

Chalet Cochand

The Ups, Downs, Triumphs and Travails of North America's First Ski Resort

Part Two in the life and times of the legendary Emile Cochand, his progeny and his legacy



In 1914, Emile and Lea Cochand agreed to pay \$500 for an old cottage and 500 acres of land two miles from Ste. Marguerite Station in Quebec. Just four years later, they added a full second floor for a total of 20 guest rooms, making Chalet Cochand one of the largest ski lodges in the Laurentians.

By Chas Maclean Cochand

With Doug Pfeiffer and Morten Lund

Once Emile and Lea Cochand decided in 1914 to buy their own small one-story chalet and build it to the dimensions of a complete resort hotel, there was the formidable practical matter of doing all the work themselves. Emile faced up to two week's work just in felling trees, cutting them to length and dragging them back to build up a woodpile large enough to keep a fire going 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the entire winter.

Emile Cochand's plan—after getting over the hump so there was some money to spare—was to expand the cottage as rapidly as possible in order to take in enough guests to begin building a winter sports center equal to the one he had

created at Ste. Agathe. And that meant starting trail-building all over again in the Ste. Marguerite region—talking farmers into opening fences and laying trails all summer. It would be a bit easier than it had been at Ste. Agathe, because the *habitants* had watched the prospering of Ste. Agathe as a ski center. The immediate key would be to get their new chalet to the point where skiers from the Montreal Ski Club would reserve their chalet's primitive-accommodation ski weeks. Emile's inspired and expert teaching would have to make up for some of the difference. Lea's superlative cooking would also do much to make up for the lack of beds with sheets. That was their plan. What they had not planned on was a world war.

They had not been in the house more than two months when World War I was declared on August 1, 1914. Canada was the oldest Dominion in the British Commonwealth so it, in turn, declared war on August 5, 1914. Nearly 67,000 Canadians died abroad in the war and many of the rest were working overtime in war-related industries. And many older skiers just gave up the sport for the war's duration.

Still, many members of the Montreal Ski Club too old to go to war kept taking lessons with Emile. Thomas Drummond, president of the club, urged members to keep the Cochands going by making reservations at the primitive cottage that the couple were now calling "Chalet St. Marguerite." These guests generated enough cash to enable Emile and Lea to make it through that first winter with enough to pay for the necessary food and supplies and provide a home for baby Yvonne.

The first winter of 1914–15 was cold even for the Laurentians. Temperatures often dropped to 40 below. The wood stove had to be kept full day and night for weeks on end. All food for themselves and for their guests was toted in from Lac Masson, some four miles off, all provided the road was plowed. When the road was closed by storm, it became impossible for the Cochands to reach Lac Masson or the train station at Ste. Marguerite. Not only were reservations cancelled, but Emile several times had to ski through a storm to fetch emergency rations to keep the family from starving.

Lea and Emile struggled on, inundated with daily chores. Oil lamps had to be filled and cleaned every day. Emile had to fetch water from a brook at the back of the cottage after breaking the ice with an axe. There also were wartime shortages that created problems in feeding guests. Yet, small groups kept coming up from Montreal to Ste. Marguerite to ski with Emile, and the business grew slowly. The skiers who came once almost always came again, drawn by Emile's deft teaching and Lea's superb cooking. In fact, Lea became an underground Laurentian culinary legend with her cheese fondue.

The reign of Lea's fondue began with the fact that some guests were on a budget and not afford the daily three-course dinner, so Lea decided that she could lower prices a bit with at least a couple of meals a week of inexpensive cheese fondue. It delighted the cross-country skiers as they gathered round the bubbling pot, cubes of bread at the ready.

During the short hot summer that followed, Emile began an expansion of the sort that would make the difference between subsistence and a good life. He cleared the spruce and pine trees around the swampy stream (which was to become later the Lac Lucerne of the chalet's summer season and its ice skating pond in winter). Emile directed local farmers who helped out cutting the trees and trimmed them into four-foot lengths to be sold for pulp, producing the income that allowed Emile to pay for the first chalet expansion. The added income

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Over the years, the Cochands built three wooden ski jumps, where Emile would coach young skiers and his sons. The lodge also had 65 miles of cross-country trails, a covered rink for ice skating and a toboggan run.

from the additional rooms paid for more expansion the next summer with the chalet beginning to look more like the hotel Cochand knew would be needed soon, given that the foreseeable end of World War I was at hand.

The second winter in the chalet, 1915–16, enough new rooms were ready to enable the Cochands to hire housekeeping girls from the village, whose first duty was a bit tricky: to go around the rooms with a shovel to break out the potties frozen solidly to the floor, carry them out and leave them upside down on the snow to thaw. By midday, they would be returned to the rooms.

The food got better and better because Lea was able to find new sources for her meals. Local farmers supplied hogs for slaughter, and Lea kept chickens for eggs and brought in a cow for milk. In time, a small farm developed at the Chalet, with cows and chickens so Lea could be sure of her supplies.

In the winter of 1916–17, Lea became pregnant with her second child. Now that they could afford luxuries, Emile thoughtfully bought a case of gin to help dissipate the occasional stress that came with pregnancy while running a vacation lodge for an increasing number of guests. Occasionally, a little nip helped. And at the point when she was eight months pregnant, it made it easier for Lea to be up and about while preparing three meals a day to feed the hotel guests.

But the sale of alcohol to hotel guests was forbidden in Quebec at the time. So when inspectors arrived at the chalet one day, they found the Cochand's gin supply. Emile had to appear in court; he pled guilty and explained it was for his own family's personal use, a stimulant to "spark up his wife." He was let off with a firm warning.

Lea's second child, Louis, was born on January 5, 1917. Then almost immediately the family was into its first real disaster. During the winter of 1917–18 the post-World War I scourge known as "the Spanish flu" swept the land. Many *Quebecois* took sick. There were a rash of deaths across the



Emile and Lea raised five children at the lodge, including Louis (left) and Suzanne (right). As an adult, Louis ran the Chalet Cochand with his wife, Morna.

region. Emile closed the chalet. But it was too late—the entire family became sick. For a few scary days in midwinter, neither Emile nor Lea was able to look after each other or their two infants. They were rescued by the *Les Soeurs du Couvent de Lac Masson*. The sisters arrived with food just in time and continued to come until Emile and Lea could get out of bed.

There was also a source of relief during the whole ordeal through a typically French form of medication probably not approved by the nuns. Emile had always ordered much of his supplies of food and drink through Laporte Martin Import & Export Company. In view of the emergency, Jules Laporte had sent a case of cognac up from Montreal. Emile and Lea survived with less stress because of the firm French belief in the well-known antibiotic effect of small sips of cognac. The cognac took the edge off four months of grim recovery before all four in the family were well enough to re-open the “Chalet Cochand,” as it was now being called.

With World War I finally over in 1918, the sport of skiing took off, attracting young recruits. Soon the skiers were back in force. The Laurentians would thrive and the Cochand’s chalet with it. The Cochands built a full second floor that summer of 1918 to give the chalet 20 rooms, making it among the largest lodges in the Laurentians.

What the couple had done almost alone in their development of the chalet to this point was to found North America’s first small but popular full-service ski resort under one roof, supplying adequate lodging, hearty meals served by a real chef, rental equipment, an inspired resident instructor, and communication with the outside world.

But not two years later, in November 1920, another disaster struck. One of the staff stuffed a straw-filled baby mattress partway into the wood-burning heater. It caught fire and the hotel burned to the ground, leaving only the chimney. The Chalet Cochand was quickly rebuilt and by the fall of 1921 the new hotel was ready and was an immediate success. The Chalet Cochand, with its combination of good food, excellent cross-country trails and good accommodations, was unbeatable. Some 65 miles of cross-country trails were eventually cut. There was a covered skating rink, two ski jumps, and a toboggan run.

When Lea asked how she coped with two children and cooked for the hordes of hungry skiers at the same time, she revealed her secret. If things got busy, she’d throw another chicken in the soup pot and then take five clean socks, drop a lump of sugar in the bottom of each one, dip them in brandy, and then pop one *sucette* (French for “lollipop”) into each child’s mouth. With the children quiet and slightly woozy with the brandy, she could tend to the food.

The skiers largely came to Ste. Marguerite by train. The roads from Montreal were still not very secure during the winter. Even for the short distance to the station Emile would send the horse-drawn sleigh to collect them, with plenty of furs aboard to wrap in against the cold. Then came the inauguration of the first “ski train” on the Laurentian line in 1926–1927, the first such train in North America, and it played a big role in the developing ski sport. During that winter, the two Canadian railroad companies (Canadian Pacific Railroad and Canadian National Railway), operating their lines through the Laurentians, ticketed 11,000 skiers on the ski trains running out of Montreal.

This shows just how much skiing in the Laurentians had grown in importance in the 15 years since Emile Cochand blazed the trail. It was also a wake-up call for skiers of the American Northeast regarding ski trains. It took a few years of lobbying, but members of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Dartmouth Outing Club put it to the Boston & Maine, which ran its first excursion snow train from Boston to Warner, New Hampshire during the winter of 1931. A decade of expansion of Northeast skiing driven by ski train business followed. (“All Aboard for North Conway,” September 2009). The radical idea of a winter ski weekend by rail was obviously beginning to spread south from the Laurentians.

Back at the Chalet Cochand, the income from an increasing number of guests allowed the hotel to expand to the point

where its two wings now held 40 new guest rooms stretching out to either side of the “new” hotel. Emile built a big Swiss-style chalet for his own growing family—which now included Yvonne, Louise, Emile Jr., Pierre, and Suzanne—across the road from Chalet Cochand and over the years went on to build in the surrounding meadow a series of smaller chalets to accommodate guests desiring more privacy. The popular chalets provided winter and summer holiday rentals for a large number of families who came year after year. The Chalet Cochand became established as an elegant place for Montreal society to ski and be seen. After all their hard work and privation, Lea and Emile had arrived.

A small “front slope” just across the road was usually set up with a jump so Emile could coach young skiers, as well as his sons. Over the years the Cochand family built three wooden jumps to promote jumping right at the hotel. The last one, which enabled skiers to jump up to 87 feet, was built in 1957 and neophyte jumpers were coached by Fritz Tschanen, the Swiss world jumping champion who’d immigrated to Quebec. There were exhibition evenings with the installation of outdoor lights.

However, it was cross-country skiing that was really catching on, and the Chalet Cochand offered miles of trails through the glorious mountain scenery of the Laurentian Shield. There were the Richard Trail, the Cochand Trail, and the Grandview Trail. The Laurentian Cross Country Ski Club, formed in 1922, designated Chalet Cochand as their head-

quarters and clubhouse. Its members gave the sport an enormous boost, and of course the Chalet as well. Thanks to the extensive, ongoing trail clearing by Cochand and his workers, the Laurentian Cross Country Ski Club was credited with having the largest selection of well-groomed and well-maintained trails in the Laurentians.

Emile got together with other hoteliers anxious to put the Laurentians on the map, men like Tom Wheeler of Gray Rocks in St. Jovite. In 1924 these men founded the Laurentian Resorts Association and Emile served as its president for the first 12 years, urging members to continue cutting trails. Trail cutting was still hard, long, lonely work battling brush and flies, and there was still the yearly necessity to patrol them to keep them from growing in. Emile’s son Louis remembers how he and Viateur Cousineau—both Quebec’s top skiers—would spend the fall days walking through the bush, blazing miles of trails and fixing metal plaques to the trees. As the sport of cross-country skiing grew in popularity, some dozen new hotels across the region cut trails.

Emile came up with a solution for sharing the burden and the rewards of trail cutting. It was to hire a nearly destitute 57-year-old Norwegian engineer who had come up from Lake Placid, where he was already well known as a nordic instructor and trail designer.

His name was Herman Smith-Johannsen, an enthusiastic cross-country skier. After his work with the company ended, he sought jobs in the sport of skiing and was hired by



A professional ski instructor in his native Switzerland, Emile Cochand arrived in North America in 1911 at age 19 to start a winter sports center in the village of Ste. Agathe, 50 miles north of Montreal. Emile was an inspired instructor in alpine, nordic and jumping techniques.

the Laurentian Resorts Association because of his qualifications to mark and maintain the existing cross-country trails. Emile's plan was to use the new hire's help to clear the trails he'd developed over the previous 18 years, and he put Smith-Johannsen in charge of linking them to those that surrounded the various hotels. *Voilà*—the famous Maple Leaf Trail was born. In 1936, the Laurentian Resorts Association was given a \$1,500 grant by Quebec's provincial government to be spent exclusively on marking trails.

When Johannsen started, there were 65 miles of cross-country and downhill trails used by the Laurentian Cross Country Ski Club alone. The energetic Smith-Johannsen rode to fame as the romantic "Jackrabbit" flashing through the frozen woods with his skis, sled, and dog, adding a sense of adventure to the sport of cross-country skiing.

The Maple Leaf Trail ran through breathtaking scenery from Labelle (105 miles north of Montreal) down past Tremblant, Gray Rocks and the Laurentide Inn at Ste. Agathe, and then southward to Cochand's. From there it continued to Ste. Adele, St. Sauveur and Shawbridge. The entire set of trails was marked with tin maple-leaf signs. Chalet Cochand now drew enthusiastic reviews from celebrity skiers arriving from far and wide. Movie stars like Tyrone Power arrived from Hollywood to learn to ski. In 1930, the 11-year-old future Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau learned to ski at Chalet Cochand.

The Cochand children added to the celebrity in their own way—racing. In 1937 Louis Cochand, then 20, won the Dominion Championships in downhill and jumping and represented Canada at Sun Valley's first Harriman Cup. While he was there, Louis made drawings of Sun Valley's amazing "chairlift," which had in turn been based on the technology of the J-bar lift installed at Dartmouth in 1934. The Chalet had a rope tow, but this was altogether new technology. By 1938 Chalet Cochand had erected both the first J-bar and first chairlift in Canada. Emile Jr. and Louis helped set up the 1939 Laurentian display booth at the Madison Square Garden ski show. Louis demonstrated turns on the Garden's indoor mountain of shaved ice. Skiers were now coming to the Laurentians by car as well as train, having persuaded Quebec's provincial government to keep Highway 11 open in winter.

Louis became a world-class skier and Olympic competi-

tor during the 1930s and 1940s. He married the flame-haired, society-born Morna Aldous Maclean of Montreal, who had come to the Chalet to meet the legendary skiing star. They fell in love, married and moved to a cottage near the hotel.

Morna became fully involved in the hotel. Well remembered is the night a distraught staff member rang to say the French chef and the Algerian dishwasher were having a knife fight in the kitchen. Louis was away, so Morna loaded a shotgun and drove to the hotel. The 50 guests sitting down to dinner knew something was wrong. Not only had dinner been delayed, but the screaming in the kitchen couldn't be ignored. It was the blast of a shotgun that got everyone's attention. Morna ordered the dishwasher to pack and the chef to cook, and that was that...no one argued with Morna, who still had one barrel loaded.

There was also the question of style. With ski clothes by Irving, everyone looked svelte—at least for the era—but it was Morna with her sewing machine who dressed her five children, "the fabulous skiing Cochands," who looked like the von Trapp family on tour, with lederhosen, special shirts, and knee-length socks from Austria.

Louis became a founder of the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance. He went on after World War II to become manager of the Canadian Olympic Ski Team and coach of the women's ski team at St. Moritz in 1948. His younger brother Pierre, also a top racer as well as a ski

jumper, became a famous Laurentian landscape artist.

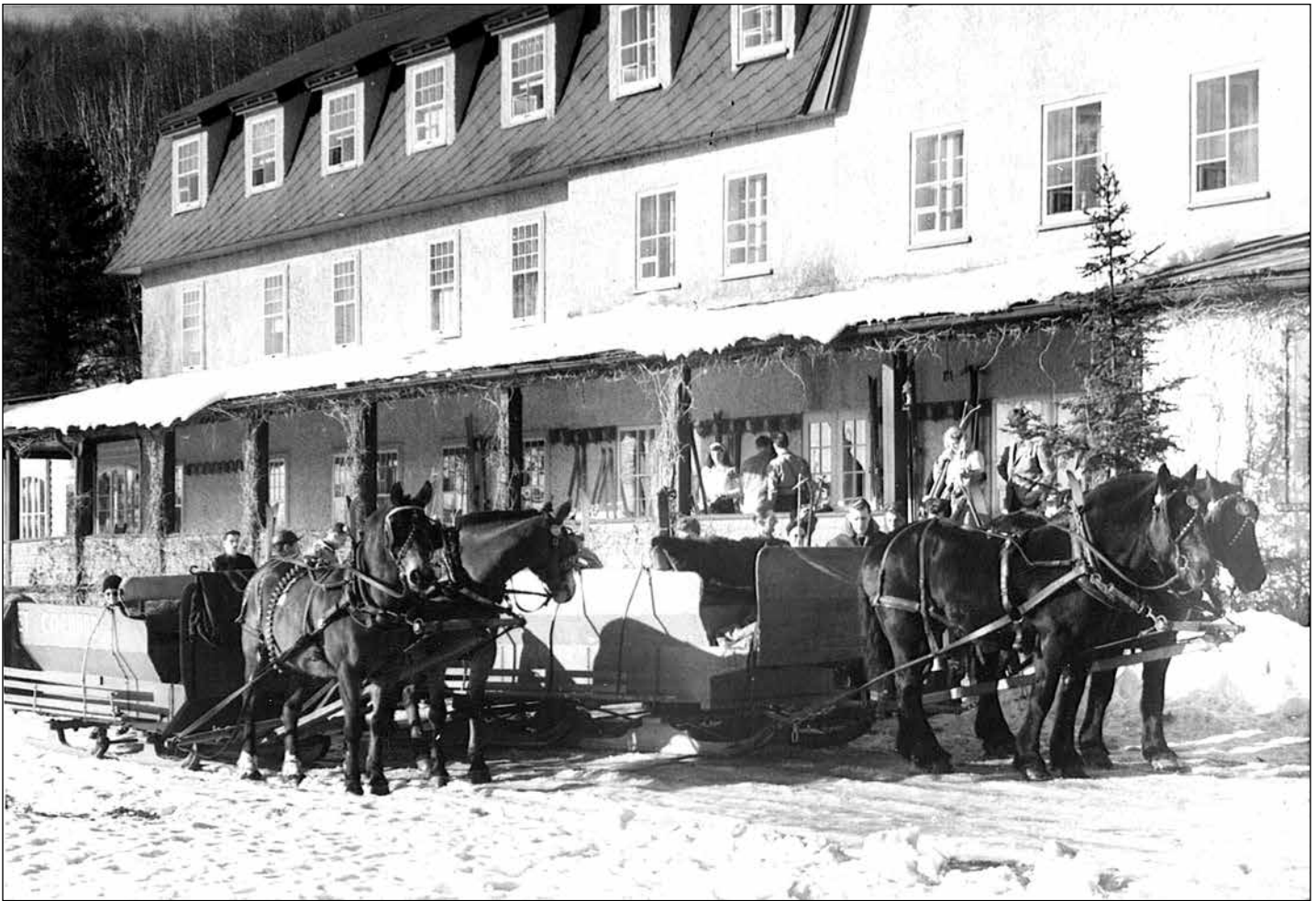
But there was trouble in paradise. Perhaps it started with Emile Sr. leaving Lea after many years and five children to marry Eliane, a younger Frenchwoman who'd been in charge of the chalet's summer riding program. Lea nonetheless remained at the center of the family, beloved by the grandchildren and revered by generations of hotel guests as the heart of Chalet Cochand. (She also trained the chambermaids to a high standard. One of her tricks was hiding things in the guests' rooms to see if the maids were cleaning properly.)

Emile Sr. moved into a new house on top of the hill in Ste. Adèle with Eliane, now free to travel and enjoy himself on the monthly "mortgage" income that Louis paid from the hotel earnings. Like a good Swiss son, Louis planned to buy the business from his father and pay every penny.

But the recurring problem was money. There just wasn't



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In November 1920, the lodge caught fire and burned to the ground after an employee stuffed a straw mattress into the wood-burning heater. The Cochands quickly rebuilt the hotel, which was up and running—and an immediate success—by the fall of 1921.

enough to go around and the industry was changing. The roads and winter snow-clearing kept improving until the building of Quebec's Autoroute. By 1964, a drive that once took two hours from Montreal could now be completed in 50 minutes. People could drive from Montreal for a day's skiing and no longer came for the weekend. And the Canadian Pacific Railway discontinued its ski trains.

Chalet Cochand was increasingly expensive to run. Improvements to the aging hotel were necessary, with all the rooms slowly being upgraded, a new dam built to ensure fresh water, the installation of a fire sprinkler system, and the prospect of ever more costly insurance.

For years the hotel had run full and been cheap to operate. Those days were over. With the aim of keeping staff year-round, an ambitious summer program was developed, the horseback riding extended, and expensive boats were bought for excursions and water skiing on the lake.

In a good year, all was fine. But the rooms became increasingly difficult to fill and a poor ski season followed by another poor season spelled trouble. It became impossible to fill the rooms for enough days of the year to cover the overhead and mounting debt. Advisors came in with elaborate

plans for a Chalet Cochand village with plots to be sold off for private homes. But it was too late and too expensive. By 1966, the banks pulled the plug. The provincial government refused to help.

Valued at more than \$1 million as a going concern, at auction Chalet Cochand was sold to the O'Hare Chicago hotels group in 1967–68. The company sold off most of the land, and then the hotel itself, to Institut Yvan Coutu, which ran it as a youth center. The hotel was then sold again to become the Auberge Lac Lucerne, which was demolished in 1990. All lifts and towers were removed and now only five chalets remain, all owned by private individuals.

So ended the legendary—and quixotic—saga of the Chalet Cochand, which hastened the arrival of skiing in North America and was at the very center of it.

Chas Maclean Cochand is the son of Louis Cochand and grandson of Emile Cochand. Today an attorney practicing in the U.K., his son Nico was awarded his Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance pin four years ago, making the Cochands the only family in Canada who can claim to have been ski instructors for more than 100 years.