



## Strange Vibes in Van Buren

January 13, 2013

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*I was chatting with the host at a house party recently who was telling me of his family link to the Acadian town of Van Buren on Maine's border with Canada. I was immediately reminded of an article I'd been assigned to write years ago by Down East Magazine, a slick vehicle for boosting Maine's touristic image. Down East had excerpted a chapter from my back roads guide to Maine, and the enthusiastic editor whose favor I momentarily enjoyed asked me to "pick a town, any town in Maine, and write about it." I wrote about Van Buren; the article never appeared.*

*Traveler's log... (circa 1990)*

At about noon on a recent, rainy Sunday, my wife and I were sitting in a hotel tavern in far away Madawaska, an old river town on Maine's remote northern border with Canada. It was one of those clean, well-lighted places with the kind of generic interior our culture feeds on and endlessly re-cycles – like Hopper's famous diner, but without the dreary or sinister overtones of that peculiar masterpiece. Quite the opposite. On the surface, everything seemed so straight, so middle-American.

Yet, since arriving in the area the day before, wherever we'd explored, including this otherwise unexceptional tavern, I sensed an exotic undercurrent, not to mention an air of indifference to our very presence. The obvious explanation, that everyone around us was speaking French, may have been heightened by an old, familiar tick of my own, the bittersweet aloofness of the self-styled outsider on the road again, just passing through. But it was more than that. I had the distinct feeling of being a stranger in my own land.

Carol and I had come into the tavern to escape a downpour, and perhaps get a bite to eat. The scene inside was palpably *en famille*; it was as if we'd suddenly intruded upon someone's private living quarters. Papa', sleepy-eyed and graying chatted in French with the only other customers, a few cronies who faced him across the bar, huddled over a round of Budweisers. When we asked about lunch, he half-heartedly responded in halting English, but soon shrugged and passed the question on to his wife, a tall, smart looking brunette whose English was fluent enough, though strongly accented, and whose manner, more correct than her husband's, was likewise cold.

Down the opposite end of the large room, other family members sat watching television, "professional" wrestling to be exact. The group included great-grandmother, a young couple with a baby in a stroller, and a hefty, bright-eyed young lad, about twelve; four generations in all, counting the proprietors. We found the menu unexpectedly pricey, but outside, the deluge raged on. So we carved out a little private space around the pool table, ordered a couple of drafts and settled in for a game of *eight ball*. As I racked the balls, the boy approached with the air of an emissary, fully confident in his own flawless command of the national tongue. We told him we were up for the weekend, staying at a B&B in neighboring Van Buren, adding that we too lived in Maine, on the coast, near Damariscotta.

"Then why," he sputtered, "did you come to Van Buren?" The tone of genuine incredulity underscored how little we conformed to his image of the typical tourist passing this way – mostly French Canadians, I gather, en route to the south and the summer sea. Perhaps the reference to our coastal village was identified in the boy's mind with the long ocean strands and exciting carnival atmosphere of a popular resort like Old Orchard Beach. Clearly, it puzzled him that anyone with all those desirable recreations close to hand would voluntarily take their leisure in boring old Van Buren or Madawaska.

I could have told him that we had some curiosity about the local history. For we certainly knew, prior to our trip, that much of the population around Madawaska and Van Buren is descended from the Acadian French who first colonized this corner of North America, and whose saga to find a homeland is a tale of epic proportions. Or I could have said that we'd come to escape the teeming masses on the coast, the very mob scene which he might find so exciting; and that the remoteness of Van Buren and its surrounding towns was, for us, their principal attraction.

But how do you explain to a twelve year old about the kind of restlessness that makes you head up the road in one direction precisely because everyone else is going in the other? The empty road's the thing, kid, I might have said, and anything you find

along it, gravy. But I spared him both these moldy explanations and instead mumbled something about, “getting away for the weekend.”

It had been about eleven in the morning on the previous day when we pulled into Van Buren under a torrent of rain the like of which the state had not seen for months. Viewed through that dense veil of rainfall, the town’s Main Street looked moribund, like a dormant stage set on the back lot of a movie studio. Only one unique detail was immediately apparent, the layout of the shops, all lined along one side of the avenue about an eighth of a mile above and parallel to the St. John River. On the opposite bank, in Canada, we could barely make out the sketchy outline of the town of St. Leonard. Between the two towns, at mid-point in the river, runs an imaginary line separating “our” country from “theirs.”

Before the U.S. negotiated that boundary in 1844 to avoid a territorial war with British Canada, both banks of the St. John, stretching from Grand Falls – below Van Buren on the Canadian side – to Madawaska and beyond, were occupied by a homogeneous community whose members traced their ancestry from the Acadian pioneers who settled here in the deep colonial past. And while Carol and I both possess the hyper-sensitivity – typically American I suppose – in the presence of an international frontier, I have since discovered that there remain those on both sides of this border for whom that arbitrary demarcation represents a kind of Berlin Wall piercing the heart of their ancestral homeland.

At that moment, though, as we dodged the pool-sized puddles on Van Buren’s sidewalks, our only inkling that a spirit of unfulfilled nationalism still lingered in the local air – should we have chosen to apply that interpretation – was the ubiquitous display of the Acadian flags up and down the avenue, sometimes paired with the stars and stripes, sometimes waving alone. But the mere presence of a festive, if unfamiliar, banner did not strike us initially as having any greater significance than the dozen or so other seemingly disconnected curiosities we saw which give a town like Van Buren its peculiar signature.

Our visit there had been only modestly conceived as a rendezvous with local history, an informal expedition, not a systematic field trip. Quite frankly, my one conscious expectation was that – the area being French – I had hoped to dine well. And, in a sense, we did. Although the plain, home-style cooking we sampled everywhere bore no relation to my misplaced fantasies of *haute cuisine* in some picturesque road side cottage or café, perched on the river bank.

Such as it was, our culinary adventure began in an eatery called Dayton's, where we found refuge from the storm immediately on arriving in Van Buren, and ate our first *authentic* Acadian meal. Famished after the long drive, we both chose the daily special, a heavily thickened chicken stew which, we were told, is the traditional Saturday lunch among Acadians. The rest of the menu featured the kind of diner-style "good eats" I often prefer from one day to the next. Surrendering to my addiction to starch, I filled out my order with mashed potatoes smothered in white gravy, and a stack of buttered *ployes* – the uniquely Acadian buckwheat pancakes offered in restaurants throughout the region as an alternative to bread and rolls.

It was in Dalton's also where we first felt that sense of strangeness I describe at the beginning of this tale. It wasn't the service; the waitresses were civil enough. And we didn't feel menaced the way you might in a local dive, where the regulars close their faces and shoot you hostile stares that say, "you don't belong here." The strangeness was more in the absence than the presence of any familiar pattern of anti-social behavior. The fact was, no one paid us the slightest attention whatsoever. And the subtext behind their masks of disinterest read, "If you ignore them, they're not really here."

Still, it's no crime to ignore someone, and there was obviously nothing personal about it; the only sign of true malevolence afoot remained outside in the foul weather. Flood rains continued to pour with an unabated fury, dampening our appetites for exploration. But neither Carol nor I had the slightest intention of being confined to the B&B where we now headed to check-in.

Van Buren's only B&B, the Farrell-Michaud House, stands "like a princess among the Trolls," to appropriate Mary McCarthy's famous phrase. Owner Shelia Cyr, a teacher in a local high school, has converted this former lumber baron's manor into an appealing way station for the sojourner who would prefer a touch of elegance and home comfort to the more conventional motel digs also available in and around Van Buren. The inn seemed to reflect Cyr's optimism that Van Buren and its folk will one day discard what, looking back on our visit, I now perceive as their protective shell, and spread a mat of welcome before at least the more peripatetic wing of the tourist trade who roam widely through the Maine interior in winter, summer and fall.

After getting settled in our room, we took advantage of a momentary break in the storm to get back on the road. At first we returned to the village and strolled the main drag, walking in and out of Van Buren's several stores. There was something touchingly archaic about the window displays, dominated by the kind of bric-a-brac novelties I associate with working class tastes, and the women's fashions that seemed like torn pages from magazines of the fifties. As for us, we glided like one-dimensional

shadows unobserved among the self-involved clerks and counter-workers who, for the most part, did not even deign to take our measure.

The rest of that afternoon we spent touring the Canadian border region along Route 108, keeping an eye out for that fabled eatery of my imagination. At one road house, we chatted briefly with a pretty young waitress. Their menu, she said, featured fried chicken, and later that evening there would be live music. "In French," I inquired, perhaps a little too eagerly? "No, English," she replied. "Why," she added innocently, "do you want to learn French?"

Unlike the young waitresses in Van Buren, all thoroughly bi-lingual, this young woman's English, while serviceable, was by no means fluent. But she was Canadian – French Canadian – and so apparently was the culture that surrounded her. The billboards, the signs on most businesses, with the exception of the American fast food franchises, are all in French. There is, moreover, something manifestly buoyant about the old French culture here: it seems to breathe freely in the open air. Whereas, on the American side, despite the still widespread use of the French language, and even its numerical predominance in the local population, the Acadian culture has a kind of sullen, underground quality.

On an aesthetic plane, however, we found the Canadian border region unbelievably drab. It wasn't merely the lack of material prosperity – Acadian Maine is no Shangri-la in that regard – but the absence of feature and proportion in both the landscape and human habitation turned our interest in touring the local countryside into a dull, unrewarding exercise. Only in the exaggerated architecture of the local cathedrals could one trace a link to the glory of France from which this culture originally sprang.

That night we ate at the Blue Manor Motel on the edge of Van Buren, another tasty stomach-stuffer that would have been the envy of any long distance trucker. Then, about nine, we drove back to town to attend the Saturday night dance in the basement club of the Van Buren Hotel. As we waited on line to pay our cover and get our hands stamped, the bouncer carded four single women, their faces shrouded with that sulky look of the dateless who resent the vulnerability of their position. Downstairs the Nadeau Family, a well-known local band, played rock-a-billy standards, all in English, and by ten the place was packed.

People of all ages – from teens to seniors – crowded around tables that were pulled together pell-mell to accommodate their extended families; and the talk was all in French. The men, in jeans or trousers, wore knit pullovers, and mostly drank

Buds. While their wives or girlfriends, for whom this weekly event was clearly an occasion to dress up, drank rum-n-cokes. Both sexes wore highly coiffed hair styles, and when they danced, did so with panache and grace, from the oldest to the youngest. Carol and I sat alone, and danced quite a bit ourselves, serene in our ghost-like status among these clannish Acadians. Ours was a ring side seat on a rare hoe down that combined elements of a vibrant dance hall scene from Toulouse Lautrec, with the easy intimacy of a mill town family reunion.

Over breakfast the following morning we heard an interesting story which might be said to represent one of the more recent assaults on this resilient Acadian way of life. A fellow guest at the B&B, Kathy Billings, who'd actually returned to Van Buren that weekend for a family reunion, told us how the use of French was actively discouraged when she attended grade school in the neighboring village of Lille during the nineteen sixties.

A tide of local sentiment had momentarily arisen within the community in favor of full assimilation. And its campaign, as other Acadian natives of the region have since confirmed for me, was centered primarily within the school system. In Billing's recollection, not without its arcane and humorous overtones, the nuns at her school handed out cards with devil's images on them to students caught speaking French. Those youths who cooperated and spoke only English, received pictures of angels which could be redeemed at the end of each week. The premiums were of a type that only those who attended parochial schools (or in Acadian Maine the much rarer case of actual public schools staffed by Roman Catholic teaching orders) are familiar with: holy pictures, rosary beads, and – most highly prized of all – little statues of the Holy Family or the saints.

Today, the study of French is once again required in local schools, and, as I have already observed, the language continues to be widely spoken throughout this northern community. No doubt the long term pressures from English language dominated mass media – music, home video entertainment, news magazines and television – also pose a genuine concern for local traditionalists. But another threat to the integrity of Maine's Acadian culture is the potential influx of "outsiders" who may first make their appearance, like us, as innocuous *tourists*.

Ambivalence toward tourism in this community can be measured in several more concrete ways than by the alleged cold shoulder treatment we felt we had received. At the height of the tourist season last summer, Van Buren actually closed its Chamber of Commerce to the public and laid off the organization's single part time employee. Also the first McDonald's ever to close its doors in America for lack of

business was located on the outskirts of Van Buren. Only a constant stream of traffic up Route 1A would have made the franchise profitable; and, for whatever reason, no such stream of cars ever materialized.

A healthy tourist industry may or may not perform conspicuous wonders for many small town economies in Maine. But for the Acadian community in and around Van Buren it is at least conceivable that an expanded tourism could ultimately spell extinction for one of the most singular American sub-cultures that has managed to beat the odds by avoiding assimilation – not just for a generation or two – but for centuries. Remoteness from the cultural mainstream – albeit increasingly neutralized by the spread of mass media – and the fact of being surrounded by the Canadian French with whom Acadian Mainers share a natural affinity, not to mention actual family ties, are factors that have no doubt contributed to the preservation of their culture.

These few impressions, informally gathered, which link Carol's and my experiences of feeling a local wariness toward outsiders were further deepened later that morning when we drove to Madawaska. It was then that we had the encounter I describe above with the young boy in the tavern, the one who stepped from behind the curtain, so to speak, that normally shrouds his culture from prying eyes, and became the only person during that getaway weekend to actually recognize our presence beyond the ritual exchanges of the marketplace. It was that boy's simple gesture, moreover, that had caused me to initially reflect on our reception throughout the area – or lack thereof – I ought to say.

We didn't stay long in Madawaska, but could not fail to notice (approvingly, I must confess) the town's honky-tonk appearance. It was "filled with bars and beauty parlors," to borrow the words Franco American writer Denis Ledoux chose with intended irony when he spoke to me once of Lewiston, Maine, his own hometown. Acadian flags flew from lamppost staffs up and down Madawaska's main street which, like its counterpart in Van Buren, borders a ridge line well above the St. John's River. And we learned in fleeting conversations while buying postcards, or ordering a round of beers, that Madawaska was not only a pit stop for French Canadian tourists en route south, but a nightlife center for Acadian young people on both sides of the border for miles around.

A more eccentric observation concerning Madawaska – the informal capital of the Acadian "republic" before President Van Buren's delegation negotiated the international boundary here and split the community in two – is that the town seems more in the Canadian orbit today – French Canada that is – than the American. And we found it quite telling while driving back to Van Buren that the sign along Route 1A

welcoming visitors to Maine, whether by conscious design or otherwise, doesn't appear until St. David, some miles beyond downtown Madawaska.

Arriving back in Van Buren later that afternoon, we made our final stop for the weekend at the *Village Acadien*. In this "living museum," spread over several acres, an ensemble of structures which included primitive cabins, plain but genteel cottages, folksy store fronts, a stunning rustic chapel made of logs, and *une grange* – a barn, map the Acadian community's material evolution in the St. John's River valley from its colonial origins down to the early days of the twentieth century. Constructed by local volunteers to mark the passing of America's bi-centennial in 1976, today the village is as much a shrine to Acadian history as it is Van Buren's one genuine tourist attraction.

We spent two fruitful hours here soaking up the tales and lessons that each precious artifact in these under curated exhibits strained to communicate. For us the place was a temple of contrasts, weaving episodes from our own lives into the Acadian tableaux at unanticipated places. As lapsed Catholics, the familiar presence of crucifixes and icons – the Sacred Heart, the Blessed Virgin – in every corner of each archetypal dwelling powerfully confronted us with the glorious excesses of idolatry and the passionate mysticism which so characterizes our former faith.

Another instance of *déjà vu* occurred in the old Post Office, a building which had seen service from roughly the turn of the century until the nineteen seventies when, lock, stock and pigeon holes, it was relocated here. Tacked to the bead board paneling we saw an FBI Most Wanted poster and the face of Kathy Boudin, a woman Carol had known from the radical struggles against the war in Vietnam, who had gone underground and was later caught up in the tragedy of the Brinks armored truck robbery.

Before departing the grounds, I searched the book rack in the *Village Acadien's* gift shop for a pamphlet that might shed a more objective light on how the Acadian culture had managed to survive despite the overwhelming obstacles history has placed in its path. Book in hand I waited while the cashier spoke in French to a customer in front of me. And I was thinking how hard it was to sort out whether or not tourism really posed a threat to this way of life. The persistence of the language, that's the key, I mused. When my turn came to pay, the cashier perused my selection, then turned to me and said, "I don't like this book. It's got too much French in it."