

MARCEL OUELLETTE

SNEWS (The Chimney Sweep News) April, 2000

This article was originally published in the April, 2000 edition of SNEWS



Maritime Sweep in the Land of Evangeline

By Jay Hensley

I knew most of the Masonry Heater Association members who attended the group's 1999 annual meeting in the North Carolina mountains, but not Marcel. All week at Wildacres retreat he had been attentive, quiet and self-contained. The day before we disbanded, towards evening on the porch of our rustic lodge, I said, "So, Marcel, how did you get into masonry heaters?" Eyes alight, he told me his story during an interview marathon I'd hate to have missed.

Marcel was born 51 years ago in Halifax, capital of the mari-

time province of Nova Scotia, and Canada's chief winter port. Nova Scotia, land of "the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks," was the setting for *Evangeline*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic narrative poem of lost love. Marcel has lived there all his life and counts among his friends, relatives and customers the descendants of early Scottish, French and English colonists. He can't imagine living anywhere else. He loves the rocky coastline, the little



The Ouellette family - Marcel, Monique, Margaret and Rene

fishing villages, the forests, lakes and marshes of this peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic only 55 miles from the coast of Maine.

"Our first snowstorm of the new millennium was HUGE and just about shut down the city," Marcel told me by phone the second week in January. "I got out and cleared off the driveway, fired up the masonry heater in my studio and cozied in. I went to repairing one of my antique clocks, and thought how glad I was to be here."

"Winters can be messy," he added. "It could pour down rain tomorrow. This is the world's worst freeze-thaw zone, just where a wooder like me who repairs chimneys wants to be!"

His mother was a pastry chef, his father, a craftsman, a hand engraver of precious metals. It was a close, happy family. When Marcel was about 10 his parents expanded the pastry shop into the French Casino Restaurant, a fine dining establishment. Both Marcel and his sweetheart Margaret waited tables there during their high school and college years.

In 1971 Marcel, still living at home, went to work for the Canadian National Railway out of Halifax as a conductor and yard foreman. It was a job he held for six years...and hated.

An intense interest in woodstoves is what sustained him. He read everything he could find on wood heat, stoves and chimneys, subscribed to *Wood Burning Quarterly* magazine, bought Jay Shelton's books, and even took a bricklaying course in

1975. He purely loved the feel of a trowel in his hand.

Sponsored by the Nova Scotia Institute of Technology, the course dealt mostly with foundations and commercial construction work. It barely touched on fireplaces and chimneys, so Marcel sought out "anything and everything" that came out in books and magazines about chimneys and fireplaces and taught himself how to build them.

"I became obsessed with fireplaces...I'd look at every fireplace and chimney I could and see everything that was done wrong." He discovered a world of sloppy work out there, spurring him to become a perfectionist in the craft.

The Clock Bug

He caught "the clock bug" in 1973 as a result of chauffeuring Margaret and her mother to antique shops. Bored with waiting in the car, he visited some of the shops with them, discovered antique clocks and started collecting them. (He now has more than 500!) This led to repairing them, in which pursuit his father became an enthusiastically, putting his engraving skill to work on the hands, pendulums and metal adornment.

Now 84 and retired, he still delights in working on clocks with his son.

When Marcel and Margaret married in 1975 and bought an old house on Purcell's Cove Road, Marcel built a studio where he could work on his clocks. Masonry work was his avocation, clocks were his therapy.

The Chimney Calling

A year or two later, he read an article in *The Mother Earth News* about an enterprising young chimney sweep named Tom Risch in Vermont. "That article ignited a whole new career for me," Marcel told me.

Margaret's reaction to this new calling was less than enthusiastic, but finding few sweeps in the local Yellow Pages, Marcel bought his equipment, top hat and tails and launched Black Magik Sweeps. At first he held onto his railroad job, servicing chimneys part-time.

Not long after though, due to the initial demand for his services, he quit his railway job; and was soon going full tilt. In his off-season he installed woodstoves and took on any masonry work to do with chimneys.

Margaret manned the phone that first summer. In the fall, when she had planned to go back to school, Marcel told her he'd pay her more than she could make as a graduate librarian if she would stay with him in the business.

"So we teamed up. She soon became 50 percent of it, and she made the whole operation more professional. If it weren't for her, there'd be no Black Magik."

Twenty three years later, Margaret is still immersed in the business, loves it, and can't imagine doing anything else half as interesting. She is justifiably proud of the company's reputation. "Marcel is known in the city for quality work," she told me. "It just makes his day when a customer calls to compliment us on our great guys and clean-up." It happens often.

The World's Worst Freeze-Thaw Cycles

From the beginning there was a big demand for Marcel's sweeping and repair services. Freeze-thaw cycles all winter put many chimneys in drastic need of repair work. And Nova Scotia's winters have moderated considerably over the past 20 years, due, Marcel believes, to global warming, which has brought about more frequent freeze-thaw cycles than ever.

Their weather has always been more moderate than on the mainland, according to Marcel. The killer ice storm that paralyzed parts of Quebec, Michigan and the New England states two years ago posed no threat to the Maritime Provinces.

He navigates the icy ground and rooftops with metal-cleated "sandals" that he slops on over his boots. He's had them "forever" and can't remember where he got them, but they sound like the "Icers" available from New Brunswick sweep/mason Brian McClenan (phone 506-488-2080, fax 832-3289), who displayed them at the Niagara '99 Trade Show.

Black Magik's Trucks

In 1980 Marcel bought a Chevy cube van and hired two brick masons. Within a few years, under Marcel's tutelage, they both evolved into professional masons. At which point, Marcel bought a dump truck, too.

"In our chimney repair and rebuild season, we drive both the cube van and dump truck to the job site. The cube van is our shop, the dump truck is

our workhorse - we transport bricks and sand and bags of mortar to the job, then all our debris goes into it. Nothing ever hits the ground. There's no huge mess, no ruining the grass. We put planks down and cart stuff back and forth with a wheelbarrow. Then it's on to one of the local landfills for dumping at the end of the day."

There are currently two more vehicles in Marcel's fleet: A black Silverado Chevy truck with a work top for the use of his two sweeps and a similar truck that he can bop around in on his own.

Daughter Involved, too

These days a third member of the family is involved. Twenty-two year old Rene, fresh out of college, assists her mother with the scheduling, bookkeeping and management chores. "She just loves it and is planning to become WETT-certified, the equivalent of CSIA certification in the states," Marcel said.

An accomplished horsewoman, Rene has been a competitor, instructor and pleasure rider for many years. Her 16-year-old sister Monique has a passion for sailing and competes all around the islands with her Byte, a small racer. She is also a talented artist and plans to attend art college after high school.

Marcel Discovers Masonry Heaters and His Bond with Larry Lamont

Through the years, Magik Sweep's main competitor in the masonry end of the business was sweep/mason Larry Lamont. Marcel noticed his Halifax Bricklayer's Co-op bro-

chures here and there, and saw his name in the yellow pages, but he never met him...nor did he want to. The camaraderie so common among chimney service folk in U.S. was non-existent in the Halifax area.

In the late 1980's Marcel joined the NCSG, subscribed to *SNEWS*, started attending a few sweep conventions in the states and struck up friendships with both U.S. and Canadian sweeps, contact he thoroughly enjoys and that have added new dimension to his life. He finds that sweeps who go to these conventions are thoroughly professional, and he "talks" to them often on the Internet.

At the Northeast regional convention in Burlington, Vermont on a furiously-cold February weekend in '96, Marcel met Quebec masonry heater builder Norbert Senf. Marcel had read about masonry heaters in both *Harrowsmith* magazine and *SNEWS*. Now he learned more about them in Norbert's seminar and hands-on session, how they work and the rationale for their use in a sustainable world.

"We have billions of tons of hydrocarbons in the ground," Norbert said, "and now we're burning it and putting it in the air. Save the oil for driving your car, not for heating your house!"

Talking to Marcel afterwards, Norbert told him there was a mason named Larry Lamont in the Halifax area that he really should meet. Norbert had become acquainted with Larry at a masonry heater and Rosin fireplace workshop in Maine.

But Larry was Marcel's competitor! And so these two kindred spirits went on with their separate and parallel lives only a few miles for each other. They were the only people around who built Rosin fireplaces and knew anything at all about masonry heaters. Larry was already building heaters and had recently joined the Masonry Heater Association of North America (MHA).

In the early spring of 1997 Larry went kayaking off the coast of Nova Scotia with his best friend. Caught in a storm in dense fog and extreme cold, they perished at sea. When Marcel read about the tragedy, he was irresistibly drawn to Larry's wake. Instead of a somber and depressing funeral, he found himself caught up in a wonderful celebration of Larry Lamont's life by those who had loved him.

"There were so many people there, and there were pictures of Larry as a child, and growing up. People shared a lot of stories about him, fond memories...and there was laughter too. I had never been to anything like that.

Marcel was not only deeply moved, but came away with the sense that he had known Larry all his life and was now himself inhabited by the essence and the spirit of this man he had never met. His feelings almost overwhelmed him.

"It was the strangest thing" he said. "I even went to see his wife...It was just something I had to do! We talked together and cried together...and I felt as if I had lost my best friend."

She asked him, "Why did you two never meet, when you had so much in common?"

Marcel joined the MHA, the small fellowship of craftsmen and heater advocates that had once included Larry, attended their 1997 annual meeting and began learning everything he could about masonry heaters, following in Larry's ghostly footsteps.

When Norbert came to the town of Shelburne nearby to lay up a Heat Kit, Marcel and his two masons met him there and helped with the job.

Then, taking the plunge, Marcel ordered a Heat Kit to install on his own in his clock studio. Before applying the facing brick, he taped a photo of Larry to the expansion-joint blanket. This was his tribute to the man who had become so dear to him and who, even now, seemed to be looking over his shoulder, scrutinizing his workmanship.

"Larry had done work for some Buddhists, building a masonry heater in their straw-bale house. One day I went to see that house and his heater...and in my mind I pictured him building it."

"Now I can venture off into the world of heaters, a market that certainly interests me in terms of the environment," Marcel said. "I know a couple of people right now who are building a house, and they want one in it."

Thus far he has built four heaters, including the one he did with Norbert. He has also done a lot of experimenting, "learning the hard way, as usual." By now he feels competent, and Larry Lamont's spirit is with him still whenever

he lays up a heater, or kindles a fire in his own.

Looking to the Future

Marcel hopes to pass his heater building skills on to a new generation. Lacking a son, he's willing to teach a future son-in-law "if he's interested, if he can put his heart into it, because here is a craft with a future."

Not that Marcel plans to close down Black Magik Sweeps. The business of fireplaces and chimneys is still what consumes him on a day-to-day basis and makes a good living for his family.

"Much as I love building masonry heaters, it's not going to be a way of life, just a wonderful sideline," he told me.

People see his own handsome heater with its built-in bake oven, bask in its gentle warmth, and ask him, "Why doesn't *everyone* have these in their homes?"

Marcel wonders the same thing. "Why *aren't* they in every house? I'm so blown away by how they work, I just marvel at the whole concept! They make so much sense - no walls catching on fire, no polluting the air."

His daughter Monique likes to kid him - she'll ask, "Daddy, have you hugged your heater today?"

Although Canadians are wood-burners from the word go, "Nova Scotia is hot right now in another direction," according to Marcel. "Offshore gas has been discovered and there are huge oil rigs out there now. They've started installing fuel lines and pumping gas to the mainland, to Maine and Quebec..." Natural gas isn't yet available in resi-

dential areas, but many of Marcel's customers are switching to propane. "I shudder to think about it. My customers are saying, "Marcel, what can I do about my fireplace?" Before, I was installing woodstove inserts and liners, but now they want a propane insert. And I say, "You're talking to a wooder! It's hard convincing people that gas isn't good for the environment, when all the gas company ads tell them how clean it is. People want the convenience of just hitting the switch."

But even with gas coming on strong, Marcel's ally the weather will keep tearing up chimneys, giving him and his crew plenty of repairs and rebuilds for many years to come.

When it's time for him to retire, when he can't climb ladders and mess with chimneys anymore, Marcel is counting on his clocks to help keep him ticking. He plans to continue collecting and repairing them, and he'll be fixing "the odd clock" for a customer or two as well. He'll very likely be laying up a few masonry heaters, too, with his old friend Larry Lamont looking over his shoulder.

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