
Chronicles from the past...

Interviews with Adrien Laplume & Simone Boily

by

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Adrien & Simone

If one day, you find yourself before an audience of 100, the easiest subject to talk about is your own life.

Adrien Laplume

Introduction

The Laplume family name in Potton is instantly recognized. For nearly a century, this family has played an important role in the social and economic life of our region. Their enterprising, independent spirit, creativity and dynamism seem to be family traits, handed from generation to generation.

We were privileged to interview Adrien Laplume, the patriarch of this family, and his wife, Simone Boily, who have very kindly sifted through a lifetime of memories to share their life's story. In speaking of good times and bad, they have generously given colour and texture to life in a different era in the Township of Potton, for which collective memory fades.

At the ripe age of 96, Adrien has a remarkably good memory: in the course of our conversations with him, he cited facts and figures relating to the cost of living, the salaries, and of how things were done in the first half of the last century. The present article deals primarily with Mr. and Mrs. Laplume's earliest years, from 1919 to the end of the 1940's. Perhaps someday their children will tell us the rest of the story.

1919 – Adrien's father comes to Potton

In May 1919, Marcel Laplume and his wife, Parmélie Joyal, along with their family of four sons and two daughters, left Saint-Marcel-sur-le-Richelieu to begin life in Potton. Adrien Laplume was then but two years old.

Here they bought a 135-acre farm at the foot of Bear Mountain, at the very end of the road bordering Vermont, now called chemin Laplume. The farm came with its twenty milking cows, two horses and the various pieces of equipment necessary for farming in those days. Adrien recalls that the landscape was a little more open than it is today. Their new home was spacious and at first the family used only the main floor of the building.

Adrien tells us that, although there was no electricity at the time, the house was supplied with running water. He tells us that many springs and veins of water are found on nearby Bear Mountain that supplied drinking water for a well, which was lined with stone and located at a distance of fifty feet slightly above the house. Water was so abundant that the well always overflowed. The installation of lead piping permitted a gravity-fed supply to the house, as well as to a cement tank in the barn, used for the overnight storage of fresh milk and cream before shipment.

The same system is still used to supply the new home which son Raymond subsequently built, only a few feet from the old house. Of course the water line is more modern and not prone to freezing, which was always a danger in the winter. To prevent this inconvenience in days gone by, the pipe carrying water was inserted into 6 foot "sleeves" of hollowed wooden beams, which were fitted one into the other and buried. Adrien recalls that these comparatively short sections wooden pipe sleeves were actually practical to maintain or repair. He reminded us that great care was always taken in the winter to leave a water faucet open at all times.

On March 4, 1923, only a few years after the family's arrival here, Adrien's mother died of complications from the difficult birth of her 10th child. Adrien was only six years old. Other family members, who had chosen to live in the States, pressured Marcel Laplume to move closer to them, but he stubbornly refused and remained on his farm with his young family. Four years later he remarried, to Joséphine Arpageau from Saint-Aimé, near Richelieu, and continued to farm until 1936, when son Adrien bought the family farm.

On August 12, 1963, Adrien's father, Marcel Laplume, and his wife were tragically killed near Saint-Marcel-sur-le-Richelieu in a car accident which also took the life of Marcel's brother and wife.

Dairy farming

In the years around 1925, Marcel Laplume sold the milk from his 22 cows to a creamery in North Troy, Vermont. The market here in Canada was limited and cross-border controls less stringent. Milk could be sold to the States for a much better price than available here. For example, 100 pounds of milk then sold for \$1.00 in Quebec, but the equivalent weight brought \$5.00 from our neighbours to the south. The choice was clear!



The Laplume farm, circa 1920

At about 8 years old, Adrien helped his older brother deliver the Laplume's milk to the North Troy Creamery in a horse-drawn wagon. In time, neighbouring farmers took turns with the task. On the warmest summer days small ice chips were added to the cans. Although this diluted the milk slightly, it was a necessary precaution. Often the four-mile trip to North

Troy was made in the coolness of very early morning. Adrien tells us that the good days ended when the U.S. introduced laws prohibiting the sale of milk coming from Canada.

Adrien's father then bought a milk separator, as did several of the neighbours. This new machine, cranked by hand, allowed the separation of 22-23% rich cream from the whole milk. The skimmed milk was then fed to pigs and calves, who would drain the pails and nuzzle hungrily for more. Care had to be taken not to overfeed calves with this milk, for the consequences could have been fatal to the animal, although Adrien did not explain why.

Adrien recalls that cream was then sold to an Eastman creamery for processing. It was shipped by train, popularly known as "The Peanut", which left North Troy to the station in Mansonville, thence to Eastman and on to Montreal. At the platform in Mansonville, farmers loaded their cream cans onto the Peanut, which carried not only passenger traffic but also transported wood, animals, produce, meats and the like. Adrien recollects wrapping veal carcasses in burlap bags for shipment and covering these with animal hides to protect from flies. The six-car Peanut provided a valued service to the local population until April 1st, 1936 when Canadian

Pacific shut down the twenty-three mile trunk line between North Troy and Eastman.

In 1930, Hormidas Lafrenière opened a creamery on Clay Hill Street, in Mansonville. Farmers would bring their cream every two or three days to this creamery, where mostly butter was made.

Clay Hill Street in Mansonville was renamed over the years: it has been called Creamery Street, Bridge Street and now it is known as rue Joseph-Blanchet. The old creamery building still stands at #7 Joseph-Blanchet.

Speaking of cream seemed to evoke memories of homemade ice cream, for which Adrien has particular affection. He spoke fondly of the family's hand cranked ice cream maker; an apparatus consisting of a large wooden pail with an inner leak-proof canister and a cranking mechanism to which the canister was attached. Rich cream, eggs, sugar and flavouring were mixed and poured into the canister for churning. Wooden paddles or dashers resembling an eggbeater were inserted into the canister; the top tightened and the whole secured into the outer bucket. Crushed ice and rock salt were then layered to fill the apparatus. An hour or so of persistent cranking would mix and freeze this mixture into a delectable treat for every one.



The Mansonville railroad station

Childhood memories

Adrien learned to help out on the farm from a young age, especially in the summer when there was much to be done. It was his job to bring in the kindling wood for the cook stove, to bring the cows from the pasture to the barn for milking, to pick potatoes in the fields, weed the garden, pick berries and so on. One of the first jobs he remembers being given was to hold or immobilize the cow's tail to keep it

from switching unexpectedly into the face of the person milking cows by hand, of course! When Adrien couldn't manage to keep up, the tail would be immobilized by attaching it to the cow's foot until milking ended! An essential intervention!

He remembers that there was far more time for playing in the winter! After a snowstorm or when the roads were icy, the children built snow forts or igloos, or better yet – went sliding! According to Adrien the best place to slide was from high on the hill beside Province Hill road, by the Ducharme house, now belonging to Serge Losique. From there, he says, they could slide to the curve leading to Laplume road, a long run of several hundred feet, where braking was often necessary when the roads were icy. Adrien recalls that the sled runners were made from the staves of molasses barrels. (Molasses was often added to hay for mineral value and to make poor hay more palatable!) These barrel staves were already curved and narrowed at either end, making ideal runners for the homemade bobsled.

Province Hill School #4

Forty-eight students from Grades 1 to 7 were crowded into the one room school once located on Province Hill road, a little to the east of Laplume road. It was built on a piece of land belonging to Antoine Ducharme, who maintained ownership of the land and never sold it to the Municipality, Adrien informed us.

Every day that there was school, Adrien walked to the schoolhouse where he attended class for about four years. Charlie Côté's wife was the teacher, and was paid \$20 per month for her work. Charlie Côté was the local handyman.

Adrien remembers splitting wood for the teacher when he was older. Some French Canadian families who lived in the States, but

close to the border sent their children to this little school so that they could be educated as Catholics in a French school. However, on Sundays, these newly minted American children went to the Catholic Church in North Troy, in order to better integrate into their own community.

Around 1955-56, the one-room schoolhouse was phased out in favour of a more centralized education in one school. Adrien noted that better road maintenance allowed this centralization. Only then did it become practical to bring all the children by bus to Notre-Dame-des-Lumières, the French school, or to Mansonville Intermediate School which was the English one. Around that time, Adrien successfully bid on the school bus contract and kept the job for ten years.

Regrettably, no trace of Province Hill School #4 remains.

The world of work

Adrien was initiated very early into the working world and learned rapidly to become



Cost \$300 US in the years 1920,
approximately \$3500 US in 2014

autonomous. As an adolescent, not only did he work on the family farm but also for the neighbours, when they needed him.

At 16 year of age, Adrien was considered old enough to drive his father's 1918 Ford Model T pickup. The process of getting his drivers' permit still brings a smile. All that was needed was to send the request for a license accompanied with a cheque for \$2.50 to the Government. Two weeks later, with no further ado, a drivers' license arrived in the mail!

Adrien remembers that one of his first trips at the wheel of the Ford truck was to fetch his stepmother Joséphine's furniture in Saint-Aimé, near Richelieu. At that time, there was no bridge crossing the Richelieu River. He remembers being ferried across the river in a boat propelled by oarsmen. A steel ring, attached to the boat by chain, slid along a steel cable stretching from one side of the river to the other, and steadied the craft in the current.

Before 1949-50, there was no electricity in the Laplume household, nor was there in many of the households beyond the village of Mansonville. That meant that much work was done by shovel, with horses or by plain manpower in daylight hours. Adrien well remembers milking cows by hand in lantern light, in the darkest months of the year.

Mansonville in the 1920's

The mills – Two of the three dams constructed on the Missisquoi River in Mansonville were still in use in the 1920's. The largest of these, upstream from town, ran two mills, Brouillette's saw mill and the Co-op grist mill, erected on opposite sides of the river. A smaller dam downstream fed the Atwell and the Boright sawmills. Vestiges of these old dams may still be seen at the end of Mill Street, though nothing of the mills remains.



Cutting ice

Cutting ice – The pond created upstream of the larger dam in Mansonville held 9 to 10 feet of water, according to Adrien, and when temperatures plummeted the surface froze. In order to make the ice thicker, snow was removed regularly from the surface, thus making a magnificent skating rink, enjoyed by young and old. Near the end of winter, when the ice was 16 to 18 inches thick, blocks of ice were extracted to fill the surrounding icehouses. This was done using a long ice saw and "good man power", says Adrien. Not only does the ice need to be thick, but the water below the ice needs to be of a sufficient depth to allow free movement of the saw. As did many others, Adrien and his brothers went to the pond with their horse drawn sleds to fetch their annual supply. A "cutter" was hired to section blocks of ice, 15 inches square, which were removed with ice tongs and placed on the sled to be drawn home. There the blocks were unloaded into the icehouse, a small and very well insulated building located near the house. Layers of these blocks were sandwiched between layers of sawdust until the structure was entirely filled. A sufficient amount of ice was "put up" to provide refrigeration needs until the following winter. The icehouse ceiling and walls were double

boarded, with 8 inches of compacted sawdust between.

Sawdust was a useful material at the time. Not only was it used for insulation in walls, and for banking houses, but it also provided bedding for the cattle and other livestock. Collecting and transporting a sufficient supply from the sawmills was another labour intensive job, says Adrien. At one or other of the sawmills in town, saw dust was shovelled into burlap bags from the large piles beneath the mill. Each bag sold for 2 to 5 cents, filled and transported by the buyer!

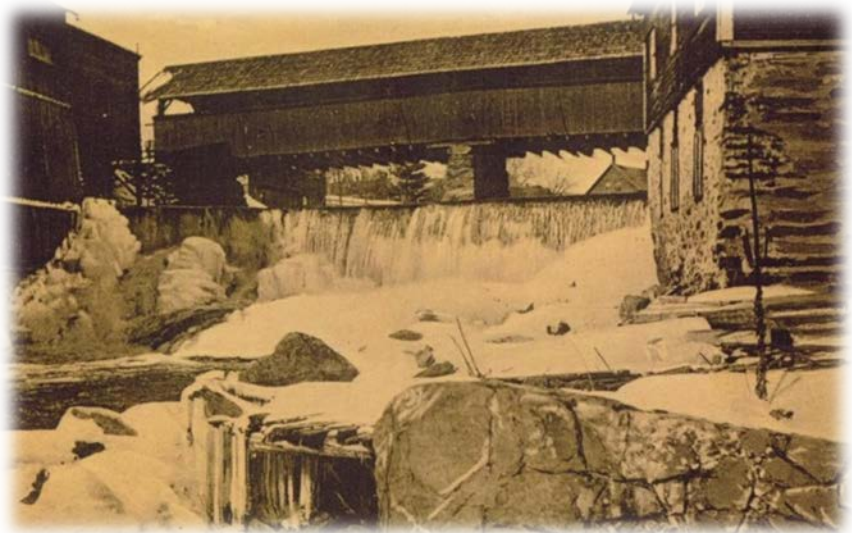
The covered bridge -- In addition to the mills, a covered bridge stretched across the Missisquoi in the heart of Mansonville. The first covered bridge was built in 1830 and was repaired many times over the years. It had two lanes, one for horse and wagon traffic, and another for foot traffic. A wall extended upwards to the roof to protect the pedestrian from the dust and spatter raised by the horses' hooves and wagons.

A huge flood in November 1927 destroyed not only the covered bridge and the two upper dams, but also demolished all of the mills in the village. Following this catastrophe, it was decided to replace the covered bridge with a cement structure. During its construction, a temporary bridge was built on posts on the bedrock of the riverbed. With the exception of the Atwell and Boright mills, the other ones were rebuilt in the months following the disastrous flood.

The crash of 1929

Even though he was only twelve years old, Adrien remembers quite well this difficult period when men often came knocking at the family's door seeking work, offering to help on

the farm or work in the woods, in exchange for room and board. He believed that farming families like his didn't feel the effects of the 1929 crash as much as their urban



The covered bridge

neighbours. They were less dependent on others for their basic needs, but nonetheless, they, too, felt the sting of the depression and needed to be resourceful in their economies to ensure they were fed. As an example, he remembers helping to preserve apples by threading slices on strings to dry to be used later in cooking.

Prohibition along the border in the US 1919-33

All of those living along the border were witness to, or were able to profit from the prohibition of the sale of alcohol which took place in the US and, for a time, in the rest of Canada. Stashes of beer or alcohol were often hidden along the border.

One day, Adrien remembers finding a cache of contraband alcohol hidden beneath a straw pile behind their stable. He told us of another occasion when he was around 13 years old. Seven Cadillacs, in themselves an unusual sight, stopped near the Laplume home, apparently waiting for the cover of darkness

before continuing across the border to St. Johnsbury, in Vermont. Curious to see what was inside these cars, he discovered burlap bags filled with 12 large beers each, and remembered that Frontenac and Whitehorse were two brands, among others.

The bags were piled to the windows, covered with curtains. Only the lead Cadillac carried no alcohol but was filled with passengers ready to intervene if need be. Their mission was to clear the road of barriers for the convoy of cars and to be a decoy in the case of a trap!

Exodus to the United States

It is a well-known historical fact that for nearly 100 years, between 1850 and 1950, more than 900 000 French Canadians immigrated to the United States seeking a better life. Each year 5 to 10% of the population of Quebec left the province. Without that massive exodus, it is estimated that the population of Quebec would today be 12 to 14 million strong.

As such, living steps from the American border, many of Adrien's family were also lured south. Land was available. Jobs paid more. Taxes were lower. The cost of living in each place was about the same. Where in Quebec one worked for about 20¢ an hour, one could earn \$1.00 an hour in the factories in the States. With the exception of that of Melvin Dunn, an American neighbour, Adrien remembers that practically all the farms along the border in Potton were owned by French Canadians: the Leblanc, Dubois, and Bonneau families, for example. He says *"We knew each other by sight, talked and helped each other out. Anywhere along either side of the border, smuggling contraband existed."*

All of Adrien's father's family, uncles and cousins, chose to live in the States, and tried diligently to convince his father to join them there. At that time, only one of Adrien's brothers, who didn't get along well with the

stepmother Joséphine, left to work in the plywood factory in Hancock, Vermont.

The other family members remained for a while in the Mansonville area, where they worked for fifty cents a day (5 cents an hour!) for the neighbouring farmers. The money they earned was given to their father.

In fact, at two different times, Adrien's family did move to the States to join the rest of the Laplume family. The first move lasted only four months, then part of the family returned to live on the farm, which had not yet been sold. Three of his sisters and another brother, having found jobs in the States, decided to remain.

Adrien buys the family farm in 1936

A year after the family returned to their farm, Adrien's father again decided to leave for Vermont. This time it was for good he said. He proposed selling the family farm to whomever of the children would buy. Only Adrien showed interest, while the rest of the family decided to follow their father to his recently acquired farm in North Troy.

After consideration, Adrien decided to make his life in Quebec; and, at the age of 19, he became sole owner of his father's 135 acre farm. He obtained a Quebec farm loan of \$4,000 to be reimbursed in two payments per year of \$54.00 for 39 years. Interest was calculated at 2.5% per annum.

Two important reasons motivated Adrien's decision to remain. He had fallen in love with one Simone Boily, and he loved the beautiful land, well situated, and full of possibilities, where he would sow oats, millet and raise hay.



The newly weds

A return to the beginning of a long love story

Living where he did, Adrien often needed to cross the border, be it for social or business reasons. On these frequent trips, Adrien began to take notice of a certain young Simone, who worked for the customs officer not far away. His reasons to cross the border grew steadily until one day he found the courage to invite the lovely Simone to meet him after supper at the Creek covered bridge!

He remembers joining her one afternoon as she was watching a baseball game in the village with her friends. He thought carefully before asking if he might visit her at her home the same night. Perhaps neither then knew it, but those first meetings were the beginning of their long love story.

They went together only a short time before deciding to unite their destinies by marrying on October 11, 1937 in Église Saint-Cajetan, in Mansonville.

Simone's story

Simone, having spent her life beside Adrien, also graciously agreed to share her memories with us. She was a native of Saint-Odilon-de-Dorchester, in the Beauce region of Quebec. Simone left her village at the age of 15, when she was hired by Odilon Parent as a mother's

helper for his wife. Parent was then the customs agent at the Creek covered bridge office, and he was a native of the same village as Simone and therefore knew her family.

For a salary of \$7.00 per month, she helped M^r. Parent's wife with housework and caring for the eight Parent children. Simone remembers that her first job every morning was to milk the couple's only cow so as to ensure the children had milk for breakfast. In addition to helping with the household chores, Simone also cleaned the customs office.

She remembers that this border crossing, at the end of the present chemin du Pont-Couvert, then consisted of a single building which was part a customs office, rented by the Government, while the remainder of the building was a bar, regularly frequented by Americans, who had only to stretch their arm into Canada for a pint which they quickly quaffed and then were off!



Creek custom house (Province Hill)

Simone wasn't long anyone's employee, because on October 11, 1937, at the age of 16, she became M^{rs}. Adrien Laplume and began a new life with her husband, on his newly acquired farm.

The children soon began coming. Over the years, she brought twelve children into the world, of whom, nine remain: seven sons and two daughters.

Her first four deliveries were at home with a mid-wife in attendance. M^{rs}. Dunn, an American, and the closest neighbour, as well as M^{me} Duguay helped Simone with the birth of her children. She bore healthy babies, all of a good size, each weighing between 8 and 14 pounds. For each delivery subsequent to the fifth, Simone was hospitalised in St. Vincent de Paul, in Sherbrooke.

At that time, it was standard practice to keep a new mother in bed for nine days after giving birth, since it was considered dangerous for her to get up before then. Little wonder, knowing what we do now, that Simone suffered tingling and swelling of her legs as well as bouts of dizziness after each delivery!

Life on the farm with Adrien was a team effort, with Simone doing her share of farm work, especially in the beginning of their married life when the children were still too young to be of any help. Morning and night, she and Adrien milked their 25 cows. She cared for the other animals and poultry, which provided food for the family. She would bring the babies with her to the stable, leaving them in a makeshift playpen made of straw while the chores were being done.

In summer haying, she did the hot and dusty work of making small roundish bundles of hay called "vailloches" or in English, "stooks", the purpose of which was efficiency. Hay was cut and, when dried, raked into rows. Then a worker walked these rows, amassing several feet of dried hay into a pile, or stook. These neat bundles would then be easily forked and swept cleanly onto the hay wagon. When these bundles were well done, they maintained their shape and loading them from the wagon into the hayloft was equally efficient. Think of the process as a precursor to baling hay!

Simone cared for the garden, which provided fresh vegetables in quantity during the growing season as well as enough for canning. Because they had neither electricity nor refrigerator-freezer, the process of preserving a winter's supply of food for her family was arduous and long, for most meats and vegetables were canned.

With her growing family, the need for food preservation and preparation also grew. Careful management was required to keep sufficient on hand for their needs. She mentioned that in the springtime, when food reserves were low, the roads were often inconveniently impassable with mud, since none was properly ditched. Her meal planning skills were then put to the test!

During the first years of married life, Simone made bread for the family. However, when the Boulangerie Wilfrid Chicoine started up in what is now the Soleil Rouge building on Main Street in Mansonville, she recalls buying as many as 36 loaves per week at 6 cents a loaf!! When the children were older, Simone remembers preparing a lunch pail and thermos for each as well as one for any hired men working in the fields.

As the years passed and the children grew older, each began to do his share: the older ones taking care of the younger, and helping their father during the busiest of times. Eventually, the eldest of her daughters, Gisèle, left school to help her mother in the home.

Adrien, a resourceful jack of all trades

As the old expression goes, Adrien always had several strings to his bow! He profited from his entrepreneurial nature and timely business opportunities. He wasn't afraid to work and, indeed, he seems to have transmitted those skills and work ethic to his children.

In addition to being a farmer, Adrien practiced other trades. In his twenties, he bought a truck with which he began a cattle-trading business that continued for some ten years. He bought cattle from neighbouring farms and resold them in Montreal – to Canada Packers, on Sainte-Catherine Street, he recalls. At the time, he was able to make one round-trip in a day. As the roads steadily improved these trips became easier. He recalls that the MLA of the time, a M^r Robertson, had the road between Mansonville and Knowlton paved. Fifteen miles of road paved for \$25,000, he remembers clearly. The remainder of the route to Montreal was already paved.

For \$2.00 a cord, he also supplied clients in North Troy with wood for heating, delivered during the summer and often not paid until winter. He said that even if times then were hard, everyone still needed to heat, thus he had a steady supply of customers! He remembers that he collected his accounts on a Friday, which was payday for the factory workers. Until the debt was paid, Adrien collected \$2.00 every Friday from his clients.

Living at the end of a dead end road had its advantages. Adrien was awarded the municipal contract for rolling ten miles of road from the border. Few remember the era before mechanized snow ploughing; however, a snow roller belonging to the Municipality was used to make winter roads. The going rate for a man and team of four horses was eighty cents an hour. When the winds had whipped snow into five and six foot snow drifts, horses were used to break up the drifts, after which the snow could be rolled two or three times to flatten and compact it into a road. Under the right



Snow roller

conditions a crust of ice would form, allowing horses and sleds to pass easily.

Drawn by four horses, this roller was five feet in diameter and made up of two metal cylinders each four feet wide. The axle and beams were fixed to the cylinder. Evenly spaced six-inch wooden planks covered the cylinder and kept snow from sticking to the metal roller since snow sticks poorly to wood. When turning a sharp corner, the cylinders rolled in opposing directions and when the road straightened, the rollers again worked in harmony.

Social life in Potton

Even if work occupied much of one's time, there was always room for a social life to distract and allow friends and neighbours to reconnect.

In those days, attending Sunday mass was a 'must' for all in the village, Adrien recalls. On the steps of the Church, after the service, was the time and place to exchange and catch up on the news of one another. Sometimes, on the way home, the Laplumes would stop at the restaurant where each child was given a soft drink for five cents.

Throughout the year, there were also different cultural and sporting events to brighten the normal routine. Softball competitions were very popular at the time, with games organized with players from Sutton, North Troy and the surroundings. The tradition of softball tournaments in Mansonville began sometime ago, Adrien points out. He remembers that some games ended at 2 a.m.! *"Competition was fierce"*, and he adds, *"hockey was the same – just as popular!"*

From time to time, a fellow by the name of Oscar Morin brought groups of actors from Montreal to present the popular vaudeville acts or the plays of the day. Adrien remembers seeing Olivier Guimond and Denis Drouin in the parish hall in Mansonville, part of the Jean Grimaldi troupe, he says. Weekly bingo nights were also very popular.

Of course, during the winter and in the holiday season, invitations between neighbours for supper and a card game provided a welcome diversion. If luck brought a fiddle player into the midst, dancing made for a very lively and pleasant evening!

Conclusion

This article chronicles some of the life memories and experiences of Adrien and Simone Laplume during the first half of the 20th century. It presents a look at a day and time that few now remember. Many other facets of their life and times together could have been recounted.

It must be mentioned that from 1936, when he bought the family farm of 135 acres, to 1974, when his holdings totalled 600 acres, Adrien and Simone Laplume maintained their farming life. In

1974, Adrien sold 320 acres to son Raymond and the balance to sons Gilles and Réjean, who kept the sugar bush and shared the remaining acres.

For many many years, until the advancing years began to slow him down, Adrien Laplume remained active and keenly interested in his community of Mansonville. For some 11 years, he was a municipal councillor and our Mayor for 7, during the time when it was the practice in the rural municipalities of the Townships to alternate the term of French and English speaking Mayors. Today Adrien faithfully follows the televised proceedings of the Charbonneau Commission, and declares, with a smile tugging at his mouth, *"big cities don't have a monopoly on schemers! You have to keep your eyes open!"*



75th wedding anniversary

In 2012, Adrien and Simone celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. Their legacy

includes 9 children, 26 grandchildren and 35 great-grandchildren. They are very proud of the fact that all their sons have remained in Potton to start their own businesses, create their own employment and contribute to the economic life of this community. The Laplume daughters followed their husbands, thereby living the French expression "*Qui prend mari prend pays*". Both lead active lives in the Granby area.

The Laplumes have given this community a remarkable legacy!

A word of thanks

We sincerely thank Simone and Adrien for their very warm welcome and generous willingness to share their memories with André Lamer, in the course of his several interviews with them in their home.

Supplementary information

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