

## **EARLY DAYS IN MONTREAL**

**by Gerry Carroll**

Like most young boys in Ireland, from an early age I had heard stories of people emigrating. My mother had spent four years working in New York, came home to Tipperary for a holiday, met my father and never returned. My father, too had lived outside Ireland, having spent time in England and served in the British army during the First World War. The stories they told us were not always happy ones, and the loneliness each had endured while away from home convinced them to remain in Ireland, in Dublin. Nevertheless, far off places had a fascination for most of the young boys of my time and all of us were interested in hearing of individuals or families leaving the country. In my early teens, the first years of the Second World War, it was quite common for boys a few years older than me to drop out of high school and go to England, in many cases to join one or other of the armed forces. At the war's end some returned, but many were not seen again. At the end of the war, too, American and Canadian soldiers serving in Europe were able to visit Ireland. We were attracted to their uniforms and were absolutely thrilled if one of them would speak to us, even for a thing as simple as asking for directions.

Most of my friends had ambitions of leaving the country and many headed for England as soon as the opportunity presented itself. The fortunate among us had relatives in the United States, in Canada or in Australia and their ambitions were to join their relatives there one day. I was among the fortunate, as I had an uncle and first cousins in New York, and I chose one of them, a boy of my own age to write to and share my ambition with him. But my letter was never answered, so I would have to look elsewhere.

For some years I worked in offices in Dublin and, when I had the opportunity to attend university, I trained as a teacher. Among my classmates there were many who had their eyes on teaching jobs outside Ireland, believing their chances of advancement were greater there. So, as graduation approached, we were very interested in hearing of overseas opportunities and many of us availed ourselves of them. Within a few years we were scattered. I taught for one year in a suburb of Dublin, all the time keeping an ear open and searching newspaper advertisements for openings. By the end of that year, I was considering moving to Mombasa, Kenya where I could have a three year contract with a six month vacation at the end. My family, and particularly my good mother were not that keen, and when I read of a recruitment team from the Montreal Catholic School Commission heading to Ireland, England and Scotland, I wrote to them and asked if I could meet them. On Easter Saturday, 1954 I was interviewed in the Hibernian Hotel in Dublin by Dr. John McIlhone and Canon Emmet Carter. A few weeks later, I received a letter telling me I would be hired. My dear mother felt a little better about this than the Mombasa, Kenya possibility, but was still apprehensive. Soon after that I had a letter from George Glashan, President of the Federation of English Speaking Catholic Teachers, welcoming me to their ranks. Things were looking better. Another letter arrived within a few days from Eugene McCarthy, telling me he had been appointed to meet me when I would arrive in Montreal and to help me get settled. He also mentioned that he was originally

from Templemore, County Tipperary and that cancelled all the misgivings. Eugene was an answer to prayer!

Thursday, August 19, 1954, after a very tearful farewell, my brother, Sean, a member of the Irish Christian Brothers, came with me to Dun Laoghaire Harbour, outside Dublin, so that I could take the boat to England. I crossed the Irish Sea and took a train across the country to London, where a cousin of mine allowed me to stay the night. Next morning I travelled to Southampton, where I boarded the SS Canberra, a refitted hospital ship, without cabins, but long dormitories and a small cupboard beside one's bed for luggage. This was to be my home for the next 10 days. Emigrant families from all over Europe filled the boat, but I was able to find a handful of English speaking passengers, among whom I was able to pass the time.

On Sunday, September 29 we docked at Quebec and we were allowed to take a bus into the city. It was there, in a drug store, that I spoke my first sentence in French. I had been practicing it all through the voyage - "Avez-vous une filme du camera?" I felt so proud that I was understood, but when the girl asked, "Quel numero?" I was stumped. Back on board, my tutor told me I should have answered, "six vingt".

The next day we docked at Montreal and there, as he had promised, was Eugene McCarthy from Co. Tipperary and with him, another teacher, Mike Feeley from Co. Leitrim to welcome me - "Fáilte go Ceanada". Eugene told me that the teachers' association had given him funds to take Mike and myself to lunch, so we headed for Dagwoods restaurant in St. Laurent, the town where Eugene lived. This was a real adventure. I was amazed at the variety of the menu and the fact that there were three different kinds of bread on the table and, as Eugene paid the bill, he just slid the loose change off the bills and left it on the tray for the waitress. Such style!

Eugene then took me to his house, introduced me to his lovely wife and their young daughter and showed me the room where I was welcome to stay until such time as I could find accommodation close to the school where I was to be assigned. His house was of new construction, with new furniture and appliances, electricity and a telephone. With this I was able to send a cable to my family to tell them I had arrived safely. A large refrigerator in the kitchen kept the food fresh, but what impressed me most was the television set in the living room. I had never seen one before and I could not wait to see it in operation. When I did see it, it exceeded all expectations and imaginings. It was truly magical, and even the commercials fascinated me.

Since this was only the end of August, I had more than a week to wait for the opening of school after Labour Day. A week of one exciting experience after another. The weather was beautiful, the area where I was living was new and clean and bright. People could be heard speaking French on the street. I was particularly thrilled to hear little children speak it and I would slow down in my walk to take it in. In these days I would probably be suspected of being a paedophile, as I would linger around them to listen. St. Laurent had only recently constructed one of the seven wonders of the North American world, Norgate Shopping Centre, and it was only blocks away. This I had to see.

Eugene had been in touch with the school board to ask what school I would be teaching in. Where was it? I would find out when I kept the appointment made for me with Doctor McIlhone at the Montreal Catholic School Commission.

Setting out for the school commission was another adventure. A complicated process. I had to take public transportation, a streetcar. I was amazed! Dublin had got rid of streetcars (we called them trams) years before, and this modern Canadian city still had them! I discovered there were two types: one had a driver in front and a conductor in the rear; the other had only a driver in front. As you boarded the tram (I was given precise instructions about this), you put thirty cents on a tray and received three tickets. You tore one off and dropped it into an adjoining container and then stretched your hand out to receive a long strip of paper called a transfer. With this you could board a second streetcar, or even more than one without paying, provided you were not travelling back in the direction from where you started. You did not need to speak English or French for this transaction. The streetcar with only a driver you boarded in front, the other one you boarded in the rear. I could not understand how the people waiting could tell instinctively which type was approaching, as they never headed for the incorrect entrance. I just followed them.

The headquarters of the Montreal Catholic School Commission was an old mansion situated where Place Ville Marie is to-day and I was received by Leo O'Connell, introduced to Walter Murphy and Edward Malone. (Did you have to have an Irish name to work here?) I was told a class awaited me in St. Rita Montreal North School - grade 4, and I should report the day after Labour Day.

Leaving the Commission, since I was down town, I took the opportunity to stroll along Ste Catherine Street and I entered Woolworths at the corner of St-Laurent Boulevard. There I bought myself a little address book for 27c., figuring I would need it for all my new acquaintances. Woolworths was air conditioned, and as I exited, I could feel the warm air of the outdoors envelop me. It was a new and very pleasant experience. In a small restaurant in the area I stopped for lunch and found out the prices of their fast food - hot dog 10c., hamburger 25c. While eating my snack I saw a customer order corn on the cob, something I had never seen or heard of before. When I mentioned it on my return, I was promised to have it at my next day's lunch. I did, and I enjoyed it immensely.

Tuesday, September 7, school started. I had made enquiries as to how distant Montreal North was from St. Laurent and how I was to get to school. Other people, Eugene among them, considered the same question and came up with a solution. They discovered that a young English girl, Peggy Moore, had been assigned to the same school and was boarding in the Cote Des Neiges area with a teacher from the staff. If I could arrange to arrive at a meeting place, I could drive with them to school. It was so arranged and the arrangement lasted one whole week. Then, disaster! The car driver's schedule was altered and she would not be reporting to the school at the same time as I. So, I had to resort to public transport. Getting from St. Laurent to Montreal North by public transport is difficult now; imagine what a nightmare it was in 1954! Fortunately, after a couple of weeks at it, I found digs in Montreal North at \$60 a month, in a new development built especially for

veterans and their families. Among them there were a number of war brides, a few from England and Scotland, and one from Ireland, naturally a lovely person. I got to know her family well and had one of her daughters, Maura, in my class.

The school was of recent construction, less than two years old, all on one level, no stairs to climb. The classrooms were large, bright and airy, and I did not have to share the room with another class or another two classes, which was common in Ireland. It had a large assembly hall which served as chapel on Sunday mornings, as the parish church was in Ahuntsic, several miles away. There was a well equipped kitchen in the teachers' room with an electric kettle, refrigerator, table and chairs. Also there, a typewriter available for the use of teachers and a truly magic appliance called a ditto machine, with which one could reproduce several copies of a written or typed sheet. I had a mixed class, boys and girls, which was something new. There were 42 pupils in the class, but soon that number was reduced to 30 (to me after my Irish experience, a real luxury), after some internal reorganization. Very nice children of a variety of ethnic origins, respectful, obedient and interested in learning. In those days, if they were not interested, you could be assured that the parents would right the situation.

The only problem I could foresee with the curriculum was the requirement to teach French. I explained to the principal that I could not teach the language, and he replied, "Of course you can; you will find a way". And I did. I would line up all the children who could speak French on the left hand side of the room, the others on the right. Pointing to the charts provided, I would ask those on the left to name the object indicated, and I would repeat it along with the children on the right. I learned quite a bit of French in the course of my first year. While I loved teaching all subjects, what I really enjoyed was teaching them singing, and by June they had quite a repertoire of traditional Irish songs. Our music inspector was very impressed and recruited me to the Teachers' Choir and to our parish choir.

As the end of the school year approached, I wondered how I would pass the idle, fully paid, summer months. One of the teachers told me that a boys' summer camp was looking for an assistant director and I should approach the director, Fintan Heffernan, who was principal of St. Thomas a Becket School. I did, and I got the job. The camp was Camp Orela, called after three Montreal priests, Fathers O'Rourke, Elliott and Dawson, and it was situated on a lake outside St. Gabriel de Brandon, Quebec. Adjoining it was Camp Marian for girls, the director of which was Mrs. Heffernan. The weather was beautiful and I enjoyed working there. It was like a summer holiday and getting paid for it.

The chaplain of the camp was Father Thomas McEntee, a young priest just one year ordained. We became close friends and it was through Father McEntee that I became acquainted with the Irish in Montreal. Montreal North was in the boondocks at that time and did not have a regular bus service, so I was very seldom able to come into the city where the Irish people were. Consequently, I had no Irish friends. I went down to watch the 1956 St. Patrick's Day Parade and, while watching the marchers on Sherbrooke Street, I spotted Father Tom marching with the AOH unit. He spotted me, too, and called out to me. So I followed him to the end of the parade, where he introduced me to John Lucey, President, and urged me to become a member. Soon I was involved with just about every Irish organization in the city and was recording

secretary for the United Irish Societies for a number of years.

After Camp Orelida it was back to St. Rita's Montreal North again. The name had been changed to Blessed Adrian Fortescue and there were some staff changes. Among the new staff, a young beginning teacher, Lois McCaffery, the girl I married a few years later. I stayed there for three more years, then moved into high school.

When I think back to the first couple of years I spent in Montreal and compare my experiences with those of other Irish immigrants, I realize how fortunate and blessed I was. I had secured a good job before I left Ireland; I had people waiting for me at the boat on arrival; accommodations arranged; excellent working conditions; the prospect of long paid summer holidays which would permit me to return to Ireland for vacation (we travelled by boat in those days, and one needed lots of time); and, after spending only one year in the country, to meet the lovely young lady who was to become my wife and mother to my children. God was certainly good to me and the prayers of my good mother were undoubtedly heard.

Gerry Carroll