

# Tales From the End of the Bus Line: The Outhouse

written by Megan and William Broughton | February 18, 2021



Ferdinand French, 1900 and Katherine French, 1912

*[Tales From the End of the Bus Line](#) is a long-distance collaboration between daughter/father Megan and Bill Broughton to collect the many adventures of Bill's young adulthood in Van Nuys, California. Installments are penned by the two of them. For a change of pace, this is a tale from the start of the bus line.*

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Dedication: this story is dedicated to my cousin Maryellen Plante, currently the Clerk of the First Congregational Church of Pittsfield, New Hampshire.

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My earliest stories are not my own – they are my Mother's family history. They are, to borrow from Nathaniel Hawthorne, twice re-told tales, first from my mother and then again from me. Some details have surely been blurred, and will doubtless be corrected by siblings or cousins, but rest assured that any error or omission is all on me.

My mother's paternal Grandparents, Eliphalet and Hannah French, who lived in Pittsfield, New Hampshire, had three sons. The oldest was Louis, born in 1874, from whom I derive my middle name; Scott, born in 1878; and my grandfather, Ferdinand, born in 1881. My grandfather did not have a middle name (my mother used to say with a name like Ferdinand French, you just didn't need one). All of them died before I was born; the only link I have to them is my remembrance of my mother's stories of her childhood, told to me more than half a century ago. But in her tales they now live on in my memory. Both Grandfather and my Granduncles all married twice, Ferdinand's first wife died from tuberculosis, and my Granduncle's wives died from complications in childbirth, which was not unusual for that time. Ferdinand learned a few months before their ceremony that his betrothed had tested positive for TB and went through with the wedding anyway, only to have her pass away within the year. I never knew her name and cannot now ask my mother if she

remembered it, as it has been nearly a decade since her own death.

Louis was a dairy farmer, and he was the serious one. Scott, also a farmer, was the fun one, always ready with a joke and a laugh and who usually had a hip flask in his back pocket. Grandfather Ferdinand was a successful businessman who owned French's Feed Store in the town proper. He did very well in the feed store business (this was before cars were popular and anyway Pittsfield is out in the boondocks) and had a fine house at what is now 11 French Circle. It is where he lived until he died at the comparatively young age of 58 with his second wife Katherine (my Grandmother, also dead at 58), their son Robert (my Uncle Bob, who made it all the way to 60), and their daughter Constance, who became my mother and outlived them all by decades, not dying until 87. The house is still there on a nice big piece of property going all the way down to the Suncook River. For that matter, my grandparents, my uncle, and my mother are still there as well, albeit resting in the ground across the Suncook in a plot in Floral Park Cemetery.

A brief tangent to this story about that plot: Ferdinand bought it for his family, it was a four-person plot, and he and Katherine were the first to go in there. With only two spaces left, my mother had Aunt Mabel cremated when she passed (she was Scott's second wife, he'd chosen to be buried next to his first one, I often wondered what Aunt Mabel thought of that) and that only took half a space. She had Uncle Bob cremated when the time came, and my father and mother were also cremated and buried in the plot as well. So Mom was able to have six people put into a four-person plot. Of everything I have heard of, that is perhaps the embodiment of all things Yankee; I stand tall and proud when I tell people about it.

Grandfather Ferdinand got to attend Dartmouth College – for free. There was no scholarship involved; his parents were simply smart enough to name him after Eliphalet's brother, who had made a fortune in the high-end carriage making business. His Uncle Ferd fortunately did not live long enough to see the automobile put him out of business, but his craftsmanship lives on; one of his best efforts is still owned by the Queen of England and up to a few years ago was driven in competitive contests by the Duke of Edinburgh. Incidentally, one of my mother's uncles by marriage, William Kaime (who I am also named for), owned a livery stable about the same time, the biggest in Concord, New Hampshire, and used to rent out horses and some of those selfsame carriages – only to also lose his business by sticking to renting out horses instead of transitioning to autos, which he thought were noisy, dirty, and a passing fad. I have lost fortunes on both sides of Mom's family, and if that was not enough, Ferdinand invested heavily in the stock market in the 1920s with predictable results. In the fall of 1929, Grandmother Katherine forbade him from wallpapering the den with the useless stock certificates. My mother would tell me these stories, and looking back at them from my viewpoint now, I think she had a more interesting upbringing than I did. I certainly know, for instance, that my father never blew up a closet trying to brew beer during Prohibition, like hers did (which gave my grandparents the only sunken living room in Pittsfield). In finally writing these stories down, it suddenly struck me as if for the first time that when my granduncle Scott was born, George Armstrong Custer was still two years

away from his rendezvous with Sitting Bull at the Greasy Grass of the Little Big Horn. It brings history home in a marvelous way. Going back just one more generation earlier, my mother would often tell me the story of how her own grandmother, Alice Shaw, had shaken hands with Abraham Lincoln while "Honest Abe" had been campaigning in Concord for the 1864 election. She was sitting on her father's shoulders, and with the boost she was the only one to match the president's height.

Sunday dinners were a rich tradition in New England, and may still be, for all I know. After all, I moved to Southern California forty-three years ago now. But back in the day, Scott and Louis and their wives would ride their horse and buggies into town for the Sunday morning service at the Congo church (the First Congregational Church of Pittsfield, to give it the proper title) and Katherine would make an early afternoon dinner for all of them. Usually it was a roast beef, sometimes a baked turkey or ham, potatoes (the great New England vegetable), and always, always, always a big bowl of Double Baked Beans and Boston Brown Bread.

The beans were a family recipe and cooked in a bean pot overnight in a hole in the backyard lined with coals with the pot of beans simmering all night. Grandmother would add her special ingredients, and by the end of the meal, they would all be gone, a testament to her culinary talent. Scott particularly loved them. The Brown Bread, well, that's almost impossible to describe unless you've eaten it, and if you never have, you have missed out indeed. It's a bread based on rye flour, with lots of raisins, a cow's bucket worth of milk churned into butter, what seems like a half a jar of molasses, and it is steamed, not baked. Tradition calls for it to be made in an empty coffee can on the stovetop, and it swells to fit, so it comes to the table as a tubular dark brown loaf, with three ridges encircling it. It is heavy and thick enough to maybe stop a bullet.

This huge meal would wind down about three in the afternoon, with some taking a walk, or a nap, or just playing parlor games (this is when houses still had parlors). Mom's Uncle Scott had a routine that he followed every Sunday, which was to take a newspaper and cigar, walk over the knoll in the backyard down towards the Suncook River, and avail himself of the outhouse. Yes, my grandparents did have indoor plumbing by this time, but Granduncle Scott had been born and raised without it, and maintained that moving one's bowels inside the house was the height of incivility, nothing short of rude and without proper regard for anybody's olfactory senses. Plus, he got to smoke a cigar while reading the paper, underneath a giant elm with a fine view of the Suncook River rapids. Katherine did not agree with smoking cigars, so it was a win-win situation for him. Ferdinand kept the two-holer outhouse standing just for his brother, even though no one else used it. I seem to have inherited Scott's appreciation of outhouses. According to my sister Kathy, when I was about three or four years old my mother took us to see some of her friends in Hopkinton, who had a three-holer out the back door. As my mother, sister and I all had to go, we were sitting side by side by side when I piped up with, "This is nice, we can all go at the same time!"

Unfortunately for Scott, one Saturday afternoon two of the local boys had to clean some farming equipment and they used kerosene soaked rags to do so.

After they finished, they had a bucket of the cleaning fluid left and nowhere to dispose of it. One of them had the bright idea to throw it in my grandparents' outhouse, since who would use that in this day and age? They threw the whole kit and caboodle in after dark that night and closed the door. The next day after Sunday dinner, Scott strolled to the outhouse, entered, dropped his trousers and the trap door of his union suit, sat down, lit his cigar, and threw the still burning match down the second hole. The ensuing explosion rocked my grandparents' house, leading them to believe the town had been struck by an earthquake and the end times had come. It was a half a minute before they realized what had happened and ran into the backyard en masse. They saw the sides of the outhouse scattered to the four winds and found Scott draped over an Elm branch ten feet off the ground, still holding a tattered piece of the newspaper in one hand, cigar clenched between his teeth, and the trapdoor of his union suit flapping in the breeze. According to family legend, he looked down upon them, calmly removed the cigar from his mouth, and thundered, "By God Katherine! What did you put in those beans?"

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*For someone who grew up competing with actual bears for blueberries, broke a bone a minute, electrocuted himself in the barn, and had a tombstone for a back step, it's funny to hear dad thinks someone else had a more interesting upbringing. Growing up, we were always hankering for stories of dad's childhood and the one about the exploding outhouse was one of the most requested by far. The one about cycling close to see a dog that turned out to be a bear was another favorite...I think we thought New Hampshire was an alternate Wild West. I had never in my life been in a position to cycle up to an actual bear – on accident – nor had I probably ever seen an outhouse in real life at that point. Who knew what was really going on in them? Exploding outhouses were accepted as a fact of New Hampshire life. Now that I've been hiking and backpacking around Northern California for the past several years I have my own, occasionally wretched, firsthand experience with outhouses. While I can confirm they are 0% mystical, I do confess this story comes to mind every time I'm in one and it improves even the foulest of them.*

*There's more mythology to this Tale's backstory than I remember. For example, I don't know how to track if a little carriage from Concord traveled across the Atlantic or if it still exists in the company of the majestic plural. Alternatively, the urge to wallpaper a room with worthless stock certificates, I accept without question. It's true to family form (both the dubious talent of losing money and the style of coping). The brewing mishap as well, to a lesser degree, seems like a totally plausible outcome which I'm sure stemmed from a combination of hereditary near blindness and Yankee stubbornness. The easiest fact to picture, though, is Connie playing tetris with the family plot. Both a puzzle and a financial game, it's exactly what dad does when laying out a print job and trying to save some money and paper stock. Different players, of course, but the board is the same and everyone tends to go home happily and orderly in the end.*

*I visited 11 French Circle and the Suncook River on Google Maps, and tried to find where the outhouse would have been. I'm not sure what I expected to spot*

– an obvious crater, ideally – but there's nothing that I can see except for an old footpath between the houses there now and the river, which maybe is what everyone ran along at the sound of Scott's unfortunate explosion. Floral Park Cemetery is just north of there, and you'd pass it on the way out of town to Franklin where much of dad's family lives now, or Boscawen (if you took the northern route) where dad would grow up. Seeing these photographs of Ferdinand and Katherine with the classic early 1900's fixed expressions makes me wonder what their smiles looked like. What their recognizably unique facial expressions were, if they might have laughed or been dumbstruck at Scott being catapulted into a tree.

Katherine's culinary skills may have trickled down the line but it would be, admittedly, an occasionally intermittent trickle. Though no exploded structures have been pinned on dad's cooking, some raised eyebrows, mis-measurements, gagging, and at least one scorched ceiling certainly have occurred. The most memorable from my lifetime (and which actually includes three out of four of the aforementioned points) would be an incident in the late 1990's when "2 tablespoons of flour" was misread as "2 cups" and his beef stew became beef flavored wallpaper paste. After trying – briefly – to eat it, one of us finally burst out with "what happened?!" to which dad replied that he honestly didn't know. A quick review of the recipe led him to whisper "two...tablespoons," eyes wide behind coke bottle glasses. To this day, when poking fun at somebody's avoidable or funny mistake, we'll say "two...tablespoons." and thankfully nobody's dumped that much flour in a recipe since.

Stew aside, dad's bachelor days really have ensured us decades of some superb simple staples. Popcorn, though, and surprisingly, took some work to perfect as evidenced by the kitchen ceiling in his Van Nuys bachelor apartment. Apparently stovetop popcorn can explode if given the chance. I'm not talking about the pot top getting knocked upward as the kernels pop, I'm talking about a proper pillar of fire. According to dad, there was no good explanation. He simply lifted the lid to check the pop progression and flames rammed straight upward into the ceiling, collided with the stucco, and shot outward in all directions. Dad's eyebrows survived by sheer and slim luck, and somehow the ceiling lived on. Shortly afterward, he met my mother. He describes the ceiling as looking, "just like Japan's Rising Sun flag!" She describes it as, "absolutely not that." Who knows what it takes to weaponize popcorn, but he somehow managed it and thankfully mom considered it only mildly concerning. I'm not sure what his landlord thought, but that little apartment off the 405 sure had some battle scars.