

# SAY, THAT REMINDS ME OF ANOTHER STORY

*Joan Finnigan*

**C**HILDREN ALWAYS DWELL amongst giants. And I, perhaps, more than some others; on my grandfather's farm in Pontiac County, Quebec, those uncles, cousins, hired men in wintertime wearing huge furry coats, in summertime those thunderous boots, all of which made them seem even bigger than they really were; and at home in Ottawa, my father, a metaphoric giant, "The Shawville Express," playing with the Ottawa Senators and the Toronto Maple Leafs and, "on the road," eating, drinking, living with the legends, King Clancy, Howie Morenz, Ace Bailey, Frank Ahearne.

The antennae of my subconscious must have absorbed my valley relatives' stories of the lumbering giants, Joseph Montferrand, Mountain Jack Thomson, J. R. Booth, E. B. Eddy. And certainly there must have been a storing of the accompanying colourful lumbering lingo. My grandfather Horner, himself a giant and known even in the "Ottawee" papers as the Strongman of Radford, enriched us with unforgettable phrases like, "Boysaboys! That's angleways fer-nenst the tamarack tree!" My mother, too, had a racy and often unrepeatable vocabulary full of imagery like "She wouldn't give you so much as a collie would you lick!" (referring to a stingy person) and, "You're going to end up on Le Breton Flats if you don't watch out!" (referring to the kind of libertine spending which would eventually force one to live amongst the E. B. Eddy workers in their wooden tinder-boxes on Le Breton Flats, a district in Ottawa wiped out by the anticepticity of the Greber Plan). I was then, and still am, exposed to my father's tall tales. For all of my young life, yea, even unto this day there has been a constant ongoing addition to the repertoire of G. A. Howard, Master of Spoonerism, from Shawville, Quebec.

For instance, just last week an addition from Norris Brough of Ottawa, formerly of Shawville: Back in the 1920's A. G. Brough, Dougal McCredie, G. A. Howard, and various other lads used to hunt at Lake Dumont, fifty miles or so northeast of Shawville. Of course, there were numerous stops on the way up to quench a growing thirst, at Ladysmith, Otter Lake, Bend in the River, John Cowan's Spring. At one point the old Ford had to be parked and left

because the last three miles in could only be concluded on foot. At this point, G.A. opened the car trunk to get his liquor out and then discovered he had forgotten his gun. They were beyond the end of the Pontiac Telephone Line, so they went to the nearest fire ranger and got him to key into the Pontiac system. G. A. Howard's son Dean answered the phone, but the line was very fuzzy.

"Dean, Dean, it's G. A. Howard."

"Yes, Father."

"I left my gun. I want you to bring up my gun."

"Bring up your what?"

"Gun. Gun." G.A. yelled.

But still Dean couldn't make out the message. So in exasperation G.A. yelled out, "Gun. Gun. G for Jesus, U for Europe, N for pneumonia."

Very often in life great decisions are made after a mysterious coalescing of conscious, subconscious, maybe even preconscious factors. I cannot remember exactly when it was I resolved to do the oral history of the Ottawa Valley.<sup>1</sup> But I do know that I held this resolve in my subconscious for a number of years and that this resolve was often brought to the surface by people saying to me, "Joan, you must tape the old-timers before they are all gone." There was a further converging of factors; the empty-nest syndrome driving me towards people, the gift from printmakers Saul Field and Jean Townsend, of a landmark book, a 1981 edition of Yeats' *Celtic Twilight* (with prints by Townsend), a taste of interviewing for an NFB film and for the CBC Anthology programme on the Valley, "There's No Good Times Left-None at all" (I knew now I could do it), a tentative search for the story lost in the oral tradition of the famous riverman and tallyman, Mountain Jack Thomson of Portage-du-Fort.

Still, in the usual human way, I was putting it all off until one August eight years ago my son and I were photographing along the Opeongo Line, the famous settlement line running from the Ottawa River at Farrell's Landing back towards Opeongo Lake in Algonquin Park. There, at the crossroads going up into Newfoundout, we stopped to talk to Allan Davidson, a fifth generation old-timer still living on his ancestral farm in the loghouse his grandparents built from the first trees on the first farm along that first settlement line. It hit me then that if I didn't start on my taping of the old-timers it would be too late, and, in particular, too late for the lumbering saga. I reversed a lease on a place in Toronto, bought a Sony "workhorse" tape-recorder and set out on an "incredible journey."

After I had done my first fat tapes with shantyman Carl Bailey, who died shortly afterwards on two bottles of gin in a Renfrew nursing home; with Winnie Inderwick, the Grand High Lady of Perth who knew Ottawa only in a derogatory way as Slabtown; with old John King, who still lived even then in the stopping-place his ancestors had kept on the road to the lumbercamps above Pembroke; with Frank Finnigan Senior and Junior retelling their stories of Harry

McLean, the eccentric construction genius known as “Mister X,” the man who used to throw thousands of dollars out of hotel windows and into the wind — after I had done those first exciting tapes I felt it was time to begin to look for a publisher who might, if I were lucky, put up some advance money for the continuation of the heavy expenses of oral history, for car, gas, bed, breakfast, typing, transcribing. In Toronto, the so-called “centre of the publishing universe,” I contacted an influential friend of mine, Elsa Franklyn, Valley-born and Valley-raised, who sent me off to a senior editor in a major publishing firm. On the telephone I began, “My name is Joan Finnigan MacKenzie and I am calling to talk to you about a manuscript of mine on the Ottawa Valley.” There was a snort at the other end of the line, and then the voice said, “The Ottawa Valley! Where the hell is that?”

**M**Y ANGER AND OUTRAGE probably fuelled me for the next eight years of work in the oral history of the Valley. In the process I have innovated a new technique in oral history whereby individual story-tellers are examined in depth. The result is that some of these larger-than-life people (Carl Jennings of Sheenboro, W. T. James of Carleton Place, Tex Naves of Pembroke, Phoebe McCord of Shawville, Vi Dooling of Douglas) are distilled and delineated like characters in a short story. This works two ways: the characters become so real to readers that they often say to me, “I really want to go and meet this guy!”; and I get to know these characters so well and care for them so much that their illnesses, removal to the old folks’ place, and deaths reverberate through me.

Taddy Haggerty of Brudenell along the Opeongo Line is one of those Valley characters whose legend began to sift into me, at first almost incidentally, as I was taping in his area around Brudenell, Killaloe, Eganville. Just as people often asked me, “Say, did you ever hear about the he-lady (or she-man) Philomene Bergeron?” or “Has anybody ever told you about Maggie Roach and her cure for cancer — if it was on the outside?” so they would often declare, “and now I’ll tell you a story about Taddy Haggerty of the Opeongo Line.” And gradually through such incidents I began to realize I was on the trail of another Irish wit, like Dinny O’Brien of the Burnt Lands of Huntley, whose lines had lived long past his leave-taking from this earth. Even today in the old Quinn Hotel in Killaloe, the old-timers sometimes amuse themselves, given the right mood and the right day, by retelling their repertoire of Taddy Haggerty stories. Like these:

“One year back in the 1880’s there was a terrible potato famine along the Opeongo Line. And after the bad crops were in in the fall the lads were sitting in

the Quinn Hotel at Killaloe having a quart or two, and talking over the bad situation.

“‘Yes, siree,’ said Taddy, ‘when you have a good year with a good crop of potatoes when you put them on to boil you can hear them saying to each other, “move over, move over.” But this year was the worse I’ve seen on the Opeongo Line.’

“‘Tell us, Taddy,’ said the lads, ‘How bad was it this year really?’

“‘Well, I’ll tell ye,’ said Taddy. ‘In this year’s crop of potatoes there was some the size of marbles. And then there were some the size of peas. And THEN THERE WERE THE REALLY SMALL ONES!’”

As the pioneer bill of fare, the potato has inspired many great stories in the Valley, stories with wonderful sociological overtones. One of the greatest of these has led to the metaphor “Soup-Eater.” It seems that back in the 1840’s the Potato Famine Roman Catholic Irish got off the boats at Quebec City so HUNGRY that, when the Protestant converters on the docks came up to them and said, “A bowl of soup if ye’ll turn,” some of them did.

**I** CONSIDER ORAL HISTORY to be the important colourful theatre, the human interest additive, the sociological underlay of academic history. My 300 tapes are multi-purpose, multi-layered, and used in multi-disciplinary ways by academics, linguists, genealogists, other writers, researchers, playwrights, song-writers — and plagiarists. Beyond the humour of the Soup-Eaters story is a historical vignette which tells us about: the importance of the potato in terms of survival, the terrible conditions of the immigrants on the boats, the transplantation of the old wars between the Orangemen and the Roman Catholics.

Over the past three years of my incredible journey I have collected Taddy Haggerty stories from a number of people along the Opeongo Line, the Sheridans, the Jessops, the Heinemans, the Walthers, Rev. John Hass of Eganville and Rev. Tom May of Vinton. This one was phoned in to the open-line programme conducted by Lowell Green on CFMO radio Ottawa. Beyond the humour, beyond the transmigration of souls during the Depression is that great parochialism born of a time when you only knew people as far as your horse could travel.

“It was during the hard times in the Twenties that Taddy Haggerty’s son, Tom, left home to go to the States to look for work. Then one day Taddy was in the old Quinn Hotel in Killaloe having a quart or two and he heard in the bar that this other fellow was going over to the States to find work. So Teddy went up to him and said, ‘Aha, I hear you’re going to the States?’ And the lad said, ‘Yes. I have to find work there.’ And Taddy said, ‘You’ll see my son Tommy over there.’ And the lad said, ‘Well, yes, if I find him I’ll see him.’

“So the lad went over to the States and he couldn’t find any work over there and, after a while, he came back to the Opeongo Line. He was in at the old Quinn Hotel in Killaloe having a quart or two when Taddy came in.

“‘Aha,’ said Taddy. ‘You went to the States?’

“‘Yes,’ said the lad, ‘I’ve been to the States.’

“‘Then you saw my Tommy?’ asked Taddy.

“‘No, I’m sorry,’ the lad said, ‘I didn’t see Tommy.’

“‘Then by japers,’ swore Taddy, ‘You damn well weren’t in the States!’”

The Ottawa Valley is distinguished from all other regions of Canada by its geography, language, legend, folklore, architecture, Irish imprint, and “frozen economics.” Even if you removed all of these distinctive factors, still the lumbering saga (1811 to 1911) would give the valley its unique regional identity, set it apart from all other “Tight Little Islands” in the country. Just as the Men who Went Down to the Sea gave Newfoundland its special qualities, so the Men Who Went into the Bush gave to the Valley its own inimitable character.

In its wake the lumbering era in the Valley left an architectural heritage of lumbermen’s mills, mill sites, shanties, lumber baron’s castles as well as a cultural heritage of lumbering story, song, folktale, legend. From the lumbering days, when strength was the primary virtue and “recreational violence” the favourite form of entertainment, emerge those astounding strongmen and giants, Wild Bill Ferguson of Calabogie, Bunker Joe Helferty from Barry’s Bay, Cockeye George McNee of Arnprior and Timiskaming, Gentleman Paddy Dillon, King of the Madawaska, Joseph Montferrand from Montreal, Le Prad from Témiscamingue, The Seven Brothers of Pembroke, the Terrors of the Ottawa River. Here from the tapes are some stories illuminating the lumbering saga:

“John Thomson of Calumet Island, father of the famous Mountain Jack Thomson, was for many years slide-master at Mountain Chute on the Ottawa. Big John Horner, of Radford, another renowned strongman, was a friend of Thomson’s and a well-off farmer who also worked in the wintertime for timber baron Gillies taking teams and men with supplies into the lumbercamps on the Rouge. One time Thomson and Horner went together to Buckingham, Quebec, on lumbering business. Buckingham was the centre of the McLaren dynasty’s lumbering operations and, because of this, the hotel in town was notches above the ordinary and boasted many fine amenities, some of which Big John Horner, at least, was not accustomed to. Well, anyhow, Thomson and Horner went off to bed in separate rooms, that in itself in those days of double-decker bunks, a demonstration of unholy luxury. When they met next morning very early in the dining-room, Thomson said to Horner, ‘Well, John, how did you sleep last night?’

“‘Pretty good,’ said Big John slowly, choosing his words carefully. ‘But it’s the first time I ever slept between two white tablecloths.’”

And this one from Phoebe McCord, the great political “warmer-upper” from Shawville.

“An old shantyman of very few words was working for Gillies up near Peta-wawa on the ice-roads. Timber Baron Colonel John Gillies, along with his foreman, Big Jim McCord of Shawville, came along to examine the work the shantyman was doing on the ice-roads. The shantyman of few words was a chickadee — that’s the man who takes the horse manure off the ice-roads to keep them clear for the sleigh-runners, and he’s called that because there’s nothing chickadees like better than fresh horse manure — well, anyhow, Colonel John Gillies and Big Jim McCord were looking at the condition of the ice-road near this shantyman of few words. This shantyman was also highly contemptuous of any authority and he was chewing tobacco — they all did it. So he spit a great big rotten spit on the ice-road right at the feet of timber baron Gillies and his foreman. Of course, it splattered and splashed —

“That’s horrible!” Gillies exclaimed. ‘I’d just as soon chew horse-manure!’

“And the old shantyman of few words chewed a few more chews on his tobacco and drawled out, ‘Wal, Colonel, I suppose it’s just whatever a man gets used to — ’”

**D**INNY O’BRIEN of the Burnt Lands of Huntley is another one of those great Irish wits in the Valley whose stories live on after him. I have collected his stories from lawyers and judges who litigated for him in his innumerable court cases and from neighbours who remember him coming home in the dark, singing drunk.

“Now Dinny O’Brien of the Burnt Lands of Huntley was an Ichabod-Crane-like Irishman who always wore black, and a black felt hat which had turned green with age. He was addicted to alcohol and had, over the years, drunk away almost everything he owned. One day he was in the dentist’s chair in Almonte. The dentist was peering way down Dinny’s throat.

“‘Say, doc,’ said Dinny, ‘Do you see anything down there?’

“‘Well, no, Mr. O’Brien — ,’ faltered the dentist.

“‘Well, you damn well should!’ Dinny snapped. ‘There’s three good farms down there!’”

Dinny O’Brien has been dead these forty years but Carl Jennings of Sheenboro, one of the many Irish enclaves in Western Quebec, at the age of eighty-four has become a legend-in-his-lifetime. Carl is, as McLean’s Gina Mallett described him, “a wit, a sage, a master of imagery.” He is also a creator of original one-liners and pithy querps.

“She was a nice quiet girl. You could put your hand on her anywhere.”

“He was the kind of a man who was too heavy for light work and too light for heavy work. So he did nothing.”

Of a lady of easy reputation in his community: “Sure, she had given most of it away before she found out she could sell it.”

Of a former lover: “Sure, I used to love to put a teat in each ear and hear her go off.”

“They always used to ask Lloyd Gavan of Chapeau how far he went in school and Lloyd always used to answer, ‘Oh, only as far as the blackboard’.”

Up until this winter Carl’s kitchen was the only one left in the Valley to my knowledge where the old-timers, story-tellers, image-makers, yarners, and liars still gathered to tell their tales, recite their verses, sing their songs.

And some of the verses I recited  
I memorized from my grandmother,  
and some of the stories  
I told you were true,  
and some of the songs I sang  
I made up myself.

Out of Carl’s kitchen over the past five years have come the expected Tall Tales and humour of exaggeration stories, as well as the raunchy, racy, irreverent stories to do with sex and death, the original repartee and teasing, the terrible black humour, the wonderful stories arising indigenously out of the real character or the real event, or the combination of both. And just when I think he has come to the end of his Well of Story, he presents an addition to his repertoire.

“One time long ago in the lumbering days this old shantyman from Chapeau was crossing the ice at the junction of the Pickanock and the Ottawa Rivers. He was crossing over with a favourite horse and sleigh when the ice cracked and the water opened. He rescued himself but his horse and sleigh disappeared into the cold depths. The following spring, curious about what might be left around the scene of the accident, he returned to the junction of the Pickanock and the Ottawa, and looked down into the clear fresh waters. At first he saw only his reflection. But then to his amazement he beheld below the biggest fish he had ever seen in his life, swimming along through the waters complete in a horse’s harness, collar, hames, with the reins trailing out behind him. And for years and years afterwards the American tourists all came to see that fish.”

**C**HARLOTTE WHITTON, first Lady Mayor of Ottawa, and Harry McLean, the construction genius from Merrickville, are two of the legendary Valley figures whose stories have not yet been told. From Lloyd Francis, who sat with her on City Council, and from broadcaster Hal Anthony and

Lowell Green, who covered her mayoralty for Ottawa newspapers, I have collected a repertoire. Many of the stories are unadorned slapstick, almost burlesque. But she did have a quick wit preserved in stories like these:

During one of her terms of office as Mayor of Ottawa Charlotte Whitton was entertaining the Lord Mayor of London at a very formal banquet at the Chateau Laurier. She was all dressed up in a black dinner gown with a corsage of red roses on her shoulder. Replete in all his splendid chains of office, the Mayor of London was naturally seated beside her at the dinner table. Attempting to make conversation with a somewhat enigmatic lady, he decided to gallantly try a bit of flattery to break the ice. So he turned towards her and whispered in her ear, "Miss Whitton, if I lean over and smell your roses, do you blush?" Charlotte looked at him a moment in surprise and then snapped back, "If I pull your chain, do you flush?"

And then there is another often-repeated story in which the inimitable Miss Whitton was one-upmanned. Again the setting was a large Civic reception. Amongst the guests was Ovila Dionne, father of the famous Dionne quintuplets, who had just been born and had made the Dionne family famous overnight. Charlotte went up to Mr. Dionne and said, "I guess you don't realize who I am. I'm the Mayor of Ottawa." But evidently Mr. Dionne had already learned to do fast footwork in the spotlight. "I guess you don't realize who I am," he retorted. "I'm the Cock of the North."

The late Harry McLean is another outstanding Canadian achiever whose stories I have been collecting for some time. After he had built his railways and made his millions, McLean retired to his favourite town, Merrickville, Ontario. In the far north, he had been a leader of men, an innovator in construction methods, a contractor working to deadlines which meant thousands of dollars in bonuses. But, in his retirement in backwater Ontario, he had a hard time maintaining his profile as superman. One of my favourite McLean stories, told by the then Chief of Police in Merrickville, demonstrates this:

"Oh, I remember something he used to do occasionally come winter to prove he was a man. And at his age, too! [McLean would then be in his seventies.] He'd go out and dig a big hole in the snow in the middle of winter and he'd strip down naked and he'd sleep in there with just a candle all night. He had married his second wife by that time and she'd be on the phone to me all night long saying, 'Oh, he's going to die in there! He's going to freeze to death in there!' And I'd say, 'Ah, never mind. He'll come out. He always comes out.' And sure enough, around eight o'clock in the morning, he'd come back out of his hole in the snow with his bottle in his hand, still stark naked."

With hindsight, looking back and trying to assess my goals and motivations in my work in oral history in the Valley, I see that I had a strong need to move the stories from the oral to the written tradition, and thus preserve the history, the



legends, the folktales, the fakelore, the folk-verses and songs of my Valley. In a manner of speaking, I did not want my people to die. I wanted to be part of the process of raising into conscious awareness in Canada the unique regional entity called the Ottawa Valley, all 750 miles of it, all twenty-six river tributaries of it. I wanted to preserve the language, very often poetic, for the Valley is passing into what might well be called its own "Celtic Twilight."

Eight years, 280,000 miles, 300 tapes later I find I have learned the value of story-telling as a way of people getting close, coming together in bonds of roots, history, laughter, and doing it despite a technological world which every day hastens isolation. We have only creativity and imagination left with which to make our stand; and creativity and imagination are reinforced in oral history, both for teller and listener.

People often ask me if the story-tellers are all dead or dying off now. I sense a renaissance, a resurgence amongst the young, and I have actually taped younger people carrying on a story-telling tradition from their forebears. From one of them just the other day I collected this Tall Tale about Ned Finnigan of Shawville, dead these many years but still recognized as a great story-teller. It is the story of the Cat With Nine Lives.

"Ned Finnigan was a great carpenter and he built our house in Shawville. I was a boy of only about ten or eleven and he used to use me to help him hold a board or carry a tool for him. I did this gladly for he was a great story-teller and I remember this one. Now Ned had this cat which was a nuisance to everybody, always doing the wrong things in the wrong places, and he decided that he had to get rid of it. So he loaded a potato sack with stones, and the cat, and took it all down to the creek, and drowned the cat. Would you believe it? When he got home, there was the cat sitting by the fire, shaking all the water out of its fur! He did the same thing again only with more stones, but still the cat came back. So Ned got outside advice; he tried poison, shooting, trapping — but still the cat came back. Finally an old lad told him that with a cat like that there was only one thing to do. Cut off its head. There was no other way. So finally in desperation he took the cat out to the far woods and chopped off its head. But, you know, when he got home to his fireside, there was the goddam cat sitting with its head in its mouth!"

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My books on the Ottawa Valley include: *Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley* (Burnstown, Ont.: General Store Publishing, 1981); *Some of the Stories I Told You Were True* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1981); *Look! The Land is Growing Giants* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1983); *Laughing All the Way Home* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1984); *Legacies, Legends and Lies* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1985).