

# Christmas in Cap-St-Ignace

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## *Chapter 1*

This promised to be an exciting Christmas. Not only were we spending it in rural Québec with images of snow, horse drawn sleighs, and wood fires warming our hands, but it was going to be a Christmas with family! Dorothy, Jack, and Peter were planning to join us in our rented farmhouse for Christmas dinner in our make-do home.

We were very proud of the way we had turned the empty farmhouse into a comfortable home. Rather than make the sabbatical sojourn a major expedition, we had opted to furnish the house using cast-offs and hand-me-downs from our friends, neighbors, and the weekly search of garbage piles outside the local houses. We were very successful in this respect, finding mattresses, rugs, a nice little wood stove, and even a clothes-washing machine to help us through the year. We picked up a new picnic table for the kitchen, pulled out our camping gear for linen and cutlery, and - using pillows and cardboard boxes, we adopted an Oriental style for sitting and sleeping.

Dorothy and Peter were already settling in. They were able to come a week before Christmas, but Jack was faced with the typical problem for clergy at Christmas: the demands on his time were increased. He would not be able to join us until early Christmas morning. After his Christmas eve service he planned to board a plane and arrive in Québec City very early on Christmas morning. It was only about an hour's drive from Cap-St-Ignace so the idea of an early excursion in the Québec countryside to bring us altogether for Christmas morning was a very small price to pay.

In fact, the idea of a trip to Québec on Christmas morning appealed to both Daegan and Peter, so the plan was finalized: I would drive with Daegan and Peter to pick up Jack while Dorothy, Fran, and J.P. would make the preparations for Christmas celebrations upon our return. Of course the gifts would have to wait until we got back, but there would be plenty of diversion to smooth over the delay.

## *Chapter 2*

The forecast was for snow on Christmas morning. This was not unusual so the possibility of delays was only a passing preoccupation. Besides, the storm was not forecast to arrive until later in the morning. By that time we would be back sitting before the fire, preparing the turkey, and opening gifts.

We woke up before the sun, grabbed some apples and toast and headed out to the VW Van. I unplugged the block heater and crossed my fingers as I turned the key. Luckily, the engine started on the second try and we all bundled ourselves into the van, pulled up the blankets around our knees and headed off past the darkened houses of the village. If any of the other children around town were up on this Christmas morning, we did not see them since we seemed to be the only thing moving.

As we pulled out on to the highway we could only see a glimmer of light on the horizon - marking the point where the sun intended to rise. It was a glorious sky - so full of stars that we had to look twice to be sure that the milky way was not part of a Northern lights show. The cold air of the van did not detract from our pleasure since the blankets were tightly wrapped around the children and my heart was warm from the view outside the windshield.

"This makes me think of the stories my Mum told me." I said. "She would often tell of the way they would head off to school in a sleigh pulled by their old mare, Daisy."  
"They kept warm under blankets the same way you are doing - except we're lucky, because we don't have the wind blowing in our faces!"

We drove the 70 kilometers to Québec City with light hearts and eager anticipation. The road was clear and each farm, bush, or tractor inspired stories to speed us on our way. If the children weren't dozing off to sleep, they were curious and excited. By the time we passed the turnoff to St-Michel, the sky was bright enough to see the church spire. By the time we drove across the bridge over the St-Lawrence river we could see the famous walled city of Québec, the green spires of the Chateau Frontenac, the cliffs below the Plains of Abraham, and the ice-clogged river stretching out in both directions from our lookout. We were so enthralled by the glorious view that we didn't notice the dark clouds way off to the west.

### ***Chapter 3***

As we arrived at the Québec airport the first snow flakes arrived. In typical mid-winter fashion they floated gently through the air, providing a light dusting to the sidewalks and runway. The airport itself seemed particularly quiet. There were no taxis waiting at the entrance, no security agent at the door, and only one or two other people sitting by their luggage.

"It's Christmas morning, I explained - I'm even sorry for the poor people who have to leave their families and warm houses so that we could all spend the day together."

We were a bit early for the arrival of Jack's plane, so the kids headed off to explore the nooks and crannies of the airport. Only after the arrival time passed, did I think to

check the arrivals display. Only then did I notice that his flight had been canceled.

The sole airport agent informed us that all flights out of Montreal airport were grounded because of the storm.

"What storm?", I asked - and checked out the window once again to see the gentle sprinkle of snow outside.

"There's a big storm right now passing through Montréal.", he replied. "It should be here in the next hour or so. I doubt whether there will be any air traffic through there today."

What were we to do?

I made a phone call to Cap-St-Ignace, but it was no more informative. They had no word from Jack, so we decided to wait a bit longer before returning home.

By the time I placed a second call, the weather outside had taken a significant turn for the worse. No longer were the flakes dancing but instead were swirling so thick that we could not see the trees on the far side of the runway. If we were to wait any longer, driving back may be a problem.

I was relieved to hear however, the Jack had phoned. When he found out that the flights had been canceled he decided to take the train from Montreal to Quebec City. If all went according to plan he would be arriving at the train station in about two hours.

Since we were well settled in the airport and the train station offered fewer services for stranded passengers, we decided to hang out where we were for the time being. Although not the location of choice for young children, an airport terminal offered sufficient action and consumer items to provide at least some entertainment- even on Christmas morning.

## ***Chapter 4***

It was about 10:00 in the morning when we headed off to the train station. By this time the snow made driving difficult - especially since the road-clearing crews were busy celebrating with their own families. The road down the hill offered a special challenge so by the time we arrived at the station my adrenaline level was already high.

The old station at Quebec City is not much more than a box. The waiting room was crowded with people in their heavy over-coats and winter hats since the train had just pulled in. We found Jack standing in his thin rain coat clutching a suitcase with a look of

wonder and confusion on his face. It was only later we discovered this small train station was the most recent surprise in his own adventure - one that began with his departure from Vancouver on Christmas Eve. That story would have to wait, since the confusion and noises of the station captured our attention almost as much as our concern for the next move.

Every time someone left the station they would be swallowed up in a swirl of snow and cold wind as they hustled out the door. Pulling up their collars they would rush out to a vehicle with wipers valiantly pushing snow off the windshield even as more flakes covered the cleared space. It certainly challenged the limits of our van - the legendary German engineers had not anticipated Canadian winter conditions.

It was clear that the trip back to Cap-St-Ignace would be impossible until the road crews had done their job. It was also clear that no-one wanted to stay in the train station for more than was absolutely necessary. The comings and goings of passengers had left the floor slippery and wet, the heating system was no match for the gusts of wind, and the few seats available looked uninviting and damp from the coats and luggage they supported.

We decided to head for the Chateau Frontenac since we knew it would be one place that was open on Christmas morning. We could better assess the situation from there.

By the time we had finished our greeting, worked out the situation, and made our decision, the waiting room was almost empty. The only remaining passengers were two elderly people standing by the door looking bewildered and a bit frightened. They were very noticeable because of the clothes they wore they were wearing clothes that would have been more appropriate for Florida than Quebec City - especially in the middle of a blizzard.

It didn't take long for us to discover that they were a couple visiting Toronto from United States. They had decided that the short trip to Quebec City by train would be a lovely addition to their first tour to Canada. They hadn't considered that the weather in Toronto can be considerably different than Quebec- especially at this time of year.

Rather than leave them stranded in this tiny station, we suggested they join us at the Chateau Frontenac and offered them a ride. They were delighted with the offer and we bundled up as best we could to make a run for the van. I headed out first leading the way. As I made the rounds of the windows, brushing off the snow, I noticed our two guests huddled against the wind and snow making their way gingerly towards the van in constant danger of slipping on the summer soles of their shoes. With exclamations of 'Oh' 'Oh' 'Oh' they climbed into the van and squeezed in with the rest of us. I slowly drove out of the parking lot, with Jack busy wiping the window as the defroster vainly labored against all the hot breathing.

It was not an easy journey between train station and hotel. It was all uphill through roads now well covered in snow, visibility in the order of feet, and wind that kept the snow swirling and disorienting. As I slowly made my way up the final hill to the Chateau it looked like conditions were improving. The wind blowing along the St Laurence river was channeled by Citadel Hill and the Chateau so that it swept the snow off the road leaving a bare surface - or so I thought. As soon as I rounded the final corner, the wind grabbed the van like a sail and the bare road showed itself to be a surface of ice. We were now ice sliding sideways along the Chateau Hill toward the public fountain. The exclamations of 'Oh' 'Oh' 'Oh' got louder as our guests could see that I no longer had control of the van.

Fortunately, we were blown into a small snowdrift that provided sufficient traction for me to make the final few yards to the Chateau parking lot. Once again we bundled up and made a dash for the side entrance against the force of the wind.

As soon as he stepped outside the van our guests' hat went flying down the hill. After a brief detour I was able to recover it from under a bench where it had stuck and I gingerly made my way back up the hill to the Chateau.

## ***Chapter 5***

Opening the heavy door of the Chateau was like Dorothy capturing her first glimpse of OZ. From a world of freezing temperatures, blowing snow, and treacherous ice, I entered one of lush carpets, gold-embroidered frames, and silver chandeliers. Our little band of travelers looked lost among the enormous hallway and darkened panels, but we were encouraged by the sight of lush chairs and green plants scattered among the pillars.

"Where is everybody?" asked Daegan as she ran off to explore the expensive-looking shops along the hall.

"It's Christmas morning" Jack reminded us, "so there won't be many people at work today." Not even the doorman was at his post.

Our southern guests had clearly begun to relax. In fact, they were beginning to look more at home in these surroundings than the rest of us. Their light clothing and summer shoes seemed to be more appropriate in this world of boutiques and glitter than our boots and heavy coats. All they needed were some cameras slung around their necks and we could have easily imagined ourselves in the Empress Hotel on a fine summer day.

"Where is the front desk?" asked the woman, "Maybe we can find someone there."

"If we are in luck, perhaps we can find a bite to eat." she added.

"We'll stay here for a while.", I said. I was feeling a bit self-conscious at the moment and needed to get my bearings before deciding our next course of action.

We exchanged goodbyes and thank-yous before the California passengers headed off in search of the front desk and we turned to find a place to wait. We chose one of the big chairs just off the main hall.

It certainly was comfortable enough. Jack settled into the high-backed chair while Peter and I chose the upholstered bench next to a small table supporting a big-leafed plant. Daegan returned, then took off again to continue her exploration of the hotel.

Within 15 minutes, Daegan was back with stories of all the closed shops and the hotel concierge in tow. She had met him in the lobby while he was getting an update from our California friends and he followed her back to see what a young child was doing on Christmas morning in his hotel. We told him our story – still full of the excitement of the day, but he did not seem impressed by it. Perhaps he was too preoccupied with this disruption to the décor of the Hotel. He didn't challenge us, but his officious appearance and departure put a damper on our sense of freedom.

We were going to have to find ways to entertain ourselves without causing a fuss, so I figured we could pass the time with some board games. I found a couple of tourist brochures that served as basic materials. We drew checkerboard squares on the back of the flyer and tore up bits of another brochure to serve as the pieces. If we were careful to keep it out of the occasional breezes, it provided a perfect pastime – at least until we started to get hungry.

## ***Chapter 6***

By late afternoon, we had finished off the cheese, crackers, raisins, and juice that Fran had packed for our (previously) short trip to pick up Jack. Although the snowstorm had stopped, the road to Cap-St-Ignace was still closed, so we were going to have to find a place to eat.

The austere atmosphere of the hotel dining room was enough to discourage us from trying out their menu, so we considered other places where we might get something to eat in the centre of Quebec city. We were sure that the many snack bars, fast-food outlets, and depanneurs that are found in the walled town were highly unlikely to be open in the vicinity of the chateau, so we decided to search for a restaurant that might be friendly enough (and cheap enough) for a rather bedraggled family on Christmas day.

We gathered up the paper, plastic bags, and juice containers from our little corner in the Chateau, put on our clothes and ventured out into the evening air.

The view was magical. The sky was now clear with the blue-black glow of a winter evening. The moon was peeking above the horizon in the south-east and the brightest stars of the night were beginning to outshine the receding glow of the day.

The storm had left a cover of snow over all the city. The streetlights reflected from the snow, bathing the scene in a warm yellow glow that made it look like a scene out of a Dickens story. The stone, brick, and gables of the old town buildings added to the effect, while the sounds of the evening were muffled by the soft cover of white.

Once again we were transformed by the scene as we trudged through the drifts that had been created by the wind swirling up the Plains of Abraham and around the Chateau. They had already formed the sharp edges of midwinter snow that reminded me of meringue on lemon pie.

Since the wind had totally blown itself out, we no longer had to clutch our coats tightly around our throats but were free to chase each other, laugh, and chat about the day's adventures.

## ***Chapter 7***

We turned up the narrow street in search of a meal. The gable lights above the stores were aglow, but few of the shops showed any signs of life.

"Everyone is probably at home, busy with the final preparations for Christmas dinner." said Jack. "Too bad we aren't with them."

Our stomachs were beginning to agree, so by the time we walked up about 3 blocks with our hopes fading, we were getting rather desperate and even a bit cranky. It was with some relief that we noticed a light in the window of a small restaurant almost at the city walls.

We were very apprehensive as we climbed the narrow stairs to the dining room, however. This turned out to be a restaurant of high cuisine – one that was more likely to be full of elegant ladies in evening dresses and gentlemen in tuxedos rather than a young man in his farm duds, an older one in his traveling clothes, and two children in their winter coats.

The look of the Maitre-de betrayed his surprise at seeing us arrive. I expect he was only able to overcome the surprise because we were the sole customers that evening. He

reluctantly took us to a table in one of the darker corners of the establishment and sent off to give us some time to look over the menu.

You can imagine our concern when we looked over the list of items. Not only were they indecipherable in our rusty French, but the prices were well beyond our budget at the best of times.

What were we going to do? We knew of no other place that was open this evening, and we were so hungry by now that we were sure to create a major scene if we tried to take Daegan away when she was so close to getting food. We would just have to make do as best we could!

When the waiter returned, he was not in a co-operative mood. It was all he could do to help us interpret the menu for the palate of a young child. It is a long way from 'poulet courdon bleu' to 'chicken fingers', for example, or 'boeuf bourgignon' to 'hamburger'. What to us was a simple translation problem, to the waiter, was a betrayal of 500 years of French cuisine, I'm sure.

In desperation, we explained our dilemma, not only for finding food, but we included a full account of our day in an effort to extract a small amount of sympathy from our host. He was not moved, but finally agreed to provide us with some chicken breast without the 'courdon bleu' and some beef without the 'bourgnone'. He even brought us an extra plate and utensils so that we could share our menu choice to keep close to our budget.

I'm sure that he was very pleased we were just finishing when other clients arrived – and that he was able to seat them far away from us.

We made our way back to the Chateau only partially fed and much poorer, but very happy to be out of such an awkward situation on such a beautiful evening.

## ***Chapter 8***

The evening sky had turned to sparkling stars. Several couples were gingerly making their way among the snowdrifts: hopping over each mound and seeking out the ruts in the road left by the cars that had slipped their way through the narrow streets. We joined them – walking single file in the tire marks to keep the snow from the tops of our shoes.

We walked down the hill to the Chateau and found that this time it was alive with people dressed in their finery for an evening of celebration. Even the doorman welcomed us with a warm smile and a question about our activities.



"I heard on the radio that highway 20 will be open about 11:00 pm." he said as we exchanged news of the evening. "They have the highway crews out now, so although you will have to be careful about drifting snow, you should have no trouble getting through."

I immediately phoned Fran and Dorothy in Cap-St-Ignace to tell them the news. They informed me that poor Jean Pierre had suffered through a day of anticipation – surrounded by unopened gifts and the smell of roasting turkey so they had taken pity on him and let him open one of his gifts before we arrived.

"He's in bed now." said Fran, "so I guess we will postpone Christmas day until tomorrow."

"We'll have hot chocolate and coffee for you when you arrive, though."

At about 10:45 we bundled up once more and headed out to the car.

It was standing where we left it, but a snowdrift was packed up above the wheels on one side and bare road showed on the other. The shape of the van had directed the wind like a snow fence – swirling it around and packing it tightly in some places and whipping it away in others. Getting out of the drift was going to be more difficult than I had anticipated.

I climbed into the driver's seat and said a short prayer as I turned the ignition. I knew that this would be a major test of the ailing battery but I wanted to get the van warming while I dug it out.

I was greeted by the low growl of the starting motor, but the engine did not spring into life as I had hoped. "Oh no!" I thought, "Now what will I do? I had better check to see if the distributor is dry before making more demands on the battery."

I hopped out of the car, went around to the back and opened up the engine compartment. To my amazement, I was greeted by a solid white imprint of the inside of the engine compartment lid instead of the steel and belts of the motor itself.

The wind had driven the snow directly into the engine compartment and packed it solidly around all parts of the motor. There was not a metal piece to be seen!

I started digging out the snow handful by handful as the others cleared the windows and worked to free the tires from the drifts that had engulfed them. It looked like our adventure was not over yet!

## ***Chapter 9***

The walled city of Québec was built on the top of a hill to protect it from any army that might try to attack from below. It made surveillance of the St Lawrence River easy – thereby giving the French control of the one major gateway into the interior of the North American continent. When it came time to build the premier Chateau of the city, it made sense to give it a place of prominence on top of the same hill.

This was the hill up which Montcalm and his army walked on their way to the fort and the Plains of Abraham. It was also the hill that forced Wolfe to seek and find a less protected route to the Plains – one where his men could prepare for the battle that was to define Canadian history.

It was also the hill that now gave us our ticket home. We were fortunate to be parked high on its side since it would provide us with the time and momentum to get our van back on the road.

It was with great trepidation, however, that I climbed back in the driver's seat after digging, scraping, and brushing off all the snow from the engine compartment. We were all tired now, after pushing the van through the snow to get it poised and ready for the descent down the hill. I tried not to think of what I would do if we got all the way to the bottom and the engine still did not start.

I felt like a pilot ready to take off: all the passengers were in and the doors shut; the windows were cleared; the ignition was turned on using the special 'key' I had designed from an old radio plug; the car was in gear; and the long hill lay before us. I checked three times for other traffic and took my foot off the brake. We didn't even have to push the van because of the slope of the hill and I held my breath as I waited to pick up speed.

## ***Chapter 10***

One of the most valuable features of the old VW van was that it had a manual transmission and only four cylinders in the engine. This meant that it was easy to jump start – all one had to do was to turn on the ignition, put it in gear, get up a little speed, pull your foot off the clutch, and most likely you would hear the chug, chug, chug of the engine as it sprang into life. I had been through this routine many times – sometimes as a pusher, sometimes as a driver, and even as an enthusiastic spectator anticipating the success of the effort.

This time, however, was one of the most memorable. It felt like our last hope from a long and eventful day. If we weren't successful now, we would be looking for a tow truck, a service station, and an hotel – and celebrating Boxing Day away from our

family.

That's why my heart sank as I pulled my foot off the clutch and only heard the soft grind of the engine – but none of the chug that would signal the spark plugs had fired. In spite of the resistance of the engine, the car gathered momentum down the steep hill, making it feel like we were under power but I knew from the sound that it was only gravity that was powering us.

I steered through the round-about and pointed the car down the main road from the Chateau. Should I stop the car before we ran out of slope and try to dry off the distributor again? Do I need to thoroughly clean off the cables? Or should I let it continue a bit longer?

I was just about to turn into one of the snowdrifts at the side of the road, when I heard the familiar, and very welcome, pop of a cylinder firing. It wasn't much, but it was enough to give me hope so I turned back to the centre of the road and checked for other traffic.

My heart skipped a beat as I saw a car coming up behind us through the round-about. I could only hope that he could see us – running quietly and without our lights on to make sure that all the electrical energy would go to the spark plugs. "Please don't make me turn off the road or slow down!" I whispered, as he hesitated at the sight of us. He must have heard me though, since he pulled out and around, giving us a wide berth as he sped on ahead.

By the time I was able to pay attention to the van, I realized that we were actually under our own power! I could hardly believe it, so I put my foot on the clutch, and slowed the van down. Sure enough, there was the whistling sound of a VW engine chugging away as if nothing was the matter.

I knew that the longer it ran like this the more the engine would heat up and dry off what was left of the snow in the compartment, so I slowed the van up to conserve some more of the hill in case the moisture would cause problems again. I was right to do so, since I more than once heard the rattle of an engine with one or more sparkplug misfiring, so each time this happened, I was careful to pull my foot off the clutch and let the slope of the hill get us back running smoothly again.

It must have taken us more than 15 minutes to get us down the hill to a point where the engine sounded warm and dry. Only then was I confident enough to let it run on its own and only after it had a good long time to do so, was I willing to turn on the lights.

At last, we could think about heading for the highway.

I pulled away from the safety of the hill and headed out the road to Ste-Foy with a light

heart. It looked like the worst was over, some of the roads had even been plowed, and the nighttime Christmas lights gave a carnival look to our route. Only one last challenge remained.

In order to make the trip home, we were going to have to fill up with gas. This was going to be risky, however, since we may not be able to start the van again once we had stopped. Perhaps we could find a gas station on a hill.

This was not to be, however, since most of the stations were closed for Christmas and for the night, so we finally chose to pull into one of the few open stations on Ste-Foy Boulevard. It was almost deserted, so I simply ignored the sign demanding that we shut off our engines to refuel and carefully topped up the tank.

We were in luck, since the attendant seemed to be uninterested in our violation of the rules or willing to ignore it for some reason. It was with great relief that I pulled out of that station and turned on to the bridge across the River.

## ***Chapter 11***

The drive back to Cap-St-Ignace was magical. It was 70 kilometers of the most difficult stretch of highway for snow clearing. It is located right in the centre of the winds that blow down the St Lawrence and its position on the top of the first bench of the River makes it totally exposed to the elements.

The snow clearing crews had done their job well, however. The drifts on the main road were pushed back and all that was left were the swirls of light snow blowing like water back and forth on the road ahead.

It made driving a challenge and gave the impression that the road itself was moving. Every so often a reflector in the centre line would appear to assure me that I was headed in the right direction and if I were in luck some other car would pass me by and I could use the tail lights as a security beacon for aiming the van.

During those periods I could relax and even had time to enjoy the brilliance of the night. This time we passed by the lights of the St-Michel and Montmagny tired, but very elated, so it came as little surprise that we should see the Northern Lights as we turned off the highway and mounted the overpass to Cap-St-Ignace.

They danced for us all the way to our little farm house – the one with the light still burning and the driveway shoveled out in anticipation of our arrival.

The hot chocolate was still hot for us on the stove but we only paused for a short time to pass on the most critical details of our adventure. The elaborations would have to

wait until tomorrow – when we were all ready to celebrate our second Christmas day of the season.

### ***Afterword***

The story of our Christmas in Cap-St-Ignace will be told many more times before it is finished. However, you can hear how your Great Grandfather Shaver told it when we arrived back at Cap-St-Ignace early on the morning of December the 26<sup>th</sup>. He evens us a bit of his own adventures in Montréal as he tried to make his way through the storm to get to Québec city. You can find the link to his story on the web site that I have prepared.