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Potton Heritage Association

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24th General Annual Meeting – March 23rd, 2014

President's Address

This year the Association is sponsoring what I consider to be our most important exhibition ever in the Round Barn. It is intended to examine the challenges surrounding the conservation and protection of the heritage and cultural landscapes of Potton and is designed to promote consideration and discussion. Although many others are involved, the concept and initiative for this ambitious exhibition must be credited to Hans, who has been a tireless advocate in this domaine both locally and regionally.

Most of the open vistas and landscapes we enjoy today, were originally cleared and maintained over generations, for the cultivation of crops. As you know, dairy farming was once the prevalent vocation of our rural township. Most of these farms were comparatively small scale subsistence operations. Knowlton Maplehurst dairy operations probably were the largest in the Township. Dairy farming, though it may seem somewhat bucolic, is actually a gruelling and labour intensive way to make a living. Its demands for time and constant attention are however, absolutely unrelenting.

Over time, this way of life has succumbed to many external social, economic and regulatory pressures. Most have now abandoned the agricultural way, to the degree that only one dairy farm remains in Potton, if I am not mistaken. The agricultural vocation of our territory is now centered on grazing and raising beef cattle. In Potton there are three major players and several smaller operations. Most recently, various areas in Potton were also turned to the cultivation of corn, the repercussions of which remain visible and have yet to be determined. By and large, the vocation of our Township is almost exclusively recreation and tourism.

We must all know the saying « Nothing is certain but death and taxes. » Significant parts of Potton are clearly on the verge of enormous change for those very reasons. Land is often the greatest asset the rural family owns. And very few of these can financially withstand being custodians when their land is not under production and paying its way, so to speak.

Agricultural subsidies which offset taxation are not available to the owner of farmland if a certain revenue threshold, derived from the land, is unmet. And in the case of protected farmland, the sale of a portion for subdivision is complicated, if not impossible. Many landowners therefore are faced with the decision of having to sell all or nothing.

Selfishly, I have often been grateful that the agricultural protection act and the CPTAQ have slowed this process. I use as an example the iconic view to Knowlton Landing and the Lake beyond on chemin du Lac. The proprietor no longer farms this land and to the family, it represents substantial value in real estate potential. Quite frankly, I believe that it is only la Loi sur la Protection du Territoire Agricole, and the hay that these fields still produce, which stand between this iconic view and the eventual construction of an exclusive housing development. One very lovely home has already been established on the perimeter of the property. How long before others will follow? In other words, how safe are « our » landscapes, if in fact they are really « ours »?

I am familiar with other cases in Potton, – where the acreage is also significant and where the owners have died. The division amongst surviving heirs will inevitably bring a change in ownership and very possibly a change in vocation, no matter how heartbreaking the process. Not even our iconic mountain itself is immune. This is neither a good or bad thing. For those involved, it is regrettable and for every one of us, the changes will be of significance.

While all these formalities are settled, what happens? Mother Nature cares little for such problems. Her needs are as unrelenting – and she presses in quietly and imperceptibly until suddenly the cumulative change becomes obvious.

There is reason for optimism for I truly believe that something is changing in our collective psyche. Both instinctively and consciously, we are beginning to understand that the constant figurative erosion of our landscapes by man and Nature has significant impact for all. In some ways, it may even be the erosion of our way of life that is really at the crux of this awareness and concern. Perhaps, as we each become more and more aware that we bear an expiry date that the matter becomes more urgent.

One thing is certain : It is far more difficult to imagine the future than it is to imagine the richness of the past. Another certainty is that the landscape will remain, but ... And this is a big but! Who is to say what and how much of it will remain 50 years from now? How would we like to see it look? Should there be discussion of what should remain? Who is to say why and for whom it should be preserved? How should this be done? Is it doable (faisable) in any case? What tools do we have at our disposition? Most importantly how do we glean maximum support for something that concerns each and everyone of us? We need to talk!

The Association seeks to address these many issues surrounding the cultural heritage of our landscapes. We ask that you actively support our effort through debate and participation.

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Sandra Jewett
March 23rd, 2014