

Essential Goods: Wood and Wool

*“J'en arrache, j'en arrache, je tir' le diabl' par la queue.
J'en arrache, j'en arrache, que voulez-vous j'su' pas chanceux !”*
Song by Ovila Légaré, “*J'en arrache*”

This was the song found on many lips early in the colonization period of the Grand-Brûlé area. It speaks of pulling the devil by the tail, being unlucky and having to tear out trees and stumps.

For the pioneer newly arrived on his parcel of land, the trees were an enormous challenge. It was only after many weeks of intense labour that the colonist finally had the wood and space needed to build his house.

To embark on this next stage, the *habitant* could choose to square the logs himself, with axe and adze, or use the village sawmill. The sawmill was essential, however, for providing the roofing shingles and the straight boards, knot-free and properly planed, used for finishing and for making furniture.

In fact, wood was indispensable for a thousand and one other purposes. While the farmer generally managed to make and repair ordinary tools such as rakes, shovels, yokes, and handles of all kinds, the sawmill provided the slats, laths and battens to make other objects: the butter churn, bread bin, barrels of various sorts, washtub and of course, the carts. The sawmill was thus at the service of the community and continually met the colonists' basic needs.

The sawmill

In 1876, to meet the initial needs for a supply of wood, Joseph Sarrazin built, close to the Ruisseau Clair stream, a water power supply and a saw pit sawmill with its long, vertical saw. It didn't saw quickly, but it was very useful for obtaining a few straight boards a day.

The following year, the mill was sold to François Léonard. To increase the speed, he installed a circular saw to saw the logs, and output improved. This was the birth of the first real sawmill. It was operated by the same owner until 1890, the year in which Magloire Gosselin took possession of it.

This latter partnered with his brother-in-law Magloire Lagacé. To guarantee an adequate reserve of water and to drive the big waterwheel with more force, they reconfigured the water power by building a dam across the Ruisseau Clair's small waterfall. In 1905, the two Magloires converted part of the sawmill into a generator... thus becoming the first in the village to make and use electricity. But the two combined functions threatened regulation of the water reserve and after several fruitless attempts to fix the problem, the two men lost faith in their business and sold the mill.

In 1919, the sawmill passed into the hands of Antonio Forget. He abandoned electricity-making and added a larger round saw, which provided even more efficient sawing. The forest industry companies and the farmers who brought their wood to be milled supplied the mill with wood. The master-sawyer received the wood and directed it towards the proper saws or the planer, depending on the work to be done. In 1920, a fire destroyed

the facilities, causing a temporary stop to activities. After a rapid rebuilding, the work continued until the early 1970s when the owner at the time, Berchmans Forget, had all the buildings demolished, including the house and the administration building.

The woolen mill

Master-sawyer Antonio Légaré was also the person in charge of the woolen mill located on the same site. He supervised, as well as participating in some stages of the process.

The fleeces brought in by each sheep farmer were placed in small jute bags, each identified with the farmer's name. Bag by bag, so as not to mix the fleeces, the wool was dropped into a basin of water and washed with a special soap that removed impurities and animal oil. When this operation was finished, the wool was put to dry before being passed on to the carder. In the carder, using repetitive movements, the carding combs brushed and carefully aligned the fibres until the wool presented a texture ready to be spun.

The carding mill could produce in an hour what a woman could do in a day with her own carding combs. A number of the women thus chose to use the service and then to spend their long winter evenings spinning their wool using a spindle and spinning wheel. The spinning wheel allowed the creation of skeins of wool of three or four strands, depending on the intended use. It was suitable for knitting stockings, tuques, mittens, scarfs and sweaters. For weaving, the number of wool threads was increased. The women wove coverlets, curtains, hangings and carpets, as well as pieces of fabric used to make clothing. All these woolen clothes and fabrics, made at home and by hand, allowed the *habitants* to dress both family and home. Far from stores and with very little money, the women counted on the strands of yarn and their own talent to battle the country's cold.

Wood and wool were everywhere in the homes of yesteryear. Their use generated local businesses to facilitate production, but it was the skills of these men and women that caused their use to take shape.

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Legend: View of the sawmill and woolen mill.

Source: collection of Antonio Forget



Legend: Pioneer sawing logs with a pit saw.

Source: collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC



Legend: Diane Gonthier with carding combs at La Butte Magique farm.

Source: photo from Colette Légaré



Legend: Diane Gonthier at the spinning wheel at La Butte Magique farm.

Source: photo from Colette Légaré