

Hans Walser, a Visionary Leader

Sandra Jewett

President of the Association from 2005 to 2010, Hans Walser is a visionary ... who never gives up. During the years spent at APP, he worked tirelessly in the conservation of landscapes and built heritage. It was in part thanks to his legendary tenacity that the Round Barn was saved.

Président de l'Association de 2005 à 2010, Hans Walser est un visionnaire... qui n'abandonne jamais. Durant les années passées à l'APP, il a travaillé sans relâche à la conservation des paysages et du patrimoine bâti. C'est en bonne partie grâce à sa ténacité légendaire que la grange ronde a pu être sauvée.

[La version française de cet article se trouve à la page 63]

What motivated Hans to shift the focus of the Association from the inscrutable, the somewhat esoteric, to the practicalities of safeguarding landscapes and heritage buildings? And what does one say about a visionary who dreams with ambition, a leader who moves with conviction?

Perhaps a little history is in order ...

Serendipity brought Hans Walser to Potton in the winter of 1970, when he and a friend combed the area for a weekend rental property. Hans was a comparatively young man, athletic, a skier, married for the second time around.

As luck would have it, the rental Hans did find in 1970 was the same property he would buy in 1972 – a house occupied by “Bill the Poet”, an American returning to California that spring. I suspect life was good – he was on his way up the corporate ladder and now, had a country home! Knowing Hans, the home in the country would probably mean his working 7 days a week! This is not to suggest any lack of financial means – rather more an abundance of ambition.

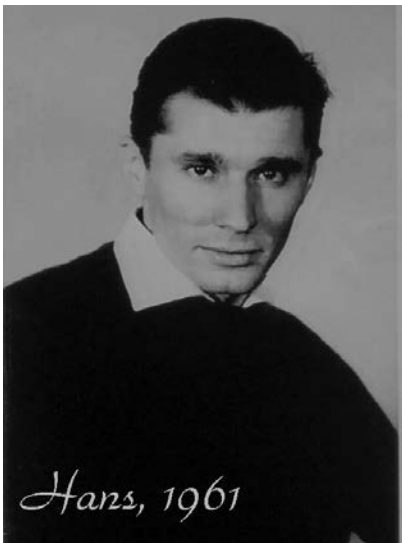
The 70's were the waning years of an antiwar movement, and still volatile civil turmoil in North America. Many young objectors seeking to avoid the U.S. selective service draft found their way across the Canadian border to Potton,

where the Ruitter Valley was particularly alluring, much as it must have seemed when Potton's first settlers sought to avoid the ideological and political conflicts with the Sons of Liberty over 200 years earlier!

By his own admission, Hans fell “in love” with the rural beauty of the Ruitter Valley and of Potton in general. Comparatively inexpensive land prices at the time may have also added to the allure! Hans purchased the remnants of the Wallace Aiken farm on Ruitter Brook road, including the house and outbuildings. Over time Hans was able to more than double his original holdings. “For 30 years, I travelled with my family each weekend and holiday to Potton. From the beginning, I improved the farmhouse and land, planting trees, moving rocks, making other improvements often to change my mind and start over again.” It must have meant a great deal to Hans to bring his parents to his home in the country to spend 6 precious weeks with their granddaughter Vanessa. Although I do not know this to be true, I suspect that Hans did not come from an urban environment in his youth, despite the fact that he grew up near Cologne, Germany. He seems to prefer the countryside, and why not? Broad vistas and open skies allow Hans to enjoy the “strong weather differences – hot summers, snowy winters - and thunderstorms ...” that mountains seem to amplify, and that he still enjoys.

Hans is neither arrogant nor patronizing. Unpretentious, pragmatic and determined are better qualifiers to describe Hans, all traits which would have likely garnered respect not only of our local merchants, Gilles & Pierre Giroux, but also of his Ruitter Brook farming neighbours, the Gardners, and the Newells. Jacques Despars, who became Hans' good friend, Stansje and Robert Shepherd were among others who had discovered this area of pristine beauty and who later militated strenuously for its conservation.

Hans immigrated to Canada in 1959 after exploring Europe and spending considerable time in Paris. It seems he was smitten with wanderlust, or perhaps *les jolie demoiselles de Paris*? And why not?



Collection privée

Hans trained as a technologist in chemistry in Germany, and his first job in Quebec was that of laboratory technician with St. Maurice Chemicals in Varennes, a division of Shawinigan Water and Power. For six years Hans furthered his education by taking evening courses at Concordia University. After seven years in Varennes, Hans transferred to a Gulf Oil research facility in Ste. Anne de Bellevue and in 1969, became a McArthur Chemical plant manager in Valleyfield. Following a corporate

takeover in 1976, he became Manager of Quebec operations and then promoted to Vice President for Eastern Canada of Univar, one of the largest industrial chemical distributors in our nation. After some forty years in the corporate world, Hans retired. He and his wife Angèle Hébert prepared to transition to a rural life.

Though no particular corporate training is needed for fulltime Potton residency, patience often proves useful. He enrolled in landscape planning courses at the University of Montréal and obtained a '*mineure en design de jardins*'. *"This experience enhanced my interest in landscaping and in the preservation of the landscapes of Potton."*

Hans' first local initiative came at roughly this same time, an indication of his intention to be an active and constructive member of his community. Nothing laissez-faire about Hans Walser, then or now!

In collaboration with then Municipal Inspector Marie-Claude Lamy, Hans prepared a proposition for delivery to his neighbours and friends. *"Preserving the Ruitter Valley Landscape"* was intended to raise awareness that the insidious growth of brush along roadsides and in fields was gradually obscuring, if not obliterating, the natural panoramic view of the countryside. To maintain these views requires consistent vigilance. Brush grows ... well, like bad weeds! By his own admission, this novel initiative was moderate success amongst his neighbours. Certainly, he raised some awareness among the skeptical! Undaunted, the crusade continued and, over time, Hans did prevail.

Additionally, Marie-Claude wasted no time in co-opting Hans for service on the Municipality's Comité consultatif en urbanisme (CCU), on which he served faithfully for 8 years. (Coincidentally, this is where I first met Hans.)

Marie-Claude also suggested that Hans consider joining the Heritage Association. It was only after his retirement and move to Potton in the early 2000's that he and Angèle became active APP members.

After nearly 10 years at the helm of the Association, Gérard announced his resignation from the presidency in 2003, preferring to concentrate on his research, his writing and to "the activities". By then, the archeological questions and hypotheses raised by Gérard, had been reasonably well investigated by professionals commissioned by Minister for Culture and the Municipality. Though it was agreed there was some plausibility to all, nothing conclusively supported any.

The Heritage Association needed to focus its objectives on a more achievable and inclusive heritage mission, were it to maintain its credibility and viability. Unquestionably, the accomplishments of the APP, in its first decade of being, were many – the production of several folders and pamphlets but one example. Jacques Thouin replaced Gérard as President in 2003. Ex officio Gérard continued to attend Board meetings and maintain his director's voice. Out of deference to Gérard and his many accomplishments, this arrangement worked for a time; however, as projects already underway were completed, the movement toward more contemporary issues lagged.

Significantly, around this time Hans began working in earnest with the municipal authorities in sensitizing the population to the importance of conserving our natural rural landscapes. Eight months before the AGM that would officially elect Hans to the Board of Directors, he was appointed Associate Director, tasked with a sole mandate of furthering the preservation of heritage landscapes in Potton. The minutes are silent as to whether that particular decision was fully supported by the

Board since four of its directors resigned before year's end.

In December the Board undertook a recruitment campaign. By January 12, 2004 Brian Waldron, chairman of the Nominations Committee, had vetted five candidates and ultimately recommended Hans!! Proverbial white smoke was said to have been seen wafting from the dilapidated chimney of the Reilly House, although I cannot affirm by any personal reckoning. Hans' cooption to the Board was confirmed. No sooner had the motion been adopted, than Hans started work. Relief could almost be sensed from reading the minutes! It was quite evident that the Board had way too many fish to fry and quite possibly, too many chefs in the kitchen.

At the 2003 AGM, held in March 2004, Carol Bishop, Laurette Colgan, Marie Deguire, Yolande Lamontagne, Jacques Thouin, Brian Timperley, Brian Waldron, and Hans Walser were elected to the Board. On April 5, 2004, Jacques Thouin was returned as President and Hans elected as Vice President. Hans' efforts within our community had been noticed and this election considered positive.

One of Hans' objectives was to rejuvenate the mission and objectives of the APP. The advantage in doing so was to reset priorities and refocus on more contemporary concerns. Hans sought to encourage a wider awareness of the importance of the preservation of heritage buildings in our community, and the necessity to conserve our rural natural landscapes to name only two. Hans' primary objective, when elected as President in 2005, was to increase the visibility and vitality of the APP as a constructive source within the community. The Association offered a rich and varied social life as well as true opportunity to discover the four corners of Potton. Hans fully recognized that an interested and engaged membership would enhance our identity within our community.

He took this mission very seriously, and was always welcoming and inclusive in the search for new members. Through a “welcome-to-Potton” letter, he introduced the Association to new property owners. The invitation to attend the AGM as an observer was extended each year, and to bring a friend on APP sponsored excursions was encouraged. Eventually, the Association numbers grew to make the Heritage Association the largest in Potton, with a membership approaching 200 on average for several years.

2004 seemed a year of almost frenetic activity on the social scene. Carol organized over 35 excursions, while Gérard offered a choice of interesting supper-talks on elements of Potton’s history. Hans ever a part of the APP social scene, advanced the practical workings of the Association, by leading “instructional” hikes or biking excursions to the most picturesque vistas in Potton, including Bear, Hawk and Sutton Mountains, Knowlton’s Landing, the pont de la Frontière, Dunkin and Ruitter Brook.

It was not all play and no work! Proposed by Hans in 2004 and eventually held in 2005, Hans led a seminar of significant importance regarding the protection of the natural landscapes of Potton and the region. The seminar was successful and drew several local participants, including the Mayor of West Bolton, and the chairman of Paysages estriens.

While I don’t mean to belabour the point, I do want to provide an example of the rigor and determination Hans applied to his plans and how each was eventually treated. At one Board meeting in 2005, for instance, three ambitious projects were proposed:

- The draft of a proposed repertory of heritage buildings in Mansonville, Dunkin, Highwater, and Vale Perkins – with pertinent details of each. (The Council finally commissioned the preparation of a

similar repertory, received in 2007, and still in use today.) Hans proposed classifying certain buildings with heritage value found outside of Mansonville; however, Council neglected to follow up.

- Proposed new format for the distribution of Association news, which then was a quarterly newsletter, abandoned in 2008 in favour of periodic emails. Hans insisted that prompt and clear communication with membership was essential for the Board.
- Proposed a draft brochure for a self-guided walking tour of Mansonville, which was inaugurated two years later as part of Heritage Day.

In September 2005, Hans made important recommendations to the Municipality on behalf of the Association. Primarily these favoured enacting bylaws to prevent indiscriminate mass plantings of soft wood in Potton; to require a demolition permit for the removal of buildings in the village; and, to develop strategies for the preservation and improvement of the built heritage in the Township coupled with protection by regulation. The apparent tone deafness of the Municipality to these proposals, coupled with the lack of subsequent concrete action must have disappointed Hans. Though these were practical suggestions, supported by the APP, with room for compromise, they were largely ignored. Undeterred however, he persisted with resolve.

An ambitious roster of practical projects which supported conservation of landscape aims was presented in 2006; the thought being that even small success was better than none at all. These included building a trail and a viewing platform for the Covered Bridge pont de la Frontière site; and creating roadside “windows” looking from Chemin Owl’s Head, thus framing an iconic and sweeping view to the west. (This, as opposed to peering over brush and between trees to catch a glimpse!) With some annual prodding, the Municipality has continued a modest effort.

Heritage Day, first instituted in 1992 under Gérard, was celebrated annually in June by the membership. Walking tours, social activities, and a BBQ made a true celebration of our collective heritage. Hans always used the occasion to excellent advantage by issuing a proclamation intended to rally the membership to particular elements of Potton's heritage. In 2006, he chose to point out that Potton's identity and unique appeal was found not only in our iconic rural landscapes, but also in our heritage buildings and their setting within Mansonville. His point being that taken together these elements give Potton a competitive advantage in our development as a tourist and recreational region.

The superlatives concerning 2006 do not end:

On July 8th, the most intrepid APP members climbed Bear Mountain in the morning and at noon 100 of them were treated to an unusual open-air concert of red jacketed hunting horn players by *Les Veneurs de la Meuse* – without a doubt, a first for Potton, entertainment so unique as to merit mention here! A+ for an imaginative activity!

The conservation of Potton's Covered Bridge capped 2007's priorities in discussion and planning. The *Charte des paysages estriens*, a concept first introduced to Potton in 2004 at the Municipal symposium led by Hans, was introduced as a *fait accompli* in 2007. A valuable and comprehensive document, with a best practices manual to accompany, was seemingly welcomed by the Municipal Council. However, when last I checked, both documents repose in the municipal office, untouched! I am reminded of the adage about leading a horse to water ...

In the proclamation of 2007, Hans reiterated that our town and rural landscapes were not only our identity and our pride, but emphasized they were also a collective responsibility. He

implored the Council to be more proactive in the recognition of this communal asset. Frustration may have been mounting!

This is perhaps a good place to insert a few personal observations about my friend Mr. Walsler!

Tangling with Hans is not for the faint of heart because he is tenacious to a fault. How well I remember Board meetings where differing opinions on one of his propositions led to lengthy discussions. More often than not, Hans, totally undeterred, would patiently allow tensions to subside and say quite blandly: "*Alors, les amis, on fait quoi?*".

Never have I seen Hans unprepared to lead a meeting and only rarely have I seen him visibly annoyed. He is a deceptively charming "opponent" – I use that word advisedly, for I don't believe I have ever opposed Hans. (I don't think I dared!!) Quite the opposite. When he tackles a problem or takes on a cause, he will not quit. Like a puppy on a root!

Never does he patronize, intimidate or denigrate his opponent. Hans' practical approach is both consistent, insistent and always respectful, much to his credit. His solutions are generally workable compromises. Swimming against the current is counter productive. Hans' logic and tenacity generally bring improvement to any project or procedure by adding needed precision to our recommendations.

"*Alors, les amis, on fait quoi?*"

And thus, another year is summarized: the priorities established for 2008 were unquestionably the conservation of the Round Barn and the pont de la Frontière. At the 2008 AGM, Hans plainly regretted that the Board's strategy introduced in 2006 and 2007 had not produced the intended results: "*Although the*

Potton heritage and its preservation is better understood by its citizens, no legal protection, no improvement to the most significant elements of our heritage has been obtained. We must revise our approach."

By training and by nature, Hans is a results-oriented individual. Process is the means to an end. And to keep Hans on board with a project, something has to show for the effort. His drive and tireless efforts have moved many projects along, often when others were inclined to stop.

A number of smaller projects were also at issue then. The Board continued with the themed historical panels depicting the history of Potton which are today displayed on the walls of the Council chamber in the Town Hall, a source of pride for all citizens. A new CLSC building was to be built. It was a credit to Hans' persistence that the appearance of the old Legion building would be approximated in its replacement. It was in November 2008 as well that the Association recommended that the Council establish a Culture and Heritage Committee as well as adopt the associated Policy.

At the Heritage Day celebrations, inevitably Hans repeated the necessity for concrete action locally and for inclusion regionally. Exceptionally, 2008 was the year that revision to the MRC land use plan included provision for the preservation and improvement of pre-identified heritage elements. Such elements, yet to be identified in our Township, were essential in order that Potton be included in the planned revision and therefore profit from some of the financial benefits. He pointed out with reason that this identification was a municipal responsibility and insisted the Council should engage publicly in the conservation and valorization of our heritage.

Throughout 2008, Hans was becoming more deeply embroiled in conservation and preservation efforts for the pont de la Frontière,

after having been inspected by an engineer who pinned projected preliminary costs of over \$300 000. The Round Barn presented difficult challenges relating to securing the premises from vandalism and preventing further deterioration of the place. The APP continued lobbying for the recognition by citation of the Round Barn as a heritage asset of great value. Without such a citation, there would be no government subsidies. Both of these questions came to the fore on the dockets of the Association and were preoccupying ever more time and study. On October 6th, 2008 the Municipal Council adopted the bylaw citing the pont de la Frontière as a historical monument.

In listing the Board's principal priorities for 2009, Hans noted his intention to review the Association's strategies in order to develop a more sustained and intense relationship with the Municipality as well as encouraging better avenues for communication with the population as a whole. This was the year of political momentum. With municipal approval, the Board nominated Hans to represent Potton on the Comité culturel de la MRC de Memphrémagog, a position which he filled for several years, with responsibility for the Heritage sector. Hans also threw his hat in the ring for the municipal elections 2009, but was defeated. The Association lobbied hard for the citation of the Round Barn and its site as a historical monument, which the Council finally did on July 6, 2009.

A five-year plan, 2010-2015, unveiled by Hans in March 2010 was a clear indication of where the Board's priorities lay: continue with preservation plans for the Round Barn and the Covered Bridge, finalize several brochures already in the works; get the website for the Association, up and running; develop and adopt a programme to improve the built and landscape heritage of Potton; establish and validate an inventory of the archeological heritage of the Township - phew! Easier said

than done! And should time remain, we could always celebrate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Association!

It is important here to emphasize the growing influence of the Heritage Association within our Potton community. Present at almost every occasion of importance for 20 years, and often as the organizer, the Association had earned both credibility and respect of the Municipality and with the citizens. Hans' tireless pursuit of several important dossiers during his tenure as its President cannot be overstated. A hallmark, too, was the continued collaboration with the Municipality on a certain level. The Municipal Council adopted on October 4, 2010, a resolution commissioning the Association to prepare, for consultative purposes, the Heritage policy for the Township of Potton. One year later, in 2011, Hans presented the draft policy to the Council, who then tabled the document; and paradoxically have never, to my knowledge, followed up with public consultation or its adoption, although the draft was drawn up by a committee of three councillors and three APP Board members.

Another of Hans' major presentations to the membership came on a Wednesday evening in December 2011. His choice of date may well have been determined by the availability of the Town Hall, but I prefer to think he wanted to speak primarily to a local audience... *"A History of Landscape Architecture ... an overview from Antiquity to the English landscape garden of the 18th century"* was his topic.

His poster read *"This illustrated presentation will highlight the major influences of the evolution of landscape architecture from Antiquity through Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, and Islam to the French gardens of the 17th century. This overview will be followed by a closer look at the English landscape garden of the 18th century. To close,*

the presenter will sketch its similarities with the landscapes of Potton as seen through his eyes."

That piqued our attention – and why not? He wasn't kidding! He certainly reached way back! Antiquity was a stylized depiction of Adam and Eve in the lushly verdant Garden of Eden. Though we might admire classic lines and geometrical symmetry of formally decorative gardens, such a sight is rare. We are more familiar with idyllic settings of cows and sheep scattered over Nature's rolling hills. As surely as he had captured our imagination by showing examples of formal landscapes through time, the transition to more natural and bucolic compositions in his conclusion was what really caught our attention. Exactly as Hans intended – the importance of good agricultural practices to the fore! Subtly emphasizing pride in the loveliness of our own environment. Hans never gives up!

Hans decided in 2011 to turn to the challenge of restoring the Round Barn and thus did not seek re-election to the 2012 Board.

In the fall of 2010, three members of the Municipal Council had formed the GBMP, the acronym for Groupe bénévole municipal de Potton, a non-profit organisation whose mission was primarily the management of certain municipal assets, notably the Round Barn, and the Covered Bridge. Hans was a member of this group from the beginning. Preliminary tasks as cleaning the Round Barn building, architectural studies of the structure, first thoughts about its future vocation, as well as searching out avenues for possible funding occupied many months.

In 2014, a very successful exhibition entitled "The Landscapes of Potton" was presented, prepared by Hans and a small team. In 2016 the APP, under Hans' direction, collaborated with Louise Abbott in the production of the "Covered Bridges of the Townships", for another

successful exhibition in the Barn. In both cases, the Association authored and printed accompanying brochures for these exhibitions.

It was in 2015 that Hans became the President of the GBMP. An undertaking such as the restoration and “improvement” of a century old structure such as Mansonville’s Round Barn required sustained leadership and coordination. Indeed, it is thanks to his vision, leadership and unrelenting tenacity that the Round Barn was largely restored during the winter of 2018-19.



Hans Walser | Round Barn 2018
Archives GBMP

Unfortunately, in 2016-17, Quebec’s Minister for Culture and Communication declined to support the Barn project. Hope then laid with a previously curated trust established by Hans with a Canadian Heritage representative for the substantial dollars needed.

Only a few of us will remember the morning Hans brought Mr. Meril Mouana from Canadian Heritage to meet the Directors of the GBMP and APP, of whom I was one. Mr. Mouana had come to Potton to assess the barn project and therefore held something of our future in his hands. Our meeting was pleasant and more than a little nerve wracking. Though financing options were few, Hans rolled the dice, one might say, in a leap of faith that I shan’t soon forget! I would like to think that just maybe our enthusiasm influenced the man favourably. Mr. Mouana eventually recommended funding the Round Barn project!

Major restoration began in fall of 2018 to terminate in 2019, under Hans’ steady hand and those of some faithful volunteers.

As the restoration work began, Hans’ role as GBMP President became much less political and infinitely more practical. He assumed coordination between the Municipality of Potton, the Finance Committee, and the General Project Foreman – management functions very familiar to him. Respecting the rigid deadlines imposed by Canadian Heritage rules was challenging since much of the work was accomplished in very inclement weather conditions of winter. Management of costs was crucial and carefully observed due to these constraints, but the result achieved was well worth it. A crowning achievement for Hans!

Composed by Sandra for the members of the Association, with sincere admiration and thanks for the examples you set.

In closing, I wrote the following as our Board’s acknowledgement of Hans when he left the Board in 2012. With your indulgence, patient reader, let me reprise my message because these words are as true today as in 2012.

"For seven years not only, you have been our leader and public face, keenly devoted to the preservation of the heritage of this Township; but also equally devoted to the general well-being and progress here. History will continue to unveil your legacy and show the influence of your leadership in Potton and to its people – of that I am certain. You have given much of yourself to us. For years, you have not only listened but heard – researched, observed, participated in – led by example, or have been a productive uncomplaining member of committee after interminable committee – at each, generously providing thoughtful, concise, yet considered judgement on questions that would frustrate most. To each, you have given full attention, preparedness and the benefit of your experience. And you have expected the same in return. In my opinion, few problems have presented themselves to you as being insurmountable. Your attitude has always been one of "O.K. well, how do we do it?" and how often, have we heard those very words. I sometimes wonder if you've not become a victim of your own success – that, perhaps we've worn you down!"

Sandra Jewett, 2012

Prix patrimoine 2014



À Hans Walser
pour sa contribution exceptionnelle
à la conservation et à la promotion
du patrimoine de Potton, particulièrement
des paysages.

To Hans Walser
for his outstanding contribution
to the preservation and promotion
of the heritage of Potton, particularly
the landscapes.



Comité culturel et patrimonial de Potton
Potton Heritage and Cultural Committee