

Montreal Gazette

Living on the line: Stanstead straddles the not-so-great divide between Canada and the United States

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Byline: JEFF HEINRICH

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Illustrations: Photo: GORDON BECK, GAZETTE / Theatre director Lynn Leime at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, which straddles the U.S.-Canadian border. Canada is to the left of the black line on the floor.

Photo: GORDON BECK, GAZETTE / Richard Wright (right), sitting in Derby Line, Vt., is interviewed by Gazette reporter Jeff Heinrich, sitting in Stanstead, Que., while Heinrich's 5-year-old daughter, Dorothy, jumps over the Canada-U.S. border that cuts through the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

Map: JUSTIN STAHLMAN, GAZETTE GRAPHICS / STANSTEAD, QUEBEC AND BERBY LINE, VERMONT

The Canada-U.S. border debate is on. An increasing number of opinion-makers are questioning the merits of maintaining the current level of regulation and security along the border. Federal International Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew has raised the notion of a "seamless border," while Paul Cellucci, the American ambassador to Canada, has suggested that President George W. Bush favours a perimeter-style border similar to the one that now eases the movement of people and goods throughout the European Union. In a five-part series called *Borderline*, which includes the first two parts today, we take the debate to various border points to ask both Americans and Canadians the same questions: Does the border between the two countries mean anything to you today? And would it be inviting trouble to change the status quo?

They call it The Line. Running east-west for 260 kilometres along the 45th parallel, it's midway on the globe between the equator and the North Pole.

The line divides Canada from the U.S. On the one side, Quebec. On the other, New York and Vermont.

But it's anything but straight. In fact, it's a squiggle, a crooked legacy of imprecise 18th-century cartography.

And like Canada's ill-defined identity vis-a-vis the United States, the more the line meanders the less it seems to separate the two countries and their peoples.

In the Eastern Townships, a hilly land of cottage country frequented by urban refugees of Montreal two hours to the west, the border passes through what are called The Three Villages.

Merged under the catch-all name of Stanstead (pop. 3,162), there's Stanstead Plain, Rock Island and Beebe on the Canadian side, and their sibling Derby Line (pop. 855) on the Vermont side.

Legend has it that 200 years ago the pioneering team of British surveyors who

first took a look at the place were too stewed in potato whisky to see straight. They couldn't Stand Stead-y, hence the name.

Today, the line is a fact of life.

It splits farmers' fields in two, divides main roads and side streets, and is the key attraction of the villages' turn-of-the-century cultural hub, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, which sits right on the border.

The Haskell distinguishes itself as the only library in the United States that has no books (they're all on the Quebec side), and the only U.S. theatre that is without a stage (it's in Quebec, as is some of the seating).

"When we have a show, the Canadians park on their side, we park on our side, then everyone comes in and enjoys themselves," said Lynn Leimer, who runs the Haskell's Vermont-based resident theatre company.

"And when it's over we all come out the same front door."

Being a binational troupe is a challenge, not the least of which is getting French Canadians to come to the shows, said Leimer, who lives in Newport and doesn't speak the language of Moliere.

But the border has its advantages, too.

The pool for fundraising - a must for the non-profit Haskell - is bigger on the American side (one helpful Vermont senator wangled \$100,000 out of the state treasury last year to pay for an air-conditioning system).

The Haskell can also take advantage of lower prices for goods on both sides of the border. It has two oil tanks, for example - one in Quebec, one in Vermont, which are filled depending on where it's cheaper at the time.

Books are cheaper in the U.S., too. Most of the Haskell library's 20,000 books were bought across the line.

And on any given day it's easy to find an American reading one of them.

In the library, I had a nice chat with a white-bearded, soft-spoken American named Richard Wright. He's 68, and runs a crafts shop in Derby Line called Tranquil Things.

Our table in the reading room straddled a line of black hockey-stick tape running across the hardwood floor.

I was in Canada, Wright was in the U.S.

"It's a novelty item," Wright said. "The (U.S. and Canadian) insurance companies made them put it down a few years ago after there was a fire. If there's ever another claim, they'll be able to tell who should cover the damage."

I felt in the middle of a most strange situation - theatrical and just a bit thrilling, like eating a U.S.-made Snickers bar when I was a kid, before you could get them in Canada.

Tourists love the feeling. They can read one chapter of their book in Canada and the next in the U.S., can ask for Canadian or American seating when they go to a show, and on their way out can take a stroll down any sidewalk they want.

The locals hate it - or at least, do their best to go about their business as if the line were invisible.

"The notion of the border is very special here," said Monique Nadeau-Saumier, curator of Stanstead's Colby-Curtis Museum.

"Sometimes you feel the border doesn't even really exist."

Annoyances are Many

Vermont Protestants attend service at the United Church in Stanstead, while Anglo Catholics from the Quebec side worship in Derby Line.

People from both sides keep a mailbox in each other's country (it helps speed delivery from Amazon.com and other mail-order houses), and they have dual bank accounts.

Many have dual citizenship, too, which makes going through customs on either side a quick affair. The agent in the booth is more likely to notice them driving a new car - and offer his compliments - than check its trunk.

The annoyances are many, though. Chief among them are the closed-circuit video cameras mounted on telephone poles that keep a Big Brother-ly eye on people's comings and goings along the line.

It wasn't always like this.

People who grew up here a few generations ago remember riding their bikes back and forth across the border, or going for a lake swim on the other side with their friends. If

you try that now, you have to report to the customs post first. Failure to report can be costly: \$5,000 if you're caught by the Americans. (For the same offence, Canada charges only an apologetic \$200.)

Out here, it's hard to say who is an American and who isn't. Even French Canadians aren't easily identifiable; on the U.S. side some changed their names long ago - Boisvert became Greenwood, Poulin became Colt.

Many locals in Stanstead were born on the U.S. side. For years the closest hospital was in Newport, Vt., a few kilometres away, and being born there gave Canadians automatic American citizenship.

People have long shelved the animosity that reigned nearly 200 years ago when Canada's British overseers kept up a hostile relationship with the Yanks leading up to the War of 1812.

Times change.

During the Gulf War against Iraq a decade ago, yellow ribbons fluttered from trees on both sides of the line. As dual citizens, many locals faced being called up to fight.

The North American Free Trade Agreement has created a surge in truck traffic through the Rock Island border post on Highway 55 (Interstate 91 on the Vermont side). But beyond that it's been pretty quiet.

With the low value of the Canadian dollar, shops on the American side have been seeing less Quebec traffic in the last decade. Gas isn't so much cheaper any more, or are cigarettes. Casual smugglers are staying home.

Which leads one to wonder: If the border were dismantled, would anyone care? Would we miss having that frontier? Would it make us insecure to have no boundary to bump up against?

Perhaps not.

Twenty years ago, in a gem of a little essay called *The Flight From Canada*, Montreal author David Solway urged Canadians to enjoy their "rootlessness" and "lack of established identity."

This so un-American sense of ourselves was a source of strength, not a liability, Solway believed.

In other words, it's better to keep our eye on the horizon, not the hearth.

Referring to the alias Ulysses gave himself in Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, he wrote that "it is the name of Noman which will help us escape from the cave of cyclopean insecurity we continue to inhabit."

Are the Nomen of Stanstead a breed apart? Neither fully American, nor fully Canadian or Quebecois, might they be an inspiring example of where both countries are headed?

In Stanstead, the horizon is as near as the closest Adirondack mountain. And though the line be crooked, the border doesn't so much divide as define.

'Special Mix of Peoples'

What it defines is a Canada linked to the U.S. by history and by everyday life. And somewhere on that meandering path is the answer to the question: Who are we?

"What's special here is the mix of peoples, the tight cultural connections that have always been part of life on the border," said John Mahoney, publisher of a local online newspaper called *Log Cabin Chronicles*.

So, is The Line necessary?

"The border itself," replied Mahoney with candour, "has always been what it is - an exceptional annoyance."

- The Haskell Free Library and Opera House will hold a centennial celebration Oct. 13, including two showings of a vaudeville-style production, a parade and a re-enactment of the original laying of the building's cornerstone in 1901. Call (819) 876-2020 for more information and free tickets.

- Jeff Heinrich will have a series of feature stories on the U.S.-Mexico and Quebec-U.S. borders this fall in *The Gazette*; his E-mail address is jheinrich@thegazette.southam.ca

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