

## The Genealogist's Corner



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# Writing More Than Just the Facts

by Denis Ledoux

Last month, I urged you to create stories around the verified facts you have of your ancestor's lives. One way to facilitate that task is to create an Extended Lifelist for your ancestor.

The Extended Lifelist (see p. 41 of *Turning Memories Into Memoirs*) is a comprehensive list of everything and anything you know about your ancestor. Its brief notes become an expandable reference guide for more exploration of the era, the region, the lifestyle and living conditions of your ancestor. The Extended Lifelist provides a handy and pertinent selection of topics about which you can write vignettes and memories.

The Extended Lifelist includes notes on:

◆ data—dates and places of births, marriages, deaths, and legal contracts. This is your hardcore genealogical data.

◆ relationships—spouses, parents, brothers and sisters, children, any other relationships you may know of. This too is hardcore genealogical data.

◆ events—in the life of your ancestor. Include any and all biographical information you have gathered. You should also add world and regional events that were contemporary to your ancestor. This information can give you a solid basis for constructing a lifestory when you have only a few basic facts.

◆ places—that played a role in the life of this individual. Write all you know about each place. Include geography, demographics, economics, architecture, etc. This is general historical research.

◆ possessions—do you know of things in your ancestor's life? Things can include objects you may know for sure s/he had and things which you can guess s/he had because everyone (at least in certain categories) had

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them. For instance, you may know your ancestor was a blacksmith. You can research the tools in use in the 17th century blacksmith shop. You can describe a probable or typical day for this person.

◆ actions and decisions—of your ancestor’s that are not included elsewhere on his/her Lifestory.

**L**et me show you how I created an Extended Lifestory for my great grandfather, Thomas Bilodeau (my paternal grandmother’s father).

Let me show you how I created an Extended Lifestory for my great grandfather, Thomas Bilodeau (my paternal grandmother’s father). This is a man who died 19 years before I was born. In the following list, I share with you only the Extended Lifestory data that is pertinent to the story that I have reproduced for you below. My whole Extended List for the 48 page booklet I produced for my grandmother’s life up to her marriage was obviously much longer.

◆ data (hardcore genealogical data)—Thomas born 1860, Aurélie Gagné born 1870, Marriage on July 1, 1879, in the next town, Saint-Bernard. [I located the town on a map and then went there.] Thomas’ sister, Marie Vaillancourt had been married in 1877 in Saint-Bernard. His sister Zoé was married there to Damase Tanguay.

◆ relationships By 1884, he and his wife already had three daughters—Angéline, Corrine, and Ernestine; Mémère Gagné (born Rose Dubois) [I know this from genealogy and from family stories] had red hair [family story] like Ernestine [I had known Ernestine]. Other children: Augustine, Albertine, Bernadette, Albert, Thomas, Emile and Nazaire, Rosilia, and Rosa.

◆ events—birth of fourth child (Marie Bilodeau) on May 15, 1884, at home. Thomas had built his house several years before marrying. “...it is time for a boy to be born in the Bilodeau family.” (both previous items collected from an interview with a great aunt).

◆ places( I had been there and had taken notes)—St Narcisse de Lotbinière in Dorchester County, Québec. Mansard-roofed Empire-style farmhouse at the end of le rang Saint-Noël [memory had reminded me about the end of the rang]. To the left from his backdoor: the spire of the parish church which dominated the countryside. The land that Thomas farmed was flat as is much of Dorchester County, as flat as the American Midwest. [from a visit]

◆ possessions—other than the house, I know only what sorts of tools were used on farm in Quebec in 1884 from having read about farm implements.

◆ actions and decisions—I don't have any specific items here for a Lifelist. In the text, I wrote up many typical actions and decisions and let the reader know that I was guessing: "Perhaps that day..." "he could turn his head to the left and see the spire of the parish church which dominated the countryside," "a farmer like his father, surely."

What follows is the first page and a half of my grandmother Ledoux's lifestory.



When Thomas Bilodeau walked out of the mansard-roofed Empire-style farmhouse he had built several years earlier at the end of *le rang* Saint-Noël, he could turn his head to the left and see the spire of the parish church which dominated the countryside.

He was thirty-four in the year Marie was born. Five years earlier, when he was 29, he had married Aurélie Gagné on July 1, 1879, in the next town, Saint-Bernard. She was hardly more than a girl, in her late teens. By 1884, he and his wife already had three daughters—Angéline, Corrine, and Ernestine, who had red hair like her Mémère Gagné (born Rose Dubois). His wife, Aurélie, was 24 the year she gave birth to their fourth child on the Bilodeau farm in Saint-Narcisse-de-Lotbinière in Dorchester County, Québec.

The land that Thomas farmed was flat as is much of Dorchester County, as flat as the American Midwest. As Thomas looked over his fields, he could see the flat land stretch northward to the Saint Lawrence River, the *fleuve* that gave sustenance to the French-Canadian nation and still holds a special place in the hearts of its people.

By May 15, the day Marie was born, the ground was finally dry enough after the prolonged, muddy snow-melt to initiate the summer's work in the fields—the work always began with plowing. The early kitchen garden, too, *le potager*, could be sown by then: peas, spinach, lettuce, radishes. Already in mid-May, the asparagus and the rhubarb were well into their season, and perhaps that day, when Marie was coming into the world, her father, looking to savor a noonday treat, had mixed rhubarb with maple syrup he had gathered in March and early April and processed right there on their land.

At 34, Thomas Bilodeau was a farmer like his father, surely, and most of the men before him, a man with a wife and three—soon four—children. They all depended on his ability to wrest a living from the land.

It is time for a boy to be born in the Bilodeau family, he must have thought, knowing he would need a boy to help him in the barns and fields. The demands of his growing family would eventually outpace his ability to provide and what would he do without a boy? Just as a woman could not make a success of living on a farm without the support of a man nor a man live there without the support of a woman,

**B**ecause birthing was women's work and because farm chores called for immediate attention in this short, busy season, Thomas would have left the house.

he and Aurélie knew they needed the work of both boys and girls, in an age when farm chores were largely gender assigned, to make a success of farm life. In their society, one strictly segregated by gender, the arrival of another girl would present limitations about how the farm could function in the years to come.

Be that as it may, there was a birth to attend to. Perhaps the red-haired Rose Dubois Gagné, in her fifties, had come to the farm at the end of the *rang* to be with her daughter. Perhaps a *sage-femme*, a midwife, had come too? Because birthing was women's work and because farm chores called for immediate attention in this short, busy season, Thomas would have left the house, exiting through the back which faced north, and, stopping a moment as he espied the spire of the church of Saint-Narcisse, to his left, across the flat landscape, perhaps he uttered a prayer for his wife and for the women who were attending her. Then he cut across to the barn. As on most farms, all the more in Québec where the season is brief, there was never enough time to do all the work. Perhaps that day he did not harness the horses for plowing because he did not want to be far from his wife.

Had the girls been sent away that day to play with cousins in Saint-Bernard (just three or four miles away) where his sister Zoé was living with her husband, Damase Tanguay, or had he himself brought the girls over to a neighbor's?

That day, May 15, 1884, another girl child was born. They called her Marie. Although her name departed from the *-ine* sound established with the names of her three older sisters, Angéline, Corrine, and Ernestine, it honored her father's sister, Marie Vaillancourt, who perhaps still lived in Saint-Bernard where she had been married in 1877. Marie's parents were to return to the *-ine* sound with Augustine and Albertine who were to be born next. There would also be a Bernadette and, at last, boys would be born into this farming family. The boys were Albert, Thomas, Emile and Nazaire. Then, well into the next decade, the 1890s, the last two children would again be girls: Rosa and Rosilia.

### Exercise

Create an Extended Lifelist for an ancestor by writing responses to each of the following prompts:

- data
- relationships
- events
- places
- possessions
- actions and decisions

Place in your *Genealogist's Memory Binder*.\*

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\**Genealogist's Memory Binder*, Soleil Press, 95 Gould Rd. Lisbon Falls, ME 04252, (207) 353-5454, fax: (207) 353-7570, www.turningmemories.com