



Video Story Transcript

The Restaurant Story: A French American Becomes More Visible

By: Storyteller Michael Parent

<http://www.storynet.org/teller/directory.php?ID=480>

Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIHWnXfKHMA>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Michael Parent. A few weeks ago, I was in residence at one of the elementary schools in my hometown of Lewiston, Maine. And I couldn't help but notice that the kids there was so visible and so audible. Many of them are African immigrants from Somalia, from Sudan, from Cote d'Ivoire, and they were visible. The girls in their colorful clothing. The boys and girls, both of them, both the boys and girls, had wonderful speech. They were all dark skinned so they really stood out. They were visible and audible. And it led me to think that my own people, the Franco-Americans, who came down from Quebec a few generations ago, had become invisible and inaudible.

So, I started thinking about this, when they arrived from Quebec mostly, to work in the textile mills of New England, they were visible and audible. Well, they had Catholic religion. They had their French accents and their French language. They loved to get together in family gatherings. They loved loud singing and dancing, music, loud conversation in large groups. Now, my grandparents and my great grandparents were part of this immigration of about 1.5 million French Canadians who mostly came to try to find work in the textile mills of New England. Many of these people thought they would come down work for a few years and return to Quebec to revive their sagging farms. Well, most did not return. And the people who stayed, banded together in their own neighborhoods called, Peu Kanata, Little Canada. And in those neighborhoods, they tried to preserve their language and their traditions. And this slowed their assimilation into the larger, predominant, Anglo culture for quite a long time.

French was the language most spoken. When they went to church, the masses were said in Latin and French. When they sent their children to schools, I was one of those children, we had school half in French and half English. Well, on Sundays, we went for family gatherings and French was the language that was mostly spoken, then. We never, ever addressed my grandparents, my Mémé and Pépé, or our aunts and uncles, my tante and my oncle, we never addressed them in English. It was considered really impolite to do so.

My father, Gerard Parent represented the voice that said, “Deux langues sont deux fois,” which meant, Two languages is twice as good. But the prevailing majority voice was, “Le boss ne parle français,” the boss does not speak French. So, these people had to assimilate in order to survive in an Anglo culture. Some people changed their names to do so. Cluse became Clukey and Boisvert became Greenwood and so on. Now the older generation seems to be saying to the younger generations, “Listen we'll never belong here in the United States but we will do anything that we can so that someday you will belong.” So, in order to assimilate into the Anglo culture many of these immigrants steered their children away from their heritage language. With the assimilation came a loss of language and culture. And with this loss of language and culture came invisibility. The story I'd like to tell you now is a, an excerpt from a larger story called, One More Thing. And it's being told by Jean-Paul Bavare, who was an immigrant, who is retired from the textile mills and he's going to tell about an incident that took place in his and his wife's life.

Oh, yeah. Irene. She was my oldest daughter you know. Still is. I had five kids. Irene, I was so proud of her. That kid. But she always reminded me I never went to her college graduation. Hmm. I just didn't feel comfortable with those college people. Hmm. Irene, she was mad she didn't understand that at all. And oh, yeah, yeah. She liked to remind me how I was a big sour puss at her wedding. Well, it's true I couldn't wait to get outta there. Malcolm, my son-in-law, he was what I called, an Episcopagen. But anyway, his people, all they talked about was their stocks and bonds, and their country clubs, and all the rest of that. Oh, gee, I couldn't wait to get outta there. Irene, she was mad about that.

But here's what I'm talking about. See, my wife felt the same way about all these things. We never hardly went out. My wife, she liked to stay home. She liked to have company come to her. So, one time, I had this boss, his name was Bill Lawler, Bill Lawler. Bill was a good guy, you know. He was one of my first bosses at the mill and he treated us workers fair and square. Well, he heard my wife was a good cook, you know. So, I invited him and his wife, Mildred, over for supper one time. And they kept coming maybe once or twice a year, but, you know, we never went to their house. Marie Louise, my wife, she did not like to go, you know, to other people's houses. She liked to have company come to her, you know. She'd like to be with her own people mostly. Anyway. So, one time at one of our anniversaries I managed to convince Marie Louise to go out for supper. And we went to Chez Robert, oh boy. When we get to the restaurant, who do we see sitting there? But Bill Lawler and Mildred and a couple of their friends. Well, we go over there, we chit chat a little bit, you know, and Bill, he's a nice guy, so he invites us to join them. Well, I didn't know how to wiggle out of it, you know. So, we sat down. Well, these friends of the Lawlers, this other couple, they start talking about how they just adore speaking French. And they start blabbing away in their a high-class, college French about their trips to Paris. The wife of the other couple, she asked Marie Louise if we ever went to Paris. Marie-Louise says, “No. No, we usually go on vacations up to Quebec to visit some of our relatives. Well, the husband of the couple, he pipes in, and he says, “They would like to go to Quebec but they didn't think they would understand such a strange accent.”

So, I said, “Hey, listen. Come on. There's all kinds, different ways to talk French. Just like there's all kinds, different ways to talk English.”

And he thinks about this for two, three seconds and he says, “But isn't Quebec, was a peasant French?”

Ooooooh! I could have bit my tongue, you know. Here was my boss. These are his friends and we were always taught to bite our tongues. I suppose in case they sent us back to Canada, I guess, I don't know. But no,

instead I said, "What's wrong with that? If it wasn't for us peasants, you aristocrats wouldn't have a thing to eat." It got very quiet that all the food finally came, thank goodness. And we started eating.

After a little while the wife of the other couple, looking down her nose at Marie Louise says, "Mrs. Bavare, do you make your own dresses?" Marie Louise takes her napkin and she folds it up. She puts it on the table.

She looks at me and she says, "Laisse nous partir!" Let's go right now. And she stands up. And she looks at that woman right in the eye and she says, "Yes, I do make my own dresses. Thank you so much for asking. But now we have to leave because I have suddenly developed a big pain in my neck." And she walks out of there like a queen.

I was so proud of her! But I never told.