

CHEZ NOUS

MARS-AVRIL 1996

THE LONG, LONG, LONG WINTERS

by Lowell Mercil, Mentor MN

Editors Note: Mr. Mercil has been and continues to be a loyal contributor to Chez Nous. In a note accompanying this article Lowell "wishes to dedicate this article to his sister, Nora Mercil Brusseau, who died November 26, 1995 in Vancouver, Washington, after a prolonged confinement with Alzheimer's disease. Her contribution to Chez Nous, "Nora Remembers", was published in the Aout-Septembre, 1990, issuse. The author also wishes to thank his sister Lorraine, and brother Jerry, for jogging his memory and keeping him on the straight and honest factual road!"

"But where are the snows of yester-years?" Francois Villon asked over 400 years ago. They may be back based on the recent weekend blizzard of 1996. I wonder if, with our great advances in weather predicting technology, the use of satellites, the doppler, etc., - are we any better today at predicting weather than the great ability developed for many generations by our native Indians?

I hear that many years ago Yvette and Joe Mafroe were driving down Highway Two, through the Chippewa Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota, when they saw an old, wrinkled, stately, gentleman sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of his teepee (some teepees had rain shields over the entrance). It was late fall and Joe wanted to know if it would be a good year for his fuel supply business so he decided to stop and find out if he could take advantage of Indian lore to predict the season. He could gage the purchase of stock accordingly. Joe introduced himself and after they exchanged a few pleasantries, he asked: what kind of a winter do you think we will have this year?" The response came quickly: "heap, long, cold winter!" Joe was curious: "what makes you think it will be a long, cold winter?" The answer came without hesitation: "Indian see white man bank house with straw - heap long cold winter!"

Well, I can't answer Francois Villon's snow question or make predictions as accurate as our native Americans but I will try to respond to a request that I describe how some of us farm children in northern Minnesota amused ourselves during the long Minnesota winter months.

Kids today have all those wonderful, safety designed, mind developing toys, games, television programs but still are bored. How come? Is it that today kids are hyperactive and we were just plain slow? Is it, as I have seen in some cases, that kids have so many things to choose from that they get mixed up and the child just doesn't know where to start - the child must make a decision and pick one of a hundred toys to concentrate on - decisions, decisions! When he selects a toy, he must go through a thousand pieces to the ones that belong to

that selected. We did not have those problems because it is much easier to pick one out of two toys than one of a hundred.

Our clouded memories can do strange things to us. It seems to me that I remember much snow and endless days of frigid weather in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This in spite of the fact that our secluded farm near Crookston MN was north of the "snow belt" that runs through central Minnesota to the Great Lakes area. Also, these were the drought years when there was little humidity so little snow. I doubt if there could have been as much snow as I remember. But I do think these were also the winters of the black snow. Not the blue snow that Paul Bunyan survived but the black snow which was the same shade as the North Dakota topsoil. That snow seemed to last forever and it was only the warm spring winds that could dispel the dark moods that accompanied those snows.

Our living conditions exceeded most others with respect to the important qualities of meaningful family values. However, we dragged behind most of our neighbors with respect to the amenities of the "easy life". Our grandfathers had left Canada to settle in the Red River Valley of the North. They were a prolific people those Frenchmen - one with eleven children, one with fourteen and another with fifteen. It was great for farming but the individual portions of the inheritance pie are not very big when you cut it into that many pieces. We lived about a third of a mile from the "new dam" but never hooked up the electricity. Not only had television not been invented, but we could not take advantage of such basic other wonders as indoor plumbing, electric lights, radios or any of the dozens of appliances and entertainment devices that we now require to live even at the lowest standards.

As a result of our lack of "luxuries", we were required to help perform many chores that kept us occupied. Most of the time the chores were accomplished under the guise of doing the job - which was actually done by Mama, Papa or one of the older brothers or sisters. We spent a lot of time "helping". The girls helped Mama with the cooking, mending, cleaning, etc., etc. The boys helped Papa feed the horses and cattle their fodder and grain, the pigs their slop, the chickens their chicken feed, helped clean and bed the stalls, etc. When I think about it a lot of children's time was consumed learning how to do things in the company of parents - the children of two employed parents today miss much of this contact. Thus, when the cows were milked it was necessary that one of the young ones be present to haul the full milk pails from the stalls where the cows were being milked to the milk separator room. Of course, it was the helper who received credit for milking the cows when he was really just "hanging around" in today's idiom. But I suppose "hanging around" with the kerosene lantern in one's hand was really helpful during those pitch dark, long winter evenings. I still think the sense of smell remains with us longer than any of the other sense memories for I can still recall the different, pungent winter odors of the barn, the pigpen, the chicken coop, etc. Whenever I attend county fairs I find that the odor memories don't go away.

Another example of a chore that consumed some of our time was "helping" with the winter laundry. Man! That laundry was a back-breaker. The memory of Mama bending over a boiler or tub and old fashioned copper washboard was engraved in my memory. I always thought that the laundry may have been the principal cause of her many backaches and those horrible migraine headaches. The ones that at times required that we walk on tiptoe and not make a sound in the house and be quiet outside. One summer a traveling salesman came to our out-of-the-way farm and demonstrated one of those beautiful, gasoline put-put powered washing machines. Wow! I was only about five years old but I dreamed of the day I could get a job and buy the washer so Mama would not have to bend over that washboard on those hot summer days.

But in winter the washing was done in the kitchen. The water was heated in the copper boiler on the kitchen range - some also in a pail on top of the pot-bellied space heater. There usually was clothes hanging to dry or to warm-up around these heaters. However, because of the resulting high humidity and quantity. It was necessary to hang most of the laundry on the outside clotheslines. We were too short to reach the lines but we did have to help carry the frozen clothes into the house. The pliable cloth became as stiff as a board but the fresh, pungent, airy smell was very pleasant. As I recall, we got a lot of laughs out of this chore. Especially, when we brought in the long-handled underwear (how did that name originate?) Man, those were practical. Especially, the drop seat model. They were very handy when you were in trouble in below-zero weather and you shunned the under-bed pot in favor of the outside two-holer.

Of course the first thing we children did when we woke in the morning was to shiver in bed for a while - I guess there was a contradictory sensation. We could feel the cold air on our faces and the outside of the blankets and knew there was a shock waiting to hit us as soon as our feet would hit the ice cold wood floor. But we were real comfortable under the wool blankets and quilts that Mama had made - except for our feet. Our arms and hands would be warm if we kept them under the blankets but our feet were usually cold - the hot water bottle was fine when we went to bed but had cooled during the night.

Eventually, we would build up enough courage to make a dash out of the bedroom, down the stairway and next to pot-bellied stove or the kitchen wood-range. We would rotate for if the stove had not been poked-up for very long, the stove side of your body would get hot while the opposite side would cool. We would be dressed in our pajamas (long-handled under-wear) and robe (wrap around blanket). These were also our breakfast clothes.

After returning to our room I often spent time at the window. There was usually a layer of ice on the window caused by the extreme cold on the outside freezing the humidity on the inside - especially after wash-days. The ice would be thick on the bottom decreasing to thin on the top. There were beautiful patterns that resembled a miniature winter-wonderland. We would spend a lot of time leaving our melted finger prints on the glass, breaking off large pieces of thin ice, moving the pieces around the non-iced surface, trying to pry pieces off the surface without breaking them, and day dreaming about far distant places. Were we bored? Would the kids today while away their time by doing such things? Is it good or bad? H-m-m-m!

I must admit that we did, also, while-away many hours with the "dream books" - the Sears-Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalogues. Wow! Those high laced boots looked beautiful - or you could look at the washing machines, houses, or cars that you were going to buy for Mama and Papa some day after you had grown up and made your fortune. When the temperature got below zero one did not spend much time reading last years catalog that was utilized in the little square house in the back yard. We did spend some time with the Farm Journal and similar magazines that had those beautiful idealized pictures of farms with rolling hills and beautiful homes and people. Our life just was not like the living depicted in those magazines.

As small children we did spend considerable time playing outside in the snow. We must have because I remember how raw our wrists would get. I think now that we lacked common sense. The snow would cake-up between the tops of our mitts and the cuff of our coats, melt, freeze, etc. The result would be chapping like I have not seen for many years. The wrist would be red on the bottom and sides and just about blue on the top where the horizontal cracks formed. It would usually take prompting from Mom: "y'an isit ton-fou!" (come here you fool!) before we would finally have enough sense to come inside and dry off our mitts, socks and under-wear by standing next to the wood stoves. Pass the jar of petroleum jelly! We used a lot of it. Also, a lot of Vicks Vapo-rub on the chest and under the nose which usually was raw - how come we never had dry handkerchiefs? As I recall, w had "hot" Vicks with a red devil on it that would make one scream when it got in the raw cracks.

When one tries to account for how children amused themselves on those long winter days in the twenties or thirties, it is necessary to reflect on the sick days. There were plenty of them! Mumps first on one side and then the other - even as kids we were afraid of the possible future effects. Was it true? Impotence? Sterility? We were very young but it still scared us. Red measles, German measles, chicken pox, flu (they did not have the fancy names for the different kinds of flu then.) diphtheria, bronchitis, sinus, adenoid and tonsillitis and always headaches, sore throats, coughs, etc. On the high temperature days there was no problem of what to do. We just laid there. It was the low temperature days that were rough! Mama just about had to tie us to the bed. Our bedrooms were upstairs so there was a lot of yelling going on: bring me some crayons and a color book! I'm hungry - when do I eat! And what did one get when it came? Hot milk soup with home churned butter accompanied by buttered toast. Sometimes, home canned tomatoes in the milk soup. Or maybe chicken broth - we did not know its medicinal effect! When we started fighting with each other epidemic was over and we were released from confinement.

Sunday was still a day to look forward to. Mama and Papa took the day off too - that is except for necessary chores such as milking, cooking, etc., etc. If possible we would go to Mass at St. Anne's Catholic Church in Crookston - four miles by sleigh or buggy. We would sit in our usual pew - third seat from the rear

right aisle. There were some of the sets without name markers where those who could not afford to pay the seat rental could sit. The altar was raised a few steps so the taller people could see what was going on - but all we little people could see was a lot of backs that were standing-up, kneeling-down and sitting-down. (Non-Catholic friends were always amazed at the amount of exercise we had in church). We could hear some Latin but I am afraid it sounded like mumbo-jumbo to us. Or, we might hear the French sermon, which some could understand, or the repetition of the Sermon in French-accented English which few could understand - all done at a decibel range guaranteed to "scare the hell out of you". I am sure that all parishioners who survived a number of those celebrations could make claim to a high place in the after-world. But we could look at those bas reliefs of the stations of the cross. We could really get saddened by looking at the station over our pew: "Christ falls for the second time." Oh well! We could always look at the strange people: the guy with the full beard, the women with big noses, the tall ones, the tiny people (we had a bunch of them), etc.

Winter Sundays at home were fun days. No question "Mama was the best cook in the world!" (I suppose a few others have made that claim!) I think, in those early years on the farm, we had our Sunday banquet in the evening. We were poor farmers but we ate better than any of the prosperous farmers. The house would be full of the beautiful odors of baked chicken, pork or beef roast - all cooked and served with the trimmings. Every one in the family had dinner at the same time. None of that leaving the table early with permission, or being too busy to eat at the same time as the others. One would go hungry like that!

Oh! We spent considerable time teasing and fighting amongst ourselves. We were like two families - Nora, Elphage and Lorraine at the top, and Jerry, Lowell and Ray at the bottom. I, Lowell, complained that there was no justice! Jerry could beat me up and not get caught, but if I tried to get even by beating up Ray, I usually got what I had coming. There were plenty of Sundays that we got kicked out into the cold outside to cool off a little - and I still remember how difficult it was on some occasions to apologize because I was in the wrong. Sometimes it would take a half hour in the corner of the room staring at the blank wall (it seemed like ten hours) before I would decide that humility was better than imprisonment. Man! Those walls were boring! It was not too bad when Mama took pity on me and permitted me to sit on a chair but it was pretty rough when I had to kneel without slumping or to stand still in one spot. I suppose today's family psychologist's would say that all that was good - that we learned how to get rid of our aggression. Well, maybe so. But it did cost me a few black eyes.

Winter Sunday afternoons were usually fun times. Mama might make divinity, fudge, burnt sugar candy or, a real treat, toffee. We kids got to scrape the pans - we would try to induce Mama not to do too good of a job when she poured from the cooking pot to the hardening sheet - the more left in the pot the better for us. Those toffee days were special. Everyone got a chance to "pull" first. I still remember the toffee skeins drying, wound in the butter coated platters - then the great moment when the skeins would be broken into one or two inch pieces and sampled.

Some Sundays we had rich home-made ice cream - no problem freezing - just put the makings outside and stir once in a while. Due to the fact that we produced the cream the resulting delicacy was about as rich as possible - that, accompanied by home made cookies or dark chocolate cake. Other Sundays, Mama might make a bread pan of popcorn (home grown of course) and pour on that rich butter and sprinkle with Morton's salt and voila - who gets to the pan first?

The "goodies" were just the accompaniment to the games we people played. Different kinds of card games. Let's see - how did "pig" go? Was it that three cards were dealt to each of the players, each drew from the deck in turn, when someone got the "pig" (the jack of spades?), he would try to conceal putting his finger to his nose, and the last one playing to do the same was eliminated. Sounds rather simple now but we did spend many happy, laughing hours together playing that game. We, also, played Battle, Hearts, Old Maid "even with our old maid aunt - the game might be shunned today as being politically incorrect.", etc. Some games we played were the store bought kind that we had received as birthday or Christmas gifts: Authors (one had to guess the name on the back based on the portrait on the front.), Chinese Checkers, Pick-up Sticks, etc. Many, many great family hours that I just don't see happening today.

Some Sunday evenings we might be given a special treat and we would have some "floating islands", I guess the whipped white of eggs over the yolks mixed with cream and sugar with a dash of nutmeg. I had not

had any for many years until I ordered a custard dessert several years ago while traveling in France. Several their foods that must have been handed-down from generation to generation that I could identify closely with my Mothers cooking were: leftover pieces of dark chocolate cake and bread pudding covered with hard sauce, head-cheese (tete-de-Fromage) and various ways of preparing pork, it seemed to me that I could identify some of those tastes that would have had to have been handed down from mother to daughter from France to Canada to the United States over a period of three hundred years, it was a sort of homelike feeling - like a fiber of my heritage.

Many of those long winter days and evenings were spent helping Mama with her rugs and quilts. Before she was married in 1909, she had been a seamstress of the highest quality. We did have store-bought overall and coveralls but about everything else was homemade.

Quilting and rugs remind me of an aside: A program was established during the depression years that was belittled and brunt of many jokes - especially if you were well enough off that you did not have to participate. It was known as the WPA - Works Progress Administration (in derision: "We Poke Along"). The program was established under the Roosevelt Administration to provide jobs and incentives to some of the millions of unemployed. One phase of the program was a project to index articles in early newspapers - I recently utilized those indexes while doing historical research at the Minnesota Historical Society. I understand that more than sixty thousand bridges were built under the program. The region "sports arena" in Crookston where I ice and roller skated and danced to big bands was built under the program - the arena is still used by young people. Maybe those who criticized the program as a waste had seen Papa when he was employed on the arena project -this was after he had to abandon farming. The story goes that his supervisor saw him throwing up behind a shed and he told Papa that he had no business there, that he was too sick to work. It turned out that Dad was riddled with stomach cancer and the supervisor was right. He did not last through the summer. It was with great courage that the family managed to survive those dark, trying days.

A phase of this program was designed to encourage and employ artists, writers, craft persons, etc., to keep them off the bread lines. Some recent art exhibits have promoted the works accomplished during this period. Prizes were offered in competitions of craft people that took place at the local level. Our family, under Mama's direction, won many of the prizes by taking the competition in crafts through rug making.

We usually had a number of frames leaning against the wall with the basics of a rug. We made hooked rugs with strips of leftover cloth (maybe one rug wool and the other cotton), leftover yarn or silk stockings - no wonder I collect so much junk and can't throw things away.

Some were "braided rugs". They were made by braiding short strips of cloth or stockings into a long tubular shaped component which was wound in a circle or ellipse and sewed together in that pattern. Maybe a light strip next to a dark strip or three colors braided together. it was sometimes necessary to dye the cloth and us kids often had the job of cutting the strips. The scissors were not always very sharp and blisters often resulted.

Some were "hooked rugs". First, a piece of burlap, maybe six by eight feet, would be tacked to a wood frame, then Mama would draw a pattern on the burlap with charcoal or crayons and each portion of a design would be labeled as to color - the procedure to that point was similar to that utilized in the production of "painting by numbers" ("you too can be a painter!") that was a popular pastime a few years ago. The next step usually was to define the pattern with an outline hooked onto the burlap - probably a black, narrow strip of cloth or yarn - depending on which was the basic fabric. Then came the fill in of the pattern blocks. Early-on we used standard hooks - a pointed notched shaft of steel set in a wood handle to make about one half inch loops on the top side - very closely woven. We later obtained a contraption that was held on the upper side that worked on somewhat the same principle as a sewing machine. It was necessary to slide the shuttles up and down with the hands. No matter which method was used ones fingers became numb after a while. But the worst chore was when we had to cut the top of the loop - we thought we would grow up with our fingers molded in the scissor cutting position.

We were very young when we were first able to "help" Mama with her knitting - she made warm wool socks, mitts, sweaters, etc. We would hold the skeins of yarn while she sat on her rocker rolling the thread into a ball. I wonder, how did we survive such peace and quiet?

