

The Oral Tradition

Popular Sayings and Expressions

The bread oven, together with all the various activities related to it, is an important and respected aspect of Quebec tradition, and has given rise to a multitude of wise and witty popular sayings and expressions that have social or moral implications. The rural people of Quebec have a vivid expression to fit almost every situation.

On the whole, most references to the oven are closely connected with life itself: "We were brought up in the shadow of the oven."¹ "The oven is life itself."² The mother's role of ensuring the continuity of the life cycle is also attributed to the bread oven.³

On occasion, the feelings of frustration and impatience brought on by continued contact with other people are expressed in the phrase "to toss someone under the oven",⁴ meaning to send someone packing. This refers to the common practice of throwing away underneath the oven dangerous pieces of glass and other useless or harmful trash. The expression "to heat the oven" is used to mean "to drink alcohol".⁵ Someone who has a dirty face may be accused of "bearing traces of the oven latch on his face".⁶ The failure of some undertaking may be expressed by saying that it is "as successful as an empty oven".⁷

The parts of the oven and the baking tools are also used in figurative speech. Thus, it might be said that a small opening is "no bigger than the mouth of the oven".⁸ When one person ridicules another while behaving no better himself, he is like "the baker's peel making fun of the fire rake".⁹ The dough box is used as a measure of comparison, as when a small child is said to be "as tall as the dough box".¹⁰ In other circumstances, the dough box and bread-bin are closely associated with childbearing and children in general. In large families, there is no need to worry about the future because "when the good Lord fills the cradle, He doesn't forget to fill the bread-bin".¹¹ Children are said to ensure the continuity of the family in the same way that bread ensures its survival. Children are often compared to loaves of bread; each child born to a family becomes "one more loaf in the bread-bin",¹² and when misfortune strikes and takes the life of a child it is said that the mother "loses a loaf from her batch".¹³ A mother will often boast about her children by saying that they are "as good as good bread".¹⁴ In some areas, the youngest children are compared to the "crumbs in the bottom of the bread-bin",¹⁵ and a child who is growing very quickly "is rising like dough in the dough box".¹⁶ Comparisons are also made in other contexts. For example, when the larder is empty and there is almost nothing left to eat, it is time to "eat

the crumbs in the bottom of the bread-bin".¹⁷ The expression "to be a crumb" is used for a person who is stingy. When someone is in trouble or is in an awkward situation, he will complain of "being in the dough box".¹⁸

Because of its importance, shape and texture, bread is the source of numerous popular sayings and expressions. "Did you bake?"¹⁹ This is a typical rural way of asking for bread at the table. A beggar is said to "ask for his bread".²⁰ A person who is wealthy is described as having his bread already baked.²¹ An egoist or a miser "eats his bread from his pocket or from his bag".²² A lazy person "is not worth the bread he eats".²³ When someone has a lot of work to do, he may say that he has "bread on his board".²⁴ To deny oneself for another's benefit is frequently expressed as "taking bread out of one's mouth".²⁵ A person boasting that he paid a very low price for an object would say that he acquired it for "a piece of bread".²⁶

Unannounced visitors arriving at the home of a stingy person at mealtime might say jokingly at the door, "Hide the bread."²⁷ A very kind person would be described as being "as good as good bread".²⁸ Somebody with a long, sad face would be asked if he had "lost a loaf from his batch".²⁹ One who believes that he will never be successful repeatedly uses this phrase in conversation: "When you are born for small loaves, what's the use. . . ." ³⁰ To "earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow" indicates the hard work necessary to support a family.³¹ A temporary period of misfortune or poverty is accepted by saying, "If there's no bread, we'll just have to eat the leaven."³² The belief that obstacles and difficulties in life allow a keener appreciation of the success and happiness that is bound to follow is expressed by: "In life one always has to start by eating black bread before eating the white."³³ Here black bread is synonymous with poverty, while white bread symbolizes affluence.

There is something sacred about bread, and in most families waste is not tolerated: "Waste not the bread of the Lord."³⁴ Bread is also related to other areas of family life. When husbands continue to remain courteous and attentive to their wives, it is said that "the wedding bread is still fresh."³⁵ Similarly, at the engagement of a son, before giving his final approval, the father will "test the daughter-in-law",³⁶ which means that he will sample the bread she makes and assess her competence in other household skills as well. A woman who cooks poorly is "a woman of heavy bread".³⁷

A person's character is also described in terms of bread. A rude, insensitive, or ill-mannered person is said to be "coarse as barley bread".³⁸ A good-for-nothing, inept, or clumsy person might be called "suet bread".³⁹ An unpleasant neighbour could be nicknamed "gingerbread".⁴⁰

The batch of loaves as a unit has also left its mark on the language. For example, a cook remarking on the poor quality of the loaves as they come out of the oven might exclaim regretfully over her "batch of potash".⁴¹

Regarding flour, one might hear: "The devil shat in my flour";⁴² this expression is used especially when the weed vetch has been milled with the wheat, thus giving it a bitter taste. The saying "the devil's flour



"This old oven saw many harvests and many generations. It must have provided sustenance for a good number of families!" (Bouchard 1917-18)
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turns to bran” is used to mean that “ill-gotten gains never prosper.”⁴³ Zany, exuberant people are sometimes said to be “under the flour”,⁴⁴ a reference to the whitened faces of circus clowns.

Finally, when the loaves are full of air holes, children will amuse themselves by pretending that they can “play hide-and-seek between the bread and the crust”.⁴⁵

Songs

The oven and the batch of loaves have been immortalized in songs. In the old days women hummed lively tunes as they baked. Several of our informants sang parts of the old songs for us, such as *Le petit Grégoire* (“Little Gregory”),⁴⁶ *La berceuse blanche* (“The White Cradle Song”),⁴⁷ *Les blés d’or* (“Golden Corn”),⁴⁸ and *Le bon pain d’habitant* (“Good Country Bread”). In the first song, there is a mocking comparison with the dough box.

*La maman du petit homme
Lui dit un matin,
À seize ans t’es haut tout comme
Notre huche à pain.**

The second rhyme expresses the feeling of security that comes with having bread in the house:

*Avez-vous faim?
Tout plein les huches
Y a du pain.***

In a number of these old songs, we again find the devil theme in connection with the oven:

*Le diable a été su le boulanger,
C’est pour l’affaire qui s’est fait attraper.
Le boulanger l’a pris l’a fourré dans son four
Mais l’diable y a joué un cré bon tour,
Y a parti avec le derrière du four.^{49***}*

This version is similar to the one discovered by Marcel Rioux entitled *Le diable est venu dans la ville*⁵⁰ (“The Devil Came to Town”). In fact, this song is also known under the title *Le diable bafoué* (“The Devil Scorned”), and is a counterpoint to *La récolte du diable* (“The Devil’s Harvest”). This time the tradesmen get together to take their revenge on the devil, who always manages to escape, but only after many adventures.

Other songs, some lighthearted and others more serious, can be added to this list. To name a few, there is *Le vol des pâtés chauds* (“The Theft of the Hot Pies”), in which Michaud lives to regret his greediness. Then there is *Les jours de la semaine* (“The Days of the Week”), in which each day of the week has its particular task: “Wednesday is bread-baking

*One morning a mother said to her son: “Now you are sixteen, you’re as tall as the dough box.”

**If you are hungry, the bins are full of bread.

***The devil visited the baker, who caught him at his mischief and stuffed him in the oven. But the devil had the last laugh—he left, taking the back of the oven with him.

day.”⁵¹ The verses of the song entitled *Le pain* (“Bread”) sing the praises of the staff of life. The refrain is as follows:

*Le pain, le pain
Est du genre humain
Le mets le plus sain.
Vive le pain!*^{52*}

Finally, while stoking the oven, the following lively refrain is sung: “Split the wood, heat the oven.”⁵³

People no longer give rhythm to their work by singing as they go about various tasks. Our informants assured us that in the old days people always sang as they worked. It seems that the songs disappeared as the bread ovens fell into disuse.

Stories and Legends

Just as it lives on in old songs, the oven also appears in stories and legends, often forming a focus for diabolical manifestations. The oven is used in explanations of such cosmic and existential realities as the origin of life, the challenges faced by man, and man’s aspirations.

Here we are concerned mainly with stories in anecdotal form. One of the themes treated is that of punishment. The oven is a place of suffering, no doubt because of its somewhat forbidding appearance: dark and cramped, it contains the fire that punishes and the heat that transforms. “In stories, people who have to be punished or got rid of are shut up in the oven.”⁵⁴ In some stories, the oven is the place of combat between Saint Peter and Satan, and in others it is the site of challenges between man and the devil.

Beliefs such as these are communicated in a variety of legends. Here are a few anecdotes that our informants drew from their memories:

It so happened that, on his rounds of the parish, the priest found himself at the house of a poor woman. This woman had two children, a boy and a girl. Because the children were ashamed of their old clothes, they went to hide in the bread oven. During his visit the priest asked the woman where her children were . . . (silence). As he was leaving he passed in front of the bread oven; the doors opened and two little demons came out.⁵⁵

The old lady who told us this story said that it was punishment for hiding from the priest. The episode contains certain similarities to the following:

A mother, wanting to punish her two children, locked them in the oven. She closed the oven and heated it, and when she opened it again two little bears came out, one female and the other male.⁵⁶

Then there is the unfortunate incident connected with a spell that caused a transformation to take place inside the oven:

There used to be a lot of beggars roaming about. When the women were alone with their children they were often afraid. One

time, a woman hid her child in the oven to protect him. When the beggar was gone, she went to get her child and found a monkey in his place.⁵⁷

Though our collection of stories and legends is small, we can see a recurring theme—the oven is shown as a place of punishment and of transformation. The oven is a mediator. All that is undesirable in life is put in the bread oven, where metamorphosis will occur.

Popular Beliefs, Spells, Incantations, and Omens

The dread of unknown forces, nourished by ignorance, created a variety of beliefs, including many connected with the making of bread and its use. Both the literature and the memories of our informants reveal the obsessions of the popular imagination.

The belief that beggars were able to cast evil spells was the most common myth, and we found it in one village after another. Beggars were reputed to have great powers: “They were either a blessing or a curse.”⁵⁸ If they were treated with impatience or were refused alms, food, or shelter, they would call down all manner of curses and evil fortune on the family. Any failure or anything that went wrong thereafter was believed to be the result of the beggar’s evil powers.

One wonders how many women with their hands in the bread dough received curses of this type and were not able to bake for years afterwards! There were many such cases, but we will mention only a few of the most interesting ones, omitting the names of our informants. At lac Saint-Jean we were told the following:

One day my mother was kneading her bread, and since she had her hands in the dough she refused to give money to a beggar. The bread did not rise, and from that day on all of her batches failed and she never again made a successful batch of loaves. She was sure that the beggar had placed a spell on her.

In Charlevoix we were told:

When the women failed in their bread making or when the bread was sour or smelled rotten, they were all too willing to believe that it was a spell placed on them by a beggar to whom they had not given alms.

On Île d’Orléans we were told: “If women made poor batches several times in a row, they said that someone had cast a spell on them.” If the bread did not last more than a couple of days, if it was too doughy or became mouldy, or if successive batches failed, the beggars were usually blamed.⁵⁹

Was it necessary to put up with these misfortunes? Was there any way to cast them off? By closely following certain rites it was possible to remove the evil spells from the bread. Some of these involved the use of fire and needles, or a wedding band. For example, needles would be poked into a loaf from the failed batch, and it would then be thrown into the fire to burn. It was believed that the person who cast the spell would suffer the punishment endured by the bread, and would then remove the spell to end



The "fruits of the oven" are laid carefully on end so that they will retain their shape while cooling
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"We were brought up in the shadow of the oven."
Les chemins de fer nationaux, Almanach de l'Action sociale catholique, 1929

his own suffering. This method was tested by one informant, who gave us the following account of it:

My aunt had been under an evil spell cast by a beggar for seven or eight days. The bread was not cooked on the inside and smelled like rotten meat, although the crust was the way it should be. The old folks used to say that poking needles into the bread and burning it would cast off a spell. So I did that, and the next day my aunt made some bread and it was as successful as it had been before the spell.⁶⁰

Another way to counteract the spell would be for the woman to place her wedding band in the new dough.⁶¹

Pierre-Georges Roy points out that “beggars in former times had the reputation of casting evil spells. . . . If an animal died in a strange manner, if the bread burned in the fire, if the laying hens had very few chicks, or if a batch of soap was a failure, the blame was always laid on an evil spell.”⁶² Today, bakers no longer complain of evil spells, but, as another informant pointed out, “Nowadays with the new welfare laws you don’t see beggars any more.”

In addition to the importance given to spells, the physical condition of the woman doing the baking might affect the success of the bread. Thus, if a woman who has a fever bakes bread, the dough will not rise.⁶³ A woman with acidity in her blood will never succeed in making good bread.⁶⁴

We also found other beliefs and customs concerning food. People used to make the sign of the cross over a loaf before slicing it, or they would cross themselves before kneading the dough. This is still a custom in some families and is done to give thanks to God. It is also a way of seeking God’s bounty for the days to come: “Always make the sign of the cross over the bread so as to have some the next day.”⁶⁵ Moreover, certain things must not be done: “If you have to leave the loaf for a minute when you are in the middle of cutting a slice of bread, you must not leave the knife in the bread or bad luck will come to you.”⁶⁶ For good luck, care is taken to keep blessed bread in an appropriate place. For example, “Blessed bread in the purse will ensure that you always have money.”⁶⁷ It was also supposed to be easy to find the body of a drowned person with the help of a piece of blessed bread: “Throw a piece of blessed bread in the water. It will float and then begin to spin when it is above the spot where the body is lying.”⁶⁸

The ill effects of certain natural phenomena were also cause for concern. For example, thunderstorms were feared because the heaven would break up and the dough would not rise.⁶⁹























