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Once a ready-made company town for a cotton mill,
this French-Canadian enclave is still unique

LAKESIDE

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Photographs by RICHARD HOWARD

DRIVING SOUTH on Pine Street in Burlington between a variety of commercial establishments, some empty, some now converted into apartment houses, one comes to a stop light and a right turn not far from a large brick building topped with a conspicuous "GE." Few people not either employed in that building or forewarned as to what lies beyond would think of making the right turn onto that deserted street which seems to disappear under the railroad tracks. No one would guess that it rises beyond into an enclave of small homes and apartment houses, secluded from the remainder of Burlington, yet enjoying one of Burlington's most prized assets — a length of Lake Champlain's shore. Here is Lakeside; not a new settlement but one established long ago for its employees by the Queen City cotton mill, the original occupant of the building that now announces its General Electric ownership.

Though Lakeside may once have looked like a company town, it is far less uniform and considerably more appealing than most of today's condominium clusters. When, in 1937, the properties were offered for sale to the mill workers already living there, a total of over 100 units were listed — single, double, three-and four-family houses plus two 12 apartment frame buildings. Most are well kept, painted in light shades of white or pale yellows, greens and grays. All have squarish front porches with small, neat front yards and larger back ones.

The Queen City cotton mill was located in Burlington at about the turn of the century for the express purpose of testing a new, fully automatic loom. Its efficiency could best be determined, the mill owners decided, if the factory workers had

not already been conditioned to working on other model looms. After due consideration and despite the fact that it had no water power to offer, Burlington was selected as the site for the new mill.

What Burlington did have was a sizeable and employable population of thrifty, reliable, intelligent, hard-working people of French-Canadian extraction whose ties with Canadian families and friends were strong enough to attract more as new employment opportunities opened up. Recommended by friends or relatives already on the work force, a newcomer from Canada could expect to find employment in the mill as soon as there was an opening.

It did not take long for the mill's employees to learn the routine of the automatic loom. A spinner would have to keep an eye on several machines whose gigantic rolls of cotton batting were being converted into thread or on looms which were weaving that thread into cotton

sheeting. In a mill not excessively large by the standards of the late 1890s, there were some 35,000 spindles and nearly 1,300 looms. The workers had to be alert in order to keep the entire complex running smoothly. And they evidently took pride in the work they performed. Word of the opportunities for employment was sent north to Canadian family and friends. Lakeside soon became the kind of self-contained, proud community that today's survivors still recall with nostalgia.

To talk with such survivors is to make a journey into a past where people lived in spiritual as well as physical proximity and where associations endured for years. We hear of the mailman who knew every child and adult of Lakeside for the 42 years he delivered their letters. There was the city policeman who was one of them, and the famous and skilled fiddler, Louis Beaudoin, who — with his talented family — brought special cheer to the gatherings of Lakeside's St. Johns Club. Most of



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Lakeside can be seen as a specific neighborhood from the air, bordered by green, railroad tracks and the lake.



all, there was the beloved Monsignor Plamondon who presided over neighboring St. Anthony's Church for so many years that when there came an opportunity to move to a larger and more glamorous parish, he rejected it. "Here I have lived for so long, it is here I wish to die."

For 80 year-old Conrad Bergeron, Lakesiders are the people who have made the fabric of his life, though he moved out of the community years ago. Tall, vigorous and looking not nearly his age, he is retired from nearly 60 years of employment, 27 of them in the mill where he began as a schoolboy of nine.

Bergeron's main hobby has for long been the collecting of Lakeside memorabilia that tell of the mill, the work, the

workers and inevitably the strike that foreshadowed the end of Lakeside as the close little community it once had been. Of the strike organizers who appeared from the outside, Conrad Bergeron has little good to say in either French or English. The increased wages that a 1934 strike brought, he remembers, were soon swallowed up in the increased prices local tradesmen immediately demanded.

Still residing in Lakeside is Marie, now in her late seventies. Born into a family that eventually included five brothers and three sisters, she left Canada when she was only five years old. The ten dollars a week Marie's father could earn then provided more than an ample reason to move his family to the Lakeside community.

Newcomers like Marie and her family were immediately invited to share quar-

ters with friends or relatives until they became settled and were able to shift for themselves. Both Marie, and later her niece Jeanne, went to work in the mill as soon as they were considered employable — sooner, in fact, since each managed to start before attaining the required age of sixteen, verbally stretching their ages by a few months. Jeanne remembers that she already knew some mill routines when she started work since she and some schoolgirl friends often stopped in on their way home from the old Champlain school to help older employed friends.

Jeanne, having started in the spinning room, recalls the thrill of her first weekly \$18 paycheck which then went into the family kitty save for a dollar or so reserved for her. After about a year as a “doffer” — taking off full bobbins and replacing them with empty ones — Jeanne graduated to the weaving room and \$35 a week. Men followed similar routines of employment. Some, however, became skilled loom fixers or were trained in other mechanical work.

The work not only demanded an alert mind but also some physical dexterity and strength, especially when heavy rolls of sheeting had to be replaced with empty cores. Summers could become endurance tests, with the heat of the machinery added to that from outside to such a degree that the flat roof was hosed off to make the place bearable. Nevertheless, the mill workers seemed to have found many compensations in their lives which were almost totally centered about Lakeside and its immediate environs.

A mill worker could rent half a duplex house for \$1.80 a week and that amount was deducted from his paycheck. Each half-house had a sizeable kitchen, a small living room and four small bedrooms, one downstairs, three above. Heated by a kitchen wood stove, the fuel for which was the tenant's responsibility, the houses also had running water and eventually electricity. All upkeep was undertaken by the company at company expense, as were the streets and small central park. Backyards, some extending to the tracks, were large enough for gardens and even a few hens.

The residents of the early days will recall that Lakeside was a happy place, a sort of extended family home where people were always ready with spontaneous warmth to help one another out. French was the predominant language and the surviving older generation in some cases barely understands English. Others speak English fluently but with a French accent while Jeanne's generation



combines French with totally fluent English. The youngest generation may understand their grandparents' French but generally refuse to converse in it, if indeed they have mastered enough to use it in conversation.

Vistas across the lake bring to the mind of an older Lakesider like Marie those lovely days of Winter when she was young and could join in moonlit skating parties after work. She also tells of the men who, having spent Summer evenings fishing from rowboats, would set up fishing huts on the ice and suddenly a new shanty village would appear. Not only did Marie's father and brothers fish each Winter but they made annual hunting trips into Canada and returned with welcome additions to Lakeside diets. Somehow most of the Lakeside young people managed to acquire skates and took enthusiastically to the ice that shone so invitingly beyond the strip at the lake's very edge. One Winter, Marie recounts proudly, two of her brothers donned the heavy woolen sweaters supplied by the mill to Lakeside baseball players, and skated all the way across the lake and back.

With Spring and after the mud had sufficiently dried, men and boys of Lakeside took to their central park to play baseball, practicing every evening until they felt themselves skilled and bold enough to challenge outside teams — Winooski, perhaps, or even the University of Vermont. The mill owners, impressed with this activity, bought each player a complete baseball outfit. Lakeside girls watched from the sidelines. But when hot days arrived, everyone joined

in the swimming available practically on their doorsteps.

Hard work and limited income was taken for granted by early Lakesiders. Today's oldtimers recall that part philosophically but their memories dwell on the many compensations they felt privileged to enjoy in that small-town atmosphere of mutual interest and help. They remember the three small stores of early Lakeside — one a dry-goods store, another an ice cream street-parlor where children happily flocked when the front panel was opened, and the third an indispensable little grocery presided over by Marie's brother. The latter, to the unfading regret of old Lakesiders, is long

owners offered, to any Lakeside resident who might wish it, a chance to purchase the place he was occupying at a low price and with generous financing.

Most Lakesiders took advantage of the opportunity and the community became an integral part of the city of Burlington. The city, for its part, levied taxes on them directly and supplied in return — the Lakesiders think rather grudgingly — upkeep of the park and streets as well as police and fire protection. It is the latter that causes today's residents real worry since fire trucks can approach Lakeside only through the underpass where water often collects and makes access — especially in Winter — most difficult. Resi-



since closed but memories linger of the easy instantaneous availability of suddenly needed items. As a neighbor who shared the same background as his customers, the proprietor let them run up bills in hard times, probably more than he could really afford. He accepted the situation knowing his customers could afford even less.

What led to the closing of that little store was what eventually led to an end of the Lakeside community as residents there had long known it to be. The cost of bringing cotton from southern states to New England mills was, by 1937, barely outweighed by the local labor force those mills could secure. With the strike, the mill owners shut their doors permanently and shipped their machinery south. The work force was left behind. As a final gesture of consideration, however, the

dents have petitioned for a better access road, though thus far to no avail. Now they also worry about the proposed beltway, wondering whether it may not cut Lakeside off entirely and make reaching the new Champlain School across Pine Street difficult for children who attend it.

Some of today's worriers are outsiders who have found Lakeside for themselves and managed to move in. Still others would like to make the move. Yet enough of the oldtimers remain for Lakeside to retain the flavor of a quiet refuge — one of the few places left in today's growing city where an elderly widow like Marie can sit on her front porch, surveying the little square that has meant so much in her life, remembering happy times past and, best of all, exchanging talk with passing neighbors whom she has long known and loved.



Yvonne Pepin Masse, one of Lakeside's senior residents, moved to the community in 1909. She appears in the photo above in 1913, the year she went to work for the mill. Aldea Boucher, 89, is pictured above with her son Armand Richer.