

The Farmers' Co-operative

“Les blés sont mûrs et la terre est mouillée. Les grands labours dorment sous la gelée.” When poet and songwriter Félix Leclerc sang of ripe grain and the end of outdoor work in the fields as winter approached, he was being poetic. For local farmers, however, the reality was less charming: times were hard.

Towards 1940, before the mountain was developed as a tourist resort, life in the town of Saint-Jovite¹ was based essentially on agriculture and the forest industry. Farmers who worked the soil, which was often rocky, had trouble making ends meet. Neighbours helped each other, but poverty forced them to find other means of subsistence. Many of the men worked off the farm, which was tended by the wife and children. Nonetheless, it was not enough for a decent life.

In addition, the farmers had to wait for the seed and tools they needed. These were brought in by train three times a week, which often resulted in delays in stock and crop management. The farmers had to go to Montreal by rail to sell their products, which often arrived there damaged and stale. The train was a burden for many who found it too costly. They opted, instead, to sell their products from door to door at very low prices.

It was to meet their increasing needs that farmers had the idea of creating an agricultural cooperative. Among the hundred or so farmers and growers in the area, there were agronomists and a few farmers well versed in matters related to this kind of cooperation. They were supported by strong defenders of the cooperative, including Mgr. Rodolphe Mercure.

The local inhabitants studied the functioning of a cooperative movement by holding kitchen meetings in area farms. After a few months and several general meetings, they founded the Société coopérative agricole des Fermes du Nord, now called the COOP.

It was the dawn of a new era, because growers could henceforth sell their farm products, such as poultry, cream, eggs and potatoes, as well as purchasing seed, mash and fertilizer, here at home.

From 1941, the cooperative took wing, buying Victor Bernier's house and butter factory. The purchase of Alphonse Prud'homme's and Henri Piché's cheese businesses followed, as did those of the towns of Arundel, Nominique and L'Annonciation.

In the years that followed, the COOP built a warehouse (1943), offices, a candling station for eggs and a hatchery. A potato grader was established on the other side of the street. The COOP also had a flour mill built in 1956, a garage in 1959, and a store in 1968. It took care of the delivery of petroleum products to everyone, starting in 1969.

Thanks to the COOP, the cream destined for the butter factory was picked up by truck from all area farmers. The same thing was true of the animals for slaughter, transported to the Montreal abattoirs by truck, thus replacing transportation by train in specially adapted cars.

When it was founded, the COOP had 67 members; in 1950, it had more than 250. The farmers had better seed and good returns. Rural life improved. Their efforts finally paid off.

¹ Saint-Jovite is the name of one of the former municipalities which merged to form what is today the Ville de Mont-Tremblant

Today, the COOP has only 100 or so members, of which the majority are no longer farmers. Tourist development has replaced farming as the economic mainstay of the region.

The COOP, however, loyal to its mission, continues to provide the products necessary to area farmers and to amateur gardeners, which is an ever-increasing customer group.

Two banners known throughout Québec are the result of cooperative models similar to that developed here. The COOP Fédérée is composed of agricultural cooperatives, and SONIC is composed of petroleum product cooperatives.

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Legend: Victor Bernier's house, which became the COOP building.

Source: *collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC*



Legend: The COOP prior to its renovation in 1968.

Source: *collection of the Société du Patrimoine SOPABIC*



Legend: After the fire in 2004, the warehouse was rebuilt without its silo.
Source: photograph from Gérard Charbonneau