

“The bread oven is not merely a bread oven.”

This may seem a strange opening remark for a work entitled *The Bread Ovens of Quebec*, but we wish to stress that these ovens are used not only for baking bread, but for other culinary and domestic purposes as well. Furthermore, as a material product of a particular culture, the bread oven is also related to the economic, social, linguistic, psychological, religious, and other cultural subsystems.*

Our study seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of combining research on the material culture with other elements making up the cultural whole. Far from being simply an object, the bread oven reflects a technique, a physical environment, a standard of living, a spatial organization, indeed a whole a way of life. It reveals a great deal about the perceptual and conceptual schemes of the people using it. The oven may therefore be considered a total cultural fact.

The study of the bread oven also relates to the increasingly widespread concept of “foodways”. “This concept of foodways refers to the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the members of a particular society.”¹ Our treatment of the bread oven as part of the overall culture naturally includes this concept.

A rigorous system of research enabled us to gather considerable documentation from various archival collections and numerous informants, especially in rural Quebec. The most informative people were from the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, Charlevoix, Montmorency, Beauce, Lotbinière, and the south shore of the St. Lawrence River as far as the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula.

Our research was conducted in three main phases: a study of the literature, research of archival documents, and fieldwork.

The first phase uncovered only a very small amount of information. There is, in fact, very little material on bread ovens in studies that have appeared thus far. There are, however, some general works on French-Canadian folk culture that deal with the subject briefly. We will mention just a few of these.

Among the most recent studies, we should mention those of Robert-Lionel Séguin, who notes the presence of the oven in the

*The reader may wish to consult the works of James Deetz, Lewis Binford, and David Clarke, which discuss the link between the cultural subsystems and the importance of considering material culture within its overall context.

settlements at various periods in the history of French Canada. Séguin makes some general remarks in his works based mainly upon notarial records.²

On a lighter note, Félix-Antoine Savard includes in one of his works a charming description of Alexis, a tireless builder of clay ovens. In a delightful allegory, the author gives us a detailed and highly informative description of the phases of construction.³

We should also mention the very useful writings of Georges Bouchard, a professor at the School of Agriculture in Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière at the beginning of the twentieth century. He offers those interested in agronomy, and the layman as well, some very valuable advice on the small-scale production of clay ovens.⁴

Our curiosity even led us to consult French literature on the subject, in an attempt to compare the methods used by French-Canadian *habitants* with those used by the peasants of France. In so doing, we were fortunate to come across the very first encyclopaedia by Diderot and d'Alembert.⁵ This scientific work, which seeks to understand and depict an object as it truly is and to show its origin, tells of a procedure for constructing a bread oven at very little cost.⁶ The method described is still used today by some Quebec farmers.

Finally, we should point out that we eliminated all possibility of the existence of seigneurial ovens by consulting authors who clearly state that this seigneurial right was never exercised in New France.⁷ This is not to say, however, that the seigneurs did not have their own ovens to meet the needs of the manor.

The second stage of our research involved the examination of some notarial records of the French Regime.⁸ In studying these documents we noted that bread ovens were mentioned only occasionally.⁹ When they are referred to, the date shown is for the day they were spotted and does not always indicate the date of construction. Consequently, an oven could well have existed for a hundred years but only appear in the records for the first time when it was already obsolete. Moreover, the records do not necessarily include all those who used the ovens. The contracts reveal that, in the city, workmen—often masons—were sometimes hired to construct or rebuild a bread oven. This was not the case in the country, however, where the assistance of a neighbour or other local inhabitant with the necessary skill could be obtained. In such circumstances, the services rendered would be compensated for in food or lodging, and a visit to the notary would thus not be necessary. Nor would there be any written record when an individual built his own oven. If rural people were capable of putting up their buildings themselves or with the help of nearby neighbours, they certainly would have been able to make their own ovens as well.

In view of the above, the archives do not tell the whole story of the ovens, and, consequently, the facts we gleaned from them should be interpreted carefully.

The third and not the least important phase consisted of careful fieldwork. We cannot overemphasize the importance of the valuable



information given to us by our two hundred informants, which enabled us to reach certain general conclusions valid for all the regions visited. Furthermore, our fieldwork enabled us to consider the bread oven within the overall context of rural life. During our visits, we were able to see a full range of oven sites and to assess the significance of the location of the ovens in relation to household activities as a whole. Our work in the field also gave us a better understanding of the construction techniques used, and enabled those interviewed to express themselves freely and naturally in their own colourful way.

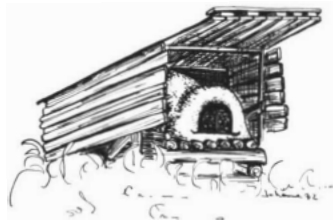
Our informants were questioned in a very objective manner. We asked only neutral questions, in an attempt to respect the scientific methodology of ethnography. According to the precepts of ethnography, it is important for the researcher to stay in the background in any interview with an informant. The informant can then express freely, in his own words, what he knows and has experienced. The interviewer is always careful to avoid any leading questions that might alter the original thought of the informant. Throughout our investigation, we judged an interview a success if our informant was appalled at our ignorance and decided to set us straight right away. It was in this way that people's perceptions of the bread oven were transmitted to us, and they did this in the terms peculiar to rural Quebec.

In the first chapter, we analyse the information collected on the ovens and the people who built them. In the second chapter, we present a technical study of the building of a clay oven in the Saguenay region to familiarize the reader with the construction of ovens of this type. You will note that the technique used is the same as the one described by Diderot in his *Encyclopédie*, which was first published between 1751 and 1765. We then move on to the chapter on bread making, where we present the information required for a proper evaluation of this source of nutrition. And, finally, we cover the oral tradition relating to the bread oven and everything connected with it.

On the whole, the picture of the bread oven that we present is basically a historical reconstruction and does not depict the situation that exists in rural Quebec today. We do feel that it is valid for the turn of the century, however, since the average age of our informants was seventy.



Baking day—a nostalgic picture of rural
life
Notman Collection,
Public Archives of Canada,
no. C-20615



Outdoor clay oven
 Saint-François concession, Saint-Urbain
 (Charlevoix county)
*Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Ar-
 chives,* no. 113*



Semi-indoor oven forming part of a
 detached building
 Concession 5, Saint-Hilarion (Charlevoix
 county)
*Blanchette Collection, CCFCS Ar-
 chives, no. 104*

*CCFCS: Canadian Centre for Folk
 Culture Studies, National Museum of
 Man, Ottawa