

**In loving memory of my father, Henry Louis Bernard  
December 22,1907-November 7,1997  
and his parents, my grandparents,  
Henry and Josephine (Collette) Bernard, Grafton ND and Long Beach CA  
and  
Euclide Collette 21 Juillet 1905 - 1 Mai 2002  
Alma Collette May 6, 1906 - March 9, 2002  
Ovila Collette 27 Mai 1913 - 10 Mars 2002**

## **The Collette's of North Dakota, Minnesota and Manitoba:**

### **A family odyssey**

copyright Dick Bernard, 6905 Romeo Road, Woodbury MN 55125-2421

[dick@chez-nous.net](mailto:dick@chez-nous.net)

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### **Dedication**

While this essay refers to the patronymic family name, Collet (later to be Collette), one must not forget the spouses and the women, of the first or succeeding generations. Without the spouse or common-law partner, there would not have been the children, nor the vitality of any family! Similarly, the unmarried women, so invisible in le heritage tranquille, immensely contribute to this family story, as do hundreds of other French-Canadian families. To the legions of unnamed and unsung femmes (and the hommes as well), we doff our 21<sup>st</sup> century hat!

### **The Beginnings**

For novices seeking genealogical information about the Collet family, it all seemed so simple: Right there, in black and white in *Receueil de Genealogies* was the lineage of our first Canadian Collette ancestor:

*"Francois Collet, menuisier, ne vers 1741, et venu au Canada en 1757, fils d'Alain et de Marie Nau, du diocese de Lyon, France, se marie a St-Vallier, le 26 Juillet 1762, a Marguerite Tanguay, fille d'Andre et de Marie-Josette Roy, PAG". [Ed. Note: "Francois Collet, cabinet maker, born around 1741 and came to Canada in 1767, son of Alain & Marie Nau, of the diocese of Lyon, France, married in St-Vallier, the 26 July 1762, to Marguerite Tanguay, daughter of Andre and Marie-Josette Roy. PAG"]*

Ah, that it would be so easy. In 1996, Collet descendant Vernon Sell of Madison WI, led a tour group to Lyon, amongst other places, to see the place from whence Francois came. Alas, not only was there no evidence of a Collet in Lyon, but a Lyon genealogist B. Berthelot<sup>1</sup> established, in a letter of 3 Juin 1997, that the real origin of Francois Collet was St. Pol de Leon, an ancient community on the northern shore of the French Brittany (Bretagne) region, directly across the English Channel from the south and westernmost part of England.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Berthelot, Societe Genealogique du Lyonnais, 7, Rue Major Martin, 89001 FRANCE

Within a French database M. Berthelot had found the following: "*Contrat de mariage devant Fortier (notaire) a Quebec le 22 Juillet 1762 entre Francois COLLET, a Breste (sic), eveche de Saint Pol de Leon, fils de Alain COLLET et de feu Marie MAHAUT, et Marie Marguerite TANGUE, fille de Andre et Marie ROY, de Saint Vallier.*" [Ed. Note: Contract of marriage before notary Fortier at Quebec, 22 July 1762 between Francois Collet of Breste (sic) bishopric of Saint-Pol-de-Leon, son of Alain Collet and the deceased Marie Mahaut, and Marie-Marguerite Tangué, daughter of Andre and Marie Roy, of Saint Vallier.]

An obvious and important clerical error had been made by someone in the past, and repeated, and repeated - not to be caught for almost 250 years.

Francois Collet's spouse, Marguerite Tanguay, "*fille d'Andre et de Marie-Josette Roy*", descended, also according to *Receueil de Genealogies*, from

*"Jean Tanguay, dit La Navette, ne vers 1664, fils de Yves et de Marguerite Abgrall, de Pludiry (Finistere) au diocese de Leon, Basse-Bretagne, se marie a St.-Jean I.O.[Ile d'Orleans] le 6 Fevrier 1692 (contrat Jacob, pere, 24 janvier) a Marie Brothu, baptiste le 14 juillet 1675, fille de Jean et de Nicole Saulnier. (Voir Memoires de la Societe genealogique can-fr, II p. 249 et III, p. 53: A Godbout).* {Ed. Note: Jean Tanguay, dit La Navette, born around 1664, son of Yves and Marguerite Abgrall, of Pludiry (Finistere) in the diocese of Leon, Lower-Brittany, married at St-Jean, Ile d'Orleans, PQ on 6 Feb 1692 (contract by Jacob, Sr., 24 Jan 1692) to Marie Brothu, baptized 14 July 1675, daughter of Jean and Nicole Saulnier. (See the *Memoires* of the SGCF, II p. 249 and III p. 53: A. Godbout).]

Could it be that Yves and Marguerite Tanguay of "*diocese de Leon, Basse-Bretagne*" could have originated from the same town or district as Francois Collet, and that their French descendants in Canada had known of Francois Collet, or vice versa? We know messages were sent and received pre-email! The only difference was that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from Europe to North America, a message might take a matter of a year or two to reach its destination.

Today, Collet family descendants of Francois and Marguerite number in the thousands, and this paper discusses only the branch most identified with the tiny northeastern North Dakota village of Oakwood. We're looking for more information about our fascinating family, and want to tell you some of the story that we now know about "our" Collette's.

## To Quebec

Other than possibly his parents, we don't know who Francois left behind in St. Pol de Leon. We know that today there are several thousand families in France's Brittany and Normandy with the surname Collet, which is an ancient derivative of the name Nicolas in France, and has appeared as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these French families, and others, are doubtless connected to our line. No evidence of present day Collet's was found in St. Pol de Leon in a late 1990's visit. But the search was not exhaustive.

As with much of the record of common people, there are mostly "holes" in the specifics of Francois's early life, travels, and time in Canada. The French records show Francois Collet to be an *armurier*, rather than a *menuisier*. Was our Francois a gunsmith

or a cabinet maker? Or both? Or could his occupation have changed quickly after the French were defeated at Quebec in 1759?

Francois Collet likely sailed to Canada from the nearby port of Brest, France, sometime in 1757, 245 years ago, arriving at Quebec sometime later the same year. We know that travel by sailing ship, the only mode available, was very risky, difficult, long and uncomfortable. The Voyage across the North Atlantic was about 2000 miles. It certainly was a matter of months from embarkation at Brest to arrival at Quebec. A timeline is useful to describe how Francois' "fits in" to the Quebec history:

- 1608 - Champlain establishes trading post at future site of Quebec City. Settlement begins.
- 1757 - Francois Collet, gunsmith, comes to Quebec (another source says 1755).
- 1759 - Quebec City falls to English; Montreal falls in 1760; French surrender.
- 1762 - Francois Collet, furniture maker, weds Marguerite Tanguay at St. Vallier.
- 1763 - Treaty of Paris formally transfers French territories to English control.
- 1775 - American forces go to war against the English, and try, unsuccessfully, to take Quebec.
- 1789 - The French Revolution begins in France.

As French-Canadian families go, the Francois Collet line has a short history in North America - only 245 years. But compared with other immigrant groups from other nations, Collet has been here a very long while.

The family record in Canada shows baptisms, marriages and deaths, etc., recorded in a number of small villages to the south of the St. Lawrence near Quebec City, the first record being of the marriage of Francois Collet to Marguerite Tanguay in St. Vallier, July 26, 1762. Ultimately, three communities, St. Lambert, St. Isidore and St. Henri-Levis, now basically suburban communities just south of Quebec City, seem to have been most frequently identified with the rapidly expanding group of Collettes. Doubtless people from villages surrounding these three also played into the family history as well.

Throughout the history of the family, there seems to have been a close connection to the Catholic Church. It is known, for instance, that Denys Collet and his brother Charles donated the land for the Catholic Church in St. Lambert: *"M.M. Charles et Denis Collet furent les donateurs du terrain ou devait se construire la premiere eglise et remplacer la premiere chapelle constuite en 1850."* (from *Le Centenaire de Saint-Lambert de Levis*). A plaque marking this donation was dedicated at the church by the Collette families in July 26, 2003.

Denys I Collet, apparently the first Denys in the family tree, is the branch of the tree from which spring the North Dakota Collettes. There followed a Denys II, and a Denys III in successive generations. The men of the family seem to have been oriented to farming and blacksmithing, though there exists a merchant streak as well.

### **Migrating to the West**

The family was living in St. Lambert, on the banks of the Chaudiere River, when the decision was made to move west in about 1865.

The Chaudiere is of some fame in history because, in 1775, at the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, an American General by the name of Benedict Arnold

brought his troops up the Chaudiere as part of an effort to take Quebec from the English. The fate of Arnold's quest, but especially of Benedict Arnold himself, for his later role as a traitor, is well known to generations of American school children. Perhaps some early Collet's observed these American troops on the river as they passed the tiny village just a few miles south of Quebec City. Of course, Arnold's mission failed...and Quebec never became part of *les Etats Unis!*

In about 1865, the family of Denys III and Mathilde Vermette, already comprising ten adults and children, decided to move as a group to the frontier, ending at the small but rapidly growing city of St. Anthony, MN, which would in a few years (1873) be merged into Minneapolis. St. Anthony was located on the Mississippi River directly across from what would a few years later become downtown Minneapolis. Five years before there was a place called Minneapolis, in 1849, St. Anthony existed as a thriving village. Close by was the famous St. Anthony Falls, power source for the developing lumber milling industry.

At the time of the Collet's arrival, St. Anthony was probably about the same size as, but losing ground to Minneapolis, its soon to be much larger neighbor across the river. Both were small but lively cities. Minneapolis had the visionary leaders. It also had the geographic advantage, being literally across the Mississippi River to the west of St. Anthony, to take advantage of serving the needs of swarms of immigrants who settled areas to the west as the railroads were built.

In 1857, the two towns were connected for the first time by a bridge over the mighty Mississippi. St. Paul, 10 miles to the east, and soon to be state Capitol (Minnesota became a state in 1858), was the frontier metropolis. (32d State. page 93)

Minnesota at the time of the Collet migration was clearly a "frontier" place. But what we now call "the Twin Cities" was just beginning to explode in size and influence. Some population data of places connected to the Collet's are illustrative (all data from the United States Census records):

Place	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	2000
Dayton MN		540	951	1107	1075	4699
St. Paul	1294	10331	20030	41473	133156	287151*
St. Anthony	656	3258	5013 (merged into Minneapolis 1873)			
Minneapolis		2564	13066	46887	164738	382618*
Chicago	?	111214	298977	503185	1099850	2896016
Oakwood Dakota Terr (first settled 1878)					581	-
Grafton DT (settled 1878 founded 1882)					1594	4516

\* - in the 2000 census, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area population was 2,968,806. Chicago's Metropolitan Area population was 9,157,540.

No records have been left explaining why the Collet family moved about 1865 to the very young state of Minnesota. They could have easily joined those heading to the nearby and already bustling milling districts of New England, but this family did not make that choice.

There are two plausible clues: This was a farming family, and a family story is that lack of available land in St. Lambert and area made it unlikely that the adult men of the family (see photo on home page of this site) could get needed farm land there, and thus needed to relocate. In addition, it is known that a son of Denys II's third wife

Madeleine Vermette, Francois-Xavier Samuel, known as Samuel, had moved to the Centerville area just north of St. Paul MN sometime before 1862. Samuel, then in his early 20s, was half-brother of Denys III - they had a common father: Denys III from Denys II's first marriage; Samuel from the third marriage. It is likely, that Denys II's third wife, Madeleine Vermette, and Denys III's first and only wife, Mathilde Vermette, were sisters.

It is logical to assume that the larger Collet family journey was not to a randomly selected destination, nor was it likely just a whim that caused them to locate in a then-small town perhaps a dozen miles from their relative, Samuel Collet, in frontier Minnesota. Samuel Collet's story is a book in itself: Likely not long after his arrival on the frontier he joined the Army in the Indian War of 1862-63, serving over a year in Co. G, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Minnesota Mounted Rangers from October 6, 1862 to November 28, 1863. Almost without question, this service took him west into the mostly unpopulated prairies of North Dakota.

An affidavit of Samuel Collet written November 15, 1897, states that he and his wife, Philomena Gobin, were wed by a Justice of the Peace in St. Paul April 1, 1863, then the marriage was blessed by the Church in the Fall 1878 - something, he feels a need to mention, his wife desired..

Samuel is mentioned in the memoirs of the famed French frontier Priest, Father Joseph Goiffon, as the plasterer who worked on the Centerville MN Catholic Church. Samuel Collet is buried in the Catholic Cemetery of White Bear Lake MN, and has many descendants.

Goiffon, a Priest who grew up and went to seminary in France, spent the first three years of his long career as a cleric, 1857-60, at Pembina, Dakota Territory, on the Red River of the North. There he ministered to the Metis and other early frontier settlers.

### **Getting There**

Exactly how Collet's traveled the 1300+ miles from near Quebec City to the fledgling predecessor of Minneapolis is not known. One can say with confidence that they didn't travel by canoe, or walk, or ice skate west in the wintertime - popular romantic notions sometimes shared in oldtimer stories.

The most likely means of getting to St. Anthony was primarily by train, a very long trip which had to be a very difficult experience for the family of travelers, among whose number were a possibly pregnant spouse and certainly very young children possibly three and four years old. These early trains did not have Pullman and Club Cars, flush toilets or air conditioning (other than opening a window, if the smoke and cinders weren't blowing your way)!

By 1860, a Canadian trunk rail line had been completed to Sarnia, Ontario, across from Port Huron, Michigan, north of Detroit. It can be reasonably assumed that the family traveled to Levis, then traveled west by immigrant trains, formally entered the U.S. through the port of Detroit, and continued west through Chicago. Direct rail connections between Minneapolis and Chicago were not completed till 1867 (32d State. page 101), so most likely the family disembarked from the train on the Mississippi River at Rock Island IL, then traveled by steamboat to St. Paul, and then, likely, traveled by

cart and on foot the ten or so remaining miles to St. Anthony, though there was a rail connection between St. Paul to the border of St. Anthony by then.

No stories have been heard about the family stopping at any other place enroute to the St. Anthony destination. Similarly, no stories are known of relatives in in-between places like Michigan and Illinois. So it is quite likely the group traveled the entire distance in one ordeal.

(There were only 200 miles of railroad in Minnesota in 1865; this increased by ten times by 1873, and by 1880 had increased to 3000 miles. (32d State. page 188) By the time Collet's arrived at St. Paul, 1865, there was definitely a rail connection between St. Paul almost to St. Anthony, so train transportation was possible. A connection into St. Anthony and Minneapolis was completed in 1867.)

At the new location in the still frontier town of St. Anthony, the family apparently all lived in a single house, which they did not own. This is suggested by the 1870 census, which shows 14 Collet's under one roof, including one son, Octave, with new wife and infant son. Four of the family are described on the census as working at a paper mill, powered by St. Anthony Falls waterpower, which maps of the time show was in St. Anthony, very near Nicollet Island .

The census, which does not record a specific street address for the family in the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward of St. Anthony, lists the following records for the Collet family, 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1870. (Except as otherwise indicated, all are listed as born in Canada; names and ages are as listed by the enumerator - there are always major potential problems with such records, usually relating to translation, how the recorder interpreted accents, use of nicknames, literacy issues, imprecise notions of ages, etc.)

*Dennis, 49, works in paper mill, no real estate, \$250 value of personal property*

*Emma, 46, keeps house*

*Adeline, 23, works in paper mill*

*Philip, 21, works in paper mill*

*Actire, 18*

*Ovid, 14*

*Omar, 11*

*Emma, 9*

*Ephraim, 8*

*Joseph, 5 (born in Minnesota)*

*William, 1 (born in Minnesota)*

*Octave, 23, works in paper mill*

*Clara, 20, keeps house*

*Octave, 1, (born in Minnesota)*

The Octave and Clara (Clotilde Blondeau) wedding, July 12, 1869, was likely the first wedding in Minnesota for the family of Denys and Mathilde, with sharing of the vows recorded at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in St. Anthony. Clotilde came from Dayton MN, a small village on the Mississippi River about 25 miles upstream from St. Anthony. The Blondeau family, the first of many to share this Collet line, had likely been in Dayton since its founding in about 1852. Simeon Blondeau, the father, was almost without any question the Voyageur of the family, not marrying Adeline LaCroix until quite old. (The 1860 census of Dayton shows Simeon as 66 years of age; Adeline as 38; and the oldest family member living with them, Simon, as 23. "Doing the math", it is

possible that Simeon was in his 40s, when he married 14 or 15 year old Adeline in Ontario.)

(There is a very interesting "what's in a name" possibility to the Blondeau name recorded at the end of this article.)

### **On the move, again**

A few years passed, and the family, or at least portions thereof, began again to move towards the west. By now, railroads were being completed to the west, farmland was opening, settlement was occurring rapidly, and Minneapolis was booming with flour mills beginning to line both banks of the Mississippi just downstream from St. Anthony Falls. Later in its history, Minneapolis came to be called "the Mill City" for its large number of flour mills..

The Collet's were not city people, and one can surmise that as Minneapolis grew larger and larger, they began to get itchy feet for the country. Doubtless there were endless conversations with spouses, relatives, friends, neighbors and acquaintances about new lands, new places. "Moving on" was not a random, whimsical decision for this family. More likely, it was a thought out choice.

By the mid-1870s, the Dayton MN area was becoming central to the Collet family. A family story is that about 1874, three of the brothers, Octave, Philippe and Alfred, bought land for farms in the Dayton-Albertville area. Alfred (Ephraim) would have only been 12 years old in 1874, so such a scenario is unlikely for him - unless some arrangement was made. At any rate, Alfred became the first Collet to return to "the twin cities" in the Albertville-Otsego area (just west of Dayton) after their migration west, which began in 1878. About this time, for some unknown reason, the family name became Collette.

On April 30, 1877, Philippe Collette married Julie Boutin in Dayton. Julie's family almost without question originally came to St. Paul from about 350 miles northwest of St. Paul in the Pembina and the Red River Colony area, and had been part of St. Paul since shortly after its founding in 1841. There were almost certainly direct family ties between Julie Boutin's family and the family of the famed Metis guide, entrepreneur and larger than life character, Pierre Bottineau. Bottineau was an early and prominent presence in St. Anthony, and later founded Osseo and Red Lake Falls MN.

It is believed that Julie's parents married at the original log cabin Cathedral of St. Paul May 23, 1848; she was born May 2, and baptized there May 18, 1851. Her Godparents were Charles Bottineau Jr and Françoise Parenteau Bottineau.

At the time of Julie's birth and baptism, Minnesota was seven years from statehood. The St. Paul "Cathedral" was the original log cabin structure. The first of three successor St. Paul Cathedrals was constructed in 1852; the current Cathedral was opened about 1915.

In 1877, the French-Canadian community of now-Minneapolis' St. Anthony of Padua parish, almost certainly still including one or more Collet's, was given its own church, formerly a Unitarian-Universalist church, which became Our Lady of Lourdes. While no records are known to exist, it is a reasonable presumption that some Collet's

were part of this church's establishment and early years. It is possible that Irish/French-Canadian tensions centering on the native language of the Priest, and the language used for sermons, led to pressure for a "French speaking church". Such ethnic churches were very common until after WWII. (Our Lady of Lourdes, Minneapolis' "French Church", is a national historic site and remains a tourist attraction of note, directly across the river from downtown Minneapolis and St. Anthony Falls.)

An anecdote: a number of years later, before 1900, part of the family ended up farming in the boundaries of the Albertville Catholic Church. In those years, parish boundaries were sacrosanct - you attended the church within the boundaries. Understanding the Mass was not a major problem - it was in Latin, and always the same, and even if you couldn't read, you learned the words and their significance. If you could read, a Missal had the translation into your own language. Sermons were a different story. At the Albertville church, the sermon was in German, and the French-Canadians couldn't understand a word. The business of the language of Priest or Minister was an important one in the early days.

### **Going to North Dakota**

In 1877, the railroad was completed from Minneapolis to Winnipeg, and in 1878 the road was opened to settlers. In 1878, four of the Collette brothers took the lead in setting up homesteads around Oakwood, Dakota Territory, a tiny unorganized place which began with a few settlers along the Park River in what is now northeastern ND. (Grafton, then consisting of only a few settlers along the same Park River, was not formally founded until 1882, North Dakota became a state in 1889).

While there are no records, it is safe to assume that the family members traveled by an immigrant train to the railhead closest to Oakwood - perhaps, initially, Stephen MN - then walked and carried their possessions by cart to their new homestead, ferrying across the summer-time narrow Red River of the North at the then-river towns of Acton or St. Andrews, Dakota Territory. When rail was completed to Grand Forks, Dakota Territory, in 1880, the probable point of embarkation to Oakwood likely became that Red River town. On December 21, 1881, the first train arrived in Grafton, putting Oakwood, five miles east, close to railroad transportation from everywhere, and Oakwood was no longer "frontier".

(Octave Collette is recorded in history as having a "hotel" at one time at St. Andrews. Henry Bernard was fond of recalling that his mother, Josephine Collette, Octave and Clotilde's daughter, was born at St. Andrews August 9, 1881. Family members recall many country dances at Acton into the 1930s and beyond. The site of old St. Andrews is presently a rest area along Interstate #29 north of Grand Forks. It originated as an Alexander Henry frontier trading post in the very early 1800s.)

>From 1878 on into the 1880s, Oakwood, a tiny and then-heavily French-Canadian community, became the hub for the Collette family, and it is here that large families began to be raised, and the family put down roots.

Early records from the 1981 Centennial History of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Oakwood, show a literal "sea" of French surnames, among which are, in 1878, Octave, Philippe, Ovide, and Theodules Collette; in 1879, Arcadius, Alfred and Joseph Collette; in 1884, William Collette. In the fashion of the times, only the male heads of



household are mentioned, but it is a safe presumption that every married and unmarried member of the Collette family who lived in St. Anthony, ultimately arrived in Oakwood, or nearby towns and townships, by the mid-1880s. Four Boutin's appear on the list of early settlers to Oakwood as well, suggesting, at the very least, that marriages like that of Philippe Collette and Julie Boutin were not necessarily random events where two people fell in love. Marriages were often practical arrangements, as much for the purposes of the greater family as anything else; and while it is seldom discussed publicly, weddings with a child on the way, or already born, were not at all uncommon in those days. Sex did not begin with the 1960s. (All of the early surnames as recorded in church records are listed at the end of this paper.)

The Pioneers - and they were truly pioneers - unquestionably encountered difficult conditions at Oakwood. Likely, even the simplest "creature comforts" we take for granted today, could not even have been imagined by these pioneers.

A "History of the Red River Valley, Past and Present" (Herald Printing, Grand Forks ND, 1909) has these recollections of 1878-80 in the Grafton-Oakwood area: *"The year 1878 brought the first settlers to the vicinity of Grafton. Quite a number located along the borders of the picturesque Park river, for a distance of twenty miles west from the Red River, during that year. Most of their claims were for 160 acres, and generally in the form of a rectangle one mile in length and one-fourth of a mile in breadth, and a portion of each claim consisting of timber land bordering on the river<sup>2</sup>. The "prairie" land was at that time considered of little value...During the following winter, on February 11, 1879, Thomas E. Cooper, having during the previous summer visited this point and selected a claim, arrived with his family and, in a small log building of decidedly primitive appearance, "settled" on the site of the present city of Grafton [5 miles west of present-day Oakwood]. During the year of 1879 there were a number of accessions to the ranks of the settlers along the Park river, but there were none who cared to brave the hardships of living on the "dreary open prairie." These pioneers were nearly all then without means...They were obliged to haul their first crops to Grand Forks or Pembina [each 30-40 overland miles away] to find a market, and ox teams were usually the mode of conveyance. During the long winters they were practically shut off from communication with the outside world...Mr. Driscoll [in 1909, North Dakota's state treasurer] recalling a trip he made on foot from Acton through this section in December, 1879, says: "It was at that time a decidedly dreary landscape. There were but very few settlers then within miles of the present city of Grafton, and these were living along the river. There was not a single house to be seen on the prairie in any direction nor any sign of human habitation. I remember meeting [a few residents], all living in log houses 'in the timber.' No one had any idea at that time that the prairie land would be settled for many years, if ever.*

*"Two years later there was not a desirable quarter section within miles which had not been taken. I never saw such a rush as there was during [18]80 and '81."*

A postal route was established from Acton westward twenty miles in 1880. The route included three post offices. The frontier had been opened. (quotes and text from pp 676-678 of the aforementioned book).

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<sup>2</sup> This seems to be an interesting and unusual accommodation to the French-Canadians tradition of long and narrow farms fronting along waterways in Quebec. More typical Midwest land division at the time was the 640 acre plot, one mile square, sub-divided into four square "quarter sections".

There were doubtless interpersonal and intergroup relationships - and relationship problems - at Oakwood, as at all other places. A review of the parishioner list at Sacred Heart in Oakwood reveals some Irish surnames among a sea of French surnames: the clear impression is that the Irish and the French coexisted almost entirely because of religious beliefs.

There were also many Norwegians, Yankees and, later, Polish among the new settlers on the frontier. A delightful recollection of an early French-Canadian pioneer child in the 1976 Walsh County ND History series was a parental caution: don't trust the Indians or Norwegians!

The Collette family tradition of love for Church quite obviously continued at Oakwood. January 9, 1897, Octave and Clotilde Collette (who "*signs by mark*" - she was apparently illiterate) deeded 4 acres to Rev. Michael Barras of Sacred Heart Church, to be used for a "college". This dream of Rev Barras was short-lived; a facility was actually constructed, but within a year, was foreclosed. St. Mary's College reverted to a dream, and likely the land reverted to Collette's: "*If this land is used for other than College purposes then and in that case this deed shall become null and void.*" (In context of the times, "college" likely meant a middle grades school, like junior high school, and probably also connoted a boarding school).

This did not end the dream for Catholic education in Oakwood. From 1906-67 a Catholic school, most years 12 grades, was supported by the tiny country parish.

### **Moving on to Manitoba...and back to Minneapolis, again.**

The settling in Oakwood did not mean that the migration was over for Collette's. Soon, no land remained for expansion of existing farms near Oakwood, but rich farm land remained available north of the border in Manitoba's Red River Valley, and by the early 1900s at least four Collette's had established farms east of Morris, around the tiny (and now defunct) community of Ste. Elisabeth, which is midway between Winnipeg and the U.S.-Canada border. This was a "nest" of French speakers, which still holds to the French language as first language, in an English speaking province of Canada. Ultimately, two of the families, Philippe and Alcidas, son of Philippe's brother, Octave, settled here for good, and the population of Collette's was permanently established in Manitoba. Later another son of Octave and Clotilde, Alire, moved north to Winnipeg.

Another brother, Theodule (Odule) moved from Oakwood, and farming, to Argyle MN where he is recorded as owning a hotel beginning in 1912. (From St. Rose of Lima Centennial book, Argyle MN 1979).

One of the brothers, Alfred, married Celina DesChenes of Dayton MN in Dayton, November 21, 1887. Their first child was born in the Oakwood area in 1888; their second in Dayton a year or two later. They became lifelong residents of the Dayton-Albertville-Otsego area, raising all of their many children there.

The parents of the family who had led the migration to Minnesota passed on and were buried in Oakwood: Mathilde Collette died January 14, 1887; her husband Denys died January 9, 1893.

One of the many "circles" which occur in all families had been completed.

## A Family Evolves

The Collette family is like all families - full of stories of fame and fortune...and perhaps infamy and misfortune; of success followed by failure and maybe by success, again.

As in all families, within the Collette's at all times in history there are stories of illness, desertion, family friction...these add spice to the family stew, but are not a subject of this paper. In the writers opinion, these "disconnects" add, rather than detract, from the persons or the family - they are simply part of the human condition, and it is important for those who follow to know about the failures as well as the successes. After all, we are all imperfect. Indeed, perceived "failures" may not, in the long term, be failures at all - helping strengthen and improve rather than destroy the fabric of the individual and the family.

## Minneapolis Area, Again

As soon as Alfred moved back to Minneapolis area, and possibly before, it is a certainty, based on photos and anecdotal evidence, that there was continuing interaction between the Collette's of North Dakota and Manitoba), and the Collette's and others of urban Minneapolis, a very long 400+ mile journey away. Most likely those who traveled came and went by train to a train stop nearest the family they were visiting. ("Whistle" or "flag" stops, even in the "middle of nowhere", were common in rural areas when the railroads were the major type of long distance transportation.)

There exists anecdotal evidence of such interactions:

- In about 1899, for some unknown reason, Octave and Clotilde Collette's daughter and son, Josephine and Arcidas, were in Minneapolis, and had a beautiful photo taken at a studio at 20<sup>th</sup> and Washington Avenue North (present day corner of Broadway and Washington). (This photo can be as this website's "signature" photo.)

- After Octave Collette's first wife, Clotilde, died in Oakwood September 29, 1916, he moved back to Minneapolis, and on August 28, 1917, he married a widow 21 years younger than he - he was 70. Her name was Herminie Poisson Henault, and her death certificate lists her place of birth as Canada. The two lived in north Minneapolis, and for a time had a small neighborhood store at 3559 Lyndale Avenue North. This store still exists. What was their home address is now part of the entrance ramp from Dowling Avenue North to I-94 in north Minneapolis. Little is known about Herminie or her children or the success of the marriage, as they perceived success, but this marriage, and the new spouse, were apparently not favorably received by the family. Octave's second wife died in Minneapolis in September, 1923, and was buried in Minneapolis' St. Mary's Cemetery. Octave ultimately returned to North Dakota and Manitoba, dying in St. Boniface (now part of Winnipeg) January 29, 1925. He is buried with his first wife, Clotilde, and two of their children, who died young, in Oakwood's churchyard.

- In 1924, the Minneapolis city directory shows nine entries for Collette's living or working in various places in the city: Names and occupations of these Collette's ring a bell of recognition for descendants of the Oakwood Collette's:

*Alex R, dept mngr, W.T. Rawleigh Co r 3309 18<sup>th</sup> Ave S.*  
*Arcidus r 1218 Bryant Ave N*

*Beatrice stenog W T Rawleigh Co b 3309 18<sup>th</sup> Ave S*  
*Joseph b 1218 Bryant Ave N*  
*Joseph Jr hlpr b 1218 Bryant Ave N*  
*Joseph elev opr Winchester-Simmons Co b 3309 18<sup>th</sup> Ave S*  
*Joseph D clk P O r 5621 45<sup>th</sup> Ave S*  
*Melvin carpr 1306 Portland Ave*  
*Octave b 1316 Bryant Ave N*

In the same directory are two Collet's, including "our" Samuel, residing at the Minneapolis Soldiers Home, and 11 Collett's, none of whose first names fit our Collette family name "pattern". But, who knows?

•On December 21, 1924, in Minneapolis, it is recorded that Joseph Collette, one of the original brothers in the migration to Minnesota, died of smallpox. His last address was listed as the Commercial Hotel, 1 East Hennepin, Minneapolis. His last residence was perhaps less than a mile from where he had been born 59 years earlier, and only a block or so from where his family worked when they first came from Quebec. He is buried in south Minneapolis at St. Mary's Cemetery. He was listed on the death notice as a widower, and farmer. No mention is made in his death certificate of four children who had been left behind years earlier in ND.

With these and other interactions, another circle was completed.

### **Some Additional Vignettes about Collette's**

•An Oakwood Collette, Alfred, son of Philippe and Julie, was one of the early volunteers for the Spanish-American War, serving in the Philippines 1898-99. In about 1920, he returned to the Philippines, going into business, marrying and living there the rest of his life. Two of his four children live on, in the San Francisco-San Jose area of California. Henry Bernard Sr, later to wed Alfred's cousin Josephine Collette, was in the same unit as Alfred.

•Janet Stenfors remembers stories of relatives who drove horse cabs in Minneapolis in the days around the turn of the century, 1900.

•In the late 1920's, probably 1929, Henry Bernard Jr remembered visiting the then-under construction Foshay Tower in Minneapolis. He and his father "*went to see Foshay. I remember that they were putting gold leaf on the ceiling of the lobby the day we were there.*" (1992 recollection) The Foshay was opened in 1929, and for many years was THE landmark for downtown Minneapolis.

•One Collette son, Frank Peter Bernard, son of Henry and Josephine (Collette) Bernard of Grafton, North Dakota, lies buried in the USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor HI. He had been a crewman on the ship for six years before his date with destiny December 7, 1941. Each time the film of December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor is rerun, we see the Arizona exploding, taking 26 year old Uncle Frank and over a thousand of his shipmates to their grave. His death, which was not verified until January, 1942, doubtless had an immense impact on the Collette family.

•A family member, Marvin Campbell (his mother was an Oakwood Collette), is a retired banker and former president of a state banker's association, and in World War II

rose to third in command of an Army Division. Despite his Scottish name - from his progenitor who was part of the Carignan Regiment - he is 99.99% French-Canadian.

- One Canadian Collette family, of Alire in Winnipeg, contributed seven brothers to WWII service: one died in combat in Sicily. Because of a duality in citizenship, four of the brothers served in the U.S. Army, the other three in the Canadian forces.

- In the late 1940's Vernon Sell, Minneapolis, whose mother was Alice Collette, daughter of Alfred and Celina of Dayton, began the last three years of High School at DeLaSalle on Nicollet Island. He was not then aware of the fact that 80 years earlier his ancestors had worked at a paper mill just a couple of blocks from the high school he was attending.

- A retired Roman Catholic Bishop, Raymond Lessard, (diocese of Savannah GA) grew up, and has deep Collette roots, in Oakwood. There are Collette's on both sides of his family of origin. His photo covers almost a full page on page 351 in the March, 1988, National Geographic magazine.

- In the fall of 1981, the author of this paper, Dick Bernard, spent an evening with Alice Sell and Anna Plaisance, another Collette descendant in the Minneapolis area. When Anna opened her mouth to say hello, she was Grandma Josephine in every tone and inflection. It was the first and only such experience, almost eerie and totally unexpected: a family living on in that most distinctive of human traits: voice.

- In the late 1990's, Normand Collette of Winnipeg served as the highest elected officer of the Knights of Columbus for the Province of Manitoba.

- Perhaps the most famed "Collette" is an object - the 1901 Oldsmobile owned for more than a half century by Henry and Josephine (Collette) Bernard of Grafton. This Oldsmobile, the 369<sup>th</sup> ever made, is now owned by a man in the San Diego area, and in 1998, two "descendants", Dick Bernard and Rene Collette, had an opportunity to go for a ride in it. It participated in, and completed, the famous London-Brighton road rally in England; participated in the Centennial celebration of Oldsmobile (where it was featured on national TV news); and visited its "home" at 115 Wakeman Avenue in Grafton - all in 1996. (This auto can be viewed elsewhere on this website: go to the "outside the walls" section, scroll down to archives, and in the segment for August – December, 2002, scroll down to the photo.)

A story with fascinating possibilities for genealogists occurred in early December, 2003. The earliest Collette wedding in Minnesota involved Octave Collet and Clotilde Blondeau in St. Anthony in 1869. Clotilde was from Dayton MN. In the course of researching 1875 census records for Dayton MN, the author discovered an Octave Bland and family – a fact that would have gone unrecognized except that he knew someone named Bland in St. Paul. Questioning his acquaintance seems unproductive: the friend knew little about the family, except there was some French somewhere in it, and a story was that there had been a name change of someone. Clotilde Blondeau, in the 1860 Dayton census, had an older brother, Israel Blondeau, whose birthdate was similar to Octave Bland. In addition, this Bland would have married two or three years after Clotilde, and would have known well this Octave Collette. Could the name change to Octave Bland have been made at this point? It is a topic for further research.

## Summing up, as the Collette family story continues

Fast forward to the present: there are still Collette's in Oakwood and in the Minneapolis area, but the vast majority of Collette descendants are scattered to the winds across the United States and Canada. No corner of either country is devoid of Collette's. There are Collette family descendants from south Florida to Vancouver, British Columbia; from Montreal to San Diego.

The stories go on and on, most still uncollected and needing to be gathered and shared..

Who are these Collette's from which we are all descended? The research so far suggests some possible family traits (revision by addition or deletion is welcome).

The Collette's seem to be:  
Adventurous and Risktakers  
Rural-oriented  
Catholic, or at the very least, spiritual  
Leaders  
Business-oriented, including those who are farmers  
Strongly aware of family and social connectedness  
Aware of History  
Proud of background  
People who value Learning  
Civic Awareness

Today's Collette's are found everywhere, mostly with "aliases" through name changes at marriage. They are "hidden" everywhere! There are many examples. Here are just a few surnames of people in the Twin Cities whose ancestry includes a healthy dose of Collette: Bernard, Flatley, Hagebock, Cadieux, Roettjer; Suchy; Erickson; Lawrence; McAlister; Minor.... The diversity of ethnic groups and location make it ever more difficult, and more imperative, to discover and capture for the future those who are part of the family tableaux, and to retain a sense of family through the coming generations.

Help continue writing our story!

### Family Names as recorded at

#### **Sacred Heart Parish, Oakwood, North Dakota, 1878-1897:**

**1878-79:** Barnabe (3), Boivin, Bourcier, Boutin (4), Brunelle (4), Charpentier, Charponneau, **Collette (7)**, Desautels (2), Deschenes, Donnelly (2), French (2), Girard, Goulet, Huard, LaBerge (4), LaBonte, Lachapelle (2), LaRoche, Lessard (4), McLernan, Parent, Patenaude, Pellant (2) Poole (2), Savard, Sullivan (3), Suprenant, Savard, Trudeau, Vary (3).

**1880-85:** Allard, Altendorf, Baillargeon, Bellgrade, Bolduc (2), Boucher, Bouvet, Bradford (2), Burke, Campbell (4), Carriere, Chales, Chouinard, Cochrane, **Collette**, Conlon (2), Corriveau, Couture, Daley (2), Demers (3), Desrosiers, Dumontet, Duquette, Faille (2), Filteau (2), Fortier, French (6), Gagner, Gagnon, Garant (2), Gelinat, Giroux, Guerin, Hickey, Huard (2), Keegan, Kelly (2), Kennedy, Kyes, Lacey, LaCoste, Laframboise, LaMarre, LaRoche, LeBlanc (3), Loranger, MacDonald, McCullum,

Murphy (2), Myers, Parent, Pilon, Raymond, Sabourin, Samson (2), Sevigny (2), Smith, Soucy, Verreau, Walsh, Welter.

**1886-1897:** Bastien (3), Bellanger, Bernard, Bessette, Bilodeau, Bouchard, Boutillea, Bouvet, Brosius (2), Cahil, Chales, Champagne, Delisle, Deschenes, Dolan, Duffy, Dumontet (2), Durand, Ethier, Gagnon, Garant, Gallagher (2), Gelinas, Goulet, Gourde (4), Grandbois, Harrington, Hebert (2), Hollenger, Jacob, Kerouack, Krier, LaBerge, Lacoste, Lacourse, Laframboise, Lafreniere, LaMarre (3), LaMontagne, LeBlanc (2), LeClerc, LeCompte, Lefebvre (2), Martin, Maurice, McAuliffe, McKenzie, Montpetit, Moreau, Normand, Pageotte (4), Pelletier, Perras, Pilon, Poole, Rheume, Riley, Rousseau, Samson (2), Schumann, Trost, Trudeau, Vary, Wentz, Yelle.

**Surnames mentioned four or more times 1878-1897:** Collette (8), French (8), LaBerge (5), LeBlanc (5), Boutin (4), Brunelle (4), Campbell (4) LaMarre (4), Lessard (4), Pageotte (4), Samson (4), Vary (4).

## End Notes

on

### **A Brief History of the Francois and Marguerite (Tanguay) Collet Family of the branch which moved to Minnesota, North Dakota and Manitoba**

**Dear Reader: Our hope is that you will share this story and genealogy of the Collette family with everyone you know who may be connected with us. Please pass on! We also urge you to write down and share stories of the family with us, and to update and correct the genealogy. Just send stories to Dick Bernard (address on title page); genealogy items to Iris Holten or Vernon Sell (addresses below). Depending on response, there may be a family book in the offing, of which this paper and the detailed genealogy will be a part.**

**Acknowledgements:** Special thanks to **Jean-Marc Charron**, Montreal PQ, (RIP 1996) who contributed pricelessly to this quest, even though not a relative (though we suspected a Collette link); and to **John Cote**, Brooklyn CT (RIP 2001), a relative on the Bernard side with common Cote lineage in Quebec back to the 1630s, and possible Collette link as well, who introduced me to Jean-Marc Charron. May they rest in peace. Thanks also to **Dr. Virgil Benoit**, Red Lake Falls MN, French-Canadian extraordinaire, who read and commented on an initial draft of this paper.

Extraordinarily special thanks to Collette family members who have helped keep the fire burning on this history quest, especially the ones I don't know about, or forget to acknowledge. Thanks to **Rene Collette**, 2520 Bonita St, Lemon Grove CA 91945 for his tireless efforts to find connections; and to **Vernon Sell** and **Iris Holten**, whose addresses are at the end of this page, for their continuous, and continuing, work to fill in the blanks of the genealogy puzzle. And to **Audrey Cady, Evangeline Collette Clement, Janet Stenfors, Loria Kelly** and every Collette descendant who has ever taken a photo or written even a note on a scrap of paper for posterity, merci beaucoup!

Most of the Minnesota history references following come from "The Thirty-second State, A Pictorial History of Minnesota" (32d State) by Bertha Herbron, Minnesota Historical Society, 1958. Page number references to this book are cited within the article.

We descendants of Collette's are very interested in making contact with the families descended from the other sons and daughters of Francois and Marguerite (Tanguay) Collet. Those with **genealogical information** can contact either **Iris Holten**, 2939 Premier Place, Longview WA 98632-4377 [momsgirl37@juno.com](mailto:momsgirl37@juno.com) or [momsgirl37us@yahoo.com](mailto:momsgirl37us@yahoo.com); or **Vernon Sell**, 725 Copeland St, Madison WI 53711-1711 [avsell@charter.net](mailto:avsell@charter.net) . Family narratives can be sent to **Dick Bernard**, the author of this article, whose mailing and e-address is at the beginning of this paper, or to **Audrey Cady**, 1945 N Benton Dr #65 Sauk Rapids MN 56379 [cady@astound.net](mailto:cady@astound.net) .

**A note on style:** This is a family whose roots are in France, French-Canada, French-speaking English Canada, and the United States. In addition to language differences, there are style differences, the most obvious being how day, month and year (or month, day and year) are connoted. A deliberate decision was made to present these differences exactly as they are presented by the documents, rather than changing them for consistency. Also, the writer does not have a keyboard with French accent marks, so these were not included.