Chapter One
1891 to 1906
From Les Escoumins to Hanmer

I learned Nanny’s story the day I got married. I was 23 years old. My Mother said, “I must talk to you.” I thought she was going to tell me about sex, you know, at age 23! But she wanted to tell me the story of my grandmother and grandfather.

Louise Mantha
My mother was born in a place called Escoumins and it is at the mouth of the Saguenay River, way up, way past Québec city. Anyhow, she was born there and her father was a Bouchard, Théophile Bouchard, and her mother was Georgina Tremblay. Tremblay originated from Lac-Saint-Jean.¹

I am interviewing Mrs. Gertrude Mantha, the daughter of Marie-Louise Bouchard Labelle. She is 87 years old and, as I write these words, the sole survivor of Marie-Louise’s three children. It is not without reluctance that Gertrude has allowed me to write her mother’s story. In a recorded text that she gave to me, she started off by saying:

*I question whether or not I am doing the right thing because my mother kept her secret right to the end of her life at age 82 and so I wonder if maybe I shouldn’t talk about all that … anyway, I suppose we could do this with … without using names.*⁵

She is afraid to stir up stories that could make some people lose face or could hurt the pride of others. She doesn’t want to offend anyone but, at the same time, she thinks it is important that her children know their grandmother’s story and that her grandchildren know that of their great-grandmother. Gertrude is a gentle woman, with a well-honed sense of humour. She speaks to me sometimes in English and sometimes in French as she recounts her memories.

She shows me her mother Marie-Louise’s baptismal certificate. It indicates that Marie-Louise’s mother was called Georgianne Tremblay. Since the transfer of information was done more
orally than by writing in those days, names frequently underwent slight changes throughout the years. So, in her family she was affectionately known as Georgie (Georger in French), even though her baptismal certificate stated Georgianne. On her tombstone, it is written Georgina. When she gave birth to Marie-Louise, in Les Escoumins in the Province of Quebec on 30 September 1891, Georgianne could never have imagined in her wildest dreams that one day this child would defy society and the Catholic Church by choosing a lifestyle considered unacceptable for a woman in the early twentieth century in Canada.

In 1891, the village of Les Escoumins is only a small group of homes bordering a lovely bay on the north shore of the Saint Lawrence River. But it already had a long history. According to archaeological research, native North Americans would have resided here 6,000 years ago. Later, "Basque hunters and fishermen, attracted by the cod and whale stocks, would have stopped here many times from approximately 1550 onwards." It is only in 1825 that a first white settler would have set up a permanent residence as an employee of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Since then, Les Escoumins went on to become the haven of many families with old French-Canadian roots, such as the Tremblays from Lac Saint Jean, Marie-Louise’s family. Thus Marie-Louise first saw the light of day in a community with a profound cultural heritage.

The baptismal registry for Saint-Marcellin Parish indicates that Marie-Louise’s father, Théophile Bouchard, works as a day labourer and is absent for the christening. The forest industry, naval construction, agriculture and fishing constitute the backbone of the regional economy. The document does not indicate in what kind of trade Théophile is engaged but I imagine that, bent over his work on the morning of 1 October 1891, he thinks about his future responsibilities as a breadwinner while Georgianne makes her way to the baptismal font with their baby girl in her arms.
The baptismal registry also testifies that the baby’s uncle, Jean Bouchard, and his wife Catherine Dion, attend the ceremony as godfather and godmother. They will not have the pleasure of seeing their godchild grow up in their community, for Théophile has heard that they are hiring in the mines at Copper Cliff, near Sudbury, and only a few years after Marie-Louise’s birth, he moves there with his family to try and improve their standard of living.

The Bouchards are not seen as eccentric in immigrating to Ontario. In the nineteenth century, Quebec’s economy undergoes a gradual and profound transformation. The province changes from a rural economy to an industrial one. This metamorphosis causes much unemployment “and at the end of the century, one counts almost 100,000 Quebecers who choose to emigrate to other Canadian provinces, mainly to Ontario.”

But while work in northern Ontario mines ensures a slightly improved income, it involves greater dangers. In 1893, Théophile dies in Copper Cliff, victim of an accident in the open-air foundry where he is working. The Sudbury Journal of 2 November covers the event:

On Friday last, while blasting was going on at the roast beds, a premature discharge took place, one man, Tuffield (lit.) Bouchard, being so terribly injured that he died on Wednesday morning. Both eyes were blown out, and his face and hands completely blackened and shattered. Another, Geo. Tremblay, was also seriously injured, but will recover. Bouchard leaves a wife and family; the other was unmarried.

Georgianne learns about her husband’s demise from a young man named Napoléon Labelle who works in the same foundry. Georgette Bergeron, Napoléon’s granddaughter, tells me:
In Copper Cliff, apparently my grandfather was “the boss” of Mr. Bouchard, Georgie’s first husband. … And that is how Napoléon first met Georgie, so my mother told us. As the foreman, it was his job to go tell the widow that her husband had died.\(^6\)

For a young widow with a 2-year-old baby, earning a living in a mining town can be brutal. Georgianne cannot consider staying alone in Copper Cliff. So she decides to move in with her brother, Georges Tremblay, who lives with his wife in Capreol, north of Sudbury. For her sister-in-law, the unexpected arrival in her household of this mother and her baby surely brings about important changes. However, I imagine that she soon comes to appreciate the company of the newcomer and her help with daily chores. Anyway, Georgianne’s stay at her brother’s does not last long.
**Marie-Louise Labelle**

Indeed, Napoléon Labelle has not forgotten the pretty widow. He seeks and finds many excuses to go and visit her in Capreol and soon he is courting her. Twenty-eight years old, tall, sturdy with a full moustache, Napoléon is a handsome man. He has plans for the future and, during his visits, he probably shares them with Georgianne. He is thinking of leaving the foundry where he works. He would like to take advantage of the Ontario Government’s offer, which to encourage development in New Ontario is selling land for 50 cents an acre, in return for certain conditions. He would have to clear the land, of course, but after a few years he would be owner of a beautiful farm in a new community. He would finally be master of his financial future instead of depending on the limited salary from the foundry. Would Georgianne be ready to adopt the lifestyle of a pioneer for a few years? She thinks about her daughter’s future. She does not fear hard work and she is anxious to have her own home. Napoléon’s dream appeals to her very much. Thus, Georgianne and Napoléon get married on 13 May 1895 in Saint Anne’s Parish in Sudbury and take up residence in Copper Cliff. Little Marie-Louise, born Bouchard, acquires the surname of her adoptive father and becomes Marie-Louise Labelle.

**Arrival in Hanmer**

Right after his wedding, Napoléon and three other settlers go to Hanmer and start clearing their recently acquired wooded lots to turn them into arable land. They return to Copper Cliff to spend the winter. Tales of their hard work must surely spice up conversation during the long winter nights, with optimists predicting the eventual establishment of a whole new community and envious people calculating the possibilities of a failure. The four men do not let themselves be discouraged by the difficulties of the work.
For three summers in a row they return to Hanmer to complete the clearing of their lots.

Meanwhile, Georgianne is keeping house in Copper Cliff, slowly introducing Marie-Louise to domestic work. In January 1898, she is pregnant again. Marie-Louise is 7 years old. The notion of having a new baby sister or brother undoubtedly pleases her. It will be a playmate in this world of adults, someone with whom to share her dreams and secrets.

On 29 April 1898, Napoléon and his three companions arrive in Hanmer to settle permanently, thereby giving rise to a small community and establishing a milestone in the history of New Ontario. Georgianne and Marie-Louise do not move to Hanmer with Napoléon right away. As Georgianne is pregnant, Napoléon prefers that she stay in Copper Cliff with Marie-Louise until the birth of the baby due in October. He takes advantage of the summer months to build the family homestead and to make necessary provisions to face their first winter in Hanmer. On 15 October 1898, Georgianne gives birth to a girl, Claire-Hilda, who will simply be called Claire in daily life. Marie-Louise is delighted to have a little sister and all her life will maintain a special bond with her.

In December, Napoléon returns to Copper Cliff to fetch Georgianne, Marie-Louise and Claire. Later, DesNeiges Bergeron, Napoléon’s granddaughter, will write in Pionnières de chez nous:

*It was in early December, the best time to travel since the roads were frozen…. During the trip, Claire had her first slide in the snow; the carriage overturned but the baby was unharmed.*

**LIFE OF HANMER’S FIRST SETTLERS**

The life awaiting the four settlers and their families in Hanmer is not recommended for wimps! “One has to walk four kilometres to
get drinking water” and “walk a distance of approximately thirty kilometres round-trip on the path from Hanmer to Copper Cliff” to buy basic supplies. Winters are hard and provisions scarce. Shelters for the few farm animals come down to tree trunks tied at the top and fanned out at the bottom. In springtime, the dirt roads are transformed into mud furrows, making transportation difficult. In summertime, flies relentlessly attack both workers and livestock. However, these difficulties do not discourage the pioneers. They have the independence for which they had hoped. They are now masters of their own destiny, masters of all decisions concerning their lands and their community.

The information that I found about the dwelling awaiting Georgianne and her children on their arrival in Hanmer in 1898 differs from one source to another. In the book Pionnières de chez nous it states that the abode was made of logs and had only “three triangular sides.” During my interview with Clothilde Bergeron, Georgianne’s granddaughter, I asked her about this curious house:

C.T.: What did a three-sided house look like?
C.B.: Well, they built walls on the north, east and west sides and left open the southern side. During the winter, they would put up panels in the front to stay warm and leave a small space for the door. They built a fire in the doorway to cook their meals. It warmed them up.

There is consensus between Clothilde and other members of her family that Napoléon and Georgianne did not live in a three-sided house. As they were moving in with two children, one of them just a two month old baby, Napoléon would have built an ordinary logwood house in accordance with building methods of the time. Furthermore, he would have built the furniture.
If men build the dwelling, it is women who, through long hours of hard work, turn them into homes. Their presence is essential to the family’s survival. Everything must be done: disinfect the wood beds with turpentine, make straw mattresses, sew clothes for the whole family, cook and bake, feed the livestock, cultivate a garden, can preserves, help butcher animals for the winter, and, in season, pick wild berries to make pastry and jams. Add to that the preparation of celebrations such as Christmas and New Year’s and, later on, when a little community has been established in Hanmer, assistance with special occasions such as weddings and christenings. Can we really understand the lives of these women who, through all this work, went through repeated pregnancies, gave birth without medical surveillance, and often took care of their children alone when their husbands had to go away to get supplies in Copper Cliff, sometimes even in Sudbury, on trips that could take several days?


**Marie-Louise’s Education**

On her arrival in Hanmer in 1898, Marie-Louise is 7 years old. She does not attend school as the Hanmer School will not be built until 1902. She is old enough to help her mother with the daily chores: wash dishes, peel potatoes, watch over baby Claire, bring in small firewood for the stove, feed the animals and weed the garden. She learns the rudiments of cooking and is gradually initiated into knitting and sewing during the long winter evenings.

Although she lives in a colonization environment, her education is not all that different from that of other young girls her age in cities in Quebec and Ontario. "In the pre-industrial age … the education given to young girls is limited to providing them with practical knowledge that can serve them throughout their life." 13 Since a young girl is expected to live in the bosom of her family, learning to read and write is not considered a great necessity — a hobby at the most. But which young woman could need a hobby in days so filled with domestic chores? So the essential techniques of cooking, sewing, gardening and child care are what is extolled. This concept of a young girl’s education is strongly promoted by the Catholic Church, judging from an article of Father Alfred Emery in the parish bulletin of Paincourt in 1914. He suggests adopting the following principles for the education of young girls:

> What we must teach young girls is to have an appropriate self-confidence. We must teach them how to make bread, sew shirts and how to check and balance the accounts of their suppliers. Teach them to wear thick, sensible shoes. Bring them up according to their rank. Show them how to wash and iron clothes and to sew their own dresses. Teach them that in one dollar there are only 100 cents. Teach them to cook all kinds of food. Show them how to darn socks and sew on buttons. Teach them what constitutes good common sense
and how to say appropriately yes or no and to not veer from that course. Show them how to wear with dignity a simple Indian dress and give them a good, solid education. Teach them to put more stock in the inner qualities than the riches of would-be suitors. Initiate them thoroughly in the mysteries of the kitchen, the dining room and the living room. Make them understand that when you spend less than you make, the difference becomes savings. Teach them that the more you live above your means the more you are heading to poverty. Don’t forget that their future happiness depends mainly on the advice you will give them. Teach them that one solid and capable labourer is worth more than a dozen dandies in suits. Introduce them to learning music, painting, and drawing if you have the time and the means, but make sure that they are talented above all in the art of tending a home and of being charming and loyal.¹⁴

Marie-Louise’s parents already apply these principles imbued with Christian values. And, even though these teachings make a lot of sense in a settlers’ milieu where women try very hard to manage the household with very limited means, they do not prepare them for adapting to the changes already sprouting in the new economy. But who in this pioneer environment can foresee that one day Marie-Louise will be thrust into the labour market in the country’s capital with her only education being “the art of tending a home and of being charming and loyal”?  

**PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Thus Marie-Louise grows up in Hanmer following the rhythm of her daily chores. The hamlet is developing gradually. A post office was built, then a small school. A historical document found
in Hanmer tells how they came to make the decision to build the school: “In November 1902, the taxpayers of Hanmer’s third concession, seeing that their numerous children were growing up without any education, convened a meeting in Mr. Beaulieu’s house to discuss the building of a school. The current site was offered free of charge by Mr. Jacob Proulx and it was accepted as being the most convenient for all parties. They started construction right away.”

Marie-Louise is 11 years old. Her father, Napoléon, “made all the student’s desks by hand. They were really tables with a shelf for books and long benches. He also built the teacher’s desk.”

The first school teacher, Miss Hotte, boards with the Labelle family upon her arrival from Chelmsford. She stays with them during her whole first year in Hanmer. Marie-Louise attends the small logwood school only sporadically because she is inheriting a constantly increasing share of domestic responsibilities. The family has grown with the birth of a brother, Paul (Napoléon Junior) on 8 October 1900, and that of a sister, Dorilla, on 19 August 1903. Georgianne needs more and more help at home. Gertrude, Marie-Louise’s daughter, tells me:

G: Her mother was always sick, so her parents kept her at home to take care of her step-sisters and step-brothers.
C: Did she know how to read and write?
G: She only had limited knowledge, very little, so she had a lot of difficulty writing and also reading, you know.

Miss Hotte surely gives a few private lessons to Marie-Louise during her year-long stay with the family but Marie-Louise has very little time to devote to learning how to read and write. This lack of formal education will become a serious handicap later on when, as an adult, she finds herself suddenly and without any preparation obliged to earn her living.
TOUGH LOVE

Marie-Louise’s adoptive father, Napoléon, is indisputably the head of the family. He exercises his paternal authority with a mixture of firmness and generous but reserved love. His children and his grandchildren are a little afraid of him. His pride is equalled only by his fiery temper and the children sometimes take the brunt of his outbursts. One of his granddaughters remembers:

*When he said, “Son of a bitch!”, we ran. We disappeared. And if something didn’t suit him, he slapped us right away.*

And she adds:

*Mostly, he was a very proud man. … You didn’t go to town if your moustache was not cut just so. One day, he had burned his moustache a little so he didn’t go to town until the next week.***

Napoléon Labelle, adoptive father of Marie-Louise
If he insists that children share the daily household chores, he also ensures that their days of work alternate with days of fun activities. Sometimes in the summer he brings them to picnic at Aylmer Lake, a few miles from home. These picnics are not simple round-trip affairs. Georgette explains me to as we drive towards the lake:

_These roads were nothing but rabbit trails, as we say. So, if it was a little muddy, they could get stuck. And when they came here, it was also to pick blueberries. So they were coming here with a wagon and two horses, they brought tents and they stayed maybe two or three days. They slept in the tent. And they cooked outside over a fire. They picked blueberries and brought them home on the wagon. And they made preserves, one way or another. But it wasn’t just next door._

So Napoléon knows how to combine business with pleasure. The children can relax and have a good time all the while assuming some responsibilities that contribute to the well-being of the entire family. Just like his children, his grandchildren keep fond memories of him. One of his granddaughters wrote in _Valley East 1850-2002_:

He was a wonderful man. He made us beautiful rocking chairs and rocking horses. My brother, Germain, and I would go to the river in the 4th concession and help him get beaver out of his traps. We would stay overnight in a little cabin by the river and sleep on mattresses. I remember when he made maple syrup. He was a real artist at carving wood.

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**And What of the Future?**

So Marie-Louise is growing up in a family dominated by a proud, active and enterprising father. As she is the oldest, the more her mother’s health deteriorates, the less leisure time she has. In one interview, Marie-Louise’s daughter Gertrude says to me:

> You know, at home [in Hanmer], before all the events, her sister Dorilla was disabled. She had had polio. And anyway, ... I imagine ... that my mother had to take care of her, too. Those were more responsibilities that she had. ... And I think that it must have been a pretty sad life ... Just work, work, work. 

Chairs made by Napoléon Labelle
At times, Marie-Louise must yearn to escape from all this drudgery. What does she see on the horizon when she thinks about her future? To grow up under Napoléon’s rule doing hard domestic chores, only to get married and do the same thing for her husband and children in another little house in Hanmer? She can see no way out of the monotonous life awaiting her.

**Spiritual Life in the Hamlet**

Hanmer continues to develop at a good pace. In 1906, the hamlet has a population of approximately 75 and counts a post office, a general store, a hotel, a sawmill and a blacksmith shop. The hamlet’s spiritual life is growing rapidly too. On the first Monday of every month, a missionary comes to say mass in a settler’s home. But the settlers increasingly aspire to a continuous Church presence. Finally, in 1905 the Church decides to establish a parish and on 1 August 1906, Father Joseph A. Roy becomes the first parish priest in Hanmer.