



Expulsion – a 1755 Tragedy

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(A version of this article/prose will appear in my upcoming book, *Beyond Acadia*)

Spring 1955, throughout southwest Nova Scotia, Acadian villages had begun to prepare for the summer festival highlighting the 200th anniversary of the Acadian's expulsion by the British Crown.

Wedgeport, my village, citizen activities exploded. Men, women, and students built replicas of early settlers' implements: canoes, boats, fishing gears, hand crafted farm and home tools, dancing stages, and flatbed floats. Women stitched early 18th century costumes. Every house flew the Acadian flag—blue, white, red, with a gold star in the blue.

The week before the festival I visited my grandparents Boudreau, the place where I was born on the Cape Road. Grandma had always fascinated me with stories of the past. In her late 70s, her mind remained vibrant.

I entered the house. "Hello! Grandma."

"Billy!"

She sat in her usual rocker by the front window that faced the road. "Smells good." I kissed her on the cheek.

“What’s cooking?”

“Haven’t seen you in quite a while.” She reached, took my hands, and looked me over. “Where have you been? You’re getting thinner. You eat well? You hungry?”

“I eat well and a bit hungry Where’s Grandpa?”

“Gone to the store. Morning visits with his friends. Talk old times. Drink coffee. Sit over there, Billy.” She pointed at her husband’s chair. “Tell me about yourself. Is it true what I hear about you and a girl?”

“It is.”

“Andrew á Charlie’s daughter, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t think I know her—Might have seen her at church.”

“I’m sure you did.” I studied Grandma’s face. She had more lines than the last time I saw her.

“You should come and see us more often.”

“I’ll try.”

“Bring the girl—we’d like to meet her.” She adjusted her seating that crowded the sides. The rocker squeaked. “What’s her name?”

“Dorothy.”

She looked out the window. “My eyes are not what they used to be.”

Grandma Boudreau must have been a very pretty woman in her youth. Now her face wore deep folds. She had endured rural life, living off the land. Her eyes were still alive and quick. She kept herself well groomed. Her gray hair pulled back tight and rolled in a bun, dignified. She made good use of her seventh grade education: wrote letters to relatives in Boston, read the newspaper, church bulletins, and letters to Grandpa who was illiterate.

She heaved herself up, pulled down on her blue, white polka-dotted dress, adjusted her white apron, and wobbled to the stove. She checked the pots, added a little water from the kettle, came and sat down again. “We have a big celebration coming.”

“Yes, to honor our heritage—it must have been a terrible time,” I said.

Silent for a few moments, she said, “Billy, my grandmother told me stories of her grandmother, Dauphine, who was expelled from Acadia. She was only a child at the time.” She looked out the window and dabbed her eyes under her glasses. “A time of great suffering for our people. The deportation started in October 1755 in Grand Pre and spread to surrounding villages—expulsion on a grand scale. The English had sailed in the Bay of Fundy and anchored offshore. The leader of the army summoned the Acadian men in the church at Grand Pre. The British Crown had told them they were going to be given land. It was a trick. Once in the small sanctuary, they became prisoners. Soldiers with guns and bayonets surrounded them. The word came that the Acadians

would be exiled to other countries. Acadia, our ancestors' home and beautiful land, cultivated that took over 150 years—taken.”

She wiped her eyes. “Our ancestors were a gentle people, Billy. Did not believe in war. Just wanted to be left alone. Live in peace with their families. Faith in God.

“We heard of the atrocities. On that day,” she said, “and some time after, our people, guiltless, herded like cattle on old frigates. Sent away to strange places.” She continued to gaze through the window, her only view of the outside world. “Their goods taken away. Strength of their bodies determined the amount they could keep. Separation of wives and husbands. Old folks from families. The English Crown wanted to destroy the Acadian culture, forever.”

She went on to tell me that her great, great grandmother, Dauphine, and her mother were separated from her father, Jacob, just before loading on a ship. Dauphine witnessed her older brother, Julian, 18, hit in the head with the butt of a rifle as he attempted to stop the breakup of the family. They dragged him away, unconscious. No family member ever saw him again.

Grandma stood, limping on her right leg, she went to the stove and peered inside the pots, moved one aside, picked up a log from a box behind the stove, lifted the cast iron cover, and shoved the chunk of wood in the fire. She sprinkled a few lumps of coal using a small shovel from a bucket on the floor then grabbed a poker, stoked the flames. She moved the pots back. Wiped her hands on her apron, shuffled to her chair, fell in. The rocker squeaked.

“Acadians endured a torturous time,” she said. “Dauphine and her family waited on the coast for their turn to be loaded. Cold wet fog hung low on the village. Shivering, Dauphine cuddled to her mother. They could see the ships' silhouettes offshore, like dragons waiting for victims. Dauphine said that throughout her life, not a day had gone by without thinking of the cruelty. She cried silently. Soldiers screamed orders, shot guns in the air to maintain order. In resignation, the old folks obeyed. A few young men attempted to rebel, outnumbered, the British crushed them—knocked them down, stabbed, shot as they ran. The soldiers executed their orders with precision, no escape allowed. Get the Acadians out of Acadia. That was the British Crown's edict.”

She stopped rocking and remained silent for a moment. Then she said, “The dispersion went on and with each day the hardship increased. Food became scarce. Old people who could not endure the trauma died on the shore, buried there without markers. The great tide of the Bay of Fundy washed their remains into the vast Atlantic Ocean.

“Temporary camps on the flats provided for those who waited,” she said. “Once on board, the ships sailed out of the Bay of Fundy. In the mornings, more ships waited offshore. The cycle repeated until no Acadian stood on our beautiful land.”

My body tensed as her story unfolded. My wet palms fisted. I breathed deep. The cooking food odor distracted my thoughts.

Her voice trembled. “From the decks they saw their possessions, their homes, barns, chicken houses, and cultivated fields put to flame. Soldiers killed the farm animals. Those not needed for food were thrown in wells to rot and poison the water. Settlements that took more than 100 years to develop—destroyed. As I said, the very young, the old, and the sick that could not stand the

cold, lack of proper nourishment, and the dampness, died, buried on the mud flats. Dauphine saw many kneel where love ones lay in the soft marsh. At bayonet point, soldiers pushed the grievous away, marched them to dories, and rowed the defenseless to the ships.

“Evenings on shores by bonfires, the Acadians gathered, consoled each other.”

Grandma pushed her glasses up and dried her eyes, again.

“The Acadians had heard that the French from Quebec would come in their defense. They never came. Of course, they prayed to God, and sought guidance from the priest among them.”

This time she pulled her spectacles off and with the corner of her apron, wiped the lenses.

“The guards camped on shore not far from the Acadians. At night the soldiers amused themselves. By the light of lanterns and bonfires, the English played cards, drank liquor, laughed, and partied all night. Not uncommon for soldiers to take Acadian women, bring them to their tents for the night, rape them while parents, husbands watched and listened, helplessly. Monsters! The English who wrote Canadian history, trivialized and clouded the actual horrible events.”

“It’s only through someone like you, Grandma, that we learn the truth.”

History told that the Acadians’ were expelled to far off places: the 13 colonies along the American coast and as far south as Louisiana, Belle Isle, an island on the northwest coast of France, England, the Falkland Islands, and the Caribbean Islands. After the dispersion, British immigrants took the Acadian’s land. At the time of the American Revolution, many British Crown loyalists left the colonies and established themselves in Acadia. A number of years later, the Acadians were permitted to return. Those who did established villages along the southwest coast of Nova Scotia.

“It must have felt hopeless on those ships in the Atlantic, late fall,” I said.

Grandma continued talking as if she had experienced the tragedy herself. “Some trips were several weeks long, others months. Many died along the way. Yes, the Atlantic Ocean is violent, merciless. The burial of the dead were devoid of proper rituals. The priest gave the last rites, bodies dumped in the ocean.”

She paused, looked toward the stove and returned her gaze at the window. “The crewmen on those ships were the scum of English society. Many were criminals, drunks, vagabonds, and treated the human cargo harshly. Sanitation not fit for animals. They trampled on each other and human waste. Think of the stench and smell of death. Clustered in hulls—the sick, old, and children. Human shivers, scent of fever, smell of excrements, moans of the old folks wanting the end to come—whimpers of babies. Doom echoed in the cracklings of the vessel’s frame and faded into the cold ocean wind.”

She repositioned herself. “My back’s been bothering me,” she said and rubbed her side.

“Grandma, when was the last time you saw doctor?”

She ignored my question. “From the crew’s living quarters, at night the Acadians heard laughter and shouts. The soldiers partied until the early hours of the morning. Then silence in the darkness, except for the ocean slapping the ship, waves twisting the frame that creaked as the vessel jerked, bounced on the ocean. Groans, moans, last gasps before death. My grandmother had been told that it was common, in the mornings, for the crew to come in the hull, dragged the dead like bags of potatoes, throw them overboard.”

Grandma got up again. “Better get the pork chops in the oven. Grandpa will be here soon.” She went into the pantry. “I’ve put extras for you, Billy. Hope you like them.” She pushed the pan in the oven.

“Anything you cook, I love.”

She sat down, peered closer to the window. “I see Grandpa coming.”