mom and Dad kept in touch with the relatives living in Canada by phone or by letter and through almost annual visits there by us or visits from them to our home.

Dad often used to tease my mother, asking her whether she remembered which of them got into bed first on their wedding night. Evidently, the one who did would be the first to die. Mom never answered. But then Dad would start singing:

Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu'il fait bon dormir.

Au jardin de mon père
Les lauriers sont fleuris;
Au jardin de mon père,
Les Lauriers sont fleuris;
Tous les oiseaux du monde
Vont-y faire leur nid.

Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu'il fait bon dormir.⁴

The refrain says it is good, so good, to sleep next to my sweetheart, "ma blonde," and the verse speaks of the garden of the singer's father, where the laurels are blooming, and all the birds in the world are making their nests. The song always made my mother smile quietly.

If your ears ring, someone is talking about you. If your slip shows, you are going to a wedding. If you break a mirror, seven years bad luck. If a bird flies against your window and dies, someone you know will also die. If you accidentally use someone's name when you really mean another person, the name you speak refers to someone who is thinking of you. All of these were items of popular belief I absorbed as I was growing up. Certainly, I must have heard some of them from my many childhood friends and their parents, a group whose national influences included not only my parents' French Canadian, but Irish, Scottish, German, Hungarian, Polish, Italian, Maltese, *etc.*, *etc.* (My neighborhood in Southwest Detroit was truly a small United Nations!) This brief look at the superstitions that can be traced to France, though, must indicate a lasting legacy.

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¹ Robert-Lionel Séguin, "Le Présage dans la Littérature Orale," *Les Cahiers des Dix*, Numéro 36, Québec, 1971, pp. 163-177.

² Pierre DesRuisseaux, *Croyances et Pratiques Populaires au Canada Français*, Montréal: Éditions du Jour, 1973, pp. 11 -12.

³ DesRuisseaux, p. 100.

⁴ Lyrics taken from Pierre Daignault, *Chantons et Dansons ... à la Canadienne*, Montréal: Les Éditions Jacmond, 1972.