

The merchant was paid by a combination of cash, often in short supply, and farm produce, from potash to eggs, chickens, grain, and firewood. Some bills were paid by labour: a blacksmith might shoe the merchant's delivery horses to pay off a bill. Of course there were always customers who found ways to avoid paying. One customer in central Ontario used the line, "Wouldn't you know it! I left my wallet in my other trousers." The credit system was a delicate balancing act, for the merchant had to be careful not to offend a recalcitrant customer while at the same time making certain that the store collected enough money to pay accounts at wholesale houses in nearby cities. One storekeeper ingeniously stole piglets from a farmer who owed a large bill. But that's another story.

Storekeepers themselves played important roles in their communities. They were often fire chiefs and telephone centrals. When asked, they gave advice on marriage and mental depression. In some cases, the storekeeper was appointed justice of the peace. In the evenings, they became club managers who hosted games of checkers and gatherings around the store radio to hear sporting events. Storekeepers witnessed peccadilloes and hypocrisy, and thus they made witty storytellers. One Moncton-area storekeeper was such a good storyteller that he was hired by the CN as an after-dinner speaker.

Not only did they keep people in food and clothing, sometimes as an act of charity, they were also small bankers, lending money when banks were more conservative. Banks often used general storekeepers as their rural agents. The first branch of the now powerful *Caisses de dépôt Desjardins* was inside a little general store in Lévis, opposite Quebec City. Because stores kept pools of cash on hand, to redeem pay or grain cheques, they were often the envy of robbers. John Diefenbaker rarely lost a case, but in 1933, he was unsuccessful in defending a young man who had murdered a storekeeper while stealing a few hundred dollars. The man was hanged the following year.

The golden age of general stores, roughly the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, gradually ended with the motor car, catalogue shopping, and community splintering as well as with the rise of urban department and specialty stores. Today a few general stores operate, mostly in villages and towns far removed from cities. When Canadians "shop" in general stores now, they do so mostly in museums. General stores have also moved into the realm of the imagination. There are stores in novels such as Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind?*; in films such as *Margaret's Museum* and *Mon Oncle Antoine*; and in the *téléroman*, *Les belles histoires des pays d'en haut*.

As Canadians prepare to celebrate four hundred years of shopping, we could do no better than to reconstruct Champlain's *habitation* with its little *magazin*, built that midsummer of 1608 when Canada began with a store. ■

R.B. Fleming is a biographer and historian as well as a research associate at the Leslie Frost Centre at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. His interest in stores began a week after he was born in May 1944. He was raised in a general store so crammed with merchandise that it earned the titles "Little Eaton's" and "Little Honest Ed's." His book *The General Store in Canada: A Personal Journey* is scheduled for publication by Lynx Images this fall.

After three decades of sitting idle, the Lachine Canal is back in business.

Pleasure boats are floating daily through the locks and basins that formed the watershed of Canada's industrial beginnings.

The reopening constitutes a \$100-million effort by the federal government and Montreal to refurbish the canal and unearth the archaeological treasures along its fourteen-kilometre banks. Locks and walls have been fixed and bridges lifted to create a 2.4-metre clearance that accommodates 85 percent of Quebec's watercraft. Eager for waterfront property near downtown Montreal, private developers have invested another \$150 million in condominiums, shops, and offices, dramatically transforming what until recently had been one of Canada's poorest regions.

Once a hub of activity, southwest Montreal witnessed the loss of fifteen thousand jobs between 1957 and 1988 and more than half its population. The dormant canal turned into a dumpsite for discarded furnishings and lives. Twenty-five years ago, bodies surfaced at an average of one a month, if they hadn't purposely been weighed down. Most of the deaths were suicides, but people knew better than to stroll the desolate shores after dark.

Desperate and despicable sorts gave way to hikers and cyclists after Parks Canada tore down the frost fences and turned the canal into a linear park with one of the country's most frequented bike paths. After years of environmental studies, a commission decided it best to leave toxic sediments except where boats might disturb them. Then basins were emptied. "We removed bikes, mattresses, fridges, pic-

History's Floodgate: The Lachine Canal Reopens

by Julie Gedeon



nic tables,” recalls Claude-Armand Piché, Parks Canada’s director for the Lachine Canal revitalization project. “Basin No. 4 has so many cars that it would have been impossible for a boat to cross it.”

The canal’s origins had been much more dignified. François de Salignac Fénelon, the superior of the Sulpician Seminary, first proposed digging a canal in 1670 to circumnavigate the rapids between Lachine and Montreal, but the project never materialized. His successor, François Dollier de Casson, reintroduced the idea in 1680, emphasizing how a canal would provide water for mills and facilitate shipping towards the “up-country.” Construction began in 1689, but the Iroquois attack on Lachine halted it. Work resumed in 1700 but was abandoned, ostensibly when funds ran out. Piché contends neither the Indians nor a monetary shortage was to blame. A sparsely populated New France lacked the manpower and equipment to penetrate a kilometre-long stretch that became known as Rock Field. When men finally built the canal between 1821 and 1825, they dug into boulders that still form the walls along this section.

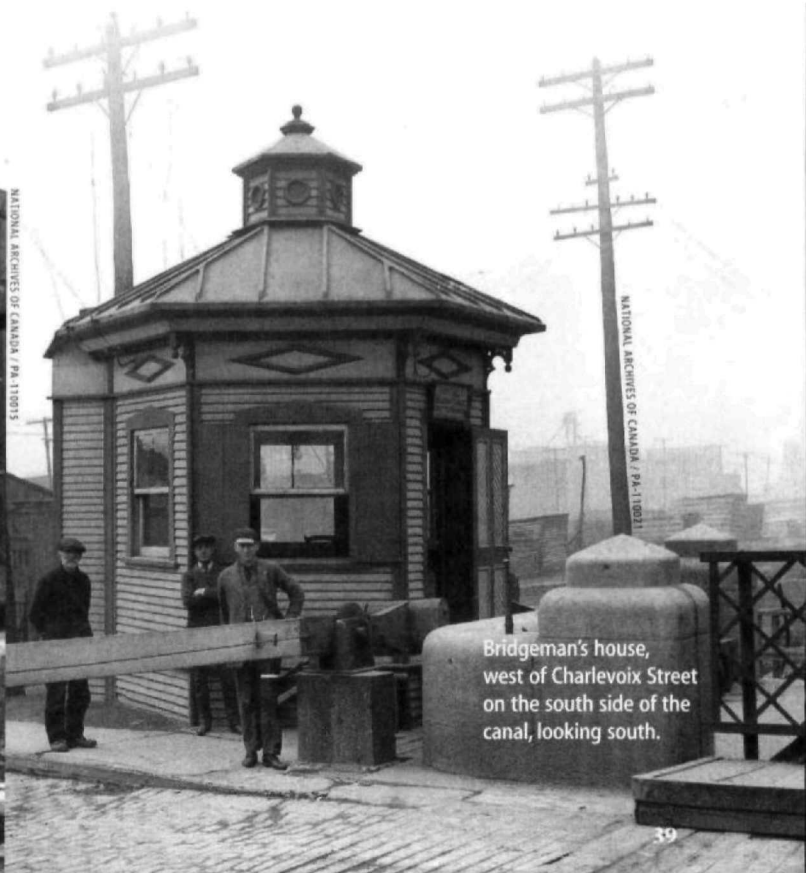
An 1843–1848 expansion accommodated the arrival of larger steam vessels and forced water to gush down each canal level to turn factory wheels and turbines. Industrialists snapped up the water lots that land commissioners put up for rent near the lower locks. They had already heard about the Grand Trunk’s plans to establish a railway nearby. The Grand Trunk had selected Pointe St. Charles as midway between Toronto and Portland, Maine, where it hoped to transport goods to a year-round port. “The railway presented numerous spinoff opportunities,” notes Yvon Desloges,

Parks Canada’s coordinator of the canal’s historical research. “Towns like Ville St. Pierre sprung up around companies like Canadian Car & Foundry, the most important rolling-stock producer, as people moved to be near work.”

Some forty industries originally used hydraulic power, and the district was dubbed Little Lowell. Unlike the textile mills north of Boston, however, these industries demonstrated greater variety from the start. According to a 1948 classification, all seventeen major types of industry took place alongside the canal at one time or another, including the manufacture of textiles, leather, rubber, electrical appliances, petroleum, iron, and steel. Welcome to the birthplace of Canada’s first sugar mill (Redpath), its second largest cotton mill (Merchant’s), the country’s most important electrical appliance manufacturer (Northern Electric), the Commonwealth’s largest mattress producer (Simmons), as well as Montreal Rolling Mills, the forerunner of Stelco, and Dominion Bridge (now Dragon Forcé).

Hydraulic energy’s limitations prompted Canada Sugar Refinery (Redpath) to opt for steam. Montreal Rolling Mills and others followed suit, but some companies employed a variety of power for up to a century. The Grand Trunk lugged competitively priced coal from Nova Scotia, Pennsylvania, and as far away as Britain. By 1880, Little Lowell became known as Smokey Valley. “Archaeologists have found a soot coating on everything from that time,” Desloges says. “Infant mortality and tuberculosis remained common until the early twentieth century. People worked ten hours a day, Monday through Saturday. Children as young as twelve were hired to keep salaries low.”

The Lachine Canal was long the heart of industrial Montreal. But the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 made it redundant. Within a few decades, the canal had turned into a forbidding backwater. Now restored, the waterway is once again a hub of activity – and a celebration of its commercial history.



The threat of losing business to American transporters spurred another expansion in 1875. It took until 1899 to complete because work took place only when ice forced the canal's closure for winter. From 1907, the canal operated around the clock six days a week. In 1924, it also opened on Sundays. Up to fourteen thousand vessels passed through the locks seasonally. Canadian and British shipyards built long, narrow vessels they named canallers that carried prairie grain from Thunder Bay and a gamut of goods westward.

World War I prompted the government to seize coal supplies, forcing industrialists to switch to electricity. They resented Montreal Light, Heat & Power's monopoly, but tolerated the utility's rates until peace eased production demands. "There were no industrial tariffs, whereas in Toronto you had Ontario Hydro since 1906," Desloges explains. "Electricity is one reason for the corridor's erosion."

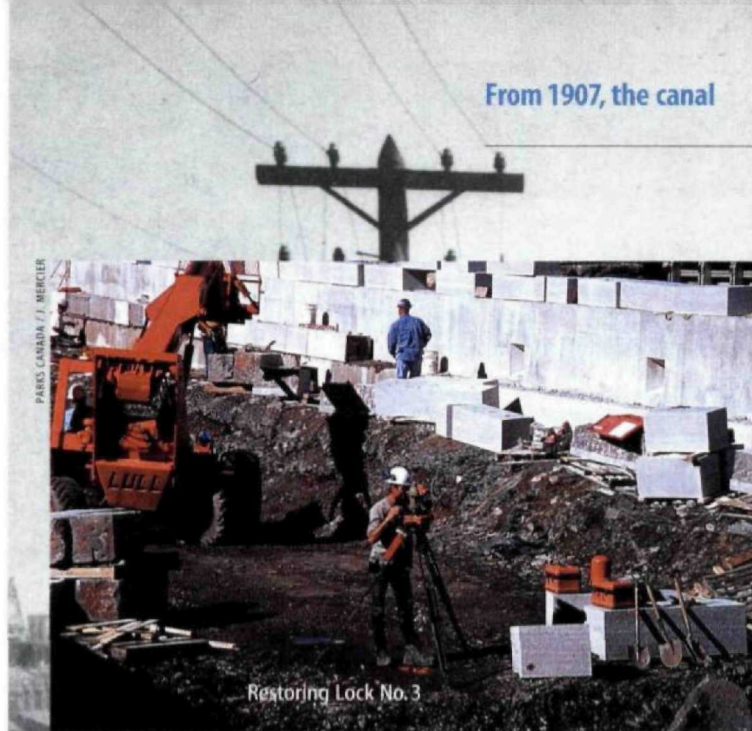
From 1950, when the St. Lawrence Seaway's construction was announced, the canal became neglected. Most boats switched to the seaway when it opened in 1959, and numerous companies moved away over the next few years. The canal was kept partially operating to deliver coal to some enterprises, but developers filled several basins with soil excavated for the metro system. By 1970, only Montreal Coke & Manufacturing still received coal by boat. It joined others in switching to rail when the canal shut down in November of that year. Few companies remained. Dominion Wadding, a company that produced stuffing materials, continued to operate until March 2001, when it succumbed to complaints from condo owners whose buildings surrounded the factory. "It was still using some nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century machinery," Desloges laments. "It all sold as scrap. I would have taken it myself, it was so unbelievable."

Fortunately, more than 25,000 artifacts endure, based on an inventory Parks Canada initiated in 1998. They include locks, buildings, machinery, and the hydraulic networks used to power the first machines. "The quantity and size are mind-boggling," confirms Gisèle Piédalue, Parks Canada's senior archaeologist, "but a lot is on private land. It's essential at least to document what's there before developers excavate." Traces of Dominion Flour Mills, Essotech (Imperial Oil), Stelco, and a half-dozen other companies have already disappeared. "We were able to shoot 3-D images of Jos. Robb's industrial leather complex, but by then all the machinery was gone," Piédalue says.

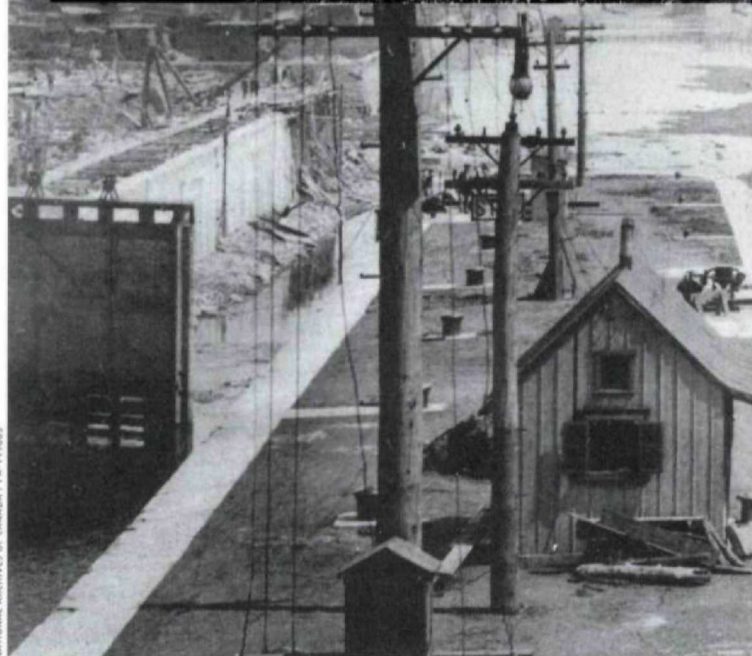
Some developers cooperate, such as Redpath's renovators. They have restored building exteriors and integrated historical elements into their project, after receiving municipal and provincial funding. A Parks Canada tour boat ferries visitors near what remains of the eighty-five Redpath structures once considered at the cutting edge of industrialization. "Until Redpath closed in 1983, it was like walking through cotton candy," Piché reminisces. "The air was so sweet."

Between 1852 and 1855, an unprecedented seventeen factories opened around the basin of the St. Gabriel lock, which still harbours the best ensemble of surviving buildings as well as remains of the 1825 canal. Here, not only Red-

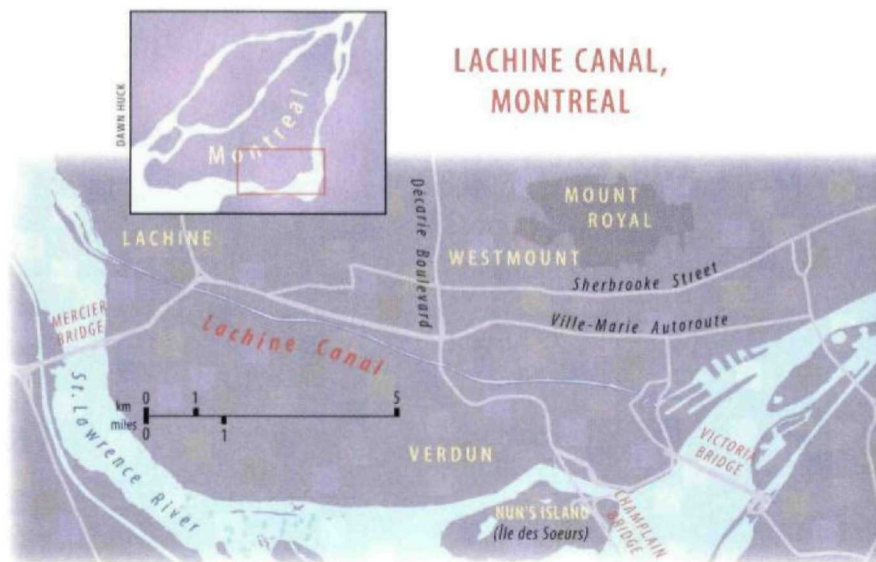
From 1907, the canal



Restoring Lock No. 3



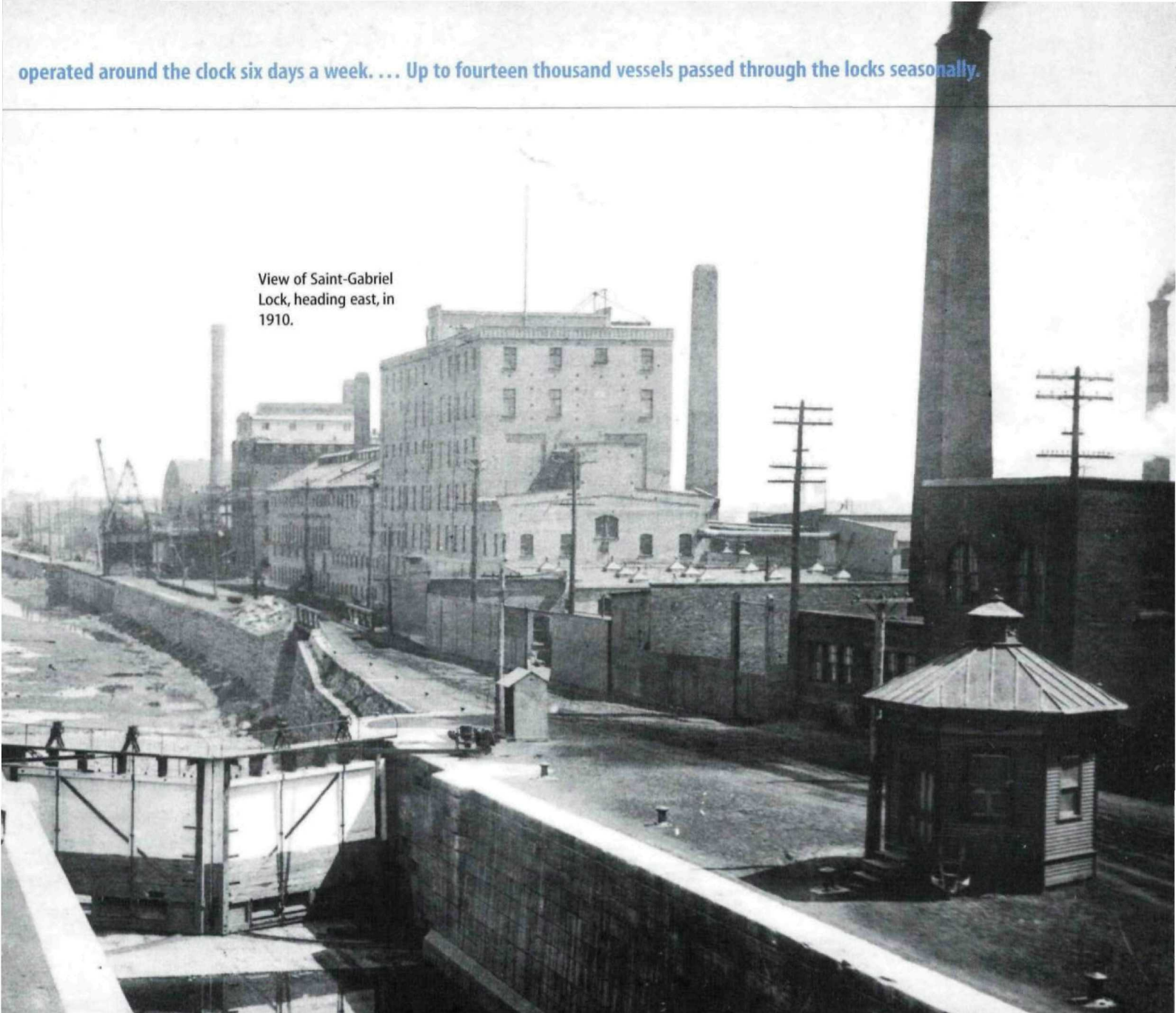
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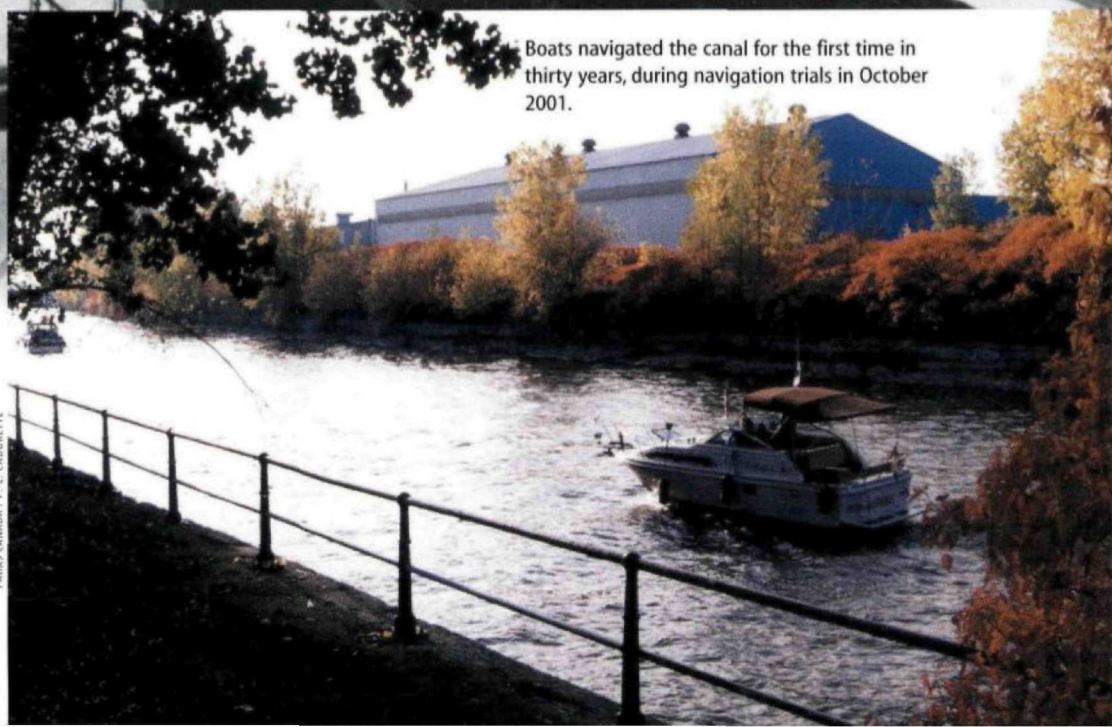
LACHINE CANAL, MONTREAL

operated around the clock six days a week. ... Up to fourteen thousand vessels passed through the locks seasonally.

View of Saint-Gabriel Lock, heading east, in 1910.



Boats navigated the canal for the first time in thirty years, during navigation trials in October 2001.



PARKS CANADA / P. - E. CADORETTE

path stands, but the origins of Five Roses, Stelco, Northern Electric (now Nordelec), and textile manufacturer Belding Corticelli.

A few metres underground, other vestiges rest alongside most of the canal. Unlike today, when soil is carted off to make way for underground parking, people used to leave demolished materials and build on top of them, sometimes on the same foundations. Fire twice razed the Brewster Sawmill, Canada's first industrial woodcutter. "The sandy earth has preserved drawings and notes on billboards," Montreal's chief archaeologist, Claire Rousseau, reveals. "When we uncovered the site, it felt as if people were still there."

While many ruins will remain buried indefinitely, at least two sites are being excavated with the aim of creating an archaeological park. It will display canal mechanisms and industrial machinery that can withstand Montreal winters. The current project also involves branching bike paths into neighbouring streets and excavating two flour-mill basins that had been filled. Interpretation points and visitor facilities will make exploring the canal easier for an anticipated 1.5 million people annually.

Everyone hopes the success of this first phase will lead to more funding. "Many canal walls are crumbling, and there's no major interpretation centre," notes Mark London, an urban planner with the Lachine Canal team at Montreal's parks department. "Several basins need to be reopened to turn a no man's land into an attractive site."

"It's a race against time with so much private interest in developing the waterfront," Piédalue warns. "We've only been able to provide an idea of what's there with the hope that it will lead to its protection." ■

Julie Gedeon is a Montreal writer with a keen interest in history. She is currently working on a book called *Iron Ladies – The Role of Women in Canadian Railways* for McGill-Queen's University Press.

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Parks Canada's website devoted to the Lachine Canal National Historic Site features a history of the canal and its restoration at <www.parks.canada.pch.gc.ca/canallachine>.