

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE ROBITAILLE BROTHERS

A recall of the distinguished careers  
of two of the leading residents of New  
Carlisle of a century ago - the brothers  
Theodore and Louis Robitaille.

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## THE ROBITAILLE BROTHERS

In recall of former times in Gaspesia, this issue of the GASPE OF YESTERDAY series will now turn to consider highlights of the distinguished careers of two citizens of New Carlisle of a century ago - the Robitaille brothers.

Theodore Robitaille and his younger brother, Louis, were descendents of a family that traced its origins to the Artois district of France. Artois is familiar to many Canadian soldiers of World War II as it is the hinterland of the Channel ports - Boulogne, Calais and Dunkerque - liberated from German occupation and control by the Canadian Army during the invasion of Europe. From the district of Artois the Canadian ancestors of the Robitaille brothers had emigrated to New France circa 1670.

The Canadian forefathers of the Robitaille brothers of New Carlisle had established a tradition as public-spirited citizens. A grand-uncle, Rev. P. Robitaille had served as a Chaplain in the Active Militia of Lower Canada during the War of 1812-1814 and other members of the family had been involved on the loyal side at that time. Another grand-uncle, Jean Robitaille had been a member of the Legislature for twenty years from 1809 until 1829.

Theodore and Louis were two of the sons of Louis Adolphe Robitaille, Notary, of Varennes, Quebec, and his wife, the former Marie Justine Monjeau. Their maternal relatives, the families of Monjeau and Brodeur, were well established and widely known. A grand-uncle, Rev. Louis Brodeur, is honoured as a founder of the College of Ste. Anne at La Pocatiere.

At the time of the 1837 Rebellion in Lower Canada, their father, Louis Adolphe Robitaille had zealously supported the "patriot" cause. He had been arrested and imprisoned until the pacification of the Province. Thus the early years of his son, Theodore, had been ones of great family anxiety and he was ever to keep in mind an ineffaceable recollection of those momentous events.

In those dark years it could not even have been dreamed that Theodore would, one day, serve Canada and Quebec as a member and a minister of government, be named as a Privy Counsellor and be appointed as Lieutenant Governor of Quebec.

In their youth the sons of the Robitaille family of Varennes followed a similar pattern of education. Their early schooling was obtained in local schools from where they proceeded to study at the Seminary of Ste. Therese. After study at Laval University, Theodore entered McGill University's School of Medicine whence <sup>he</sup> was graduated M.D., C.M. He was followed at the McGill Medical School by his younger brother, Louis, who completed his training as a doctor in 1860.

Dr. Theodore Robitaille established a medical and surgical practice at New Carlisle in Gaspesia in 1858 and was joined there two years later by his brother, Dr. Louis. From that time onwards it seems appropriate to recall the careers of the brothers Robitaille separately.

#### THEODORE ROBITAILLE - 1834-1897

After three years of successful medical and surgical practice in New Carlisle and area - a practice that made him widely and favourably known - Dr. Theodore Robitaille felt the powerful pull of his family's tradition for public service and entered the political arena. In 1861 he won election as the Member for Bonaventure in the Assembly of the Province of Canada where he served continuously during the stirring years of political activity that culminated in Confederation on July 1st., 1867. Through those years his parliamentary colleague, the Member for the County of Gaspé, was John LeBoutillier of Gaspé. In 1867 Dr. Theodore Robitaille was returned by the electors of Bonaventure County to represent them in the first House of Commons of Canada and also in the Quebec Legislative Assembly until the

practice of such double representation was abolished in 1874. A measure of his reputation with the electorate of Bonaventure County can be seen in his return as their representative in every election in which he presented himself as a candidate for the House of Commons until the year 1879.

It was not only in Bonaventure County that Dr. Theodore Robitaille was held in high regard. In 1873 Sir John A. Macdonald appointed him to his Cabinet as Receiver-General of Canada and named him as Privy Counsellor.

In 1867, the year of Confederation, Dr. Theodore Robitaille married Marie Josephine Charlotte Emma Quesnel. The bride was the daughter of the noted lawyer and parliamentarian, Pierre Auguste Adolphe Quesnel and his wife, the former Charlotte Adelaide de Vercheres de Boucherville.

When the violent political storm commonly known as the Pacific Railway Scandal toppled the government of Sir John A. Macdonald, Theodore Robitaille remained steadfast in his support of Sir John as one of his "Old Guard" in the House of Commons from 1874 to 1878. But the Pacific Railway Scandal had barely subsided when a new and very different political storm of alarming proportions erupted in Quebec. In 1879 the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, Letellier de St. Just took the extreme course of dismissing from office the administration of Premier Boucher de Boucherville. The political turmoil that ensued became so wide-spread and impassioned that the Governor General of Canada, Lord Lorne, on the advice of the Macdonald Government, removed Letellier de St. Just from office, in turn. To deal with this grave crisis Macdonald turned to his colleague and trusted friend, Theodore Robitaille, whom he appointed to replace Letellier de St. Just as Lieutenant-Governor of Quebec. The choice was an excellent one for Robitaille's prudence, moderation and vast experience contributed to quiet public excitement in Quebec. As the storm eased, the interim administration of Premier Joly de Lotbiniere resigned and Lieutenant Governor Robitaille called upon the Hon. J.A. Chapleau to form a new, stable government. His role in resolving

this Quebec political crisis won for Theodore Robitaille the esteem of all without distinction of nationality or religion.

After six years of distinguished service as Quebec's Lieutenant-Governor, Theodore Robitaille was appointed, in 1855, to the Senate of Canada. As a Senator the interests of Gaspesia and the County of Bonaventure in particular continued to be uppermost in his thoughts and activities. His role in the long and complex project to have a railway built along Bay Chaleur as an extension of the Intercolonial Railway - a project in which his brothers, Dr. Louis of New Carlisle and Louis Adolphe of Quebec were also involved - will be the theme of a future issue of this GASPE OF YESTERDAY series.

The long and distinguished career of Senator Theodore Robitaille came to an end with his death at New Carlisle on August 17th., 1897. His funeral in Quebec was reported by the "SOLEIL" of August 21st., as follows:

"This morning took place at the Basilica the funeral of the late Honourable Theodore Robitaille, former Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Quebec.

In the cortège were representatives of the leaders of the different branches of the Administration -

His Honour the Lieutenant Governor Chapleau and his Aide-de-Camp, Captain Panet.

Sir L.N. Casault, Judge-in-Chief, Court of Appeal.

Hon. C.A.P. Pélletier, President of the Senate

Hon. F. Langelier, Hon. S.N. Parent, representing the Quebec Government.

Sir Hector Langevin, Sir J.M. LeMoynes, Hon. C.P.R. Landry,

Hon. Thomas Chapais, Hon. de Boucherville, Hon. E.J. Flynn,

M. Amedée Robitaille, M.P.P., Ph. Huot, etc.

The burial took place at the Belmont Cemetery.

Louis Robitaille, M.D., C.M.

As noted above, Dr. Louis Robitaille joined his elder brother, Theodore, in medical practice at New Carlisle following graduation from the School of Medicine of McGill University in 1860. Four years later the New Carlisle district was faced with a serious outbreak of small pox which had been imported by the seamen of foreign vessels. Dr. Louis Robitaille was appointed by the Central Board of Health to serve as a special medical officer to deal with this epidemic. In that capacity he did notable work over a three year period, for it was not until 1867, the year of Confederation, that the danger was considered to be past.

Following a family tradition, Dr. Robitaille accepted appointment, in 1869, as a Captain in the Militia of the County of Bonaventure and Military Surgeon of the Bonaventure Regimental Division.

During the decade from 1873 to 1883 Dr. Robitaille was the Collector of Customs for the Port of New Carlisle. This work brought him to the attention of the seafaring fraternity of the time and to the foreign lands whose vessels called at the Port. In 1875 he was named as Vice-Consul for France for the District of Gaspé. As collector of Customs his role was reflected in the books of the Quebec author and historian, J.M. LeMoyne. LeMoyne wrote from a background of personal knowledge of Gaspesia for, as a youth, he had visited with his grandfather, Daniel MacPherson, at Point St. Peter. That the Robitaille and LeMoyne friendship remained close across the years was evidenced by the presence of J.M. LeMoyne at the funeral of Theodore Robitaille.

When, in 1879, Theodore Robitaille resigned from the Macdonald government to become Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, the electors of Bonaventure County nominated Louis Robitaille to replace his elder brother as their representative in the House of Commons. However, Dr. Louis was not

willing to undertake such a political career. In declining the honour of election to a seat in the Commons he assured the electors of Bonaventure that he would use his significant influence in support of another candidate to be chosen in his stead. Thus it fell that Pierre Clovis Beauchesne succeeded to the seat vacated by Theodore Robitaille to be followed, in turn by Louis Joseph Riopel, the brother-in-law of Louis Adolphe Robitaille. Subsequently, Dr. Louis Robitaille was appointed to the Canadian Senate to represent the Gulf Division but in 1885 he chose to resign from that secure post for political reasons.

From July, 1885, Dr. Louis Robitaille served as Inspector of Customs. He was also active in the Baie Chaleur Railway Company in which he served as Vice President. His contemporaries in Bonaventure County and far beyond knew him as a brilliant and able man, energetic in character and courteous in all his relations. He had a keen interest in travel and visited the countries of Western Europe from Great Britain to the Mediterranean lands, including the Artois District of France from whence his ancestors had emigrated to Canada generations ago.

#### IN CONCLUSION

Recall of such former Gaspeian personalities as the brothers Robitaille is a reminder of the truth of the hymn lines:

" TIME LIKE AN EVER-ROLLING STREAM  
BEARS ALL ITS SONS AWAY....."

Though borne away on the irresistible stream of time, the Robitaille brothers of New Carlisle left a legacy of of public service and accomplishment that justify place and honour in the history of Gaspesia.