The Ovens

We should first make a distinction between brick, clay, and stone ovens; the type is determined by the material used for making the dome. The material varies not according to the period, but rather to the wealth of the people and to the availability of suitable raw materials in the surrounding area. In our fieldwork we learned that people usually preferred to use some inexpensive material that was within easy reach.* To build an oven at very little cost, what better material could be found than clay or stone? Village brickyards often provided an inexpensive product, such as bricks from less successful firings. If people had more money, they bought better-quality bricks and often went so far as to import them.

Secondly, we noticed a difference in the sites of ovens: some were outdoors and others indoors, and we believe it is extremely important to define clearly each of these two categories.

The outdoor ovens are completely separate from the house or are set apart in the yard and protected by a simple shelter. In each region studied we noticed that, though the oven was located not far from the dwelling, it was positioned so that the prevailing winds would not blow smoke or sparks towards the house.[1]

Indoor ovens can be found on the ground floor, in the cellar, in a lean-to, or in a detached building, and may be either wholly or partly indoors.[2] They are all connected to a chimney.

We believe that distinguishing between indoor and outdoor ovens reflects domestic realities. Ovens equipped with a chimney serve specific household needs; in providing the room with necessary ventilation, the chimney makes it possible to carry out other tasks. It thus links the oven with the household's indoor life.

In previous studies on rural dwellings in French Canada, the indoor life of the household had always been considered as limited to the inside of the house; everything outside the house was related to outdoor life. We believe that this interpretation does not reflect reality as expressed (either explicitly or implicitly) by our informants. According to our informants, the separate building in which the oven was often located should be considered as a second component of the dwelling, which the whole family occupied and worked in during certain periods of the year. From early spring until late fall a variety of household chores were performed there, such as bread making, washing, cleaning and dressing

*We should point out that, in work camps, cooking was often done on portable steel ovens or over burning embers.

flax, carding, smoking meat, drying vegetables, rolling tobacco, and even preparing and sharing meals.

It appears that during certain times of the year, depending on socio-economic circumstances not yet studied sufficiently, household tasks and leisure activities took place in different buildings. For practical considerations as well as psychological well-being, family routines were patterned in accordance with the weather and the seasons. This change of surroundings, adding as it does a new dimension to the rural way of life, deserves further study and interpretation.

Outdoor Ovens

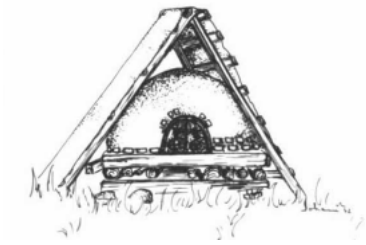
In this section we will be discussing clay, brick, and stone ovens. **Clay ovens** are made by a mudwalling technique and are built in the shape of a horseshoe.[3] These thick-walled ovens make the best bread. Simply constructed, they have a base, insulating material, a hearth, framework, doors, a dome, and a shelter. A description of each of these parts will help us to better appreciate these inexpensive ovens, which were very popular at a time when the need for self-sufficiency on the farm compelled people to use natural materials.

Levelled earth or the flat side of a rock is most often used as a natural foundation for the base, which may be made of wood, stone, or cement. Among the types of wood commonly used, cedar is preferred because it resists rot and is long-lasting.[4] Next in popularity are pine, ash, balsam fir, cypress, tamarack, or black spruce. Four cedar logs used as legs are stood on end on the ground or on large flat stones and are held in place by small joists on the top. A deck made of spruce or ash logs is laid on these joists. Sometimes thick boards are braced to form a cage instead of erecting vertical posts. The platform can also take the form of a footing made of fieldstones held together by clay or mortar. This masonry is laid about one foot (30 cm) down in the ground.[5] As a buffer, sand is inserted between the stones, which are used because they are so readily available and are more fire-resistant than other materials.

Sometimes an insulating material is used between the frame and the hearth. We noted this addition in the description of a number of ovens. A large flat stone formed a base for the hearth and the doors,[6] but these days cast iron[7] or sheet metal[8] are being used instead. It is also possible to apply directly on the deck a layer of clay reinforced with straw,[9] a row of bricks,[10] or stones held together with clay.[11] Some people even use cedar bark or jute as insulation and to prevent the clay from slipping through the spaces in the flooring.[12]

The hearth, or platform, on which the bread dough is laid to cook is generally made of one thickness of blue clay from steep riverbeds or riverbanks that have rich and heavy soil. The choice of the material is important, since it influences the efficiency of the cooking and the durability of the oven. The ideal clay breaks like soap,[13] is granular, blue,[14] crumbly, sticky,[15] and "tough". In the Malbaie region, the clay[16] would be taken from the Clermont[17] slopes. On Île aux Coudres, along the banks of

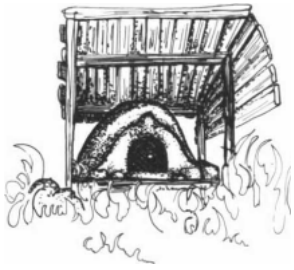
Outdoor Ovens



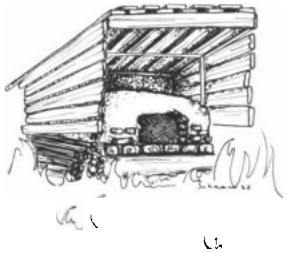
Brick oven
Concession 8, Saint-Honoré (Dubuc county)
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 54

Clay oven
Saint-Simon-de-Rimouski
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives. no. 201

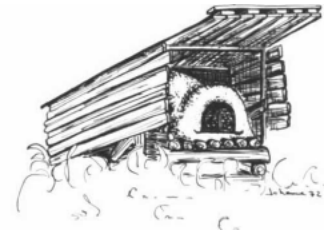
Oven with brick dome covered with fieldstones
Kamouraska
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 194



Clay oven with ornamentation on the clay collar, or ridge
Saint-Laurent concession, Baie-Saint-Paul
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 106



Brick and mortar oven
Saint-Antoine concession, Baie-Saint Paul
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 120



Clay oven
Saint-François concession, Saint-Urbain
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 113

Clay oven with projecting collar and
well-shaped dome
Saint-Louis concession, Saint-Fulgence
(Dubuc county)
Lise and Jean-François Blanchette Collection

the Saguenay River, as well as at Petite-Rivière and in the Lower St. Lawrence region, such clay can be found along the foreshores at low tide.[18] In Beauce, near Scott, the clay can be found near the brickyards.[19] At Sainte-Anne-de-Chicoutimi it can be taken from the Terres Rompues.[20]

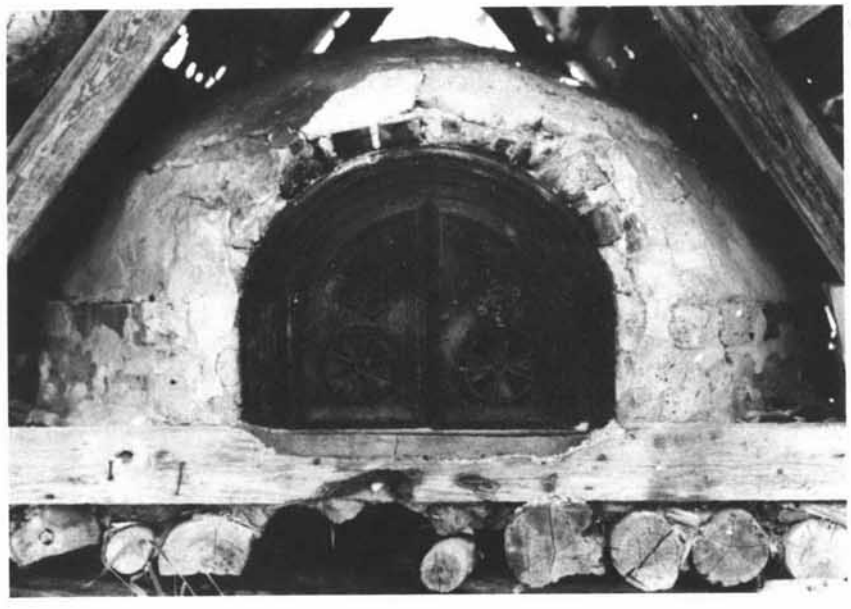
The clay is pounded, worked, or trodden upon in a simple trough, or a horse can be used to tread it under its hooves.[21] Straw is generally added as a binding material, but millet, a type of dry hay called *taigne*,[22] salt hay,[23] horse hair,[24] or cow hair[25] are also used; other additives are sand to dry, thin,[26] and reduce the stickiness of the clay, or perhaps salt to harden it[27] and make the mixture waterproof. Salt is used in the Gaspé Peninsula, in particular. Once the worked soil breaks apart easily in chunks, it is used to build up a generous coat on the surface of the base or on the insulating material, wherever necessary. A good eight inches (20 cm) of this mixture is uniformly applied and allowed to harden naturally. The thicker the covering, the better the oven heat is retained.[28] In some regions, the circumference of the hearth is marked with a belt of quarry stones, which help to retain the clay and support the dome.[29]

We noted a certain diversity in the materials used for the hearth. Sometimes flat fieldstones are held together by a mortar made of quicklime, sand and water, or by clay.[30] Sometimes the hearth is made of bricks, set either on edge or flat, in loose sand or clay. The joints are filled with mortar, clay, sand, or cement.[31] Sometimes there is a double row of bricks.

Once the hearth is completed, the doors (generally made of cast iron) are put on. These doors play an important role in the design and the roughcast of the dome. They are put in place on the front of the hearth even before the framework is erected. The most common models are semicircular in shape[32] and may be described as follows. A shelf 10 inches (25.4 cm) wide forms the threshold of the oven. A frame decorated with simple mouldings and soldered to this shelf forms an arch-shaped opening; the hinges that support the double doors are attached to the front of the opening, one on each side. The doors are held closed by a depression in the threshold. Each of the double doors is decorated with a stylized sheaf design and has small air holes cut out at the bottom. The arch-shaped opening to which the doors are attached slopes inward to form a slightly oblique ledge 5 inches (12.7 cm) wide; this ledge not only supports the flexible branches used for the framework, but also makes it easier to shape the protective ridge, or collar. The doors are 23 inches (58.4 cm) wide and 18 inches (45.7 cm) high on the outside. They are cast in sand moulds, and their place of origin is frequently shown on the frame above the two doors. The inscription, when used, appears like this: BERNIER LOTBINIÈRE or BERNIER. Some doors do not bear any inscription.

This model was not the only one that existed. At the Méthot foundries in Lotbinière another type was made, in the shape of a semipolygon. It is very decorative, the frame made in fine, fluted lines, with leaf-work all around it. Four hinges are used to hold two iron bars

Sometimes a large flat rock is used as a
base for the doors
Saint-Augustin, lac Saint-Jean
*Blanchette Collection, NMC (National
Museums of Canada) 73-25922*

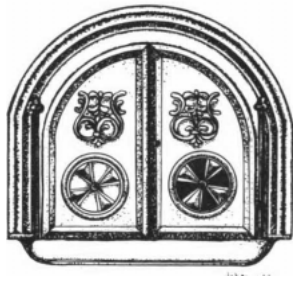


Oven built on a base of logs
Saint-Honoré (Dubuc county)
*Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-25915*

Door resting on a row of bricks
Fortierville (Lotbinière county)
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-26005

The baker's peel and the fire rake are
the most used oven tools
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-25979

An old oven door made of wood and held in place by a long pole
Anse Saint-Jean (Saguenay county)
Blanchette Collection, NMC 73-25973



Style of door called *oeil de bouc* ("goat's eye")
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives

Semipolygonal door
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives

supporting the doors, which are decorated with floral designs and have small air holes at the bottom. The door sill is crescent-shaped. The inscription MÉTHOT, when used, runs along the base. The manufacture of these rare crescent-shaped doors was stopped before that of arched doors.[33]

These two main models of iron doors date from the second half of the nineteenth century, and seem to follow the development of the foundries mentioned:

> The Bernier and Méthot foundries in Lotbinière poured double doors for bread ovens. These are the only two documented examples that I know of, and foundries probably manufactured such doors after 1852.[34]*

It should also be noted that some people mentioned as the manufacturers of their doors the Terreau-Racine foundry in Quebec City or small local foundries, such as the one run by Eucharist Lavoie in Baie-Saint-Paul, among others. It is difficult to determine exactly when oven doors were first manufactured in Quebec. Nevertheless, the information we obtained shows that under the French Regime iron doors did not exist,[35] and that it is possible that the ones we know are the result of a series of adaptations.

Then, and sometimes even now, other types of doors were used to close the ovens. They were constructed very crudely and often consisted of a single wooden door, which was wrapped with wet cloth during the baking. Old metal hoops resting on a flat rock, hewn stones arranged to form a square opening, or old bricks arched or piled side by side were used to make a frame. During the baking, the opening was closed by a wooden door covered with sheet metal and held in place by a wooden beam or perhaps an enormous flat rock.[36] Square, rectangular or semicircular single or double doors of old furnaces were also used, as well as pieces of sheet metal propped up by long poles. In 1918, Georges Bouchard gave the following interesting description:

> The opening of the oven was most often framed by an old bottomless cauldron and old discarded metal wheel-rims from carts. Later on, doors from cast-iron stoves were used. A cauldron lid, a piece of bare wood, or wood covered with sheet metal was used to close the opening.[37]

In this way, even before using foundry products, the *habitant*, or farmer, used his imagination to find appropriate solutions to his everyday problems.

Once the hearth is firmly set on its base, the framework, or form, for the dome is erected. Among the materials used for this framework are young trees, barrels, wet sand heaped in the shape of a dome, layers of turf, and metal cart-wheel rims. This list requires further explanation.

The most common form of framework consists of a lattice of alder branches.[38] If alder is not available, hazel, aspen, or young birch are substituted, depending on which is most abundant. After the wood is

*Unless taken from English texts, quoted passages throughout have been translated from the original French.

worked to make it more pliable, a basic form is constructed; preferably this will be higher at the back, in accordance with the oldest and best technique,[39] to ensure good hot-air circulation in the oven. The ends of the branches of supple wood are stuck through the edge of the hearth until they touch the deck, or the top part of the footing. The framework is first constructed lengthwise (from the rear to the ledge above the doors), and then shorter, older branches are positioned across the width at regular intervals. At this stage the resulting lattice already reveals the final shape of the dome. The bent branches are then attached together at intersecting points, using binding cord, twine, or fishing line.[40] Sometimes this latticework is strengthened by adding cedar bark,[41] gunny sacks,[42] or straw to hold the clay together and to avoid any unevenness on the inside of the dome.

Small barrels that formerly held flour, apples, or molasses were occasionally used as a model for the form.[43] A barrel was laid on the hearth, fixed in position, and several pieces of wood were attached to the sides and covered with strips of turf to complete the required shape.[44]

Occasionally, wet well-compacted sand was used.[45] The sand was used alone, or firewood was piled up "to the right height and then sand was placed on it, higher at the back than at the front".[46] Compressed clay could also be used for the form,[47] as was done by an old craftsman at Cap-au-Corbeau. There were other variations, such as the use of old sleigh-runner fittings covered with chicken wire,[48] or wooden cages rounded out with dried hay.[49]

In spite of all these possibilities, we should stress that alder frames appear to be the most suitable, since clay domes contract slightly, due to the evaporation of water, as they dry out in the air. If the frame is made of flexible wood, it will easily withstand shrinkage and thus avoid the cracking that sometimes occurs with metal frames.[50]

The clay used for the dome is chosen according to the same criteria as those for the hearth. A blue clay, which is handled the same way as pottery clay and is combined with a filler, such as vegetable or mineral binding material, has the best texture. Blocks of clay combined with hay or sand are applied first to the sides and to the ledge over the doors, and then along the base of the frame. Lumps weighing between 15 and 25 pounds (6.8 and 11.3 kg) are shaped and used to cover the framework. They are laid with alternating joints[51] and are levelled off and smoothed out by hand. Special attention is given to the thickness of the walls, which should be between six and eight inches (15.2 and 20.3 cm) at the base. The top part of the dome is thinned for the sake of balance, but it is thickened at the front edge to form the ridge. This more-or-less pronounced ridge forms a collar around the doors. It acts as a barrier to the flame when the oven is lit,[52] and reinforces the structure around the door.[53] In certain regions, as in Charlevoix and Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean, the ridges sometimes have a clay ornament, such as a small figurehead,[54] or special conical finishing touches,[55] and sometimes they bear the date of construction.[56] The last stage is the smoothing of the dome: all the joints are filled in[57] and the surface is either worked by hand or tapped with a mallet. The rear part is

A metal hoop can be used for the door frame
Saint-Gabriel concession, Sainte-Marie (Beauce county)
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-25996

Framework of young branches for the dome
Marius Barbeau Collection 1936,
NMC 81097

evened out, and the oven becomes smooth and shiny with the addition of a fine clay glaze as a sealer.[58] Sometimes the dome is protected with a layer of chalk or mortar.[59]

Then there is a wait of several days to allow the clay to dry and harden slowly before lighting the first fire. The drying period lasts at least eight to fifteen days.[60] The best results are obtained by allowing the oven to dry naturally, since sudden drying would cause it to crack. The oven is fired progressively by means of repeated small fires until the wood framework breaks apart and the clay becomes brick-red on the inside.[61] The oven is fired in the same way as a potter fires his pottery. Little by little, the dome contracts slightly and hairline cracks appear here and there. This is no cause for alarm: "As the cracks appear they are filled in with clay."[62] Diderot, in the eighteenth century, emphasized the special precautions to be taken during the drying process:

> We notice that the best ovens are those wholly constructed of clay and then allowed to harden gradually, in stages, until a very hot fire vitrifies the clay. In these ovens the bread bakes easily, perfectly, and for little cost, especially when the dome is not too high, when care has been taken to make the sides of the dome sufficiently thick, and when the cracks have been adequately repaired.[63]

Because of the possibility of damage in bad weather, the clay oven is protected by a wooden or sheet-metal shelter. This may be made of cedar, waste timber, or sheet-metal shingles curved over the dome, with the sides made of overlapping vertical boards.[64] The shape used varied: triangular, semicircular, or inverted U-shaped; sometimes the shelter had a slanted roof. In the Gaspé we noticed that shelters were not always used. A number of ovens were left exposed to the weather.[65] As we have already mentioned, the addition of salt to the clay makes the oven weatherproof to some extent. In order to protect the ground from the fire, a small terrace made of flat stones or old bricks would often be laid in front of the oven.[66]

In conclusion, clay ovens cost almost nothing and are quickly built—it takes only one full day, once the base is constructed. They are also very durable.

Exterior **brick ovens** are regular in shape and have simple lines. The oblong shape of the brick does not give the craftsman much scope for using his imagination. These ovens are more costly to build, requiring an exceptionally solid base made of stone, cement, or heavy wood, and a particularly resistant type of framework for the dome.

The platform is erected in the same way as for clay ovens. The hearth is made of brick rows, the bricks lying on edge or flat, and held together by mortar made of quicklime, sand, and water, or by ordinary cement. Occasionally fieldstones are used and covered with mortar,[67] or sometimes the bricks are coated with clay.[68] Something stronger than alder branches is needed for the framework: wooden arches can be cut to make an appropriately large dome; the dome can be constructed of two-by-fours;[69] a framework can be made of halved metal hoops;[70] or clay can be built up to the desired size and shape.[71] The bricks follow the line of the

Shelter known as the oven shed
Saint-Pierre concession, Bagotville
(Dubuc county)
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 74-14539

Clay oven with an ornamented projecting collar, or ridge
Saint-Laurent concession, Baie-Saint-Paul
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 106

Clay oven found in Charlevoix. On the collar of the oven are the remains of a clay figurine made and put there for the amusement of the children
Sainte-Mathilde
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 86

domed support and are positioned flat, one on top of the other. At the bottom of the oven they are aligned on both sides, but as they reach the top of the dome they are set wider apart, as in the shape of a fan. The edge of the bricks gives the inside a uniform curve. Small pebbles and mortar are slipped between the bricks to preserve the shape of the arch and to fill in the joints.[72]

> Because the mould is curved, the sides of the bricks on the inside of the oven are almost touching, while on the outside they have larger spaces between them; these spaces will be filled with mortar mixed with small pieces of brick.[73]

The dome is coated with one thickness of mortar, clay, cement, or whitewash to preserve the brick and keep in the heat.[74] For greater protection, a wall of stones and mortar up to one foot (30 cm) thick is sometimes built against the sides of the dome.[75] In some areas, the oven is enclosed by a structure of large stones, and a clear idea of the appearance and actual size of the dome can only be obtained by looking inside the opening of the door and examining the inside of the oven.[76] A brick wall is often erected to form a façade. The doors, as well as the shelters, are similar to those used for clay ovens. Some brick ovens have an air hole either at the rear or at the top of the dome. This characteristic of both clay and brick ovens is rarely found in the Charlevoix region, but is common on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River and in the Lower St. Lawrence. The durability of these ovens depends upon the quality of the wet mortar used for the joints.

We were unable to find much information on **stone ovens**. Our fieldwork led us to old brick and clay ovens, and we found it most unusual that we did not find any specimens of stone ovens. Stone ovens date back many years, as there are references to them in the notarial records of the French Regime. In 1667, the notary Bénigne Basset described the estate of the late Jean Cicot and noted the presence of a stone oven: "A large chimney wall with its substructure also in masonry, and a decrepit stone oven. . . ."[77] On 27 March 1677, a contract "was made between the parties to the effect that the said lessor would make on the said leased concession, during the said lease, and construct, a chimney of masonry with a well-built stone oven."[78] Records of the notary Anthoine Adhémar, dated 5 February and 11 April 1699, contain two other references to limestone ovens.[79]

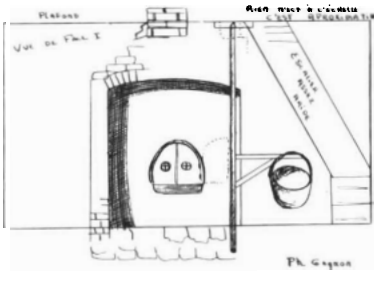
These records confirm the existence of stone ovens, but do not explain why they disappeared when others constructed so long ago managed to survive the passage of time. Were they very good for baking? How long did they last? How important were they? Our informants had very little to say on the subject. Furthermore, it is all too easy to mistake a brick or clay oven protected by a stone structure for one that has a skilfully constructed dome of quarry stones!

A brick wall often forms the façade of brick ovens
Chambord (Roberval county)
Blanchette Collection, NMC 73-25949

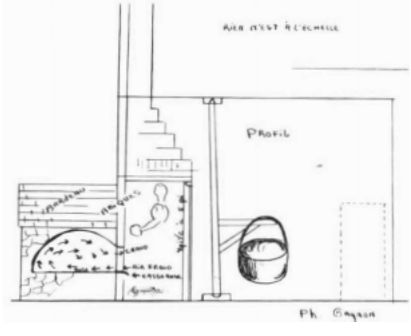
An oven with a brick dome, its sides and front protected by rough masonry
Kamouraska region
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 194

Oven with a brick dome, whose sides are protected by a wall of mortared fieldstones
Kamouraska
Blanchette Collection, NMC 74-14626

The "Old Grey House" and its semi-indoor oven. The smaller house and the oven were built about 1850 and the large house in 1870.
Photograph of a pastel drawing by Mr. Philippe Gagnon, Chicoutimi, May 1972



Front of the semi-indoor oven in the "Old Grey House"
Freehand sketch by Mr. Philippe Gagnon, Chicoutimi, May 1972
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 32A



Cross-section of the same oven; its doors are set in the backplate of the fireplace
Freehand sketch by Mr. Philippe Gagnon, Chicoutimi, May 1972
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 32B

Indoor Ovens

In our travels throughout the various regions of Quebec, we observed some very old ovens that are still standing, largely because of their location. In the cellar or on the main floor, partly or wholly indoors, and surrounded by stonework, these ovens are all connected to large fireplace chimneys, and their doors always open on to the main living area of the house or building in which they are located. There, baker and bread are protected from the weather.

The dates on catalogued models start from the middle of the eighteenth century and continue until the beginning of the twentieth.[80] The various parts and materials differ very little from those of the outdoor ovens described above. Nevertheless, we noted a regularity in the base, which is almost always a footing of large stones held together with mortar. Occasionally the base is constructed of squared timbers. The hearth is made of flat stones,[81] bricks,[82] or simply compressed clay.[83] The dome is basically an assembly of bricks or, very rarely, a symmetrical layering of clay blocks.[84] The ridge over the opening merges with the wall of the chimney, and the doors are set into the backplate or sides of the fireplace. The dome will thus be located behind the fireplace[85] or on either side of it.[86] In both cases it is necessary to reach the oven through the fireplace. There are some exceptions, such as ovens that are connected to the chimney by a pipe. The oven is then situated right beside the fireplace and has a separate opening, thus providing easier access to it.[87] Although in former times chimneys were often made of mud, those which have survived were made of fieldstones held together with mortar.

The Various Uses of the Oven

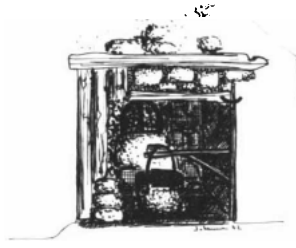
Bread ovens were, of course, used chiefly for baking bread, and we describe the technique in detail in a later chapter. But it is incorrect to assume that the bread oven was used solely to produce batches of loaves. Depending on seasonal requirements, it was used for a multitude of purposes. We obtained an enormous amount of information concerning these ovens, and the subject continues to arouse our curiosity. If only the ovens themselves could talk—they would have countless stories to tell!

After a baking session, it takes the oven at least twenty-four hours to cool down.[88] In former times, this lower temperature was used for different types of cooking. One of the favourite dishes was the pot of pork and beans, which was placed at the back of the oven, where the beans simmered slowly, filling the air with their almond-like aroma. During the holiday season, the oven was used for cooking *tourtières*,* pot pies, ground-meat pies, and other meats, as well as dessert pies, cookies, buns,

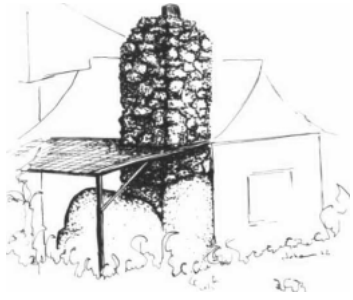
*The term *tourtière* is commonly used to describe the well-known French-Canadian meat pie. Traditionally, in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, however, a *tourtière* is actually more like a deep-dish layered meat-and-potato pie.

Indoor Ovens

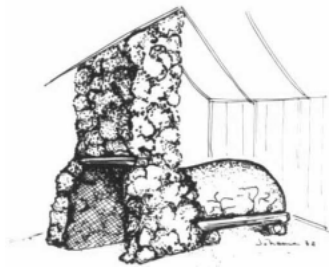
A detached building with oven
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 104 (exterior)



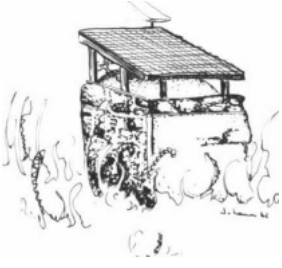
Although its dome is outdoors, the oven can be opened from inside the building by doors in the backplate of the fireplace
Saint-Hilarion (Charlevoix county)
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 104 (interior)



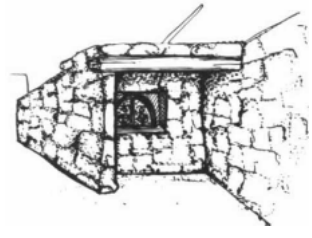
Semi-indoor oven in a building adjoining the house
La Baleine, Île aux Coudres
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 141



Oven in a detached building
Saint-Gabriel concession, Baie-Saint-Paul
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 142



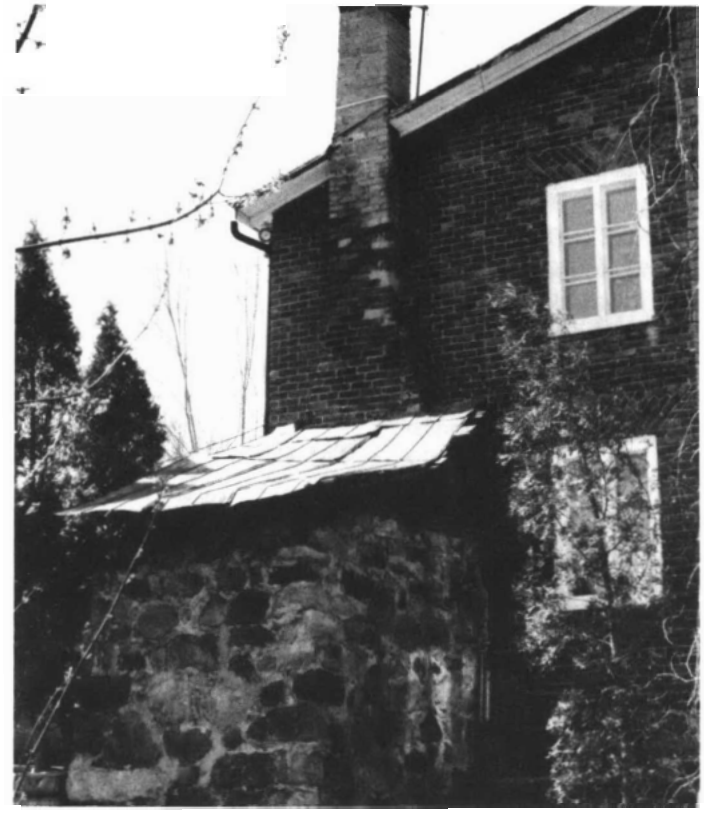
Semi-indoor oven in a detached building
Sainte-Hélène, Kamouraska
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 196



Oven located in the cellar
Saint-Laurent, Île d'Orléans
Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Archives, no. 148

Semi-indoor oven forming part of a detached building
Saint-Hilarion (Charlevoix county)
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-25993

Small detached building housing an oven
Saint-Gabriel concession, Baie-Saint-Paul
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 73-26061



Semi-indoor oven on the ground floor
Chicoutimi-Nord
Blanchette Collection,
NMC 74-14548

Semi-indoor oven forming part of a
building adjoining the house
Saint-Jean-Port-Joli
Blanchette Collection
NMC 74-14616

raisin cakes, and a large variety of fruit cobblers, such as the blueberry cobbler made in the Saguenay region during the summer months.[89]

As well as for cooking, the still-warm oven, with all its burning embers removed, was used as a sterilizer to disinfect the chicken, duck and goose feathers used for stuffing mattresses, pillows, or cushions. The feathers were first washed and stuffed into cotton or gunny sacks, and then dried in the oven for five or six days. The odours and parasites frequently found in the quills were killed by the heat.[90] During periods of illness, it was also a common practice to disinfect the clothing of the sick, as well as their dishes and straw mattresses.[91] This odd combination of culinary and medical functions bears eloquent witness to the transforming power of heat generated by an oven. The oven serves as a mediator for the necessary transformations.

At harvest time, the task of drying the flax was made easier by placing it in the oven prior to hackling it.[92] Bundles of flax were laid out on small iron bars to prevent them from becoming scorched on the hearth.[93] The bark protecting the fibre dried out and was thus easier to remove. "I can tell you that when we had flax to hackle for making thread and cloth, as soon as the bread was out we put the flax in the oven and that made it ready to hackle."[94] In *La Corvée*, published in 1917, the author refers to that particular use of the oven: "The old folks did not want to hackle hundreds of bundles of flax without help when drying them in the bread ovens."[95]

The oven was also used as a substitute for a drying room for fulling homespun cloth. Strips of wet cloth were rolled up and placed in the warm oven. The fulling was accomplished by the heat, and the weave gradually tightened up.[96] The oven was also used for drying herbs, such as parsley and savory, which were then used throughout the winter.[97] Carpenters also took advantage of the warm oven to dry out their wood; this practice is still common at L'Anse-Saint-Jean in the Saguenay.[98]

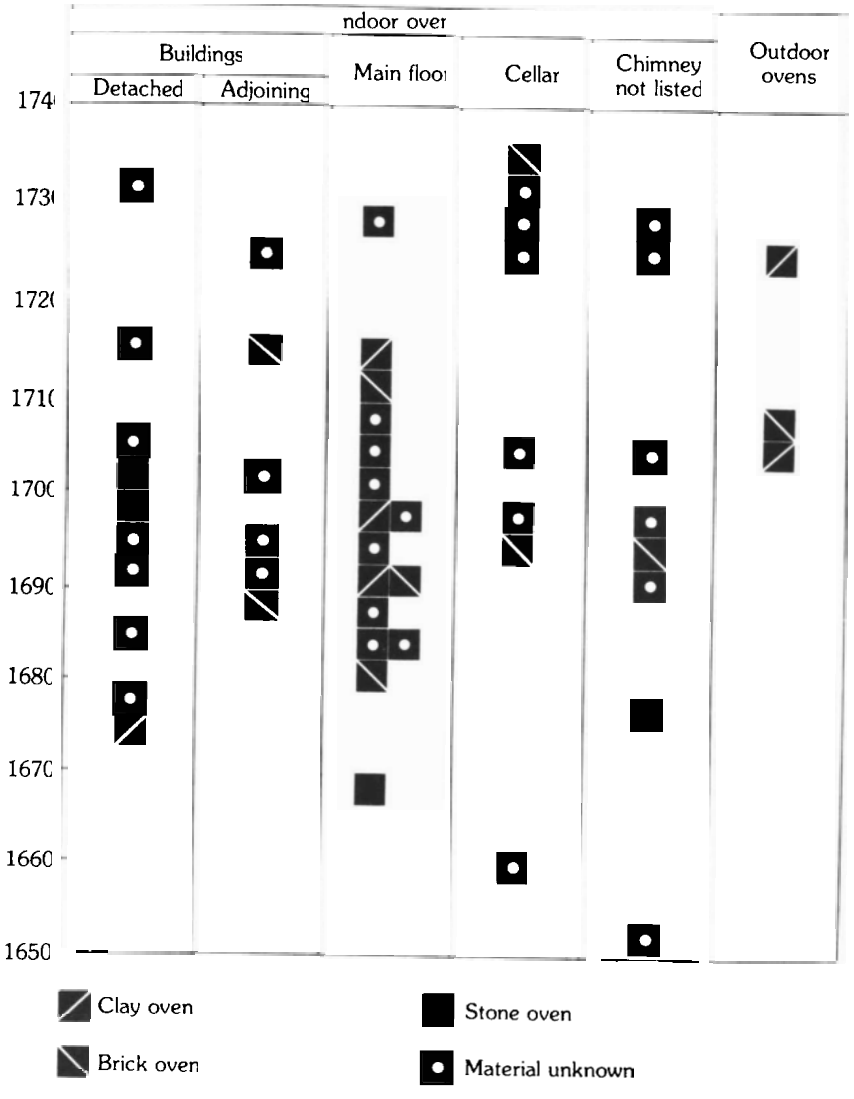
In the absence of a smokehouse, many *habitants* attached supports or iron hooks above the oven doors. They placed damp sawdust on the hearth, lighted it, and left the doors ajar. Burning slowly, the fire gave off smoke, which cured meat previously coated with molasses (giving it colour) and sprinkled with aromatic herbs. Sometimes the meat was left to soak in brine for a couple of weeks before smoking.[99]

Other, more ordinary tasks were also done in the oven after the baking was finished. Some women, for example, browned flour for stews,[100] while others stacked wood in the oven for the next baking.[101]

Tables

The two tables that follow sum up our archival research and our fieldwork. Table 1 shows the sporadic mention of ovens during the period under study, that is, from 1650 to 1740. A number of factors influenced the components of this table, since, as we mentioned at the beginning of this study, the notarial records give incomplete information with regard to the occurrence of these ovens. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions.

Table 1
Occurrence of Ovens in Notarial Records, 1650 to 1740



The dates cited in the table correspond to the year the oven was noted and not the year in which it was constructed.[102]

However, this table does show all the various types of ovens that existed at the beginning of the eighteenth century. We found a reference to an outdoor clay oven in a farming lease dated 1704, between Pre LeClerc and Jacques Gervais, with the following details: ". . . and an oven on this land made of clay, simply erected, separate from the house, and exposed to the air".[103] In 1709 an outdoor brick oven was noted: "A brick oven fitted with an iron ring at its opening and situated in the yard of the said house. . . ."[104]

We also find indoor ovens housed in detached buildings. In 1673, a reference was made to such ovens: "A little square building made of wood stacked one piece above the other, 17 feet long and 16 feet wide, with its floor made of planks of hewn timber. The chimney, constructed of masonry from the ground to the beam, with its foundation and the rest of the said chimney of mud-walling, and an adjoining clay oven at ground level. Its door closes with a bolt, and brass hooks and hinges, but no lock or key."[105] In May 1692, an agreement was reached between Louis Prat, on behalf of Louis Jolliet, and André Coutron to build a bakehouse, "and also to repair the oven, to reduce it, and to cover it with boards to protect it from water damage . . . and to finish building the chimney for the oven and raise it to the necessary height. . . ."[106] Later, in 1699, this same type of oven was reported in a rental lease: ". . . to have the lessor build an oven for baking bread with a capacity of about two and one-half minots next autumn and then to build a small building to be used as a bakery, closed and covered, next spring at the latest, after the next seeding. . . ."[107] The minot was an old French measure for grain;[108] it indicated the quantity of flour needed for one batch of bread and was thus used as a reference for the dimensions of the oven.[109]

Ovens situated in buildings adjoining the house appeared in several places. A sales contract for a house and property, dated 14 August 1700, specifies "a two-storey stone lean-to with oven and chimney that the said seller has constructed".[110]

Ovens on the main floor of a dwelling are also recorded, and one description dated 1698 is found in a lease that states that "the lessee agrees to have the ruins of the clay chimney belonging to the said house destroyed, and to build a new one of stone and clay on the same spot, together with a clay oven".[111]

Finally, various notarial documents list ovens located in the cellar. In a document dated January 1727, we have the details of an agreement between a certain Mr. Lapalme and Vincent Rorant in which we note the requirement to construct an oven in a cellar: ". . . to make and supply all the materials necessary for the construction of a thirty-foot-square building as agreed. . . . An oven in the cellar with a small chimney connected to the large chimney. . . ."[112]

When all the inventories from the French Regime have been examined we will be able to determine the chronological trends and possibly the geographical variants.

Our fieldwork led us to examine 113 ovens; and our informants were able to establish accurately the date of construction for 99 of them. The location of the ovens, and the effect this had on their durability, was the prime factor influencing our data. Very old ovens have survived because they were built indoors. Since there are a limited number of these, we have very little information on their occurrence. Some of those examined were constructed in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Table 2).

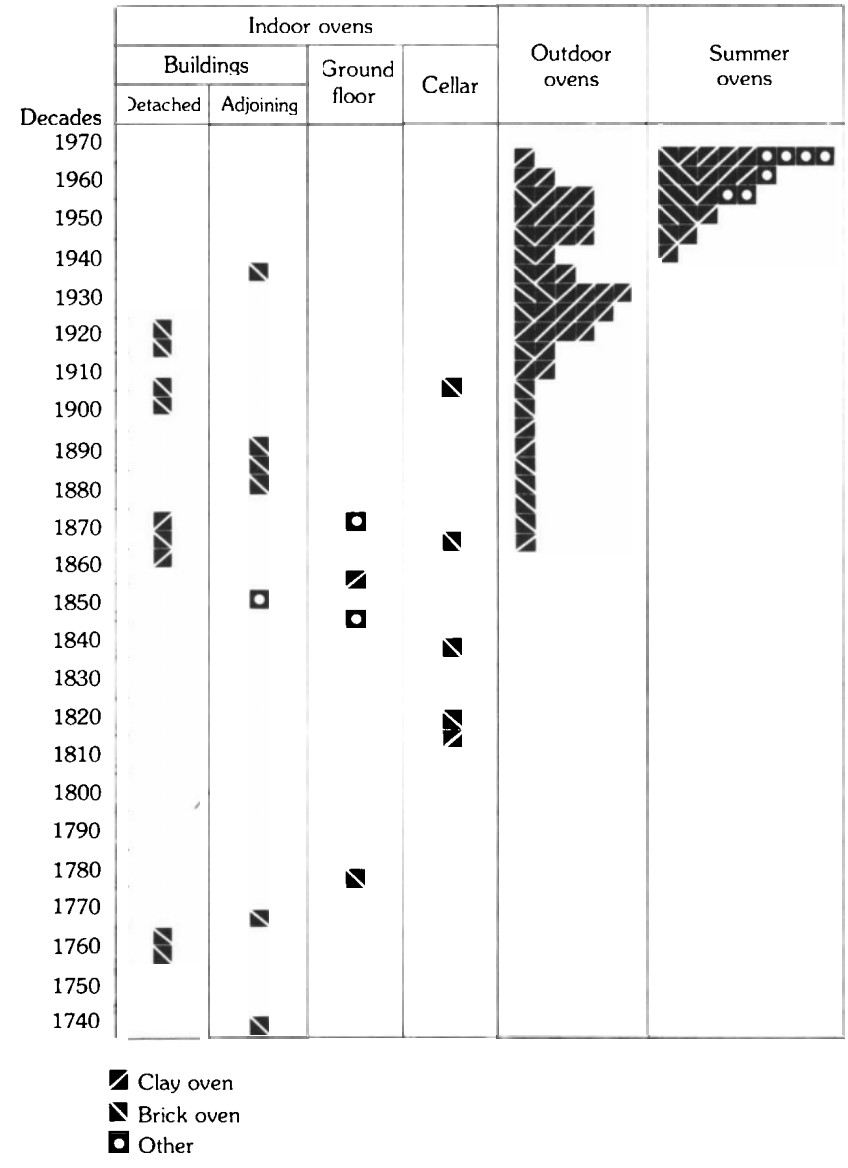
More exposed to the weather than the indoor ovens, outdoor ovens[113] survived for a shorter period of time. On the other hand, we found enough of them to be able to be more explicit about their importance from 1920 on. Table 2 shows an increase in the number of these ovens between 1920 and 1935. This increase corresponds to the beginning of a period of self-sufficiency that reached its high point around 1930. This phenomenon is seen not only in the country but also in the villages and small provincial towns. In the latter, bread was no longer bought from the baker but was baked at home in wood-burning stoves or in ovens built especially for this purpose.

In Table 2 we see that few ovens were constructed in the 1940s, but that there was an increase in the 1950s. We learned from our informants that the cost of chemical fertilizers and farming equipment, which had become increasingly important at that time, made it necessary to save money in other areas. This may seem a strange reason for building an oven. It is true that many housewives used their stove ovens, but the excessive heat caused by baking four or five batches on the same day forced some to use an outdoor oven for bread baking. The problem of baking the twenty or so large loaves required weekly was solved by the outdoor oven, which could bake them all at once. The bread oven is therefore closely connected with the family diet,[114] and as long as bread remains the most important food, the use of this oven to bake it in permits a significant saving and ensures a better organization of household tasks.

Finally, we should say a few words about the ovens that we have grouped under the name of "summer ovens". They are all located outdoors and include ovens that are used only occasionally during the summer, either for personal needs or to make a little extra money during the tourist season. We have also included in this category several ornamental ovens that have never been used for cooking. All of these summer ovens seem to us to express a feeling of pride in old traditions and a need for cultural identification.

In fact, the bread oven may be considered as an element of nationalism. It is very frequently used as a characteristic symbol of the people's way of life. A look at paintings and sculptures, as well as other works of art, reveals that artists often choose the oven as a central theme. At Saint-Jean-Port-Joli for instance, the local artists offer us a wide choice of miniature ovens skilfully sculpted in wood. The sketches of Edmond-J. Massicotte and Horatio Walker or the canvases of Yves Lemelin, Blanche Bolduc, and many others often feature a woman baking bread in an oven. Also, in the Saint-Jean-Baptiste parade, the people are always proud to

Table 2
Ovens Observed during Summer 1972 Field Trip, Showing Year of Construction



Clay oven with a clapboard roof-shelter;
built at Saint-Ambroise in the summer of
1971 to commemorate the past
Lac Saint-Jean
Blanchette Collection,
NMC AC-21-74-2

A Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day parade-float
with bread making as its theme
Chambord, lac Saint-Jean
Archives de la Société historique
du Saguenay, Chicoutimi

convey the importance of the old oven and batch of bread by means of an allegorical float. This practice is still in vogue today. During the summer of 1972, for example, we came across three villages that had constructed a bread oven for a special celebration—Saint-Pierre-les-Becquets for Saint-Jean-Baptiste day, Rivière-Ouelle for its tricentennial celebrations, and Saint-Séverin for its centennial.

Typological Considerations

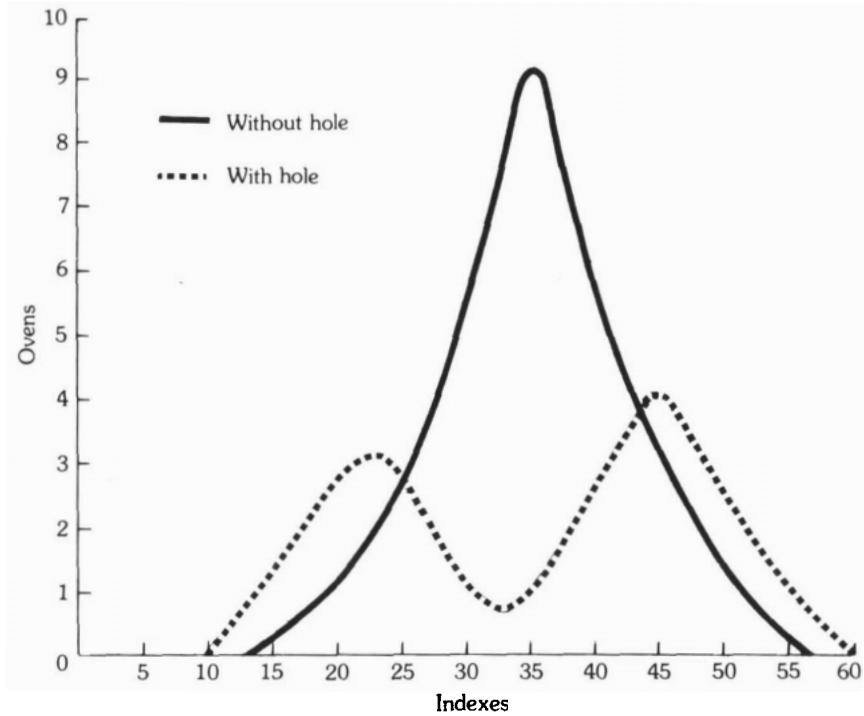
Let us return for a moment to a number of technical and typological considerations. In the tables, we classified ovens according to their location and material. A typology of the oven should include more than that; it should take into account both the shape of the dome and its material, the type of shelter, the location of the oven, and what the oven is used for.

Of all these considerations, shape is the most important, since in the material culture, as Henry Glassie[115] so ably demonstrated, this is the most traditional characteristic; it remains the same from one place to another and from one period to the next. Thus, the inner shape of the dome always increases gradually in height, from the door to the rear of the oven. However, this elevation should be moderate, neither too high nor too low in relation to the size of the opening, so as to permit good hot-air circulation in the oven; Diderot pointed this out in his *Encyclopédie*. We wanted to check the variability of this factor in the ovens constructed in Quebec. In order to do so, we calculated what we shall call the index of circulation, using the information in our technical data, which gave the exact external and internal dimensions of the ovens. Taking the maximum internal height of the dome as 100, this index represents the part of the dome that rises above the height of the opening. It is obtained by the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{internal height of the dome} - \text{height of the opening}}{\text{internal height of the dome}} \times 100$$

In this way we found that the average index of circulation in all the ovens we examined was 37. In other words, the average oven had a dome measuring 100 units in height and an opening measuring 63; therefore the dome was 37 units higher than the height of the opening. We then took this further. After noting that one-third of the ovens had a draft hole at the rear, we wondered if this indicated that an old technique had been lost, and, if so, to what degree. It would appear, in fact, that the technique of forming the traditional shape has been lost, as has people's confidence in it. According to the old people we spoke to, the real oven builders took care to give the dome the correct elevation and thus did not have to make a hole in it.[116] We checked these statements mathematically by plotting on a graph the circulation indexes of ovens both with and without holes. The results show a pronounced curve for the ovens without holes and a wavy line with a crest at each end for those with holes. We therefore have an

Index of Hot-Air Circulation
in the Oven



average index of 36 for ovens without holes and two indexes for ovens with holes, one lower than 23 and one higher than 45. Although fewer than one hundred ovens were studied to establish this curve, we can assume that a hole was necessary for ovens with too little or too much elevation.

The outer shape of the ovens depends on the materials available. Brick domes always have the same unvaried shape. Clay ovens allow an alternative—the dome may be continuous from the door to the back of the oven, or it may be interrupted by a ridge over the door. This ridge probably came into being with the appearance of doors having a wide ledge around the door frame. A stone structure is sometimes used to protect the oven; this gives it a different appearance but does not change the shape of the dome itself.

Outdoor ovens sometimes have shelters that are slanted towards the back of the oven, and are thus similar to those used for semi-indoor ovens. Their height is functional, as these roofs provide a place to hang meat for smoking and serve as a shelter when a batch of loaves is put in the oven. As for the shapes of other roofs, we were unable to discover the reasons for their variability.

The location of the ovens varies greatly. Neither our archival research nor our fieldwork indicated any geographical concentration; both indoor and outdoor ovens are found in all the regions studied. As for

their date of origin, the archival records are still too sketchy to allow us to determine when there was a concentration of a given type of oven.

In the study conducted during the summer of 1972, we attempted to relate the utilization of the ovens to their location on rural land. A careful examination of the data leads us to assume that these two factors—physical location and utilization—have a direct connection with the socio-economic organization of country life. We have attempted to demonstrate the interrelationship of these various aspects by showing how the oven is linked to other culinary and domestic activities.

The Oven Builders

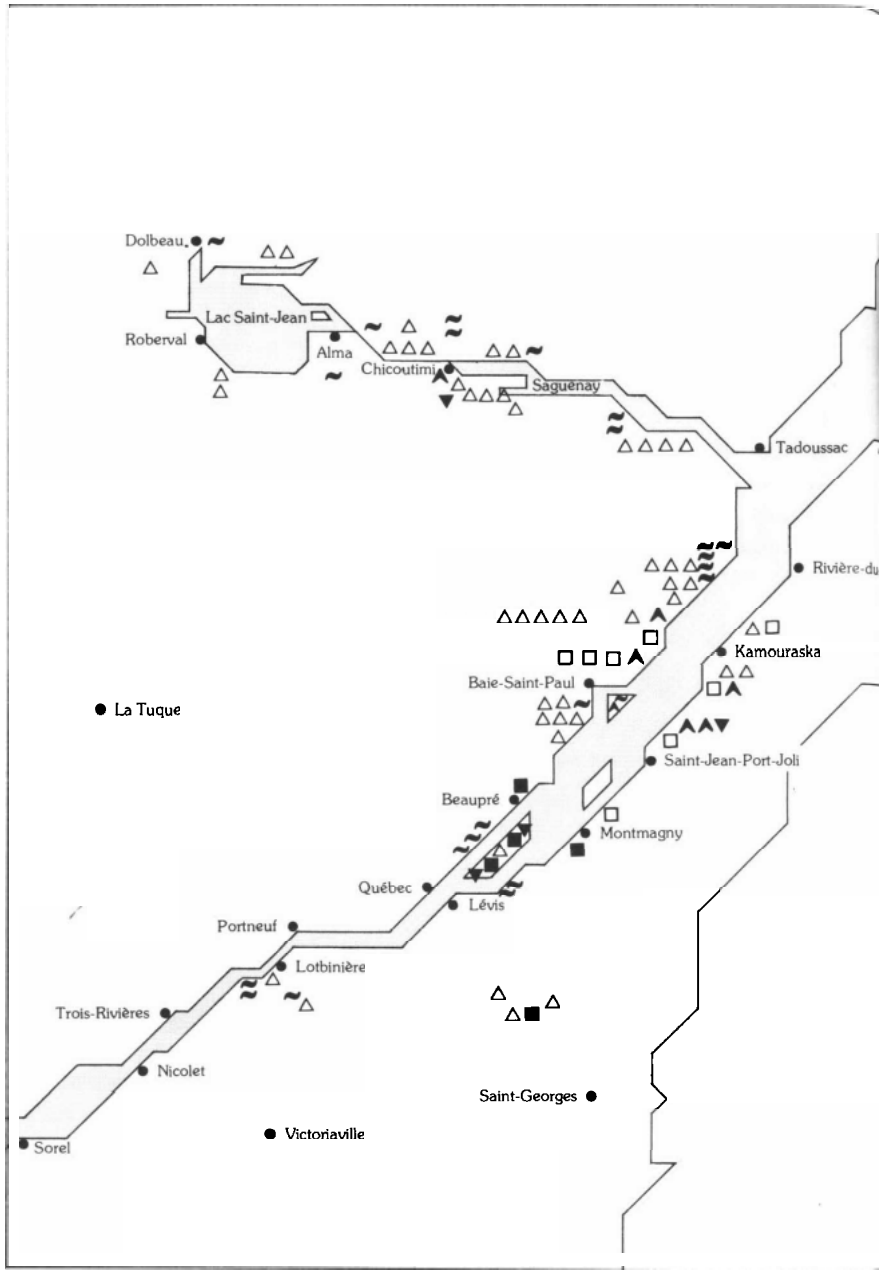
The construction of bread ovens requires a precise technique that only a good craftsman is able to master. Oven building is more a craft than a trade. In general, brick ovens are the only ones built by skilled workers—bricklayers. Their construction does not give rise to the abundance of celebrations, linguistic expressions, and metaphors that surround the building of clay ovens. For every term or expression related to brick ovens, there may be ten for clay ovens.

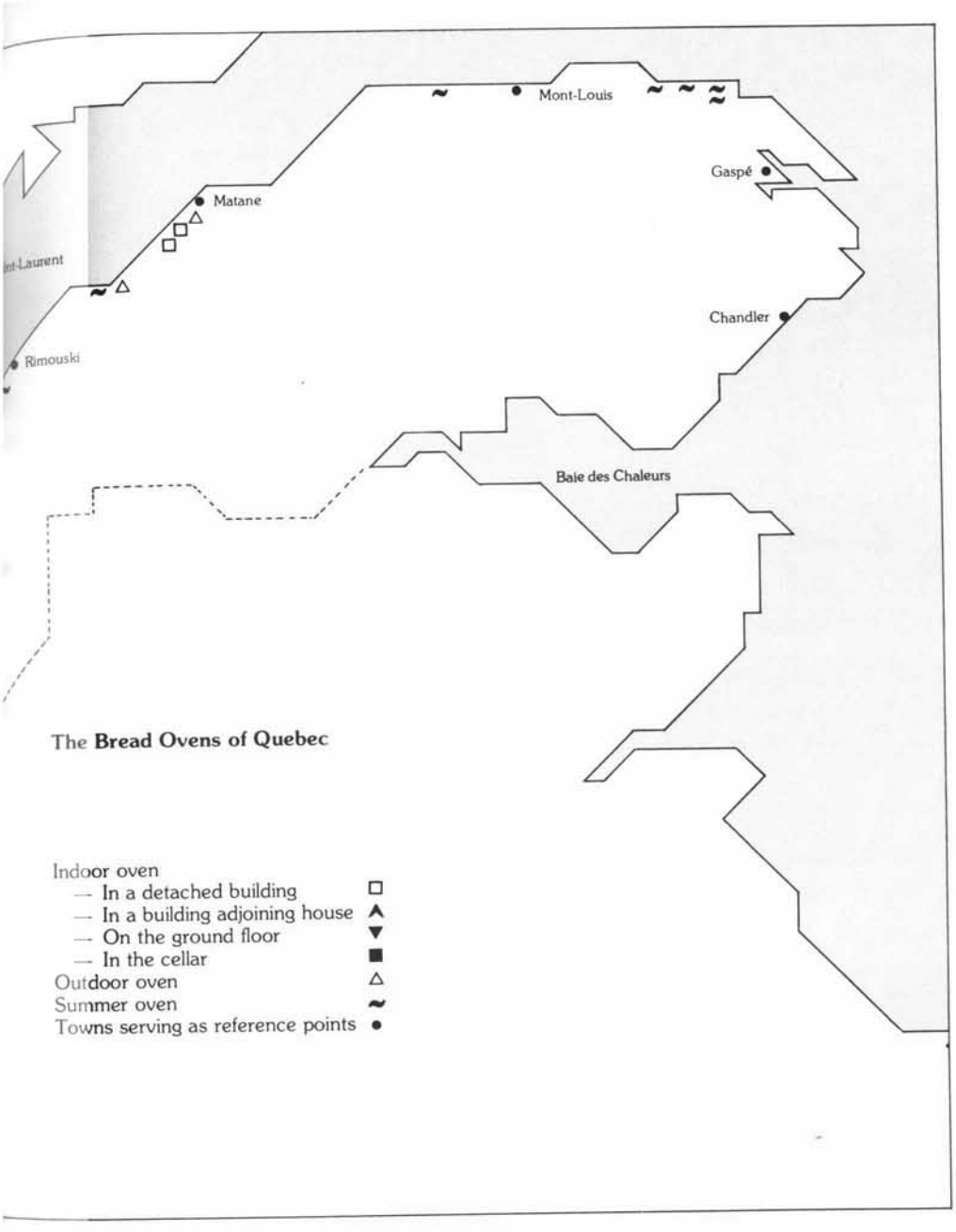
The building of a clay oven calls for a true craftsman. He may be a specialist in oven building, known either locally or throughout the region; such a man was Alexis, called Le Trotteur, whose reputation lives in the memories of the people of the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean and Charlevoix regions. In some areas, people remember where certain oven builders used to live: in Baie-Sainte-Catherine, they speak of Motté Dufour; in Chambord, Onésime Laforêt, nicknamed "Beau Poil"; in Pointe-Bleue, "Léon des Bonnes Âmes"; in Saint-Charles-Borromée, Alexis Bradette; in Saint-Henri-de-Taillon, Ernest Tremblay; in Saint-Urbain, the brothers Élie and François Lavoie; and so on.

In addition, there are all the anonymous craftsmen who know how to work the clay with care, who discover its special qualities, and who create objects that come alive. The technical knowledge possessed by farmers easily enables them to become good oven builders, and they are eager to describe, in their own colourful language, how they use the various materials. They provided us with a wealth of comparisons, expressions and cultural manifestations pertaining to the existence of the bread oven.

The vocabulary used is taken from daily life. These ovens and the process of building them give rise to particularly expressive forms of speech: "People . . . also like to use striking images in their conversation, metaphors that reinforce the expression of their ideas."[117] The craftsmen who build clay ovens are always making comparisons with the various things they see around them. Because of their concrete vocabulary, they turn to metaphors taken from their intimate knowledge of nature and from their own experience. Thus, they would say that the task of packing down the clay is like the work of swallows building their nest.[118] The craftsmen who shape the oven continually compare the working of the clay to bread making; they handle the clay as if it were bread dough, and speak of

An oven-builder, Polycarpe Bouchard
Marius Barbeau Collection, 1937,
NMC 83519


Dolbeau
Lac Saint-Jean
Roberval
Alma
Chicoutimi
Saguenay
Tadoussac
Rivière-du
Kamouraska
Baie-Saint-Paul
La Tuque
Saint-Jean-Port-Joli
Beaupré
Montmagny
Québec
Lévis
Portneuf
Lotbinière
Trois-Rivières
Nicolet
Saint-Georges
Victoriaville
Sorel



The **Bread Ovens of Quebec**

Indoor oven
— In a detached building □
— In a building adjoining house ▲
— On the ground floor ▼
— In the cellar ■
Outdoor oven △
Summer oven ~
Towns serving as reference points •

"loaves" of clay. They say that the oven itself looks like a large loaf of bread.[119] They describe the parts of the oven as parts of living beings, speaking of the oven's legs, skeleton, carcass, flanks, hips, back, belly, paunch, rump, and mouth. They even go so far as to say that "the oven vomits, or throws up, when smoke escapes through its doors".[120]

The construction of a clay oven also gives rise to spontaneous celebrations and activities—singsongs, dances, children's games, the modelling of symbolic animals on the clay ridge of the oven, and even the "baptism" of the oven.

In describing the unsurpassed skill of Alexis, Félix-Antoine Savard related the excitement and joy that surrounded the work of this craftsman: "Mud-spattered children clapped their hands", and as soon as the first baking proved the quality of the oven, "there was endless dancing and merrymaking."[121] Children would imitate the work of the craftsman by making little clay loaves and even miniature ovens that could cook just as well as the real ones.[122] Our informant told us that when he was very young, about eight or nine years old, he made himself a small clay oven with a wooden base and an alder-branch frame. His mother placed small balls of dough, made especially for him, in sardine cans, and the baking was as successful as in the large oven.[123] But all this was only part of the greater joy expressed by families as they celebrated their new oven by "baptizing" it. The oven was appropriately toasted all round and blessed by a local priest,[124] and friends and neighbours were invited to a party to mark the joyous event.[125]

The animal theme so often used in Quebec handicraft also appears on clay ovens. Some craftsmen sculpted small clay animals on the ridge of the oven as a decoration or finishing touch, or even simply to amuse the children:

> In thé old days our craftsmen were sufficiently interested in the animal world around them to draw inspiration from it as well as to use various themes that were often both striking and amusing.[126]

In Charlevoix and Saguenay the duck and beaver are used. Alexis le Trotteur amused himself by sculpting these animals on the ridge of his ovens,[127] and other Charlevoix craftsmen used the figure of a duck, which supposedly watched over the various comings and goings to and from the oven.[128] These symbolic animals are smashed during the "baptism", when the oven is used for the first time. For this reason, only traces of the sculpted figures can now be seen on the collars of bread ovens, as in the drawings at the bottom of page 23.

This animal theme also finds expression in the comparison of the dome of the oven to a crouching beaver,[129] once again confirming that "in the popular imagination, the animal world constituted a huge reservoir of metaphorical terminology."[130]