

CASE - IN - POINT

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SUSTAINING STORIES OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: LESSONS IN STORY FROM ST. LAURENT, MANITOBA

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SYNOPSIS

Each community in Manitoba has its own story -- telling of its people, its culture and the historical identity by which it is defined. This Case-in-Point study tells the story of St. Laurent, and also the importance of the story as a way of understanding and communicating cultural identity in planning. St.

Laurent has a story which must be told, because it is an example of local community strengths being harnessed by community residents, so that their own local culture would be sustained, and even thrive. In a time when rural Manitoban communities are at risk of losing their identity due to the many challenges facing them, this story is one of *hope* that a community can successfully maintain its identity for future generations. This is a story of a people who are committed to their own culture and are working hard to ensure it is sustained.



Above: *Les Jeunes Violoneux* travelled to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., where a recent exhibit highlights their Metis community of St. Laurent, MB



Above: *St. Laurent* is located on the eastern shore of Lake Manitoba, northwest of Winnipeg

THE STORY OF ST. LAURENT

Many communities in rural Manitoba are in the midst of change. For a majority, the change is perceived as negative and is characterized by population decline, loss of identity and erosion of the local traditional way of life. It is a continuous struggle for these communities.

On the surface, St. Laurent is a community very similar to many other Manitoban communities. On the eastern shore of Lake Manitoba, its way of life, culture and relationships with other communities has been

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shaped by its Interlake location, as well as its ethnic heritage. As the largest Métis community in North America, St. Laurent is a leading example of establishing the importance of local traditional culture and maintaining it as a visible part of community identity. The story of St. Laurent tells of a people who are the

strength of their community, and a community which has identified culture as the defining factor of identity. It is a community dependent on its environment for its livelihood and ways of life.

This Case-in-Point paper will discuss the role of storytelling in planning, and how St. Laurent embodies this role as a story of planning, and the story of a people who are telling the story of their own future.

STORYTELLING IN PLANNING

Leonie Sandercock has become one of the foremost writers and advocates of storytelling in planning. In her book, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century*, she discusses the importance of the local story being told. She notes that the traditional practice of simply compiling case studies and producing generalizations from them which are then applied to many different situations, actually generates an increased distance from the “specific historical, cultural, institutional, political and economic circumstances that shape place.” (Sandercock: *Mongrel Cities*, page 158)

Indeed, every place is unique. A solution that has seemingly worked in one community will not necessarily produce the same results in

another community. This localized sense of place is the embodiment of the importance of storytelling. To tell the story of a place is to also tell that unique context, the place’s history and the people who make up the unique balance of the community. A story is the unfolding of events in a particular context. The plot, for example, could be similar to other stories. But the context, the setting and the atmosphere of each story remains unique.

‘The storyteller, besides being a great mother, a teach, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fairy, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories ... has the power of bringing us together’

- Trinh Minh-ha,
Woman Native Other.

Many stories in planning are intended to convey a certain project, with the purpose of downtown revitalization or community growth, for example. However, Sandercock notes that “it is quite conceivable that actions intended as catalysts of transformation, of urban regeneration, may have positive effects in some cities and negative effects in others, because of the different mixture of local ingredients.” (page 158) Therefore, it is imperative

that each story be told from an unapologetic local and unique setting. Each story must make clear the context, the history and the many “local ingredients” which make this story the story that it is.

However, stories can work as catalysts towards positive change in a community. They can inspire and set an example of what has worked in one situation. When one community has a story to tell, others should listen. Each story is also a lesson. Communities can learn from stories, but they should watch against simply becoming a copy of another community’s story. Stories are not easily duplicated.

Leonie Sandercock believes that planners should depend on the use of story more often. Her purpose in this is “to suggest that the role of the story telling imagination could be given far more prominence in the education of planners.” (*Mongrel Cities*, page 204) To tell stories is to continue an ancient art form. This manner of communication defines and relates the unique identities of a place which becomes the subject, the setting, the background, and the future. “This most ancient of arts begins with the sharing of stories, and moves toward the shaping of new collective stories,” (Sandercock, 204) and therefore will help us to remember the past, and to guide the future path.

THE STORY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Unlike many communities in this global age, St. Laurent has not lost touch with its identity, history, community, or the local ways and traditions.

Marcia Nozick writes, in her book *No Place Like Home: Building Sustainable Communities*, that “a true community has a heart, a source of feeling and spirit. Its life blood is its culture -- the local ways people do things together, their common feelings and values, the way they express themselves ... their identification with a landscape, their shared dreams and hopes for a future. Obviously, these are not items which can be manufactured, bought or ordered: they are life patterns which evolve over time.” (Nozick, page 182).

Much of the historical Métis cultural identity has been kept alive in many Métis communities. The Métis sash, for example (right) is a identification of Métis culture which has continued to the present day. The Manitoba Métis Federation now has its own Métis sash to symbolize its own unique history. The Métis community is tight-knit and connected to one another. The cultural identity has remained strong throughout many of the Manitoba Métis communities. St. Laurent is an example of just one community which has maintained

its identity and sustained its sense of place, while continuing to grow and provide economic opportunity for the community.

St. Laurent’s local Métis culture has been sustained because of its commitment to core community development principles. The community has focused on the priority of identifying strengths which are inherent to the local identity. These strengths include traditions passed down through education, the cultural importance of music, and many other traditional values of the Métis community, and many which have found a unique expression in St. Laurent.



Above: Métis Sash

THE STORY OF EDUCATION

A culture can only truly be sustained if it is successfully passed down to the next generations. During a CBC Radio interview, Dan Vandal said, “The youth are waking up and are really starting to do things and get more involved with the Métis community ... I think they are really the future of the Métis community.” The story of education is the story of imparting the value of a cultural identity to the younger generation. For the community of St. Laurent,



Left: The *Seneca Root*, a plant traditionally used for medicinal purposes in St. Laurent.

language is an important part of this cultural education.

The Michif language is derived from the three languages Saulteaux, Cree and French. It directly reflects the beginnings of the Métis people, who are usually descended from both Native American and French backgrounds. This rich heritage is alive in the continued use of the Michif language in St. Laurent. This language is taught to the younger generations and therefore language education becomes a cultural link between generations and a way of sustaining the local community strengths.

This language is sustained as part of the traditional cultural identity, and it is even showcased on the community’s website, which can be read in either Michif or English, and includes a guide to the Michif language.

Education also takes the form of learning to live as a part of the local environment: understanding the landscape, the seasons and the local wildlife and plants (such as the Seneca Root, in the photo above). All of these

factors are part of the local Métis culture. Through education, St. Laurent is sustaining the values which are important to their culture so that future generations may benefit and, in turn, continue this act of place-sustaining.

THE STORY OF MUSIC

The story of Les Jeunes Violoneux, also known as the Young Fiddlers (see photo on Page 1), are an example of educating the next generation in the importance of traditions and cultural identity. Traditional fiddle music has been an historic part of Métis heritage.

The St. Laurent website (www.stlmb.ca) notes that, “Five years ago, St. Laurent School, in partnership with the St. Laurent community and parents, decided to integrate some Métis cultural initiatives into the school curriculum. This initiative has created cultural awareness and



Above: Emile Lavallée is one of St. Laurent's well-known fiddlers. Traditional Métis music has helped to sustain local cultural identity.

a sense of identity for many of our students.” Through these grassroots partnership-driven initiatives, Les Jeunes Violoneux have created a meaningful source of community pride which works to sustain the culture. They have spread their music by performing across North America, and have therefore made their own local culture known as an education to many different places.

This group of young musicians has also maintained a connection between generations. Frequently, they perform at senior's centres, providing the elderly Métis with a connection to their own traditions and the security in knowing that their culture is being sustained. Les Jeunes Violoneux have helped to spread knowledge of their own culture as well as sustaining their own culture in their own community for the benefit of existing and future residents.

Emile Lavallée (see photo at left) is a community leader, who is also a well-known fiddler. He has recorded CDs of his playing traditional Métis music. He has represented the Métis people of St. Laurent through his music on many occasions, notably at the Canadian Parliament Buildings and at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

This connection of music to culture as a sustaining factor is a strong part of the story of St. Laurent. Music is an integral part

of their community and each song tells a story of the place and the people, therefore passing on the importance of song and community to the next generation.

THE STORY OF A WAY OF LIFE

Throughout St. Laurent's history, fishing has been the primary local industry and way of life for many members of the community. As the community's website states, “Sometimes it seems as if everything revolves around fishing. In the summer and fall, families get ready for the coming winter by mending nets and preparing other equipment. The winter is spent fishing and the spring usually provides some time for relaxation while telling stories about the past winter's fishing activities.”

The commercial ice-fishing on Lake Manitoba can be a treacherous industry, battling the freezing temperatures and



Above: Commercial Fisherman from St. Laurent, with Bombardier in background, drilling through the ice on Lake Manitoba.

ice conditions. Fishermen in the community, however, are well-respected and honoured as they continue the traditional way of life of St. Laurent. It is a generational way of life, with fathers and sons going out on to the ice together.

In a CBC Radio broadcast on St. Laurent, Father Guy Laval-lée ponders his community of St. Laurent: "Why did St. Laurent persist as a community? Its because their economy was well-integrated to the land. Fishing, hunting and trapping. And it still is today." St. Laurent's continued dependence on the local environment has produced a sustainable relationship which is represented in all aspects of their culture.

Today, women are also joining in the commercial ice-fishing industry. This local industry links the community to its neighbour, Lake Manitoba. It is dependent on the lake, and the fish which it provides. This industry is reflective of the local culture and identity of St. Laurent.

Smithsonian

This way of life has now been showcased at The Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. In September 2004, St. Laurent became the focus of an exhibit on the Métis community, as part of the new U.S. National Museum of the American Indian. It tells the story of the culture and traditions

of St. Laurent, which have been successfully sustained over time. Jacinthe Lambert, a co-curator of the Smithsonian Institution Project, said, "This project will highlight the Métis history and culture of St. Laurent and all the community will benefit from it."

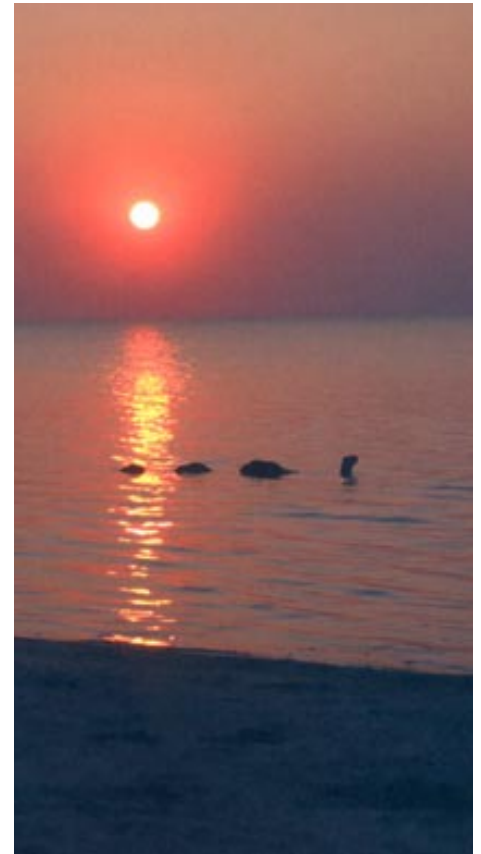
St. Laurent residents donated many items to the Smithsonian exhibit, which they feel represent their way of life. The items are diverse, and include fiddles and a bombardier (ice-fishing vehicle).

THE STORY OF CELEBRATION

For the community of St. Laurent, celebration is a part of life. The story of celebration in St. Laurent involves two major examples ... The Manipogo Festival and Métis Days. Both tell a story of the place of St. Laurent, its people and its history.

The Manipogo Festival, which takes place annually in March, celebrates the local area, the culture, and of course the legendary sea creature of Lake Manitoba: Manipogo (see photo above right). The focus on this legendary sea creature reinforces the value of storytelling, and myth, in the context of celebrations and community festivals.

Métis Days are, perhaps, a more direct celebration of the local culture. This festival takes place in August every year. It is



Above: *Manipogo* of Lake Manitoba

a celebration of the Métis people, history and culture which have made them who they are today. Many people come to St. Laurent for this celebration, making St. Laurent a gathering place focused on the importance of its own cultural heritage.

Patrick Rey, of CBC Radio, has said that "It's a new found pride that's spread throughout the country. The time for humility and shame is over." The Métis people have reason to celebrate their own culture, and through these celebrations, local community pride is strengthening.

THE STORY OF A CULTURE SUSTAINED

Much of St. Laurent's success can be traced to local grassroots initiatives. People in the community are interested in the future of the community and have dedicated themselves to actively being a major strength of St. Laurent. Many of the "planners" who have helped to shape the story of St. Laurent are not mainstream planners, but they are members of the community: people who have worked hard to sustain their own culture and the identity of the place in which they live.

However, the story of St. Laurent cannot be told in isolation from outside partnerships. Many of the initiatives have been based in community development, and therefore the regional community development programs and corporations have played a major role in many chapters of the St. Laurent story.

CDEM (Conseil de développement économique des municipalités bilingues du Manitoba) has been a support to St. Laurent as it is to all bilingual communities in Manitoba. Specifically, CDEM has helped to implement the projects of a new Health Centre (renovation of an old convent into a health centre which includes housing for the elderly) and a Community Services Centre, in St. Laurent.

St. Laurent is also a mem-

ber of The Super Six Community Futures Development Corporation. This corporation provides business and community development support, as well as information and publicity, to the communities along Highway # 6 in Manitoba (see map on page 1).

Through such partnerships, St. Laurent has worked to identify its strengths and make the most of its opportunities. And, the community has been successful in identifying its own strengths and working toward making these strengths more of an inherent part of the community. Yet, it is fairly unique in that it is not simply trying to change where change may not be necessary. When one's highest priority is recognizing the local identity and sustaining the sense of place, any interventions must support that motivation.

CONCLUSION

The stories of this Case-in-Point project are only a select few that make up the community of St. Laurent. The community has placed a priority on these stories, and the sustaining of the culture which has produced them. St. Laurent's strengths have been identified and opportunities have been realized. In this way, the community has taken their future into their own hands. They have decided to grow based on the strength of their cultural identity and their traditional way of life.



Above: *St. Laurent* celebrates its place in the Smithsonian Museum

St. Laurent may not necessarily be described by many as a *Cosmopolis*. However, in Sandercock's words, cosmopolis is the embodiment of "combined effort, by residents, planners and politicians at local, state, and national levels. What remains to be underlined is that this effort is not only about mobilizing resources and power, and changing institutions, but also about *organizing hope, negotiating fears, mediating collective memories of identity and belonging, and daring to take risks.*" (Sandercock, Mongrel Cities, page 179). In this sense, the community of St. Laurent is fulfilling Sandercock's definition. St. Laurent has taken risks, and done whatever possible, to mediate collective memories of identity and belonging. And, therefore, the story of St. Laurent has been sustained.

Although the story of St. Laurent is unique to its specific

context, it can be a valuable lesson and an inspiration to the future of other communities with similar stories to tell.

Yvon Dumont, former Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, is from the community of St. Laurent. During a CBC Radio interview, he recalled the story of Louis Riel, who, in 1885, “said that his people would sleep for a hundred years, and after a hundred years, when they would awaken, that it would be the artists and musicians that would wake up the spirit of the Métis.”

This has given hope to the Métis people, it is part of their story and part of their future. And once again, their strength in heritage and identity is being realized.

The community of St. Laurent, which began as a small settlement in 1882 with only five Métis families, has a strong future because it has realized the strength of its identity.

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IMAGE CREDITS

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Above: **Bombardiers** are a common sight during the ice fishing season in St. Laurent. A Bombardier has been brought to Washington, D.C., to be a part of the St. Laurent exhibit.