

Family recounts early years in rural Saskatchewan

By Jacqueline Lavoie Little

Sylvain Lavoie's grew up in the district of Highgate, Sask., as a member of the nearby parish of St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle in Delmas.

Diogene (Dave) Lavoie and Claire (Hebert) Lavoie began their family on Dec. 28, 1939. First came Adele, then Louis, Roger, Sylvain, myself Jacqueline and Jeanne.

Sylvain was born on April 22, 1947. We were all bouncing, healthy babies; however, Sylvain contracted rheumatic fever at the age of five. He spent three months in the hospital. He spoke only French. He felt the staff was laughing at the way he spoke so he quickly learned English. While in the hospital he had to educate the nurses as to which side of his head to part his hair. We can see that he was a bit of a perfectionist even at this early age.

Sylvain attended White Cap School in Highgate, three-and-a-half miles from our farm. It was a one-room school, so he always had at least two siblings in the same classroom. Part of Grade 8 was taken at the neighbouring Tulip School. We used to walk a mile across the field over the drifts of snow in the winter to the neighbours to ride with them in their caboose. In summer we would ride our bikes or go with our own horse and buggy.



At recess we played softball, soccer, prisoner's base or anti-anti I over. In the winter there was always a skating rink behind the school for hockey games. At the end of the school year there were the traditional field days, and annual picnics.

The highlight of the school year was the Christmas concert. The stage would be set up and wires strung to hold our best white sheets that each family brought to serve as curtains. We spent many hours learning our lines and rehearsing our parts.

One year, Roger and Sylvain played Polly Wolly Doodle on the accordion and violin while the rest of the boys danced dressed as black workers. When the

curtain opened and Roger and Sylvain saw how many people were in the audience, they got nervous and started playing faster and faster until the dancers couldn't keep up. It ended in disaster (to them) but it was a total hit with the audience. The crowd went wild shouting "Encore!" No other song had been rehearsed so the dancers who had already begun removing the black stockings from their heads, quickly put them back on and went back onstage to repeat the same performance.

After school once a week, Father Bideault would drive from Delmas to teach us our catechism lessons in French; then for sacramental preparation, we would drive to Delmas. During summer holidays the neighbours would take turns driving all the kids from the district to swimming lessons once a week in the back of their one-ton trucks.

For family fun we rafted on our slough or played ball. In the winter we skated on our dugout and tobogganed on the hills nearby. Our mother, a teacher, had skis for us, but I seem to remember them being more work than fun.

Growing up on the farm involved a lot of chores: caring for the animals, working in the fields and maintaining the farm and machinery. Sylvain was involved in all of the above. Dad was impressed one morning when Sylvain went out and loaded up a hayrack of bails before breakfast and parked it in front of the house for all to admire.

One fine summer day, Adele, Louis, Roger and Sylvain were all going bailing. I was only four at the time, so Mom didn't want me to go. I begged loud and long until Mom gave in and allowed me to go.

We had trouble with the bailer and headed home with only a third of a load of bales. Sylvain was riding on the chute at the back end and seemed to be having a great time so I went to join him. It was great fun until we hit some hardened ruts and I bounced right off on to the ground. The first wheel of the hayrack went over my legs and I quickly rolled away before the back wheel went over me.

Sylvain hollered out to Louis who was driving, "You killed her! You killed her!" Actually I wasn't hurt at all. The back wheel would have been more painful as that's where the load was. I requested that Mom not be told. I sheepishly went straight to the bathroom to have a bath, and when I got downstairs, Mother knew about my mishap. I'm not sure who told her.

Helpful as we were as kids growing up on the farm, we did cause a few problems -- one of them being burning down the chicken coop. While we raked and burned leaves, the fire caught on to a pile of straw adjacent to the coop. It didn't take long for the whole thing to take off in flames.

Sylvain ran to bring the news to our mother who was painting the living room at the time. At first she thought he was joking. Perhaps Sylvain had a hard time believing it himself as he ran back to take another look. He came back to repeat the news more emphatically this time and Mother came to take a look herself.

She quickly got on the phone and cranked the distress signal (one long ring on the crank phones at that time) and in a flash all the neighbours arrived. The nearest, Joe Lavoie, came across the fields with a team of horses and long wagon. Dad saw the smoke from the field where he was working and he came as fast as the tractor would travel. I can still picture Dad on top of the barn dumping pails of water so it wouldn't catch on fire as it was very near to the chicken coop. It was a traumatic experience for us kids as we watched singed hens exiting to safety.

In their teens, Louis and Roger put their mechanical skills together and built a go-cart using Dad's motor from his grain auger, front wheels from the combine pickup, and back wheels from the garden tractor. They had Dad's permission for this venture.

Sylvain inherited the go-cart, but got pulled over by the police on the highway as it had no brakes, no lights and wasn't licensed. The policeman was impressed with the "mechanical marvel," as he put it, but Sylvain was given a warning and had to drive home in the ditch. In the process, a drive cog fell off one wheel, so from then on it was one-wheel drive. Sylvain eventually sold the go-cart for \$100 and got to keep the money.



Sylvain had a knack for business. At about the age of 12 he took over the hen and egg business from Mom. He fed the hens making sure they got enough oyster shells for nicer eggs, cleaned the coop and sold the eggs. He had his younger sisters' help with washing the eggs. It wasn't hard to make a profit as our dad provided the feed. Sylvain kept accurate records of all his income.

Part of his training for bookkeeping no doubt came from 4-H. In the Highgate 4-H Beef Club he won awards for his record book as well as for his calf. We looked forward to 4-H meetings which were once a month on a Friday evening. Meetings were always followed by sandwiches and cake. The kids got to drink coffee. There was no juice. The neighbours were mostly Protestant, but were very considerate in not showing up with meat sandwiches.

As younger sister to Sylvain, I was always impressed with his many talents. He excelled at public speaking, violin playing, won many oratory contests, and was a high achiever in school.

At about the age of 11, he took up baking. He found a recipe for Christmas dominoes in the newspaper and began making them -- much to our delight. These are the Nanaimo bars we know today, except they had drops of filling on top to make them look like dominoes. He would trade recipes with our cousin Gerald, who also did baking in their household. Later on, Sylvain became excellent at making his signature omelette.

While a teenager and young adult, Sylvain was very sociable, and the life of a party. He put his violin on the shelf but took up guitar. He entertained with both his playing and his singing.

Our parents were a major factor in our upbringing and our faith. We all knelt down in our growing up years to pray the rosary together. In fact, Sylvain attributes his vocation to the priesthood to the peace he used to experience after we said the rosary as a family, or when we returned by car from attending Sunday mass in Delmas.

Mom and Dad had an enormous amount of patience and never scolded us for our antics, not even when we burned down the chicken coop, nor when Roger and Sylvain filled up the neighbour's (abandoned, they thought) well with rocks. Our Dad humbly helped our neighbour remove the rocks.

Our mother had extremely well-developed social skills. I can remember her sitting my brothers down and reading to them from a book of etiquette. On Sunday after church, she had something to say to everyone. After up to an hour on the church steps visiting after mass, we would begin our peaceful trip home as we meandered through the country checking up on the roads as Dad was reeve of the Rural Municipality of Battle River.

Sylvain in his teens was the proud owner of a Honda motorcycle. He was leaving for Saskatoon with his Honda for a doctor's appointment to see about a skin graft to prevent nosebleeds. Helmets weren't obligatory yet, but Mom insisted he purchase a helmet before leaving for Saskatoon. Sylvain did so, and it may have saved his life as he had an accident on that trip, and the helmet came out with a serious dent in it.

Our parents both supported our music lessons. Saturday was music lesson day. After cleaning the house all morning, we would all go to town in the afternoon for our lessons. After our respective lessons, we would all meet at the Co-op store. Visitors to our place could never leave without being entertained with a few tunes at the insistence of our dad.

We did some playing in the community as well, especially Roger on accordion and Sylvain on violin. Dad read the Bible every evening after supper. When he had finished reading the Bible, he would go get another version and start all over. He read it from cover to cover in both French and in English.

When Sylvain was away at university and later at the seminary, Dad would make a note of points to discuss with him when he would come for a visit on a weekend. Then the lengthy discussions on Scripture would begin.

In Sylvain's third year of university, he joined an international cast of Up With People, and toured with them for seven months through the States, France and Belgium while completing two university classes by correspondence. The summer following that experience, he took one final class at summer school to complete his BA.

I was looking forward to being at university with Sylvain, but he slipped away unannounced to the Oblate novitiate at Arnprior, Ont. (He didn't want anyone to know until he was certain for himself.) He had taken his high school at St. Thomas College in North Battleford.

While driving to Arnprior in his Toyota that fall of 1969, he began to question his decision wondering what he was doing, going to novitiate when he hadn't even been an altar server? He had a quick thought that he should turn south and head to Mexico. He did that and his Toyota started making some knocking noises.

He returned to the border town, realized that he had neglected to change the oil for too long while pondering his future, got that done and the noise stopped. He then changed his mind about going to Mexico, and continued to Arnprior. There he felt the same peace, on arrival, that he felt at home after the rosary and in the car after mass, and knew deep inside that this was where God wanted him to be.

And that is the beginning of another stage of his life.