STORIES MY AUNT TOLD ME:  
Recollections of 96 years by Simone Haux  
As told to J.P. Leguerrier

Editor’s Preface:

Over a period of time spanning several years, I had the opportunity of a lifetime to listen to some incredible stories and anecdotes told to me by my aunt Simone, my Dad’s sister, who lived in Hamburg, New York. Throughout my life, I had enjoyed her hospitality, her sense of humour, her great cooking abilities, and her positive outlook on life. But I think it was her crisp memory as she reflected on the past of growing up in a small, rural village in Ontario and her war time stories, that impressed me the most.

I quickly realized that she was what the ancient Celtic tribes of Europe would have called a “seanchai”, which means “bearer of old lore”; such a person was the repository of all of that clan’s knowledge of past events, customs, genealogy, and history. In ancient cultures, the “seanchai” was second only in importance after the Clan Chieftain. In the Leguerrier family, Simone was our clan’s “seanchai”, the custodian of our past.

My aunt had this great gift for remembering events, people and things going back over ninety years. I can only hope to remember half the things she could when I get to a certain age!

Following is a sampler of her stories.

My Father, Mastaï, 1882 – 1960:

He would hitch his horse and buggy, and leave Clarence Creek around 9 PM, ride all night to Ottawa and then arrive at the Ottawa Byward Market to sell the farm’s produce. He would do this a couple of times a week. Once everything was sold, he would stop to buy used clothing from a clothing store, to be used later by his wife to restyle the clothes for the kids.

At suppertime, he would come in from the fields, wash up, and Mom would get him his favourite vest, which he would proceed to put on, and only then was everyone permitted to sit down for the evening meal.

I remember in the back of the house we had honey bees, between the apple orchard and the clover patch.

When asked a question, my father had the habit of puffing on his pipe first, as people waited for the answer, before finally answering.
“Easter Water”: on Easter morning, he would get up before sunrise, put a yoke on his back with two water buckets, one on each side, and go draw some "Easter Water" from the natural spring that flowed freely in the back of the house. Everyone got up to drink this ice cold, refreshing, and "special" water.

“Frie-co”: whenever someone slaughtered a pig, the families in our "rang" would have what was called a "frie-co": whoever was killing and roasting a pig would invite the other families over to share in the meat, and the favour would be reciprocated later on, so no meat was wasted, in the days before refrigerators.

My Mother, Cordélia, 1889 – 1964:

She would have the kids look through the Eaton's Catalogue, and they would choose the style of clothing they wished for. Then the kids would take apart the used clothing with razor blades that father had picked up on one of his trips to Ottawa, and she, along with her Mom, would resize the clothes to fit the children. All the Leguerrier kids always had nice clothes to wear because Mom and Grandma were great seamstresses.

A neighbour's daughter came over once to enquire about playing with some of the siblings, Mom asked her what she wanted but then told her: “the kids don't play here, they have chores to do”.

*Editor’s Note: with sixteen children in the house, it was no doubt extremely important that everyone pitch in, and that an orderly distribution of chores be established.*

One morning, one of the kids didn't have any clean socks to wear to school, so without hesitation, she got out the sock maker and in less than an hour, she had knitted a brand new pair of socks ready on the sock machine.

To supplement the family income, Mom worked on a “métier”, or loom, doing rugs, clothing, and all sorts of crafts to make ends meet.

We had all the modern conveniences of the time: foot operated butter churn, washing machine, etc. Before we had the washing machine, we had a woman from the village come in to do our laundry.

In the morning, we all had a huge cauldron of oatmeal.

Sundays we usually had visitors from the city come in for a big breakfast of “grillades” and a huge omelette.

We never ate our chickens: they were “pets”.
When Ernestine was 12, she told our Mom that she would look younger if she cut her hair. She had long hair which she tied in a bun. After she cut it, she did look younger, but Dad wasn’t very happy with the change.

For a sore throat, Mom would wrap a wool sock dipped in hot vinegar around our neck.

For an ear ache, we would heat up a small bag of salt and press it to our ear.

My Grand-Father, Emile Richer:

He injured his arm, falling from a hayloft, at some point in time: after that, I think he was never able to do heavy work. He was very proud of his horses, and I have this picture of him in my mind polishing up the brass tack for the horse carriage in order to go to mass on Sundays.

Around Holiday time, my grand parents and their family would hitch up a sleigh and drive to Ste. Marthe, Vaudreuil County, the ancestral home, for the Holidays. They would carry a bottle of whisky blanc and pass it around to keep warm during the trip.

We used to say Grand-Father looked like a "vieux juif", with his long beard. He had a spinster sister, “Elizire”, or “Elzie”; she was very nice to us kids. She always wore black clothes. She eventually was sent to L’Orignal, when she got too old, where there was the only Senior’s Residence in the Province.

My Grand-Mother, Nathalie Cheff:

She was trained as a professional seamstress for doing men’s suits. She was a very active person. Her and her husband owned three houses in Hull and these were lost in the great Hull fire of 1900. They didn't have "real" insurance, they only paid 25 cents a year to St. Anthony's charity as a form of "divine" insurance.
Editor’s note: On the 1901 Census, they are found living in Clarence Creek.

When she was young, her father died and the Mother couldn't support the five kids, so Nathalie was sent to Montreal to live with two spinster sisters and their bachelor brother. In return for maid duties, she was given an education as a professional seamstress. She also worked as a cook for men working on the cross country railway. She was very spunky.

In the 1911 Census, all her kids are gone, except for Florida Régimbald, age 15, who was adopted because her Mom had a drinking problem, and her father had died. Florida was one of three children and she was thought to be the hardest of the three kids to control, so the Richer’s took her in.

After her husband Emile died, she stayed with her son, Maxime Richer in Hammond. She would get him to saddle up her buggy so she could go visit "Cord" (Cordélia) in Clarence Creek.

My brother Armand says that he remembers she lived with us in Mastaï's house, where she died. He says they had to keep an eye on her because she suffered from Alzheimer, and would sometimes wander away. She didn't remember who or where she was.

Editor’s Note: The Cheff’s are said to be descendants of Andreas Schaffer, a Hessian German soldier brought to Canada to fight with British troops in the American Revolutionary War.

My other Grand-Mother, Delima Beauchamp:

She told us kids she didn’t like our Mother: what a thing to say to kids!

My Brother, Armand:

We kids were all really “pissed off” when Armand was born the day after Christmas, ruining all our planned Holiday outings!

He was the only one in the family who was able to come to my wedding. He wasn’t expected, so I had someone else lined up to give me away, but when Armand showed up, that person said that my brother should have priority to give the bride away.

He came by train, and then hitchhikded the rest of the way to Niagara. He came with an Air Force buddy. Years later, he always got along great with Al, who was also a great card player, and they both liked to discuss investments.
My Brothers Gustave and Simon:

They were the jokers of the family, but they didn’t get along together.

Simon was the “cookie guy” in the family: he loved to bake cookies, especially buttermilk. We would trade chores with him to free him up so he could bake cookies for us.

My Brother, Ernest:

When he was sixteen or seventeen, he had a favourite horse, which he put out to pasture to graze the fresh Spring grass, but he left it out too long, it ate too much grass, and started to bloat. Ernest tried to get a vet but to no avail. The horse exploded, and Ernest was broken hearted, and cried. Ernest cared a lot about animals and people.

Ernest was extremely kind to everyone. One day when I sprained my knee feeding his horse, he felt responsible and he would take me to Rockland by buggy for my electric therapies.

Ernest always hated how Simon was rough with the horses. If Simon felt they weren’t going fast enough, he would whip them.

My Brother, Charlie:

He was a big support to me when Al died, we were very close. When Armand and Chuck came to Hamburg, Al would take them up to Buffalo to see the burlesque shows. They had a big laugh about that.

Charlie use to say that he felt like our father Mastaî was more like his grandfather, he was so old: when Charlie was born, Dad was 48, and when Charlie became a teenager, our father was 61 years old.
**My Brother, Jules:**

He always read a lot, and had a habit of tapping his foot while doing so.

The parish priest was very impressed with him, and paid his tuition to become a priest.

**My Brother, Jean Noël:**

At school, he would show off by standing up and answering the questions before the teacher had finished the question. His schoolmates weren’t impressed with that...

He went into the monastery at age 12. A World War I vet at the village saw he had talent and decided to further his education by paying part of his tuition.

Those famous Gauloise cigarettes he smoked, what a smell! He was the “separatist” of the family.

Al and I visited him in Halifax when he was billeted with the Archbishop of Halifax, Monsignor Jim Hayes. We stayed in the Archbishop’s Palace on the Northwest Arm.

**My Sister, Ernestine:**

She was a hard working, talented (she was a seamstress like my Mom), and very strong-willed person. When she first started going out with Ollie, he showed up drunk for their first date. She told him to sober up or don’t come around again. He did, and they became life-long partners. Ollie was very devoted to her.

Ernestine was very serious. When me, Thérèse or Angéline would laugh at something trivial, she would say “grow up”: we were ten or twelve, then! I told her it’s not a sin to smile...

She worked for a Cheff relative in his store on the Byward Market, for very little money. She was always short, so she wore high heels, even when working. They would bring in a slab of meat, and she would carve it up. She would bake a dozen pies before the store opened.

She was a couple of years older than me, but when she went to dances, she would take me along.

One Easter, she bought me a really nice blue coat and matching white hat. The purchase cost her $10, when she was making only $15 a month. She always wanted me to have as good as her, but not exactly the same.

**My Sisters, Thérèse and Angéline:**

They were both teachers, they were both quiet and always smiling.
My Sister, Julienne:

She had pneumonia when she was young, and only started walking around at 5 years of age. Today, this would not happen with modern medicine. Eventually, when Mom and Dad got older, they had to send her to a Group Home.

My Father-in-Law, George:

He came from Germany and was always very nice to me. He worked in a war factory during the conflict and then a brass factory in Hamburg: he did beautiful brass work.

He was so proud when we bought our first home, he was impressed because it was made of brick, and that made it better in his mind than a wooden house.

My Mother-in-Law, Cathie:

At first she wasn’t very warm to me, she thought I might be older than Al (I was!), I was French, and I was also Catholic: I had three strikes against me, so I decided to kill her with kindness, and over time, I won her over with my charm...!

When World War II came along and war was declared against Germany, Al asked her what he should do. She told him: “you live in this country, you fight for this country”.

*Editor’s Note: Al, as well as his parents, were all born in Germany and were first generation in America.*

She was very astute and dabbled in real estate and bought quite a few houses in Buffalo, and made money. She advised her husband and Al against playing in the stock market, which she didn’t like.

My Husband, Al:

He was a lot younger than me by nine years, but he said that didn’t matter to him, that age was just a number, and if we didn’t care, no one else should.

We never argued much. If we did, we just went to our separate corners of the house for some time out.

Al was an engineer and worked at the Republic Steel Factories. His first week at the job they had him stoking the furnaces, but eventually he got the proper job. I would get up with him in the mornings, fix his lunch box, and see him off.

Al had a very good mind for investing. He thought we didn’t have enough money on his pension to live on after he retired, so he started dabbling in the stock market. He was very successful at it.
We also starting breeding purebred German Sheperds to make some money, but we had a very hard time parting with even one puppy.

During World War II, he was stationed in a POW camp in Louisiana, and was used as a translator with the German POWs there. He would write to me, and I would write back very short letters, due to my limited English vocabulary.

Al went to England, France, and then to the German border during the war. He was such a good translator that after the war, the US Army would have wanted him to stay on as a translator.

Al was born in Germany and left there when he was 10. Here he was at 18, back in Germany fighting for America. He loved America like his parents.

We never travelled much, we loved our home, we raised our German Sheperds there, and we also loved our cottage near Kingston. Al felt like that was his domain, that cottage.

We went to Germany once to see his sister. Before going, he took German lessons to improve his proficiency. When he got to Germany, his sister was amazed at how he had retained the German language!

After he retired, he amazed me by confessing that he felt I had been skimping on the sandwiches I had made for him all the years he worked: I had only been giving him one slice of meat between the bread, and he would have liked two!

**My Son, Mark:**

We couldn`t have a baby, so I asked Jean Noel if he knew of a way to adopt a child. He hooked us up with a doctor in Hull, Dr. Bourque, who knew of a girl from a good family who was having a child out of wedlock, somewhere in the Laurentians.

When I first got Mark, I would go to his room at night, to watch over him, as I was afraid someone would come through the open window during the night to steal him. He was such a good looking baby. Being blond, people assumed he was Al`s biological child.

We were so happy to get such a beautiful baby in our lives. Every Christmas I would thank God for such a gift, and I would feel a little sad for his biological mother's, and her loss.
Me!

I was sent to Ottawa a couple of times to earn my keep. Once was to the Lalondes to look after their young daughter who had typhoid, which I guess I could have caught from her. But I wrote home after two weeks as I wanted to go home.

When I was eleven years old, I was sent to Ottawa to go work for a doctor as a servant. Eventually though, I got homesick, and took the train home to Bourget, so they could pick me up by wagon there. When I got home, Thérèse who was 8 months old, didn’t recognize me, and she started to cry, only the family dog recognized me and was glad to see me.

On the 1st of May, we would take our shoes off and walk in the ditch to school. The water was so cold that our feet would turn red, and Mom would know what we were up to.

Our one room school in Clarence Creek held 12 kids at the most, and most of the students were Leguerriers.

Edith David was the teacher for most of the Leguerriers in the one-room school in Clarence Creek.

Later on in life, I trained as a Cordon Bleu Cook for a few years, and even worked as a cook for a Canadian Senator, and then as an hostess in the biggest hotel in Niagara Falls at the time, The General Brock.

At some point during the beginning of the war, I decided I wanted to support the war effort and work in a factory. The two options at the time were to build Lancaster bombers in Toronto or to go to Fort Erie and work for Fleet Aircraft making Cornell training planes for new pilots. It was suggested I might enjoy Fort Erie better since it was a smaller place than Toronto. So I made planes on the assembly line, became a “Rosie the Riveter”, and they nicknamed me “Frenchie” at work.
When I started working in the War Factories, Mother wanted me to send all my money home so she could give it to the boys. I told her that I needed money myself to live on. I think in that era, more value was placed on boys than on girls.

My first date with my husband Al was when I was hitchhiking with my girlfriend to go see a movie in Niagara. Al and his friend offered us a ride, and then they went to the movie with us. After a while, they suggested we go to Crystal Beach a very popular spot then, and they had the biggest roller coaster around called “The Cyclone”. I didn’t want to go on it, but they called me a “pooper”, so I went on, but I ended throwing up all over Al's summer uniform!

Al proposed to me on her third date. I told him go fight your war, and then we’ll see. Three years later, we were married.

Recipe for Sweet Sauce, suitable for Duck à l’Orange or other meats:

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\begin{align*}
\text{½ can of concentrated orange juice} \\
\text{½ cup of tomato ketsup} \\
\text{½ tsp. cherry} \\
\text{½ cup currant jelly}
\end{align*}
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Heat until jelly dissolves.
“Life’s a journey, and I had a nice, long ride.”

1913 - 2010