

How a Heifer Changed my Grandfather's Life (Willie Comeau)

by Gisèle Thibault, Willie's grand-daughter

This story is about my grandfather, Willie Comeau, or more specifically Willie à Louis à Pierre à François à François Maza. It begins in 1890, when he was 14 years old. Father Blanche and another priest from France came to his home and spoke to his mother, Catherine. They were recruiting students for Collège Sainte-Anne, the school they were in the process of establishing to educate Acadian boys.

One of them said, “Madame Comeau, we’ve heard your son Willie is quite intelligent, and we’d like him to come to our college. Would you be interested?”

“Oh yes, Father,” she replied. “I would like that very much, but we can’t afford to send our son to your college.”

Catherine and Louis Comeau could barely feed their 12 children; they certainly didn’t have the means to pay for a college education for Willie.

The priest reassured her, “Madame, send us your son. We’ll worry about the money”

Then she remembered the young heifer that was in their field and asked whether they could use her to help pay for Willie’s studies, to which the priest agreed. And so, at the age of 14, my grandfather left Comeauville with a bag of clothing and a heifer and walked to Church Point to begin his studies.

After three years at the College, Willie took a year off to teach in a neighbouring village, then returned to his studies. With his savings and the money he earned teaching evening classes to adults, he was able to pay his fees, and also those of his younger brother, Edouard. Over the years, he and his brothers funded the education of their younger brothers. The heifer that had financed the first part of my grandfather’s studies changed the course of his life completely. Everything he became was thanks to the College, the priests who recruited him, and that heifer.

Willie graduated with a “Diplôme en Études commerciales”, the highest qualification Collège Sainte-Anne granted at that time. It’s interesting to mention that he had to borrow a pair of shoes to attend his graduation. In those days, very few people in the region owned shoes. They wore “caristiaux”, the knees of cows or deer which hadn’t been tanned and which molded to the shape of their feet. It is said they were comfortable and quite warm, but unattractive. So Willie borrowed a pair of shoes from a cousin to go to his graduation.

After completing his studies, Willie got a job teaching in Meteghan River. While he was there, he heard of a job opening for a bilingual man as assistant to the Commissioner of the Canadian Pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition. With the support of the Eudist Fathers and local politicians, Willie got the job and at the age of 24, he set off for Paris. It was quite an

adventure for a young man who had probably never even been to Halifax! He spent a year in Paris and was able to do some travelling in Europe. (I remember my grandfather telling me about visiting Pompeii and climbing to the summit of the volcano, Mount Vesuvius.)

When he returned to Comeauville, Willie had some money in his pockets and he had a house built for his parents. Later, he had another built for his wife, himself, and their growing family. The education he had received and the experience he had gained in Paris gave him the confidence to venture into the world of business. Over the years, he was part owner of a shipyard that built three-masted ships, a lobster cannery, and fish plants in Petit-de-Grat, Briar Island and Long Island. He also had a company which built wharves, and later owned a fox ranch and then a mink ranch.

in 1907, Willie entered the political arena and had a long political career, always with the Liberal Party. (In my family, if you vote other than Liberal, you keep quiet about it.) He was an MLA almost continuously until 1948, when he was appointed to the Senate of Canada. He served until his death in 1966 at the age of 89.

And that is how a little heifer had a big impact on my grandfather's life and on the life of my entire family. She undoubtedly changed the course of our family's history.