



Heart of GOLD

LIFE IN BOURLAMAQUE, A FORMER MINING TOWN
IN QUEBEC'S GOLD BELT THAT HAS BEEN PRESERVED
AS A LIVING NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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As a teenager in Val-d'Or, Que., in the 1990s, I was poking around the woods when I discovered an overgrown tennis court. I felt like an explorer happening upon an Incan ruin. Long abandoned to the elements, the court sat behind a European-style mansion that had once belonged to the boss of the first mining company in the prolific Abitibi gold belt that stretches northeast from Wawa, Ont., to Chibougamau, Que. I had seen enough. I visualized the lifestyle of the former residents of this house compared with that of the mineworkers from the neighbouring village of Bourlamaque. It looked to me like a classic example

of the story of old Quebec: the anglo boss enjoying summers on his estate bankrolled by the French-Canadian proles in their tiny, squalid log homes.

But as that teenager grew up, and wisdom taught me that things are rarely black and white, I learned that Bourlamaque's story wasn't so simple.

A company town built in the 1930s around the Lamaque gold mine, Bourlamaque is a time capsule of Canadian history — a planned community very different from Val-d'Or, which would spring up beside it in a more haphazard way as the mine grew. Today Bourlamaque remains virtually untouched, the series of almost identical homes recalling an early

mining boom now largely forgotten. Bourlamaque was amalgamated into the city of Val-D'or in 1968, and officially designated a national historic site by Parks Canada in 2012. But it has been a challenge to bring the town's rich history to life, not just for apathetic local teens like my former

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self, but for the rest of the town, past and present. Still, many feel we owe it to the historical figures on the sun-bleached information panels that dot the small, log home-lined grid of this living historic site.

When these homes were built at the tail end of the Great Depression, they were considered comfortable and modern. They were also affordable: rent was just \$50 a year (\$1,000 in today's dollars), including utilities and phone service. The town was planned according to the latest principles of urban design and construction — Lamaque Gold Mines Ltd. even imported more than 100 decorative trees to plant around

the neighbourhood, a cost incurred purely to achieve the designers' aesthetic vision. Beyond aesthetics, the arrangement of the town was meant to solidify a social hierarchy, with areas designated for more spacious managers' homes and others for the basic log houses rented by labourers.

And Bourlamaque was not exclusively French-Canadian. It was also home to immigrants from eastern Europe, dubbed "fros" (short for foreigners) by the locals. Decades later, I would still hear the Slavic surnames of their descendants during the daily roll call at my small high school.

Born in Slovenia, the late Peter Ferderber was one of the town's first

The mine shaft (PREVIOUS) of the old Lamaque gold mine has become a symbol of the early mining boom in the region. Modest log houses line the streets of Bourlamaque, a living historic site (OPPOSITE). Clermont Fortier (ABOVE) was a miner for 24 years and has lived here with his wife, Aline, since 1970.

residents, a mining pioneer and prospector whose personal story mirrors the gold-fuelled highs and lows of the region. His family settled in one of the Bourlamaque log cabins in 1934, the year the village was founded, and the seven-year-old grew up during the town's first gold mining boom. Indeed, Ferderber lived and breathed



the coveted yellow metal — and he became a towering figure in the mining exploration and development sector. Over the course of his career, Ferderber discovered eight major gold deposits in the area and opened mines with evocative names such as Sleeping Giant, Aurizon, Bras d'Or and River Gold.

The Abitibi region would change a lot over the course of Ferderber's lifetime, and yet, near the end of his life, in 2019, he could have strolled down his childhood street and found it essentially unchanged. When the company gave up control over the town to the larger municipality in the 1960s, residents recognized the uniqueness of their town and were

determined to preserve it. Forward-thinking citizens in the 1960s and 1970s — part of a movement intent on conserving and protecting the company town — are the reason the village and the former mine today survive virtually unchanged. If not for them, the village would likely not exist in its current form.

Today, Bourlamaque does double duty as both a living community and an open-air museum whose strict preservation rules can sometimes be a source of consternation to residents. There are no swimming pools, no sheds. A precise colour palette for every home is strictly enforced — Pantone 4485 is the brown designated for exteriors, though residents have the

choice of either green (Pantone 378) or red (Pantone 200) for their trim.

Still, for the most part townsfolk accept these minor irritations as the cost of living in a place they praise for its *tranquillité*. Since it was conceived in the 1930s, Bourlamaque has been viewed as the serious older brother to the more chaotic and ramshackle Val-d'Or. The urban design decisions made 100 years ago to create this livable neighbourhood in the middle of the forest have stood the test of time. Its residents go ice skating on the very spot the first miners did, watch movies at a theatre that's been in continuous use since 1937 and host family dinners in dining rooms that remain virtually unchanged.



Sophie Corbeil and Andrée-Anne Petit (OPPOSITE) share a moment before having dinner with their daughters at home in Bourlamaque. The couple fell in love with the quiet village and were inspired to raise their family here.

Friends celebrate a birthday (ABOVE) in the village, which is now attracting a new generation of residents looking for a peaceful and close-knit community.

The Lafontaine family (RIGHT) prays before breakfast at their home. Sébastien (right), a carpenter, rebuilt the family's log home, taking the utmost care to preserve the heritage of the original house.





But the decision to designate and protect Bourlamaque was made not just to create a charming place to live; it was meant to preserve history. The history of the Abitibi region and its resource-driven economy is arguably the story of Canada. Our federal coffers, our stock markets, our currency — the fate of our country — have long been driven by our resource industries. Which brings us back to the question of how a place like Bourlamaque can help convey that history.

The village has a self-guided audio walk. It's a nice touch, though the experience isn't interactive. The Cité de l'Or mining history museum at the former Lamaque mine makes history more real, transporting visitors down into former mining tunnels (an improvement over the old Malartic Mining museum of my youth, with its fake mining elevator that shook you without actually descending). The museum's new director has also opened up the former mine as a site for a variety of festivals, attracting a new crowd into the heart of Bourlamaque — this past winter saw the mine host a 1980s snowsuit-themed dance party.



Tourists explore an underground tunnel (OPPOSITE TOP) leading to the former Lamaque mine. The mine was converted to a tourist attraction named La Cité de l'Or in the mid 1990s. Today, it's also used as a training location for new miners. Retired miners (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) René Caron and Serge Frenette (right) are now mining instructors at La Cité de l'Or.

Tourists (ABOVE) are shuttled back from a visit to La Cité de l'Or. Retired miner Clermont Fortier (RIGHT) holds a photo of himself taken in 1977 in the Lamaque mine at more than 1,000 metres deep.





A pair of crows (OPPOSITE) fly toward the entrance of the former Lamaque gold mine. Nearly 90 years ago, hundreds of miners from nearby Bourlamaque walked through this entrance each day. In operation from 1935 to 1985, Lamaque was one of the most prolific gold mines in the province.

A staff member (TOP) closes the gate at La Cité de l'Or after the last visit of the season. Tourists (RIGHT) listen to audio devices during a walking tour. Now a neighbourhood of Val-d'Or, the village was declared a provincial historic site in 1979 and a national historic site in 2012.



Meanwhile, inspired by the marketing used by popular tourist areas in Montreal and Quebec City, local Airbnbs have begun referring to Bourlamaque as “Old Val-d’Or,” and a local duo have launched an intriguing new storytelling experiment framed around local history. Émélie Rivard-Boudreau and Serge Bordeleau have

created a CBC podcast series about a storied downtown bar. They have also collaborated to re-create history, stitching together archival photographs and immersing participants within the images using virtual reality headsets.

Some 90 years after Bourlamaque’s founding, Val-d’Or is experiencing a new gold boom, expanding around

the historic site. New subdivisions are sprouting up with dwellings that dwarf Bourlamaque’s modest log homes. However, the city’s head of urban planning assures me that its future as a protected neighbourhood is safe.

The abandoned tennis court sinks further into ruin and the mists of time, but the log homes live on. 🌲