

GRANDE DAME

Mont-Gabriel celebrates 80 years in the Laurentian Mountains.

BY ROBERT MIRON

COLLECTION MARC GABRIEL VALLIÈRE



Above: A postcard shows the lodge at Mont-Gabriel in 1947, when it was owned by a group of four American women. Right: A&P heiress Marie-Josephine Hartford built the original hotel in 1936 on land purchased with the help of Marquis degli Albizzi.



COLLECTION COLUMBUS AND ANDREA O'DONNELL

In August 2016, Andrea and Columbus O'Donnell visited the Mont-Gabriel Hotel and Spa, a four-star resort in the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec. They were celebrating its 80th anniversary: O'Donnell is the son of Marie-Josephine Hartford, who built the original hotel in 1936 on land she'd purchased with the help of Marquis Nicolò degli Albizzi.

Albizzi, who owned a small inn in Saint Sauveur (see *main article*), often took his clients cross-country skiing. One of these visitors was Hartford, an American grocery store heiress whom he had met in Lake Placid. She fell in love with the region and in 1934 asked the Marquis to act as her agent in buying some land. She made additional purchases in 1935 and 1936 for a total of 550 acres, and then hired Victor Ny-mark to build a 16-room hotel with a ski slope and bobsleigh run, served by a wooden funicular.

In 1941, Hartford sold the property to Mont-Gabriel Resort Limited, a group of four American women whose husbands were away at war. Two of them—Marjorie Sawyer Dewey Graff and Anne Clark Scott Martindell, the future U.S. ambassador to New Zealand—handled daily operations at the lodge. The women were active in developing and promoting the property, hosting competitions like the “Ladies International” from 1944 to 1947. The event drew up-and-coming stars like Rhona and Rhoda Wurtele, who in 1948 comprised Canada's first women's Olympic alpine ski team.

In December 1951, Herbert John O'Connell, a well-known road contractor, bought the resort and ski operations. He improved the lifts and slopes, built a beautiful day lodge and bar, added night skiing, and transformed Mont-Gabriel into a glamorous four-season resort that in the summertime hosted equestrian competitions, tennis tournaments and charity benefit balls.

Donald M. Mumford, President of Hilton Canada and Vice-President of Hilton International, purchased the resort in November 1960. He increased the number of rooms to 156 and introduced snowmaking, a first in the Laurentians. Starting in 1970, a series of owners continued to expand the terrain and improve the lifts. Mont-Gabriel hosted a FIS Freestyle World Cup competition, including moguls and aerials, every winter from 1985–1991 and 2006–2011.

Today, Mont-Gabriel mostly serves families and novice skiers on 21 trails with a 656-foot vertical drop. “Our goal is to provide an exceptional experience at an affordable price,” says general manager Eric Dufour. Meanwhile, the Mont-Gabriel Hotel—which sits on the summit, with breathtaking views over the Saint Sauveur valley—offers indoor and outdoor heated swimming pools, an 18-hole golf course, clay tennis courts, snowshoeing, ice-skating, cross country skiing and a luxury spa.

Robert Miron is an amateur historian and five-decade ski instructor at Mont-Gabriel. His extensive history of the ski area was published in June 2016 in the journal of the Société d'Histoire et de Généalogie des Pays-d'en-Haut. With the support of the Chawkers Foundation and Canadian Ski History Writers Project, an adapted version will soon be available at the ISHA Website (www.skiinghistory.org/resources/canadian-ski-history-writers-project) and the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame and Museum (<http://www.skimuseum.ca>).