

In Search of Hugo by Charlie Sieracki



Lake Ave. in Hugo looking West towards Highway 61, c. 1930s

Hugo, Minnesota, always had a mystical appeal for me. It was the little village just north of St. Paul where my mother was born and where my father used to take us every June to visit my maternal grandmother. The three-hour trip from Winona was an annual affair to drop off my oldest brother, Jerry, at Grandma's in the spring and pick him up in the fall, giving him the whole summer to run through the fields, swim in the lakes, walk in the woods, and play baseball with his many Hugo friends and cousins. And the village was loaded with cousins. It was predominantly a French-Canadian village, and our French-Canadian ancestors had the habit of producing big families with names such as Cummings (Viens), Belland, Houle, Peltier, Peloquin, La Motte, Lavallee, Letourneau, and Brisson. My memories of the summer car trips are shadowy and limited because they stopped when I was only 7, Grandma (Mary Peloquin Cummings) married Michel Cartier in 1951 and moved to Coos Bay, Oregon.



Hugo's rural mail carrier Walter "Walt" Marier stands just off of Highway 61 c. 1950.

I remember only a few details about the last time we visited Hugo. We entered Grandma's porch and were greeted by a cheery voice coming from inside the house, asking us to put the mail on the table. Grandma laughed to see that we were not the mailman bringing the mail into the house. The mailman used to bring the mail into the house because Grandma was confined to a wheelchair. Grandma

had an extra wheelchair in the house, which I loved to try out

and negotiate my way throughout the little house. Grandma was a great cook, so our arrival meant being treated to delicious cookies or cakes.

I remember that we pretty much had the run of the village when we visited, so my younger brother and I would wander the little streets and try to find our way to and from the grocery store to buy candy. I bothered him one day and he threatened to tattle on me. My bribe of a trip for candy to the store was quickly accepted. My grandmother's lot was very deep and led out into a field. We would find our way through the long grass to a little shack and climb on the roof. At night the curfew siren wailed at 9:00 and scared the hell out of us, even if we were safe in bed at home. The nights were chilly, especially since I was relegated to sleep on the porch with Jerry. One night, I found myself freezing without the covers. Jerry had rolled himself up in them. When Dad stepped out to check on us, he promptly pulled the covers from Jerry to give me my share and told him sternly not to do that again. One day, we all took a little walk down the street to visit my mother's grandparents. I vaguely remember a really old but very friendly man and woman with a very big garden greeting us outside a little house. This couple would have been my great-grandparents (C.V. [Charles Viens] Cummings and his wife, Catherine).

Hugo dropped off my family's radar screen after Grandma's marriage and departure, much to my brother Robert's chagrin. About that time, he thought it was his turn to summer over in fabled Hugo. But he never got a turn, nor did I. I often asked myself what I would have found if I did get the chance to stay there. I consulted with my second cousin Ray Cummings; we share the same great-grandfather (C.V. Cummings). Ray grew up in Hugo about that time, and he graciously briefed me on the life of the village and the family connections. And here is the 1950's Hugo that Ray described for me.

It was during the 1840s through the 1860s that the Centerville/Hugo/White Bear area attracted a huge contingent of cousins from Quebec. My great-great-grandparents (Prudent and Philonise [Lebel] Viens) came and settled on the Mendota side of the river across from St. Paul

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with their children including their son Charles who was born in Quebec in 1859. Soon they moved to the French section of Minneapolis on Second Avenue, which is across the river from downtown Minneapolis. Then they bought property on 624 University Avenue NE. Prudent got into the real estate business and had apartments in that area.

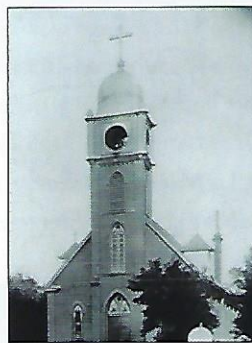
A 1904 St. Paul newspaper article on their 50th wedding anniversary noted that even at the age of 84, Prudent was still managing property. In the 1880s, they also had a 60-acre farm near Centerville, Minnesota, on what is now 20th Avenue North, northeast of the village of Centerville. In the 1870s when in his 20s, Great-Grandfather C.V. worked on the railroad and then worked in Minneapolis as did his sister Clara. They were just putting in the railroad from St. Paul to Duluth through what is now Hugo. Interestingly, the company planned to route the railroad through Centerville. However, because Centerville objected, the railroad was routed three miles east of Centerville through what was called Centerville Station. In 1882, a post office was built at the spot. To avoid the address confusion between Centerville and Centerville Station, the new site got the name Hugo Post Office in honor of Victor Hugo. Thus, the new village of Hugo got the railroad and the commerce that went with it.

Our great-grandmother, Catherine, who married C.V., grew up on her father Pierre Belland's farm in the Centerville area. She and C.V. were married at Saint-Genevieve-of-Paris Church in Centerville. Our great-grandmother, Catherine, lived to be almost 90—and to her dying day—only spoke French. There was no need for English. She never roamed more than 10 miles from her birthplace, and nearly all of her neighbors and relatives spoke French. When C.V.'s son, Fred, courted my grandmother, they very likely spoke French since it was the native language of both of them. I remember overhearing my grandmother, Mary, speaking with her sister, and when the conversation turned to serious gossip, the language slipped from English to French.

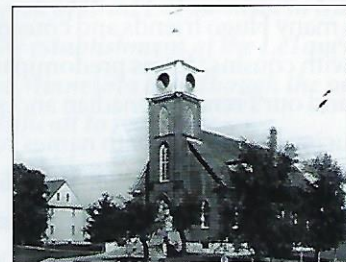
The Lebel family is notable because the lineage might possibly trace back to the royalty of Europe as delineated in the book, *The Ascendance of Catherine Baillon*. Our Lebel (Labelle)

ancestors (the father and brother of Philonese, our great-great-grandmother) came to Green Bay first. It was Halaire, Philonese's father, who came to the Centerville area. The brother who remained in Green Bay started the Lebel trucking firm, which later merged with Allied Van Lines.

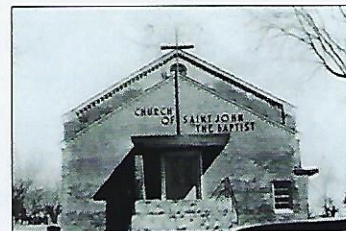
A good place to start the description of significant sites in the village of Hugo circa 1950 with its 444 inhabitants is C.V.'s house. My mother used to sleep in the room behind the kitchen. Later, C.V.'s son, Willard, bought Great-Grandfather C.V.'s house in April 1950, and cousin Ray ended up sleeping in the same room so many years later. The house had two fifty-foot lots which ran 450 feet deep and made for huge gardens with potatoes, corn, radishes, cucumbers, lettuce, melons. Grandma Mary Peloquin Cummings lived just down the street, and this is where Jerry would stay when he came to visit during the summers. Our great-uncle and great-aunt (Bill and Ida Peloquin Lavallee) also lived in Hugo. One of their sons, Marcel, was the same age and dear friend of my mother.



Exterior of the original St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. Mass was delivered in both French and English until 1941.



Exterior of the original St. John the Baptist Catholic Church and Parish House in 1938.



Rebuilt St. John's Church following the fire that destroyed the original building in 1947.

Jerry and Grandma would go to church on Sundays. These French-Canadian immigrants were devout Catholics

and their beloved church was the Church of St. John the Baptist. It burned down in February of 1947, but was soon rebuilt on the original foundation. Father Fortin built the Our Lady of Fatima shrine and the Sacred Heart altar in the Catholic cemetery, the burial place of C.V. and Catherine Cummings, their children, and their children's spouses.

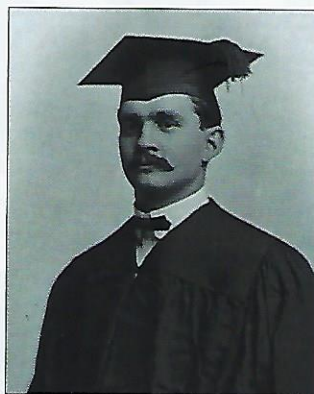
The District 44 two-story school stood right next to the church; it burned down in 1957. Each of four classrooms handled two classes: 1st and 2nd, 3rd and 4th, 5th and 6th, 7th and 8th. During the winter, students would slide down the snowy hill from the school to the lake.

Hugo had two doctors:

Dr. Mingo and Dr. Del Mas.

Dr. Raymond Del Mas and his wife, both born in Europe, had spent some time in Brazil and then moved to Chicago. Dr. Delmas's grandson, Claude, explained to Ray and me that his grandfather came across a flier in Chicago advertising the interest of Hugo to have its own French-speaking doctor, and so they moved first to

Centerville and then to Hugo. Dr. Del Mas was very popular, and he even started a newspaper called *The Courier* in the early 1900s. Dr. Del Mas' son, Raymond, was Ray Cummings' godfather and his namesake. Dr. Del Mas' house was later owned by his son Claude. Grandson Claude was one of Jerry's Hugo pals. Claude's wife Jewell is our cousin; like us, she is a descendant of Pierre Belland, our great-great grandfather. Dr. Mingo, the second Hugo physician, lived near the church. His son owned a mink farm and another son was a priest who served in Hugo.



Graduation photo Dr. Francis Mingo, who graduated from Hamline University Medical School in 1904.



A group of women stand on the steps of the Hugo Telephone Exchange Building, November 11, 1930.

Other Hugo citizens that Jerry would have run into included the Olingers, who moved to Hugo in 1950. Gus Olinger worked at the mink farm skinning and butchering rabbits to feed the mink. Clarence and Elsie Wenzel were my grandmother's next-door neighbors. The Hugo telephone system, which had 7 to 8 people on the party line, was established by Herb Rodrique. Linda Brisson Cummings' (Ray's wife) Great-Grandmother Leah Arcand was

a telephone operator. To ring someone, you had to crank the phone the appropriate number of times (e.g. one long and

two shorts) or call the operator and give her the number of the party. Linda Brisson and her parents lived next to Great-Grandpa and Grandma Cummings. At one time, Linda's father owned Brisson's Market, a mom-&-pop grocery store in Hugo. Next to them was the Connie Crever family, whose son Mike Crever married Roy Brisson's second daughter. Ray Cummings married the oldest daughter. Ray's grandfather, Ervin Cummings (my mother's uncle) lived across the street from my grandmother and he was the rural mail carrier from 1920 to 1960. Mike Crever's Aunt Mildred worked in the post office and married Erving Cummings (Ray's grandfather) after his first wife died. The post office served as a social institution because mail patrons went to the post office to get their mail from a box there and had a chance to chat with neighbors.

The village had the typical shops: Bert Ethier's barbershop, Grace's Malt Shop, Fred Carpenter's gas station and repair shop, Marier's (then Nadeau's) grocery store, Bob's (Burkhard) Market, and

Brisson's Market. The village hall with a jail cell was nearby on Main Street (Highway 61). Moise Parenteau was both the town constable and janitor at the grade school. Moise had a hook hand; no problems with discipline at that school. Erving Cummings and other town elders played cards at the village hall most every day. Gambling was popular with all the Cummings. C.V. frequently had a game going with his sons at his home. The Interstate Lumber Company, an important business, was located next to my grandmother's. Free movies were shown on the wall of one of the buildings during the summers in the hopes of forestalling juvenile delinquent behavior. Probably more effective was the loud curfew siren that sounded at 9:00 pm. Moise Parenteau was in the habit of escorting home the curfew breakers.

Hugo was blessed with five bars, not that Jerry would have been at all interested: Tilroy's Bar, later called Carpenter's; the Rendez-Vous bar now a chiropractic clinic; the Legion Club now the new Legion Club; Sam Sadowski's bar where Connie Crever made his famous Tom and Jerry's at Christmas time; Traegers' Bar where Great-Grandfather C.V. and Great-



145th and Highway 61 in May, 1959. Business (right to left): Post Office, Hardware Store, Ethier Barber Shop, Lavalle's Garage, Carpenters Restaurant

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Grandmother Catherine celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary and where Ray's father and mother first met. (Willard used to bartend and Ivana would waitress.) During Prohibition, people from the Cities would come out to Louie's Steak House, which was a speakeasy probably benefitting from many of the stills in the area. Kelly Lysoff lived in Hugo, but then moved to Centerville where he owned Kelly's Bar.

One of Jerry's favorite activities in Hugo was a good baseball game with friends and cousins. The baseball field rose in importance after World War II as it did in most small towns throughout Minnesota. League games were available for both adults and kids. The Hugo Frenchmen fielded outstanding teams, reaching the regional playoffs in 1953 with Willard

Cummings as manager and Ray as batboy. In the winter, the firemen would flood a park area to create an ice skating rink where hockey was played in the afternoons. The many woods—Cole's, Doherty's, Molitor's and Alex's—were wonderful playgrounds for playing capture-the-flag, camping, and hunting. Jerry's favorite place for camping was a little clearing in Cole's woods.

Over the passage of time, 1950s Hugo has sadly lost most of its main characters, including my brother Jerry and my cousin Ray. But with the help of Ray's memories shared with me over many pleasant conversations, Hugo comes into focus as a little French-Canadian village filled with many relatives and bustling with life. 🍷



The Hugo Classic 5 baseball tournaments winning team of 1966.

Pictured (left to right)
Back: Virgil Sontag, Jerry Fisher, Art Thornquist,
Deane Vail, Tom Crever, Ray Cummings
Front: Richard Vail, Dale Pelletier, Bob Charpentier,
Jay Brisson



Barber Albert "Bert" Ethier stands in his shop, 1936.



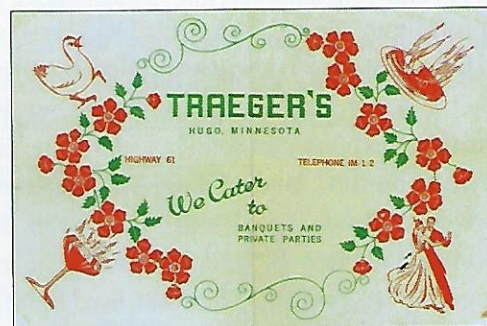
Chisago Lakes Lumber Yard off Highway 61 and 165th Street in Hugo.



The Mingo family in front of their Hugo home (L to R) Phil, Nate, Dr. Francis, Al, Anges, Francis, and Ruth in 1927.



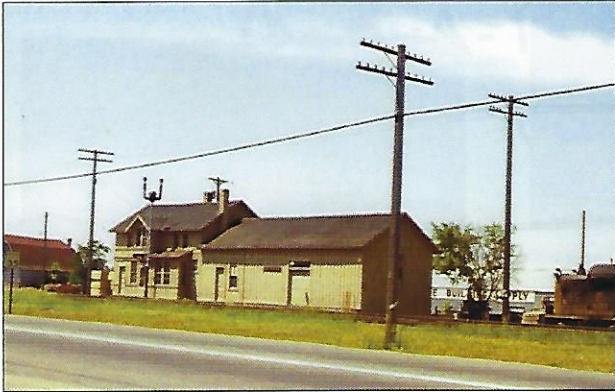
Louise Mueller, Everett Gallivan, and Millie Crever stand inside the Post Office.



Placemat from Traeger's Restaurant, c. 1960.



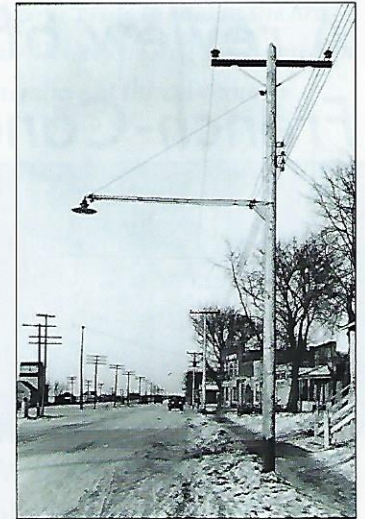
Father Fortin sits with a dog in front of the chapel where mass was briefly held following the fire at St. John's in 1947.



The Hugo train depot was located on Highway 61 where Frenchman Road is currently. It serviced the Northern Pacific Railway until it was demolished in the late 1970s.



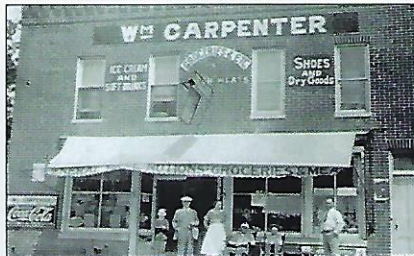
Barber Albert "Bert" Ethier with a customer in his shop.



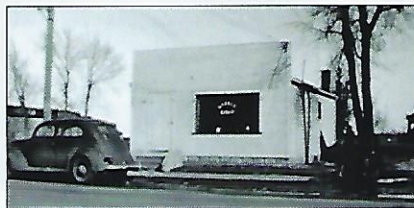
Highway 61 looking North on January 6, 1925. Photo taken by Stillwater photographer John Runk.



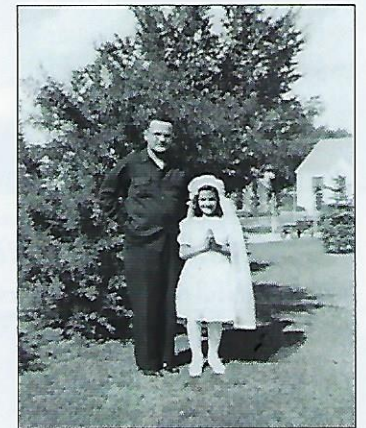
Quilting B - Far left, clockwise: Mrs. Philip Houle (center front, short dark hair, floral dress), Mrs. ___ Houle (blond hair, white shirt), Mrs. Oliver Peloquin, Mrs. Mose Parenteau (partially hidden), Aunt Olive Ouimet, Mrs. LeClair, Mrs. C.V. Cummings (partially hidden), Mrs. Cyril Bernier, Mrs. E.J. Letourneau, Mrs. Peltier



A group of people stand outside the storefront of William Carpenter's grocery store.



Exterior of Albert Ethier's barber shop on Highway 61.



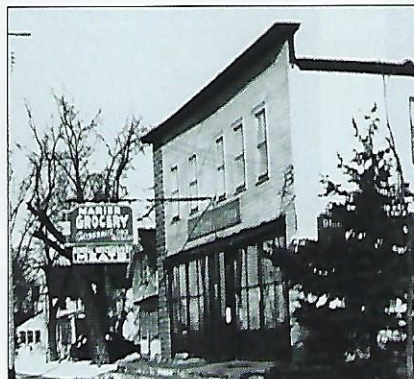
Father Fortin stands with Yvonne Peltier on the day of her First Communion, c. 1940.



Considered a farming community for many decades, this is an example of a typical farm field that can still be found throughout Hugo.



Carpenters Store, looking West from the Hugo blacksmith shop across Highway 61 in the late 1950s.



Marier Grocery Store on Highway 61 c.1940.



Yvonne Peltier, Bonnie Steiner, and Carhol, Richard and Roland Granger stand in front of Roy and Ida Peltier's store.



A group of women quilting in Hugo - Pictured (L to R) - Back: Mrs. CV Cummings, Mrs. Philip Houle, Mrs. Adolore Theroux, Aunt Olive Ouimet, Mrs. LeClair - Seated in Front: Mrs. Cyril Bernier, ___ Houle, Mrs Wm Lavalley, Mrs Oliver Peltier



Carpenters Store, looking West from the Hugo blacksmith shop across Highway 61 in the late 1950s.

Photos provided by the Hugo Historical Commission: Aiming to connect the community to its rich history through education and the preservation of historical information and artifacts, as pertaining to the Hugo area and its heritage.