

The Memoirs of Armand Charest Part I





Armand Charest in 2000

The Charest-Frenchette Family in America: A Success Story

Editors Note: Shortly before my father had his stroke which ultimately was fatal, I managed to convince him to write some stories and family history. I promised him I would get them at least published on a family website if he did. Well, with a lot of “encouragement” from myself and possibly my brother Howard, Dad did write some of the family stories. This is part I of a three part series.

I have taken the liberty of re-formatting Dad’s writings to be suitable for this website. Otherwise, I have posted them as written. I may on occasion add some editorial comments of my own; these will be clearly marked when I do.

Ron Charest

Part I – Growing Up in Rhode Island

Chapter 1

The Charest family traces its ancestry with any definite knowledge to Canada as early as 1812. The ancestral home in France has never been definitely established. Some family members feel that the earliest settlers in Canada came from Central France; others feel that Normandy is the likeliest home; others say that the first Charest came from Lacadie, France.

In any event it is most likely that the Charests came to Canada before 1763 since, in that year of the English conquest, the British government forbade immigration from France. Therefore, we can say with a certain amount of truth that the Charests arrived in Canada in the early or the middle of the 1700s or possibly in the 1600s. However, we must also say in all honesty that since the territory contained few French females, the probability exists that the first Charest males might have taken Indian women as wives. This statement might offend some descendants, but the possibility is there, nonetheless.

We have been able to trace the Frechette family as far back as the late 1600s in Canada. We have no way to know where they came from in France. However, we must limit this story to the exploits and lives of Alphonse and Emilie Charest, a prolific and energetic couple.

Alphonse was born in the village of St. Gabriel, in Quebec province. Not much is known about his early years. Emilie was born on a farm in St. Didace, also in Quebec province. We do know that she received a fairly good education from the convent nuns. She read books and did receive a daily newspaper from Montreal when the family lived in Woonsocket. I and my children inherited the love of reading from her. She and I spent many evenings discussing world politics and the approaching war.

They first met in the year, 1912, on the road to Lincoln Park, an amusement park somewhere between Fall River and New Bedford, Mass. According to the popular belief, Alphonse and his brother, Armand, were two men about town who enjoyed

flirting with the ladies who traveled on the streetcars between the two cities. It so happened that Armand knew the lady who accompanied Emilie on that particular day and she introduced Emilie to Alphonse and the rest is history, as people tend to say.

Due to a health problem Alphonse's doctor advised him to travel out West where the pure air might cure him. Subsequently, Alphonse became a cook on the Canadian Railroad somewhere in Manitoba or in one of those Canadian provinces where no one can say whether it is east of British Columbia or west of Ontario. He also found work in the lumber camps.

He returned sometime in 1914 and promptly signed on with the Canadian government as a cook on the icebreaker, the *Laurier*, that according to tradition or rumor had picked up survivors from the Titanic.

By 1916 Emilie is supposed to have stamped her foot and demanded, yes, demanded that Alphonse choose the care-free life or marry her. According to family legend the young man is supposed to have scratched his head, mumbled something about freedom, walked the floor, argued about the demand but he finally gave in.

So Emilie and Alphonse were married in Joliette, Quebec on October 4, 1916 by the Reverend Msgr. Forbes. According to family legend the couple took up residence in Quebec City where, and this information cannot be verified, Alphonse found employment at the famous Hotel, the Chateau Frontenac. Emilie spent one winter on that iceberg and gave Alphonse another ultimatum.

So the couple moved to a city called Grandmere (grandmother). The first Charest children were born there: Marguerite Albina on Sept 19, 1917 and Louis George on October 4, 1918. The couple's need for milder weather eventually made it relocate to Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1919. Two more children made their debut: Therese Jeanne D'arc on June 9, 1920 and Rita Edmire on Sept 21, 1922.

At that time Alphonse won the food concession at the new factory built by the J.P. Coats Thread company. It was a prosperous time for Alphonse and Emilie who were able to furnish an apartment with the latest appliances including an electric sewing and washing machine. At the expiration of the contract Alphonse opened a restaurant in Pawtucket.

We have no explanation why the couple then decided to move to a bustling textile manufacturing city called Woonsocket where two more little ones joined the growing clan: Lucille Evelina on Dec. 13, 1922 and Armand Gabriel on August 16, 1924. I believe that Alphonse still kept his restaurant open with the help of two brothers.

A business opportunity presented itself so Alphonse moved the family to a small town called Manville where he bought a country house and opened his second restaurant at a busy intersection in the village. It was also a happy and prosperous time for the family. I remember distinctly the house that sat next to a bubbling brook and the swamp to its rear where Alphonse raised his pigs. The final three children came into the world in that house: Claire on November 2, 1925, Noella on Dec 15, 1927, Rosaire on November 7, 1930.

Chapter 2

The Great Fire and Killing Hogs. The family stories continue...

An incident of great importance occurred around 1930 that must be told and seen as an exercise in misplaced enthusiasm.

One fine summer afternoon Rita, myself and a local boy whose name I do not remember found some matches and set off for the neighboring hill to do something. Meanwhile big brother George who may have been all of twelve years old and his buddy, Lionel, who later married Theresa, persuaded the three of us to play fireman games with them. They had put together a big fire wagon along with buckets of water, a hose and some ladders. The idea was for us to ignite a small patch of dry grass and then to call them. In turn both boys would have become heroes as they put out the fire.

It did not really turn out that way.

The three arsonists piled up grass and someone lit the match and applied it to the dry pile. In no time at all the flames shot up and then began to spread. In a panic Rita screamed for the firemen. The two “heroes” came running up and tried to douse

the flames. It was too little and too late.

All of us ran to the house where we alerted my mother. Luckily we had a telephone so she called the fire station. In those days the firemen were all volunteers so by the time they arrived on the scene the fire was racing along very well. It raced downhill toward the house only to be turned aside by that wonderful swamp; it then took off toward a small village called Albion some miles away.

By that time the local fire chief had alerted fire departments throughout the state that arrived on the scene through the afternoon. It was a real mess because in 1930 communications were primitive compared to modern times. Nevertheless, the truly heroic firemen stopped the fire at the edge of the village in the growing darkness. However, rumors persisted that the fire had demolished a local factory and that the owner had died of a heart attack.

The chief questioned all of us, but could not press charges. It was a lesson to all of us. In later years I remembered that sober experience and that made me a bit more lenient and tolerant of people who make mistakes, including my children.

There were fun times also. As I said before Alphonse the chef had developed quite a reputation as a hog farmer. The swamps in back of the house were ideal for raising those noble animals that grew to enormous size. In September or October the villagers gathered at our house for the annual event of pig butchering. Festivities began early in the morning as people moved in for lunch. I don't remember if Alphonse served breakfast but, knowing him, I would not have been surprised if he had. The big event took place in the late afternoon.

I was six years old and my father gave me a big job. I was to hold a gallon jug next to the hog's throat and catch the blood that would come pouring out. A group of husky men were designated "pig handlers". Their job: hold the pig down and let Alphonse slit its throat. I still cannot comprehend that activity on my father's part. He was normally a tender, calm person, but he must have rationalized that someone had to do the job, or so I have thought all these years.

In any event the men led the pig to its destiny, pushed it to the ground and held it there while my father did his job. I held the jug in place and watched the blood flow in that would be used to make blood sausage. This one time the pig screamed and took off across the yard. I still remember my father's words: "catch the blood, catch the blood."

I followed the bleeding hog and caught as much blood as I could. It was a very frightening time for a six-year old. Eventually the poor animal collapsed and died. The men then dumped it in a large pot of boiling water so that it could be skinned, hung up and its belly opened so that the excess blood could flow out. Then, and only then, did everyone continue the festivities.

There was a dark side to the hog fanning. Once in a while the poor animals would crash through the restraining gates and take off on a rampage through the village or countryside. My father would enlist the help of his friends who would then engage in a hunting expedition. Legend has it that one of the hunters returned to my father's restaurant, collapsed and died.

Chapter 3

Of making moonshine during Prohibition and the onset of the great depression...

I must add one final story. It concerns the making of moonshine.

The 1920-decade saw the enforcement of prohibition laws against the making and selling of liquor. Some misguided people back in 1913 believed that the working class, at that time consisting mainly of immigrants from Europe, was spending too much of its money on liquor and not enough on supporting the families. The real culprits were the miserable living and sanitation conditions that deprived the older people of a chance to enjoy the benefits of democracy.

In defiance of the law many people decided to make liquor at home a process that became known as, "making bathtub gin." In the early 1920s Alphonse had a food concession at the construction site of a J.P.Coats Company factory that would become famous as a producer of sewing threads.

One day so the story goes the manager approached Alphonse with a proposition too good to turn down. He had a problem, he said. The work schedule was falling down because the workers would head to other cities on payday, get drunk and then

they would show up whenever they sobered up. He could no longer tolerate that. As an alternative he proposed that Alphonse should undertake the task of making moonshine himself. We could, said the man, dig under the stand and built you facilities to make the stuff while guaranteeing freedom from police interference. In return Alphonse would make quality liquor and sell it to the workers at a reasonable price. Management hoped that the workers would stay in the vicinity and thus be able to work on Monday morning.

Things went swimmingly for some time. Alphonse equipped the apartment with first class furniture including an electric sewing machine and washing machine. To Emilie's questions about the origin of so much money, Alphonse would only say that business was good. The construction work retained its schedule. All was well in Mudville until one day, a day that still lives in infamy disaster struck the Charest family and J.P.Coats Company. The mother-in-law came for a visit.

Grandmother Charest had a taste for the finer things of life that tragically included the love of liquor. She asked Emilie to go with her to the stand. While there she asked Alphonse the \$64,000 question.

“Can I have some of that good liquor that you are making?”

Emilie replied in a shocked tone, “Liquor, what liquor?” (I am merely reporting what I heard through the years. I am not making it up.)

Alphonse is reported to have stammered an answer, mixed with a barrage of accusing daggers at his dear mother. He is also reported to have shrugged his shoulders in total defeat. Emilie went on the offensive.

“You are making moonshine here? Is that where all the money is coming from? Shut that business down right now!”

Needless to say management was in an uproar; Alphonse faced the danger' of a broken or damaged family; the workers face a crisis about their drinking activities. Alphonse merely, shrugged his shoulders one more time and shut down the still. Thus ended an enterprise founded in noble ideas but destroyed by an unfortunate trick of fate.

In 1932 dark times intruded into the Charest family and made life very unpleasant for Alphonse and Emilie: the Great Depression was on.

Chapter 4

The Great Depression and the start of World War II...

Like many small businessmen, Alphonse was unprepared to face the economic catastrophe that hit the country in 1932, the result of the stock market crash of 1929. The closing of the local textile factory, the biggest employer in the area was the final blow. Alphonse lost two restaurants and a house. He moved the family into several apartments while he looked for work in different locations including Woonsocket and a hotel in Maine. In 1933 the chef finally got a break.

A well-known businessman in Woonsocket opened a first class restaurant and hired Alphonse as chef. So the Charest family settled in Woonsocket as it tried its best to survive while waiting for better times in the country. Alphonse's reputation as a dependable, creative and hard-working man spread through the city in the next several years. Business was good at the restaurant and the owners prospered.

Since Alphonse could not read or write English, I had the pleasant job of going with him very early to write out his day's menu. We became close that way. As a reward the chef always prepared a breakfast for me fit for royalty. It usually consisted of a giant piece of ham along with potatoes and eggs, or a giant steak with hash browns and toast. I would then go home carrying a jug of the previous day's soup and leftover pies. At times the soup would spillover the brim and I would smell like a soup pot.

An ugly economic situation had hit the country. By 1932 it was estimated that 25% of the people were out of work. The textile industry began to move out of New England and New York for non-unionized states in the South, mainly North and South Carolina, where the wages were lower and the politicians and the brain-washed workers friendlier to big business interests. In Woonsocket a factory employing 7,500 workers dismantled the machinery and said goodbye to the city. The resultant unionization was pushed in an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred of the ruling class. It was no surprise that a

dangerous riot broke out in 1937 that threatened the safety of all residents. Since the majority of the textile workers were women, the factory owners found it easy to intimidate them into not joining unions. It was the same throughout the country.

The automobile and coal mining industries became unionized, but not until intervention of the courts on the side of the workers. President Roosevelt, himself called a traitor by the ruling classes because even though he had been born in money and privilege he favored the working classes, persuaded the American people to stay calm and to trust in the Constitution. He and the Democratic Party passed laws that reformed the banking system thus reigning in abuses. The forty-hour workweek went into effect; in 1935 the Social Security system became law; welfare laws went into effect, thus making it possible for people to receive help.

Storm clouds were gathering overseas. Japan attacked China in 1931, invaded it in 1937; Italy invaded and conquered Ethiopia in revenge for an Italian defeat inflicted by that country in 1896; Spain endured a terrible Civil War from 1936 to 1939; Russia attacked Finland in 1939; Stalin killed off his top generals for fear of a revolt; Italy invaded Albania in 1940, moved into Greece; Hitler persuaded the German population that since Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in 1918, they should all be executed; America closed its eyes and mind to those troubles and concentrated on its own. That was a major mistake.

The nine children were not really aware what the depression meant. Compared to most families ours lived quite well. Since our father was a chef, we had plenty of good nutritious food. We never were deprived of all the milk, bread and meat we wanted. We went to a good parochial school, St. Anne's, run by dedicated nuns who spared no effort to teach us more than reading and spelling. We engaged in games and sports activities, enjoyed family get-togethers in which aunts, uncles and cousins counseled and advised us on life matters and who also kept us on a straight path, something that is perhaps not done today.

By the time I was twelve years old I had read through the local library. As much as I enjoyed sports, there were times when I wished for rain on Saturdays so that I could spend the day browsing through the book stacks. The 1930s were carefree years for children, perhaps the last generation to enjoy such times. We spent the time attending story-telling sessions at the local

library, playing sports depending on the season: softball, swimming, volleyball in the summer, football in the fall, ice hockey and basketball in the winter, soccer in the spring.

We lived in an age noted for creativity in music and the movies, a time that saw perhaps the greatest concentration of musicians and movie performers in our history. We danced and sang to the tunes of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman; we wept with Bette Davis; we charged enemy lines with Errol Flynn and Victor McLoughlin; we laughed with the Three Stooges and became hysterical with Laurel and Hardy; we solved crimes with Charlie Chan; we thrilled to the romantic behavior of Clark Gable and Lana Turner.

Two weddings took place in the late 30s. Therese married Lionel Hurteau, her childhood friend and one of the brave firemen; Marguerite married Andrew Paquin, an ex-soldier. In October 1941, Alphonse and Emelie celebrated their silver wedding anniversary with a formal ball and a gala dinner. A tragedy based on a giant misunderstanding darkened the family life. Alphonse quit his job!

Chapter 5

Alphonse changes jobs and Armand gets drafted...

The man's honesty had always been above reproach. He had been able to buy food for the family through the restaurant owner's good credit rating. One day a lousy pound of butter disappeared. The owner's wife accused Alphonse of taking it. His reaction was one of outrage. He removed his apron and walked out.

On his way downtown when he tried to cool off, another restaurant owner asked him what he was doing, Alphonse told him the story. The man replied to follow him to his own place. My father had a new job. But at that time his health was beginning to crack. He had developed throat cancer some time previously and it was beginning to spread. This was 1939.

In desperation he spent the summer at my Uncle's house at the beach. Both men opened a hamburger place. I joined Alphonse for the summer where I learned to peel potatoes and cook hamburgers. In 1941 I believe Alphonse borrowed some money and went back into the restaurant business by buying an empty establishment and running it so well with the family's help especially George that my mother was able to sell it for a very good price after Alphonse passed away. We had fun without really realizing it. We thought the good times would never end. Then came Pearl Harbor and the lives of the Charest family along with million others, changed forever.

We were at lunch on a Sunday afternoon when we heard the news over the radio. Most of us did not really know where Pearl Harbor was. I believed that the war would be over before I could get involved. My father was quick to re-assure me that my wearing eyeglasses would exempt me from service. So I relaxed.

In June 1942, I graduated from high school and began my apprenticeship as a toolmaker with a well-known tool and gage manufacturer. The country was united in fighting the war. The government began to draft millions of men to build up its military forces. Women began to work in defense plants taking the men's places; many would never return to the kitchen. In January 1943, I received my first draft notice, but since I was involved in national defense work, I was deferred. In July the roof caved in and I received my second notice. I immediately volunteered for the CBs, the construction section of the Navy. I had some experience by this time and the Navy was desperately in need of experienced workers. But lo and behold I was turned down due to bad eyesight.

So I took the bus to Providence where I took my physical examination for the army. I believed I was home safe when at noon someone announced: "Those men whose names I call will stand here to the right."

He went through the first two letters and I held my breath as he came to "C."

He went right by and so I sighed in relief. Then came the crushing news.

"Those men that I have called out put on your clothes and go home. The rest of you prepare to take the oath. You are now in the army. Congratulations!!!"

It might be the time to write something about the events that took place in the intervening years between the two world wars so that the grandchildren may know the reason for the war. It is widely believed that the main cause of the first war fought by the countries of Europe was because Serbian terrorists had assassinated the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. In actuality after one hundred years of peace, the Europeans might have been tired of it and they sought excuses for going to war, a war in which over twenty-five million people perished, five monarchies disappeared and the map of Europe was once again re-drawn.

Germany became a nation of disaffected, disillusioned, disappointed people. When in 1933 a man named Adolph Hitler came to power, the stage was set for another war. He mesmerized the German nation into believing that the Jewish population was responsible for all economic and social problems, including the betrayal of the army in the first war.

He frightened France and England into not opposing him as he took the Rhineland, a land bordering the Rhine River, Austria, the Sudetanland, the part of Czechoslovakia containing many Germans and, finally, he took the country itself. When in September 1939, he attacked Poland under the excuse that Polish soldiers had fired on Germany proper, France and England declared war.

The war lasted until the month of May 1945. Eventually, America entered the war when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The country mobilized for the first time in its history and by the end of the war it had over fourteen million men and women in the military services.

The members of the Alphonse Charest family who took part in the war were: Adrian in the army, Armand in the army, Louis George in the merchant marine, Lionel Hurteau in the navy, Leo Forand in the army, Armand Duclos in the air corps, John B. Danese in the army. Adrian and Armand served in the Pacific Theater; George traveled the world bringing supplies and weapons to the troops; Leo Forand served in Europe, John Danese was in North Africa and Italy; Armand Duclos served as a mechanic instructor in the air corps; Lionel Hurteau was stationed in North Africa.

I cannot write about the experiences of others, I can only put down what I saw and did, primarily for the benefit of my children and grandchildren.

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