



A Hidden Past

By Sylvia Foster

My grandmother had no place at her own table. Her husband considered her family stories as *less than* – not even worth sharing when he said, “What would you know about how to celebrate Christmas or any other holiday, for that matter?” he told her. She and her French-Canadian siblings had grown up in poverty. For this, she was silenced by the man she had wed.

Being French-Canadian in the 1950s in Maine, where I was raised, meant being the target of bias and hate. My grandmother and many others suffered for it. Erased were my great-grandmother’s recipes; cherished holiday traditions through generations; my family’s daily culture; the knowledge of whether family members spoke French in their home; whether they had games that I could have learned to play; what their favorite toys and books were.

My aunt confided that, as a child, my grandmother had to share every stitch of her clothing, and there were no dolls, unless you made one for yourself out of scraps. Another aunt told me that the doll my grandmother created as a child was comical, but when I saw it, I just saw her unschooled but loving handiwork. (Later in life, she would become a skilled seamstress, making smocks for her daughters and helping one of them to pay her college tuition. My grandfather didn’t believe money should be wasted on college tuition for women, so he refused to fund it.)

I am proud of my heritage, but as a child, I was told to keep our French-Canadian roots a secret; moreover, the adults poked fun at French houses painted in beautiful bright pastels and threw insults at their lovely accents and distinctive, slight stature. White Protestants in Maine openly scorned them for being Catholic. The expression “she’s half French and half foolish” was commonly tossed around. These and other judgments often revealed envy of the successes of French-Canadians as they made economic gains through hard work.

Someone recently said that prejudice is a heart disease, and it’s curable. And it does seem that

there has been some healing – that things are more accessible and equitable now for people of French Canadian heritage in Maine.

What should I do now with the knowledge of the erasure of my grandmother's heritage – a conspiracy to silence a whole community of good, hardworking, smart people? First, I'll say to the spirit of grandmother Alberta Lafland Thompson Tozier, born 125 years ago, "You whose stories entwined to meet mine from the beginning of my existence, I see you, and I hold you in my heart. Be well, good soul. Be well."

Native American Poet Laureate Joy Harjo said, ". . . If everyone is not seated at the table, what kind of life is that?" We are each a part of everyone's story– the bigger story trying to "make itself right." She believes that there's "a cultural shift beginning in which we understand that Native rights, trans rights, black rights, women's rights, LGBTQIA+ and immigrant rights – all relate to each individual's story, AND, each of our stories add to our collective story" as peoples in our families, neighborhoods, towns, cities, and countries. Equal regard for all races – all cultures – brings us quality of life.

Native American Luther Standing Bear said, "All over the earth, faces of living things are alike. Mother Earth has turned these faces out of the earth with tenderness."

Thank you to the Racial Unity Team for encouraging us to share our histories – challenging us to enrich our compassion across differences so that, through self-exploration, we may see ourselves whole again.