

Mount Royal

by

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My Great-Grandfather, Charles Frederick Stevens, arrived from England as a young man in the 1870s. He was president of the then-famous Mechanics Institute, which survives today as the Atwater Library. He was also one of the founding aldermen of the nascent City of Westmount. Three of his children died in the typhus epidemics of the era: one within a year of birth, one within a month, and another, within a day or two. These Great-Uncles of mine are buried in Mount Royal cemetery.

My Grandfather, Frederick Moses Stevens, was an accountant. He worked for the Robert Reford Company, agents to the Cunard and White Star Lines. He and his wife, Edith Hazelwood Bridges, are buried in Mount Royal cemetery.

My Father, Charles Frederick Bridges Stevens, was a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Air Force and a decorated veteran of World War II. A McGill graduate in chemistry, he became editor-in-chief of Pulp and Paper Canada, an important trade magazine.

As a child and teenager in the 1920s, my father would climb Mount Royal with his skis on his shoulder. At the top, he would clip them on and ski down. His route would take him down through the streets of Montreal, past horses and sleighs, to the front door of his Durocher street home. While playing university football in the 1930s, his team practiced on Fletcher's Field, the part of Mount Royal right behind the Lions. (Not to be confused with Jeanne Mance Park of course, which is across the street).

This was the depression. At that time, there were still wolves to be seen on the mountain. And homeless men.

Mount Royal is part of my family's history. It is in my blood.

My childhood was full of Sundays playing on the Lions; I can still feel the sensation of cold iron on a fall day. Running through Fletcher's Field. Skiing and tobogganing down the Beaver Lake hill, skating on Beaver Lake, drinking hot chocolate in the chalet. We often walked to the Kondiaronk lookout and had something to eat in the Mount Royal Chalet, which had a small snack bar in those days. We used different routes. Sometimes we parked at Smith House and walked. At other times, we started from Park Avenue and followed the road up, on past Molson stadium. There were even occasions when we simply climbed straight up the mountain. And, like millions of other Montreal children, we tobogganed down the Park Avenue slopes, undoubtedly giving our parents chills as our garbage-can tops took us perilously close to traffic that lay just beyond the George-Étienne Cartier monument.

Last winter, I had the pleasure of teaching my two-year old daughter to skate on the same Beaver Lake skating rink where, 52 years ago, my father had taught me.

The park we know and love, designed by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead and inaugurated in 1876, was and is for all Montrealers. The rich, the poor, the old, the young. Friends, lovers, families. Frisbee-throwers, walkers, stroller-pushers. Toddlers learning to walk, people leaning on canes and who can just barely walk at all. Moms and Dads leading and sometimes carrying caravans of babies, toddlers, picnic baskets and even barbeques. In winter, make that skis, sleds, babies, skates. Many, probably most, live too far away to walk. Montreal, and Montreal island, is a large place. To ask them to come by bicycle is ludicrous. To ask them to come by bus is impossible. They can only come by car.

And what of the cemeteries? The Jewish cemeteries. Notre-Dame-Des-Neiges cemetery. Mount Royal cemetery. To state the obvious: although these grounds are made available to everyone, their visitors, the bereaved, are predominantly the aged and the infirm. To ask them to come by bicycle is ludicrous. To ask them to come by bus is impossible. Not only do they need their automobiles to get to the cemetery, they need them also to get from the cemetery gate to the graveside they have come to visit.

So, to be clear. To close Camilien-Houde Way and Remembrance Road to through traffic will have consequences. And those consequences will be to close off the park, and the cemeteries, to Montrealers. With the exception of cyclists. In effect, you will be turning the mountain into the private preserve of cyclists. It will cease to be a public park. The cemeteries will become inaccessible to their users.

This was not the wish of the city fathers who commissioned the park and cemeteries a century and a half ago. It was not the vision of the Montrealers who supported them. It was not the vision of Frederick Law Olmstead. And, as citizens of this city are fully aware today, and have known for months, it is not the desire of the majority of Montrealers. The number of petition-signers against this foolish and unjust measure far, far outstrips those who think differently.

Mme Plante, M. Ferrandez, you need to understand something. We live in a democracy. In it, the citizens come first. Not the politicians. You need to remember that you work for us. Not the other way around.

Mount Royal belongs to all Montrealers. It is not your personal property. It is not yours to make of, what you wish. You have been elected to be, among other things, its caretakers. It is therefore your job to make sure all Montrealers, those who do and do not ride bicycles, those who come from both near and far, the young and the old, the mobile and the not, have equal access to Mount Royal. Our mountain is a public treasure. It

is for all. It is most certainly not the exclusive preserve of cyclists. Or anyone else.

You need to permanently restore through traffic on Camilien-Houde Way and Remembrance Road. You need to respect this mountain, the people for whom the park and the cemeteries were made, and most of all, the people of generations past who made it possible: those who bequeathed to us this beautiful, priceless legacy, this jewel in the crown of our city. They lie at rest on the mountain's slopes, reminding us of our past. And, as they witness what you are doing to prevent people from enjoying this enchanting place, they weep.