

Canon O'Meara Boys School

Leo Purcell

In the early part of 2007 we followed the struggles of the parents in Pointe St. Charles to keep their community school, St. Gabriel's, open for at least one more year. The problem has been, and continues to be, low registration, due to a shifting population, and to the long term effects of Bill 101.

It wasn't always the case. Through the first half of the twentieth century three schools educated the English Catholic children in the Pointe - Canon O'Meara Boys, Sarsfield Boys, and St Gabriel Girls. The few lines to follow will deal with some of the history of Canon O'Meara Boys.

The school, Canon O'Meara Boys, was called Chauveau School back in 1910, when the then pastor of St. Gabriel's parish, Canon O'Meara, brought back four Presentation Brothers from Cork City, Ireland, to teach in Belmont School, located on Guy St. Canon O'Meara was the representative for the English Catholics on the Montreal Catholic School Board (MCSC). While he was doing his job in Ireland some local politicking was taking place back here. On his return to Montreal he was told that the Belmont School was staffed for the coming year. With four teaching Brothers on his hands, he counted his blessings and made arrangements to have them start a regular school for the English Catholics (Irish) in St. Gabriel's parish. Some of the English Catholic children were already being taught in Sarsfield School and in Chauveau School by members of the French teaching Congregation, Les Freres de Sacre Coeur who had enough English to get the children started in their basic three (four?) R's.. The Sacred Heart Brothers moved out of the residence attached to the school, and the Presentation Brothers moved into a residence already set up for community life, i.e., chapel, community room, small bed rooms, dining room. From 1910 through the next forty plus years, St. Gabriel's Parish (located on the corner of Centre St. and Laprairie) had a school directly behind it on Laprairie St.

This was the first of several schools administered by the Presentation Brothers in the Montreal area. In the twenties a Secondary Top was added. The MCSC eliminated this facility when the English section of the MCSC started to explode in the early fifties. The Secondary Top offered students the opportunity to complete the first two years of High School, after which they wrote a special exam, and left to find employment. Many companies required nine years of schooling for some of the positions they wanted to fill. After Canon O'Meara died, the MCSC agreed to change the name of the school to Canon O'Meara.

Stories abound about how the Irish Brothers disciplined the local children. Many of them are apocryphal, but not all. Names associated with the school in its early years are Brothers Irenaeus, Thaddeus, Stanislaus, Fleming, Rodgers, Monahan, Michael. The grades three to seven were taught by young Brothers, some getting their first teaching experience there, and moving on to different schools, others leaving the Brothers. The lay teachers on staff in the late forties-early fifties were

Phoebe Noonan (1st G.), Alice Neville(2nd G), Bill Doyle, Devney Hogan, Mr. John Lyng.(Secondary Top)

I taught in Canon O'Meara for the academic years 1949-50, and 1950-51. My first year was with a Grade Five, my second with a Grade 7. It was an exciting time for me as a teacher, learning the trade (or profession), and being introduced to the then formidable task of preparing the 7th graders for provincial examinations. There was also a diocesan religion examination that the 7th graders had to take. The provincial exam was used as a screening device for entrance to High School and it was not taken lightly by either the staff or the Principal. Corrections were done in various centers, and teachers were appointed to them to correct in committee all the examinations in that area. My first correction center was at Belmont School with Mr. Himpy (?) as Principal. At this time Sarsfield School had Michael Rochford as Principal, and one of his staff was 5th Grade teacher John Shore, later first Principal of James Lyng High School.

A few names from my time in Canon O'Meara are known to teachers (some as teachers) and even in the broader community. Terry Evanshen, of football fame, was in Grade Two in 1950. Patrick Duffy, who played semi-pro football in the area, had a tryout with the Alouettes, and spent several years coaching football, was in Grade 7. The Deegan twins, Kevin, and Brendan, well known teachers in the West Island, were in the Secondary Top

The Presentation Brothers withdrew as administrators of Canon O'Meara in June, 1951. Shortly after that (a few years?) the three schools - Canon O'Meara, Sarsfield, and St. Gabriel Girls were combined to form the St. Gabriel's School for both boys and girls - the school that was featured in the Gazette earlier this year and is now fighting for its very existence..

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