



# Farewell to the oldest store in Morin Heights: the Mickey's story

by David Hodgson

The afternoon of December 24, 2013 marked the closing of a chapter in Morin Heights history. Owen LeGallee and his eldest daughter Heidi locked the door to "Mickey's" for the last time after 53 years of continuous operation. The store, named for Owen's wife, Mildred "Mickey" Pollock who died in 2001, was a clothing and shoe store, coffee shop, laundromat and community meeting place. The building, a fixture of our local business scene and a witness to 115 years of daily life, was one of the oldest in the village. It was constructed in 1898 by Mr. Cuffling to serve as a general store, but it was remodeled and expanded several times, and many different people owned and operated it as a store prior to its purchase by the LeGallees in 1960.



The large wooden structure across from the town library was demolished by its new owners in the spring of 2014, and a handsome new building has taken its place. On the main floor is a coffee shop appropriately named "Mickey's Café"; upstairs are commercial offices.  
*(Photo circa 1905)*

### LeGallee family history

Owen's family story started two centuries ago when his ancestors arrived in Canada from France following the Huguenot persecution in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. They settled in Strathroy, Ontario, just west of London. Owen's Great Grandfather moved to Montreal sometime later and was married at the Wesley Church in Montreal in 1850. Owen's grandfather, William, was born shortly thereafter. William and his brother James established a printing and engraving business at the corner of Lagachetiere and Bleury streets in the late nineteenth century. They specialized in the manufacture of bronze plaques used to identify buildings or as historic markers. Some can still be seen— look for the "Legalle Brothers Ltd." mark on the lower edge of plaques on buildings in Old Montreal.



Owen's grandfather moved his family to Chicago after his brother James, a member of the Royal Patricias, was killed in France in 1917. Subsequently several family members moved west to California, but his son Fred (Owen's father) moved back to Montreal in the early 1920s. Looking for work, he responded to an ad in the *Montreal Star* – a Mr. Syvret was looking for help in running his general dry goods store in Morin Heights (the same store that Fred's son Owen would buy 45 years later). Fred took the train up for an interview and ended up getting the job. He worked for "Pop" Syvret for about five years. During this time he met his future wife, Ella, a member of the Kerr family who owned a large farm in Mille Isles. By the time Owen's father



appeared on the scene she was living with her Mother in what is today Marcel and Norma Vaillancourt's house on Millard Ave. Ella went into Syvret's store regularly as this was the location of the post office at the time.

*(Winter photo 1925)*

In the early thirties, times were tough in Morin Heights as they were pretty well everywhere else. The Syvrets were struggling and the prospects for Fred's continued employment were looking dim. By this time, Fred and Ella had two children, Jim (1929) born in a house, now long gone, that used to stand in front of l'Heritage, and Jack (1933) born in the upstairs of the Pagé house on rue du Village. Feeling there was little hope for a good life here, they returned to Montreal. The connection to Morin Heights however, was made, as there was now permanent family in town. Fred worked at various occupations in Montreal and eventually became a successful independent distributor for Pepsi Cola.

Owen, the last of his siblings, was born in Montreal in 1936. He initially attended Barclay School in Park Extension, but spent many summers and vacations visiting with his grandmother in Morin Heights, coming up on the train. He remembers Millard being a dead-end street accessible only via a laneway that ran from rue du Village up through the parking lot of the current "Comfort's Pub." There were gates at the bottom and the top to keep in cows being pastured there at the time. Owen had many friends in Morin Heights and remembers going to Mr. Corbeil's restaurant for 10-cent hotdogs. The Corbeil building is the one immediately west of Mickey's store.

In the early fifties however, the LeGallee's lives changed. Pepsi altered its strategy and decided to handle distribution of its products internally. Fred found himself handsomely "bought out," but also out of a job. He and Ella decided to return to Morin Heights permanently and purchased a farm from the Thompson brothers located near the Kirkpatrick family farm near Lake Anne.

Not one to spend an idle retirement, Fred founded the Morin Heights Express Co., a commercial cartage service. Office and depot was located just outside town on the way to Lachute near the current road into Green Acres. Owen remembers being picked up every day by Clifford Black in his Bombardier snow bus to make the trip to school in the winter. The school was located between the present day depanneurs (Couche Tard and Boni-Soir) effectively in the middle of the current Highway 364.

### **Owen's career underway**

Fred's business prospered and Owen, at the age of 15, started working for his dad after completing grade 8 at the local Morin Heights school. Owen worked for Fred full time for a few years as well as working evenings at the Rockcliffe Inn for \$5 a night. He vividly recalls the square dances that were held there called by Willie Baldwin and his daughter Marion Elliott.

Robert John Ivall, the blacksmith from Christieville, played fiddle while his sister Naomi played piano. The Rockcliffe unfortunately burned to the ground in the 1970s, but you can still see what is left of the foundation up Rockcliffe Road on the hill on the right overlooking the lake.

At one point, Fred took Owen aside and suggested that if he wanted to make something of himself he had better acquire a trade. Agreeably, Owen decided that a job with the railway was the way to go. He approached Mr. Allard, the stationmaster in Morin Heights, and obtained a junior position for the princely sum of \$25 a month. His first year was spent mastering the workings of a train station. He did it all-- from washing floors and toilets to selling tickets and



preparing freight shipments. In due course, he found himself enrolled in a “land telegraphy” training program under Mr. Allard’s tutelage.

Owen proved to be a quick study and learned Morse code within six months. This earned him a special “keener” bonus of \$90 and his operator’s license. Qualified, he was now earning \$261 a month. He continued to work for the CNR in Morin Heights then was moved to Grenville, St-Eustache and finally to Hornpane in Northern Ontario, taking short-term postings relieving regular employees off for sickness or other reasons. As it turned out, Owen was the last English telegraph operator to work for the CNR in Canada. He left this profession in 1956 at the ripe old age of 20 and returned to Morin Heights to work again with his father.

In the same year, Owen met Mildred (Mickey) Pollock at Boyd’s restaurant – located beside today’s post office in the building beside what was then Mr. St Denis’ taxi stand on the northwest corner of Village and Watchorn. The Pollocks, like the Kerrs, was an old family from the area. With seven children, they owned and operated a large farm off Lac Echo road near Cote St-Gabriel. Owen and Mickey were married in 1957 at the Anglican Church on rue du Village followed by a reception at the Rockcliffe Inn. They first settled in the apartment above Mr. St Denis’ taxi stand; for this humble abode, they paid \$35 a month rent. While Owen continued in his Dad’s business, Mickey worked for Carl Seale at his general store located where the parking lot for the Garderie is today.

### **Mickey's store began in 1960**

During this time, Isabel Watchorn owned and operated the store in which Owen's father had worked many years before. Owen and Mildred purchased it from the Watchorns on September 6, 1960 for \$1000 down and \$1000 a year for 15 years at 5% interest. At the time, in addition to clothing, footwear and a limited selection of grocery items and hardware, Mickey's was the "go to" place for yarns, fabric and sewing supplies. Of course, this mix changed over the years as the focus shifted to other things.

Having grown up on a farm, Mickey had an intense love for animals. The grounds behind the store provided an ideal location for a small barn, which Owen built himself using beams and timber recycled from the old Pollock farm. Mickey had one horse when they married but it wasn't long before there were six horses as well as goats, sheep, chickens and ducks resident in the barn and yard behind the store.

In 1963, Owen and Mickey came up with the idea of adding a Laundromat to their general dry goods business. Everyone in town thought they were crazy – people washed their clothes at home, didn't they? As it turned out, demand for the initial four washing machines and two dryers grew quickly, and more machines were added. As Owen will tell you ..... "we did very well with the Laundromat."

By natural extension, the coffee shop followed. People waiting around doing their washing needed something to occupy their time and so, not to overlook a moneymaking opportunity, the coffee shop was born. Owen and his father built the counter and installed the stools, the same ones that remained to the last day of business. By the early seventies, recognizing the renaissance of tourism and people buying summer cottages following the completion of the Autoroute, Owen saw a growing demand for propane gas, and with it a new business opportunity. It fit well with the Laundromat business as all the dryers were powered by propane. Finally in 1984, the local taxi business came up for grabs following the death of its proprietor, Mr. Connolly, and Owen added another service to his business mix.

As Owen's business prospered and grew, so did Morin Heights, and as the seventies unfolded there was a tremendous influx of both new permanent residents and weekenders, all bringing business to the LeGallee enterprises. Owen particularly remembers the parade of musicians recording at Le Studio. Jeff Healey, Cat Stevens, Robert Charlevoix, Marie Desrosiers, Sarah

McLaughlin and Shania Twain are only a few of the notables who passed through the door for a coffee or to buy a lumber jacket, socks or a pair of boots, or to secure a taxi to the airport.

A final part of the Mickey's prosperous business package was a contract with the municipality to provide emergency telephone services. In the days before "911" and centralized security services, Mickey's (and alternately Mr. St. Denis' taxi business) served as the community emergency central. Even as late as the mid-1990s, Mickey's had two phones dedicated to fire and police respectively. When the fire phone rang, Owen and family members manned the lines to call volunteer firefighters to service. It also meant ringing the alarm bell which sounded from the fire hall across the street. Police emergencies required the summoning of the active duty Morin Heights police officer and then any follow-up needs such as an ambulance or additional police back-up. In return for providing these services the Legallees were paid \$200 a month.

While the business was evolving, Owen also served as a town councilor for 24 years (1982 – 2006) and with Mickey successfully raised five children (Heidi, Stacy, Kelly, Shawn and Jamie), all adopted from Weredale House in Montreal at the tender age of several weeks. Mickey and Owen also decided that all their kids should be educated in the French language.

Routine was an important part of the LeGallee family life; every Tuesday, Owen went bowling in Ste. Adele, and on Saturdays he and Mickey went out for dinner. On their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, each child was treated to dinner at Gibby's Restaurant in St. Sauveur and was given a wristwatch to



mark the occasion. After Sunday School each week, the kids were taken to Alice Gardner's restaurant ("The Senate") for hot dogs and soda, and afterwards were allowed to go into the store and each make their choice of a chocolate bar and some penny candy.

Unfortunately, Mickey contracted rheumatoid arthritis in the early 1990s and suffered with this terrible disease succumbing finally in 2001. Owen and Heidi soldiered on and kept the business going until December 2013, when the store closed forever.

Soon afterwards, Owen moved into a small flat owned by his son Jamie just outside of town on the old road to St-Sauveur.

After working continuously for 62 years Owen finally retired, although he continues to offer taxi services and plans to continue this enterprise as long as he can. When asked what he would do differently if he had to do his life over again, Owen had no regrets... only that he would make more time for golf second time through. Owen plans to spend time in Florida in the winter and certainly more time playing golf here in the summer.

As for Morin Heights, Owen is convinced that the town will continue to grow and prosper because, as he put it, “people like to live here.” Perhaps it’s appropriate that one of the most interesting lasting legacies of the LeGallee business ventures is the famous decal seen to this day on many vehicles, tee-shirts and sweat shirts -- “London, Paris, New York, Morin Heights.”

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*Photo credits: Judith Cezar, and Morin Heights Historical Association*