

## [The Life of Mike Pelletier]

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Maine

Living Lore

Old Town - 51

(The Life of Mike Pelletier, French-Canadian Paper Maker)

(This evening I went over to interview Mike Pelletier. A young fellow named Paul Cyr and Mr. Pelletier's son, Albert, were there paying a visit. I knew both of them. Paul is a quiet fellow - almost every one is when Albert is around. Mike is youthful and vigorous in spite of his sixty-eight years, and Albert resembles his father. Both of them are interesting and rapid fire talkers, but Albert, with the advantage of youth on his side, did most of the talking. He's not a bore at all and he has such a pleasing and forceful personality that people seem to like to hear him talk.

Bill Rioux was holding a three year old child on his knee when I entered. They told me the child belonged to Robert Cust, a son-in-law of the Pelletiers. The young fellow fell asleep on Bill's lap shortly after I sat down, but whether it was a [nrtural?] natural sleep or a trance induced by the fumes of Bill's pipe would be hard to say. The child woke up a little while after his father called to get him, and began to talk about wanting his ball back. As he had no ball with him, they decided that he must have been dreaming about one. If Albert had not been there I don't think I would have got nearly so much of the incredible story that was told that night.)

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Albert: "Hello Bob. I see Jo Martin is not with us any more." (He was referring to a WPA worker who dropped dead today while waiting in a line at the city hall for an allotment of federal food. Martin was fifty years old.) "Did you hear about them closin' up Bosse down here: the fellow that runs the White Cafe? Pretty tough for him: he'd just slapped down \$200.00 for a license to keep open. There was a woman went in there and told [Bosse?] to send her husband home: he was spendin' too much time there. Bosse wouldn't do it so she says, 'All right, Mr. Bosse, I'll have this closed up.' She went to see a lawyer and the next day Guy [Moors?] (Old Town police chief) went in there with some kind of a paper and Boose had to close his restaurant."

R.G.: "I heard that the government had closed up that moccasin factory."

Albert: "They ought to close that place up: it's nothin' but a damned sweatshop."

Mrs. Pelletier: "I don't think they closed them up. My girl works there and she worked today."

Albert: "They haven't closed them up, but they're goin' to make them pay people while they're learnin' a trade. They made them work there five weeks without a nickle."

Paul Cyr: "Yes and they got just an much for those 'A' and 'B' moccasins as they do for the rest. They all go in together."

Albert: "Sure they do."

R.G.: "What about that old mill? Arthur Leblanc told me I would be surprised if I know who was going in there."

Mike: "All I know is that they auctioned off the machinery and that this fellow Smith, from Massachusetts, has an option on the plant until June. That option cost \$5000.00."

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R.G.: "Leblanc says that they haven't sold the machinery and that it's going to reopen as a woolen mill."

Albert: "You'll never see me back there if they do. I have a steady job now at Great Works and I'm goin' to hang on to it."

Mrs. Pelletier: "Steady pay down there even if it wasn't so much, would be better than high pay in the woolen mill."

Albert: "Sure it would. I hear some of the big follows are comin' down there tomorrow, and maybe we'll get back that cut. That would help out."

Mike: "It sure would; 7%."

Albert: "In that woolen mill I know how it would be. We'd work for three weeks and then we'd got laid off for three months. No thanks."

R.G.: "Is that Lincoln mill running now?"

Albert: "Yes it is - and, believe me, that is some place to work."

R.G.: "I suppose Wilbur is there yet."

Albert: "Oh yes, Wilbur's there. He's got to stay there now, because they've fired him everywhere else. The first night he worked in the new mill (in Old Town) he had four automatics, with those time cloaks on them, to run. The boss looked in about nine o'clock and there was Wilbur runnin around those four looms and the time clocks hadn't moved on any of theme. 'Hey, Wilbur,' he says 'what's the matter with you? Why aren't these looms runnin'?' 'there's nothin' the matter with me,' Henry says, 'It's the damned looms: they wont run.' We went up to Lincoln for a job and the boss says, 'Now boys this is a different type of work from what you've been doin', and I'm not sure you understand it. Do you know anything about double [reeds?]' 'sure,' Henry says, 'sUR-R-RE.' "Well,' the

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boss says, 'What are they?' 'I'll be damned if I know,' Wilbur says. The boss explained the double reeds to us, and we went to work. Those double reeds were two reeds clamped together. The front one was twice as fine as the back one. Six threads came through a reed in the back, 54 but those six went through two in front. If an end broke out you had to press those down to find which of the reeds had only two threads, and you had to put that end through one of the reeds in front, push it over and get it through the back one. If a bit of flyins got in there and started to build up on a thread you had to reach down between those reeds. If you didn't know how to do it, it would take you all day to get that out, but those weavers had a special hook for that and they could get those things out in no time.

"That filling is so fine up there that when you fill your shuttles you have fifteen minutes before they run out. If a bobbin is left with much filling on it you have to cut it off. It's so fine it would take you all day to pull it off. Drop a little piece of that yarn and it floats down like a feather. They have a smoking room right in the weave shop and you can go in there and smoke anytime. If you got any grease on your hands you have to wash it right off. When you got your warp out on a loom you go on another one: no cleaning up. Somebody else does that and he spends about three hours on a loom. When he gets done that loom is just the same as when it came from the factory.

"They have automatic worm takeups on those looms and the first time I got a warp out I didn't know how to roll down the cloth. I didn't want to spend an hour windin' that down by hand, and I know Henry Wilbur had worked on Knowles looms, so I went over to him and asked him how to work that gear. 'Henry,' I says, 'how in the devil do you get that cloth wound down?' 'damned if I know,' Henry says. I went back to that loom and started to fool around with that take-up and I noticed a little lever folded into a slot on the side of a gear. I pulled that lever out and whir-r-r! that cloth wound up in a second. After that I run across anything I didn't understand I didn't waste any time askin' Henry Wilbur about it.

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“When I got through there they were runnin' just three days a week, and to hold the crew they made them work every other week. I got a double and twist end through a wrong reed and the boss says, ‘Albert, I've got to lay you off for a week.’ He said he was sorry but he'd got orders to lay off weavers for a while when they made mistakes so they'd learn to be careful. I asked him if I could get my pay and he says, ‘No: you aren't fired - you're just laid off for a week.’ ‘Well,’ I says, ‘if you lay me off, you might just as well fire me.’ He told me that any time I wanted to come back the job was good.

“I saw old man Morton the other day. He was tellin' me how near he came to gettin' a job in Lincoln once. An old friend of his got a job up there as the boss weaver, and Morton telephoned up to him for a job. The boss telephoned back, 'sure, sure, but I'll have some one else to make a place for you. Come up in a week.' Instead of goin' up in a week, Morton waited two week. He went up there and went in the mill and he saw a big fellow struttin' around the weave shop and he went up to him and says, ‘Mister, can you tell me where the boss is?’ 'sure,' the big fellow says, tappin' himself on the chest, ‘I'm the boss.’ ‘Why,’ Dave says, ‘I thought a fellow named Randall was the boss here!’ ‘Well, he was last week,’ the big fellow says, ‘but they fired him.’ If Dave had gone up when Randall told him to, he would have got a job, of course. He said it was the nearest he ever came to gettin' a job without connectin.’ Old Dave doesn't have to worry, though he's pretty well fixed. He just bought a new house up here.

“Say, if you're writing something you ought to say somethin' about those eagles they saw out at Pushaw Pond this winter. ‘Humpy’ Moore was out there fishin' through the ice with a couple of other fellows, and they saw those three eagles flyin' around. There was one big one and two small ones. ‘Humpy’ says they sailed around up there for two hours without flappin' a wing.

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“I was listenin' to a radio program last week advertisin' Sensation cigarets. The name of that program was Don't You Believe It. That announcer told about a lot of things that

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people believe that aren't true. He wouldn't name the town, but he said there was a place up here in Maine where people thought the devil had left tracks across a ledge of rock. 'don't you believe it,' he says, 'the devil never left tracks anywhere. Those marks were made by the action of the water washin' against the ledge.'”

R.G.: “Why, that's the story you told me, Mike, a couple of weeks ago, about the tracks of the devil left in that ledge down below Wing's Mill.”

Mike: “Those marks weren't made by the river water: it never came up that high. They were the prints of feet in the ledge. I've seen them myself. There was a dog's tracks right alongside of them. But how do you suppose that story ever got on the radio?”

Albert: “H-m-m, that is funny-comin' right after' you told Bob about it. I suppose, though, other people besides us know about that. That program came from a New York station. That same night he mentioned that gravestone down in Bucksport where a woman's leg is supposed to appear on the stone. He didn't say 'Bucksport,' he said 'somewhere in Maine.' That was another of his 'don't you believe its. He said there was no magic about that: it was just caused by a fault in the / rock. A friend of mine told me he saw two perfect rabbits once on a gravestone. They painted them out, but they kept comin' back. They were caused by a fault in the stone. He told me about another stone he saw that had a woman with a babe on it.”

(Robert Cust came in about here to get his child, and in discussing the closing of the White Cafe, Cust said that the trouble started when Bosse attached the wages of the husband of the woman who took action against him.)

Albert: “Oh, no, no. You're wrong there. You can't attach any body's wages unless he get gets more than twenty dollars a week, and that fellow doesn't.”

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Cust: "Well, maybe he was goin' to have the fellow jugged for not payin' him. Do you know you can have anybody put in jail for the debt of a dollar if you want to pay the state a dollar a day for the fellow's board. Say, they came near puttin' my brother in jail for a debt he didn't really owe. He was managing a basketball team up here, and the boys wanted suits. There were eight of them and they went down to Bangor, and Kenny went with them. (Kenneth [Cust?], his brother) The boys each had five dollars to pay on their suits, but Dakin (of the Dakin Sporting Goods Company) didn't want to open eight accounts. He thought those young fellows might not pay him, and he know it would be easier to collect one account than eight. Those suits cost \$17.00 apiece. They had the regular pants, blouse, and sweat shirt. Kenny let them put the account in his name, but of course he wasn't gettin' any suit. Those fellows never paid Dakin a cent. Kenny was workin' up here in the woolen mill and one day Pelletier (a policeman) and Guy Moors came in with a paper. Pelletier asked Kenny if he'd like to go to jail for a while. My brother went to a lawyer about it and the lawyer says, 'Cust, you've got yourself in a jam, all right, and there's only one way you can get out of it besides payin' this bill: by takin' the pauper's oath. Do you know what that it?' Kenny said he didn't have a penny and no prospects of ever gettin' one. He says, 'You're word will be no good anywhere, you can never get trusted again.'

Mike: "He'd be a sort of an outcast."

Cust: "That's the idea. That bill wasn't big enough to go through bankruptcy for, and of course Kenny didn't want to take any pauper's oath. He had to pay it. He had to pay for all, those basketball suits or go to jail. He took that receipt and went around to see those fellows. He says to Applebee, 'Look here, Bud: I've paid for the basketball suit of yours, and if you don't want to pay me for it, give me the suit.' 'the heck,' Applebee says, 'I've sold that suit.' 'Okay,' Kenny says, 'give me the money then,' 'Hell,' Applebee says, 'I aint got any money.' 'Well,' Kenny says, 'you better get some pretty soon. You fellows 58 would have stood back and let me go to jail, and now you're either goin' to pay me or go to jail

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yourselves.' Applebee paid him and so did Haley and the rest. It goes to show you can get slapped into jail for a bill you don't owe."

R.G.: "Isn't a bill outlawed in a certain length of time?"

Albert: "No, they changed that law. They can collect a bill no matter how old it is."

Cust: "Bills for personal services are never outlawed. If you owe a doctor, for instance, for services rendered he can collect anytime." (Cust left with his child about this time.)

Albert: "Say, dad, you want to tell Bob about Jo Fountain's sister."

Mike: "Says there's a story for you."

Albert: "I'll say it in - a story for any one! You should have been here last night when Anna Fountain was here. You know Anna - Jo's wife. She was tellin' us some stories about Jo's sister that died up in Canada. She died two years ago, but they never got a chance to bury her because she disappeared from the room she was laid out in. They found that body two weeks ago and her flesh was just the same as it was right after she died. The body turned up in a friend's house, and nobody knows how it got there. Now this is not something that happened seventy five years ago. The body turned up two weeks ago. Anna sat right in that chair last night and told us about it." Story

Mike: "There's some people up there now investigating that. They're goin' to put out a book about the girl, and when that book is published, people will have something to read[:? Wasn't that in Montreal that woman lived?"

Mrs. Pelletier: "No, that town is half way between Montreal and Quebec. I can't remember the name of the place - Saint Something. But Anna knows it."

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Albert: "This woman was 42 when she died. She had been tempted by the devil ever since she was a child. Her mother died when the girl was young, and when they took her up to bury her over, they found that her flesh hadn't changed a particle. The girl pulled some flesh out of the side of her mother's neck and they put that piece of flesh in a covered jar on a mantelpiece. Whenever they take [off?] that cover a sweet perfume fills the room. Anna said she and Jo were up there after they found the body. She said there were 200 people in the house, and for lunch they had a ham. Anna said she sliced the ham herself to make sandwiches for those two hundred people, but the ham didn't get any smaller. She cut off slice after slice and still remained the same size." ?

Mike: "I'd like to get a hold of a ham like that."

Albert: "It'd be all right if you didn't get what went with it. That girl used to disappear. Once they found her in the woods, and once they found her frozen in ice and smilin' up at them. They used to find her locked in her room with the door looked on the outside. Once she was in a room that had a cross over the door. The door wasn't locked, but they couldn't get it open until they took down the cross and then the door opened itself. Once when she was in her bedroom and mattress of her bed disappeared and they finally located it up in the attic. There was only a small hole to get in that attic, and it was too small for the mattress to go through. The door of her room detached itself and went up the stairs and then the mattress came down and appeared back on the bed. Then they heard the door come down and it attached itself to the frame without any screws. You can see that door up there now. It works like any door except that there's nothing holding it on."

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(It can well be imagined that by this time I was beginning to be just a trifle flabbergasted. I know that Albert was a great practical joker, but I knew, too, that nobody could think up such incredible tales on the spur of the moment. He had no idea that I was going to call that night at his father's house. I knew that my suspicions were entirely without foundation, but nobody could listen to stories like these without expressing incredulity. I asked him and

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Mike if they were telling those stories in a joking way to see how much I would swallow. Mike and Albert both assured me that they were merely repeating the stories that they had heard from Anna the night before. "The stories are unbelievable," said Mike, "but nobody - Anna Fountain, may or any one else - could thing up much yarns[. ?]" Mrs. Pelletier and Bill Rioux also assured me that Anna had told the tales that Mike and Albert were repeating. "Well," I said, "what about the Fountains[?] Why are they suddenly telling about this girl? It seems as though they should have said something about her long before this.")

Albert: "You don't go around tellin' stories like those to everybody: they might think you were crazy. But he often told me about that girl when we used to work in the mill. The reason Anna brought it up last night was because she had just come down from there and she was tellin' us about how they found the body of her sister in law.

"The devil used to slap that girl in the face and burn parts of her body. She had hearts burned on her wrists, and the Blessed Sacrament burned on her breast. Once there was a cat appeared on the sill of a small window. They couldn't get that cat off from there so they sent for the priest. He read some prayers and sprinkled some holy water round and that cat went down through a register in the floor something like that one there.

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"The devil did all sorts of things to annoy her. If she sat down to do some crochet work, when she got it nearly finished, the work would all unravel. She had a canary that disappeared from its cage. By and by it reappeared. It was very tame and when she took it in her hand to pet it, the devil crushed it.

"There was a picture of her mother on the wall and she used to stand before that and pray. Sometimes tears would roll down from the eyes in the picture. They collected some of those tears and took them to a chemist to have them analyzed. He said it was the purest water. Tell him about those words, dad."

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Mike: "She used to fill up with worms, and they'd come out of her body, her mouth, eyes, anywhere - thousands and thousands of them. Some of those worms had black heads. Scars used to appear on her body, and once one of her fingers dropped off. After her folks died she went to live with an uncle. They loaded some of the household goods on a truck and she got into the seat with the driver. On the way to her uncle's house all kinds of things happened. The wheels flew off and the goods kept fallin' out of the truck and they had a hard time to keep the truck on the road. There was a galvanized roof on her uncle's house, and as soon as she got inside the house they thought that [roof?] was comin' off. All kinds of rappin' and poundin' came from up there. Sometimes she'd complain that some one was chockin' her or squeezin' her, and when she complained of being choked, white marks used to appear on her throat. They found the marks of the devil's claws on her waist."

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Albert: "I slept all night after hearin' those stories, but talk about dreams! I'd carry in a lot of wood and when I got through I'd find it all outside again. The clapboards started to fall off my house and they kept fallin' off as fast as I could nail them back on. It was like that all night. I was all in, in the morning."

R.G. "I'm interested in that occult stuff. I read an account of a spiritualistic seance a while ago. Bells rang, the table jumped around, balls of light floated around the room, and spirits drew their hands across people's faces. I often thought I'd like to attend a seance. The trouble is, of course, it's all done in the dark: you can't see what's going on."

Albert: "They could see what was goin' on up there in Canada, all right. I went to a spiritualist meeting once, but they didn't turn off the lights and they didn't pull off any of that stuff you mentioned. There was some funny work there, though, just the same. I went to see what they would do, and I told my wife if he could name me I'd think he had something.

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“She was afraid we were goin' to be late. She had a whole dish pan full of dishes, and she says, 'dear me, I've got to wash those dishes, and if I do we'll be late for that meeting.' I just took that pan full of dishes and shoved it under the sink. 'Bother the dishes.' I says, 'we'll do them after we get back. I don't intend to be late for that shindig.' There were about sixty people there and by and by he called out my name - Albert Pelletier. He told me I was a happy-go-lucky guy and a lot of stuff like that, and then he says, 'Now I'm goin' to tell you something that'll surprise you.'

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Well sir, that fellow described my grandmother just as well as I could do it myself. Then he says, 'Your wife is a very neat and careful housekeeper, but you did something tonight that didn't look very good.' 'Good night,' I says to myself, 'he's goin' to tell about those dishes.' And that was just what he did. He called Elise up then and told her she had had a lot of sickness. He told me to quit worryin' about gettin' my house finished, and to not spend any money on it because I could get the work done for nothing. I thought there wasn't much danger of my spendin' any money fixin' up my house because I didn't have any money to spend. A few days later a fellow came over and told me he had a little building stuff I could have and that he'd come over and help me put it on. I got that work done and it didn't cost me anything.

“He told Neil Fox he was goin' to get into some trouble with two other boys, but that he'd get out of it all right. Well, of course we know Neil did get into that trouble and the other two fellows went to jail, but Neil got off because they couldn't pin anything on him. That fellow's name was Strout, and he came from Portland.”

R.G. “Where were those meetings held?”

Albert: “Oh come now: I won't tell you that. He ran away with Gray's wife.”

R.G: “I mean were they held in a hall or in a private dwelling.

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Albert: "Always in private homes. I can't tell you that fellows first name, but he had just one hand: that is, he had an artificial hand."

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R.G.: "Say, do you fix motors? I have one over to the house that wont run. It belongs on a washing machine."

Albert: "Fetch it over and I'll look at it. They bring me all kinds of stuff to fix. Old Charlie Hutchinson had a chime clock that he wanted fixed. 'Albert,' he says, 'that's a fine clock and I hate to see it standin' idle, but if I take it uptown they'll want more than it's worth to tinker with it.' I like to fool with clocks and I told Charlie that I'd take the clock home and fix it and he could pay me whatever it was worth to him." (Albert told us here something about clocks in general and about how Charlie's chime clock differed from ordinary ones. He told us what the trouble was and how he fixed it, but it was all too technical for me to remember.) "When Charlie came up to got it a week later the four o'clock woolen mill whistle was just blowin'. That clock was setting on the mantlepiece and the hands pointed to just four. 'Charlie' I says, 'you see that clock? It hasn't lost a minute since it was fixed.' Charlie says that clock is running fine now.

"[Adolphe?] Leblanc - you know the fellow that goes around selling things - come up to the house once with a bag in his hand and he says, 'Albert, I've got a clock here that the kid took apart. If you can put life into that I'll say you're good.' I looked into that bag, and say; it was just a collection of springs, wheels, and screws. 'I'll bet you a dollar you can't put that together so it'll run,' he says. 'Is everything here?' I says, 'I'll guarantee all the parts are there,' he says. I put that clock together and everything was there but one of the wheels and a few screws, but I happened to have an old clock that had just the parts I needed. The next time he called the clock was running."

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Mike: "That reminds me of the experience of a fellow that took a clock apart to clean it. He put it together again so it would run, but he had a handful of gears that he hadn't found any place for in the clock."

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Albert: "I fixed one clock for a fellow that he had been tryin' to fix himself. There were some long screws in there that he had lost [che?] the nuts for, and he had bent over the ends of those screws so they'd stay in. Now there was no need of doin' that: it would have been much better to have just pushed the screws in and left them like that. The trouble with one clock that a fellow brought me was that it kept stoppin' at twenty minutes of eight. He thought the hands were catching, and he had twisted them all kinds of ways." (Albert gave me some more technical details here, but I couldn't remember them. The trouble was, he said, that a hen's feather had gotten into that clock and got wedged somewhere so that the clock would stop at 7:40. The hands could be turned by, but the spring wasn't strong enough to run the wheels by the feather. He said he noticed the feather as soon as he opened the clock, and that all he did was to take a pair of long nosed pliers and pull the feather out. "The fellow thought my fixin' that clock was something of a miracle," Albert said, "but I never told him what the matter was with it.")

Mike: "That was pretty near as bad as some trouble that I saw Johnny Haines fix once. (Haines ran a jewelry repair shop here about forty five years ago.) I was up there in his shop and a woodsman came in with a watch that had stopped on him. It was one of those old fashioned key wind watches with two covers on the back. You had to open both covers to wind the watch. I have one in my pocket, right now, that I've had for fifty years. Johnny opened that watch and screwed a glass into his eye and started pokin' at the works. By and by he let the woodsman take his glass so he could see what the matter was. 'Come over here, Mike,' Johnny says, 'I want you to see this too.' I took that glass of his and looked in at the hairspring and there was a dead louse wedged in there. I suppose the

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woodsman opened the watch to wind it and that louse got in there and got caught. Say, with Johnny's glass that louse looked to be inches long.”

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Albert: “That's something like the one about the fellow that took his watch in to a jeweler to find out why it stopped, and the jeweler found a dead bed bug in the works, ‘Look here,’ he says to the fellow, ‘no wonder this watch want run: the engineer is dead!’