

Hidden English History in the Saguenay, Part 6: Arvida

RUBY PRATKA
RUBY@QCTONLINE.COM

In front of the modernist pre-amalgamation City Hall of Arvida, in the Saguenay, the memorial to the town's fallen Royal Canadian Air Force members takes the form of a large aluminum wheel. The vast Rio Tinto-Alcan smelter complex still leaves its ponderous handprint on the town of 12,000 people, today merged with the City of Saguenay.

A few steps away from the city hall stands the public library, with its reading rooms all named for people instrumental in the founding of Arvida, a planned "company town" for thousands of Alcan employees and their families flown or driven in from further afield.

"It should say 'Public Library,'" says Arvida native Terry Loucks, the son of two Alcan employees who was born on the second floor of what is now the library when it was an apartment complex, gesturing to the large "Bibliothèque

publique" sign. "But that will never happen now."

Today, in Saguenay as a whole, people who speak English as a first language represent just under one per cent of the population. The single English-language public school, Riverside Regional School in Jonquière (created from the 2016 merger of the remaining elementary and high schools) has under 450 students across 11 grades, bused in from around the region. A recent conference held to discuss the past and future of Arvida's anglophone community drew about a dozen people, many of them from out of town.

But, as Loucks and his friends explain, it wasn't always that way. "The English-speaking families were between five and 15 per cent of the population, and [in Arvida], they were all Alcan families," says Joan Monahan. "I didn't think of it as small-town life at all, because it was so cosmopolitan and diverse," she says, showing off a high

school yearbook with German and Southern European names mixed in with the MacDonalds and Tremblays. Monahan says she and her brother Tom grew up bilingual. "The ski team was in French and the sailing team was in English," Tom Monahan recalls.

The town of Arvida is now a provincial heritage site, and Loucks and the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network, among others, have advocated for it to be named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was founded in 1927 by the American industrialist Arthur Vining Davis, president of Alcan (then Alcoa). Its carefully planned layout earned it the name "Washington of the North" and smokestacks towered over houses built for working families – "in my time, before all the anti-pollution efforts, the sky looked like a bomb had gone off," says Loucks, who now lives in the Eastern Townships.

Thousands of workers from English Canada and abroad, like Loucks' Ontario-born

parents, were brought in to work at the plant in the 1930s and '40s. Much of the work was, in Loucks' words, "almost slave labour ... in -40-degree weather, some of the guys would come home and sit in the living room and cry; others left after three weeks.

"[The company] realized that you had to keep the workers happy to make money," says Loucks. For those families that stayed, a burgeoning community catered to the workers once their shift ended: a bilingual newspaper and a vibrant network of English-language and bilingual sports activities and social clubs were created to accommodate them. Loucks recalled that the company would fly in a Santa Claus "to give out candy to every little kid in Arvida."

In the mid-1940s, the company began gradually dialing back its out-of-area recruitment efforts, hiring locally based, French-speaking employees and laying off or transferring out employ-



Photo by Ruby Pratika

Arvida native Terry Loucks, beside an exhibit on Alcan employees in front of Arvida's pre-amalgamation City Hall, describes working conditions for rank-and-file Alcan employees.

ees brought in from outside, Monahan explains. Many English-speaking families returned to their hometowns, were transferred to Alcan operations in other provinces or left to seek other work. "Also, we all had to go away to college or university," recalls Monahan, who is now a lawyer in Ottawa. "Then we all

kind of gravitated elsewhere after that. There's not really anybody I know here now, but when I come back up, there are a lot of happy memories. When people ask where I'm from, I always say the Saguenay, and then people say, 'What?! You're English!'"