

NORTH HATLEY

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It's hard to impress North Hatley, Quebec. For the quiet village of some 700 souls, nestled among pastoral farms and verdant hills surrounding Lake Massawippi, 140 kilometres east of Montreal, has seen scores of millionaires, artists and celebrities come and go since its founding as a municipality precisely one hundred years ago this autumn. The media tycoon John Bassett used to play tennis against the novelist Hugh MacLennan at the North Hatley Club; Premier René Lévesque held his first cabinet meeting at the Auberge Hatley; a Saudi prince and a Pakistani president once gazed upon the abundance of fresh water and green trees as though upon paradise; Leonard Cohen, Pierre Trudeau and Nobel laureates from Harvard came to visit Frank Scott, the brilliant legal scholar and poet.

A couple of years ago, however, the village was abuzz about what two unknown guys were doing to the old Colapinto place. One of North Hatley's grandest summer homes, imposingly set on a gardened slope within sight of Earl's convenience store and the lakeside road, it was hard to miss. Sam Pollock, the former managing director of the Montreal Canadiens, has a similarly huge and dark-shingled "cottage" next door; Tory leader Jean Charest rents a modest version just behind. As the months of renovations stretched past a year, during which the whole house was lifted from its foundations and angled for a better view down the lake, there was endless curiosity in the Pilsen Pub and LeBaron's grocery about what the hell Bill Letteney and John Hay were doing and how much it was costing.

Their story gradually emerged. Bill had been an airline executive in New York who cashed in his stock options and took early retirement; John, originally from Winnipeg, was a successful costume designer for Hollywood movies, *Evita* being his latest and perhaps last. For many years they shared the dream of quitting Manhattan to run a high-quality bed-and-breakfast in some tranquil spot. They scoured a dozen sites from Vermont to Cape Cod and nearly closed a deal in Bar Harbor, Maine, when they happened to stay with friends in North Hatley in 1993.

"This property was for sale, and we were intrigued enough to call the broker right away," Bill remembers. "The moment we walked in, we felt something magical about the house. It had a quintessential turn-of-the-century ambiance, dark, rickety, like an Adirondack hunting lodge without all the antlers. It had been neglected for about 10 years - a family of groundhogs had taken over - but we could see the potential."

They could also see, from the sinking verandah, the picture-perfect lake, reaching more than 12 kilometres south toward the U.S. border yet narrowly

contained within a valley whose western side was steep and wild, the eastern undulating and tamed. Bewitched, they became the latest of the long line of Americans who came, who saw, who bought.

If North Hatley can be said to have had a founding father, it was neither a French habitant venturing into Indian country nor a British loyalist on the lam from the American Revolution, but a Yankee settler named Captain Ebenezer Hovey, who migrated north from Vermont near the end of the 18th century to occupy land he had been granted. And if North Hatley enjoys a certain renown as a summer resort, with its old-money regulars, its exclusive club and its two first-class inns, that had more to do with the nobs of 19th-century Baltimore than with the elites of Anglo Montreal.

In 1886 came Dr. Powhatan Clarke, a professor of natural sciences named after his distinguished native ancestor, the chieftain-father of Pocahontas. He and his wife had been visiting their daughter in a Montreal convent when they made a trip to North Hatley and, like Bill Letteney and John Hay more than 100 years later, fell instantly under the spell of the lake, the landscape of the Eastern Townships and the friendly farming village. Besides its beauty, the place offered a Southern gentleman such as Dr. Clarke a few practical advantages as well: it provided an escape from the sweltering heat of a Baltimore summer, its lodgings were relatively inexpensive and it wasn't on Yankee territory. He spread the glad tidings among his cronies back home, and the next year a whole load of them came up by train, drawing the curtains in the parlor cars while they chugged across New England.

"Judging from the prevailing sentiments, intonation of speech, way of thinking and tradition," a local historian once observed, "the first little summer colony at Hatley might have been situated on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, or the banks of the James River in Virginia, or the Mississippi or outside the cities of Charleston, South Carolina, or Savannah, Georgia, rather than beside an obscure Canadian lake. The colony was all Confederate."

By 1894 it included Hugh Lennox Bond, a Baltimore lawyer who started coming every summer with his wife, five daughters and a handful of servants. Eventually, in 1902, he built a large, elegant house overlooking the lake to accommodate them- which the last two Bond girls sold to the Colapintos in the '40s and the Colapintos sold to Bill Letteney and John Hay 50 years later, original linens, wicker furniture and all. "Time," says Bill, "had simply passed it by."

There are places in the world that derive their magic from being exactly what they are imagined to be. In its own unassuming way, North Hatley is one of them. It's constantly being discovered by all sorts of people whose first and lasting impression is that they have finally stumbled upon the town of their dreams.

In the wake of the Southerners, word of North Hatley's attractions reached various fashionable circles in Boston, New York and Philadelphia - more so when Prohibition lent Canada yet another attraction - and the Yankees were in turn followed by the Holts, the Websters and other wealthy Anglo-Quebeckers. Then came Frank Scott and Hugh MacLennan, the distinguished artists John Lyman and Marian Scott, the award-winning poets D.G. Jones and Ralph Gustafson, all of whom extolled the Eastern Townships as the equivalent of England's famous Lake District and North Hatley as its Windermere.

Like anyone who has ever come over a hill and discovered a Shangri-La hidden in a remote valley, they were struck by an immediate and immutable desire to keep North Hatley as they had found it- which seemed to suit the regional ethos, if one considers how many Vermont villages have been protected from the ravages of the 20th century or looks at other heritage gems in the area such as Hatley and Georgeville. Indeed, once the first batch of stately Victorian summer homes had been erected around the northwest corner of the lake and the smaller, simpler cottages had gone up on the hillside above them, there was a local movement to create a village conservation society. Today, there's also an active heritage committee and a water-protection association that limits the speed of power boats and wages war against the introduction of zebra mussels.

Circumstances also worked in the preservationists' favour. Most of the western slope was too steep for agricultural clear-cutting or access by road. Railway tracks were laid along the eastern shore, thus impeding its development. The economic decline of farming meant that the hills actually became more wooded over the decades. Nor, until quite recently, were there the highways and ski resorts that had lured so many Montrealers to the Laurentians, while those drawn toward the Townships found wonderful places around Brome Lake and Lake Memphremagog long before they reached Lake Massawippi. By the time the autoroute was completed in the mid-'60s, making the region less remote and better known, there was a universal interest in natural and historical conservation and plenty of horrid examples of Quebec beauty spots vandalized by tourism, commerce and summer chalets.

The most serious threat came during the late '70s when a mysterious Moroccan investor showed up with grandiose schemes to transform North Hatley into an educational and high-tech Mecca. He dangled the prospect of lucrative jobs in front of the locals and even enriched a few by secretly buying up half the businesses in the centre of the village. His only accomplishment, however, was to turn much of the main street into an abandoned ghost town before, so the story goes, he went bankrupt and vanished - like a divine warning to the citizenry not to be tempted by some devil's promises of progress.

For the most part, happily, the town councillors have shared the summer residents' feelings about what should and shouldn't be done, in part because the city families contributed so much to the community for so long (including an excellent bilingual library and decent summer theatre), in part because so many of the year-round inhabitants are retirees anxious to hang on to the past or professionals commuting to jobs in Sherbrooke but desiring the charms of an old-fashioned town. As a result, there are no cigarette boats on the lake, no neon billboards on the street, neither a McDonald's nor a Ralph Lauren.

And while there are a few modern showplaces and some suburban bungalows on the edge of town, the panoramic view from the public beach is still of clapboard cottages, large or small, white or brown, hardly intruding upon the unspoiled backdrop. From the start, as well, both the winter and summer populations shared an unusual combination of sophistication and rusticity. Captain Hovey may have had delusions of being English gentry, but he was living in the bush. The Baltimore Brahmins may have had distinguished pedigrees and private trains, but they had to rub elbows with farmers and woodsmen at church. And the Westmount families may have position and power in Montreal, but here they want to get away from - or can't get away with - the usual social trappings.

Money in North Hatley tends to be quiet. The fabled club consists of an old wooden pavilion, two docks and a couple of tennis courts. When the theatre patrons dress up for an opening night in their lightweight finery, they don't mind that they're going to be spending the evening in a converted piggery. In fact, there's very little of the snobbery and swanning that mar most other summer playgrounds of the rich and famous. Monster homes, such as the Moroccan's huge and garish palace, are considered vulgar. There is no cult of antique launches or expensive sports cars. Nobody seems very interested in making business connections or doing the cocktail circuit. It's summertime, after all, and the livin' is supposed to be easy.

What's remarkable is how little the laid-back atmosphere of the place has changed over the years. The road along the western shore has become busier with rumbling trucks and speeding cars. The Saturday morning market, full of fresh vegetables and homemade pies from the many organic farms in the region, is much better, while the Sunday afternoon traffic, caused by weekenders from Montreal and day-trippers from Sherbrooke, is much worse. Bed-and-breakfasts, from the modest to the elegant, have sprung up all over town. The new bicycle trail along the old railway line from Lennoxville rewards its users by terminating at an outdoor car that specializes in gourmet quiches and award-winning pastries. A beautiful day attracts scores of sunbathers to picnic on the grass around the neo-Victorian band-stand in Dreamland Park. On the whole, however, North Hatley feels as somnolent and unpretentious as ever.

It also feels as Anglo-American. Though French-speaking farmers and mill workers began arriving in the Eastern Townships before the turn of the century in search of good land or industrial jobs, French-speaking Montrealers tended to avoid the English enclave. But as the Laurentians and the Lower St. Lawrence became overrun and somewhat squalid, as the new autoroute cut the distance and adequate ski hills opened, as reports circulated about the lovely vistas and the pristine lakes and the cheap farms and the maintained villages, more and more French Quebecers started vacationing in what they arbitrarily decided to call l'Estrie. North Hatley saw the arrival of the separatist chanteuse Pauline Julien and the poet-politician Gérald Godin, the Marxist sociologist Marcel Rioux and the popular folksinger Jacques Michel, as well as professors teaching at the Université de Sherbrooke and gastronomes salivating over the Auberge Hatley's renowned menu.

Except for the coercive provincial law mandating French on public signs, the two languages co-exist in harmonious equality, with most people able to hop back and forth from one to the other without a second thought. And except for the occasional outbreak of tension between federalists and separatists - most notably during the celebrated series of passionate debates held in Dame Jacqueline's bakery at the time of the 1980 referendum - the two linguistic communities live side by side with enviable tolerance. Nevertheless, for the moment at least, North Hatley remains one of the last pockets of Anglo-Quebec patrimony outside Montreal.

As chance would have it, Bill Letteney and John Hay opened their bed-and-breakfast in the fall of 1995, on the very eve of Quebec's second referendum. Yet, stepping into the Abenaki Lodge, as they called it, was like stepping back before the Great War and leaving all the turmoils and anxieties of our fin de siècle far behind. Its main rooms artfully recreated the rustic comforts of a northern fantasy, with big stone fireplaces and authentic memorabilia. Each of its five suites resembled an elaborate set for a Eugene O'Neill play, from the Ivy League pennants and half-unpacked steamer trunk in the Varsity room to the hunting and fishing trophies crammed into Woodlands.

"Generations keep coming back to North Hatley," John Hay explains. "They're fiercely proud of what it has always been and they don't want it to change. So it's nice to have been able to bring this house back to what it once was." In fact, he admits, it's a totally different house within a renovated shell, insulated, rewired, with a functional kitchen and contemporary bathrooms, in which genuine artifacts and Hollywood artifice cater to the nostalgic romance of a more privileged, more peaceful era. In that respect, the lodge is perfectly situated in North Hatley, where discreet money and good taste have managed to maintain the languid atmosphere of the late 19th century without surrendering any of the advantages of 20th-century progress.

