

## Marie Peloquin

The basic “family tree” facts of my grandmother’s life seem rather humdrum.

Marie Peloquin, daughter of Calixte and Edwige Peloquin

Born 1895, Hugo MN

Marries Alfred Cummings in 1913

Children: Irene Cummings born April, 1915; Alfred Cummings born December, 1918

Marries Michel Cartier 1951

Dies in 1976

But if we tell the story behind these key dates, we not only learn about how remarkable she was as a person, we learn about her French-Canadian heritage as well.



After their wedding, the couple goes to live on his parents’ farm to help with the farm work. Tragically, only four years later, my grandfather died on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, a victim of the Spanish flu epidemic. My mother was only three years old.



Picture of Irene and

Alfred.

And their second child, my uncle Alfred, was born in December, 1918. With the life insurance money paid upon the death of her husband, my grandmother bought a small house in Hugo, and, as a single parent, supported her family by doing housework. The village of Hugo did not have a high school, and my grandmother sent my mother, Irene Cummings, to attend high school in Winona, where my grandmother's sister was living in the 1930s. There my mother finished high school and promptly fell in love and married a man from the Polish East End of Winona -- and stayed in Winona to raise her family. My grandmother sent my mother from Hugo to finish her education and she never came back to live in Hugo. In 1942, her son, my Uncle Alfred Cummings, enlisted in the Army Air Force to become a fighter pilot and he never returned to live in Hugo. After the war, he moved to Montana to keep his job on the railroad.

During the 1940s, we used to visit Grandma, who was living alone in Hugo until I was six years old. By this time, Grandma was confined to a wheel chair. It all seemed normal enough because that is all I knew. When I asked my mother how Grandma came to be in a wheel chair, she said her mother was shot by a robber. It was only many years later that I found out the whole story.

Grandma was not shot by a robber. She was shot in 1934 by a deranged man, John Vollary, who fancied himself in love with her; and when he was told his love was doomed to failure, he shot her and then shot himself.

In 1951, my grandmother married a former resident of Hugo Michel Cartier and moved to his home in Coos Bay, Oregon. She spent some very happy years in Coos Bay until her husband died, and she came to live with her daughter, my mother, in Winona until her death in 1976.

It is a remarkable life story. Of French-Canadian heritage, she marries at the age of 18, but her husband dies when she is 23. And when grandma is 36, her daughter leaves home. She is wounded by a deranged neighbor when she is 39. She sends her son off to war followed by out-of-state work when she is 47. The question is how does her life story reflect her French-Canadian heritage?

Telling her story reveals a remarkably resilient woman who perseveres through calamity and hardship. She was able to rely on strong family ties with her siblings and children and her rock-solid religious faith to achieve a great deal of happiness and fulfillment. By her example, she taught us the values of our French-Canadian heritage: trust in God, work hard, love your family, and enjoy life.

My grandmother's unwavering religious faith led her to accept her fate as God's will and helped her to meet her daily challenges with good will and cheerfulness. There was a never-ending stream, of her handiwork, of mittens, scarves, comforters and crocheted table cloths, supportive letters – whatever she could do for others with her limited means. Every day she would turn to her prayer book and rosary. She was a good influence on the lives of her children and grandchildren and she lived many happy years with her devoted second husband on the Oregon coast. She was smart, humble, deeply religious, and never uttered a word of complaint about the enormous difficulties she faced in life.

My grandmother's faith, perseverance, hard work and good cheer are similar to the virtues of the French immigrants to Canada as well as the French-Canadian families that moved to Hugo. At great sacrifice our ancestors moved from Canada to build a community in Hugo. They left the safety and fellowship of their Canadian communities to eke out a living as best they could. They hunted and trapped and fished, cut wood from the forests and cut ice from the lakes in winter to supplement their meager incomes while they opened up the land for farming. They overcame the challenges of learning a new language while searching for jobs or starting businesses.

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