

“A sparkling example of what aggressiveness, imagination, and skill can accomplish”

The Rise of Dubreuil Brothers Limited, 1948-1973

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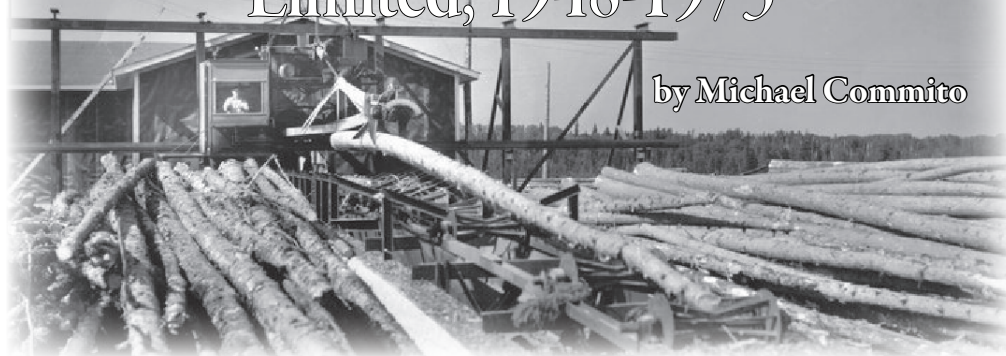
Article abstract

This article argues that the brutal aftermath of the catastrophic Mississagi forest fire in 1948 enabled Dubreuil Brothers Limited (DBL), formerly of Quebec, to grow and develop while salvaging timber for the Crown. The Ontario government, so concerned with getting the project concluded, essentially tolerated sub-par performances from contractors such as DBL for the sake of expediency. The salvage shaped DBL's formative years, but its success after 1952 was largely due to its drive and resolve. Part environmental history and part business history, the rise of Dubreuil Brothers Limited tells the distinctive story of a company that defied the stereotypical views of French-Canadian business. It may have been forged by fire but it remained viable through entrepreneurial spirit and ingenuity.

*"A sparkling example of what aggressiveness,
imagination, and skill can accomplish"¹*

The Rise of Dubreuil Brothers Limited, 1948-1973

by Michael Commito



The absence of francophones in forest industry histories can be partially explained by the fact that until the dawn of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, francophones did not generally rise to the top of the corporate ladder in resource industries, especially the forest sector. William Coleman has argued that in the 1950s, the Québec economy had only isolated pockets of successful francophone entrepreneurs; for the most part this group was still shut out from primary and secondary industries.² As a result, the Quiet Revolution

had the twin mandate of “rattrapage” and “maître chez nous” in order to modernize Québec’s economy and “obtain significant control over production for the francophone business class.”³ When the Québec state took a more interventionist role under Premier Jean Lesage (1960-1966), francophones began pushing for control and leadership in industries from which they had long been absent.⁴

Yet the evidence indicates that even before Québec had enacted policies to nurture francophone enterprise, successful French Canadian firms did exist;

¹ Archives of Ontario (AO), RG-1334, Box 279 “Dubreuil Brothers Limited, Bonus Rates, License D-1821” 30 October 1962.

² William D. Coleman, *The Independence Movement in Quebec, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 99.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Michael Bliss, *Northern Enterprise: Five Centuries of Canadian Business* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1987), 504. Also see Jorge Niosi, “The New French-Canadian Bourgeoisie” *Studies in Political Economy*, 1 (Spring 1979): 113-61 and Jorge Niosi, “The Rise of French-Canadian Capitalism” in *Quebec: State and Society* edited by Alain G. Gagnon (Agincourt, ON: Methuen Publications 1984), 187.

Abstract

This article argues that the brutal aftermath of the catastrophic Mississagi forest fire in 1948 enabled Dubreuil Brothers Limited (DBL), formerly of Quebec, to grow and develop while salvaging timber for the Crown. The Ontario government, so concerned with getting the project concluded, essentially tolerated sub-par performances from contractors such as DBL for the sake of expediency. The salvage shaped DBL's formative years, but its success after 1952 was largely due to its drive and resolve. Part environmental history and part business history, the rise of Dubreuil Brothers Limited tells the distinctive story of a company that defied the stereotypical views of French-Canadian business. It may have been forged by fire but it remained viable through entrepreneurial spirit and ingenuity.

Résumé: Dans cet article nous soutenons que l'incendie catastrophique qui a ravagé la forêt de Mississagi en 1948 a permis à Dubreuil Brother Limitée (DBL), d'origine québécoise, de croître et de se développer, en récupérant du bois pour la Couronne. Le gouvernement de l'Ontario, désireux surtout de voir achever le projet, pour ne plus avoir à s'en occuper, a toléré le travail médiocre ou inadéquat d'entrepreneurs comme DBL. Si ce projet de sauvetage a marqué la période formative de la compagnie, sa réussite après 1952 est attribuable à son dynamisme et sa détermination. À la fois histoire environnementale et histoire des affaires, la montée de Dubreuil Brothers Ltée est l'histoire distinctive d'une compagnie qui ne se conforme pas du tout au stéréotype de l'entreprise canadienne-française. Formée par le feu, elle a prospéré grâce à son esprit d'entreprise et à son ingéniosité.

Dubreuil & Frères Engr. or Dubreuil Brothers Limited (DBL) was one such company. Comprised of Napoléon, Joachim, Augustin and Marcel Dubreuil, DBL had begun operating long before Québec created state apparatuses to foster French-Canadian entrepreneur-

ship.⁵ At a time when their Québécois counterparts were still constrained by Anglophone management in Québec's forest industries, the brothers decided it was best to leave their birth province in order to find opportunities elsewhere; they settled in northern Ontario after

⁵ Other historians and scholars have noted the successes of French Canadian entrepreneurs in other facets of the economy prior to the 1960s as well. Please see, See Gerald Tulchinsky, *The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837-1853* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), Paul-Andre Linteau, *The Promoters City: Building the Industrial Town of Maisonneuve, 1883-1918* translated by Robert Chodos (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1985), Ronald Rudin, *Banking en français: the French Banks of Quebec, 1835-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), Ronald Rudin, *In Whose Interest? Quebec's Caisses Populaires, 1900-1945* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), Dany Côté, *Histoire de l'industrie forestière du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean: au cœur de l'économie régionale depuis plus de 150 ans, 1838-1988* (Alma, QC: Société d'histoire du Lac-Saint-Jean, 1999), Jean-Pierre Charland, *Les Pâtes et Papiers au Québec 1880-1980: Technologies, travail et travailleurs* (Québec: Institut Québécois De Recherche Sur La Culture, 1990).

the Second World War and began pursuing their trade. The watershed moment in the company's operational history occurred in the aftermath of a catastrophic forest fire, the Mississagi, in 1948.

Following the brutal aftermath of the conflagration, the company took part in a massive timber salvage organized by the provincial government. Due to the scale of destruction and logistical concerns, few of the province's more seasoned firms offered their services. Consequently the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests (DLF) was compelled to entice smaller and less experienced companies such as DBL to carry out the workload. The project was marred by problematic operators and hamstrung by the fact that the Department was unable to properly supervise all the crews in the salvage area. Nevertheless, the salvage provided companies, namely DBL, with the chance to hone its lumbering skills and branch out into other sectors of the forest industry.

Yet it would be too myopic to suggest that the Mississagi salvage fully explains the long-term success of the company. In many ways the salvage was a crucible for the company, shaping the firm's formative years. However, DBL's prosperity from 1953 onwards cannot be attributed to the salvage alone and is largely the result of the company's drive and resolve. It defied stereotypical views of French-Canadian business of the day, overcame discrimination, and went on to earn the respect and admiration from its

peers. Moreover, the company was one of the first to establish a permanent forest community in Ontario during the modern era. Part environmental history and part business history, the rise of Dubreuil Brothers Limited tells the distinctive story of a French-Canadian company that was forged by fire but remained viable through a combination of entrepreneurial spirit, perseverance, and ingenuity.

* * *

The Dubreuil family originally hailed from Sherbrooke, Québec. While living in the historic "Cantons de l'Est," Joseph-Alexandre Dubreuil and his wife Cécile had five children; in the summer of 1918, the Dubreuils packed their belongings and moved to Taschereau.⁶ Once settled in their new location, the family welcomed four more children to its clan. For work, Joseph-Alexander and his brother Jules founded a small woodworking factory near Lac Lois, roughly twenty kilometres southwest from Taschereau. The two fabricated a myriad of products ranging from doors and windows to breadboxes and coffins. Yet the most significant item to come out of the Dubreuil woodshop was a small portable sawmill that Joseph-Alexander developed in the early 1930s.⁷ Under their father's tutelage, the four boys learned to handle various tools and machinery, but most importantly they learned the ins and outs of harvesting and sawing wood.

During the Great Depression the Québec forest industry was hit hard on

⁶ Comité du Livre, *Taschereau: 75 Ans D'Histoire* (Town of Taschereau, 1988), 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

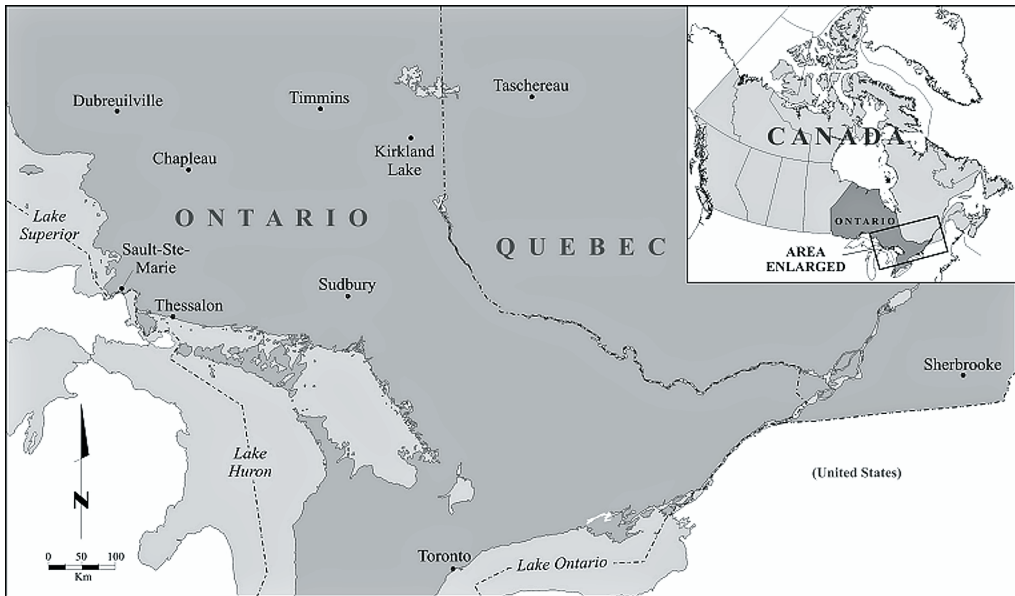


Fig. 1. Map of northern Ontario and Québec highlighting the key locations for Dubreuil Brothers Limited. Cartography by Leo Larivière for author.

all fronts. In the 1920s the province's pulp and paper industry had been unregulated, leading to overproduction and a sharp drop in prices.⁸ Similarly, the lumber industry also faced a significant slump in production and the number of jobs in the industry as a whole shrivelled from 9,676 to 2,937 in the early years of the Depression.⁹ According to Peter Gillis and Thomas R. Roach, by the beginning of the Second World War "the forest industry in the province was stagnant."¹⁰ The small Dubreuil woodworking shop

was just one of many that struggled to stay afloat in Québec's ailing forest industry, so much so that Napoléon and Joachim both ended up taking employment with the Canadian National Railway Company as engineers.

By the end of the Second World War, the family had experienced a hardship far worse than the battle to keep its tiny mill running. Following "la mort de leur père en 1945, ils décidèrent de travailler ensemble, et avec près de \$1,000, ils formèrent leur propre compagnie

⁸ Paul-André Linteau et al, *Quebec Since 1930*, translated by Robert Chodos and Ellen Garmaise (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1991), 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ R. Peter Gillis and Thomas R. Roach, *Lost Initiatives: Canada's Forest Industries, Forest Policy and Forest Conservation* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 127. In his book, *Les récoltes de forêts publiques: au Québec et en Ontario, 1840-1900* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) Guy Gaudreau discusses how the economic crisis of 1873 coupled with the poor condition of Québec's forests may help explain the influx of many Québec families to northern Ontario.



Fig. 2. This is the type of smoke-choked scene that pilots would have encountered when flying near the fire in the summer of 1948. This is an aerial photograph taken near Thessalon in 1948. Photograph courtesy of Thessalon Public Library, "The Mississagi Fire 1948 Historical Account."

Dubreuil & Frère Engr; Dubreuil Brothers Limited (DBL)."¹¹ Napoléon and Joachim both left their jobs with the railway in order to devote themselves completely to getting the family business up and running. The brothers vainly tried to obtain cutting rights in Québec but when this venture failed they decided that, with plenty of concessions available in northern Ontario, they would try their luck outside the province.¹²

Once settled in northern Ontario, DBL established a tiny sawmill in the gold mining town of Timmins. During the first year of operation, Joachim, Augustin and Marcel stayed in Timmins to supervise the construction of the mill while Napoléon, head of the company, and his wife Gabrielle ventured to Kirkland Lake to oversee the harvesting. According to Napoléon, it was during the cold and desolate winter that he had an

¹¹ Comité du Livre. *Dubreuilville 50 Ans D'Histoire: 1961 à 2011* (Town of Dubreuilville, 2010), 16. Translation: After the death of their father in 1945, they decided to work together and with \$1,000 formed their own company, Dubreuil Brothers Limited.

¹² *Ibid.*

epiphany and “would never set up another lumber camp without wives and children.”¹³ Moreover, the animosity he witnessed between French and English lumberjacks in Kirkland Lake did not sit well with him. It made him determined to create, if the opportunity presented itself, an exclusively francophone community in the future. Yet, it would be years before he would realize this vision and the path to this goal would be circuitous and difficult.

The company’s luck took a dramatic upturn in the summer of 1948 when nature interceded and presented the brothers with the opportunity of a lifetime. From May until mid-August 1948, a massive forest fire roared through the Mississagi River Valley and area around Chapleau in northern Ontario. This fire became known as the Mississagi forest fire and was the largest in provincial history in terms of burned area, scorching approximately 747,520 acres.¹⁴ It left the DLF with millions of foot board measure of merchantable timber left standing in the form of undamaged and slightly damaged trees.

Following a significant reorganization of the Department’s mandates in 1941, the DLF was firmly committed to preserving Ontario’s woodlands for

the greater public and curbing needless waste and exploitation. Under the auspices of this new system, a timber salvage appeared to be the only viable option for the government. This project would help offset the funds spent on suppressing the fire and allow the government to prevent enormous additional losses in timber values.¹⁵

The project, dubbed “Operation Scorch,” was unique because without the more established lumber companies to do the work the provincial government had to take unprecedented steps early on to entice other firms. Logging companies in Ontario had carried out their own salvages after burns or storms in the past but this marked the first time “the government had to undertake the project itself.”¹⁶ To secure the services of inexperienced but necessary firms, the DLF was prepared to offer contractors cash advances to finance their enterprises. It was agreed that once harvesting commenced, the department would deduct the advances from the income the operators received from selling their wood.

Despite failing to enlist the services of the region’s more promising firms, the DLF pushed forward with its bold plan for salvaging what remained in the blackened woods. The plan outlined parcelling

¹³ Sheila McLeod Arnopolous, *Voice from French Ontario: A Vivid Portrayal of the French-Speaking Community of Nouvelle-Écosse* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1982), 132.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Pyne, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 430.

¹⁵ Michael Commito “‘The Biggest, Blackest Graveyard’: A Socioeconomic History of the Mississagi Fire and Salvage, 1948-1973” (MA Thesis, Laurentian University, 2010), Chapter 2.

¹⁶ Richard S. Lambert and Paul Pross, *Renewing Nature’s Wealth: A Centennial History of the Public Management of Lands, Forests & Wildlife in Ontario, 1763-1967* (Toronto: Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, 1967), 222.



Fig. 3. Augustin and Marcel Dubreuil, in the rear of the vehicle, with their father Joseph-Alexander, near Taschereau in 1932. Source: Private collection. Photograph courtesy of Lynne Dubreuil Belanger.

out pieces or logging chances within the burned area to various contractors. These firms would then harvest fire-damaged trees in their respective areas and either ship out the timber whole or as processed lumber, depending on whether they were operating a mill on site. All Crown timber or lumber was then to be collected at a temporary central depot in North Bay, run by the Great Northern Woods Company, where the salvaged wood would be processed and marketed.

As the DLF prepared to embark on its unprecedented project, the Dubreuil brothers also prepared to begin a new chapter in their business history. The

Mississagi salvage formally began in the autumn of 1948 but the Dubreuil brothers did not begin cutting for the Crown until the summer of 1949. Under the conditions of its contract, the brothers were to establish operations along in the Aubinadong River in the District of Algoma, including a sawmill, and harvest from an area containing an estimated 3,000,000 board feet of timber from July 1949 to November 1951.¹⁷ For the small company, this represented a great opportunity but it was not without risk.

The company's commitment to family was evident early on but some Department officials had misgivings. Following

¹⁷ Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) Blind River (BR), Dubreuil File, "Salvage Contract," 29 June 1949. The bulk of the research for this article was drawn from these files. These were the original documents from the Mississagi salvage that were preserved in the Blind River MNR depot garage by former forester Gord Campbell. The collection has not been archived in an official sense but a rudimentary finding aid was created by the author through the course of the research.

an inspection of the firm's Mountain Ash Lake mill, near Chapleau, three inspectors made it a point to note that DBL consisted of three families with thirteen children, which to them seemed like a liability.¹⁸ But for Napoléon this was an important part of his vision and he wanted to ensure that his employees could live with their families while working on the salvage. Jean-Paul Dubreuil later recounted that his father, Napoléon, believed that in order to establish a healthy working environment he needed to "to bring families with him."¹⁹

Regardless of the department's views on Napoléon's family-oriented business structure, harvesting got underway at the end of August 1949. This date thus marked the beginning of the realization of the Dubreuil's commitment to the establishment of forest villages, even temporary ones, so long as it provided the opportunity for the brothers and their employees to work and reside with their wives and children. Napoléon's system must have been effective as, despite the slow start, salvage officials commented early on that Dubreuil's production was "one of the best and would compare favorably with good mills anywhere," but this proved to be an anomaly.²⁰

By the next operating season, a more troubling issue overshadowed any positive appraisals when an ugly situation re-

vealed the DLF's prejudicial attitude towards francophone firms on the salvage. The incident occurred when Napoléon apparently sent a letter to the Department in order to renegotiate an aspect of the firm's contract. Under the salvage operation, companies were paid to transport cut timber to the DLF's central log depots.²¹ In the letter to Frank Sharpe on 9 March 1950, DBL suggested that the Crown should be paying the firm more money to haul out its timber. The memorandum was forwarded to government forester Jack Hope, who immediately noticed something peculiar in the letter. Hope intimated to Sharpe that he believed the letter was a forgery and actually originated from the offices of Beauchamp Transport, apparently a disreputable firm from Rouyn, Québec. Hope stated that Beauchamp "seems to be more or less connected with most of the Québec French jobbers on this project. A contract with Dubreuil would undoubtedly result in bringing in more of the same type of men and equipment which have caused so much trouble throughout the project."²²

In an effort to avoid sounding overtly prejudicial, despite the obvious overtones, Hope had actually crossed out the word 'French' when he wrote that he was worried that the hauling dispute "would actually be a contract to another Québec jobber."²³ However, Hope pushed all ni-

¹⁸ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 2 August 1949, Jack Hope to J.G. McMillen.

¹⁹ Phone conversation with Jean-Paul Dubreuil, January 19, 2010.

²⁰ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 27 August 1951, D.W. Milne to Jack Hope and Ross Hyslop.

²¹ The main concentration yard was located in North Bay and was operated by The Great Northern Woods Company.

²² MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 15 March 1950, Jack Hope to J.F. Sharpe.

²³ *Ibid.*

cities aside when he firmly stated that the DLF “strongly recommend that all future contracts on this project be negotiated with responsible residents of the Province of Ontario.”²⁴

Despite the government’s misguided view, it was precisely because of the aftermath of the Mississagi fire that the DLF could not conscript a more desirable group of experienced operators. Larger firms in the region, such as the McFadden Company, witnessed the destruction firsthand on the ground and backed out because it believed that the government had underestimated the degree of damage to timber and was in over its head.²⁵ As a result, it was compelled to enlist the services of unseasoned firms from Ontario and Québec, some of which were invariably French. Yet it was also within this precarious situation that many of these firms, like DBL, defied expectations and succeeded.

Due to the scarcity of documentation on the company’s side regarding the Beauchamp trucking incident, the author speculates that Napoleon’s brush with the Department’s overt francophobia only solidified his goal of an exclusively francophone community. In order to reach this end the company would need to establish a foothold in the region as the salvage was only a temporary operation and set to expire in the early 1950s.

To achieve sustainability follow-

ing the end of the project, the company sought out additional opportunities to branch out into other facets of the forest industry. In March 1951, it signed an independent contract with the Algoma Central Railway (ACR) and began cutting railroad ties for it. In addition to these new ventures, DBL also signed supplemental contracts with the DLF. These included the innovative idea to cut 50,000 board feet of jack pine sawlogs as a trial to see how the wood would sell; it was not common at the time to turn jack pine into dimensional lumber. Furthermore, it also received permission from the DLF to conduct a pulpwood operation during the summer of 1951 along the Chapleau Highway.²⁶ In all cases with the government, the expectation was that these auxiliary projects could be carried out provided they did not “interfere with lumber production from government owned [salvage] logs.”²⁷ This directive reflected the government’s desire to complete the salvage as efficiently as possible and prevent companies from placing more importance to secondary ventures over harvesting timber burned in the Mississagi fire.

By the summer of 1951 Dubreuil’s performance on the salvage was slipping, which did not sit well with the DLF; even a more seasoned firm would have had difficulty juggling the company’s new activities. According to forester Ross

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Michael Commito, “The Biggest, Blackest Graveyard,” 48-49.

²⁶ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 14 March 1951, Ross Hyslop to J.F. Sharpe.

²⁷ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 26 March 1951, J.F. Sharpe to R.S. Hyslop.

Hyslop, DBL was conducting its harvesting operations in a poor manner because it had made the salvage contract an afterthought, exactly what the Department feared. In an effort to curb the company's overly ambitious agenda, Hyslop reminded DBL that its salvage contract plus the small pulpwood operation was enough to keep it busy.²⁸ During an inspection of the company's bush operations in August that year, the government's inspector Logan Eagle reported that the operation had gone "from a fair beginning, to bad, and now worse."²⁹ Eagle told the DLF that the company needed a new carriage to haul lumber from the sawmill to the DLF's lumber collection sites, but financial constraints made acquiring this new equipment impossible. He sarcastically argued that somehow this lack of money for capital projects "did not deter them [DBL] from building and operating a mill in Timmins, a tie operation on the Algoma Central Railway (ACR) and pulp operation on the Mississagi. The sawing of salvage logs had now become a matter of secondary consideration."³⁰ Most disconcerting was Eagle's observations of live sawing³¹ and poor production quality. He warned the Dubreuil that their cutting quality was grossly inadequate and cautioned that he would

not "become a party to that type of sawing and that [he] would be putting in a stiff complaint with the Department. If the complaint was not righted at once, [he] would recommend that his [DBL's] mills be closed."³²

Despite drawing the Department's ire in the summer of 1951, undoubtedly because of the firm's bulging workload, evidence demonstrates that DBL was still one of the salvage's more prolific cutters. By the end of September 1951, the company had cut 13, 332, 977 board feet of timber (see Table 1) for the government, just over thirteen percent of the total production up to that date.³³ The brothers were only bested by one other company, the J.D. Campbell Lumber Company, which had cut over 21,000,000 board feet by the end of September. However, it should be noted that Campbell declared bankruptcy in early 1950 following a string of financial issues exacerbated by the salvage. However, because it had performed admirably, money woes notwithstanding, the government assumed the company's debts and took over managing the operation, which explains why production increased and remained one of the more productive organizations in the autumn of 1951.³⁴

Even though the original salvage con-

²⁸ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 20 June 1951, R.S. Hyslop to J.F. Sharpe.

²⁹ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 27 August 1951, Logan Eagle to D.W. Milne.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The sawing of green or live timber refers to the cutting of still-living or immature trees. Under the conditions of the salvage, operators were limited to only cut fire damaged/killed timber.

³² MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 27 August 1951, Logan Eagle to D.W. Milne.

³³ MNB BR, Dubreuil File "Mississagi Salvage Production," Department of Lands and Forests, undated.

³⁴ MNR BR, Campbell File, March 1954, Clare E. Mapledoram and Frank A. MacDougall.

Table 1
Mississagi Salvage Production, From Commencement (1948) to 30 September 1951

Operator	Timber Cut to September 30 1951
A & E Lalonde	806,491
Baderski	6,543,002
Bazinet Brothers	2,794,441
Block	7,549,073
Briscoe Brothers	11,334,454
Campbell Lumber	21,606,395
Dubreuil Brothers	13,332,977
Lahti	12,456,638
Lalonde	2,941,313
Mississagi Lumber	4,318,917
R.G. Sparks Jr.	2,735,227
R.G. Sparks Sr.	3,730,062
Strickland	653,186
Tetreault	5,042,700
William F. Kreiger	6,226,564
TOTAL	102,071,440

Source: MNB BR, General Files “Mississagi Salvage Production,” Department of Lands and Forests, undated.

tract for DBL stipulated a completion date of November 1951, this agreement was actually extended until July 1953.³⁵ The company’s remaining two years as Crown salvagers were largely uneventful as the records do not reveal any exemplary events, positive or negative, involving the brothers and the DLF. The company’s salvage production did increase, bringing its total on the operation up to 16,595,888 board feet.³⁶

DBL’s efforts in the graveyard of blackened trees left by the Mississagi fire

was a defining moment in its operational history; providing it with the opportunity to improve and extend operations into the Algoma woodlands. However, with the salvage completed and the company no longer on the Department’s payroll, its long-term viability hinged on its ability to conduct business effectively. DBL was then able to focus more on its agreement with the ACR, signed during the salvage, which proved

to be quite profitable for the fledgling firm. The initial contract, cutting ties, paved the way for an eleven-year volume agreement with the ACR beginning in 1955. It provided DBL with timber limits on the ACR’s private lands, and most importantly the agreement was designed for the company to “establish a suitable sawmill and develop a permanent industry.”³⁷

It was during this time that DBL established its first permanent, and second forest community at the site of the

³⁵ MNR BR, Dubreuil File, 29 June 1953, Ross Hyslop to J.G. McMillen.
³⁶ MNR BR, General File, Department of Lands and Forests, 1954 “Mississagi Salvage Project,” Schedule G.
³⁷ Dubreuil Forest Products Archives (DFPA), “ACR Volume Agreement-28200” 30 June 1955. A research trip to Dubreuil Forest Products Limited in Dubreuilville was conducted in autumn 2011. Mill manager Dave Jennings assisted in giving the author access to various company files from the post-salvage period to the early 1970s. The files were not organized in a formal sense and the series appears to be incomplete. Nevertheless, these particular files were particularly useful in enhancing the scope of the project.



Fig. 4 The Dubreuil brothers invention, "Sputnik" being operated circa 1958. Source: Dubreuilville Public Library.

former village Magpie Mine, in the Algoma District.³⁸ At this time the company was able to recruit approximately thirty men and their families from Taschereau and provide them with suitable accommodations.³⁹ DBL then proceeded to construct two sawmills in the village and build thirty houses for its workers. With long-term operations now viable along the Magpie River, the brothers sold their sawmill in Timmins to the Malette fam-

ily, also originally from Taschereau.⁴⁰ Although the Dubreuils established a village at Mountain Ash Lake during the salvage, it had been rudimentary and not designed for long-term use. Gaining timber limits in the Algoma District thus provided DBL with the first real opportunity to develop an extensive and permanent settlement. In many ways Magpie was the pilot site for the brother's eponymous future town.

³⁸ Magpie Mine was first established in 1909 after the discovery of iron but by 1921, "the demand and price for iron made the mine unprofitable and it closed." Ron Brown, *Ontario's Vanished Villages* (Toronto: Polar Bear Press, 1999), 195.

³⁹ This was Napoléon's dream to incorporate family into his enterprise. This also relates back to Taylor's positioning of family at the focal point of Francophone enterprise. While DBL did accord great importance to family, their overriding concern was always to stay afloat in a highly competitive market.

⁴⁰ The Mallette Lumber Company prospered in Timmins before being sold to French-Canadian magnate Tembec in the late 1990s.

Even though Magpie was a relatively tiny forest village in the heart of the Algoma wilderness, it still represented a remarkable achievement for several reasons. At its peak in the mid-1950s, the town boasted a population of 200. More importantly, it was in Magpie in 1958 that Augustin Dubreuil devised an ingenious machine that was designed to bring full-length logs into the sawmill. Augustin and his brothers dubbed the single operator mobile loader “Sputnik” after the first artificial satellite launched by the Soviets because the machine looked like something from another universe.⁴¹ According to company officials, other sawmills in Canada, the United States, and Sweden quickly adopted the invention.⁴²

Yet the brothers wanted more for themselves and their community. In 1961 they obtained more cutting rights from the ACR on timber tracts roughly twenty-two kilometres away from Magpie. The Dubreuil brothers decided it was best to move the village, all inhabitants included, to the present-day location of Dubreuilville, at mile 184.5 on the ACR line.

This new settlement would dwarf the company’s previous efforts in Magpie. In an effort to attract even more families, Napoléon and his brothers personally paid teachers to settle in the village and

teach the children of employees in a company-built schoolhouse. The burgeoning town also had a general store, a restaurant, a recreation centre, a church, and a park nearly all at the brothers’ expense. In addition to the company’s accommodations for permanent workers and their families, DBL also offered excellent housing for the single or temporary worker in the form of innovative motel-style accommodations.⁴³

The significance of these amenities should not be overlooked. According to historian Ian Radforth, a few forest villages were created in Ontario in the 1950s but “the forest village concept never caught on in northern Ontario.” While some companies experimented with mobile homes and prefabricated housing in the 1970s, the expansion of provincial roads in the post-war era allowed many employees in the pulpwood and lumber industries to commute to work.⁴⁴ More importantly, although company towns in Ontario were not novel at this time, the establishment of town oriented around a forest industry by a French-Canadian firm was. The province has seen its share of company towns, including lumbermen John Rudolphus Booth’s Depot Harbour near Parry Sound and John Waldie’s Victoria Harbour in the Midland area in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Former provincial

⁴¹ AO, RG-1-334, Box 279, Charles A. Rowe, 26 January 1960.

⁴² DFPA Jean-Paul Dubreuil “History of Dubreuil Brothers’ Operations” January 23, 1986.

⁴³ University of Toronto Archives (UTA), Faculty of Forestry (FF), A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report 1964,” R.J. Beny and H.J. Iverson.

⁴⁴ Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 169-73.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Ontario’s Vanished Villages*, 102-103.

forester Ken Armson and Marjorie McLeod have written that Waldie “recognized the importance of fostering a strong sense of community and allegiance to his company and encouraging a permanent workforce by providing housing and contributing to the town’s infrastructure...This in a time when sawmills and bush operations were seasonal.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the Dubreuil brothers recognized these benefits at time when others were not so inclined, essentially taking the experimental forest village concept and making it viable.

Within a few years of the town’s formation it had already become a popular annual field trip location for the University of Toronto’s faculty of forestry. Clearly this major forestry school thought there was enough to learn from visiting Dubreuilville to take its students there, which speaks volumes about the brother’s early accomplishments. Throughout the winter months of the mid-1960s, the town



Fig. 5: The Dubreuil Brothers with their mother Cécile (l-r: Napoléon, Joachim, Augustin, and Marcel)

was frequented by a number of students, the majority of whom were impressed by what they saw. R.J. Beny and H.J. Iverson, for example, noted that the “mill has been designed to make the best use of the mate-

rial available. Complete utilization has been the keynote in the design.”⁴⁷ Mike Innes and J.K. Welsh also visited Dubreuilville in 1964 and were impressed with how well the company utilized its timber. They noted that because the forest that DBL harvested from was largely low-grade timber it was imperative that the company’s extraction methods were highly efficient.⁴⁸ Forestry students in Toronto, J.J. Dorsey and J.T. Davis, similarly picked up on this idea when they visited the community, commenting that the “town is very self-sufficient.”⁴⁹ In assessing its infrastructure, Richard D. Fry⁵⁰ and J.F. Christian remarked, “the company appears to have provided their employees with a very comfortable village

⁴⁶ Kenneth A. Armson and Marjorie McLeod, *The Legacy of John Waldie and Sons: A History of the Victoria Harbour Lumber Company* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007), 110.

⁴⁷ UTA FF, A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report 1964,” R.J. Beny and H.J. Iverson.

⁴⁸ UTA FF, A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report 1964,” M.R. Innes and J.K. Welsh, 2. Mike Innes eventually had a successful career in the Abitibi Power and Paper Company, where he held the positions of managers of forestry and vice-president of environment. See Mark Kuhlberg, *One Hundred Rings and Counting: Forestry Education and Forestry in Toronto and Canada, 1907-2007* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009)

⁴⁹ UTA FF, A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report 1964,” J.J. Dorsey and J.T. Davis.

⁵⁰ Like Mike Innes, Fry also held a position in Abitibi but not before serving over two decades as chief forester in Marathon, Ontario.

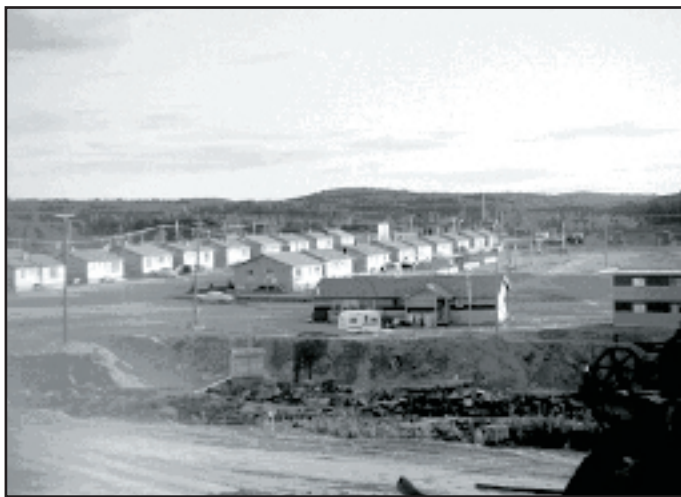


Fig. 5. Dubreuilville in 1961. (Courtesy of the Dubreuilville Public Library).

in which to live.”⁵¹ The faculty’s first female student, Rose Marie Rauter, was so pleased with what she saw that she stated, “the mill is a million dollar investment, designed by the brothers and is one of the most modern and is the most efficient in Ontario.”⁵² Cleary, the company and its town had left a positive impression on their visitors.

Proof of the company’s success is also evident through the accolades that it received from the forest industry’s leading publication. In 1959 *Canada Lumberman* commented on the Dubreuil operation’s success and praised it for its ability to continually apply the latest techniques to its operations.⁵³ It also received praise from industry leader, Charles A. Rowe, a graduate of the University of Toron-

to’s forestry program in 1925.⁵⁴ His contact with DBL came through his term as Superintendent of the Lands and Forest Division in the ACR’s Woodlands Department, a position he held until his retirement in 1964. During an assessment of DBL in 1960, Rowe heaped praised on the firm in general and on its close utilization of timber in particular. He also ad-

mired the company’s development and applauded how “the brothers were able to earn profits and plough these back in, and by risking what they had to secure additional, short term financing.”⁵⁵ In the final words of his assessment, Rowe lauded the firm’s ingenuity and progressiveness. He stated that he wished “to take a not very sly poke at we foresters—the forest experts. While we have debated, too often with a show of ponderous learning and professional approach, ways and means of conserving the country’s forest resources, these people went ahead and did it. There can be no question now that close and intensive utilization is economical. We have the final proof today in the Dubreuil venture.”⁵⁶

Even after it had secured a long-term

⁵¹ UTA FF, A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report January 1964,” R.D. Fry and J.F. Christian, 3.

⁵² UTA FF, A1991-0021, “Dubreuil Report –Winter 1964,” G.A. Bull and R.M. Rauter, 3.

⁵³ Glorya Nanne, “Triples Production in Four Years” *Canada Lumberman* (Feb. 1959)

⁵⁴ B.J. Stocks “Charles A. Rowe Obituary” *Forestry Chronicle* 54, 1 (1978): 53. Rowe is best remembered for having “pioneered the use of aerial photographs in forest inventory procedures.”

⁵⁵ AO, RG 1-334, Box 279, 1966, Charles A. Rowe “Comments on the Dubreuil Brief.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*



Fig. 6: Loading logs near future town of Dubreuilville, circa 1960. Source: Private collection. Photograph courtesy of Frank Jalbert.

contract with the ACR and established a forest village, the company was not about to rest on its laurels. On 16 October 1962, Napoléon petitioned the DLF to reward the company for its achievements thus far. While the Department had agreed that DBL “sets a standard for utilization and efficiency worthy of emulation by other operators in the north,” it could not give the company a reward because doing so would set “a precedent of unimaginable consequences.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, one must admire the temerity of a company that came to Ontario some fifteen years earlier, “parlaient très

peu l’anglais” and were now lobbying the Crown to reward their efforts.⁵⁸

Even as DBL’s production and efficiency increased (see Table 2 and Chart 1), the brothers never stopped trying to improve the company. In addition to lobbying the DLF itself, it also looked to local Members of Provincial Parliament (MPP) for support. One of the company’s most impressive efforts occurred in 1966 when it prepared a petition to the provincial government that asked for an exemption from the corporation tax for a period from five to ten years. The memorandum was addressed to the MPP for

⁵⁷ AO, RG-1334, Box 279 “Dubreuil Brothers Limited, Bonus Rates, License D-1821” 30 October 1962.

⁵⁸ Comité du Livre, *Taschereau: 75 Ans D’Histoire* (May 1988), 204. Translation: Spoke very little English.

Table 2: DBL Lumber Production (FBM) 1952-1973

Year	Amount
1952	2,604,000
1953	3,339,000
1954	7,007,000
1955	9,322,000
1956	9,204,000
1957	7,022,000
1958	13,236,000
1959	8,039,000
1960	8,847,000
1961	8,908,000
1962	19,887,000
1963	22,622,000
1964	22,441,000
1965	27,012,000
1966	28,967,000
1967	29,700,000
1968	30,171,000
1969	33,192,000
1970	35,036,000
1971	36,471,000
1972	41,201,000
1973	52,103,000
TOTAL	456,331,000

Source: *Dubreuil Forest Products Archives, Company Reports, 1952-1973.*

Algoma, George E. Nixon, and Ontario's Attorney-General, Arthur A. Wishart, who was from the Sault Ste. Marie riding. The report was comprehensive and included four appendices, which were meant to tout the company's efforts and achievements since the town's inception in 1961. The company's greatest concern was that "as mechanization increases, job opportunities decrease."⁵⁹ Moreover, DBL was also in a more precarious position than its rivals because the company

was still paying for all of the services in the town from housing to education.⁶⁰ In the report to Wishart, the company outlined that conservative estimates for 1965 projected the company would be spending \$125,000 on a community centre, \$400,000 for additional housing, and \$125,000 on road construction.⁶¹ Consequently, DBL had to think about more than its own viability; it also needed to worry about the future of the town and its residents.

In an era when company towns were beginning to fall by the wayside, the Dubreuil brothers were still acting as boss and mayor in their community. It would not be until the mid-1970s that the Dubreuil brothers and the townspeople realized that "town was becoming too large and diversified to be run like an extended family."⁶²

Even after Jean-Paul Dubreuil succeeded his father, management continued to try and remain competitive by lobbying the government for help. In 1973, Jean-Paul sent a letter to maple syrup magnate and Algoma MPP, Bernt Gilbertson. The new chief of DBL outlined that the company needed to produce 25,000,000 board feet per year in order to keep its mills running at maximum efficiency but to do this it needed to increase its timber supply. Jean-Paul bluntly asked if the government "was against privately owned corporations or

⁵⁹ AO, RG 1-334, Box 334, 15 March 1966, DBL Brief to George Nixon and Arthur Wishart, 2.

⁶⁰ DFPA, "Crown Timber License D-2386" 1 April 1965. This license allowed the company to cut jack pine, spruce, balsam, poplar, and white birch in a total area of 321.5 square miles.

⁶¹ AO, RG 1-334, Box 334, 15 March 1966, DBL Brief to George Nixon and Arthur Wishart, 13.

⁶² Arnopolous, *Voice from French Ontario*, 134.

Fig. 7: Piled logs during Dubreuil Brothers winter operations in 1958 near the Magpie settlement. Source: Private collection. (Courtesy of Frank Jalbert).

French communities and operators or against the people that have been labouring and making a go at sawmilling in the past, when it required a lot of courage, ability and true sense of wilderness or is it because we are exporting our product or is it because we work our business without asking too much financial help from the government?”⁶³ He closed by solemnly claiming that Dubreuilville’s



“future is at stake and in your [Gilbertson’s] hands.”⁶⁴ Jean-Paul’s words had an impact on Gilbertson, who replied that he would do what he could to “see that [DBL] get a fair deal.”⁶⁵

The Dubreuil brothers were rewarded for their perseverance as the firm and town enjoyed considerable success and prosperity until the late-1990s. DBL itself remained in the hands of the brothers until it was sold to James River Marathon Limited and Ken Buchanan in 1989 and renamed Dubreuil Forest Products Limited (DFPL). Initially, the new structure was beneficial as the company received

better access to timber and obtained insights for improving operations and marketing. This was most notably evident in 1992 when several mills in the region were forced to close temporarily while DPFL maintained its operations for the entire year. However, the situation changed dramatically in 1998 when Buchanan bought James River Marathon and subsequently Dubreuil Forest Products Limited, becoming the sole proprietor. The mill continued to operate until 2008 before closing its doors permanently due to mismanagement and poor market conditions.⁶⁶

⁶³ AO, RG 1-334, Box 416, 15 November 1973, Jean-Paul Dubreuil to Bernt Gilbertson.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ AO RG 1-334, Box 416, 30 November 1973, Bernt Gilbertson to Jean-Paul Dubreuil.

⁶⁶ *Dubreuilville: 50 Ans D’Histoire: 1961 à 2011*, 91-94.

Forest fires and broadaxes do not make towns; people do. That being said, the Mississagi fire and more importantly, the subsequent salvage operation was a monumental factor in the early history of Dubreuil Brothers Limited. The project gave it the opportunity to hone its skills and allowed Napoléon Dubreuil to implement his forest village concept. However, the firm's success after the salvage must be attributed to the brother's ingenuity and determination. Building up on the experience gained while cutting Crown timber, the Dubreuil brothers then carved out a section of forest, in which they established a permanent sawmill and community. Through DBL's tireless efforts to improve the lives of the company and its community, the firm succeeded in far more than just lining its pockets. It enriched the lives of thousands in northern

Ontario and serves as a testament to the fortitude of the franco-Ontarian entrepreneur.

In her book, *Voices from French Ontario*, Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos argued that the Dubreuil brothers could be classified under the theory of the "marginal man" as first identified by sociologist Robert Park. According to Park this refers to someone has been "condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic, cultures" in this case, French and English.⁶⁷ Yet, this prognosis is misleading as they managed to straddle both cultures rather effectively, wading through the waters of Anglo-Ontarian business and politics. While their brethren in Québec struggled to obtain control over management positions in the province's primary industries, the Dubreuil brothers were undertaking a "Quiet Revolution" of their own.

⁶⁷ Robert E. Park, "Introduction" to Everett Stonequist, *The Marginal Man: A Study of Personality and Culture Conflict* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), xv.