Rediscovering Paradise: The Inimitable Rufus Rockhead

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Quebec Heritage News

Vol 7, No. 4 Fall 2013

A Mind at Sea

Henry Fry and the Cosmo

Teapots, Flies, Chains and Phones

QAHN's 2013 Heritage Photo Contest Winners

Other Musical Venues

Cat's Corner and the Potpourri

Quebec Heritage News

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Cover photo: Rufus and Elizabeth (Bertie) Rockhead. Wedding photo taken at the Plaza Studio, New York City, 1928. Photo: courtesy of Anne Rockhead.

Editor's Desk

Crucifixation

by Rod MacLeod

The ornament over the speaker's chair in Quebec's National Assembly is a crucifix – that is, a cross with the figure of Jesus on it. It is a direct reference to that form of execution practiced most famously on the first-century religious leader many hold as the Messiah. It isn't exactly a depiction of that event, nor is it exactly a symbol (a cross, without the figure of Jesus, is a symbol). The best term might be icon. Some crucifixes are quite graphic, suggesting pain and suffering. This one is rather discrete, unthreatening, even pleasant.

I say this, aware that crucifixes are not part of my own religious tradition. My ancestors, going back generations of course, were staunch Calvinists out of Geneva by way of Scotland and western France. They were Puritans who would have found religious icons as pagan as the celebration of Christmas. Some of them may have been iconoclasts, the perpetrators of the often mindless destruction of church decoration that makes studying English Medieval art such a challenge. ("The Reformation," a rueful professor of mine once proclaimed, "was a very bad thing!") As an art lover, and as a human being, I deplore the fervour of those vandals – but I understand their motivation, given that, to them, religious images suggested idolatry, and idolatry was dangerous to your soul.

I also recognize that, on some levels, Calvinism has shaped me. Mine was a very liberal upbringing, but I did absorb the idea from the extended family that certain "pagan" tendencies within Christianity were spiritually questionable. These tendencies included church paraphernalia such as candles, incense, chalices, vestments and, of course, crucifixes. This sort of thing sticks. I love visiting Catholic churches, especially when there are paintings and carvings and a sense of spiritual mystery that transcends denominationalism – but I always feel a little uncomfortable at the sight of the host and the holy water and the crucifixes that some ancestral part of me finds unnerving. Protestants are, admittedly, unusually hung up about idolatry – but that reaction helps me appreciate how, to a great many non-Catholics, a crucifix can be something other than a symbol of selfless sacrifice.

Protestants, furthermore, aren't the only ones in history to have reacted aggressively to Catholicism. Indeed, taking on the church has been a cornerstone of revolutions, from the seminal French one to our own Quiet version. Such animosity has clearly had more to do with the church's power than with its symbols, but symbols are all-too-often the victims of restrictive policies. A great many people feel (and this view is, significantly, well-represented in both France and Quebec) that public display of religious symbols is a threat to the hard-won freedoms that their respective revolutions were all about. Granted, restrictive policies usually emphasize the "public" display of symbols: on soccer fields, at airport security, at licence bureaus. There is a prevailing view that public figures – people connected to, or representing, the state – should present a "neutral" aspect, as though the state could ever be free of cultural influence. Determination by Quebec governments to keep the crucifix on the wall of the National Assembly is evidence that the state is not culturally neutral, and perhaps has no intention of being so despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Our current government's prospective assault on religious symbols is wrong on several counts, beginning with its faulty notions about neutrality. This striving for neutrality is in itself commendable, and follows in the prestigious footsteps of France, the nation that first went through the un-baptism of fire, risking its own soul in an effort to break free from the dominance of one church. Quebec did all this "quietly," of course, but the urge to keep church and state separate is no less noble. One can do this, however, without making unreasonable claims about neutrality and what it is to be secular. Quebec has rejected "multiculturalism" as a policy in favour of "interculturalism" on the perhaps logical grounds that the former is cheaply sentimental and encourages moral relativism while the latter acknowledges neutral territory where cultures may interact freely. Sounds nice – but how does one achieve this neutrality? Shucking one's crosses, scarves and stars may give the appearance of neutrality, but can one so easily shuck one's beliefs, one's traditions, one's prejudices? It is naïve to think so.

To be secular (as I have argued before in this magazine) is not to be free of religion, but rather to be willing to interact with others on non-religious terms. There is indeed a public arena where we meet to do public things – exchange goods, pass laws, educate our young – and when we are there we have to agree to respect some overarching principles, otherwise known as human rights. Often, respect for rights seems to clash with some religious tenets. This is logical, given that rights typically came about in opposition to religious tradition (including the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition). Rights are the product of revolution – including that painfully fought (and still not by any means won) battle for gender equality – not evolution. These days, however, there are elements within all major religions that have come to understand that it is possible to embrace human rights without compromising faith. Others are less sure, and for them the business of interacting in the secular domain is more challenging, particularly when it comes to frontier issues like gender. We don't make their challenge any easier by attacking their cultural symbols – by, in fact, limiting their capacity to work without compromising aspects of their faith that have little or no impact on their jobs. Quebec does itself a great disservice by arguing against multiculturalism; the argument

may be about policy, but it sounds to most people like a refusal to acknowledge diversity. Instead of accommodating diversity, we seem to be trying to pretend it doesn't exist. Those turbans and kippahs make this pretence harder to maintain, so better get rid of them. The result will be to isolate people who hold traditional beliefs, when they might have been integrated through inclusive dialogue and (for want of a better term) reasonable accommodation.

Banning religious symbols would also take away a lot of colour in our lives – important colour. Symbols (and remember that this is the descendant of iconoclasts talking) serve to remind us that we are not all the same, that we have diverse and possibly incompatible (at least at some level) views. Yes, there are some symbols we can all agree should never be displayed, and others that individuals would probably be unwise to sport. In general, however, we have everything to gain from allowing the trappings of religious diversity to be on view, even on public figures. Especially on public figures, who then serve as evidence that the "state" apparatus (eg. teachers, SAAQ employees, and so on) is a reflection of the wider society and not just one interest group. True, some people might not feel comfortable having to deal with officials who obviously have different beliefs than they do, but that again is something they have to deal with. The rest of us also have to deal with their discomfort – sympathetically, of course, knowing that none of us is without prejudice.

In addition to being naïve about neutrality and misguided about diversity, the prospective attack on religious symbols is inconsistent, even hypocritical. If the Quebec government really believed that banning the wearing of religious symbols would bring harmony to its citizenry, it would long ago have legislated against saying prayers before town council meetings (there has been some recent movement on this one, admittedly) and removed the crucifix in the National Assembly. On the latter score, all major political parties seem to agree: the crucifix is sacred, part of our heritage. Apparently, individuals should not express their heritage, or at any rate not if they are in any way affiliated with the state – but it's all right for that state to openly express one particular heritage, in defiance of any attempt to appear neutral.

I do not deny that Catholicism has been a major force in Quebec's history, or that the crucifix is central to Catholicism. In rural areas, you can still see crosses at the sides of roads and in the centres of villages, and in Montreal the mountain sports a large one that lights up at night. These objects are a collective expression of Catholic heritage, just as a cross on a chain around the neck would be a personal one. Do I, as a person of another faith (one, moreover, that is opposed to iconic symbols on principle), find such public crosses offensive? No. Would it matter if I did? No, because these religious symbols are as much a part of heritage as churches themselves, and if I were to object to the presence of churches I would hardly be able to consider myself a good citizen of a free society.

But Catholicism is not the only religion to have had an impact on Quebec's past – very far from it. More to the point, it was never the only religion of the Francophone population, even though generations of politicians and pundits have singled it out as a defining characteristic of French Canada, particularly when resisting Anglo-Protestant acculturation. This view has left a highly dubious legacy. In fact, a (quiet) revolution was required to unseat it as the dominant mythology – or so one would think were it not for the current reverence for symbols like the National Assembly crucifix. But more to the point, this mythology ignored the rich contribution to Quebec's history of non-Catholic Francophones, including the Jews and Muslims who have come from North Africa in recent decades, the Swiss Huguenots of the nineteenth century, and many early French Protestant visitors to these shores (Champlain himself might be counted among them) who would certainly have been more numerous had colonization by Protestants not been banned in 1627. Many historical forces have contributed to the notion that Catholicism was essential to the identity of French speakers, and the National Assembly crucifix perpetuates this mythology. Arguments that it is part of our collective heritage imply that what is not Catholic must inevitably be foreign.

The heritage argument for keeping the crucifix is highly flawed, and inherently offensive. But whether or not anyone finds it offensive is moot, for the issue at hand is values and the way values are projected by public institutions. Here, the proposed charter has gotten things backwards. I say the state, via its laws, should promote the expression of religious diversity among citizens, including those who work for the state – but when it comes to institutions state and citizenry have to think carefully. Some public crosses, including the one on Mount Royal, were in part sanctioned by municipal governments, which is probably questionable but that leads us into the whole Xmas Tree / Crèche controversy. Suffice it to say that public endorsement of religious imagery should only be a problem when certain faiths are clearly privileged over others. I was distressed to hear from my son that in the public high school he attended one of the teachers displayed a crucifix on the wall. I'd have had no objection to her *wearing* a cross, but to hang one on the wall was to imply its endorsement by an institution that has no business doing that kind of endorsing.

One way around this problem of privilege might be for public institutions to adopt a "rainbow" approach, which was one of the proposals for religious education in schools argued some years ago. In other words, Xmas Trees are OK if a town also puts up a Menorah. This solution is an agreeable alternative to official grinchiness at the darkest time of the year. (Of course, my Calvinist streak says just stay indoors on winter nights, but I won't pursue that.) But in general, surely it is far simpler for public institutions to stay as neutral as possible. Whether or not individual public figures can, or should, leave their religious convictions at the doors of schools, courthouses and parliaments, the institutions themselves must not show favouritism. To do so is to thumb the official nose at diversity.

Madame Marois, tear down that crucifix!

President's Message

Plotting a course for the next five years

by Simon Jacobs

Greetings!

Apart from the AGM that was held in Stanstead at the beginning of June, this is my first occasion as QAHN president to address you.

As you may know, Kevin O'Donnell stepped down from the presidency, having spent five years at the helm of QAHN. Under his careful guidance we have seen the organization continue to flourish. Last year QAHN undertook three significant projects (100 Objects, Storynet, and Mapping the Mosaic) alongside its regular duties such as advocacy, keeping our network active and informed, and publishing the *Quebec Heritage News*. None of this would have been possible without the dedication of Kevin, members of the Board, the QAHN staff and all the volunteers who are involved with the organization. I would also like to thank the Department of Canadian Heritage and Quebec's Ministère de la Culture et des Communications for their financial support that allows us to accomplish our mission.

We now need to look ahead to the future, taking stock of what we have achieved and plotting a course for the next five years. In the first week of September, the QAHN board started the strategic planning process with a two-day meeting facilitated by Kit Malo from the Centre for Community Organizations (COCo). Once the information and brainstorming has been sifted and analyzed, we will contact our membership to continue the process and discussion.

One change soon will be the look of our Heritage Line e-bulletin. Rather than a text-only document, there will be an interactive index at the beginning and images to accompany the text. I also hope that people will profit from the section with "Requests for Information" or "Help Needed." Sharing information and know-how makes membership in this network so rewarding.

Another important role we play is in the protection of our heritage. QAHN passed a resolution at the June 2013 AGM regarding the perceived lack of protection of heritage sites afforded under the new Cultural Heritage Law. More information about this can be found on our website, www.qahn.org. Should there be threats to heritage in your area please ensure that we are made aware of the situation.

I look forward to hearing from you in the future and don't hesitate to contact me if you have suggestions regarding the improvement of services offered by QAHN.

Simon Jacobs
President

QAHN News

Security for Heritage Outreach and Workshop Initiative

QAHN is pleased to report that its 15-month project, "Security for Heritage Outreach and Workshop Initiative" (SHOWI), has been funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage in the amount of $114,300. QAHN veteran Dwane Wilkin and Missisquoi Museum curator Heather Darch have been engaged as project managers.

SHOWI will enable QAHN to develop a series of workshops, conferences and other outreach events designed to inform personnel at small community-based museums, heritage organizations and historic sites around rural Quebec about how to attain a greater level of security. Issues to be addressed will include physical security (for buildings and premises), collections security (protection from theft and degradation), virtual security (digital vandalism), and security for staff and volunteers (insurance concerns). QAHN will be producing instructional handbooks and other resources pertaining to security-related topics. Experts from various fields will assist throughout this project.

Over the coming weeks, the project managers will be developing the program for the coming year. For more information, or to sign up for conferences in your area, contact QAHN at: (819) 564-9595; or toll free at: (877) 964-0409.

Strategic Planning

At the beginning of September, members of the board, staff and volunteers, with participation from the Centre for Community Organizations, met in Longueuil to begin mapping out the path that QAHN will take over the next few years. Over the coming months, QAHN will be working to refine a new 5-year strategic plan. We will be looking for feedback from our member-organizations.

Legends of Magdalen

The documentary film "Legends of Magdalen" explores the shipwrecks and treasures of Quebec's Magdalen Islands. The documentary is led by Leonard

QAHN President Simon Jacobs.
Photo: Matthew Farfan

Security for Heritage

Workshops & Resources

Interested in local history? Would you like to learn how you can help preserve this heritage for future generations?

Join the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN) as we explore ways that history societies, small museums, faith groups and other concerned citizens can better secure and protect:

- Historical Properties
- Community Archives
- Cultural Sites & Institutions
- Artefact Collections

You can make a difference!

Learn from museum professionals, conservation specialists and experts in risk management how to:

- Reduce Theft & Vandalism
- Safely Handle Collections
- Plan for Emergencies
- Minimize Liablility

Don't miss this series of workshops and outreach events

Starting April 2014

Visit our website at www.qahn.org for a list of dates and location details beginning November, 2013. or email home@qahn.org to receive notice of upcoming events and information tools.

For more information please call toll-free 1-877-964-0409 or (local) 819 564-9595.

Security for Heritage, Outreach and Workshop Initiative (SHOWI) is sponsored by the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network, with financial support from the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Patrimoine canadien Canadian Heritage

Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network QAHN Réseau du Patrimoine anglophone du Québec RPAQ

Clark, a local fisherman, farmer and self-taught archaeologist who has studied hundreds of sunken ships around the Islands. Executive-produced by Gregory Gallagher, and funded in part through QAHN's StoryNet project, "Legends of Magdalen" was first broadcast on CBC TV's "Absolutely Québec" on August 3. The film is now available on the CBC website at: http://www.cbc.ca/player/ Shows/ID/23995238188/. The Documentary Channel (Canada) will also be airing "Legends of Magdalen" on November 19 at 8:00 p.m. A French-language version will be released later this year, along with an interactive website.

100 Objects DVD

"The Identity of English-Speaking Quebec in 100 Objects," the DVD produced as part of QAHN's successful "Significant Objects for Telling Identity (SOFTI)" initiative, is now available. This stunning DVD, which comes with an attractive 12-page booklet, features essays on each of the 100 objects selected for the project, over 500 photographs, a detailed historical timeline, and six documentary videos. It is a veritable treasure trove, and a must for anyone trying to make sense of the patchwork that is English-speaking Quebec.

To order a copy, please send $13 (which includes shipping and handling) to: QAHN, 400-257, Queen, Sherbrooke, Qc J1M 1K7. For non-QAHN members, add $2.00 per order. This DVD makes an excellent gift or fundraising tool. For bulk orders of 20 or more, please send payment of $6 per DVD, plus $20 s/h. Order while supplies last!

Letters

California Old Girls

Warm congratulations to Sandra Stock for a wonderful article in the Summer 2013 issue of *Quebec Heritage News* on the fascinating Eastern Townships history of Dunham's St. Helen's School!

Years ago, my father proudly informed me that my grandfather Enoch Buzzell of Buzzell Bros. hardware store in Cowansville was on the committee that brought the school into being, so the connection with St. Helen's was natural for his two granddaughters, retired Montreal diocese Anglican priest Rev. Karen Buzzell-Frey and myself. I always joke with California friends that I was brought up in the Victorian era, as Miss Wade's strict regime was still being followed even in the 1950s, and among the many teachers from England we had a history mistress, Miss Coggan, who endlessly enthused about the "glorious British Empire." My experience of the school library was less up-to-date than Sandra's, though, and when I arrived at McGill to study English and American literature I was ashamed to realize that I hadn't read many books published after World War I!

And of course there are so many additional stories and experiences that could be told to bring the St. Helen's story to today's readers. A St. Helen's Old Girls group existed for a while, organized by former Head Girl Holly Higgins Jonas, but it no longer seems to be in existence. Is there a place online where Old Girls could post their stories about their time at SHS? Hopefully some of the "old girls" tales will appear in future *QHN* issues or on the website so they won't be forgotten.

Linda Buzzell-Saltzman
Santa Barbara, California

Seraphic inspiration

It was with great interest that I read the informative article "Traditional Education, Changing Times: St. Helen's School," by Sandra Stock (*QHN*, Summer 2013). The Missisquoi Museum houses a small collection of objects and documentation from the school including a school jacket and class yearbooks. As a small addition to the article, I wanted to mention that Seraph Amanda Comstock Morgan (1838-1919), principal at the Stanbridge East Academy, directed a letter-writing campaign to the community calling for proper education for young women in this region. She believed that sound intellectual training in a cultured environment would ensure a certain degree of independence for women and would provide a new model for the public roles women were being called upon to fill. The Dunham Ladies College was established largely through the support of independent entrepreneurs who had rallied behind Seraph's call for action.

Heather Darch
Missisquoi Museum, Stanbridge East, Quebec

The House that Rockhead Built

Montreal's jazz paradise

by Rohinton Ghandhi

Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'til it's gone.
They paved paradise, put up a parking lot.
- Joni Mitchell

On a chilly Sunday evening in Montreal's Plateau district, a landlord was putting out the trash in a dimly-lit laneway between his buildings. All seemed normal, until his eye caught the glimmer of something metallic at the rear. Squeezing through the alley, he saw the reflection of a large green frame behind layers of debris and pulled it out of the pile revealing its plywood-covered centre. Back in his apartment, he pried off the wood, uncovering what had been hidden for so many years. It was a lost billboard from Montreal's jazz era announcing the "Hottest Show in Town" and "Swing Nite Fri. Sat 8pm - Rockhead's." Unsure of either its history or its value, he passed the piece along.

The breadcrumbs led from there, enticing us to follow the music back to a lost time when a small Montreal nightclub made all the difference in the world of Jazz and beyond.

The faint sounds of jazz…

Standing in an empty parking lot at the corner of Mountain and St. Antoine streets was an eerie feeling. As swirls of dust danced across the asphalt on a cold winter's day, it was almost as if he knew that we were there. For at that moment, we were standing centre-stage at what was once known as "the hippest place for jazz in the world." Over several decades, it was a listed stop in Billboard magazine's "Attraction Routes" for many entertainers and musicians touring through Montreal. The club once boasted having the longest bar in the country (75 feet). It also claimed the distinction of having the first black nightclub owner in Montreal, possibly in Canada. With only his keen sense of knowing what the crowds wanted, his club showcased some of the most talented performers of his time.

Magically, we reopen the double doors of "The House that Rockhead Built" and walk into the smoke-filled nightclub world of Rufus Rockhead's Paradise…

Setting the stage…

Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead was extremely secretive about his birth date, even with his closest family and friends. The limited records we have show only that he was born in the year 1896 in Maroon Town, an independent territory in Jamaica. Like his father, John Rockhead, he came from a long line of "Maroons" who were the proud freedom-protectors against English rule. In early 1918, Rufus Rockhead immigrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where his forefathers had helped build British military installations, and soon made his way to Montreal.

A call to arms…

On January 29, 1918, Rockhead joined Canada's Infantry as a private first-class with the 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st Quebec regiment at $15 pay per month, all of which was forwarded to his mother, Drusilla, back home. Three months later, on March 24, he boarded the *RMS Scandinavian*. The ship was previously named the *Romanic* under the ownership of The White Star Line, and was built in the same Harland & Wolff docks as the *Titanic*, which had been lost only six years earlier. Arriving on the shores of England, Rockhead travelled to a staging area at Bramshott, and then ever closer to the front lines. He served in France in the Canadian Forestry Corps, earned a British War Medal and a Victory Medal, and returned home a hero on March 19, 1919.

A snare-drum picks up a beat with the bass…

The Roaring Twenties brought in the wild times of Prohibition, speakeasies, flappers and the earliest notes of jazz. Rockhead began working as a porter for the CPR Railway, frequently running the Montreal-Windsor route and hopping over to Detroit to "make some real cabbage" during Prohibition. In 1927, he left the CPR and set up a prosperous hat-cleaning and shoe-shine business in Verdun called the Wellington Shoeshine Parlour, located at 6 Stephens Street.

A vintage photo from late 1927, stamped "Plaza Studio," was most probably taken at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, since luxury hotels provided portrait-taking as an in-house service. It shows a young Rufus Rockhead proudly standing beside his new bride, Elizabeth (Bertie). Her long white wedding gown and "peacock" headdress fully comple-

Rockhead's billboard discarded in an alley.
Photo: courtesy of Rohinton Ghandhi.

ment his black tuxedo, white gloves, and top hat. The one flower in his lapel would become his trademark. Rufus and Bertie had met at their local church and

fallen in love. They would go on to raise three children: Jackie, Kenny, and Arvella.

A piano chimes in…

Rockhead always dreamed of owning a bar. In 1928, he applied for a beer permit, but the commissioner replied, "You know we don't give licenses to coloured people." Rockhead persisted and, after eleven months of pulling strings, he became Montreal's first black citizen to hold a tavern license. He first tried purchasing a building on Bleury and "St. Kit's" (St. Catherine), but was refused and reminded that "his place was not uptown, but downtown, after the tracks." Soon after, he purchased a three-storey building and opened a tavern on the corner of Mountain and St. Antoine, the very first street below the tracks.

Early in 1929, Rockhead added a lunch counter, serving full-course meals for 25 cents, and opened a fifteen-room hotel on the uppermost floor. In October, the Crash started the Great Depression, but Rockhead was undeterred. In 1930, Rockhead's Paradise club was officially opened, serving only wine and beer in its new second-floor dining room with a stage where local coloured jazz bands played.

A trumpet joins the group…

After a five-year battle, Rockhead obtained his hard-liquor license and the Paradise became a cocktail bar. One year later, Quebec's Premier Maurice Duplessis cancelled the licenses of all ethnically-owned establishments, a precursor to the 1937 Padlock Act. By now well-experienced and well-connected, Rockhead knew just what to do and soon regained his license. The famous "Rockhead's Paradise" neon sign then lit up the corner block. Yet another law required that hotels have a separate entrance. Rockhead kept the street-level cocktail bar, remodeled the second floor into a nightclub, and converted the old hotel's third floor into an upper dining area, complete with "Stump's Kitchen" (the chef, an amputee with a prosthetic leg, had been given the nickname "Stump" by Rockhead), which was famous for its fried chicken and ribs. The centre of this floor was completely cut out and surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped balcony so that patrons could watch the acts below while dining from their perches above.

The band's in full swing…

The 1940s were the club's heyday, as the war attracted servicemen who were hungry for entertainment. Rockhead's gave them big glittery shows featuring comedians, acrobats, hoofers (tap dancers), exotic-dancers, and a chorus line called the "Rockadets." The house band, Allan Wellman's Orchestra, provided the music for many of these performers. From snake-wielding burlesque dancers on the second floor's main stage to wandering Calypso singers like Lord Caresser crooning the booths with guitar in hand through the street-level lounge below, Rockhead's was "the buzz." His nightclub became as famous as the Cotton Club in New York's Harlem, featuring many great black performers, including Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and two young Montrealers named Oscar Peterson and Charles Biddle. It made Rufus a wealthy man. The club's popularity attracted many celebrities from around the world, including Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson and, at times, the entire Harlem Globetrotters team. It was said that soldiers fighting overseas would tell the guy in the next foxhole, "If you ever get up to Canada, go to Rockhead's."

Rockhead welcomed all into his

Top: Rufus and Bertie, 1929. Photo: courtesy of Anne Rockhead.

Bottom (left and right): Allan Wellman's band at Rockhead's, early 1950s. John Gilmore Fonds, Records Management and Archives, Concordia University.

Paradise, without the race rules of the uptown clubs. He always wore a red carnation in his lapel and handed a flower to each lady as she entered. In his club, black and white musicians performed together freely, so that all could enjoy the jazz, no matter their race.

The players take five…

In 1951, Rockhead brought his son Kenny, now 21, on board and spent $100,000 to double the club's size, installing a new air conditioning system and a water tower. In 1952, with renovations completed, Rockhead refused to make a $40,000 "political contribution" to Duplessis' party. He offered half, which wasn't enough to save his liquor license. Under a mocked-up charge of staying open after hours, the club was padlocked with everything in place, all except $10,000 in alcohol which was never seen again. Rockhead's stand took a heavy toll on him.

For the next eight years, only the tavern paid the bills as the new Paradise rotted away next door, and with it Rockhead's fortune. He sold an apartment building and two duplexes to avoid bankruptcy and was frequently seen sitting quietly on a stool outside his empty tavern on Mountain Street. Only a miracle could save his dream.

The bands return…

In 1960, that miracle came. With the Liberals in power, Rockhead's was back. Re-entering the club was a surreal experience, with cobwebs stretching from ceiling to floor and with dust covering everything as it was in 1952.

Top: Postcard, Rockhead's Paradise. Courtesy of Matthew Farfan.

As a gesture of resistance, Rockhead reopened the club with exactly the same acts as when it was closed down so many years ago, including Allan Wellman back at the helm. After being shut down for so long, the place was practically forgotten. Montreal's action had shifted uptown and television was cutting into nightclub traffic. Although headliners like Redd Foxx, Nipsy Russell, Sammy Davis Jr. and Montreal musician Oliver Jones would fill the club at times, the Paradise kept struggling. Rockhead's reputation would again be its saviour.

In the 1960s, Montreal's hotels and restaurants did not have the same colour discrimination as in the U.S. southern states. This brought black tourists up to Canada. When they came to Montreal, they came to Rockhead's. A few tour buses arrived at first, but soon they all flocked to the Paradise for their holidays. Year after year, the lines of buses grew as did the business. By the summer of 1973, the 300-seat club was filled in 20 minutes and the bar was out of scotch by midnight. Rufus Rockhead simply smiled and said to Kenny, "This is just like the old days!"

The last gig…

In March of 1978, Rockhead suffered a massive stroke and entered the St. Anne de Bellevue Veteran's Hospital. His lively eighteen-hours-a-day / seven-days-a-week schedule was now replaced by two daily nurse-assisted walks through the hospital's corridors. On January 18, 1979, as Rockhead's Golden (50th) anniversary was being celebrated at his club, the man who had personified its spirit sat silently in his room under doctor's orders.

The city decided to celebrate on his behalf, as people from all walks of life gathered at the club to speak of this one man's dignity and of his passion for entertaining them over the last half-century.

Final curtain call…

On brighter days he would remember his son Kenny, and on others, no-one at all. In a wheelchair, with his memory fading, Rufus Rockhead passed quietly on September 23, 1981, joining Elizabeth who had gone nineteen years before him. Along with him went the echoing sounds of jazz that he had brought to his city. A year later, the Paradise would be sold, and by the end of the decade demolished and paved over.

As funeral goers paid their final respects, they could only imagine the ex-

Bottom left: Rufus Rockhead, 1930s. Photo: courtesy of Anne Rockhead. Bottom right: courtesy of Rohinton Ghandhi.

periences of this legendary man, a great man, a man who had once made Montreal his Paradise.

Rohinton Ghandhi is a local author/historian who loves writing stories of Montreal in times gone by, specifically stories about Crawford Park, Verdun and LaSalle. Many of his historical stories have been published in newspapers, magazines, and online, including on Montreal Mosaic *webmagazine. Rohinton has been digitally chronicling the* Verdun Guardian *for the last five years, from 1931 to currently 1941, as a personal preservation interest, before the pages turn to dust.*

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St. Antoine Street, corner of Mountain, 2013. Photo: Rohinton Ghandhi.

Additional Rockhead's Trivia

The emcee at Rockhead's was so afraid of snakes that he hid in the closet during the times the "snake dancers" put on their act.

Rockhead never owned a car, always taking the streetcar to pick up the flowers from an NDG florist twice a week. In later years, he would take a cab to and from the club daily.

Rockhead always wore a red tie, a flower in his lapel, and a stiff detachable collar that he bought only at one specific store.

Sandra Fields led and choreographed the Rockadets chorus line. Their name was changed to The Rockheadettes at the reopening in 1961.

Rockhead was known to eat toast and coffee twice a day, once after entering the street-level lounge in the morning and again at about 4 p.m. From 6-8 p.m. each evening he would nap in his closet office on the upper floor.

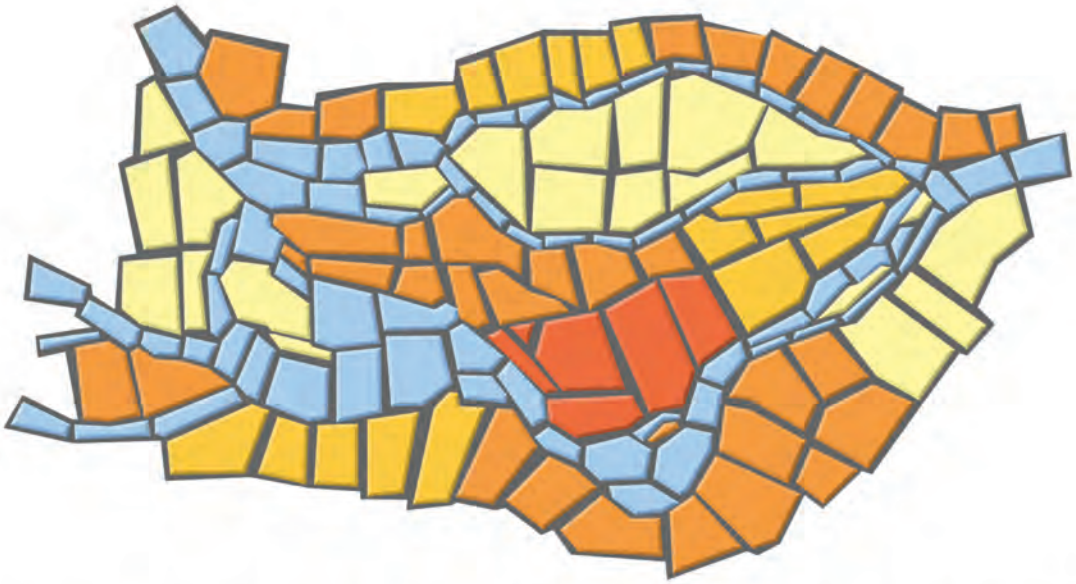
In 1974-1975, the street-level lounge itself was completely redone with mirror-balls and strobe lighting for the disco years.

Rockhead never called people by their real names. He always gave them nicknames according to their attributes or their individual characters.

Rockhead once owned the whole block of buildings from the corner of St. Antoine to Torrence (to the south) on Mountain Street.

The rival club, the Café St-Michel, operated just across the street from Rockhead's on the west side of Mountain Street.

The Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network wants your stories of English-speaking Montreal for



MAPPING THE MOSAIC

Montreal and Its Diverse Neighbourhoods

mapping.montrealmosaic.com

Mapping the Mosaic **is a new community mapping project to collect histories and memories of English-speaking communities in the Greater Montreal Area.**

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Geoff Agombar (geoff.agombar@gmail.com, 514.276.0839)

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600 Miles of Music

Making a StoryNet audio documentary

by Glenn Patterson

Last January I was contacted by QAHN to produce an audio documentary featuring traditional music from several Quebec Anglophones for the StoryNet oral history project. I felt this would be a great opportunity to raise awareness about this rich and diverse musical heritage. It also drew from my current doctoral work in ethnomusicology at Memorial University, in St. John's, Newfoundland, researching music-making among rural Anglophone communities in the Gaspé and Chateauguay Valley.

Ethnomusicology attempts to document and interpret music-making and its place in different cultures. It began as a way to address academia's lack of understanding of the vast world of music that existed outside the institutions of Western classical music. How can we approach another culture's music in a way that respects that culture's own understanding of it while seeking broad insights that have meaning for an outside audience? Ethnomusicologists tend to collect oral histories from people willing to share their thoughts on their music with us.

Music is a potent symbol of who we are as individuals and as members of a community. Many of us associate a song with a memorable event or period in our past – typically our high school years when we socialized with those of similar musical tastes. Perhaps no other art form has the power to evoke memories of time, place, emotions, and community as does hearing music from our personal and collective pasts.

So how has music connected Quebec Anglophones to our communities, both its people and its places? What insights can the study of music-making in English-speaking communities bring to the understanding of Quebec's greater cultural heritage? Unlike Francophones, who have a vast set of commercial and archival resources (see *Archives de folklore et d'ethnologie* at Université Laval) through which they can access the musical heritage of their communities, traditional and vernacular music-making among Anglophones has been essentially undocumented. (One important exception is the wonderful disk, Ireland in Quebec, put together by Lisa Ornstein, André Marchand, and Nick Hawes, profiling the music of two English-speaking musicians, Keith Corrigan and Jimmy Kelly, from the Irish communities of Valcartier and Shannon in the Quebec City area.) In the absence of commercial or archival records, our musical heritage resides primarily in the memories of musicians and listeners who lived in these communities and are still around to tell us about it. A project like StoryNet was just what was needed to increase awareness of this aspect of our heritage.

My documentary, "Six Hundred Miles of Music," available on QAHN's StoryNet.ca, attempts to allow listeners to "hear," through music and spoken word, the deep ways in which music has connected three musicians to each other and to the places and communities to which they belong. The central character is Brigid Drody, a guitar player who was brought up in a family of fiddlers in Douglastown on the Gaspé coast. She introduces us to musical life in Douglastown in the 1940s and 1950s and then takes us to Montreal through Murdochville (a trajectory followed by many Gaspesians who have left the coast since 1950). After relocating to the Chateauguay Valley, she met two fiddlers with whom she has played extensively: Cyril Devouge (originally from L'Anse-a-Brillant near Douglastown) and Neil MacKay.

Getting to know these three musicians, I have come to see that for them and many in their communities the music they have played is more than a collection of great melodies and songs; indeed, it also indexes a deep set of powerful memories of people, places, and experiences they have encountered in their communities. Given the diasporic history of Quebec's rural Englsih-speaking population, I see musical heritage as a powerful resource for fostering senses of connectedness to our communities. The responses left by listeners on StoryNet.ca and on links to it shared on Facebook speak to the emotional potential of making accessible their musical heritage in an audio documentary format.

StoryNet gave me the opportunity to develop my ethnomusicological toolbox, as it were. This was the first time that I interviewed participants with the goal of creating a "listening product" for an external audience, and I was quickly made aware that these interviews are about not only the "data" (what is said) but also the emotional presence created by the subtle qualities of the unique voices of the interviewees. Getting great-sounding interviews meant learning how to get in close with the microphone (1 foot to 3 inches from their mouths) while still making participants feel comfortable. Minimizing my own comments and interjections *significantly* simplified the task. The audio of Cyril Devouge came from an informal visit to his seniors' residence, complete with a loud air conditioner and fridge, the mic placed about six feet from Cyril, and us musicians noodling somewhat incessantly on our instruments while he was speaking. Editing the audio for this chapter probably took up a good two-thirds of the time I spent creating the entire documentary. Requesting a quiet room to interview participants, asking to close windows and turn off air conditioners was well worth the momentary awkwardness, and participants were always more than happy to oblige me. The vast array of online resources devoted to the nuts and bolts of producing audio documentaries (see www.transom.org and www.how sound.org) were a great help and I highly recommend them. The Hindenburg software for radio documentaries (http://hinden burgsystems.com) is an intuitive and user-friendly way for beginners to edit and mix music and spoken audio.

I would encourage readers to consider their unique musical heritage still living in practice and the memories of their family and neighbours. If you have questions about documenting musical heritage (coming up with interview questions, how to record, and so on), don't hesitate to contact me at gdp682@mun.ca.

Happy listening!

The Great Ship *Cosmo*

Quebec's finest square rigger

by John Fry

In 1876, Henry Fry – Quebec merchant, ship-owner, Lloyd's agent for the St. Lawrence River, ex-president of the Dominion Board of Canada – arrived at a decision that would lead to the shipbuilding triumph of his life. Strange as it seems, he wouldn't have undertaken it if economic circumstances had been better. But a world-wide economic downturn, which had started with the financial crisis of 1873, was underway.

A close friend, Quebec shipbuilder Henry Dinning, revealed to Fry that he faced the coming winter of 1877 totally without money to construct a ship. "Some two hundred decent men at Cap Blanc are dependent on my yard for work," said Dinning. "Without it, fully a hundred poor people will starve. Give me a contract for a new ship, and I will build her cheaply," he implored.

The undertaking didn't attract Fry, who was sitting on a heavy inventory of wood, with no spare cash at hand. He could not anticipate that the ship would lead him to financial suffering, and a personal crisis. It wasn't a problem. Two of Quebec's leading bankers – Abraham Joseph, of the Stadacona Bank, and James Stevenson, general manager of the Quebec Bank (whose daughter eventually would marry Fry's eldest son) – said they would lend him the money to build the ship.

"I felt that I should do it as an act of mercy," Fry confessed. He agreed to pay Dinning $39.50 per ton for a 1200-ton ship. . . or $47,400, an amount he would advance in weekly instalments so that the workers could receive the pay they desperately needed.

He immediately found himself absorbed in the details of the new ship's building, so much so that he decided not to travel to England in the winter of 1877, as he typically did to find cargoes for his ships. Instead, he sent his brother and business partner Edward.

Henry started with the laying-out of the ship's plans in the moulding loft, and then the setting of the keel on the sloping beach of Dinning's yard. "I superintended her construction all winter, chose her dimensions and model." He decided to name the ship *Cosmo*, the name of the barque on which he'd first left England in 1853 to take up life in North America. The original had been named for the illustrious Florentine merchant prince Cosimo Medici. For the jutting wooden figurehead of the new Cosmo's bow, Henry ordered a carved representation of the fifteenth century potentate's head and torso.

Henry Fry, 1872. Photo: McCord Museum , I-70328.1.

The specifications for the three-masted ship were stringent. The keel and planking to the unloaded water line were to be of the finest rock elm. "Tamarac frame, beams and planking," Henry wrote. "Double diagonal ceiling (giving great strength) locust and elm tree-nails, and iron lower masts and bowsprit." Tamarac, or red spruce, had the best combination of strength and durability for shipbuilding.

The *Cosmo* measured 200 feet overall, with a 37.3-foot beam. She was typical of Quebec-built sailing ships launched after 1854. The captain's and mate's quarters were in the stern, while the crew was housed forward. The galley was between. Sometimes there was a wheelhouse, but more often the man at the wheel was at the mercy of the elements and, in a storm, lashed to the wheel.

Over a quarter-century, a total of 349 such large square-rigged ships were built in yards along the St. Lawrence and the St. Charles rivers. Virtually all of them basically were simple containers with a single deck, suited to carrying huge loads of timber – the world's most cost-efficient freighters at the time.

Cosmo, though, was far more than a container. "When she was launched," wrote maritime historian Frederick William Wallace, "Lloyd's surveyor stated that the *Cosmo* was the finest ship ever constructed in Quebec. The foremast, mainmast, and lower bowsprit were of iron. Her cabins were beautifully finished in ash and black walnut." Lloyd's rating of the ship *Cosmo* was 9A 1, indicating a first-class vessel whose rating would hold good for nine years. A project to help the poor had produced a masterpiece!

Cosmo slid into the St. Lawrence on Wednesday, June 27, 1877. She must have been fully masted and rigged, and virtually ready to sail after she went down the ways, because within five days she was fully loaded with wood, including 308 pieces of oak, 2,758 pipe staves, plus elm, red and white pine – destined, Fry believed, for certain sale in England. When the ship arrived in Liverpool at the end of July 1877, however, no one was waiting to purchase her cargo. Henry's brother and business partner Edward had "failed lamentably to carry out my instructions as to sales of wood. He came back from England [to Quebec] in the spring [of 1877] with most of my heavy stock unsold. For the first time in my life, I feared financial trouble." In fact, the trouble precipitated a personal crisis that came to define the rest of his life, eventually turning him from merchant to historian and essayist. (The story is told in my new biography of Henry Fry, *A Mind at Sea*.)

In Liverpool drydock, the bottom of *Cosmo*'s sleek hull was coppered to protect it against worm and marine weed. She sailed with a cargo to New Orleans, and over the next dozen years, she criss-crossed the world's oceans, carrying kola nuts to China, and nitrate from Chile. By 1883, Quebec tycoon James Gibb Ross owned her. When Ross suffered a bankruptcy, she was taken over by a Norwegian. "She made remarkably fast passages," wrote Fry, "but times were very bad, steam was everywhere cutting out the sailing ships." In 1889, sailing out of Savannah, Georgia, bound for Hamburg, Germany,

Cosmo disappeared over the horizon, never to be seen again.

Yet *Cosmo* would be seen again – and again, even though in diminished sizes. After her launching, Fry had commissioned the marine artist and craftsman Thomas H. Willis of Connecticut to portray the ship. On a canvas 31 inches wide by 18 inches high, Willis painted sea and sky. He fashioned the *Cosmo*'s hull from embroidered velvet, made the rigging with silk thread, the masts of woven string, and the sails of silk or cast paper – all of it stitched onto the oil-painted canvas and placed in an ornate frame. It hangs in the entrance hallway of my home, and a photo of it appears on the cover of *A Mind at Sea*.

Nor was Fry finished with commemorating. Something far larger had to be made. He paid a master carpenter in Dinning's yard to build a handsome nine-foot model of *Cosmo*. The model was likely mounted and displayed initially in Dinning's yard. Then it became something of a white elephant, finding its way around the taverns and hotels along the waterfront in the Lower Town. Each move led to damage. One summer night in 1927, a Norwegian skipper Captain Jarlsen, who was in port, eyed the oversized, beaten-up *Cosmo* model in a pub in Ancienne-Lorette. The next day he called on his friend Edmond Lecouvie who, in addition to his vocation of police constable, was a skilled model shipbuilder – among the best in North America. The two men visited the bar, and examined the nine-foot model. "It was in a terrible state," Lecouvie later recalled. "Her spars were all gone, and her rigging too. The bowsprit was broken, her hull stove in. But I knew she meant something. She was original."

Jarlsen bought the *Cosmo* for "a paltry sum," and presented it to Lecouvie. After restoring the giant model, Lecouvie later sold it to the Literary and Historical Society. (Visitors to Quebec can view it today in the Morrin Centre, home of the Society's Library.)

Lecouvie's involvement with the *Cosmo* didn't end. In the fall of 1951, Princess Elizabeth visited Canada with her handsome husband Prince Philip Mountbatten, who had served in the Royal Navy. The Prince was a keen collector of model ships. During the visit, Quebec officials told the Prince's secretary that the City would like to present Philip with the gift of a model sailing vessel built in the port.

"Dear M. Lecouvie," wrote the Duke of Edinburgh's private secretary on December 18, 1951, "His Royal Highness has asked me to write and say that he would very much like to have a model of the *Cosmo*, which he would place in his study."

Lecouvie immediately began work, taking more than 800 hours to carve by hand at least a thousand tiny pieces assembled into a 30-inch long model of *Cosmo*. Finished, the exquisitely crafted model was transported across the Atlantic aboard the *Empress of France*. It can be viewed today in Buckingham Palace.

Lecouvie made yet another model, a copy of the one given to the Prince, for his own collection, which includes 42 miniature ships carved from Canadian walrus ivory. Acquired by Gaston Déry of Quebec, it is today part of his private Lecouvie-Déry Collection.

The June 2, 1952 edition of the *Quebec Chronicle Telegraph* had the final say: "With the building of the two-foot model of the good ship Cosmo for Prince Philip, the three-masted timber ship becomes one of the most storied of the sailing ships built at Quebec during the 19th Century. In the annals of the Ancient Capital, it has its rightful place among the legends and stories of history that have added to its fame over three hundred years."

John Fry is the great grandson of Henry Fry and of James Stevenson. He is the author of A Mind at Sea: Henry Fry and the Glorious Era of Quebec's Sailing Ships*, to be published later this year by Dundurn Press Toronto. Montreal-born Fry worked over 25 years as a chief editor of magazines at the Times Mirror Co. and the New York Times Co. He lives in Katonah, New York.*

COSMO LECTURE AND RECEPTION, MORRIN CENTRE

The Literary and Historical Society in Quebec's Morrin Centre (44 Chaussée des Écossais) will host a talk by author John Fry on Sunday, December 8 at 2 p.m. about the curious history of the illustrious *Cosmo*. A large model of the sailing ship has been displayed for many years in the Society's library.

Fry will be signing copies of his new book *A Mind at Sea – Henry Fry and the Glorious Era of Quebec's Sailing Ships*, which will be available for purchase. On hand will be the doyenne of Quebec shipbuilding history, author Eileen Marcil, whose research was used extensively in the writing *A Mind at Sea*, and Gaston Déry, owner of a *Cosmo* model and of the Lecouvie-Déry Collection of miniature ivory ships.

RSVP (418) 694-9147, or info@morrin.org.

During Quebec's remarkable 19th Century shipbuilding boom, the Cosmo *may have been the finest of the giant square-riggers launched from the port city's shores. Prince Philip has a model in Buckingham Palace.*

Top: Composite painting of the Cosmo*, with woven velvet hull, silk rigging, by Thomas H. Willis, 1877. Photo: Doug Abdelnour.*

Bottom: Model of the Cosmo *in the library of the Morrin Centre, Quebec. Photos: John Fry.*

2103 Heritage Photo Contest Winners

1ST PRIZE
Gramma's Tea Pot
by Esther Grebe
Secondary 4
Maniwaki Woodland High School

Going to Gramma's house was always fun. One of the things I loved was looking at her china cabinet and all of the pretty plates, statues and teapots that it held. Each particular treasure had its own story. I can't explain why, but for some reason I was always inexplicably drawn towards the teapots, especially this teapot. I never grew tired of hearing about the story of my Great-Great-Grandmother Alice Doggert. This fun-loving school teacher migrated from Ireland in 1912 to "teach the heathens." She set sail only a few weeks after the Titanic sank, suffering the long and arduous voyage over the Atlantic Ocean. When my Gramma traveled to Halifax on a cruise last autumn, she found Alice Doggert's name written in a book of arriving immigrants as having docked at pier 21. As a little girl I found it hard to believe that something that was so old could still exist today. I remember running my fingers over the Wedgwood pottery, cracked with time and wear. The past is not altogether gone. It has managed to survive in little pockets of memory. I promise I will not forget all the stories I was told. It only takes one person to lose what has been built up for generations. I promise I will not be the one.

2ND PRIZE
Fly on the Wall
by Kelly Benoit
Secondary 4
Joliette High School

For as long as I can remember, we've always gone fishing in the summer. My parents took me, their parents took them, and their parents took them. My father's side of the family is Native American (Qalipu Mi'kmaq) and fishing is an integral part of the Mi'kmaq way of live. My family has tried hard (and succeeded) in teaching me the importance of knowing how to survive in the woods, and because of this I have learned to fish and hunt in traditional ways. The flies (lures used in fly fishing) in the accompanying photograph were made by the art teacher at my school, since I haven't the skill nor the expertise to create a fly, and with the addition of a hook would attract at least three different species of freshwater fish. My father is a very proficient fly fisherman and though he's teaching me, I find it harder than spin fishing. These flies represent my familial heritage because the different types of fishing, whether spin, fly or hand fishing, are all important parts of and a basic skill in a simple, social society of yesteryear that people today seem to be leaving behind in favour of 'ready in 5 minutes', cookie-cutter society.

3RD PRIZE
Old Rusty Logging Chains
by Joshua Hearty
Secondary 5
Doctor Wilbert Keon School, Chapeau

During summer time I would always go down to the river to fish or lay on the hill to relax. One day I saw an old log rise up out of the water. We call them dead heads because when they're underwater for a long period of time they would

rise due to oxidation. Every day that log made my beach look like an eye sore so I finally got fed up with it sticking out. I got my four-wheeler and hooked it up with chains to pull it out. Only to find that there were chains already attached to it. They weren't just any ordinary chains; they were antique logging chains from way back in 1960s. My mom used to be one of those log runners that would stand on a bunch of logs and push them down the river to the old mill. These chains represent the lumber industries from way back when there wasn't any electricity around here. Every time I look at the old chains I wonder what those chains have been through and think of the possibilities on how and when they used them. These rusty old chains represent the hard working community of the early 1960s.

1ST HONOURALE MENTION
Frozen Hands
by Liam Racine
Secondary 5
Doctor Wilbert Keon School, Chapeau

This picture is a simple sunset but it has a strange twist, frozen hand prints on the window. These were from a little girl. Her family has been here for 4 generations. This is a true symbol of heritage because this little girl has been here her whole life and so has her family and these frozen hand prints represent the strength of community. Riding in cars in freezing cold weather is a Canadian experience. Most adults have recollections of making designs on frosty windows during their childhood years. This particular picture was taken on a bumpy school bus ride on a frosty January morning. This photo to me showed me that we can make it through the hard Canadian weather and still play and have fun. Her hand prints have been frozen on the window for only 7 days, but the heritage has been frozen to her heart and it will stay for the rest of her life.

2ND HONOURABLE MENTION
Go Habs Go
by Jean-Charles Fillion
Secondary 4
Joliette High School

What's the weirdest thing you can see at the IGA store in Rawdon, Qc? It's also the coolest. There are two of the original seats from the Montreal Forum just next to the jelly bean machine.

The Forum closed in 1996 so I never went there, but if you ask anyone of my Dad's friends, it was the best place to watch the Habs and apparently these were great seats.

3RD HONOURABLE MENTION
The Red Phone
by Amelie Mongeau
Work Oriented Training Path
Joliette High School

The red phone is in the general office. It sits there for emergencies, like when we don't have electricity. With all the modern technology, we still need a backup. The secretary jokes about it by saying it's a direct line to the president.

Mystery Objects

Jim Caputo of Heritage Gaspé displayed a number of intriguing items from his collection at the QAHN AGM in Stanstead this year. It occurred to us that these objects would make fascinating entries in our Mystery Objects series. Jim has obligingly furnished us with a series of questions as well as (it was darned nice of him!) the answers.

QAHN has decided to sweeten the deal a little for you by offering a free DVD of "The Identity of English-speaking Quebec in 100 Objects" to anyone successfully answering the following question and identifying the object or objects in question. Send your answers to: editor@qahn.org.

Here is the first challenge, for objects 1 and 2:

These two items (one a reproduction and the other real) are significant to a Canadian historical event. What are they and what is their significance?

Editor's note: Credit where it's due

The photographer responsible for the image on the front cover of our Spring 2013 issue ("Winners at 1979 Calf Rally," Quebec 4-H) has been identified as Charles Bury, veteran Quebec journalist and the first editor of the *Quebec Heritage News*.

Off to a Bad Start

Cartier and the Laurentian Iroquoians

by Joseph Graham

The sixteenth-century French imagination was stirred by the existence of a country beyond Hochelaga, a country so influential that the St. Lawrence River valley, with its many villages dotting the shoreline between Stadacona and Hochelaga, was just its threshold. This country and its people, the Wendat, dominated trade and culture in the Great Lakes region and had furnished the Iroquoian world with a good deal of its history and mythology. It consisted of four farming nations that traded with their non-farming neighbours, fostering trade, manufacture and a cosmopolitan culture. The French, who would call them the Huron, were ill equipped to travel into their country. They lacked the means of transport necessary and, in any case, Jacques Cartier's uncivilized intrusions alienated the St. Lawrence Iroquoian nations for more than a generation after his visits in the 1530s.

Donnacona, a Laurentian Iroquoian chief, was the headman Cartier first met in the Bay of Gaspé in 1534. The headman of an Iroquoian group was not a warrior, nor a strongman. He was chosen by the women for his ability to build consensus and to represent the people. Donnacona was a colourful storyteller who shared tales of a great culture to the west, or perhaps the north. He told many stories, as though testing European gullibility, including describing a people who lived on a strictly liquid diet because they had no anuses. Communications must have been difficult, but the Native peoples had been trading with Basque fishermen and had some familiarity with Europeans. Donnacona and his people did everything reasonable to establish a decent trade relationship with Cartier, but the French sea captain had no diplomatic skills and sowed distrust among the people he met. Cartier effectively abducted two of Donnacona's sons, tricking them onto his ship and forcing Donnacona to accept the idea that they would go to France. The sons told Cartier that the Bay of Gaspé was at the mouth of a great river and they expected him to establish a proper business relationship with them before exploring further. When he returned with them the next year, he anticipated that they would act as his interpreters. They guided him to Stadacona, their settlement at present-day Quebec City, and Cartier expected the brothers to lead him in exploring the river as far as Hochelaga on Montreal Island, but they refused because the two parties had not come to a business understanding. Cartier headed off to the lands they had told him about without them, and without any interpreter. Upon his return he found that the men he had left behind were erecting a fort to protect themselves from Donnacona's people. The French had lost the trust of their hosts and feared they would be attacked. Cartier had planned to stay for the winter and he worked to re-establish the relationship. Donnacona's sons, the most knowledgeable Iroquoians when it came to their French visitors, had lost confidence in the intentions of the French, but they were still willing to listen and try. They proved this during the hard winter that followed by saving the French from scurvy, sharing their medicinal expertise and demonstrating at the same time their civility.

Cartier and Donnacona. Photo: uppercanadahistory.ca.

During the next year, Cartier discovered that there was a contest between headmen. Instead of trying to understand how such rivalries were resolved, Cartier invited Donnacona, his sons and some supporters to celebrate the Holy Cross, offering to aid them against their rival, Agona. When they came, he took the whole lot hostage and brought them back to France, where they died.

When Cartier again returned to Canada in late August of 1541, he reported that Donnacona had passed away and that the other Iroquoians had declined to leave France because they had become large landowners. In truth, nine were dead and the only survivor at that point was a child, a girl who was the youngest of the group. Cartier, initially welcomed, soon found that the Iroquois, led by Agona, distrusted him. His men built a fort further east at Charlesbourg-Royal, near present-day Quebec, but the Iroquois travelled there anyway, keeping it under siege the whole winter and killing 35 Frenchmen. In the spring, Cartier abandoned the fort and headed back down the St. Lawrence.

A reading of Cartier's interactions with the Laurentian Iroquois demonstrates which of the two societies was the truly civilized. His actions were contemptuous and power-based. On that last trip, the French king had made Cartier subservient to Jean-François de La Rocque de Roberval, a man who had the means to finance the establishment of a permanent colony. Cartier, who was the

expert on the St. Lawrence Valley, now had to report to Roberval who would take over the process of establishing a permanent presence at Charlesbourg-Royal. Roberval was travelling with the people and all the makings of a colony, and was due to arrive that spring. Cartier met Roberval's contingent at the port of St. Jehan (St. John's, Newfoundland). Roberval insisted that Cartier return to Stadacona in order to found the colony the king had authorized Roberval to establish. Cartier put to sea and returned to France, disobeying direct orders, making it impossible for Roberval to succeed, and showing historians the kind of man he was. Roberval nevertheless proceeded to Charlesbourg-Royal but was forced to abandon his colony and return to France within a few months.

No Frenchman succeeded in creating a colony in the St. Lawrence Valley during the balance of the sixteenth century, and by the time Samuel de Champlain arrived in the early seventeenth century the St. Lawrence Iroquois had disappeared.

What happened to the people Cartier met is the subject of a lot of speculation. The most probable explanation is that Cartier's presence had spread European diseases among his hosts, decimating their numbers and leaving a vacuum to be filled by the Innu, a people Champlain called the Montagnais.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Laurentian Iroquois who were established further up the river, beyond Stadaconna, practiced agriculture. As a farming culture, they probably traded with the Innu and with Donnacona's people, exchanging grain in the form of corn for fish and other products. Historians argue that the remnant of their populations joined neighbouring peoples to the west. This would be more logical than their joining with the Innu since their neighbours, both west of the Ottawa River and south towards Lake Champlain, were also Iroquoian people in large, established communities. They are said to have joined both the Wendat (Huron), who were centred around Lake Simcoe and Lake Huron, and the Mohawk of the Five Nations, who lived south of the Great Lakes. Some also joined with the Algonquin on the Ottawa River.

It is possible that the memories of the descendants of the Laurentian Iroquoian drove the Mohawk to try to take the valley back. When Champlain arrived, the Mohawk were already irregularly present in the St. Lawrence and, had he never come, they may have eventually re-established the Laurentian Iroquoian farming culture along its banks.

But Champlain did come, and with a very different mission.

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A Feast of Identity

The Potpourri

by Myra Shuster

"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and we realize we are but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."

- Vladimir Nabokov

Just how brief the crack of light my little life is has become disturbingly palpable to me. My crowded study cluttered with photos, journals and memorabilia is testament to an irrepressible urge to hold on to its traces. I won't live long enough to preserve them in any aesthetic and enduring way, and I'm not sure what purpose preserving them would serve. My digital teenage kids don't find my scrapbook and photo album approach to memories very palatable, and they have no attachment to records of the past as I do. In the mere click of the 'delete' button, they've done away with the texts, writings, school projects, poetic Facebook posts and emails. When I was their age, I would have considered this precious stuff. But they love streamlined living, love purging their rooms of relics of the past and their cell phones and computers of excess information, keeping only an essential minimum on hard drive. Today's treasures are so *yesterday*, come tomorrow.

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So who am I keeping records for? Will any of this stuff have a life beyond mine? Maybe there's a gene for the archivist's impulse, and a future grandchild will consider them treasures as I do.

My preservationist/archivist instincts recently turned to the Potpourri, a Stanley Street coffee house and bookstore my late uncle Morris (Moishe) Feinberg owned and ran in the early '60s, taking over Bicycle Bob Silverman's Seven Steps. Sir George Williams College was housed in the YMCA just a few steps away. Students thirsty for new music and the leftist and existential literature sold in the bookstore poured in after class. Many poured in during and instead of going to class.

I craved stories about the coffee house as a kid, curious about this definitively hip stage of my uncle's life and my mother's too, since she'd helped out there as a waitress. I also wondered about the influence a coffee-house hangout like the Potpourri might have had on the people who experienced it firsthand, and where it fit in the vibrant cultural history of Montreal's pre-television heyday when dance halls, bars and coffee houses were thriving meeting places. Regulars were drawn to their favourite spots in search of community and a shared love of the cultural events they featured.

Steven Berlin Johnson describes ("Where Good Ideas Come From," TED lecture, September 21, 2010) how the coffee house has long been a fertile place for nurturing creativity, a place where people of different backgrounds would gather together to share ideas. He describes the quest that took him as far as coral reefs and the tropical rain forest to find environments that lead to innovation and creativity, and he notes that an astonishing number of innovations in the seventeenth century had a coffee house in their story. The coffee house was crucial to the advent of the Enlightenment, one of the greatest intellectual flowerings of the last 500 years. It is in such environments, which he calls the *liquid network*, "where lots of different ideas jostle off each other," that the spirit of innovation can be found. "Coffee houses are where ideas have sex," he says.

Was my uncle's coffee house a "liquid network," I wondered – and did ideas have sex there? If so, what were those ideas, who was tossing them around, and what did their intermingling give birth to? I found answers to these questions, but the route to them was circuitous.

I stepped up enquiries for Potpourri stories to my mother and her two surviving brothers, but they had a hard time calling up specific memories. I couldn't find anything in the archives at Concordia, the Grande Bibliothèque or the McCord Museum. I attempted to bring the Potpourri legend alive for myself by visiting the site at 1430 Stanley, now a Subway fast food restaurant. The yeasty smell of freshly-toasted buns and mouthwatering fresh-cut cucumber filled the air, but clearly the heart of the Potpourri had long stopped beating there, and its spirit was gone. Out the window, past the Subway girl and boy waiting expectantly for me to order the sub of the day, I watched youths dashing up Stanley

The author in front of 1430 Stanley Street, site of the Potpourri. Photo: Myra Shuster.

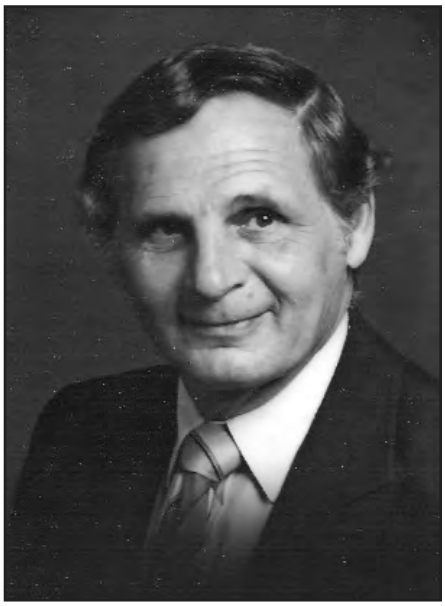
from St. Catherine, flashy Forever 21 and Urban Outfitters bags in hand. Since its '60s heyday, this little quadrant of Montreal's downtown core has morphed from anti-materialistic hippie haven into consumerist hipster heaven.

I became resigned to the fact that the Potpourri had disappeared from Montreal's collective memory, like the "brief crack of light" Nabokov refers to, swallowed up in the large hungry jaws of a new fast-food identity. But as I was writing about another coffee house not too long ago – Café Mariposa in NDG, I googled "Potpourri" and was thrilled to find an entry called "Seven Steps: Potpourri" in a blog entitled *Beat the Devil* by Vancouver writer-photographer and jazz presenter Brian Nation. "Seven Steps" contained poignant vignettes of his early '60s experiences at my uncle's coffee house.

I contacted Brian and was amazed to learn that the Potpourri was alive in a way I'd never imagined possible. A dynamic ex-pat community of people spread throughout North America had years ago created a Potpourri Facebook group to keep in touch with each other. These very artistic and engaged people, whose intellectual and political sensibilities had taken root in the fertile atmosphere of the Potpourri, now shared memories, blogposts and photographs. When Brian invited me into the group, I began to see that my uncle's coffee house was still very much alive. This revelation was the exact opposite of an experience I'd had some time ago: having discovered the work of Ryszard Kapuscinski, I began writing a letter telling him how much I loved it, only to despair upon learning he'd been dead for many years. By contrast, here I'd thought the Potpourri was dead, but was amazed to discover it's still alive in another form, a half-century later.

I may disparage my kids' love of social media and the digital world, but without incredible tools like Facebook, which enliven things long past, I would never have made this heady discovery. Reconnecting with my uncle's Potpourri entourage was like finding long-lost family. After I launched a rich correspondence with several of the group's members, I felt I'd found kindred spirits. The stories I'd been craving since childhood began to fill the gaps between what I already knew about the Potpourri (affectionately referred to by them as the 'Pot'), and what I'd imagined.

I became familiar with these folks' remarkable artistic accomplishments, the deep social conscience they're imbued with and their continued social activism and involvement in the arts. Brian is an extraordinary writer with a crisp, cynical style, whose blog entries span several years, showing the interplay of his personal history with cultural events of the times. He's immersed in the world of jazz music, both as a jazz presenter in Vancouver and as what some have affectionately referred to as a jazz advocate. Renee Rodin is also Vancouver-based and the author of three books of poetry and non-fiction. She owned the *R2B2* bookstore in Vancouver from 1986 to 1994, where she hosted poetry readings. Her bookstore concept was inspired by the Potpourri. San Francisco artist and writer Marlowe Rafelle is a deeply committed social activist; she promotes responsible and sustainable living through environmental and related causes such as the anti-fracking movement, organic farming, and efforts to expose the hazards of GMOs. Montreal-based Hyman Glustein is a writer and researcher who works in the Cree communities of northern Quebec, and Murray Meyer is a Los Angeles criminal lawyer and stand-up comic. Through our correspondence I came to see that much of their social activism and their artistic and political sensibilities took root in the Potpourri's vibrant '60s spirit. Was it something in the coffee? The literature? The music played there? I came to believe that the leftist credo of my uncle's political, pre-Potpourri days played a role, and was passed on to them in unspoken ways.



Uncle Moishe

My uncle worked for several leftist organizations affiliated with the Communist Party in the 1950s. According to Merrily Weisbord in *The Strangest Dream*, Moishe's social circle was "an idealistic, hardworking group of Canadians who believed they could make a better world." Some joined the Communist Party and others worked for affiliated organizations promoting social justice. They fought "for unions, for the unemployed, and against fascism. They thought of themselves as revolutionaries – in the heroic mould of the Russian worker pitted against the tsar." My uncle lost his job in the fur industry trying to defend workers' rights and help them unionize.

In 1956, Moishe's faith in communism as a fair and workable system ended abruptly. Everyone in his leftist entourage suffered serious disillusionment upon hearing Kruschev's speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party about the horrors Stalin had been committing. Weisbord aptly describes the reaction to the revelations as amounting to a "shocking perversion of everything (they had) believed."

Top: Uncle Moishe in later years. Bottom: Uncle Moishe and Aunt Mary, 1956. Photos: courtesy of Myra Shuster.

As I explored what my uncle created through the Potpourri, it seemed to me his vision for it was born out of this disillusionment. The Potpourri was a new way for him to create a socially-conscious community based on the leftist ideals he'd held dear, a space for like-minded people to meet and experience them through literature and discussion. Many regulars were youths who shunned mainstream values and were searching for meaningful answers with others who saw the world through the same lens. It became a centre buzzing with intellectual debate, where protest songs, and folk music notables could be heard. Dave Van Ronk played there, as well as Reverend Gary Davis, the McGarrigle sisters (then called the New World Singers), Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee and Wade Hemsworth. The Potpourri was also home to several theatrical performances. The bookstore sold the *Communist Manifesto* and other books by leading thinkers of the day. Hyman remembers that peace buttons were available at the counter, as well as a publication called *Our Generation against Nuclear War*.

Give me a hand

How is it that the bonds born at the Pot still exist today, several decades later, especially since the members of this short-lived coffee house community span the continent? My uncle nurtured their connection; he kept them coming back to the Potpourri, where they could count on finding each other. Most were youths who shunned mainstream values and were searching for meaningful answers with others who saw the world through the same lens. He knew how to make them feel at home and engage them.

"Give me a hand" seems to have been his trademark phrase. Each Potpourri alumnus offered up a different vignette of being called upon to help him out. Brian had to pick up a delivery of books. Renee helped prepare fancy sandwiches. Hyman shelved British anti-war newspapers. Marlowe made gourmet coffee. As they each recounted these memory-bits to me, I wondered how could it be – had they all been employees? If not, how did they come to be assigned these tasks? It seems that on any given night, running the Pot was, in true collectivist fashion, an improvised but cooperative group effort.

"Your uncle would always give me something to do," Hyman said. "We kept coming back because he got us involved. He'd see us wander in and he knew we (poor students) weren't going to buy a book, so he'd say, 'Give me a hand,' and find something that needed to be done.... Morris was also kind enough to feed me, and lend me books I needed for my courses. But I didn't really want to go to school," Hyman added. "I got my only (real) education at the Pot."

Brian's blog entry describes his own experience. "One day, Morris asked if I'd pick up a shipment of books for him at the Customs House. I showed up, documents in hand, and watched them slit open the cartons of books for inspection. What were they looking for? Drugs? Sex? Atom bombs? Among the contents they found copies of Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, one of the more popular psychology books of the day. A gathering of half-wit French-speaking clerks conferred briefly, perplexedly flipping through the book, then decided they'd have to seize the shipment. Morris eventually got the books back, but the fact that these civil servants, who didn't have ten words of English among the lot of them, had this power, had an effect on my worldview that has only grown more cynical and despairing with age."

The café was eye-opening for students. "I managed, at times, to wheedle my way into the kitchen to help prepare what to me were most exotic drinks," Marlowe recalled. "They stood out in my memory: cappuccino, cafe-au-lait, scrumptious dessert drinks that were new to my palate." Renee said she helped serve up platters of fancy European sandwiches surrounded by a generous scoop of potato chips.

It came as a surprise to me that the man I'd known as having a distinct disdain for small talk, and for being quiet and withdrawn, had been an important mentor to these folks in their youth. But as they each sent accolades for what my uncle brought to their lives, it became clear that in many ways, he had. I enjoyed some of that mentoring, and so did his children Jennifer and Leon. But we all wish we'd had more. The protective wing he extended in his Potpourri days no longer had the same breadth by the time we needed it.

"I felt your uncle had a true interest in us young people," Marlowe wrote, "combined with a proper distance, tinged, perhaps, with scepticism. The feeling was that he really cared but was not going to gush over us, but still give hints and clues if we had the sense to listen to him."

In a Potpourri commemorative newsletter he launched in 1994, Murray Meyer wrote about coming into the Pot one day "full of disgust" because he had received an "F" on an English paper. My uncle asked him what the problem was, looking at him with what Murray described as wry amusement. "Actually," writes Murray with uncanny accuracy, "Morris had wry amusement etched into his face." My uncle read the paper and told him he thought it might have merit. Either it had merit, or Murray needed a psychologist, he said. "I remember that exchange as if it were the

Left: Reverend Gary Davis at the Potpourri.

Right: New World Singers (the McGarrigle Sisters) at the Potpourri. Photos: courtesy of Jennifer and Leon Fineberg.

start of something," Murray wrote. "Actually, that's the way I remember the Pot – as the start of something."

The Potpourri was indeed the start of something for everyone who shared their memories; they all alluded to this. Brian credits the Pot for nurturing a lifelong passion for jazz music, and for a nourishing a dream that he later fulfilled: "I was actually at the Pot when I decided I'd be a jazz presenter or club owner one day. I remember the moment. I was in the back (coffee house part) reading a *Down Beat Magazine* – an article about Charles Mingus' woes dealing with club owners. He was one of my favourite musicians; still is. He was quoted as saying: 'All I want is a place to play my music.' I thought: *I can do that*!"

Hyman had his first introduction to blues and protest music at the Pot. He said the café had no character as a place – apparently the kitchen was the size of a broom closet – but the attraction was that he could find like-minded people and get to hear "hungry performers on the verge of not being hungry." There was no other way to hear such music in the day, other than to take it in live wherever it might be happening. Radio stations played a limited range of music, and consumer access was obviously nothing like it is today. Most of the musicians who played at the Pot didn't have record contracts. Hyman explained that when he and Brian would take their musical thirst to Greenwich Village, they couldn't afford the cover charge to hear these acts in the clubs there. Yet for a small cover, many of the same acts played at the Potpourri.

Hyman said he and his friends gathered at the Potpourri to hear music about issues that were important to them then. He and others were active in the Ban the Bomb movement. He described their demonstrations as rites of passage, which "happen only once in a lifetime," and said that he and his fellow demonstrators were "unrealistic and absolutist, lacking any notion of compromise... All we wanted to do was change the world." This was "the first expression of Montreal hippies coming out of their shell." After their demonstrations in the streets of downtown Montreal, they'd meet up at the Potpourri. The feeling of the demonstration would carry over in the cozy atmosphere inside.

Bob Dylan's first Canadian performance

The most notable piece of folklore associated with the Potpourri is that it was the first place a young and then-unknown Bob Dylan ever performed in Canada. He played there from June 28 to June 30, 1962.

A 1974 *Gazette* article by Dane Lanken quotes Uncle Morris: "There was this guy named Barry Cornfeld, a protegé of Rev. Gary Davis, who used to keep me abreast of up and coming talent. He told me about Dylan playing at Gerde's Folk City [in Greenwich Village] and he said why not try him out? So I did. There was no background to him, just the in-people in the Village said he was good. So when he came up, we were all surprised. He was very young, he looked scruffy, he had his railroad cap on. He was quiet, reserved, he wouldn't talk, and when he sang he sounded like the inheritor of Woody Guthrie's style. He played Thursday through Sunday. He got $200 and had to pay his own transportation up and back. There were some people there who liked him, but on the whole, he did not go over... Frankly, I was not that impressed."

Uncle Moishe later said what was to become the most prized nugget of our family's collective memory: "With a voice like that, he'll never make it."

My uncle was not the only one unimpressed with Dylan's performance. According to Ontario visual artist Gordon Peffer, who was working at the Pot the night Dylan played, "It was a crappy night. Hardly anyone there. I was selling books in front when Morris said why not go and listen to Dylan, which I did, and even sat with him for a while, but I have no idea what we talked about."

Hyman said: "I didn't really like him. We tried to talk and he mumbled and didn't make any sense."

Marlowe remembers otherwise: "The musical highlight, of course, was Dylan. I'd... heard a lot about him, but looking at him, didn't expect that much – until he opened his mouth and his voice poured out. People have found fault with his singing voice, but there was no disputing the power of that voice that was nearly too big for the size of the room. I think he blew us all away."

Soon after Dylan's stint, my uncle closed the Potpourri and moved into the air conditioning business. Not surprisingly, he had more success in air conditioning than he'd had in recognizing musical talent.

Safe, Dark Space
A Home away from Home

Dylan's first Canadian appearance is a remarkable piece of Potpourri history, but the more outstanding legacy is how one short-lived coffee-house-bookstore lives on years afterwards in the hearts of those who used to meet there. What does it take for a place, a hangout,

The Potpourri on Stanley Street

what we put on as clothing
became our skin

this was the centre we were starved for
a feast of identity
kindred spirits gathering
high on espresso and existentialism
Sartre de Beauvoir Goldman Ginsberg

at the intersection of sex and symbolism
folk music and blues
the McGarrigle Sisters Dave Von Ronk
Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee

still I gnash my teeth because I refused
to help fill an audience for Bob Dylan

in my rush to get "home" after Sir George Williams
I walked right through its plate glass door
not a scratch on me

huddled there during the Cuban Missile Crisis
petrified the whole world was going to blow up
and I would die a virgin

safe dark space baby beatnik heaven

-Renee Rodin

to create such a lasting impact on peoples' lives? The language the Potpourri folks used to describe it is telling: not as a physical space they occupied, but as an abstract place that lives within them – a "refuge," a "feast of identity," a "home away from home," an "oasis" and a "haven."

"For me, it was a refuge," Marlowe wrote. "I finally met a bunch of people with whom I had more in common than I'd previously experienced. We were, if I may say so, an odd crew, in a wonderful way – the ones who didn't quite fit in, through, perhaps, too much talent and creative aspirations..... The bookstore was wonderful, so many titles to open our minds; we were introduced to Penguin classics, New Directions publications, the existentialists – Sartre, Camus – the absurd playwrights – Ionesco, Genet. It was quite amazing, the selection that was in stock, chosen, I presume, by Morris."

Brian recalled being at the Potpourri during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He described it as "the single most horrifying event of my life. Most, if not all, of us expected nuclear war any day. We couldn't imagine either side backing

down. I hung out at the Pot every day during that period. (I pretty much did anyway.) We were all very scared and depressed and I suppose sought each other out for solace or the like."

Renee described how the Pot served as a "happening place, and a refuge from a scary world." She said that "after the misery of high school (I was the only student to wear a peace button) I finally found a group of like-minded people. The Potpourri was a refuge where I could count on being with others who shared my values. It was the ideal home, the place for real community."

Like Brian, Renee remembered how she and her Potpourri friends were terrified during the Cuban Missile crisis. They believed that tensions would escalate and that they would die. She said she wanted to die at the coffee house, among her Pot friends, her second family, rather than at home with her parents. "Essentially what the Potpourri was, was our home away from home," she said.

Renee's poem "The Potpourri on Stanley Street" was published in her collection *Bread and Salt* (Talon books: 1996), and she sent a copy to me, dedicating it to my Uncle Moishe and Aunt Mary.

I'm grateful to the special people who experienced the Potpourri firsthand for generously sharing their memories with me. They helped me to discover a part of my uncle's legacy I couldn't have known without them, and to re-create a moment of Montreal's folk music history I'd thought was lost forever.

There's comfort in knowing that of the brief cracks of light that are our lives, some things come, some things go, and some things endure.

Myra Shuster is a Montreal immigration lawyer and non-fiction writer, recipient of two Quebec Writers' Federation mentorships. She is currently working on a memoir concerning the death of her sister as a Moonie in the late 1970s, and has launched a blog at http://vintagelight.wordpress.com/.

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Perusing the titles on the Potpourri bookshelves. Photo courtesy of Jennifer and Leon Fineberg.

Shim Sham and Downtown Stomp

Finding the past through swing dance

by Lys Stevens

Another Friday night and my man and I zip south on our bikes to St. Laurent and Milton, scramble up the two flights of stairs to Cat's Corner Swing Dance School for our beginner class. It is our fourth session, and once again Kevin tells me he might not have his heart in it tonight. His body's there, he says, and he isn't resenting being here. "But I just might not love it as much as I did last week."

But he does. It's become almost predictable that by the end of the class Kevin wants to dance in the streets with me.

We pass through the front room, with its one brick wall and a curiously inviting empty floor, to the bigger back room, and our two-dozen classmates. A south wall of potentially-intimidating mirrors is offset by the Chinese lanterns, velvet curtains and hardwood flooring. The space is both cozy and classy, welcoming and expectant, a place where you can imagine good dance parties happen.

We begin to bounce. On one foot, and then the other, we get ourselves back into the beat of the music. Back to our swing stance, which is likened to a sports stance – feet apart, knees flexed, body leaning forward slightly, ready.

Various things brought me to take, and drag my man into, swing lessons. Probably the clearest reason is my academic interest in African American vernacular dance. Dance is the art form I trained in, and race interests me: I want to understand the privilege my white skin holds. I have researched hip-hop street dances and the intimate connection of jazz to the African American tradition in tap. Swing, a family of forms including the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, the Jitterbug and blues dancing, emerged out of the same spaces and collective inspiration of Black America in the first half of the twentieth century. Up here, north of the border, Montreal exploded with the rhythms of jazz between the 1920s and 50s, the only major city in North America to avoid total prohibition.

I am intrigued by what I might discover about the past by dancing a dance steeped in another era. What might the movement evoke in me? How does nostalgia work in the mind? How does nostalgia work in the body? Are there, in today's swing scene, traces of Montreal's Swing Era history?

In pre-television Montreal, dancing was a major leisure activity, despite condemnations from the clergy. House bands played for dancing patrons at nightclubs, lounges and restaurants between sets of exotic and entertaining floorshows. Uptown, downtown, in the east and west ends, the number of dance houses is incalculable. The Big Band Era of the Second World War saw a proliferation of ballrooms: Chez Maurice Danceland on St. Catherine Street, The Roseland Ballroom at Ontario and Bleury, later licensed for alcohol and renamed The Auditorium. A young Oscar Peterson played with the Johnny Holmes Orchestra at weekly Saturday night dances at Westmount's Victoria Hall throughout the '40s.

Dancing is mentioned all through the book *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montreal Night Clubs 1925-1955*, a fascinating collection of photographs and programs compiled by Concordia University archivist Nancy Marrelli. However, not much of the actual substance of that dancing is revealed in the images and its accompanying text. In one picture, taken at Chez Maurice, the stunned crowd peers up at the famed American scat singer, bandleader and popularizer of the Jitterbug, Cab Calloway, wailing it on the microphone. A picture of The Auditorium is similar – all faces oriented in one direction, not in pairs, no limbs in off-kilter motion. On the sheet music for a song by the early Montreal jazz band the Melody Kings, line drawings depict couples in a closed, upright position, ladies in long dresses – no ready stance with bent knees here. In another, the white floor-length gown of a woman suggests a more elegant and restrained kind of dancing than the get-down I'm learning on Friday nights.

It remains unclear how "swinging" Montreal swing dancing got back in the day. A wide range of stylistic interpretations likely existed across Montreal dance locales, depending on the social make-up of the clientele. Many venues barred black patrons; fancy hotel lounges such as the Ritz Carleton on Sherbrooke Street also excluded black entertainers from their stages. Couples in these contexts would have learnt the latest social dances – "refined," based on white racial ideals, from self-proclaimed professionals. Venues such as Connie's Inn on St. Laurent that featured exclusively black artists for exclusively white audiences might have provided a more direct transmission. At Rockhead's Paradise at Mountain and St. Antoine, black artists were showcased for an integrated clientele, and who knows what exclusively black locations might have witnessed the swingingest and Harlem-esque dancing in town.

Meanwhile, my body is learning the basics of what swing dancing is.

Pretty quickly we are told to experi-

Doing the Lindy Hop at the Cat's Corner, Montreal. Photo: catscorner.ca.

ment a bit with a few of the simple footwork combinations we had already learnt: side to side, double time, and if we want to go crazy we can step forward and back, maybe even travel around a bit. After the warm-up we are asked to pair up and form a circle around the room. We practice closed holds and open holds, turns and walks. We begin the Cat's Corner merry-go-round, a speed dating of swing pairing where you spend only a few minutes with a given partner before moving on to the next.

I quickly realize that being the man is not easy. Yes, as a follower I am exercising my skills in "écoute" – responding to the slight indications of the lead. Picking up the steps is easy enough – following is my main task. It is surprisingly hard for women of my generation to give up leadership in a couple. Kevin adores admonishing me ("Stop trying to lead!") as a teasing blame when our bodies go in opposite directions. But leaders must master the movement, and then live in it confidently enough to direct the follower. As they improvise. "Make a decision about what you are going to do next, and then make it clear to your partner," is something the teacher likes to say. "It's always the man's fault if things go wrong," is another. As I said to one seven-minute partner, this is not part of our society's cultural habits: men dancing, men leading.

The merry-go-round is a great way to learn to adapt to a range of abilities and a variety of movement styles. It also primes you to feel comfortable asking or accepting a dance with a stranger if you stay for the Downtown Stomp – a dance event later on in the evening.

This activity is the heartbeat of the studio. As of 9:30, all levels come out to strut their stuff, try new moves, meet new dance partners, and share in the good vibes. It is also an opportunity to witness superb floor improvisations as more experienced dancers magically fall into pairs of movement communication that habitually explode in creativity and connectivity.

On this night the DJ arrives early to set up, crossing behind the paired confusion to the corner where I happen to be partnerless for one last turn. When he sees me alone, he asks politely if I need a partner. I had noticed him at the last Downtown Stomp, a young bashful thing, tall and slim. He had spent most of his time on that occasion behind the DJ table, but I had noticed he had technique from the couple of times he ventured onto the floor. Now, silently, we dance as he leads me in the basic steps everyone is working on – back and side, side – me staring at his white pointed leather shoes as I listen as hard as I can, with my whole body. His touch is angular, but firm. An extra knee pump here, a leg shake there, I try to match him as he nudges us past where the curriculum has brought us. I marvel at the white shoes, the way his shirt hangs off his lanky frame, trying to avoid lecherous thoughts. He barely speaks. Just one question at the end: "Is this a beginning or intermediate class?" I take that as a compliment.

References to the past come in various shapes and sizes at Cat's Corner: a poster of Frankie Manning here, of Norma Miller there, two of the original Harlem lindy hoppers. It's in the music they choose to play, in what they wear when they dress up. It's a particular flavour of retro fashion - the white leather shoes come to mind. It's in the movement. "I feel it in my sense of groundedness, in the pulse, and in my connection to the music," says Anaïs Sekine, who has been swing dancing for seven years. It's a movement aesthetic that is promoted by most of the teachers at Cat's Corner.

The Shim Sham is a ritual done by contemporary swing dance groups around the world that recalls the roots of the dance. Well into a social evening such as the Downtown Stomp, the song 'Taint What You Do comes on, and everyone begins doing this rollicking solo group routine insiders seem to know very well, and those of us on the fringes struggle to keep in step with.

The story famously goes that Al Minns and other original lindy hoppers were "rediscovered" in the early 1980s by separate groups of dancers from New York City, California, Stockholm and the United Kingdom, and urged to come out of retirement. Minns died in 1985, passing the torch on to Frankie Manning, who died in 2009. Manning and Minns had each developed alternative swing choreographies for what was originally a tap routine. Manning's version is likely the one done at Cat's Corner, as his presence at modern swing events had a longer, and therefore more lasting, impact.

The weekly Shim Sham and the Birthday Jam – another ritualized moment where those with a birthday that week are told to take the floor, as the crowd gathers in a circle, and, for one song, dancers cut in to whisk the birthday girl or boy in a frenzy of partnering – point to the community-minded nature of Cat's Corner. The school seeks to promote an authentic experience of swing dancing, defining authentic in its accessibility and social character. "There are very few sources for the original swing dancing," points out owner/manager Debbie Carman. She explains that many of the old-timers have passed on, and the little available media footage, such as the famous Whitey's Lindy Hoppers scene in the 1941 movie Hellzapoppin, were intentionally created as a spectacle, to "wow" an audience. They were meticulously planned choreographed routines, in response to the demands of cinematography. The acrobatic, gravity-defying flips were characteristic of Whitey's troupe. They were the "cats," in fact, eponymous to the name Cat's Corner: the section of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem where the Lindy Hop was developed by the likes of Minns, Manning and Miller in the '20s and '30s.

We can presume, however, that the majority of swing dancers of the time were enjoying it socially, not as a performance, explains Carman. The philosophy of the school is to emphasize improvisation and a connection to the music, rather than perfecting difficult choreographies. "It's not that we never perform or compete, but that's not what the core of what the dance is," says Carman. For those that can and want to push the form beyond this realm, there's encouragement for that too.

Kevin and I are still laughably far from being good enough at swing dancing to compete or perform, unless you count our Saturday morning kitchen performances for our kids, who are eager to cut in and dance along with us. We're happy enough attending our beginner classes, and occasionally making an evening of the Downtown Stomp. Laughing is definitely part of the game, though, and it's a large part of what keeps us coming back.

Lys Stevens is a Montreal writer and researcher specializing in the history of popular dance.

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