



Chapter 5

Les Américains

by
Solange Poulin Turcotte



In the year following the death of Joseph's father, the young family emigrated to Skowhegan, Maine, in search of employment. It is a popular family myth that the three traveled south by horse and buggy, but the reality, lately revealed to the family by Solange, is that the three of them traveled by railroad from Canada to Skowhegan, Maine. There was a train station in Skowhegan until the early 40s. The station was located where the Aubuchon Hardware and the Milburn Hotel are now. They rented a house on Free Street.¹ Pèpère's first employment in support of his family seems to have been working at odd jobs. It is unknown if he went back to logging on the river at this time, probably not. Eventually he succeeded in obtaining permanent employment at a local spinning mill. Mémère took care of the children. There were nine siblings in all (in order of birth): Gaston Gerard (Gus, 1/28/22), Joseph Guy (Guy, 10/15/23), Marie L. Yvette (Yvette, 10/15/24), Marie Antoinette Solange (Solange, 9/15/26), Marie-Marthe (Martha, 3/20/29), Joseph Victor (Victor, 3/18/31), Joseph Marius Roger (Roger, 11/27/33), George (2/22/35), and Marie Bernadette (usually called Bunny, 11/19/37); five boys and four girls.

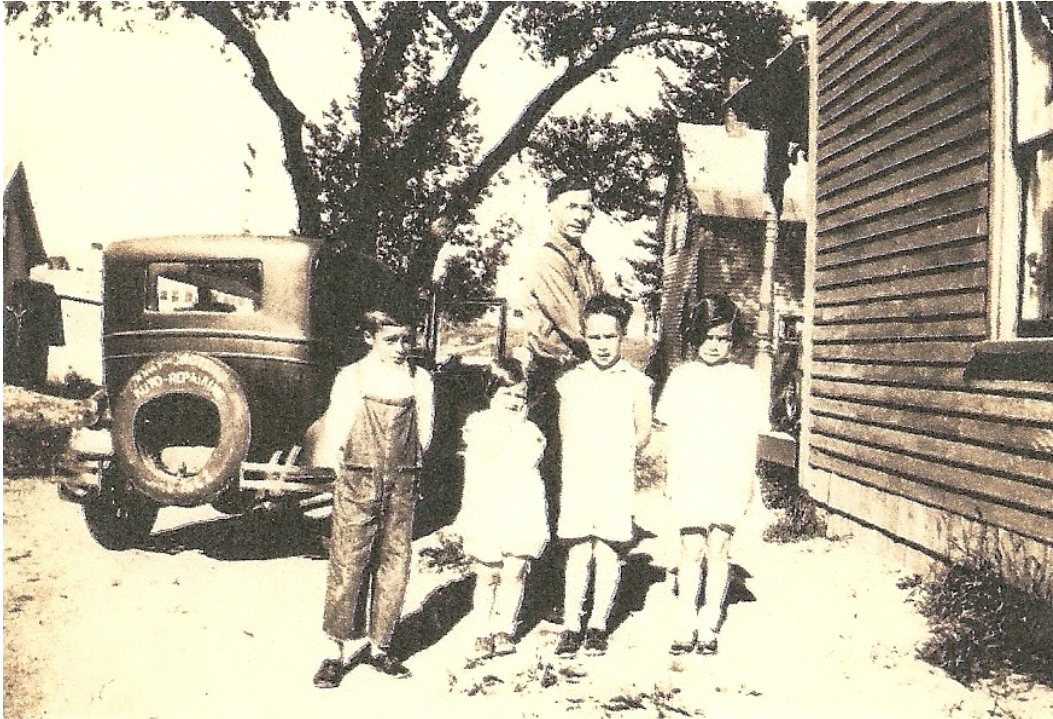
Solange: "I was born on Wednesday 9/15/26 in Skowhegan, Maine, in a house on Free Street which my parents were renting. I weighed in at eight pounds, but my mother didn't remember the time of day. My mother had nine children and certainly didn't have time to keep any records on each of us. At that time the President of the United States was Calvin Coolidge, Republican; Vice-President was Charles Dawes. Bread was 10¢ a pound, milk was 56¢ a gallon, gas was 23¢ a gallon and stamps were 2¢ a letter. According to the Chinese zodiac it was the year of the Tiger. Martha was the last one to be born in the house on Free Street. When I was eight months old, my mother was in the process of ironing and I was crawling about on the floor when I pulled the hot iron down onto me. I have a scar on my left upper arm as a result of that episode. When I was about four years old, we moved to the house my parents bought on North Avenue. My only recollection of the house on Free Street is standing in front of the house and enjoying the pouring rain, sans raincoat."²

"Our house on North Avenue didn't have a toilet till my father had one installed when he bought the house. He put it in the smallest of the three rooms upstairs. It wasn't till the forties that my parents were able to afford to have a tub and lavatory installed there, and to have oil heat in the kitchen stove. In the bathroom was a cot where one of us kids used to sleep. Downstairs there were also three rooms. We had two sleeper sofas in the living room. A large round table was in the dining room and a buffet with a clock that chimed the hours. It was rather comforting to hear the chimes if you happened to be wakeful some night and be able to know how many more hours till morning. In the kitchen was a old slate sink, a Maytag wringer washer, (no fridge), a wood-burning cook stove, Kineo was the name on it. The reason that I remember the name is because my brother Joe (Guy) got branded with the 'O' on his backside one winter morning while trying to get warm before dressing. The flap on his long-johns was gaping and he got too close to the stove. (I often wondered if the mark was on Joe when he grew up.) We had a pot bellied stove in the front room. It was dragged in from the shed in the fall and moved out in the spring. We burned wood in that stove and also in the kitchen cook stove, summer and winter. Consequently every summer there was wood to be cut, about eight cords a year. After it was chopped into stove-size pieces, it was piled up in the shed. Mama led the brigade – and all of us, down to the smallest, carried in wood to be

¹ Memories of Martha Poulin Kammer and Solange Poulin Turcotte.

² Memoire by Solange Poulin Turcotte, 1.

piled. We usually did this in the evening in the fall. My mother and father used to bake about sixteen loaves of bread every week, summer and winter. They had a huge bread mixing machine, but it ran on manpower. There was huge woodbox behind the stove where Mama put eight loaves at a time to rise; it was warm in that corner. When she wasn't using it for bread, it was one of our favorite places to play or to lie down, especially in the winter time.”³



Circa 1930 looking east, L-R: Gaston (8), Solange (4), Guy (7), Yvette (6) Pèpère in background.

The photo above was taken shortly after the family moved to North Avenue from Free Street. The large oak in the background is the one that Guy climbed when the family dog chased him (Rex did not know Guy yet). The corner of the open porch can be seen. The car must have belonged to a neighbor. “I don’t know when they enclosed the porch but before that we (the four oldest) used to sleep out there lying on a blanket (ouch!) with one to cover us in the summer when we had company from Canada and during Fair Week so we could watch the fireworks.”⁴

“Besides not having any labor-saving appliances, Mama did dressmaking and alterations for people in the neighborhood to help toward the family income. My father used to work as a log driver on the Kennebec River, but I don’t have any personal recollections of those days. I only remember the time when he worked in the spinning mill on the night shift; he worked six nights a week. He went to work at 8 p.m. and came home about 6 a.m. It was a very difficult time because there was a depression on then which lasted most of our childhood. When Papa received a full week’s pay, it was \$11.00. I don’t know how my parents managed. People didn’t get food stamps in those days, but there was donated government surplus food at the Town Hall. I remember going with Papa and helping to drag the little wagon to pick up some food. It was on a Saturday morning usually. Papa must have looked like the Pied Piper, because he took some of us kids with him to give Mama a break. She always had plenty of housework, cooking, and

³ Solange, Memoire, 1-2.

⁴ Reminiscences in an email conversation and photo by Solange.

sewing to do. I remember her getting up in the winter about 5 a.m. to light the stoves for cooking, to heat up the house, and to start breakfast before Papa got home from work. Papa had to try to sleep during the day which was very difficult with a house full of kids. Mama was always shushing us. She must have gotten very tired of reminding us to be quiet, especially when we went upstairs to use the bathroom.

I remember that we had a lot of fun playing together. We never went to the neighbors to play but we always had plenty of them come play with us. We didn't need any neighborhood friends; we were a neighborhood by ourselves. We used to play school a lot, using the stairs as the seating arrangement. Because of all these experiences playing school, I could read and write by the time I entered kindergarten, and I was promoted from kindergarten to second grade. It didn't bother me at the time, but now I don't approve of that practice because emotionally you're not as fully developed as your classmates. Academically I did not have any problems; in grammar school I was always one of the top three students in my class. I attended, as we all did, Notre Dame de Lourdes Parochial School, which was staffed by Ursuline nuns. A lot of the kids didn't like the nuns, and there were some confrontations between some of the students and the teachers.

Victor was the first one born in the house on North Avenue, 3/18/31. He was the sixth child. It's a good thing he was a good baby (according to Mama we were all good babies) because she must have been very busy. She nursed every one of us and that takes a lot of time. It's also fortunate that she had a good husband. They worked together to raise us, which took a lot of patience, sacrifice, and hard work. Roger was born 11/27/33. He was a beautiful baby with blond curly hair, but always colicky. He cried a lot and when he was a little older, he walked in his sleep. I don't remember when he stopped. More than once, I was called out of class by the nuns to comfort Roger and sometimes I had to walk him home. He was a real homebody and missed his Mama.

Mama delivered all her children at home, so when her time came we were farmed out to the neighbors. I can remember sleeping at the Sirois's house when George was born 2/22/35. As an infant George was covered with black fuzz; we were all excited because we thought that we got a little black boy. When Bernadette was born, I stayed at the Bushey's house. That was 11/19/37. As the baby of the family she had a lot of doting older siblings, so it's a wonder that she wasn't spoiled rotten. While Mama was recuperating from the birth of Bernadette, Vic who must have been six years old was hit by a truck. He was sliding at the sand bank [across North Avenue], and I don't know if his sled ran out onto the road or if he was dragging his sled on his way home, but Mama saw it happen from her bedroom window. Luckily he was all right except for some bruises and a bump on his head. The doctor was called to check him out. Doctors made house calls in those days.

As the family grew we played musical beds. There were three double sized beds upstairs, plus two cots; downstairs there were two sleeper sofas. All were put to use. When we were growing up, Papa always had a large garden. Since we didn't have enough arable land at home, neighbors with more land than they needed would allow Papa to plant on their land. We were supposed to help with the weeding, but I don't think we were much help. We did more standing around and complaining about the heat and the bugs. I think we kids were quite bratty, because Mama used this expression quite often, "Courage mon ame, le ciel est au bout." And when she had yelled upstairs at us for a third and fourth time to quiet down and go to sleep, she would say, "Vous allez payer pour mes pas." If Papa wasn't there to back her up, it took a little longer for us to behave. I guess we all had too much energy. Poor Mama – and she had to have a lot of energy, too, to cope with us, getting as little sleep as she did. She never went to bed before midnight and got up at 5 a.m.

Mama always sang when she did the laundry. I remember telling her what a lovely voice she had and how beautiful she was. She just smiled and continued singing. She used the Maytag washer and two tubs for rinsing. She always had a huge pile of clothes, but that didn't daunt her. She actually enjoyed her

work. She was always a happy person and accepted life as it was dealt. Another of her sayings was “L’homme propose mais Dieu dispose.” My parents were good Christians. They believed and lived the Word of God. They tried to instill in us the value of prayer and sacrifice and the practice of religion. I hope we weren’t a disappointment to them. I think we all did our best to live by their example. We said the rosary together every evening before supper. It seems that just kneeling was a signal to start giggling. Sometimes Mama had a hard time to keep from joining in. Not so Papa; he was made of sterner stuff. We went to Mass every Sunday morning and Benediction every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m. During Lent we got up earlier and went to Mass every morning before school started and Saturdays as well. It was mighty cold walking to school during the winter. We went to the parochial school from K to eighth grade. We all had bookbags to carry because we always had plenty of homework – our bookbags were homemade.”⁵



Circa 1932 or 33 L-R: Gaston (10-11), Guy (9-10), Solange (6-7), Yvette (8-9), Martha in window (4).

“I don’t remember the occasion [of the picture] but it must have been some event at school. Gus liked to make model airplanes and woe to we who were watching if we touched anything. He threatened us with a knuckle sandwich. He had a paper route so was able to buy his airplane kits. We, the girls, versus the boys, had to take turns doing the dishes after supper. The dishwasher had to clean the stove and the sink and the dryer had to sweep the floor. After we finished is when we would wrestle....Gus against the rest of us. We didn’t stand a chance. Mama kept a close eye on us so no one would commit mayhem. Gaston was a promoter!! He liked to organize games and even included the girls.”⁶

“Gaston was the oldest of my brothers and he was a promoter. He organized the ball games, tag games, and was always challenging us to take him down. When the wrestling got too noisy, too much crying and whining, or in danger that somebody might get hurt, Mama would step in. Mama was usually stuck with the job of disciplining us, but only because she was on hand. When Papa was home, there was no question of anyone defying his orders, although I don’t think he ever struck any one of us. We were

⁵ Solange Memoire, 2-3.

⁶ Reminiscences and photo by Solange Poulin Turcotte.

very intimidated by his large hands and didn't believe in tempting fate. We weren't allowed to play in the neighbors' yards so consequently our yard was always overrun with kids. Gaston built us a sort of round-about. It was a long plank like a teeter board which was laid across a post which was sunk into the ground. He drove a spike into the center of the plank and into the top of the post; the diameter of the post was about a foot. Someone sat on each end and another one pushed it around. When the kids started horsing around and falling off, Mama made him take it apart. I remember it was a lot of fun and we hated to see it taken down.⁷

"When he was 12 or 13, mama was looking for Gaston and I found him at the neighbor's. He and Walter Dube were smoking in their barn! Walter's grandfather had a huge horse, either a Percheron or a Clydesdale and of course plenty of hay around – the worse place to be smoking. Mama scolded him all the way home. That made me feel bad about tattling. When he was 13 or 14 Gus made a merry-go-round for us. It consisted of a big board balanced on a tree trunk with a spike through the middle. We sat on each end and someone would push us around. It was a lot of fun. It was like we were two families, the four oldest and five youngest as two sets. I didn't have much interaction with the younger except as big sister or baby sitter."⁸

"While I was still in high school, my parents were able to afford to have the kitchen stove converted to oil, and they put in a hot water heater so we had hot and cold water in the sink. The hot water heater stood behind the cook stove because the water coils had to go around the oil burners. We still didn't have a complete bathroom, so we had to continue lugging water upstairs and bathing in a wash tub.



Gus's copy of his father's certificate of citizenship; he became a US citizen in 1935.⁹

⁷ Solange Memoire, 4-5.

⁸ Reminiscences in an email conversation by Solange.

⁹ From Gus Poulin's wartime Scrapbook.

World War II was declared during my junior year of high school, and the salaries started to rise. I was earning 30 cents an hour before leaving for nursing school. My parents were able to put in a new bathroom and to replace the slate sink. They eventually remodeled the whole kitchen and had white metal cabinets installed, which was the style in those days. All this was done about the time Gaston and Guy got out of the service in 1946. It was about this time that they also finished off part of the shed to make a bedroom for the boys.



The Poulin Family in 1941: L-R (back row) Martha, Mémère, Yvette, Victor, Gaston, Solange, and Pèpère; (front row) George, Bernadette (Bunny), and Roger; the only one missing is Guy (*Photo Courtesy of Bernadette Poulin Karter*)

My father died March 31, 1952, from a coronary thrombosis induced by electroshock treatment for depression. (Now there are medicines that are more effective and safer). Victor and Roger were in the service and Martha entered the Nunnery, so there were only Bernadette and George with Mama at home. It's a good thing she had her dressmaking skills to supplement her income from Social Security. She also did babysitting but usually just for her grand kids. I know she was shattered when Papa died, but afterward you never heard her complain about her situation. (C'est la vie.) She was always optimistic. Papa was the pessimist. I don't know how she did it but she sent George and Bernadette to boarding school for their high school education." Mémère died of cancer of the liver and bowels on 4/30/71.¹⁰

[Here the grandchildren can add their own histories of their family life]

¹⁰ Solange Memoire, 6-11. The story of Gus and Guy in WWII is told in another book entitled *Gus and Guy, and Their Many Air Force Friends during World War II*. This story can be found at: <http://entrada1598.com/books/Marauder/G&G.pdf>

“La Bastringue”
(4/4 Time)

Mademoiselle, voulez vous danser?
La bastringue, la bastringue,
Mademoiselle, voulez vous danser?
La bastringue va commencer.

Oui, monsieur, je veux bien danser.
La bastringue, la bastringue,
Oui, monsieur, je veux bien danser,
C'est pour vous accompagner.

Mademoiselle, il faut nous arrêter...
La bastringue, la bastringue,
Mademoiselle, il faut nous arrêter...
Vous aller vous fatiguer.

Non, monsieur, je sais bien danser...
La bastringue, la bastringue,
Non, monsieur, je sais bien danser...
Je suis prête à recommencer.

Mademoiselle, j'n peux plus danser...
La bastringue, la bastringue,
Mademoiselle, j'n peux plus danser...
Parce que j'en ai des cors aux pieds!

Miss, would you like to dance?
The bastringue, the bastringue.
Miss, would you like to dance?
The Bastringue is about to begin.

Yes, mister, I like to dance,
The bastringue, the bastringue.
Yes, mister, I like to dance,
Especially if you accompany me.

Miss, we must stop.
The bastringue, the bastringue.
Miss, we must stop.
You will be tired.

No mister, I like dancing.
The bastringue, the bastringue.
No mister, I like dancing.
I'm ready to go again.

Miss, I can't dance any more.
The bastringue, the bastringue.
Miss, I can't dance any more.
Because I have corns on my feet!

This immensely popular Canadian dance tune has its origins in the 1600-1700s. By the early 1800s it was very popular in New England and appeared in “Wilson’s Companion to the Ballroom” in 1816. It is a song about an old man who asks a young girl to dance but soon regrets it. His feet are hurting and he pretends to be concerned that she is tired, but she is not. The song ends with him finally admitting the truth. They take their folk songs seriously in Quebec; in the 1950s Charles Marius Barbeau recorded 9,000 versions of 5,000 tunes in a few years of research. “They consider them ‘...the very breath of our life...’” The Marius Barbeau Museum is located in St-Joseph, P.Q. He also collected 400 folk stories.

Ancestors of my paternal grandfather (the Poulin side):

Pascal Poulain married 1615 Marie Levert in Rouen, Normadie, France.

New World Generations:

- 1) Claude Poulain, carpenter, married 1639 to Jeanne Mercier at Quebec
- 2) Martin Poulain, occupation unknown, married 1688 to Jeanne Barrette at Ste-Anne, P.Q.
- 3) Jean Poulain, farmer, married 1711 to Agnes Druoin at Chateau-Richer, P.Q.
- 4) Joseph Poulin, farmer, married 1739 to Angelique Pare at Ste-Anne, P.Q.
- 5) Joseph Poulin fils, farmer, married 1762 to Angelique Rodrigue at St-Joseph, P.Q.
- 6) Jean Poulin, farmer, married 1792 to Charlotte Roy at St-Francois, P.Q.
- 7) Pierre Poulin, farmer married 1829 to Apolline Vachon at St-Joseph, P.Q.
- 8) Prosper Poulin, farmer, married 1861 to Caroline Gilbert at St-Francois, P.Q.
- 9) Thomas Poulin, farmer, married 1888 to Elmina Plante at St-Francois, P.Q.
- 10) Joseph William Poulin, logger and millworker, married 1921 to Marie Elise Alida Lessard at St-Joseph, P.Q.
- 11) Gaston Gerard Poulin, upholsterer, married 1948 to Theresa Provencher at Skowhegan, Maine.

Ancestors of my paternal grandmother (the Lessard side):

Jacques de Lessart married Marie Herson at Chambois, Normadie, France

New World Ancestors:

- 1) Etienne de Lessart married 1652 to Marguerite Sevestre at Ste-Anne de Beaupre.
- 2) Etienne Lessart married 1679 to Marie Poulain (Claude and Jeanne's 2nd Marie).
- 3) Prisque Lessard married 1699 to Marie Jacob.
- 4) Francois-Malo Lessard married 1724 to Angélique Racine (moved to Beauce).
- 5) Francois Lessard married 1767 to Marie Anne Gagne.
- 6) Francois Lessard married 1802 to Marie Gilbert.
- 7) Basile-Elie Lessard married 1832 to Angele Labbe (an Amerindian).
- 8) George Lessard married 1859 to Dina Tardif.
- 9) Amedee Lessard married 1887 to Celina Lessard (cousins).
- 10) Marie Elise Alida Lessard married 1921 to Joseph Poulin.

Ancestors of my maternal grandfather (the Provencher side) are completely unknown.

Arthur Provencher married Emma Laney. It was said that Arthur came from New Hampshire.

Ancestors of my maternal grandmother (the Laney side):

- '1) Antoine Dionne married Catherine Ivory 1660 in France (migrated to New France)
- '2) Bernard Laisnes married Anne Dionne in 1680 at Quebec City or Chateau-Richer
- '3) Pierre Laisnes married Marguerite Plante 1720 at St.-Jean Parish, Isle d'Orleans
- '4) Jean-Marie Laisnes married Basilisse Audet 1764 at St.-Jean Parish
- '5) Jean Laisne married Louise Guffard 1796 at St.-Charles
- '6) Michel Laisne married Theotiste Bilodeau (marriage records are still undiscovered)
- '7) Paul Laine married Oveline Bouffard 1862 at St.-Victor, Beauce, P.Q.
- '8) Theophile Laney married Philomene Jolin, Beauce, P.Q. (date unknown)
- '9) Emma Laney married Arthur Provencher, Skowhegan, Maine