

Life after Hells Angels gives new wings to Sorel

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When the architects of urban gentrification made their way through Quebec in the 1980s, they hesitated outside the old city of Sorel, then tiptoed around it.

There was a good reason for that. The Hells Angels were running the show here, and nobody wanted to invest in businesses or property. For two full decades, there was virtually no significant private investment in Sorel, which merged with Tracy in 1999 and lies at the junction of the St. Lawrence and Richelieu rivers.

Young people left - and never came back.

As a result, Sorel-Tracy, population 35,000, is 10 years ahead of Quebec's demographic curve. Six of the 12 primary schools that existed 20 years ago have closed, and Sorel has one of the smallest populations age 14 and under in Quebec.

But there's good news, finally. The police crackdown on biker gangs has neutralized the Hells' bunker in Sorel. And though the building is still owned by the organization, there is little activity in or around it, and the local economy is starting to show the signs of belated renewal.

"Things were so hard for so long that the reconstruction has a long way to go - but we have faith," said Patrick Laramee, owner of two clothing boutiques in the downtown areas around historic Carre Royal park.

Created by the British colonial administration that ran Sorel as a clearing house for immigrating United Empire Loyalists, Carre Royal is an architectural tribute to the British Union Jack flag. The walkways within the square are configured to match the criss-cross pattern of coloured lines within the Union Jack.

These days, as part of a

continuing urban-renewal program, the walkways in Carre Royal have been watered down and turned into ice-skating lanes. The gazebo in the middle of the park has been renovated.

And loudspeakers attached to it were playing Shania Twain tunes on a recent day as two young men at the forefront of Sorel-Tracy's reconstruction effort passed by on their way to a noon business appointment.

One was Jeremy Parent, executive director of the downtown merchants' association; the other was Denis Marion, a consultant who just completed a report for the association on revitalization of the old commercial core.

"People have been saying: 'Okay, bad things have happened here; now, what are we going to do about it?' " Parent said.

As Canada's fourth-oldest city, Sorel-Tracy has a long and proud heritage. Before the arrival of European settlers in 1642, the land on which the city stands had long been important to aboriginal peoples, given its strategic location.

"Before railroads, the main way between Montreal and New York City was up the Richelieu through Lake Champlain



CREDIT: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE

Jeremy Parent (left), of the Sorel merchants association, and Denis Marion, a consultant at Gestion Alter Ego, are leading the effort to revitalize Sorel-Tracy. "People have been saying: 'OK, bad things have happened here; now, what are we going to do about it?' " Parent said.

and down the Hudson River to Manhattan," Marion said.

Because of this water link, Sorel was a natural site for a Loyalist refugee processing centre after the U.S. War of Independence.

While some Loyalists settled in Sorel, most were dispatched to what is now Kingston and Belleville in Ontario, and the Niagara and Gaspé peninsulas. The town was renamed William Henry, then renamed again back to Sorel in 1845, in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1837-38.

The city was synonymous with heavy industry through the 20th century, and no family dominated the economic landscape more than the Simards of shipbuilding fame, into which the late premier Robert Bourassa married.

During the Second World War, thousands of men converged on Sorel to help build Royal Canadian Navy frigates and work in munitions factories. That, in turn, created a red-lightish nightlife that rivalled Montreal's in terms of helping to define the meaning of the adjective "wide open."

However, it all became much more seedy and sinister after the Hells Angels established their presence in Sorel in 1977. And as old industries began to close, Sorel fell into a severe and prolonged depression.

First, the Simard business, Marine Industries Ltd., died over a period of seven years beginning in the 1980s. Then Beloit Canada, which made paper manufacturing machinery, shut down in 1994, followed in 2000 by Tioxyde Canada, which made paint pigment, and in 2004 by Aciers Inoxydables Atlas, a steel company. One by one, most of the major employers disappeared, leaving only QIT-Fer et Titane - operated by Rio Tinto, a British mining multinational - as the major private employer.

The ensuing economic slump was worsened by the fact that years of dependence on large employers had left Sorel-Tracy without an entrepreneurial class, Mayor Michel Robert said.

"Everywhere in towns where big industries have left, experience has shown it takes about 10 years to get over the shock before people rebound," said Robert, who has been mayor of Sorel-Tracy since the cities joined.

Robert said the municipal mergers have helped to rebrand the Sorel region in a more positive light. Mergers have also provided an opportunity to restructure the municipal bureaucracy and finally "put competent people in the right positions," the mayor said.

As for the Hells, "they're not even a subject of conversation anymore," Robert said.

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It's a new dawn, then, in old Sorel.

About 30 new businesses have opened in the city centre during the past 18 months, most of those by people under 40. And last fall, a renovated Marche Richelieu, reminiscent of Montreal's Atwater Market, opened, along with a pedestrian mall just south of it.

As well, the city is buying riverfront land along the St. Lawrence and offering renovation grants to inner-city property owners.

Among the recommendations he has formulated for the merchants' association, Marion is urging the group to hire a "prospector" to find people willing to invest in downtown Sorel-Tracy. As well, he says the association should create a formal training program for prospective new retailers.

"The old generation of merchants is beginning to slip into retirement, and we're going to need competent people to take over if downtown is to thrive," Parent said.

Urban legend has it you can always tell when a rundown neighbourhood is poised for a comeback: to the surprise even of real estate speculators, a Starbucks outlet suddenly opens up. That hasn't happened yet in Vieux Sorel.

"No, but we have a Presse Cafe now," Parent said with a wry smile.

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