

THE ORATORY

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To Find Joy,
Give it away

A Visit with
the **Cantin**
Family



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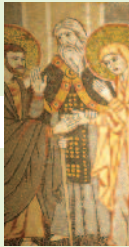
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Cover: Pauline and Marc Cantin sitting in the St. Joseph Historical Walkway located at the crossroads of Bluewater Highway and Zurich Hensall Road, in St. Joseph, Ontario. We met them last May. Read our report on page 7.

Photo: Nathalie Dumas

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A Visit with the Cantin Family

by Nathalie Dumas

On May 1, the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, a carpenter with giant hands welcomes us to his home. The table is beautifully laid for a feast. Large windows provide a majestic view of the sun as it slowly sets over Lake Huron. We have finally arrived in St. Joseph, Ontario, on the very spot where Brother André stayed with his friends, the Cantins, in 1917 and 1922.

This time, it is our turn —my colleague Jean-François Rioux, the Oratory's Archivist and I— to enjoy the Cantins' hospitality. Jean-Paul Cantin is our host; his son Marc, our guide. Marc and his wife Pauline have prepared a busy schedule of activities to help us discover all there is to see and know about St. Joseph.

In this part of the country, as nowhere else, people remember Brother André from generation to generation. The Cantins serve as the guardians of memory.

Continued

N. Dumas



Both in their early forties and the parents of two tall girls and two very tall boys, Marc and Pauline Cantin take seriously this responsibility of keeping alive the spirit of Brother André. They recently set in writing the story of Brother André's visits to St. Joseph and his friendship with the Cantin family. With infinite patience, Pauline copied out the story—not once but twice—carefully inserting French accents into the English text. The couple also mounted the *Innovative Huron* exhibit presented during the past year at *Huron County Museum* in the town of Goderich. The exhibit explores the innovations dreamt up and realized by Marc's great grandfather, Narcisse Cantin (1870-1940), who had big plans for St. Joseph. He was a businessman who traveled regularly, and one of his frequent destinations was Montréal. There he met Brother André around 1910 at a time when the



N. Dumas

In the house of his father Jean-Paul Cantin (background), Marc, grandson of Napoléon-A., shows family portraits to Oratory archivist Jean-François Rioux.

small Saint Joseph's Oratory of Mount Royal was rapidly growing. The ten children of Narcisse also developed strong bonds with the religious brother who would mark their lives. Marc and Pauline's exhibit could not pass over Brother André's presence in their family history in silence. Displayed are letters, photos, press clippings and various objects that attest to this friendship.

N. Dumas



The care with which family members have preserved these souvenirs over the years reflects the depth of their attachment and admiration for the religious brother. The conservation of these documents was mainly the work of Napoléon-Edward Cantin (1919-2005), commonly known as “Nap”, the grandson of Narcisse Cantin, who collected and collated thousands of documents on his family and his region. A small building in front of his home served as a storage and consultation room until 2002. The sign “Les Archives” is still there although the archivist is not. After her husband’s death in 2005, Velma Weeres-Cantin left the two words in black lettering as a discreet reminder of the site’s former vocation but especially in fond memory of the one who had been its heart and soul. Today, these private archives have been donated to the St. Joseph & Aera Historical Society and are conserved in one of the buildings of the Hessenland Country Inn.

Narcisse’s Ambitions

Just like his Uncle Nap, Marc is passionate about history and genealogy. “Archivist is the most wonderful profession in the world”, this Project Su-

perintendent for construction states enviously. Passionately and without wasting a second in any of the places visited, Marc explains the origins of St. Joseph and his great grandfather’s plans in detail. With evident pride, Marc presents each anecdote he tells, each photo he shows with great enthusiasm and plenty of large gestures. How can hours of explanations possibly be summarized into a single paragraph? It is an impossible task, but if we must, we must.



Br. André stands amid the extended Cantin family: Madeline, Valérie LaPorte-Cantin, Joséphine Denommé-Cantin, Gabrielle (in front), Marie holding her Godchild Nap.-E., Antoinette, Anne, Pierre Denommé, Napoléon-A., Arthur Streenan and Gonzague.

Once upon a time, there was a French settlement, the only one between Midland and Windsor, where pioneers from Joliette, Berthierville, Saint-Félix-de-Valois and Sainte-Élisabeth in Quebec settled in 1846. In 1860, the Huron Tract took the name of Johnson’s Mills, then Lakeview in 1874, and finally St. Joseph

in 1896 when Narcisse Cantin placed the town he would found and own under the protection of Saint Joseph. He purchased the entire site so that he could control its development. A visionary entrepreneur, Narcisse had big dreams for St. Joseph; he wanted to make it a business town and commercial centre. With his plans for a deep, navigable waterway between Lake Huron and Lake Erie, he envisaged St. Joseph becoming a major transportation hub linking the United States, Canada and the rest of the world. At the turn of the century, he dreamt of building a wharf, a rail line, industries and all the necessary services to turn St. Joseph into a great city. The avant-garde thinker dreamt big, perhaps too big for his era. St. Joseph has become “the city that never was”. However, his canal project would inspire the creation of the Saint Lawrence Seaway inaugurated several decades later.

In Napoléon’s Home

The town was in its heyday when Brother André made his first visit in the fall of 1917. It boasted a saw mill, a brick yard, a blacksmith’s shop, a general store, a novelty factory, and a luxury hotel. However, it was not at the chic *New Balmoral Hotel* that the brother stayed when he came for a rest but rather in the home of Napoléon-Arthur (1891-1953), the second son of Narcisse Cantin and Joséphine Denommé. Napoléon’s father had written him from Buffalo, entrusting him with the responsibility of looking after Brother André. The five-page letter in English reproduced in Marc and Pauline’s account contains numerous instructions regarding how Brother André was to be received. About Brother André it says: “He is a saintly man. Learn to know him. He will delight you with wisdom.” Twenty-six years old at the time, Napoléon performed his task admirably, the

A few of the objects from the *Innovative Huron* exhibit displayed at the *Huron Museum County* in Goderich.

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Jean-François Roux

The former home of Napoléon-Arthur Cantin, son of Narcisse, where Brother André stayed during his visits to St. Joseph.

same way he would continue to take care of his father's business in St. Joseph for the rest of his life, as a loyal steward.

Of the twelve children Napoléon and his wife Valérie LaPorte would raise in this house, then there was only little Gabrielle, born in 1916. Brother André's room was upstairs in the tower of the pretty yellow brick house. The house is now an inn, and at the time of our visit there were no rooms available. "No vacancy" read the sign outside *The Organ Factory*. Not far from there, a commemorative park has been created at the crossroads of Bluewater Highway and Zurich Hensall Road. Plaques along a walkway explain the town's origins. Beneath a

Canadian flag, a sign erected by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board, Department of Public Records and Archives of Ontario pays tribute to Narcisse Cantin. But that is not all.

In Honour of Saint Joseph

In the very centre of the park stands a beautiful, big, white marble statue of Saint Joseph. Brother André is credited with having come up with the idea of honouring Saint Joseph at this very spot, which he chose with Napoléon in October 1917. Brother André hammered a metal pipe into the ground to mark the place. From her kitchen window, Valérie saw it all and in 1956 produced a sworn affidavit before a notary to that effect. The hammer was carefully preserved by the Cantins. Indeed, everything

Brother André touched or used has been reverently preserved by the family members. Some of these objects are on display in the Goderich museum exhibit, including a chair, a fork, religious images, a statue of Saint Joseph, a crucifix, a medallion and of course the hammer. (photo p. 10)

Fifty-five years were to pass between the day Brother André first uttered his wish and the time when the wish was finally realized. It was only in 1972 that a statue weighing over a ton acquired from St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario was installed on this parcel of land donated by the Cantin family. There is a dedication to Brother André on the pedestal:

“Memorial to Brother André of St. Joseph’s Oratory on [sic] Mount Royal at Montreal, whose virtues and good works, known throughout the world, inspire this dedication to St. Joseph, patron saint of Canada. This exact spot was chosen for a memorial by Brother André.”

Marc’s father, Jean-Paul, the carpenter, recently placed a small wooden niche he built himself in front of the statue. He lights votive candles there for parishioners who are ill. There is also one candle dedicated to the cause for the canonization of Brother

André, an event Jean-Paul Cantin hopes to be around to see.

At the Parish Church

It is not just the Cantins who pray to Blessed Brother André in St. Joseph. Every Tuesday morning at St. Peter’s Church, formerly Saint-Pierre-aux-Bouleaux, parishioners gather for devotions praying for his cause. The quaint church was restored last year for its 135th anniversary. The bust of Brother André placed near its front door seems almost to welcome all who enter there. The parish priest, Father Peter Keller, made a point of mentioning the presence of representatives from the Oratory in the congregation at the vigil Mass on Saturday. Although the topic of the homily was Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Father Keller slipped in a few words on Brother André and on the importance to Christians of having such models of saintliness as the Oratory’s founder.

A monument to Brother André stands next to the church where it can be seen by parishioners of St. Peter’s and travellers passing through St. Joseph alike. The following text appears in French, *“En souvenir du révérend frère André qui a demeuré quelques temps parmi*

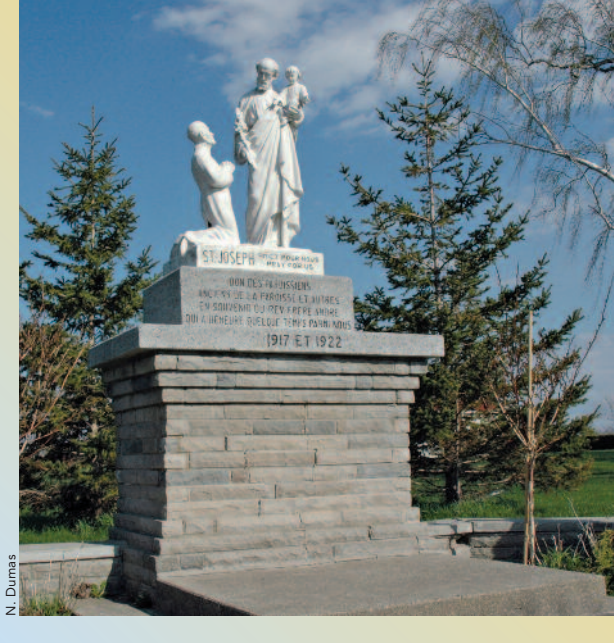
In 1972, this statue of Saint Joseph was erected on the spot chosen by Brother André in 1917.



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The monument inaugurated in 1955 in memory of Brother André's visits of 1917 and 1922, on the grounds of St. Peter's Church. It shows Brother André kneeling before Saint Joseph.

nous. 1917 et 1922" (In memory of the Reverend Brother André who lived awhile among us. 1917 and 1922.) The statue is of Brother André kneeling, hands clasped and looking up at Saint Joseph, who holds the Child Jesus in his arms. The invocation "St. Joseph, priez pour nous; pray for us" is engraved at the base of the cement statue produced by the Montréal firm of Carli-Petrucci. Two angels, set atop a small brick wall below the statue, complete the ensemble designed by Dr. Josef Hilpert. Father Henri Bernard CSC, of Saint Joseph's Oratory was invited to preside over the preparatory triduum for the celebration of the unveiling of the monument in October 1955. He "gave a series of bilingual instructions to a congregation that filled the tiny parish church to bursting every evening" reported *The Oratory* magazine in January 1956. This monument in tribute to Brother André was promoted by none other than ... another Cantin. This time, it was Joseph Cantin (1899-1961), one of Narcisse's other sons.



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Georgette's Memories

Joseph Cantin was dedicated to Brother André. A resident of Montréal, he would visit the religious brother at the Oratory and welcome him to his home. The same was true of his great friend and brother-in-law, John Woodcock, who was married to Joseph's sister Josephine Cantin, known as "Josie". Their 84-year-old daughter Georgette now lives in St. Joseph in one of the cottages built by the Cantin brothers on the banks of Lake Huron.

One May evening, Georgette Woodcock-Firlotte happily welcomed us to her home. "Parle français!" (Speak French!) Georgette insisted. The old lady was proud to show that she has not forgotten her mother tongue. With an Anglophone father, French was never the language of choice for family conversations. Georgette spoke of



They shared their memories with us: left, Georgette Woodcock-Firlotte; right, Velma Weeres-Cantin, wife of the late Nap, “keeper of the St. Joseph Archives”, and centre, Verona Asmus (Denommé), Pauline’s grandmother.

On the back of one of these passes is a notice in French of a special privilege: “Permission for Mr. Joseph Cantin to ad-

just the pillow holding Brother André’s head.”

Brother André’s visits to their homes in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce district of Montréal and in Toronto. She remembers sitting on his knee.

Georgette also remembers having attended Brother André’s funeral in January 1937 with her parents, Josie and John Woodcock. Her father related all the details of the event (the death announcement, the viewing of the body, the funeral in the Montréal’s Cathedral and then at the Oratory, the number of visitors, etc.) in a series of letters to Napoléon, who was unable to leave St. Joseph to go to Montréal. Marc and Pauline were careful to include these unpublished documents in their book. Woodcock’s correspondence tells us that Joseph spent several nights at the Oratory keeping watch over Brother André’s body, which was viewed by thousands of people who came to pay their last respects. Among the objects on display at the Goderich Museum are passes for Brother André’s funeral signed by Father Adolphe Clément, CSC.

Nearly one hundred years after the first meeting between Brother André and Narcisse Cantin, the memories remain. And they are plentiful. Among the objects preserved with veneration are unique photos featuring a jovial-looking Brother André surrounded by almost all or a few of the family members. Along with these material souvenirs are the numerous anecdotes about the brother’s visits to St. Joseph as well as the tales of healings. There was not enough room in this article to include all of them! The stories this family passes on from generation to generation serve to nurture and preserve their singular attachment to the beloved little brother. “We, the Cantin family, persevere in spreading this unique history in any way we can,” state Pauline and Marc, filled with great devotion to Brother André. 🕯