

The Queen Comes To Minnicog

By James Bacque

"Minnicog is the most original and humourous Canadian community since Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (by Stephen Leacock)..."—Don Harron

NOTE: This story first appeared in Harrowsmith Magazine, then as the lead story in the book *The Queen Comes To Minnicog*, Gage/Macmillan, Toronto 1979. Various stories in this series won the Gold Medal of the Magazine Publishers' Association of Canada, an award of the Periodical Distributors of Canada, and the Chatelaine Fiction prize in 1979. Bacque and Don Harron collaborated on a series of readings from the book on Harron's CBC radio show, *Morningside*.

Ossie Saint Amour took off his green work smock with Ossie embroidered over the pocket, put on his old RCAF blazer, closed up Saint Amour's Plumbing and Heating and walked across Yeo Street in the sunset to the town council meeting over in the firehall. You could see him developing into a Mayor with every step he took. The maple leaves were falling on his bald round head like Roman laurel, and his face began to get that thoughtful paternal look befitting the Mayor of Minnicoganashene, Pop. 4,998.

He put on his tie going up the stairs, and you could practically hear his brain start up like a furnace on a cold night. By the time he sat down in front of the sun-faded portrait of Minnicog Guide who covered the meetings with both eyes closed and never took a note.

"Now we have to consider the town's anniversary celebration next summer. Clerk?" said Ossie. "Say that word again."

"Sesquicentennial," said Fred DuCharmant.

"Sexycentennial then," said Ossie and looked sideways at Roy Feathers of Feathers Sand and Gravel.

Roy laughed, "That's why I asked everyone to be sure and turn up. And I see we only got six again, out of twelve. So have we got a report then, Clerk?"

Tall, slow Fred DuCharmant, part-time over at Middlebury Awning, had been researching Minnicog's town history for years preparing for this event, which he had predicted. Fred slowly opened his thick file folder and started to read. Ossie's face got more and more thoughtful until he was practically asleep.

"Could you just touch the highlights there, Fred," said Roy Feathers. A lot of heads nodded in the warm room.

"Now Samuel de Champlain, he came by here in . . ." said Fred.

"Samuel do who?" said Roy, opening the window to get some warm air in the warm room. "Champagne," said Ossie with a grin. "Famous French explorer."

"What did he do here?" asked Stan Comfort, of Stan Comforts Ambassador's and Gremlin's.

"He didn't do anything here, he more or less went right on past," said Fred. "On his way somewhere else."

"Oh that's great," said Ossie dryly. "We could dress up a kid in an old hat at the town dock and he could call out, 'There goes Champlain.' That'll be a big draw."

"And cheap, too." said Fred. "You told me \$500, all in."

"Fred, have you got something we could reenact, just like it happened?" asked Ossie.

"Next up was Etienne Brule. He got eaten by Indians across to Northwest Basin."

"Fred," said Ossie kindly, "there's Indians coming to this from the reserve. What else have you got?"

"The time the American Navy sent ships up here to invade us," Fred began.

"Now that's better. We can get them all back up here, from Cleveland and Detroit and New York. Take out an ad. Come on Yanks, try again."

"They got lost in the fog out in the Islands and never found us," said Fred.

"Well, then, how about that exhibition?" suggested Ossie. "You know that one up to the Arctic?"

"The Royal Navy sent an expedition from the Fort here to find Sir John Franklin, but they never saw him."

"No," says Ossie. "Keep on."

"Well, there was Celestin Beauchemin who emigrated to Toronto and invented lipreading."

"Fred," said Ossie patiently, enumerating on his stubby hard-calloused fingers, "We got an explorer who didn't come, an invasion that didn't get here, plus lip-reading, plus a cannibal feast. What have you got we can use?"

The silence lasted so long that Ed Story woke up.

"What about the Queen's visit?" said Roy Wildgust, "What are your plans for that?"

"What Queen?" said Ossie abstractedly, staring out the window. You could hear boys' and girls' voices outside talking and laughing.

"The Queen of England," said Roy.

"You mean her?" Ossie stuck his thumb backwards over his shoulder at the portrait above him.

"The same," said Roy.

"Is this another of your practical jokes?" asked Ossie. "We didn't hear that."

"The itinerary was announced today," said Roy. "Montreal, Ottawa, Minnicoganashene, Winnipeg." They all sat up amazed hearing Minnicog's name in such distinguished company, ahead of Winnipeg.

"She's on a state visit, going to cruise the Great Lakes."

"I heard about that," said Stan Comfort. "She's coming up in the Royal yacht the Titanic."

"The Britannia," said Roy.

"Right," said Stan.

Well, the meeting broke up in a babble of excitement, and they all walked up right away to the Hotel Champlain so the after-meeting meeting wouldn't be late starting (the Champlain beverage room closes at 12 weeknights) and all the way up the street they were gathering in councillors who were arriving just in time, and when everybody got there the news was all over town and right through the beverage room, and people were crowding around the council table so deep that Jack Goodspeed had trouble getting through with the trays. The number of monarchists in town turned out to be scarcely credible. Year in year out, the Monarchist League of Minnicog is a one member League, George Bellehumeur, but that night, everyone loyal and royal crowded into the beverage room till you could hardly shout for a tray over the din. The glasses were speeding by under the taps so fast Jack Goodspeed might as well have locked them open. Enthusiasm for the Queen was running as high as the foam in the glasses.

"The Queen, God bless her," said Jack holding up his foaming glass, and they all drank. Suddenly, they could all see something good in her.

"Personally," said Jack, "I can see at least 200,000 gallons of beer in her, plus the chips and eggs."

Stan Comfort turned out to be a royalist too, and he said flatly, "I can see a good 100,000 gallons of gas in her. And besides, a lot of people will want a new Ambassador or Gremlin for the parades, or at least a two dollar wash and wax."

Roy Feathers pointed out that the road to the fort was in terrible shape and would need to be levelled and graded. "Personally speaking for myself, I see a good 10,000 tons of sand and gravel in her."

Now they were all enthusiastic for her. Les More of Les More Lots and Real Estate said she'd move at least 25 cottage lots for him and Jack said she'd fill at least 200 beds. Well, by the time they'd filled her with beer and pumped her with gas and she'd moved 25 cottage lots and filled 200 beds, the Queen was so popular she could have moved in, no charge, Duke and all, let alone come by for a visit.

To understand why all that fuss came up, you can't just look at the gallonage and tonnage of the Queen. No. Minnicog is more than that. As you've seen from all the names, this is a very mixed place--French and English and Indian. But no-one in his right mind in Minnicog ever says the words French or English, like "The French are restless today," or "She's not dead, she's English," or anything dumb like that. You've got to realize the French and English in Minnicog have been married for over 150 years, and when you're married to someone, you're stuck with it. What you're stuck with is no use thinking about and if there's no use thinking about it, you don't put a name to it. So, for instance, a man doesn't call his wife by her name, 'round Minnicog. Everything that's tricky and hard to handle, like a boat, or the weather, or a car, or a man's wife, is just her, or she, or you. One night down at the Legion Ossie was talking about his wife getting in an accident in the car, which is also she, and he said, "She backed her in a ditch and by the time we hauled her out she had to have a whole new rear end in her." Everyone knows he means the car, not Angele. Ossie probably hasn't called her Angele to her face for twenty years. She is always you.

One night down at the Legion, Ossie was talking about the old problem, English and French, just this once he did, because it was after some crisis down in Quebec and the whole point of what he said at the Legion came down to why it's so peaceable in Minnicog and they are always after each other in other parts of Canada. "When you get down to the bottom of it," and he looked in his empty glass and picked up a full one, "at the bottom what you've got, you've got the English who are grateful that the French don't mind anymore that they got beat, and the French who are grateful that the English don't mind it never took." That was the longest most difficult sentence Ossie ever uttered at the Legion.

He nodded, agreeing with himself, and looked at the waiter, and everyone else nodded, looking at the waiter, and he brought another tray, and that's how they knew they all basically agreed about that.

Another example is how they get along about the Mayor. First he's English and then he changes over to French, but there's no French-English content to it at all, or not much, not like it sounds. You see, they're almost past that. Everyone just votes for the best man. And the way that works is, every year, the English all vote for the best English-name candidate and the French vote for the best French-name. And it's amazing how it turns out every election. When it's the English name turn, enough French don't vote or get confused in the ballot or change their minds at the last minute, or arrive late, that the English name gets in. And vice versa the

next time. It hasn't missed yet. One year, there was a problem, with George Bellehumeur running against Ovide M'Gonigle, but that only happened once.

Still there was this feeling that if they did get on so well, if it was really in their thoughts and feelings the way it was out on the highway where they had the two stone angels set up with the brass trumpets up and the wings on their backs and the plaques saying Quebec on one and Ontario on the other, well then, you'd hear more French in town and maybe see some bilingual signs. Isadore LaChance, the carpenter, goes around with the sign on his truck saying Have No Fear Isadore Is Here, and if they were really like the angels, wouldn't it say something in French? But it would be hard, and no-one really got to grips with it till the Queen came along.

The official letter arrived from Buckingham Palace, and the Postmaster, Rosaire Moreau, was so excited when he saw the return address, that he walked all the way up to Ossie's to deliver it personally. Ossie opened it standing in the back room of Saint Amour's Plumbing and Heating where they do the spot-welding and soldering, saying "Boys oh boys," fingering that rich creamy stationery with the Royal Crest banged onto it, and he poured out a cup of reinforced coffee for Rosaire and him and Angele. She was so excited when she answered the phone that she said, "Saint Amour's Humming and Pleating."

Well the Mounties start coming 'round and the Ontario Provincial Police. The number of them, you'd have thought the Queen was coming to rob the bank. But of course Minnicog people couldn't have handled all that unnecessary security; they're not used to it. For 25 years, they've only had one policeman, Norm Frith, and he's only got one arm.

Fred DuCharmant brought new flags over from Middlebury Awning and Roy Feathers dumped well over 10,000 tons of sand and gravel for a new breakwater and road. And Isadore LaChance, with his uncle Jean and his uncle Jean and Isadore's cousin Robert, and his walleyed nephew Olivin, and another cousin Jean Claude were building the grandstand out of new pine cut from Bob Cote's bush near Moonbeam, and they got the contract to sharpen the tops of the posts in the palisade at the Fort, because they were so worn down and whitewashed with all the seagulls coming to sit on them. And Art Beck, principal at the high school, taught his children to say "Bonjour Votre Majeste" all in tune. He thought it would be cute to welcome the Queen in French just a bit, not too much, Minnicog having really been founded by the French voyageurs who lost their land in some boundary deal with the Yankees in 1820, and came back here to live beside the Fort, a good long way away from the border.

Chief Jack Pinetree at the reserve got out his big leather belt with CHIEF lettered into it with nailheads that his great-great grandfather, a Potawatomie, got from the British when he crossed the border from Detroit in 1829 to come up here and settle, and his wife Jessie let it out at the back, because Jack, like most of the men 'round Minnicog, is over 200 lbs. And the young women brought in wild rice to cook in two waters for the Queen and the young men said they'd glue some birchbark over their Kevlar canoes, and paddle along with the Brittanica when she went by.

They rented a bunch of store dummies from Middlebury - "a good place to get dummies," said Angele - to populate the Fort.

Now, all this happened about the time that sex started coming back in. Angele said she didn't know where it had gone - she and Barbara like all the ladies 'round Minnicog have got a child in every bedroom, sometimes two - but the ladies were truly shocked by these dummies when Isadore delivered them to the Fort in big crates. They shooed out the men when they arrived at the fort and Barbara pried them open with a hammer of Isadore's.

There they were lying in there, dozens of naked ladies and men lying in pieces peeping out of the straw. Some of these naked ladies had three arms and no legs and they were staring up out of the straw with their painted lips and mascaraed eyes looking very alive, but all bald. And everyone of those female dummies had nipples on her. Both sides.

"Well," said Barbara, looking at one with her arms jerked off and blue eyes staring up, "Well, I never," and started to laugh and all the women crowded in behind Angele. Just then Isadore came to the door for his hammer and the ladies shooed him out again and closed the big wood door and let down the bar over it and drew the old curtains and wondered what to do now.

"They'll show right through of course," said Barbara.

"Well, we'll see," said Angele and reached right in and lifted out one of the dummies with her New York face and tried on her mother's old ball dress. Sure enough, there was no hiding it, or them. They opened all the crates, some of the ladies crowding in close when they got to the crates of men, but it turned out that sex hadn't come that far in, yet.

"I've got an idea," said Angele and she sent Marie Celeste Vadeboncoeur in Isadore's truck over to Minnicog's Five and Ten to borrow a load of brassieres. Now that room was getting warm all closed up and the dummies were heavy, and the ladies were perspiring by the time they tried on all the bras, and they didn't take. The bras didn't fit. They rucked and sagged and showed and all the lady dummies stuck right out through the dresses like a spar buoy on a calm morning.

Angele stood back and said 'round the pins in her mouth, "Barbara, what if we borrow Isadore's belt-sander and sand them off?"

"We'd have to pay for them then." They were stuck.

"I know," said Barbara, "where's my purse?" Now a woman with six kids has a purse like a picnic hamper with a complete line of first aid in there too, right down to a bottle opener in case her husband forgets it on a picnic. She took it out in the sun and tilted it up until she could see almost to the bottom and rooted around in there for a few minutes until finally she came out with Band-Aids. She stuck pads of flesh-coloured Band-Aids right over, both sides, and the Queen's modesty was saved.

You could hardly believe the old stuff these women had been saving over the years, dresses all feathered and flounced, rucked, tucked and pleated; there were church dresses and comehither dresses, old widow's weeds and young matrons' pregnancy let-outs, and the girdles and stays, petticoats and underskirts, with all the hats, muffs, purses, scarves, earrings, dancing pumps and high-button boots.

It was a monument to the vanity of women and the folly of men over 150 years. And, of course, for the men, lumberjack outfits and workmen's clothes, blue and red uniforms for marine and naval officers, lieutenant-governors' cocked hats and toques, ceintures fleches, German spiked helmets and gas masks from World War I, swords and canes and top hats, wigs, pomades and moustache wax. Now they began to see the history of Minnicog coming right out.

What a sight they made. A whole ballroom of ladies and officers dancing around the mess, arm in arm, holding each other up, with their shoes screwed to the floor and a band all in authentic military costume from the 1820's with the old instruments that the ladies shined up sitting on the dais, and fake food spread out on a dining table with Marie Celeste's biggest white damask cloth over it and some old silver that Jenny Goodspeed rummaged up from the basement of the Champlain that Jack had forgotten all about.

It was a beautiful sight and not a nipple in view anywhere.

And outside they had soldiers dressed up in the parade ground in front of the barracks and boatmen at the docks and voyageurs in ceintures fleches and fur traders in woolen caps, fur hats and toques. It was enough to make you believe you were back 150 years.

The great day came, flags flying on the halyards and masts of the sailboats, the metal all polished up, glinting so bright it hurt your eyes, and the water all over Minnicog Bay was blue with not a cloud in sight except out over Pinery Point where they saw one big black cloud spout up and someone shouted "there she is" but it was only the old Fred Beavis coming in with grain to Middlebury elevators.

Then they saw it, some of them up in the hill behind the asylum, at Paradise Point, and some out in little boats, ready to escort the yacht. It came in past the Indian Islands and when she came round the point at Pinery, there was such a cheer from the people on shore she must have heard it. Ahead of her was a big grey destroyer that looked as big as a battleship, and a red and white coast guard ship with a helicopter flying slowly overhead, and a flypast of fighters, and all 'round them like dogs buzzing a car, hundreds and hundreds of boats: outboards, power cruisers, sailboats, a Chinese junk, catamarans, trimarans and the big old cruise boat out of Minnicog that Pete LaChance was steering with one foot at 20 knots talking on the loudspeaker to the tourists. The Indians paddled their birchbark canoes right up beside her as she came in slow and stately, oh it was a sight to remember. Closer she came, past Rumrock and Gin Reef, in past Whiskey Island and Brandy Point, closer and closer, past Old Brewery Bay, to Paradise Point. The yacht pulled in past the new breakwater that Roy Feathers had put a crick in his neck building for her, backing his truck down time and again to dump in the sand and gravel.

The Queen stepped out on the dock and a cheer went up you could hear 200 miles away. There was her husband the Greek, walking beside Michael Cacayanous of Socrate's Grill and Takeout. Then she walked slow and careful along the new wood dock up to the Fort which the ladies had decorated and up to the grandstand Isadore had built for her with Fred DuCharmant's bunting flying out. She was greeted by Ossie in a new suit and all the councillors and the children from school all said "Bonjour Votre Majeste."

"Bonjour" she said right back, and smiled and she took Don Light's microphone, and she said, "Nous sommes tres heureuses sur cette si belle journee de vous acceuiller, tous les citoyens fideles de Minnicoganashene, a notre ancien Fort de. . . ." and so on and on, a beautiful speech all in French right to the end.

Ossie made his speech of thanks, "Comme Maire de Minnicoganashene, je suis tres reconnaissant de votre gentillesse," said Ossie and so on. And Chief Jack Pinetree got up with his CHIEF belt polished, and made his speech in Ojibway.

Then the Queen stepped down and walked with Ossie through the exhibition the ladies had made, talking with Ossie in French and switching right into English like she spoke it every day. She was so good-natured about it all, and smiling at everyone equally and so willing to be pleased with everything that there wasn't a sad face in town for a week after.

The ladies had cooked up amazing things. The Indians brought wild rice which they cooked in maple syrup. Delicious. There were tourtieres, black bass, lake trout and fresh pickerel, which Henri LaChance had caught that morning out at the Seagull Islands while the Brittanica was going by and he brought in right beside the yacht and delivered to Angele and her cooks. There was corn bread, and muffins with fresh wild blueberries picked that

morning, and fresh raspberries, and crepes with maple sugar, oh it was a feed. The Queen ate till she was laughing and red-faced and Ossie practically put his arm 'round her shoulder he was so friendly and she was so friendly. They were both charmed and he told her all the old French words they still used, like "Towz de the" for cup of tea and "tumbleur de vin" for glass of wine and they laughed and had a great time and afterwards Ossie said he couldn't remember whether they spoke English or French for half the things they said, they slipped in and out of them so easily, but what he did remember was she was interesting and witty, just as level-headed and natural as any Queen had a right to be.

After, he said that someone in Ottawa had researched up on Minnicog and discovered about the voyageurs coming here and settling the town and how there was French all 'round from Moonbeam to St. Jean de Railway and they just naturally assumed from Ossie's name that it was normal to write to him in French and naturally having been written to in French by the Queen's equerry, he replied in French and it went on from there.

The big thing about the Queen's speech that got everyone going, her standing there so pretty on the dock, was how she said it. Some of the councillors, who understand a little of your Parisian French, said it was amazing how well she spoke French and Ossie said it was amazing how well she spoke English and they all agreed it was remarkable how much she knew about the town and its history, she must have read a lot beforehand.

The council meeting after that was when everyone voted for the change in the names of some of the streets, and now, of course, you see the signs Rue Yeo St. and Rue Main St. and there's Lise Gendron down at the Minnicog Guide, who spends a couple of hours a week peppering accents on the French story they put in the paper nowadays. When they first asked her to do it, she said No, it would be like milking a mouse, but then she took it on, for the sake of the work.

On the morning after the meeting Napoleon Bourgeois of Napoleon's Body got a bucket of paint and a dictionary and went down to his body shop and changed the name Napoleon right across to French, Napoleon, and painted in the rest, Napoleon's Auto Body and Depannage. And Isadore LaChance changed his sign so it now reads, Have No Fear, Isadore Is Here, N'ayez pas peur, Isadore est La.

And to this day he has his photograph of the Queen in her pink dress and flowered hat in the sunshine, taken from a distance so it looks like she's about to get into the truck with him and drive away with a load of pine.

If you enjoyed this story, please let me know, at jabacque@csolve.net