

# CLÉOPHAS LACHANCE

(1911 - 1989)



*"Le Village Historique du Nord"*





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## LINDSAY GALLERY

986 NORTH HIGH ST. | COLUMBUS, OH 43201 | 614-291-1973

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# CLÉOPHAS LACHANCE

(1911 - 1989)

Lafontaine, Quebec

In 2018, I was approached by an antique picker who said he had acquired numerous wood-carvings that he thought might interest me. He proceeded to open boxes filled with carving after carving of stoic people mostly around 9" tall, dressed in styles from the 40s and 50s. He said he had no idea who the artist was and the person he bought them from also knew nothing of their history.



I was mesmerized by this parade of people; men, women and children with very similar faces and expressions reminiscent of the sameness of the people portrayed by West Virginia carver S.L. Jones. After acquiring them, I searched each figure for clues and found almost nothing. Finally, one word stood out. On a small tableau depicting a woman at a kitchen table rolling out dough there was a container labeled "Farine", the French word for flour.



## **Baker**

c. 1970s - 80s

8 x 5 x 4 inches

Woodcarving, mixed media





*Cléophas Lachance circa 1930s*

I was relatively certain the carvings were not from France, which led me to believe they were from Québec. What followed was a yearlong wild goose chase for information, contacting people all over Canada. Clues came bit by bit until I found Ottawa collector Don Hewson who said he also had pieces by the same artist in his collection. He believed them to be by Cléophas Lachance and said he thought he had found the Lachance family!

Not only did Don Hewson find the Lachance family, they invited him for a visit in July of 2019. Luckily Hewson's wife speaks French, because Cléophas's wife and son do not speak English.

What they found was that these carvings were not individual works, but parts from a huge outdoor environment that Cléophas called "Le Village Historique du Nord," "The Historical Village of the North."



*A section of "Le Village Historique du Nord"*

The family graciously loaned us old photos, and shared stories of this obsessive creation.

Hewson has written an article about Cléophas Lachance and his village for *Canadian Antiques & Vintage* magazine which is reprinted here with their permission.

*- Duff Lindsay, 2019*



## Cléophas Lachance

### ***"A Folk Art Feat of Historic Proportions"***

Published in *Canadian Antiques & Vintage* magazine

By Don Hewson, 2019

(reprinted with permission)

What does an energetic construction foreman do when he retires at 63? Instead of supervising 200 men on five job sites, he starts building a fully functioning village of over 40 homes with supporting commercial establishments and utilities - a miniature historic community of more than 300 carved citizens and in excess of 100 buildings located in his backyard in Lafontaine, Québec (now St-Jérôme).

To accomplish this folk art feat, Cléophas Lachance drew on his love of carving, his training as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, his understanding of construction and his joy of sharing his passion with his grandchildren. In just fifteen years before his passing in 1989, this tireless talent created a local attraction that earned him the title "the second mayor of Lafontaine" (*L'Avenir du Nord*, July 30, 1985).



*Very few photos of the entire village have survived. These snapshots are courtesy of the Lachance family.*





Le Village Historique du Nord, situé à Lafontaine, est une petite merveille. Il aura fallu près d'une année à Cléophas Lachance pour construire cette cité miniature. Toutefois, ce

qui est le plus difficile à faire selon M. Lachance, c'est d'y couper le gazon...

Créateur du "Village Historique du Nord"

# Cléophas Lachance: Le deuxième maire de Lafontaine!

par Jacques Laplante

Saviez-vous qu'il existe à Lafontaine un village historique miniature? Baptisé Village Historique du Nord, cette petite cité renferme toutes les composantes des villages d'antan.

Une petite promenade à travers ce village nous fait découvrir un monde vivant. Sur une superficie de 2.400 pieds carrés sont érigés 40 bâtiments. S'ajoute à cela près de 300 personnages. On remarque entre autres

l'église, l'école, la ferme et ses animaux, l'hôtel, le magasin général, la maison du médecin ainsi que la gare et son train qui file à vive allure. Toute cette attraction est rendue vivante grâce à 14 petits moteurs installés un peu

partout à travers le village. Il y a même une rivière qui, aussitôt le moteur en marche, coule d'est en ouest. Elle trouve son origine aux côtés de la maison du forgeron pour s'arrêter au centre du village où quelques baigneurs en profitent pour y faire des plongeurs.

Un an de travail

Il aura fallu près d'une année au créateur du village, Cléophas

Lachance de Lafontaine pour mettre en scène cette impressionnante exposition. Menuisier à la retraite, Cléophas

Lachance a toujours aimé travailler le bois. "Dès que j'avais un moment de libre j'en profitais pour sculpter" nous raconte le sympathique septuagénaire. Le bricolage n'a plus de secret pour M. Lachance. Il a construit lui-même sa propre maison et c'est lui qui y a

aussi construit les meubles.

En ce qui regarde le petit village, l'idée lui est venue après avoir construit maisons-jouets pour ses petits-enfants. "Pour amuser mes petits-enfants je leur construisais des petites maisons. Après en avoir fabriqué deux ou trois j'ai décidé d'en faire une plus grosse et plus belle. J'en ai construit une, deux, trois, puis soudainement je

me suis retrouvé avec une dizaine de bâtisses. Je me suis alors dit pourquoi ne pas faire un village et je l'ai fait".

Remisage

On ne dispose pas d'un village de 40 bâtiments où les dimensions des maisons sont d'environ trois pieds par deux pieds de haut, comme on veut. M. Lachance a donc installé son village dans la cour arrière de sa résidence. Lorsque l'automne arrive le "maire" entrepasse ses

plus jolies maisons dans sa remise et recouvre les autres d'une toile. M. Lachance, qui désire agrandir son village, l'été prochain, profitera de l'hiver pour construire d'autres maisons. Le beau temps venu, il réinstallera le tout à l'extérieur afin que tous ceux qui le désirent puissent visiter le village miniature. Les personnes qui aimeraient faire une visite au Village Historique du Nord, peuvent le faire en contactant M. ou Mme Lachance à 438-7968.



A 70 ans Cléophas Lachance n'a rien perdu de son talent inné pour la sculpture du bois. Le "maire" du Village Historique du Nord a construit du bout de ses doigts un véritable petit monde.



Photo R L'AVENIR DU NORD, 30 juillet 1985

Parmi les plus belles pièces figure l'église où on assiste à un mariage. Plus de 300 personnages, sculptés par Cléophas Lachance, vivent à l'intérieur du village.



La Fromagerie et l'Ecole sont au nombre des 40 bâtiments qui forment le village. Ce dernier est construit sur une superficie de 2.400 pieds carrés.



He started by fashioning a few doll houses to keep his hands busy and to amuse the children in his family. Then, he thought to himself, why not fabricate a complete village. The installation which he constructed in his backyard became so large and complex that he could only put his favourite pieces into winter storage; the rest he covered. As a result many of the components became weathered and naturally aged, a process which adds to their charm.



Cléophas and his wife Aline, the proud family tour guide, hosted numerous visitors who were asked to sign a guest book and donate left-over paint, scraps of wood and electric parts. This quiet, determined folk artist was a local hero and devoted family man. Although his opus was immense, it was never for sale until the Lachance family had no other option but to dismantle it. It represents a body of work worthy of consideration as a significant folk art achievement by an artist who wanted to preserve and celebrate the memories of earlier times in Québec.





Cléophas called his miniature community "Le Village Historique du Nord." The folk art collector community will no doubt call it awe-inspiring, not just because of his prolific carving and woodworking efforts - there have been many prolific carvers in the Québec tradition - but because he was trying to capture for posterity a vanishing way of life.

In addition to the village, Cléophas carved hundreds of personages and objects for display. In examining his figures one can differentiate clearly between those that were kept indoors and those exposed to the weather, an observation which also applies to his buildings and scenes.







In a 1980s video which combines an interview by a local TV station with Lachance home movies, Cléophas is shown wandering through his domain of miniatures (buildings ranging from 30 to 90 cm in height), in his backyard studio and basement workshop. The walls and shelves are lined with sculptures - figures supported on wooden bases, various lathe-turned pieces, complete scenes with single and multiple figures doing daily chores, work-related and recreational activities. As Cléophas bends over to rearrange figures, scenes, machinery and buildings, one gets the sense that his community was always evolving. With Aline by his side trimming vegetation by hand and providing her opinions, it is clear this was a family project.

The video shows family members as sculptures standing by their homes, commercial establishments from different periods, a house being rescued by the fire department (Cléophas having put smoldering grass inside), a train passing by beside gatherings at churches, the school and historic sites. It's quite a mélange of contemporary and early memories created without restrictions on scale, time and material. True folk art freedom of expression.

The Lachance family has a long history in Québec. Cléophas's earliest ancestor, Antoine Pépin dit Lachance was born and baptized in 1636, emigrated from Normandie, France to Nouvelle France and settled on the Île d'Orléans where he died in 1703. Seven generations later the surname was shortened to Lachance by his grandfather, Thomas Lachance.





Cléophas's father, Mathias Lachance (born in Beauce, Québec), and his mother, Ernestine Lefebvre, were married on February 22, 1909. Because of their consanguinity, the bishop in the archdiocese of Québec had to approve their marriage. Shortly after their wedding they moved to the United States where Cléophas was born in 1911. Their second child, he was baptized at Église St-Georges in Manchester, New Hampshire on May 29, 1911. His parents probably immigrated to the United States in search of work as many Québécois were employed in the forestry industry and textile mills in New England.

At the age of twelve, his family returned to Québec. A short time later, Ernestine passed away, an event that had a traumatic impact on her son. Throughout his life he was quite reserved and serious and became a focused, imaginative individual who believed that you always had to have a vision in mind that could be adjusted as you went along. He remained true to this approach to life in his work, family matters and folk art.

Between the ages of twelve and nineteen little is known of his life. For a time he worked as a gardener for a physician in Québec City. The latter had a workshop in which Cléophas made a piece of furniture that won him first prize in a local competition. To encourage his talent, the physician paid for him to take carpentry and woodworking courses. His protégé went on to become a very good interior-finishing carpenter accomplished at building everything from kitchen and bathroom cabinetry to complicated staircases. This all took place at a time when these finishing touches were built onsite and not fabricated in a factory.



*Cléophas and Aline Lachance*

After Québec City, Cléophas moved to East Brighton near Thetford Mines. Then in 1940 he relocated to the Abitibi where he met his wife Aline Leblond. They were married on August 12, 1942. Their oldest son was born in the Abitibi, the first of 6 children. He has been very helpful in the telling of this story. It was he who brought samples of Cléophas's work to sell at the Lachute Flea Market in Western Québec. Local antique dealers there were quick to recognize his talent and soon discovered the magnitude of his folk art productivity.



Even though Cléophas started carving in the 1950s he really had to put his creativity on hold until his retirement as a consequence of his demanding work as a construction foreman and the raising of his family. His early pieces are very detailed sculptures, often painted silver. But when he retired at 63, the creative flood gates opened. After he built his home in Lafontaine, his 2400-square-foot backyard became his palette, for it was here he envisioned and created an historic village.

One cannot but be astounded by both the scale of the project and his dedication to detail. In addition to the hundreds of carved figures and buildings, there was a multitude of supporting objects including garbage cans, light posts, hydro poles, roads paved with tarpaper, artificial grass lawns and water features. Present were all the representative service and manufacturing businesses from the early 20th-century period: a dairy, cheese factory, carnival, smithy, sawmill, snack bar, farms, marché aux puces (flea market), motel, auto repair shop and even a "house of negotiated affection" aka brothel. To keep the law and religious order, he provided a police station and a number of churches.



### **House of Negotiated Affection**

c. 1970s - 80s

11 x 4 x 2 inches each

Woodcarving, paint

A closer look at his work reveals the remarkable detail that somehow has survived exposure to the elements such as a small handle on a piece of machinery, the tiny wooden French fries on a snack bar sign, the little cat sitting on a roof, the gingerbread under a soffit or the leather strap on a miniature purse. It's all there representing hours of exacting attention and enormous patience.



### ***House with Man, Cat and Dog***

c. 1970s - 80s

15 x 15 x 10 inches

Woodcarving, paint

During his family outings and vacations Cléophas would often stop the car and draw a quick illustration of a shutter or dormer on a home, the look of a gas lamp or the posture of a person at work, all to be incorporated later into his folk art sculpted in his two workshops. A family vacation to the Charlevoix region near Québec City inspired him to reproduce faithfully all the buildings made famous in the television series "Le Temps d'une Paix" (1980-1986) including the historic Rose-Anna residence. He also duplicated his farm in the Abitibi and the homes of his children, all of which were integrated into his village.



His figures, which vary in refinement, were carved primarily with a pocket knife and he could make three to four a day. To simulate the texture of clothing fabrics, he covered those areas with glue and then coated them with fine sawdust which he painted in a rainbow of colours. Sometimes he used black markers to draw jewelry around necks and wrists. In the windows of some buildings he put glass and installed fourteen small electric motors to animate certain features like the circular saw in the sawmill and the rotating carousel and ferris wheel in the carnival. No detail was too small for his attention.



The tools in his two workshops included a table saw, lathe, jig saw, pocket knife, Stanley knife and professional carver's knives. His construction materials, often donated, were salvaged plywood, chip board, particle board, scrap softwood, shakes, steel and electrical wire, plastic flowers, alphabet soup letters, sheet metal bits, pictures from magazines for drapes, words from the newspaper for titles, all held together with tiny nails and carpenter's glue. The term "multi-media" could have been invented to describe Cléophas's art.

Both the enormity and finesse of his installation attracted much attention in community newspapers. Such publicity, of course, resulted in many visitors to his home. Two articles in particular provide photographic and written tributes to this quiet Québec folk artist with the amazingly creative soul. To date they constitute the only written documentation of his achievements. Family photographs, videos and conversations with his son and daughters and his 99-year-old wife Aline complete the story.



It is unfortunate that the village could not be preserved intact in one place at his home in St-Jérôme, since the sheer magnitude of his feat has been lost by the breaking up of the collection. The positive result of its dispersion, however, is that many collectors of contemporary folk art in both Canada and the United States have learned to admire and respect his artistic vision.

*My sincere thanks to the Lachance family, without their gracious assistance this article would not have been possible.*

*- Don Hewson, 2019*



***Woman on Horseback***  
c. 1970s - 80s  
11 x 9 x 3 inches  
Woodcarving, mixed media



***Man on Horseback***  
c. 1970s - 80s  
10 x 9 x 3 inches  
Woodcarving, mixed media





***Distinguished Couple***

c. 1970s - 80s

11 x 4 x 2 inches each

Woodcarving, mixed media



***Women with glasses***

c. 1970s - 80s

9 - 10 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media





***Kneeling Woman***

c. 1970s - 80s

8 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media

***Smoking Man***

c. 1970s - 80s

8 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media



**Couple... Woman with Slit Skirt**

c. 1970s - 80s

8 x 4.5 x 3 inches

Woodcarving, mixed media





**Woman with Secret Compartment**

c. 1970s - 80s

9 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media



**Two-faced Woman**

c. 1970s - 80s

7 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media

Most of the figures are fairly similarly made, but there are exceptions. We can only speculate about the two-faced woman... and what might have been hidden in the secret compartment.



*Cléophas Lachance on the porch of his summer studio*

## ***The Late-life Obsession of Cléophas Lachance***

by Tom Patterson

When Cléophas Lachance started building what he called "The Historic Northern Village" ("Le Village Historique du Nord") in his backyard in Québec, he unknowingly became a participant in an international phenomenon that transcends national boundaries.

Like other highly motivated creative individuals across many cultures, Lachance (1911-1989) was seemingly compelled to create a self-contained world within the limited domain of his own property. After retiring from a long career as a carpenter, cabinetmaker, and construction foreman in the early 1970s, he spent the remainder of his life carving and painting more than 300 figures and more than 100 miniature buildings that he assembled and installed in the form of a traditional small-town community. Aside from entertaining himself and others who saw his creation, Lachance's post-retirement project was evidently motivated by an interest in celebrating and preserving a style of life that he realized was fast disappearing.



*Lachance "self portrait" carving on the porch*



While many artists and craftsmen throughout the world have turned their creative abilities toward building idiosyncratic “folk-art environments” in their yards and houses, Lachance inhabits a relatively small subset among this group. One aspect of his special status in this context is the miniaturized scale he employed. His handmade buildings - including houses, a motel, a factory, a blacksmith’s shop, a flea market, an auto-repair shop, a police station, a brothel, and a number of churches - range from about one to three feet high, and his figures are scaled accordingly. Although many artists employ miniaturization, Lachance is among a comparative few who have combined multiple self-made miniatures to render an entire townscape and its populace, all designed for display in an outdoor setting.



### **Snack Bar**

c. 1970s - 80s

Woodcarving, mixed media

Such comparisons highlight the ambitious creativity that motivated Lachance’s project and the historical sensibility that informed it. An effort that began with a few dollhouses he crafted to entertain his grandchildren eventually took on a life of its own, expanding to cover 2,400 square feet.

Among somewhat comparable projects is the late Henry Warren’s “Shangri-La” in Caswell County, North Carolina. Instead of using wood, Warren built his miniature village out of white stone and populated it with store-bought figurines. Also, unlike LaChance’s backyard creation, Warren’s was largely inspired by popular songs from the early 20th century. Likewise in something of the same vein are the elaborate, electronically motorized model-train communities that some dedicated enthusiasts have constructed in their homes, although these environments are typically assembled from mass-produced miniatures.



*Henry Warren’s “Shangri-La”*

By the time of his death it had become the miniature equivalent of a fully functioning, early 20th-century village. Among its many structures were miniature replicas of his grown children's homes, buildings on his farm in Québec, and selected buildings in the Charlevoix region of Québec, familiar to many visitors as settings for a popular Canadian television series. He even installed small electric motors to animate certain features.

It's unfortunate that Lachance's remarkable creation couldn't be preserved intact. The breakup and dispersal of its many components following his death led to a temporary loss of information about their creator and their original context. Fortunately, subsequent circumstances have restored much of this information, as a result of which audiences previously unaware of Lachance's work are coming to appreciate it and recognize his important contribution to 20th-century folk art.

**Tom Patterson** is the author of books about visionary artists Eddie Owens Martin (aka Saint EOM) and Howard Finster, along with many published essays, articles, and critical reviews about other artists and their work. Many of his writings about "outsider" art have appeared in the international magazine *Raw Vision*. He lives in North Carolina.



### **3 Children**

c. 1970s - 80s

5.5 to 6.5 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media





***Man with Unbuttoned Trousers***

c. 1970s - 80s

8 inches tall

Woodcarving, mixed media



While most of the figures in the village are approximately the same size, a few are much larger. These range in height from 11 to 13 inches.





**Little House on the Prairie Cast**

c. 1970s - 80s

9 x 9 x 4.5 inches

Woodcarving, mixed media



**Little House on the Prairie Cabin**

c. 1970s - 80s

22 x 22 x 20 inches

Woodcarving, mixed media

(the faded signs above the door say "Little House on the Prairie" and the name and photo of the star of the show Michael Landon)

"Le Village Historique du Nord" was meant to tell what life was like in Cleophas' younger days. But the Lachance family has no idea why he included the house and cast from the American TV show *Little House on the Prairie*! They have no recollection of him ever watching the show.



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Cleophas Lachance photos courtesy the Lachance family

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*"Le Village Historique du Nord," faded snapshot collage*

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