

Museum offers different take on guns



MAURICE CROSSFIELD

Granby businessman Pierre Gravel is turning a longtime interest in history into a new museum that will feature firearms, bronze, coins and stamps, all with a local flavor.

A safe alternative to turning unwanted firearms in to police

By Maurice Crossfield

GRANBY

By this time next year there will be a new museum in Granby, displaying an extensive collection of firearms, stamps, coins and bronze sculptures.

"There are so many heroes in Granby, in Cowansville, in Sherbrooke," said Pierre Gravel, one of the founders of the Musée de l'Arme et du Bronze.

"There is a lot of history here. Many of our young people went to Europe to defend Canada. These were our kids,

our fathers and our grandfathers."

A history buff and collector by nature, Gravel is better known for his four decades as an impresario, booking entertainment acts for corporate functions and managing artists like André-Philippe Gagnon out of his Granby offices. He says most people don't know enough about the rich history of the people around them.

"We had regiments around here that did good things, and we have forgotten them," he said.

As an example he cites the statue in nearby Victoria Park. He spotted the Latimer statue years ago, and soon realized he didn't know anything about this war hero.

"Today the statue is there for pigeons to land on," he said.

Five years ago Gravel decided to start a museum. The idea developed to include his interests, namely gun, stamp and coin collecting, and his passion for collecting bronze statues.

"The museum will be educational, telling the story of the Americas through firearms, money, stamps and bronze," he said. "Whether we like it or not our history can be told through firearms."

As owner of Armouriers de Sherbrooke and Armouriers de l'Estrie for nearly two decades, Gravel has an extensive personal history with firearms.

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Museum founder more interested in guns' history

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Today he says he's less interested in shooting and more interested in the history that surrounds various makes and models of pistols, shotguns and rifles. Why was a firearm made, what purpose did it serve, how was it used?

NEW CHAPTER

Today we are at the beginning of a new chapter in our relationship with guns, due to tough new regulations requiring all firearms to be registered by Dec. 31, Gravel said. They must also be locked up, separately from the ammunition.

"People are already having to live differently with firearms," he said.

As an example he shows an advertisement from a few decades ago. The National Rifle Association advertisement shows a young boy's room, complete with a full, unlocked gun rack on the wall—almost unthinkable and definitely illegal in Canada today.

"We have a lot of firearms that are only seen in pictures or in a museum," he said. "There are going to be a lot fewer guns in circulation, and I'm not against that."

Under the new firearms law, those who choose not to register their guns have two choices: turn them into the police for destruction, or donate them to a museum. Gravel says the second is the better option, taking the gun out of circulation and preserving it for future generations to see, but not use.

Gravel told a story from Halifax of two black powder pistols originally owned by a notorious pirate. The pistols had been handed down over the generations, and the newest owner didn't know what to do with them. He turned them in to the police, and they were destroyed.

"It was a part of our cultural heritage that was lost," he said. "The person should have talked to a museum first."

DONATIONS

Today the Musée de l'Arme et du Bronze is offering that same service to anyone with a firearm they don't want. Turn it in and the museum will give a tax receipt for the value of the firearm, something you won't get from the police.

"We can't afford to develop a collection of antiques. We are developing a more contemporary collection, which will give us a better chance to have a full collection of, say, Smith and Wesson, than to have a full collection of antiques," he said. "And in 50 or 60 years these guns will be real collectors items."

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Townshippers doing what they do best

Feature Story



Security a top priority at Granby location

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So far Gravel has garnered 140 firearms of various makes and models, ranging from hunting rifles to "purse guns" to practically-new automatic pistols. They are all safely locked away in a vault, waiting for the day when the museum opens its doors next fall.

"By December we should have double the number of firearms," he said.

In fact, security for the new museum, which will occupy a 1,500-square-foot space in Dufferin Street, will be a top priority. Floors and ceilings will have to be changed, and windows barred up.

"Security will take months of analysis," he said. "The goal of the new law is to get rid of unwanted firearms. When you give it to a museum it's a safe way to dispose of it without destroying it."

Gravel said he's also committed to

having every firearm, stamp, coin and piece of bronze collected finding its way to a display, not just collecting dust in a warehouse somewhere.

"We have to be sure that if we take it, we will display it," he said. "Once we accept a firearm we cannot sell it afterwards, so we have to be sure it is something we need."

MILITARY HISTORIAN

Setting up the displays will be military historian Michel Litalien. A member of the Canadian Forces since 1982, Litalien works in the history and heritage division of the Department of National Defence. Sitting on the museum board with Gravel, Carole Potvin and Brigitte Gravel, Litalien will be looking to educate the public on the regiments and heroes of Quebec and the Eastern Townships.

"The more I talk to him, the more I learn about history," Gravel said of Litalien. "He can talk for hours and hours about history, it's incredible."

As the name of the museum suggests, bronze, in various shapes, sizes and designs, will also play an important role. A collector of bronze for the last 15 years, Gravel already has a solid collection, from military bronze to a 12-inch statue of former Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis. Research showed only 100 of the Duplessis statues were made, given out to supporters of one of Quebec's most notorious leaders. It was given to Gravel by an Anglophone from Ontario.

Gravel said various displays are being planned, such as an exhibition of military paintings and art. An artistic genre of its own, most people see such works only rarely, even though they are

prominent in places like the officer's mess of a military base.

"We don't want a museum where the displays will be the same year after year," Gravel said.

With a lot of work still ahead, Gravel says the Musée de l'Arme et du Bronze should be able to carve out a niche that is unique in Quebec.

"Here we have the history and I think our museum will be able to do things other museums don't do."

Anyone wishing to donate firearms, coins, stamps or bronze can do so by calling the museum at 450-405-4585.

The museum is a registered non-profit organization, and tax receipts will be given based on the value of the item donated. The museum can also be contacted by e-Mail, at bell@musemah.com. The museum's Internet Web site is www.musemah.com.