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## 90 years of stories to tell

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by Tory Bonenfant, Reporter  
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ALLAGASH - Louis Pelletier, 90, built the house he and his family has lived in since about 1950 or so. Working with his father, he dug out the basement in the late 1940s, he said, using a team of horses and a large scoop. It was 21 feet deep because he had planted potatoes that year, he said,

and took three and a half weeks to finish.

Pelletier, a lifelong Allagash native, recently co-authored a book with his daughter, novelist Cathie Pelletier, called “A is for Allagash: A Lumberjack’s Life.” It’s a memoir of sorts, a sharing of stories about growing up there in the years when homes were lit by oil lamps, when the logs and the ferry were part of everyday life - even before moose were discovered.

He shared some of his early-youth experiences last Friday in his kitchen near the St. John River, just down the bend from the home where he grew up. It was fitting, as the river is his second home.

“It’s not the same at all,” he said of how times had changed. “The old people are pretty much all gone. The work is different too – it was horses, and by hand, and now it is all machinery. And we needed a lot of people to do the work!”

Pelletier also said that the town had 228 children in the Allagash school system in the 1950s, when they built the school, and that number has dwindled.

“Well, some families had 17 kids, some had 18 kids, then,” he said.

Pelletier is now the oldest man in the town; his sister, Evelyn, is the oldest person at 93. He was born “up to the Allagash Ridge,” he said, in a house near where the Allagash Bridge is now, and has lived in the town all his life, early on working on the ferry with his father and in the woods with loggers, and later raising buffaloes on the land across from his house.

His mother was a Thibodeau, one of three French sisters from across the river who married and settled in the town, he said.

“My mother never spoke English to us,” he said. She spoke French to the children, and they spoke English to her, he said.

His grandmother lived nine miles away, Pelletier said, and could only be visited by sleigh.

“Today they run back and forth (to visit people), but back then they didn’t,” he said. One day, he said, his dad announced that the family was going to visit the following day.

“And we knew it would take all day to get there,” he said.

The next morning, the family woke up on Sunday to a “blowing storm,” and had to cut alders to bend over the sleigh, fasten them down, and cover them with blankets to keep the six children warm as their mother and father drove the horses through the storm to their grandmother’s house.

As a boy, from age 10 to 12, he was given the job of making the fire at the school for 10 cents a day – and he had to bring his own kindling.

“I would take an arm full of dry wood with me,” he said. “It was two years before they paid me. It was \$14 for two years,” he said, which amounted to 140 fires.

As an older teen, from about age 14 on, he would go up to the Allagash falls with his brother and with a pair of horses, to “fix it up and stay all winter” at a logging camp. A towboat towed their winter necessities up to the camp – hay, cooking utensils - and they worked with about nine men there in the fall, cutting logs. Once school closed in the fall, he said, his mother came to cook for the winter. They would use a “bateau” to help push the logs along the river.

“Homemade beans and biscuits, that was the thing back then, and sweets,” he said. “I still like those beans and biscuits!”

A lot of the loggers were French-Canadian, Pelletier said, and were grateful that his mother, as well as he and his brothers, could converse in French.

Whether at camp or at home, if the family needed to go anywhere in the winter, they had to “break road” with the help of the horses, who often plowed through neck-deep snow, deeper than it is nowadays, Pelletier said. Once, he was leading two horses out onto the road and one of them cut its neck on a sharp object coming out of the ground, and began to bleed. His Uncle Dennis, who was known for his uncanny ability of “blood-stopping,” was able to make the horse stop bleeding, a rare ability, he said. In fact, that uncle always said he could not be around when it was time to slaughter the pigs “or they wouldn’t bleed!” Pelletier said.

His father ran the ferry across the river for more than 30 years, Pelletier said, at all times of the day from dawn to late night, earning \$1 per day. The ferry was attached to a cable running shore-to-shore across the river and at 40-ft. long, could transport a car. The ferry ran until the Allagash bridge was constructed in 1945, at nearly the same spot the ferry had been.

At age 16, Pelletier was allowed to bring a 50-ft. by 20-ft. pile driver down the river from Allagash to St. Francis, and then let him bring two large boats down to farmers in St. John while his father and uncle rode along.

“We did so much around the river,” he said. “It’s like cars today. We were on the river all the time, on logs, and we would get off on the boom and run back up.”

One winter, he said, there was no way to get across the river, so he took a big stick and broke off a big piece of ice, got on it, waited it for it to float downriver and hit the “turn” he knew was there, and let it take him home across the river.

Another winter, he said, he and his brothers decided to make a road down to St. Francis to drive down in a 1936 Chevy. The ice on the road was bad, he said, so they decided to use the frozen river instead of the road. The crew got a flat tire on the river, and with no spare, they left the car there for the night.

“The next day, we saw we were almost at a big hole, as wide as the road – If I hadn’t had that flat tire, I wouldn’t have seen it,” he said.

In the summer, nature was a big part of the Allagash children’s lives.

“There were all kinds of cranes, fishhawks, turtles, and now there are none,” he said wistfully, adding that groups of great blue herons would hatch and fly up. “There were more fireflies, and lots of gorbies and porcupines.

A “gorby,” more recently known as a grey jay, was what the loggers called the birds that would swoop down and snatch the lumberjacks’ sandwiches out of their hands. The name is a Scottish word for “greedy person,” Cathie Pelletier said she learned recently, but they were also thought by locals to be the ghosts of old lumberjacks.

At the very moment Louis Pelletier was describing how the “gorbies” used to flock to the lumberjacks, one appeared at eye-level on a branch outside his kitchen window.

Deer were in abundance back then, too, Pelletier said, with banks of snow around the swamps aiding in their shelter and survival, but hardly any are left now. Also, there were no moose in Allagash when he was growing up, he said, a far cry from the identity the region now carries.

“One guy came up in an old car, he had seen a moose in Cross Lake,” Pelletier said. No one from Allagash, as far as he knew, had ever seen one before then. “Boy, people were talking about that moose!”

Also, he and his siblings would pick berries all the time, he said, as well as medicinal plants his mother would ask them to find and bring home.

“She would hang them in the garage to dry,” he said. When one of them was sick, she would pick certain parts of her dried plants and add them to hot water to steep, making a tea.

Their mother read tea-leaves, also, which Cathie Pelletier said is called “tasseography.”

“We’d always bring our cup of tea to her, and she’d look in it and tell us what was going to happen,” he said.

Pelletier said he bought his first horse at age 16, working in the woods and saving up to buy it. It was a white horse, he said, and cost about \$40.

“I was making \$1 a day,” he said.

Electricity only came to the town in 1953, Pelletier said. That was also the year that Cathie was born, the only one of Pelletier’s children to be born in the house he built.

Cathie Pelletier said her father has always wanted to share his memories with grandchildren and new generations, that he thought they might not remember the times “before they tarred the roads.” She has spent the last 20 years recording both him and her mother, she said. Her mother passed away several years ago. As the book was being written, she asked her father to add more detail to his memories, and together they wrote the book that eventually became an A to Z, illustrated, anecdote-filled story of growing up in the Allagash in the 1920s and 1930s.

“A is for Allagash: A Lumberjack’s Life,” a full-color, hardcover book with 26 illustrations and photos, will be available around the end of November at several area stores, including Shop ’n Save and Country Cottage in Fort Kent. It can also be ordered online with PayPal by visiting [northernmainebooks.com](http://northernmainebooks.com), by calling Allen Jackson at 834-6221, or by e-mail at [northmainebooks@aol.com](mailto:northmainebooks@aol.com).

Pelletier said he might consider co-authoring another book about Allagash.

“Another one like this? Maybe!” he said with a smile.