

We Were Not Spoiled

A Franco-American Memoir



Lucille Verreault Ledoux

with Denis Ledoux

Soleil Press

We Were Not Spoiled

A Franco-American Memoir

by

Lucille Ledoux

as told to

Denis Ledoux

SOLEIL PRESS

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Many thanks to Zoé Blowen-Ledoux and Maxim Blowen-Ledoux for their help in editing the manuscript. It is a better memoir because of their insightful contributions. Thanks to Sally Lunt for her many hours of diligent technical and creative work to make *We Were Not Spoiled* the very beautiful book it is.

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A Note from the Co-writer

My mother was born into a world that was different from the one in which we live today. It was different not only because it did not have computers and television and cellular phones, but because of the way she, and the people who surrounded her, thought of life, how they related to one another and what they accepted as the consequences that mattered to their activities.

In *We Were Not Spoiled*, you will read how the first third of my mother's long life was not congruent with how most of you readers have lived yours. I hope her story helps you understand where she came from—not just from Lewiston, Maine, but from her era, her generation and her Franco-American roots—and so understand how some people of her generation made decisions and lived their consequences.

—*—

This is a collaborative work. My mother spoke the stories—sometimes purposefully as we sat to reminisce, sometimes spontaneously as we were engaged in other activities, sometimes with resistance as I probed and she asked “Why do you want to know that? No one will be interested”—and I took notes. When it was time to write, I reviewed the notes and recalled what we had talked about and I wrote from that. There were also recordings we had made on two occasions, years earlier when I had organized story parties. These sessions had been very successful, generating some dozen hours of taped reminiscences—from my mother and from her six children.

There are numerous endnotes in this book. Some are there to provide family information that would have disrupted the

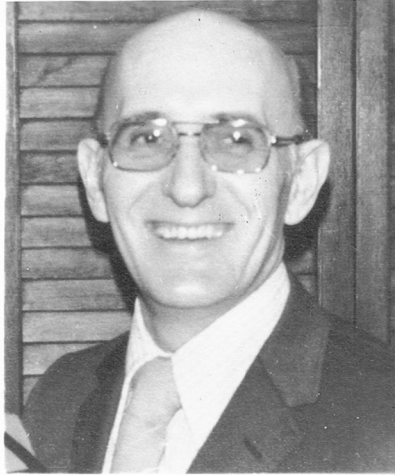
narrative flow of the account, but other endnotes are purely informative. They are there not because I wanted to make *We Were Not Spoiled* into a scholarly tome but because I often wanted to include historical data that my mother was not privy to. I felt this information was necessary to interpret her story.

My mother is not particularly given to introspection. In a number of endnotes, I indulged in my own penchant for introspection by asking questions and by providing possible interpretations behind the story of her lived life. I have identified all endnotes that are entirely mine by my initials.

—*—

I hope you enjoy reading *We were Not Spoiled* and getting to know my mother, Lucille Verreault Ledoux.

— Denis Ledoux
November 2013



A LA DOUCE MEMOIRE DE

Albert R. Ledoux

Epoux bien-aimé de Lucille Verreault

Né à Lewiston, Maine
le 13 juin 1922

Décédé à Lewiston, Maine
le 1er février 1981

A l'âge de 58 ans

1922-1981

To my husband, Albert,
who died too young

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On Shawmut Street, c. 1926. Girls did not wear pants.

Chapter 1

My First Years

As good a place as any to start my story is with my birth. My parents, Joseph Verreault and Yvonne Lessard Verreault, lived in a second-floor apartment of a four-story building on the west end of Howe Street near Walnut Street in Lewiston. The building, which was on the north side of Howe, was owned by a Mr. Thibodeau. My parents' apartment was in the back, away from the street, and to get to the hallway entrance, you walked down a driveway against which there was a three-story building blocking the sun from our apartment. It was there on Thursday, July 21, 1921, that I came into the world. I was their first child, born when they had been married less than a year.



116 Howe Street, 2013

While my parents were immigrants to the US, they had not really come to be immigrants. My father's health had been

affected by the tiny, deadly filaments called *asbestos dust* in his hometown of Thetford Mines, Québec. Thetford was an important mining town—that's how it got the "Mines" in its name—and beneath its streets were many tunnels into which men went down night and day to bring the asbestos filaments up to the ground surface. This process produced a lot of slag, and that slag was piled high outside the mines. Almost anywhere you were in town, on the main street of *rue* Notre-Dame with its stores and churches or in the side streets where the miners lived, you could see mountains of refuse. These piles were gray and ugly, and there was no vegetation growing on them. Behind the slag heaps and all around the town, though, were the rolling hills among which Thetford had been built. These were green and lovely because they were covered with trees.

The air the people in Thetford breathed was always filled



The Verreault family in front of their home on *rue* Smith.
Notice the asbestos slag heap to the left of the house.

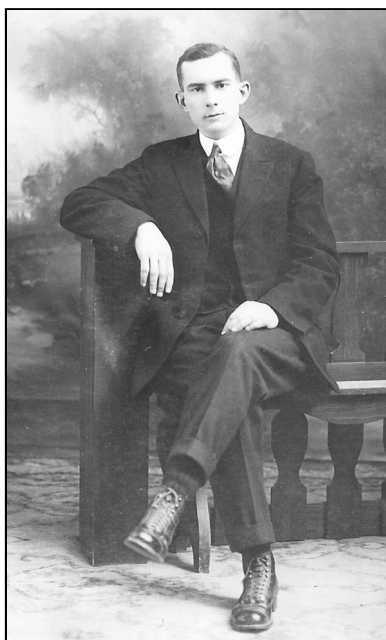
with asbestos dust. Sometimes you had a sense of it and other times not, but you knew it was there. You knew because it came to rest on the streets and the houses of Thetford and covered them with a layer of dust. But

the dust did not just stay outside. It entered the homes of the people and settled, white and thick, on bureau tops and tables and floors. My mother told me how, even though housewives were always dusting to keep their rooms clean, they were never

successful for more than a few hours. Soon the dust settled white and thick on the surfaces.

But, bureau tops and tables were the least of the problem. The dust was like a germ that entered into people's lungs and began to cover vital tissue. There was no way to clean these tissues, no cloth to wipe away the dust. The filaments accumulated and irritated the lungs. People coughed and still they could not clear the dust from their systems. These infected lungs began to bleed and eventually many people died from lung-related diseases.¹

My father was a strong, young man, but by the time he was 18 or 19, he began coughing and wheezing. When he was in his early 20s, a doctor advised him—as I'm sure he was warning a lot of people—that if my father wanted to live to see his children and grandchildren, he would have to leave Thetford Mines.



My father, Joseph Verreault, 1920

My grandmother, Zélire Dulac Verreault, had a brother, named Joseph just like my father, who lived in Lewiston, Maine.² Uncle Joseph had a home and a family in Maine and so he could take my father in. I believe my father was only intending to spend enough time to regain his health and then return to Thetford. But, of course that's not what happened.

It must have been hard to leave Thetford because, in addition to leaving his parents and younger siblings, my father was

distancing himself from his girl friend—Yvonne Lessard, the woman who would become my mother. They had, I seem to remember, an understanding that they would get married. So, going away from Thetford must have been hard, but his health required that he leave that mining town and Lewiston was perhaps a better place for him to end up in than any other. In 1919, when he was 21, my father came down to the US—*les États*—for a time of rest from the dust and the coughing.

Most Canadian immigrants worked in the mills, but Joseph Dulac and four of his five sons³ had started a plumbing business, Dulac Plumbing and Heating. While my father was recuperating, his uncle Joseph offered to hire him. My father was not a plumber but he was willing to learn. Over the next months and years, without intending to, my father learned a trade which, as it turned out, he had a lot of talent for. In time, his coughing and wheezing became less and less pronounced and came to a stop. By that time, Lewiston which had been only a place to get away to became a place to stay at. That winter, he wrote postcards to Yvonne and shared his life in



My mother, Yvonne Lessard, 1920

Lewiston. He was not comfortable with writing to judge from the short notes, but he managed to let her know bits of his life.

In Thetford, my mother worked as a waitress in the restau-

rant of the *Hôtel Lessard*⁴ on *rue* Notre-Dame. The hotel, just across the street from the parish church of Saint-Alphonse was a convenient stopping spot for salesmen and buyers who had come to call on agents of the mines.⁵ In addition, the hotel was also convenient for engineers and representatives who had been sent from the mine companies' headquarters. Since business spoke English in Canada, my mother had learned enough English to serve the commercial diners. *Salt, pepper, well done, water.* As long as no one engaged her in a conversation, she was fine. Neither in Thetford nor after she came down to Lewiston did she become fluent in English.

After her shift at the *Hôtel Lessard*, she returned to her home on *rue* Dubé. The house which was filled with younger siblings⁶ was a one-and-a-half story building two streets up from the *rue* Notre-Dame. The bedrooms upstairs were under a pitched roof. As the oldest girl, she was expected to help in the house and with Gabrielle, the baby who was born in 1919.

I'm not sure how or when my parents decided to set a date to get married—whether it was in person (did my father go back up to visit?) or through writing, but my parents settled on Monday⁷ August 2, 1920. It was then, in the church of Saint-Alphonse,⁸ the parish church they had attended, on the *rue* Notre-Dame that they exchanged vows. At the time, all four of their parents⁹ were living as were some of their grandparents.

Instead of a wedding trip, my parents came to Lewiston. They rode the Grand



A newly-wed couple traveling by train, c. 1920

Trunk train down much of the length of Vermont. The Green Mountains through which they travelled were much larger and taller than the rolling hills around Thetford. At White River Junction, my parents spent their wedding night, and in the morning, they resumed their trip, crossing the Connecticut River into New Hampshire. Again the mountains—the White



A wedding portrait of my parents with my father's family. My grandparents are on either side of my mother and father. Notice the slag heap in the rear right.

Mountains—loomed around them and provided beautiful views. Finally, perhaps in mid-day, they arrived in Lewiston and descended at the Bates Street Station.

The Howe Street apartment where I was born was their second home. When they first came, they lived downtown in a tenement on Lisbon Street.¹⁰ My father worked at Dulac's which was just down the way, and while the mills were not far

from their tenement, my mother, who turned 21 on August 15 just a few weeks after marrying, did not seek outside work but kept house.¹¹

Language was not a problem because people spoke French in the stores and at church and on the streets. There were French-speaking doctors and dentists and lawyers. In that way, Lewiston was an easy place for my mother to come to, but still, it was an unfamiliar city. In the little apartment on Lisbon Street, she found herself alone all day. She had no friends or family there other than those of my father's. I can only guess she must have been lonely. Like my father, she was the oldest of her family and had left five brothers and three sisters behind, the youngest of whom, Gabrielle, was only one year old. "I miss my Gabrielle!" my mother told me she said over and over in that first year away.



My parents and I, 1922

One day, perhaps wanting to please her young husband, she devoted herself to making a pie. When my father returned home and was ready for his desert, she proudly served him. When he pressed into the crust with his fork, the piece shot off his plate and landed on the floor. Then, it bounced away on the kitchen linoleum. My mother was nearby and the piece of pie came to a stop between her feet. My father who was still a young husband thought this was funny, but my mother did not. She was new at being a housewife and, being only 21 and having tried her best, she broke into tears. I don't think she had

much experience in preparing meals because, at the little house on *rue* Dubé, it was her mother who had done most of the family cooking.¹² My mother had worked at the hotel dining room and not in its busy kitchen.

Sometime before I was born, my parents moved from downtown to their Howe Street apartment. Towards the end of July, Dr. Morin was summoned to the apartment to assist in my mother's first birthing. I was born on Thursday, July 21, 1921. (That made me only two years younger than my aunt Gabrielle.) Now my mother had her very own baby.

As was the custom, because I was the first born, my paternal grandparents, Eugène and Zélie Dulac Verreault, were chosen as godparents. I don't know if they came down for the baptism or whether they were represented by proxies.¹³ Saint Peter's parish had only a basement church then. Work was in progress for the upper church but it was often halted for lack of money. (Many of the Canadians could afford to give only dimes and quarters and so the money was slow in coming.) I was baptized in what was later to be called the lower church but then was the only church.

My maternal grandparents, the Lessards, did not come down.¹⁴ My young mother—she was after all only 21—must have been sad not to be able to present her new baby to her mother for her approval and blessing. I know it was important for me to have my mother around when I had children.

Not too long after I was born, my uncle *Pitou*¹⁵ Lessard (his name was really Lionel) came looking for work. Today, people would say the apartment on Howe Street was too small to take in another adult, but in those days, there was almost always room to take in another brother or sister. He just moved in with the three of us, and since he didn't know anybody, he tagged along with my parents when they visited my father's Dulac and

Verreault relatives. In particular, they visited my father's cousin, Charles Verreault, whom people called *le gros Charles*.¹⁶ He was the son of my father's father's cousin, Louis Verreault.¹⁷ Charles was Louis only son, but Louis had also had eleven daughters. *Le gros Charles* had married and had had children, among them Antoinette. On his visits, Uncle Pitou seemed to take notice of her.

Only two of Louis' eleven daughters (Charles's sisters—one of whom we were eventually to call "Aunt" Emilia) had married. The nine single women who remained at home with Louis were known as *les vieilles filles Verreault*. These "old maids" continued to live with their parents in a one-family house that was less than a mile from the New Auburn¹⁸ tenement district towards Durham.

My parents became friends with one of *le gros Charles*' two married sisters, Emilia, who married Louis Lessard.²⁰ Emilia had been born in Auburn in 1893, four years after her parents had come down, merit-ing her American citizenship by birth. *Mon Oncle* Louis and *Ma Tante* Emilia (in those days, we called older people "Aunt" and "Uncle" when they were close to the family²¹) had had one still-born son and then no other children. They worked in the mills and remained close to my parents their entire lives.



My great-grandfather, Richard Bizier, my grandmother, Virginie Bizier Lessard, and my young mother holding me, 1922

—*—

My mother went up to Thetford the summer after I was born.

There is a photo of me with my grandmother Virginie Lessard and my great-grandfather Richard Bizier. (*Grandpère* Bizier was well into his seventies and so my guess is that he would not have traveled to Lewiston and it was my mother who went up.)

Richard Bizier had been married twice—the first time to my great-grandmother Stéphanie Delisle on February 14, 1876, and the second time to Victoria Gagné on September 2, 1891. Like many men of his generation who lived in the region, he had come to Thetford to work in the mines. I don't know much about *Grandpère* Bizier except that he used to stutter and had a

hard time pronouncing his son-in-law's name—*Odias* (Lessard). He would say *Gaudias*.

—*—

Mon Oncle Pitou and *Ma Tante* Antoinette began seeing a lot of each other and they announced their wedding date for Monday February 12, 1923. During their courtship, my mother was pregnant with my brother Robert. She must have been looking forward to attending this wedding, but she never made it, since Robert arrived the same day!



Mon Oncle Pitou and *Ma Tante* Antoinette

Her labor seems to have been longer with Robert than it had been with me because Dr. Morin and my father had time to play pinochle for money—nickels and dimes—while her contractions grew closer and

closer together. My father—who was 24, almost 25, at the time—kept winning, and in the years to come, he often laughed as he claimed he had gotten Robert for free. (In those days, babies were delivered for five dollars and ten dollars.) Getting Robert for free, he'd repeat, is what got him and my mother going on a large family! Besides playing cards while he was waiting for Robert to come along, Dr. Morin made use of the time to brush Uncle *Pitou's* wedding suit before my uncle set



My parents, me and Robert, 1923

off from our apartment to be married.²²

Almost right away, my mother was pregnant again and my parents moved to an apartment on Shawmut Street. Perhaps my parents found the place on Howe Street too small for two adults and soon-to-be three kids; perhaps relatives from Canada boarding with them called for more space and, with the room and board they paid, made it possible to move to that larger space. Whatever the reason, my parents were on Shawmut

Street when Marcel was born²³ on Monday, January 21, 1924. I



115 Shawmut Street, 2013

don't remember much about the place except that we had a yard for us to play in and that the apartment had three bedrooms.²⁴

I believe it was that summer of 1924 that my mother went back to Thetford with the three of us kids. I don't think my father came with us but I may have simply forgotten. I do know my mother took the train with Robert, who was about 18 months, Marcel, who was perhaps six months, and myself who was three. With a handful of kids to watch over, she must have been tired by the time the train finally pulled into the station.²⁵

Gabrielle whom my mother had so missed was five that



Me in the stern with my mother during our 1924 visit to Thetford. My aunt Gabrielle is the child in the center.

summer. How big she must have seemed!

By now, though, my mother had her own children to look over and worry about. During the time she was there, while the four of us were staying at the small Lessard house on *rue Dubé*, Marcel caught diarrhea. My mother always said it was the time “he almost died.” It was fear of losing one of her babies that made my mother decide she would not travel with youngsters again—and she did not go back to Thetford for eight years!

My mother was not a person who chatted—my father was more outgoing than she—and so she did not share much with me about my early life. I do know that she breast-fed me. In addition, she used to tell me that, one time, when I was playing with a balloon, it went into a tub filled with water. As I bent over the tub to retrieve my balloon, I lost my balance and fell head first into the water and almost drowned. Another time, my mother was making pea soup and had left the handle sticking out. Being curious, I reached for it and pulled it towards me. The pot turned over, and the pea soup went all over the floor, but I was not burned.

As children, we were home-bound. My parents never went out with us nor did we accompany them anywhere because they were too busy taking care of us to do any thing else. There were no such things as library hours or playgrounds to bring kids to. We did have a yard and that was where we played, but the yard did not have a swing.

We were still in the three-bedroom apartment on Shawmut Street when Gertrude, thirteen-and-a-half months younger than Marcel, was born on Thursday, March 5, 1925. I was a little over three and a half at the time, and Robert was two. My parents, married only four and half years, now had a houseful of kids, but two thirds of their family was yet to come!



Me on the back porch at the Shawmut Street apartment standing on a chair and my mother holding Marcel. Notice the tenement building in back and the fire escape for the apartment on the upper story behind us. Did I climb up and down the escape and make my mother nervous?

Chapter 2

My Parents Buy an Apartment House

My parents had no extra cash to serve as a down payment to buy a home of their own. My father's cousins Charles Verreault and Joseph Dulac owned their own homes, and my grandparents in Thetford did, too. So owning a house must have been a goal, but my parents were strapped for money and they had many mouths to feed.

Joseph Dulac who had founded the plumbing company where my father worked and of my grandmother Zélire Dulac Verreault²⁶ had a sister, Emilia.²⁷ She had been widowed twice and—perhaps as a result of these marriages—she was financially at ease. Aunt Emilia had once lived in Lewiston where she had been married to a Mr. Parent, but by the late 1920s, Mr. Parent was deceased and she was staying in Detroit with a son. I knew Aunt Emilia because she used to come back to Lewiston for long visits. She was a showy lady who wore a big fur coat in the winter and who ran *stances*.

One day, she shared with my parents that she had some extra money she wanted to invest in an apartment building and was looking for partners. Were my parents interested? She would put cash into a down payment for a newly-constructed

apartment building on Jefferson Street and would receive interest on her investment as my parents paid her back. In exchange



Emilia Dulac Parent

for my father's time as a caretaker and for the rent my parents would pay, they could eventually own the place outright without having to come up with a down payment themselves. In short, she wanted to serve as their lending agent, as a bank. It seemed a good deal to my parents, and they took her up on it.

From Shawmut Street, we moved into a large apartment on the first floor of the new building on Jefferson Street—the first people to live there. This was quite a step up for my parents. They bought a dining room set with a buffet. My mother was very fond of this set. In the front of the apartment, there was a living room. Between it and the dining room, there was an archway so that the two rooms made a large area. In the back of the apartment was a sizeable kitchen where much of our family life was lived. As my mother cooked and cleaned, we played on the floor with our many toys—often, these were pots and pans we had taken out of the cabinets. The sink was made of black slate. In those days, countertops were covered with linoleum rather than the harder materials of today, and a linoleum is what we had. Farther in back of the apartment was a shed where we could keep sleds and other outdoor playthings.

There were also the bedrooms that ran alongside the rooms I have mentioned. I had my own bedroom—something I would not have again for the rest of my growing up. In all the rooms, the floors were hardwood. My parents were well set on Jefferson Street. I can imagine my mother liked it that her children could play out in the yard without clambering down and

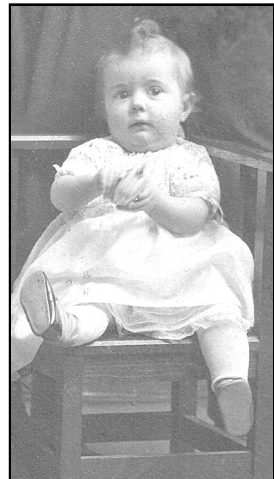
up steps, and if there was a problem, she and my father were the landlords and could settle the issue to the advantage of their large and loud family.

When Aunt Emilia Parent was in Lewiston, she sometimes stayed with us and sometimes with other relatives in another building she owned. She came once with her granddaughter Dorothee—who had been born in Detroit and did not speak French. I spoke no English at the time. I was not lonely for friends on Jefferson Street, but I remember enjoying playing with Dorothee and we made do with our lack of a common language as is often the case with children. It is on Jefferson Street that I first remember playing with other youngsters. Across Jefferson Street lived a girl named Jeannine Dionne, and next door to us, Juliette Lepage.

—*—

My father loved to tell us stories. He would sit three or four of us on his lap and ask us what kind of story we wanted to hear. “Perhaps *un petit rien tout nu*?”²⁸ he’d suggest. Not knowing what that was, we would nod our heads eagerly. “Do you want your *petit rien tout nu* to be red or blue?” Then, he’d make up a story. I loved sitting on his lap hearing his stories.

Réginald came along on December 3, 1926, when Gertrude was twenty-one months old. He was the first of the children to be born on Jefferson Street. He was followed eleven months later by Normand on November 17, 1927. When these new babies grew big enough to sit on my father’s lap, I was moved to a little chair next to him. That was



Gertrude, c. 1926

not the same thing at all, and I didn't like it, but I was told I was "a big girl." Being the oldest of a large family, I was often made to be the big girl before I was ready.

At night, if any of us complained about not wanting to go to bed, my father would say, "That's not a problem. You don't have to go to bed. We'll get you a pole, and you can sleep perched like a chicken."²⁹

—*—

In the fall before Normand was born, I had started first grade at Saint-Pierre School on Bates Street. While the school was run by the Dominican nuns whom I had seen at church, it



Zélire Dulac Verreault

was staffed by young laywomen. I liked school and I learned well. My parents must have arranged for me to walk from our house at 63 Jefferson Street to school with other children who were older than I, but I don't remember. The year after I started classes at Saint-Pierre, Robert went to kindergarten but he attended the Coburn School which was a public school. I don't know why my parents sent him to a school where the teachers didn't speak French. The next year, he

joined me at Saint-Pierre.

On October 10, 1927, right before Normand was born, my grandmother Zélire Dulac Verreault, who was only 56, died

from kidney disease. I don't remember if my father went up to Thetford for the funeral. We didn't have a car, but people went up all the time by train.³⁰ I was only six when my grandmother Verreault died, and, since I had never seen her except possibly at my baptism, I didn't know her and her death did not sadden me. What saddened me was, because we lived so far away from any of my grandparents, I did not have the opportunity to be a granddaughter. Because of that, I always envied those children whose grandparents lived in Lewiston or in Auburn.

After *Grandmère's* death, *Grandpère*³¹ Verreault visited us.

What I remember about him was that he had big hands. My father had big hands, but his father's were bigger still. I had never seen such



Eugène (right top) visiting with his cousin's family in 1928 after *Grandmère* died. *Gros Charles Verreault* is at left.

large hands. He had worked in the mines much of his life and had become a foreman on the third shift. I remember a story he must have told at this time about how, one night when *Grandmère* was by herself, there had been a large thunderstorm booming all around the house on *rue Smith*. The lightening that was cracking the sky open frightened her so much she decided to protect her home by sprinkling the house with holy water. She took what she thought was holy water and began spraying

its contents around the rooms. In the morning when my grandfather came home from his third-shift foreman job, there were blue spots all over everything—the wallpaper, the upholstered furniture, the carpets. *Grandmère* had sprinkled bluing water!³²



63 Jefferson Street, 2013

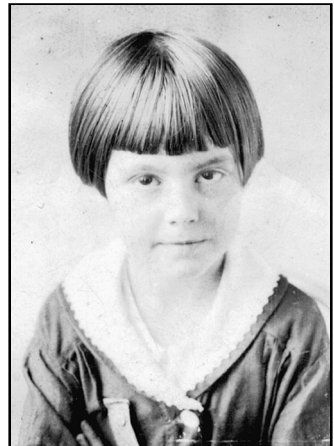
From Jefferson Street, my father could have walked to work at Dulac Plumbing and Heating on Lisbon Street, but I remember that someone picked him up in a truck in the morning and brought him back at night. (Perhaps he thought he had enough exercise at work that he did not need extra walking.) The business operated a storefront and a service department. My father worked only in the service end. He was an outgoing man and he enjoyed meeting

people as he installed new plumbing or did repairs in homes and businesses. When he needed transportation to get to a job, he used company trucks. Arriving home for lunch, he smelled of metal and solder, but this was something we had always experienced about him and it did not seem unusual that he should smell this way. Before eating, he washed his large hands, which were always stained dark from grease and dirt, with a special gritty soap called *LAVA Soap*. (When you washed with it, you could feel granules rubbing against your skin.) Even so, he was usually not successful at getting the grease and dirt from beneath his nails and from the pores of his skin.

My father was a strict disciplinarian. We obeyed or we were punished, so we tended to obey. If we didn't—and we were never more than just a little bit naughty, then as later, my moth-

er sometimes would say, “Wait until your father gets home.” That was always enough to get us in line, but I wish she hadn’t reacted to us like that. She should have punished us immediately. Turning over punishment to my father undermined her authority. When the truck would pull up to the house in the evening and my father would get out, if we had been naughty, we made ourselves scarce. It often happened that my mother forgot to tell my father when he entered the apartment or she found him so tired after a day of work that she would decide not to burden him. We were not difficult children, however, and I think we were generally obedient and respectful. As the oldest, I was expected to offer an example to the others.

People in the apartment district tended to know each other. Perhaps the men worked together or the women met as they shopped for groceries at the corner stores. They got to talk as they hung laundry out on their porches or as they went out to the front steps to call the kids in for supper. They all went to Saint Peter’s Church and took part in activities there—the week-long men’s or women’s retreats, the Sodality of Sainte Anne’s meetings, suppers to fundraise for the construction of the upper church, which was always “stopped for a while.” And so they were people who shared a way of looking at life and generally agreed on how children ought to behave. When we were outside, beyond my mother and father’s supervision, we were always under the unofficial supervision of some other parent who would keep us in line.

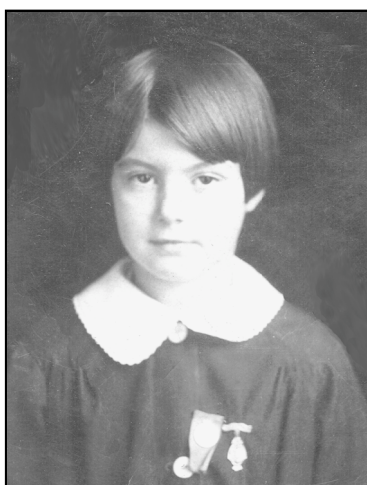


“Your parents will hear about this,” shouted from a second- or third-floor Me with my barbershop haircut

porch was enough to get us to change our ways—not that we were naughty!

Because so many people in the downtown knew each other, parents did not worry about letting their kids wander around or run errands alone. At the time, girls used to get a rather simple barbershop haircut. My mother would send me off to a barber a few blocks away. Clutching the coins she had given me, I set out from our Jefferson Street home to a barbershop near the park. This was normal at the time to let even young children go off on their own, and no one thought anything of it.

—*—



Me, at eight years old. Notice the medals on my dress. I had received them for doing well in school.

While my father was strict with discipline, he also had a playful side. After Sunday dinner, he liked to lie on the living room couch to take a nap. How he ever thought a houseful of kids could be quiet enough for him to sleep in the middle of the afternoon, I don't know, but he would try, just the same, to nap on the couch. After a while, when we thought our father was asleep, with Robert and me as instigators, we kids would stuff toilet paper under his glass lenses. (How could he have slept through that!) Then when we were through, he'd "wake" up.

"I'm going blind," he'd shout to my mother who was perhaps in the kitchen, beyond the dining room. We were waiting for this response, of course, and it would make us laugh. This happened many Sunday afternoons, and as children, we did not realize that he was on to us. It is

hard for me to imagine that at this time my playful father was only about 28 or 29 years old. (The youngest in my family probably didn't experience him as playful. But by the time they were born, my father had become more the rule setter than the playful father. I suppose that was a result of getting older—and having more children.)

—*—

During these years, Aunt Blanche (Lessard) lived with us. When she was in her early twenties, while we were still on Shawmut Street, she had come down looking for employment and had moved with us to Jefferson Street. In Lewiston, she apprenticed as a hairdresser with a Canadian woman and eventually was able to earn her living as a hairdresser. When she was not working, she helped my mother with household tasks. But, what I remember most about my aunt was that she gave me a lot of attention. I didn't get the attention I needed from my busy parents but I got it from *Ma Tante* Blanche. She'd do my hair up in curlers and she'd fuss over me. My aunt Blanche had a boyfriend, and we thought she would marry and remain in Lewiston, if not in our house, at least close by.



Blanche Lessard

My father had a brother, Roméo,³³ who also stayed with us during the same time Aunt Blanche did. He did not stay long however before going back to Thetford. My mother's brother,

Pitou Lessard, and his wife, Antoinette, had an apartment down in Little Canada where they were raising a family—by this time, they had Wilfred and Gloria—so I had some first cousins in town on the Lessard side.

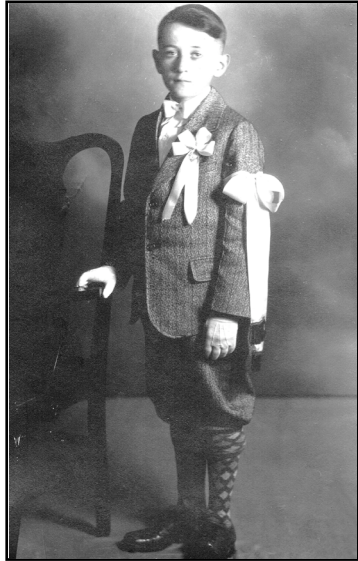
Upstairs from us lived three women³⁴—the Ouellettes—who had never married. They would take Reggie to their apartment to “spoil him for a while!” (They took the others of us, too, but I remember how they were most fond of Reggie.) Often, the ladies fetched him in the morning and did not return him until bedtime. This lightened the load for my mother, and she must have looked forward to these breaks. Not that she spent this time resting—there was always a baby clinging to her as she prepared a meal before my father arrived for his short lunch break or as she did a laundry at a series of tubs in the basement (which was how the wash was done in those days before washing machines).

It was perhaps in 1928 or 1929 that I made my first communion in the basement church of Saint Peter’s. By then, the lower church had been in use for more than twenty years,³⁵ and it must have seemed to parishioners that the upper church would never be finished, but little by little, it was being constructed.

My mother bought me a white dress and veil from the *Mademoiselles* Janelle who owned a shop on Lisbon Street. They were single women who made their living as business people. In those days, sales were much more personal. The sales clerk, as in this case, was often an owner who was invested in customer satisfaction. I regret I do not have a photo of this first communion dress. Photos were then a more challenging project than they are today and were usually taken in studios. Most likely, my family could not afford a studio session and so there are no pictures to commemorate the event. Nor was there a reception at the house.

Not long afterwards, I was confirmed. It was a tradition to choose a couple from the community to serve as godparents to the entire group, even though each of us had individual godparents. That year, Dr. Morin served as godfather for the boys, and his wife was godmother for the girls. Again there was no reception and no pictures.

I don't remember when my Aunt Blanche left, but I must have been about seven or eight. The relationship with her boyfriend had not worked out, and she wanted to go back home to Thetford. She had learned to be a hairdresser, but like my mother, her time in the US had not facilitated her acquiring any English beyond a few words. We



Albert's First Communion portrait. c. 1930 The Ledoux could afford a studio session.

lived totally in a French-speaking environment. Reading the newspapers, listening to the radio, shopping downtown could all be done in French.

On the day my aunt left, I had school. We said our good-byes in the morning and, sometime that day, she took the train back to Thetford. When I got home, she was not there. I had known she would be gone but I still cried because I understood at last what "I'll be gone when you get back" meant. For a long time, in my large family where I was the "big girl," I was so lonely for Aunt Blanche and for the attention she had showered on me. As long as she lived (she died in 1984), she was always a special aunt to me³⁶ Whenever I went to Thetford as an adult, I wanted to stay at her house.



With my classmates at Saint Peter's School. I am the tall girl in the back left.



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*We Were Not Spoiled* chronicles the life of Lucille Verreault Ledoux, a Mainer born in 1921. Raised in Lewiston, her life is typical of many Franco-Americans of her generation and, as such, is an important addition to our understanding of Maine's ethnically diverse communities in the last century.

This is a book of often overlooked details, of information thought to be marginal and so too frequently lost to students of history. A basic function of memoir is to give witness to a time and a way of life gone by, and this book succeeds admirably at this task.

*We Were Not Spoiled* is full of period photos drawn from family collections and is generously endowed with endnotes to enhance the significance of her story for historical reference.



In *We Were Not Spoiled*, Lucille Verreault Ledoux shares her childhood and young womanhood with us. This was a time when the world was very different from what it is now. Her early life was different not because she had no cell phones or internet but, in a more fundamental way, because of how people related to each other and to their futures.



She and her husband Albert had six children. Widowed before her youngest daughters were out of the house, she considers having finished raising them alone as a special achievement. Lucille Ledoux lives at D'Youville Pavillion, an assisted living facility in Lewiston, Maine.

Lucille Verreault Ledoux  
Spring of 2013