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'A is for Allagash': The life of a northern Maine man



PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHIE PELLETIER

Louis Pelletier's memories and tales of growing up in northern Maine are chronicled in the new book "A is for Allagash." Fellow Allagash native Lulu Pelletier contributed color drawings to illustrate Pelletier's stories.



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By Julia Bayly
Special to the NEWS

There was nothing easy about growing up in the woods of northern Maine in the 1900s. Boys became men quickly working the log drives or cutting timber to feed mills to the south or in Canada. Girls grew up just as quickly to follow their mothers' footsteps in running households, small businesses and raising families during the coldest months of the year while their fathers, sons, husbands and brothers worked and lived at the logging camps.

But it was also a time of simple pleasures, when family was everything and the memories center on a lamp burning in the kitchen window or a pleasant fiddle tune floating up from a neighbor's home.

Louis Pelletier grew up on and around the Allagash River, as did his daughter Cathie Pelletier.

While Louis, now 90, spent his entire life in that small community, his daughter left at 18 to travel the country and eventually become a best-selling author.

Throughout her travels and subsequent publication of nine novels and three works of nonfiction, Cathie's thoughts were never far from home, and eventually the notion of a collaborative book project with her father was born.

"A is For Allagash, A Lumberjack's Life," is a simple narrative of life as Louis Pelletier knew it told through stories and tales collected over the years by his daughter.

"I asked questions of my parents for many years so that I could make a scrapbook for my family," Cathie Pelletier said during a recent interview. "I wanted to know what their early lives were like."

Initially, Cathie filed those stories under specific subject headings such as food, clothing, marriage, children, school and Christmas.

"I liked the easiness of that style," she said. "That's when an alphabet format occurred to me [and] since the book with Dad is certainly not a history of the lumbering industry, I thought a more casual style would make it accessible to young readers, too. That Allagash begins with an 'A' didn't hurt."

The hardcover book includes full-color illustrations by local artist Lulu Pelletier, a brief foreword by Maine Attorney General Janet Mills, and endorsements by country stars Tanya Tucker and Doug Kerhsaw, and film director Doug Liman, all of whom have met Louis Pelletier.

The work is dedicated to Louis' beloved wife, Ethel, who passed away in 2000. It even includes a recipe for her famous mustard pickles.

"It was my mother I always envisioned doing a folksy book with one day," Cathie said. "She would buy books with blank pages so that she could write down her favorite recipes, little truisms and inspirational songs. Sometimes, she would add a drawing of a flower."

Such fodder, Cathie felt, would make a wonderful recipe book.

"I have enough material from her papers to still do it," she said. "I just don't have the heart to do it without her. That's when a book with Dad came to mind. I know Mama would like that idea."

For the elder Pelletier, the notion of those stories of his youth getting turned into a book was, well, a novel one.

"I didn't think all those questions Cathie asked me would really become a book," he said. "I didn't know it would take so long and be so much work."

Questions that included what year certain events occurred, how things worked, where did Louis go skating, what did he miss the most and what kinds of clothes did he wear.

"But she's been doing that for as long as I can remember, asking me questions," Louis said. "I had fun doing this, and it's nice to meet folks who want to know about the way it was back then."

Among those memories recorded in the book — in alphabetical order — are stories of Louis' father who built the boats used to ferry people across the St. John River in the days before bridges, the tools used to harvest timber in the woods, the weather, quilting, woodland flora and fauna, and the unique characters who filled the Pelletiers' lives.

Basing the book on a real childhood — his own boyhood — and a real way of life as it existed in Allagash in the 1920s and 1930s should place it in the "memoir" category, according to his daughter.

What was not so easy, Cathie said, was convincing her father of the importance of pre-signing copies of the books.

"I think he was a bit intimidated by the process," she said. "In a single day, however, that changed. I got up one morning and he had signed 164 books, and on the correct page, the signing page. Now he pushes me to keep up."

The two were busy doing just that during a recent book signing in Fort Kent attended by fans and friends from all over Maine, Quebec and New Brunswick.

Joanne Thomas, Jane Hawketts and Brigitte Marsden drove up from the Woodstock, New Brunswick, area to attend and chat with the authors.

The grandsons of former lumber baron Edouard Lacroix attended, driving over from the Beauce, Quebec, area. They had hopes of meeting lumbermen who once had worked for their grandfather.

So Pelletier arranged a supper in Allagash to follow the book signing and invited men who had worked in lumbering in the 1930s and 1940s.

"What started as a small gathering for 10 grew into over 100 people," she said. "I decide to invite those still working in the industry today, so that they could meet all these lumbermen who did things the old way. And I invited my father's sisters Albertine O'Leary and Evelyn McBrairty and other local women like Faye Hafford, Clara McBrairty and Shirley Connors, who would also know the old names and places."

Jacques Ouellette of Pohenegamook, Quebec, attended both the signing and the supper. Retired after 40 years with J.D. Irving, Ouellette was impressed with the gathering.

"I wrote down 40 names of people I'd worked with in the past," he said. "I never dreamed I'd see them all again and in one place."

Cathie hopes people read the book and see connectivity to the way life was in an earlier time.

"The Allagash I knew as child and teenager in the 1950s and 1960s no longer exists," Cathie said. "So imagine how the world has changed for my father, who was born in 1920. His own father's generation went from horse and wagon to man on the moon."

Technology, Cathie said, changed everything.

"We expected a lot from those 'wagon-to-moon' people but look at the world we live in now," she said. "When the file for this book was finished it was 126 million kilobytes. It was then e-mailed from Illinois to Manitoba, Canada, for

printing of the book. How can you explain that to a man who lived before electricity came to town? I can barely understand it myself."

"A is for Allagash" is available through the website www.NorthernMaineBooks.com, which also lists local booksellers.