

The Gazette

BOTTOM LINE

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Property Report

A former sugar shack has been transformed into a one-of-a-kind country residence with a charming old log cabin and access to the Rigaud River. *Page C13*



Investing Strategy

Do you know who's managing your mutual funds? If you haven't checked lately, you might be in for a surprise. There has been a fair amount of movement. *Page C16*



Hot wheels

From riding off cliffs to meandering along forest paths, mountain biking offers a wide range of experiences, and, as bike technology advances, the ride is getting smoother all the time. *Page C11*

Going it alone

Independent family-run heating-oil dealer has been warming hearts and homes for 40 years

PAUL DELEAN
The Gazette

When Robert Charbonneau Sr. started selling and delivering heating oil on the island of Montreal, his retail price was just over 3 cents a litre.

"We still sold in gallons then," recalled Charbonneau, 61. "We paid about 10 cents a gallon and sold for 14 cents."

Forty years later, the price of heating oil is more than 10 times higher and most of the independent dealers are gone, squeezed out of the market by Big Oil.

Not Charbonneau. He's still delivering for the company he started, Les Pétroles Charbonneau Inc., now being run by his two children, Robert Jr. and Sylvie.

They've managed to grow their family business in a flat market for heating oil, more than doubling their client base in the last

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four years to 3,500 last winter.

"We like to think our personalized service has a lot to do with it," said Sylvie, 36.

"When you call us, you get one of the owners on the phone. We deal directly with the client. People appreciate that. A lot of our business comes from word of mouth."

A client who calls Les Pétroles Charbonneau at 2 a.m. with a furnace problem probably will speak with Sylvie.

"I sleep with the cell phone by the bed," she said.

That's after answering as many as 100-plus phone calls a day in winter.

Robert Jr., 34, starts his day at 3:30 a.m. during the busy season, which began Sept. 1. Often, he's on the road making deliveries until 6 p.m. in one of the company's three trucks. Emergency calls regularly send him out at night as well.

"You're on call 24 hours in winter," he said. "It's physical work, in all kinds of weather. You've got to love it to do it."

The bulk of the company's clients are on the island of Montreal, though the trucks do travel as far afield as Rigaud.

"We've been dealing with some of these people for decades," Robert Sr. said.

He started the company in 1962, initially serving his Ville Emard neighbourhood, Cote St. Paul and Verdun.

The idea had come from his father, Roland, who didn't like to see his son - a bricklayer by trade - inactive during the winter months.

"One day, he came to get me at a job and brought me to see a delivery truck. He said: 'See that truck - it's yours.' He'd bought it for me, to get me started," Robert Sr. said. "He was also my first client."

Soon, there were many more. "If you called me on a Sunday, or at 2 a.m., I went," Robert Sr. said.

The business was called Charbonneau et Frères, although



A family affair: Sylvie (left), Denyse, Robert Jr. and Robert Sr. of Pétroles Charbonneau.

there were no brothers. Wife Denyse, who handled the phones, was his only partner.

"My father's construction company had that name and it was well-known, so I thought it would help our business to use it as well," Robert Sr. explained.

Competition was fierce. In the 1960s, anyone could sell stove oil, then the main heating fuel for 80 per cent of Montreal homes. The multinationals left that retail segment to the independents because of the difficulty of servicing people who lived upstairs in duplexes and triplexes. They'd sell the stove oil to middlemen, who'd resell to tenants and homeowners.

"In our district alone, there were about 40 people selling stove oil that way," Robert Sr. said.

The stove-oil market died as centralized oil furnaces became commonplace, but Charbonneau stayed alive by evolving with the market.

How do you compete successfully with oil multinationals?

For starters, by going the extra yard. The Charbonneaus didn't let a little snow stop them.

"Some companies' drivers

wouldn't deliver if they didn't have a clear path to the tank," Robert Sr. said. "A few inches of snow was too much for them. We'd go in up to our waists. Our priority was keeping the client happy, not the driver."

Some companies also insist on 24 or 48 hours' notice for a delivery. Anything sooner involves a surcharge. That's not the Charbonneau way.

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"We deliver as soon as we can. Often, I can tell people I'll be there in an hour."

Often, I can tell people I'll be there in an hour," Robert Jr. said.

Keeping costs low is another necessity. The Charbonneaus have always run a tight ship, and it's no different now.

Both Robert Jr. and Sylvie work out of their homes, in Ile Perrot and Lachine, respectively. There is no corporate headquarters to staff and maintain.

Other than family members,

there are only three employees on the Charbonneau payroll, a couple of them part-time. They use subcontractors - eight in total - to do the furnace repairs and service work.

Robert Sr. and Jr. have mechanical expertise and maintain the company vehicles themselves.

Sylvie's background in administration helps keep order in the finances, a crucial element for a business that has to juggle thin profit margins, large volumes, constantly changing prices and different payment schedules for clients and suppliers.

"It can be quite stressful during the winter. We have to carry a lot of (customer) credit," Sylvie said.

That's because clients have 30 days to pay their bills, and Charbonneau gets only 10 days to pay its suppliers.

The company buys its heating oil wholesale from several multinationals, whose prices are faxed to them nightly. They don't get fixed prices for the season any more, so they're subject to the same price swings as retail clients.

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HELP WANTED

Working adventure in Libya

Engineering project has 80 jobs

AMANDA JELOWICKI
Special to The Gazette

The living conditions sound less than ideal. An engineering compound scattered with air-conditioned trailers doubling as homes in the middle of a desert. Cafeteria-style food. No television, but there is a library and a gym. Spouses aren't encouraged to join their partners. And the job demands a six-day work week to boot.

But the almost 600 resumes that SNC-Lavalin Group Inc. have received since taking out national classified ads last month for a construction project in Libya belie suggestions that austere living conditions matter much when it comes to the job hunt.

"We are looking for a person who is seeking an adventure," said Sami Bébawi, executive vice-president of SNC. "It's a fantastic opportunity, but of course (living conditions) won't be like home. If you want the same thing as home in Libya, then stay home."

\$475-MILLION CONTRACT

Last April, SNC-Lavalin, one of the world's largest engineering firms, was awarded a \$475-million contract for the operation, maintenance, care and custody of the Sarir water-pipe plant in Libya.

Began in the early 1980s, the construction scheme, known as the Great Man-Made River Authority, is gargantuan in scope. Twenty years ago, the Libyan government started to build a vast underground concrete pipeline to pump water from fossil aquifers under the desert in the south to the coastal area in the north.

The water is to be used for agricultural and industrial purposes, and will alleviate a strain placed on the coastal water supply.

UNESCO tags the ongoing endeavor the largest engineering project in the world.

SNC took control of the water plant and all its existing facilities in June, in a contract to last almost two years.

It took out classified ads last month seeking to fill up to 80 engineering and managerial positions for one- and two-year contracts.

Bébawi said SNC is searching for reliable, independent and experienced engineers who can handle pressure, are open to learning about another culture and have the support of their families.

'MIDDLE OF THE DESERT'

Bébawi said while SNC usually encourages families to accompany employees, that's not the case this time.

"We have to be practical. This is the middle of the desert. There are no schools, no recreation centres," he said.

It's 400 to 500 kilometres off of the big cities. That is why we opted for single status," Bébawi said.

As a benefit offered to employees and to accommodate the long workweek and the distance from home, Bébawi said most people will work six to eight weeks at a time and then be granted a one- or two-week paid trip home.

Gillian MacCormack, vice-president (public relations) at SNC, said the company uses several methods to recruit candidates. She said SNC has a large, rolling resumé bank that it taps into, typing into a database keywords, like "water treatment," to find engineers who have salient experience.

Please see LIBYA, Page C10