

HENRI BELANGER
Life Experience
Ken Formalarie

Henri Belanger

At age nineteen, I was a restless young man lusting for travel. My earliest mode of transport was hitchhiking, later followed by my fondness for aged and broken-down vans where I often slept. Frankly, they were all I could afford as a poor college student. I drove one of those vans 480 miles straight north from Cape Cod to Quebec City, Canada. 1971 wasn't the best year to be an English speaker in French Canada but what did I know? I was on an adventure, politics be damned!

I had visited various parts of Quebec province previously, including Montreal, but I had never been far enough north to explore Quebec City. It was a unique experience for me as it was markedly different from anywhere I had been before. The area was initially established as "New France" in 1608. Despite being defeated in a military battle by the British in 1759, and falling to British governance, the province continues to uphold its French-speaking culture and heritage. It was during my time in Quebec City that I had the pleasure of meeting Henri Belanger.

I parked near a stunning old hotel, the Chateau Frontenac, and walked along a boardwalk overlooking the Saint Lawrence River, which was breathtaking. The walk led me to a traffic rotary where a lively crowd gathered around a magnificent fountain with live saxophone music playing nearby. I couldn't resist investigating!

There he was, this short French Canadian with a curly black beard, standing barefoot and shirtless playing his tenor saxophone in front of the ornate fountain on that warm July evening. His sax case was open at his feet collecting money. I sat across from

him on a cement bench that encircled the fountain making sure he noticed me listening attentively to his music. He played louder and with more energy as he realized I was watching. When finished, he threw on a shirt, collected his earnings, and approached me.

"Salut. Comment ca va?" He said.

I didn't speak French, but I recognized 'hello'.

"Hi," I responded.

"Eh, Yank-ee?" he said, slightly surprised and confused. It served as a reminder, that despite our connection, I was still a stranger in a foreign country who didn't speak the language.

"Qui," I replied quietly, proud to have remembered at least one word from my Junior High French class.

He asked in English, "What hotel?"

I replied, "I don't have one."

He smiled and said, "Okay, come follow."

Then he turned, saxophone slung on his back and started to walk away. He looked back and gestured to have me follow.

We walked downhill for several city blocks. As we walked, the buildings became increasingly more dilapidated. I kept nervously wondering where we were going. We were in a neighborhood comprised of three-story high old brick apartment buildings. This was lower Quebec City. Children were playing noisily in the streets, conversing in French, which felt surreal.

We stopped at a doorway, which my companion unlocked and we walked in. As we entered, I observed the paint on the door was peeling off. Once inside, I saw no walls,

just the wood-framed partitions. Towards the back, a bed was suspended from the ceiling joists by heavy chains. Clothing was strewn everywhere on the floor. In front of me, there was a beat-up-looking mattress sitting on the floor. Shockingly, a toilet and sink were also visible. I didn't know it yet, but this would be my new temporary home. The room was ringed by nearly three dozen full paint cans and many supplies. I later learned that these apartments were historical French housing being restored to their original glory. The work was being done under the guise of preserving French Culture in Quebec City, with funding from the Canadian Government. It was part of the government's efforts to pacify a growing "French Separatist Party" movement that urged all of Quebec to secede from the rest of British-ruled Canada and become a sovereign nation.

Henri conversed with me in English, but he didn't care to. He preferred trying to make me speak French. To that end, he rolled out what he thought were beneficial phrases like: "Où sont les toilettes?" (Where is the restroom?), or "Ce dîner est fantastique!" (This dinner is fantastic), all of which, I'm guessing, he must have thought would aid my survival in his French world. The frightening part was that it was beginning to make sense! After all, I reasoned, I am a child of Boston and the French were our brothers in arms against the British in the American Revolution, how could it be wrong for me to side with this man in such a noble cause trying to preserve his culture? French it would be, as much as was doable...

As soon as Henri stowed his belongings we left to return to my van. It was dark but the streets were crowded with people. As we walked, Henri did his best to explain to me that his job was to hire French workers to restore this French Historic District of Quebec, but he had a problem. The French workers he hired were afraid of climbing high

ladders. He pointed to the rooftops and said, "They are afraid of falling from the high height."

I asked, "How will you solve this?" He pointed to me and said, "Climb."

"What?" I asked, not believing I heard correctly. "What do you want me to do?"

"CLIMB!" He shouted.

"Climb where?" I asked him. He pointed back to the rooftops. Then I pointed at them and he nodded. "What on earth does he expect me to do?" I whispered aloud to myself.

"Paint," he said, "Paint the top." His English comprehension was far better than he would let on.

Fortunately, I became accustomed to heights as a younger teen working for my roofer father, so this did not seem unreasonable to me and I agreed to do it. I needed money anyway and he offered to pay forty dollars Canadian per day to do this plus free meals. It was summer, there was nowhere else I needed to be, so we started the next morning. That first night, I slept in my van parked in front of his apartment. The rest of the time I got brave enough to move indoors.

The next morning I followed Henri to a large courtyard flanked by several of these apartment buildings. We met up with about a dozen other young French men and women. For the next several weeks, I spent 10-hour days atop ladders and scaffolding. While working, they often gathered below me in a circle, just looking up and watching while I painted 3-story high fascia boards below the slate roofs. They dubbed me the "Yankee fou" (Crazy Yankee) because I was the only one who would climb the extension ladders.

Mid-day lunch often had beer, eighteen was the legal drinking age in Canada, and then early afternoon naps were permitted. Supper always had beer which we enjoyed in pubs together with my co-restorers and other friends of theirs who joined us. Most of the women in our group took advantage of this time to practice their English with me. The cutest and kindest of these young women turned out to be Henri's girlfriend, Solange Gagne. She lived with Henri but was never present at our worksite. Together, on the weekends, they both toured me around Quebec to places I would otherwise never have seen, continually enhancing my knowledge of French history. It became clear that many Quebecers wanted to separate from British Canada. I became conflicted that I might be indulging in a revolution, with native rebels who took me in, not just as an acquaintance, but also as an accomplice. Somehow Henri sensed this, even though I never mentioned it to him directly. He took pains to keep the "Yankee fou" at a distance from those who were fomenting revolution. He made clear to others that I was not some sort of ally from America helping to resist the British Canadian Government. When the work was finished Henri proclaimed, "C'est fini." This is done, finished! I was exhausted but happy... Henri, now a new dear friend, just smiled and paid me. He told me I would have to return for Winter Carnival in February. I did!

After returning home that summer, I felt like a completely different person. I matured from being someone aimlessly wandering to someone with a purpose. I had become a committed member of a community and culture. I wanted more of this. I continued to travel to Quebec City, eventually with the woman who would later become my wife. She met and befriended Henri and Solange. I invited them to visit us on Cape Cod, and to our surprise, they accepted. We took them for a tour of Historic Boston. They

loved seeing the next oldest city to their own and could not get enough of it. One of our stops was the top of the Prudential Tower where they acted like excited schoolchildren on their first school trip. It was amazing to see the whole city from this view on the 65th floor of the Prudential! We dined with them in Boston pubs and ate more seafood than I thought was possible. Of course, time passed quickly and they needed to return to Canada.

My friendship with Henri and Solange continued for another five years. They decided to marry and had two children before we lost touch with them. Throughout our time together Henri continued to work as a diplomat and a teacher, both in his country and in ours. I still cherish the memories of the wonderful adventure that followed our serendipitous meeting by the fountain at Chateau Frontenac.