

“Bernier the Lumberman”: The mystery carver of Biddeford, Maine, identified

The story seems apocryphal: a French-Canadian lumberjack crippled by a falling tree around 1900 began to create small wood carvings and to sell them to support himself. He merited a brief mention in the seminal *American Folk Sculpture* by Robert Bishop in 1974,¹ and by the late 1990s his work was being avidly sought by folk art collectors, attracting prices well into the thousands of dollars.

But nothing was documented about “Bernier the Lumberman,” so when the Saco Museum in Maine acquired three examples attributed to him, we resolved to learn more about him. Local records offered little help without a first name, but a query placed by the museum in the local newspaper last year brought an immediate response.² Richard Boissonneault called to say that Bernier had been his great-uncle, and Boissonneault’s cousin Lorraine Patt remembered the carver as an impoverished man living with his wife in a tiny house on West Street in Biddeford. Another great-nephew, Guy Champagne, produced a faded snapshot showing an elderly man and two women with a carved squirrel and bird in front of them. On the wall was a carved butterfly similar to one that had recently sold in South Deerfield, Massachusetts.³ That man, Champagne told us, was Romuald Bernier, whom he remembered carving and painting animals like these.

The revelation of his first name allowed us to piece together a biography for Bernier. Born Joseph Romuald Bernier in April 1873,⁴ he was the fifth of six children of Elziard and Hanriette Lacourse Bernier of Sainte Hénédine, near Quebec City, Canada. The family was still living there in 1881,⁵ but in 1886 Elziard appears as a laborer in the Biddeford city directory.⁶ During this period, thousands emigrated from Quebec to Maine on the Grand Trunk Railroad to fill often low-paying jobs at the textile mills along the Saco River. Romuald (the later spelling of his name) joined his father, and on December 31,

1894, he married Georgiana Turgeon at Saint Joseph’s Church in Biddeford.⁷ They had seven children, of whom at least two died in infancy.⁸ Georgiana herself died in 1909, just three months after their infant son Alfred,⁹ and on July 20, 1912, Bernier married Anthenaise Beauchemin.

He appears annually in Biddeford’s “Men’s Census” as a “day laborer” through 1921.¹⁰ The following year his name appears with no address listed, and in 1923 “Excused, cripple” is noted next to his name in red ink. Similarly, the 1922 city directory lists Bernier and his wife

as living in Biddeford, but he was unemployed. All this supports the family’s memory that he was paralyzed when a falling tree broke his back while he was working as a lumberjack.

Starting in 1932 the directory lists Bernier as “woodworker,” indicating that he had begun his second career. Importantly, this indicates that his works should probably be dated to the 1930s and 1940s, rather than to about 1900, as earlier scholars have hypothesized. The family remembers that he carved constantly, using a pocketknife and whatever wood he could acquire. All the carvings we have

observed are painted with hatched brushstrokes in colors ranging from muted to vivid. Though fluid and self-assured, the carving is relatively simple; the basic outline provides the sculptural form, while details such as feathers, beaks, and wings are delineated by deep to delicate incisions. Some of the objects are essentially two-dimensional, their reverse sides unpainted and uncarved, although they have bases that suggest they were not meant to be wall-mounted.

Most known examples are modest in



Romuald Bernier (1873–1952), his wife Anthenaise (1883–1959), and his sister Georgiana in a photograph of c. 1940s. Photograph by courtesy of Guy Champagne.

Eagle by Bernier, 1930s–1940s. Carved and painted wood; approximate height 36, width 36 inches. Private collection.

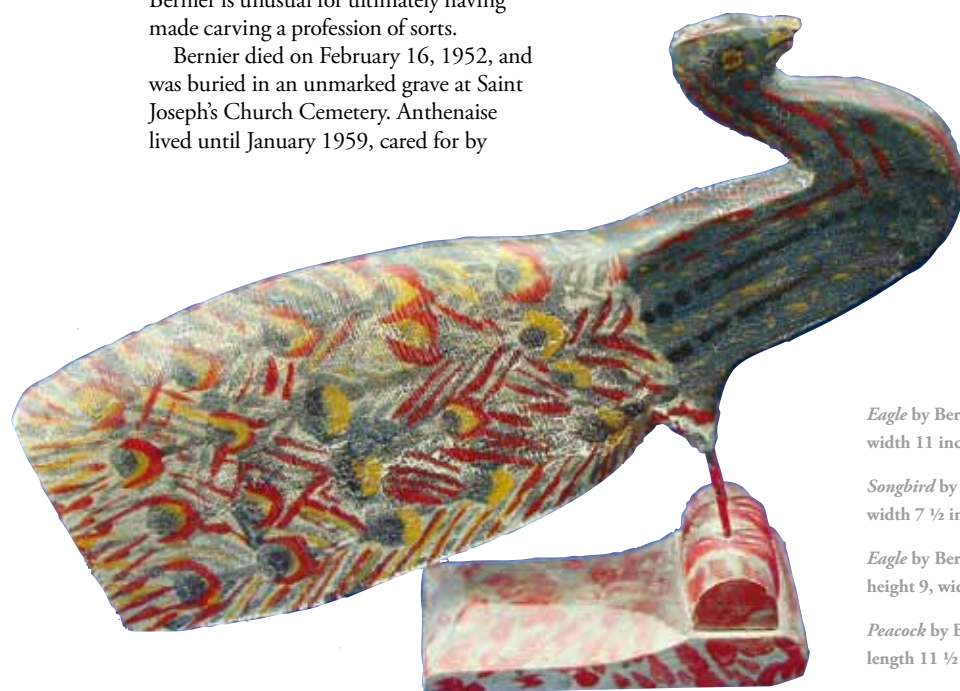
scale, perhaps pieces that he offered for sale “on the street,” as relatives recall. Indeed, one peacock bears a penciled price of ten cents underneath the base. But Bernier family members also remember a now lost floor lamp, four or five feet tall, carved to look like a tree with songbirds scattered throughout the branches. Another large piece is the eagle shown on page 70, which remains in family hands. They recall that a large eagle was displayed on a car hood in a 1936 Biddeford parade,¹¹ but it is unlikely to have been this one, since the injured bird positioned underneath the raptor’s beak is detachable and would surely dislodge if displayed in motion.

Bernier’s work fits into a tradition of Franco-American woodcarving with roots in a school of arts and crafts founded in 1672 by Monsignor François de Laval, the first bishop of Quebec, which sought to establish the French Renaissance tradition of religious wood carving in New France.¹² The mass immigration of French Canadians to work in New England’s mills brought the tradition south. Franco woodcarving in the United States ultimately embraced many secular and rural subjects, and was most often a “home” art—done during idle hours, making toys for children or knickknacks for parlors. Bernier is unusual for ultimately having made carving a profession of sorts.

Bernier died on February 16, 1952, and was buried in an unmarked grave at Saint Joseph’s Church Cemetery. Anthenaise lived until January 1959, cared for by

the Boissonneaults. Interest from folk art scholars came only after their deaths. According to Richard Boissoneault, around 1960 his mother, Nora, was contacted by Daniel J. Foley, who was researching a book about New England folk art. He interviewed her regarding Bernier, but no mention of him appears in the book.¹³ However, after Bishop included Bernier in *Folk Art Sculpture*, collectors and dealers alike became more aware of this modest woodcarver. In 2001 a record price of \$12,100 was achieved for a thrush-like bird with berries in its beak that sold at Cyr Auction in Gray, Maine—a far cry from the ten-cent price tag on the peacock sold in Bernier’s lifetime.

Romuald Bernier is one of many regional artists, artisans, and historical figures featured in Making History: Art and Industry in the Saco River Valley, a new permanent exhibition at the Saco Museum in Maine. www.sacomuseum.org.



¹ Robert Bishop, *American Folk Sculpture* (E. P. Dutton, New York, 1974), pp. 173, 284. ² Leslie Rounds, “Mystery Carver, Step Forward,” *Saco-Biddeford-Old Orchard Beach Courier*, June 25, 2009. ³ For a “Carved and Painted Folk Art Butterfly by Biddeford, Maine Carver Bernier. Circa 1900–10,” see houseoftheferret.com/index.php?id=449. ⁴ Death records, Biddeford City Hall. ⁵ Quebec 1881 census accessed through familysearch.org. ⁶ This and all subsequently referenced Biddeford city directories are in the Roy P. Fairfield Maine History Room, Dyer Library, Saco. ⁷ *Marriages of St. Joseph’s Church, Biddeford, Maine*, comp. Youville Labonté, vol. 1 (Franco-American Genealogical Society, Auburn and Biddeford, Me., 1979). ⁸ The 1900 United States Census, Ward 2, Biddeford, Maine (accessed through heritagequestonline.com) lists Bernier as the father of two young daughters, Marie Ann and Blanche, later known as Bernadette. A son Wilfrid was born in October 1904, followed by another daughter Bertha, and a son Rudolphe (b. 1908). Antoinette (1903–1904) and Alfred (d. 1909) died in infancy. All St. Joseph’s Cemetery burials were found in *St. Joseph’s Cemetery Records, Biddeford, Maine 1870–1990* (Franco-American Genealogical Society, Biddeford, Me., 1999), vol. 1. ⁹ *Biddeford Daily Journal*, November 15, 1909. ¹⁰ The censuses are in the Dyer Library Archives. ¹¹ Three parades took place in Biddeford to celebrate York County’s Tercentenary on August 27, 1936. ¹² Erwin Ottomar Christensen, *Early American Woodcarving* (1952; reprint Dover Publications, N. Y., 1972), p. 116. See also J. Russell Harper, “Folk sculpture of rural Quebec: The Nettie Sharpe Collection” *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 103, no. 4 (April 1973), pp. 724–733. ¹³ There is no mention of Bernier in either edition of Priscilla Sawyer Lord and Daniel J. Foley, *The Folk Arts and Crafts of New England* (Chilton, 1965; reissued in paperback 1975).

LESLIE ROUNDS is executive director of the Dyer Library and Saco Museum. JESSICA SKWIRE ROUTHIER is the museum director.

Eagle by Bernier, 1930s–1940s. Carved and painted wood; height 7 ½, width 11 inches. Saco Museum, Maine, purchase.

Songbird by Bernier, 1930s–1940s. Carved and painted wood; height 6 ¾, width 7 ½ inches. Saco Museum purchase.

Eagle by Bernier, 1930s–1940s. Carved and painted wood, approximate height 9, width 13 inches. Private collection.

Peacock by Bernier, 1930s–1940s. Carved and painted wood, height 8 ½, length 11 ½ inches. Saco Museum purchase.