

Mount Sinai

September 2011

Just over 100 years ago, the Jewish community of Montreal raised the funds to establish the Mount Sinai Hospital for the treatment of tuberculosis. It was built in Préfontaine, then south of Ste. Agathe, and now part of the city.

Although built by the Jewish community, under the leadership of Sir Mortimer B. Davis among others, the hospital served everyone suffering from tuberculosis, no matter their religion, language or ethnic origin. At the same time as Mount Sinai was built, Lorne McGibbon led the English community's drive to build the Laurentian Sanitorium, whose main building now stands as the administration building attached to the Laurentian Hospital in Ste. Agathe. It was a time when tuberculosis was rampant, striking people in the prime of life. Until the development of antibiotics in the 1950s, the only treatment for TB was the rest cure, in the pure clean air of the mountains, and Ste. Agathe became the premier location in eastern Canada for those suffering from the debilitating disease.

The original Mount Sinai hospital building was replaced by a magnificent Art Deco building in 1939 with updated and much larger facilities. These included vast cure porches where the patients could breathe the fresh mountain air even in winter, bundled up in blankets and lying still, looking out over the beautiful grounds that included streams, ponds and extensive lawns. In addition, but out of direct view, was the garden where many of the vegetables used to feed the patients were grown. And, since the original land used for the hospital included nearly 100 acres of mountain and valley, trails were developed through the forest for those patients whose cure was more advanced and could walk about, building up their strength for their return to their normal lives in the city, often spending several years away from their families and familiar surroundings.

The mid-1950s saw a drastic fall in the number of TB cases, due to both antibiotics and a higher standard of living that allowed people to live in cleaner, more spacious homes. That led to a decline in the need for the rest cure provided by the rural sanitariums and, ultimately, to the move by the Mount Sinai Hospital Corporation to a brand-new building in Montreal in 1990, where it still provides long-term care for those with respiratory diseases.

An agreement with the provincial government led to the transfer of the old building in Préfontaine to the Ste. Agathe hospital, which continued to use it as a long-term care facility until, due to the cost of updates necessary to meet current standards, it declared redundant..

Demolition took place in 2004 and was followed by decontamination of the site, necessary due to fuel leakage in the ground. Once that work was complete, in 2010, the next step was undertaken: conversion of the former site of this landmark into a community asset. Consultation between the CSSS des Sommets, the city of Ste. Agathe, the Heritage Committee and concerned citizens has resulted in the creation of a new park, to be developed over the next few years. A big step was taken this spring when, with the help of students from Fleur-des-Neiges school and the support of local businesses and professionals, 200 trees were planted on the site. These indigenous plants will help naturalize the grounds and make them more appealing after the years when it contained first an abandoned building and then was a demolition site.

The next step will be the installation of a memorial panel commemorating Mount Sinai Hospital, and its long and important history in the area.