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Letter, Sinclair Lewis to Edwin Lewis [October 30, 1922]

Sinclair Lewis

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Hartford, Monday, October 30. 1922

Dear Dad:

The Quebec motor trip was a great success. We took just two hours over one week -- left at noon, Saturday the 21st, and got back at two, Saturday 28th. The first day we drove only about three hours and stopped for tea and dinner at the house of Owen Johnson, at Stockbridge, in the Berkshires. Remember him? He's the author of "Stover at Yale." etc., which we published when I was with Stokes. He was one of the ushers at my wedding. He's been sick lately -- gallstones operation last June -- but is all right now. He has a pleasant old place, forty acres, largely in garden and lawns, on the edge of town. Present also at dinner was his father, Robert Underwood Johnson, ex-editor of Century, ambassador to Italy under Wilson, and one of the founders of the National Park system. He told us how Italy came into the war -- some time before she actually joined the allies she tipped France off about her intentions, and thus permitted France to use against the Germans the division ^{which} ~~was~~ had guarding the Italian border.

The third day, crossing Lake Champlain, between Burlington, Vt. and the Canadian border, we had to go over on the damndest ferry -- simply a huge flat scow, though with powerful gasoline engines. The lake was frightfully rough, and the scow tilted and rolled, while waves swept up enough to wet the top of the car. Then on into Canada. At the border they examine the car perfunctorily (both coming and going; it would have been a cinch to bring a few bottles of hootch in in our pockets, had we cared to) and give one a permit to take the car in for a month.

I had known that Quebec was French, but I hadn't known how French.

Everywhere the signs are more likely to be in French than in English -- "Traverse de Chemin de Fer" for "Railroad Crossing," and on the barns, "Fumez le Tabac Old Chum"! In the provincial legislature, most, tho not all, of the speeches are in French.

Quebec is only partly dry. At hotels, wine is served only with meals. ~~Whisky~~ Whisky, gin, and brandy can not be bought at any bar -- though it can be bought in bottles or cases at the licensed Commission Stores. But beer is sold without ~~food~~ at bars. The prices are very high -- champagne six, nine, and eleven dollars a quart (we ~~did~~ NOT have any champagne!)

Montreal is a big, busy, modern industrial city, but Quebec city is absolutely old France -- rows of white faced stone houses with glimpses of florid interiors, creeping little crooked streets below the bluff along the water-front, lines of old open cabs -- "caleches" they call them, gay with green bodies and polished brass. In Quebec we saw Cecile Sorel, one of the most famous of Parisian actresses, in a play by Moliere. But Quebec lacks the gaiety of French sidewalk cafes; it is rather Northern and dour.....Nothing could, however, have been lovelier than the view from our windows up in the Chateau Frontenac hotel -- the gray city, church spires, the steely river with ^{freighters} ~~freighters~~ in from Europe, then a broad sloping valley with little villages glinting along it in occasional patches of sunshine, beyond all, the dark peaks of the Laurentian Mountains.

We left Quebec with two inches of snow on the ground and every tree stark bare; we arrived here to find grass still green, and some of the trees green, the rest still brave with crimson and yellow; in two and a half days, ^{of motoring} we had turned the calendar back six weeks or more. It snowed the day before we left Quebec -- the whole air gray with it; then it quit, and thawed, and froze, and thawed again, so that we had a pleasing combination of snow, bare earth, slush, and hard thin skiddy

ice to motor over, at different spots. I started out with chains on -- I had to; we came back a ~~different~~ way; first down a sharp hill from the Chateau to the ferry, across the St. Lawrence, then, at Levis, across the river, ^{from Quebec,} up the darndest hill you ever saw, all snow and ice. But in thirty miles I took them off again. Then we hit one hill ----- We've never been quite so nearly killed in motor-ing. ~~The~~ ^{It} didn't look as though there were any ice on the hill, because the ice was so thin that it took the color of the sand road. As I started down the hill, I just touched the brake, to check her, and instantly I was swung around, the car off the road, heading up a steep gravel bank, bouncing, and suddenly (when I thought we were gone) going down the hill again, while I fought to keep her in the road. It was fortunate for us that there wasn't a deep ditch beside the road there. Oh, that first ~~man~~ day out of Quebec was a peach! It was regular old-fashioned motoring, not boulevard travel. I've given the beginning of it -- though not mentioning that a road sign was so small that we missed it, and went fifteen miles out of our way, and the same ~~man~~ blissful fifteen back again, among tiny French villages along the river. Late in the afternoon, it first rained, then turned bitter cold, so that the windshield was so covered with ice that it was exactly like pebbled glass, and we had to drive against the wind with the windshield open, and Grace wrapped in everything except the spare tire. But all the other days of the trip were perfect.

We saw a lot of glorious scenery, especially in Northern ~~Verm~~ Vermont, between the border and St. Johnsbury -- for example, Lake Willoughby, with mountains running sheer into the lake, and at one side gleaming fields. AND we bought three quarts of real Vermont maple syrup! AND the houses in Quebec province were interesting -- though they were frame, which you wouldn't see in France, they were different in having curving roofs or low galleries round them.

This week I lecture in Philadelphia, on Thursday, then return at once and start a lot of things I have to write. I'm glad to have given up the lecturing; it will save both my time and my nerves. Grace and I both feel strong as oxen after our trip.

Love,

h