

Doug Ball, June 16, 2020, George McLeish Center.

## FADED FOOTPRINTS OF ANOTHER ERA.

As a relative newcomer to Montreal, and Senneville, I was immediately struck by the rich historical significance of the city and its surroundings. Certainly the village of Senneville, being ideally positioned on a major waterway, was perfectly situated for exploration, trade, and even the odd conflict at times.

As has often happened with well-to-do families from large cities, the city dwellers would gravitate to more tranquil summer places. Senneville became, for many wealthy Montrealers, what Newport RI was for the wealthy families of New York City.

As with both groups, they often chose the most notable architects to design their city houses, followed by their need for country homes and their respective outbuildings. In Montreal's high society, the partnership of Edward and brother William Maxwell became the architects of choice. Their particular style had come to dominate the architectural landscape of Montreal. I imagine they were more than happy to make the long journey to the island's end for their patron clients.

The land that I discovered in 1979 was barely recognizable from the original. The owner, at that time, was Rosanna Todd. Her father, Dr. John Todd had died in 1950 and the property had been divided among his three daughters. These were the grand-daughters of Sir Edward Clouston. Bridjet and Jackie married and remained on their respective properties, but Rossana was more interested in theatre and chose to live abroad. I don't think they were on the best of terms. In the 35 years of Rosanna's ownership, her portion was allowed to fall into ruin. The original property had been a very large tract of land. Situated at the upper corner was the very first fortified structure located west of Montreal. It was a tower, designed to offer protection to the inhabitants if they were attacked by Indians. This actually happened resulting in a loss of life, and years later a proper fort 'Fort Senneville' was built further westward on the very tip of the land. This was unfortunately destroyed by the Americans under Benedict Arnold in 1776.

I might add that Rosanna's property contained only the working buildings, but what magnificent buildings they would have been. During all the construction and while we lived there the original family home for the estate was close by and was inhabited by Bridjet, and her husband George Fialkowski. This main house was designed prior to Maxwell's involvement but sometime before the outbreak of WW1 the Maxwells were asked to design a large addition which extended the house considerably. I was told it housed the kitchen and staff. I was told that it was demolished sometime after the war.

On the 9 acre portion we bought, it is thought that Edward Maxwell had his fingerprints on all but one of the buildings that were left.

- First of all there was an incredibly long stable, which was about 140 ft in length. It was in a collapsed state. It was just too far gone to even consider restoring the stable. The inside of the stable, which was designed to house cattle and horses, was much like a royal stable, lined in

glazed white brick, with red wood walls and ceiling materials. It would have been a magnificent structure. Visitors arriving in their horse drawn carriages would first pass through a set of impressive gates and then come upon this stable, guarded by a tall imposing silo. When we found this structure it was damaged beyond repair. The rear retaining wall had split, causing the foundation to then break as well, and slowly the building broke into two sections.

- A small brown house, for staff I imagine, that was definitely a Maxwell design. Trees had come down on the roof and broken windows had allowed rain and snow to enter. It was in sad shape.

- A lovely little white house with rotten sills that predated Maxwell's time. It had been moved to its present location, where it had served as a laundry house. A big wind could have easily taken it down, but luckily that did not happen. We restored it.

- A beautiful building down by the water. It was used as a generating building. A good sized engine charged large glass jars filled with acid. They served as batteries and were used to charge up Dr. Todd's electric vehicle and electric lights I assume. It was pure Maxwell, clad in cedar shingles with curved eyebrows over the doors and windows. We restored it.

- The squash court was certainly a Maxwell design. It was a lovely little building designed just for the game of squash. It even had a small gallery for spectators. We were told that a young Christopher Plummer visited in the summers, and that this building became his theater. We found a trunk that still contained old costumes. I have since been reminded that it could have been Rosana's trunk, since she had been interested in theater as well. We had originally intended to save this delightful building but as the project evolved its condition deteriorated even more and we were running out of steam and money. I am pleased to add that this was photographed and the pictures will be shown.

- There were numerous other unremarkable buildings that made up the setting. There was evidence of greenhouses, a beautiful silo still stood, and there were plenty of stone walls that typified that era. A magnificent pier had been built so that a steam boat could tie up to the dockside. All this portrayed an extremely lavish setting and today one could not begin to imagine what it would have been like during this era.

It was, in retrospect, a very different time. A time when manpower was plentiful and cheap, and income taxes had not yet been invented. WW1 changed all that. There were fewer working men to return to work on these large properties, and the income taxes, which were originally said to be only a short term offering, to help pay for a war, have stayed with us to this day. Sadly it was the end of that era, in more ways than one. The time of horse drawn carriages carrying elegant ladies in their long dresses, accompanied by men with tails was now over. The motorcar had made all this redundant.

The second part of my story deals with our move to 286 Ch de Senneville. Fortunately this put us very close to another collection of impressive Maxwell buildings in the form of stables, that are very different from that of 178. During my daily dog walks I have had unlimited opportunities to photograph these buildings. One of them has, unfortunately, not survived during our short time here. Sadly some of these buildings, now owned by the City of Montreal, have been neglected over time. One is now gone. I was fortunate on my dog walks to be able to document the decline and ultimate destruction of this gem of a building.

The larger, and fortunately the more impressive buildings are holding their own. The city, to their credit, recently sent in a crew to erect support and covers in an attempt to save a portion that had partly collapsed. I believe they are acting in good faith.

However if they do disappear eventually it will dramatically alter the look of this little part of Senneville.

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I will add another little bit that I might have mentioned to you back in the beginning of this conversation.

We have lived in a variety of houses while in Senneville, but there was one common denominator during all those years.

Once a week, during this time, I would make the trip down Senneville Road because it was such an interesting drive. The big houses behind their gates were certainly a part of the overall picture, and the tree-covered winding road another, but for me, the most interesting part of the trip was the collection of Maxwell designed white barns near Phillips Ave. And especially it was always the little working building on the opposite side of the road that caught my eye. It was small, generally in shadow, but perfectly situated in its setting. It had to be a Maxwell design as well. It was too perfect not to be. To make the picture more complete there was an old vintage Fargo truck parked in front. The grass was always neatly trimmed and sometimes flower pots appeared by the Fargo truck. A resident of Senneville cared a great deal for the property. She said that she was only a squatter. It was her sheep that grazed in the adjoining field.

To my mind it was this simple collection of country things that created the most perfect picture, and it was this that continued to reinforce the notion of how special this place was.

This was the building, called 'The Workshop.' that I photographed religiously, for about fifteen years, that is now gone, along with the sheep and the Fargo truck. At a certain point the roof was in desperate need of work, but the work was not done. I am pleased in a way to have had the chance to photograph such a simple little building in decline. It is much like watching a good friend who slowly fades away from you. We mistakenly think that these friends and other things that we love will always be there, until they are not.