

## ROAD TRIP

## My English-to-French Dictionary Rides a BMW

*Robert Laford*

I walked into another department where I worked one day and tossed a map of northern New England onto Gaetan's desk. Gaetan is an engineer in our facilities department and although he has lived in the United States since he was a young man, he grew up in Quebec and still has a bit of a French-Canadian accent.

"Gaetan, I have use of a buddy's camp in the woods of northern New Hampshire, just a few miles south of the Canadian border. I want to spend a couple of days riding in Quebec, and I bet you can tell me some good roads." He opened the map and his eyes lit up, telling me about different roads, the town he grew up in, the views, the family still there, the food. What a great ride I would have, he told me. Every time he pointed to the map it brought stories of past motorcycle rides, family, and hockey games.

"Do you want to come along," I asked – and he was on his feet. "Are you serious?" I told him that my high school French could let me ask someone if they speak English and that's about it. I figured he would be a great tour

guide and a great interpreter. With a grin ear-to-ear he said he would think about it.

**Left: Some great roads, villages and views in Quebec.**

**Right: New England country store, complete with trophies.**

**Opposite page: Motorcycle monument in New Hampshire and sunset and prediction for the next day's ride.**

Later that day we were in a meeting together and he told me that he would really like to go. Great, I thought, I've got my English-to-French dictionary all packed and he rides a BMW!

I was able to secure a day more than Gaetan for our travels, so we agreed to meet in northern Vermont for

our cooperative journey. A day of solo riding allows you time with your thoughts and to get you focused on your riding and not on work. Such a ride of solitude is good for your mental health – and it helps to refresh your spirit.

Leaving central Massachusetts I chose to head west on Massachusetts Route 2 through the Mohawk Trail in western Massachusetts and then up into Vermont. Each of these paths could be an article depicting a great motorcycle ride by themselves.

On my second day's travel, I am the first to arrive at our coffee-spot rendezvous point in northern Vermont. When my riding partner pulls into the parking lot I can see the crinkles in the corners of his eyes inside his helmet and I know he is wearing the same smile I am. "Bonjour Gaetan!"

Our route takes us along Vermont Route 2. This road cuts a well-maintained swath East-West through Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. With motorcycle-friendly curves, ascents, and descents the route offers us alternating views of fields, farms, and forests. Entering the fertile Connecticut River Valley, the White Mountains of New Hampshire appear before us and we notice the Green Mountains of Vermont standing in our rear-view mirrors.





These mountain ranges stand as sentries on either side of the river that divides their two states.

Each village is rich with character – and you know that you are in an authentic small town country store (complete with squeaky wooden floorboards) when there are trophy mounts of deer and bear along the wall above the dairy cooler; or you notice that the community bulletin board has a flyer from the local “Coon Club” for a wild game supper.

Climbing into the White Mountains we move away from the valley floor. If I did not know where we were I would not recognize that Mount Washington, with its 6,288 foot summit elevation, was just off our right flank. But today he is playing hide and seek with us behind the clouds. One section of today’s pleasant ride down into the Mount Washington Valley cuts through a forest grove of white birches. The contrast between the black-topped road and the green forest make the white trunks even more pronounced. As we bank around another sweeping curve, a mountain lake comes into view with the

birch trees encircling the lake. The stark trunks highlight the early fall colors and are a mirror reflection off the lake for a picture perfect view.

All around us are clues of the not-so-distant winter. Numerous ski slopes, ice fishing shanties waiting to be deployed, snowmobiles at (almost) every doorstep, and evidence of the many sled trails that cross the roads, all show that this is an area that embraces the winter season. A Maine friend of mine once told me that they never cancel school because of snow. But if your sled won’t start, he said, it is an excused absence.

After rolling a few miles into Maine, we turn back towards the north woods of New Hampshire and climb into Maine’s Grafton Notch and New Hampshire’s Dixville Notch. As our altitude climbs the clouds again begin to close in and the filtered sun disappears from view. The stone ledges in the Dixville Notch appear like the crystal caves in the Superman movies and are an eerie sight in the clouds. Working our way back towards the Connecticut River we head for our night’s lodging in the woods of New Hampshire. As we approach our cabin, night begins to fall and we are treated to

a beautiful sunset. We have spent a good part of the day in the clouds, but this is a clue that when we greet the new day it will be with sunshine.

The next morning, as we had hoped, we are met with blue skies and a bright sun. We leave our cabin, buried in the woods of New Hampshire, and



follow the Connecticut River byway towards the border with Quebec. Passing by the Connecticut Lakes our rolling route is shadowed by the tall thin pines at this early morning's time. The Connecticut Lakes are the birthplace of their namesake's river that flows to the sound and the Atlantic Ocean in Connecticut.

At the crossing into Canada, the border guard tells us that we have picked the right day – as the previous day saw temperatures in the single digits (Celsius). Today is already steadily climbing into the 50's (F) and the sun feels wonderful.



Riding away from the border we are on a ridge that overlooks the deep valley below. We drop down the long straight descent into our first village in Quebec. With the green rolling hills with cattle and sheep grazing on the hillside, the small village with its white steepled church and well-kept homes and gardens, we could be riding through any similar village in Europe.

Our first stop is to have coffee with Gaetan's cousin Rhea and her husband Evan. Like any family greeting there are hugs, stories, and the quick jabbering of excited family who have not seen each other in some time. Since I don't have a clue what is being said I smile and nod my head – while enjoying their hospitality and fresh baked sweets with our coffee.

Occasionally the laughter would subside and Gaetan would share a piece of the discussion. After one boisterous exchange he said that his cousin said that when she gets grumpy it means it is time to visit her son in Quebec City – and her husband re-

sponded that it was time for another visit. The home they have opened to us was the homestead of Evan's parent's farm. There are still pastures across the street, but the houses that dot





Left: Our cabin for the trip, view atop Du Mont-Megantic, and the Sanctuaire du Mont-Saint Joseph.

This page: Road up to Mont-Megantic and our overly satisfying lunch including Poutine with gravy.

the neighborhood on the former farmland are those of his brothers and sisters and other extended family rather than the crops and livestock of a past generation.

Back on the road, one pleasant surprise is the light traffic along our roller coaster-like route. We climb towards the clouds, have a quick pass over the top, and dive into the valley below. At each crest we can see the road stretching further for several miles towards the mountain range ahead of us.

We take a detour from our planned route to visit the Parc National Du Mont-Megantic. At the visitor's center Gaetan speaks fluent French with the attendant selling tickets up the mountain road. When they finish she hands us brochures and I ask Gaetan if "he got all that!" With a broad smile the lady behind the counter asked me if I would like the English version of the brochure. "Merci," I replied.

Climbing the summit road we enjoyed the switchbacks and very steep



climb to its 3,600 foot summit. The views on this perfect day were spectacular as we could see around Quebec and also into Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire. From the summit's observatory we can see fall colors more prominently in the woodlands before us more than we did during yesterday's travels in Vermont and New Hampshire. The view from the mountaintop gives a global picture of the countryside with its towns and farms below. The spires of the churches rise above the tree line announcing each village's existence to us.

Partway back down the mountain road we take another that climbs to a second summit at du Mont-Saint-Joseph at 3,500 feet in elevation. This sister mountain adjacent to Mont-Megantic is home to a small chapel called la Sanctuaire du Mont-Saint-Joseph. The shrine was built in the 1880's as a pilgrimage site to those colonizing the region. Gaetan tells me that his great-grandfather helped build the chapel.

Back onto our planned route we have another family stop with Gaetan's elderly aunt Helene. She is elderly in years only, not in spirit or energy. She greets us with hugs and fast French that Gaetan absorbs as both of them rattle on and on with their arms and hands gesturing throughout the conversation. Helene brings out some pictures to show us her summer travels to other parts of Canada.

My riding partner has made a point to tell me that he is really enjoying practicing his French. At one point while talking to his aunt they stopped talking, stared at me, and burst out laughing. He said he told her to stop talking and look at me and laugh and I would think they were telling a story about me! Well Gaetan, your French is fine, you can stop practicing now!

Every time we stop, the hospitality is wonderful, but everyone wants to feed us. We argue against more food on this visit as the bikes won't be able to climb more mountains if we keep packing on the calories. One culinary

staple that we must have as we pass through the area, however, is some Poutine. Poutine is French fries topped with fresh cheese curds and covered with brown gravy. We do make a stop at a mom and pop diner during our travels and find that their specialty was to add a bit of BBQ sauce to the gravy as well. It was really good but I could feel my cholesterol jump 30 points while I was eating it!

Our stop for lunch is along our scenic ride by Lake Mégantic. Along the lake shore the town is having a festival of sorts. It appears to be sponsored by Can-Am and there are ATV's everywhere. All the businesses have the four-wheelers in their parking lots and the vehicles are moving in and out and along with traffic. It appears to be a common occurrence. After lunch we take a few minutes to let our food settle and to waddle a bit around the vendor tents at the ATV fair and around the waterfront in an attempt to get some exercise after having all the treats we have eaten today.

As riders we know that riding a motorcycle is a conversation starter and people stop to talk to you when you are parked with your bike. Being in Quebec is no different. But I found that when they did stop to talk it always seemed coincidental that my riding partner, with his fluid French, was not standing next to me to translate! Using my one year of high school French I knew enough to say, "Parle tu Anglais?" And only once was the answer, "Non." Everyone we met was friendly and willing to talk to us even if our conversations were part English, part French, and part hand signs.

Signage, I found, was pretty user friendly. I was able to decipher the men's and ladies' rooms signs pretty readily and most menu interpretations got me fed OK. Road signs are for the most part universal. The STOP sign octagon is the same (and red) and even though it says ARRET, I knew what it meant. A few traffic signs took a couple of seconds to comprehend what they actually wanted me to do, and "Risque de Collision" does sound more formal than our "Deer Crossing." The horizontal traffic lights have always intrigued me. A number of years ago, the first one I encountered, was when my wife said, "I think you just went through a red light."

Back on the road we change directions and head northwest away from the mountain range. In our mirrors the road looks like a straight mountain pass cut through the trees. The views around us now go back to the open rolling pastures and farmlands. Sometimes the fields have peaceful inhabitants

grazing in the afternoon sunlight and sometimes it is the crops or the farmers themselves that catch our view.

A local farmer at home told me that the hay crop is one beneficiary to the exceptionally dry summer we have been experiencing this year. He said those that harvest hay as a crop, have been able to garner a very unusual third "cutting" this year. This fact has been evident throughout our trip as we have seen hundreds of white "shrink-wrapped" rolls of hay in the fields and stacked near the farmers' barns throughout New England and Quebec.

Our day is starting to wane, and as the afternoon sun is dropping lower in the sky we must look back to the border and our New Hampshire accommodations. The plan is that we want to be back to our cabin and off the road before dusk, because as you know, the "risqué de collision" increases as we approach sunset. It is time to say au revoir to the people and places we have enjoyed on this day's ride in Quebec. We have found some exceptional views and roads along the way. And I must also say, "Merci," to my riding partner, tour guide, and interpreter for his companionship as well.

