

# BGHS: Remembering the extraordinary

by **Laurel Soper**  
BGHS member

We often fail to recognize the extraordinary in those familiar to us. The distance of time or place is needed.

Many of us remember Bernice Fortin Bissaillon, known as the proprietor of Makeup and Costumes by Bernie and Bridals by Bernice. She lived at 309 Rivard St. in Bourbonnais her for 89 years and died in 2008.

Bissaillon served her country as a Coast Guard SPAR during World War II. She studied acting and costume design at Chicago's pioneering American Television Institute and worked on early television shows. In 1963 she opened her costume rental business, later adding wedding attire, and for 45 years she successfully operated one of the longest lived businesses in the village.

Bissaillon was active in her community, volunteering in her parish, Maternity BVM, as a member of Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society and Women of the Moose.

Single for most of her adult life, she married Ray Bissaillon in her 50s. She would often say the 10 years of her marriage were the happiest of her life.

An autobiography written in 1935, when Bissaillon was a sophomore at Notre Dame Convent, reveals the intelligence, determination and independent spirit that she was

known for as an adult.

"I was born Jan. 29, 1919 on Wednesday morning, in my home on Wabash Avenue, Bradley. My parents were Mr. Thomas Fortin and Lillie Belisle. In the family there was one child Zeta Fortin, aged 5.

I was christened on Feb. 2, 1919, as Bernice Marie Clarabelle. My sponsors were my grandparents Charles Fortin and Odile Brouillette. The priest who baptized me was Rev. W. H. Granger.

Before I reached the age of 1, we moved to a new home on Rivard St. Bourbonnais. My father sold the home in Bradley and bought a piece of land in Bourbonnais and built a house. My father worked at the Bradley Factory and tilled his small piece of land when he returned from work each day.

There was one great weight upon my parents' heart, and that was the inability of my sister who was an invalid from birth. She was nervous and could not talk.

On the whole my home life of my early years was a happy one.

At the age of 6-and-a-half years I started school. I liked school very much and was always anxious for vacation to be over so that I could go back to school. My teacher for first and second grade was Mother St. Emma.

When 7 years old, I made my first Holy Communion in Ma-

ternity Church Bourbonnais, on June 3, 1926.

When I was 8 years old my grandmother, Mrs. Caroline Bellisle died. She died on the 26th of May 1927, and was buried on Decoration Day. This was a dear one who left us and we sorrowed for her. But a still dearer one was to leave us. One who would have us in complete sadness. One who would never be forgotten. My dear father met with his death in an accident on the 12th of June, 1927. My father fell off his plow coming home from work, and he was dragged about 25 feet. He was brought to the hospital. Five days after the accident Friday June 17, he died at six o'clock in the morning. He was 51 years old. He was buried on Monday, June 20.

I sorrowed much, but I was too young to fully realize what I was losing. It is only now that I know what I lost. I often wonder what it must be like to have the loving care of a father.

My mother took all responsibilities upon herself and she has done very well since. My mother sold all the farm implements that we had and she rented the farm, or land in back of our home for a Fox Ranch to Mr. George Arseneau Jr.

At 9 years of age I made my Confirmation. It was a very happy day for me. We were fifty who made our confirmation that day. Bishop Shiel confirmed us. My sponsor was Mrs. Aurelia Lebrun.

I was in fourth grade when I made my Confirmation. My teacher was Mother St. Valery. In fifth grade I had Mother St. Thomas and in sixth Mother St. Agnes.

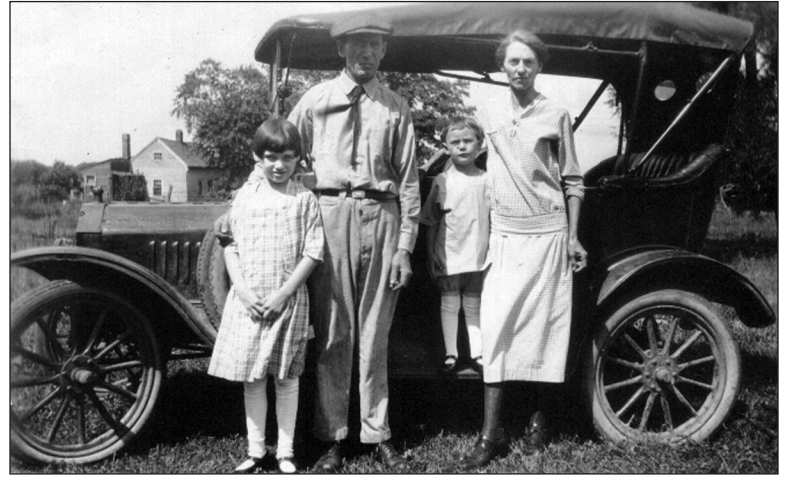
It is when I got in seventh grade that I thought school was hard. I had many books to carry home every night. This is where I learned to study. When I was promoted from seventh to eighth grade I had an average of above 90.

I had a nice vacation that summer, and when I returned to school the next Fall, I was ready for a year of hard work, this being my last year of grammar school. I toiled hard until I finally reached the end of the year. The Final Examinations were easy, because I had studied hard throughout the past months, and knew everything that I must know. I graduated with an average of 97. I came out head of my class. Mother St. Joachim was my teacher in seventh and eighth grades.

During vacation I worked at the Bear-brand hosiery Company for about three weeks. I was looping, it was easy work and I enjoyed it. But I had to quit when they passed the law of all those under 16 could not work. I was only fourteen so I was too young.

When school started again I was a freshman. This was a jolly year. We were initiated at the beginning of the year at a Halloween party given by the seniors. We will never forget our initiation. The year went smoothly by. And in came another year in which I was a Sophomore.

I am sixteen and I am a Sophomore. I am anxious for the school term to be over," Bernice Fortin.



Thomas, Zeta, Bernice and Lillie Fortin with the family's Ford automobile, circa 1924.



Bernice Fortin (second from right) is pictured on the set of The American Television Institute where she studied acting and costume design and worked on early television shows.



The 1937 Notre Dame Academy graduating class included Bernice Fortin, Marcella Reuter, Angela Senesac, Dorothy McCoy, Burdell Tittinger, Idella Dickman, Mary (unknown last name) and Edith Fitzgerald.



The Fortin home at 309 Rivard St., formerly 108 (at some point Bourbonnais renumbered streets in the village), was also the location of Bridals by Bernice.

*The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting local history. Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month March to December. Museum hours are 1 to 4 p.m. first and third Sundays of each month, March to December or by appointment. Contact them at <http://bourbonnaishistory.org> on Facebook at [facebook.com/bourbonnaisgrove](https://facebook.com/bourbonnaisgrove) or call 1-815-933-6452.*

## Super Crossword

### Answers

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