



Birth of a local living
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Description

The Atwater Library and Montreal Island seniors construct a Living History Collection

By Wanda Potrykus

Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength.

The Fountain of Age, Betty Frieden, 1993

Living with Purpose

There is a basic human need that is so often overlooked, especially as we age, which is to have a purpose or to find tasks that give meaning to our life. If you will, a confirmation that we matter and we can be productive human beings during all stages of existence. For some, it can be a crucial but absent piece of the puzzle at a variety of junctures during our lifetime, but no more so than when we enter our retirement years. **Atwater Library's Community Outreach programs** recognize this and seek to partially fulfil this need.

About the Seniors' Living History Collection¹

The [Atwater Library Digital Literary Project and Lab](#) works with a variety of senior-serving groups as well as other community and academic groups to support a wide range of senior volunteer participants from Quebec's official-language minority population as well as the Deaf community on the island. Under the aegis of its **Digital Outreach** services, a diversity of seniors from Montreal Island have come together to tell, record and share their stories. The **Seniors' Living History project** is initially taking place between June 2017 and March 31, 2018 but expects to continue recording stories and refining the collection for considerably longer.

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Its legacy will be the creation of an ever-evolving Seniors Living History Collection in a multi-media format, available through digital media and permanently based in Atwater Library's stunning, light-filled heritage building, where traditional and cutting-edge technology coexist.

Lasting legacy, ongoing initiative

By engaging with seniors to take on the tasks of creative storytelling, documentary making and dissemination along with facilitating their use of digital technology and online research techniques to capture stories with video and sound and categorize them with multiple access points, the Seniors Living History Collection will have many applications.

For example, the Collection will be a tool for researching neighbourhoods, career paths and different types of life and social experiences. Even in its infancy, it has already played that role assisting a class of students from the Art History department at Concordia, who, as part of their course work, were tasked with researching the Shaughnessy Village area of Montreal as an aid to choosing their project subject. The seniors worked with the class to help introduce them to the history of the district.

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It also means that although seniors are leading the project and serving as mentors in some instances, there are younger people are involved in a variety of roles including technical support, resulting in significant inter-generational collaboration.

The library is working to ensure the Seniors Living History Collection will develop beyond this project through its future digital media work with seniors, resulting in the growth of its capacity to serve seniors.

[New Horizons for Seniors](#), a Federal government programme, awarded a grant for the launch of the project.

Snapshots of some of her and his stories collected to date

"In old Rome the public roads beginning at the Forum proceeded north, south, east, west, to the centre of every province of the empire... so out of the human heart go, as it were, highways to the heart of every object in nature... A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world."

– History Essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841

The stories collected to date are still works-in-progress. Some need to be edited to reduce or remove anomalous recorded sounds or over loud voices, etc., as these first stories were part of a steep learning curve for the seniors in terms of technology, terminology and what works and what doesn't in equipment set up, style and interviewing methods. Some other stories that were first recorded without any visual accompaniment may need some further fine-tuning in terms of images to help future listeners connect to the narrator, or because the neophyte interviewees are gaining more confidence in their abilities and wish to add more content to appeal to a wider public.

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In addition, tags need to be added to assist future researchers access specific topics of interest. All of which, takes hours of additional work in addition to the researching of topics and stories along with the time spent doing the actual interviewing, recording and editing. Seniors are being helped to master this part of the project with

assistance from students from Concordia University.

Nevertheless, to provide an idea of the wide range of personal stories you will be able to access at the library, once the collection is open to the public that is, here are some snapshots of the early participants in the Collection to wet your appetite and give you an idea of what you can look forward to, although be forewarned the collection is growing exponentially week by week.

Susan Bronson

More a story of her connection to and her restoration work with the Atwater Library than a life story per se, **Susan Bronson** was a board member of the Atwater Library and Computer Centre from 1994 until 2000. She is an architect and noted heritage consultant. She was awarded the Gabrielle Léger Award for Lifetime Achievement in Heritage Conservation in 2010. The [reading room](#) of Atwater Library's heritage 1920 building, originally known as the Mechanics' Institute of Montreal, is among the many restoration projects that she has worked on during her career of almost four decades.

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As a practitioner, historian, and an activist, her work focuses on the link between conservation and environmental, social and economic sustainability. She has conducted extensive research on Montreal buildings of the 19th and 20th centuries, their design, their function, the context in which they were built, their present reality and their potential for the future.





In this interview, she talks about the history of the Mechanics' Institute of Montreal, and some of its members, including architect [Alexander Hutchinson](#), a student and then teacher at the Institute's headquarters on Saint-Jacques Street in the 1860s, whose firm later designed and built Atwater Library's heritage building at 1200 Atwater Avenue.

She also spoke of the continued commitment of the Atwater Library and Computer Centre to preserve their building, noting the new wood doors on Atwater Avenue that were inspired by the original design, along with its extensive community education initiatives that function as an up-to-date realization of the original mission of the Mechanics' Institute.

Penelope Cumas

Montreal born of Greek and Syrian heritage, and raised until the age of 11 near the corner of St Catherine Street and St Matthew (now renamed St Mathieu), **Penelope Cumas** is one of the seniors participating in the project. She agreed to be the first subject to be interviewed as part of the learning process the seniors' group was engaged in. Her story includes a snapshot of a time when store and cafe owners often lived and raised their families above their places of work. At that time, her father and mother ran the restaurant, first opened on St Catherine by her paternal Greek grandfather. She tells us "these are the times that fascinate me still".

Her story includes a snapshot of a time when store and cafe owners often lived and raised their families above their places of work.

Her maternal grand-parents had emigrated from Syria (now Lebanon) in the 1880s, opening a food importing business on the corner of Bonsecours & Notre Dame (circa 1890), and Main Importing on Saint-Laurent in 1917, so the food business connected both sides of the family. [Victoria School](#) (1887), the grade school building where she and her brother attended school on St Luke Street (now de Maisonneuve Blvd) still exists, although repurposed to a culinary institute in 2009.

Moving with her family to Cartierville in the north end of Montreal she told of a time when parents allowed their children to float down the "back river" (Rivière des Praires) phoning ahead to relatives to ensure that if they got too far into the centre of the river someone would go pick them up. A far cry from today's helicopter parenting? At 13, Penelope's family moved to Toronto. She finished her schooling, married early, and returned to Montreal at age 20, eventually settling in Westmount, since it seemed a "good place to raise children". However, her life didn't end there. For the rest, you'll need to listen to her story.



Seniors' Team conducting practice first interview with Penelope Cumas – Image: Eric Craven

N.B. Penelope Cumas was the first story recorded and although it began as a video interview, with audio backup, no one in the neophyte equipment setup crew thought to verify the amount of memory on the camera card. In consequence, only part of the resultant interview is on video, meaning the continuation of her story is available on the backup audio. Thus, the participating seniors learnt a valuable lesson: check all your equipment, including the capacity of your memory card, before beginning a recording session.

Mélodie Grenier

At the time of this recording in September 2017, **Mélodie Grenier** was the manager of the [Café de la Maison Ronde](#) (Roundhouse Cafe) on Cabot Square, long a haunt of indigenous Montrealers and the homeless. She is a social worker by profession, who self-identifies as a member of the [Métis nation of Québec](#) as her father was an Abenaki First Nation's man and her mother a French-speaking Québécoise, and who has faced her own racial integration challenges.

Mélodie provides insights into life as a young urban Métis woman seeking to make her way in a changing world.

Mélodie was raised in Montreal but has spent time working in international development projects in Rwanda, Lebanon, and Brazil. This most recent project, a [seasonal cafe](#) (open May to October) with a “pay it forward” programme, offers indigenous eats – bannock, “Indian tacos”, scone dogs, “3 sisters’ chilli”, strawberry drink, along with coffee sourced from the Moccasin Jo coffee roaster in Kanehsatake – and is part of the most recent face-lift and refurbishment of this green space, with a long, chequered history of its own in this area.

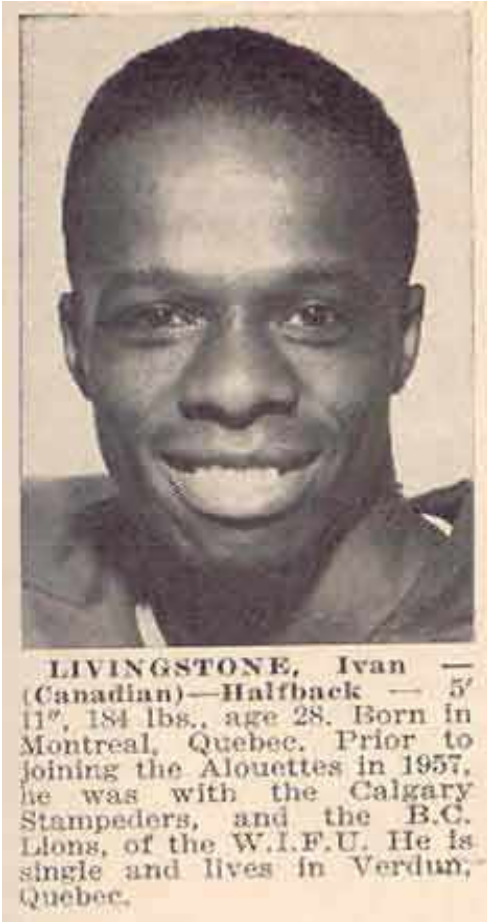
The cafe, housed in a repurposed Camillienne or [Vespasienne](#) building dating from the 1930s when Camillien Houde was mayor of Montreal and designed using the drawings of noted architect Jean Omer Marchand, is a combined imitative of Montreal's Ville-Marie borough and various indigenous organizations in conjunction with the [L'itinéraire](#) newspaper. It was established, in part, to provide on-the-job training to indigenous people to help them gain job experience, so as to facilitate their transition into more mainstream employment, as well as a way to help breach the barriers between indigenous and non-indigenous Montrealers and visitors and add to the

fabric of our multi-racial, multi-national city.

Mélodie provides insights into life as a young urban Métis woman seeking to make her way in a changing world. Audio-taped at the cafe in the square during a bright late fall “Indian Summer” day just prior to closing for the season, chances are you will be fascinated by this story.

N.B. Audio accompanied by a photo montage of the group of seniors setting off to conduct the ad hoc interview with Mélodie, along with scenes of Cabot Square and some surrounding street views.

Ivan Livingstone



Newspaper clipping of Ivan Livingstone during career in the CFL

Raised in Verdun, **Ivan Livingstone**'s parents were immigrants from Jamaica and Guyana. A talented athlete, as a young man he received many national and local awards in track and field but faced significant racism throughout his life, especially in his early school years where he was told “he wouldn't amount to much” by more than one of his teachers. Entering McGill in 1949 on a scholarship, he distinguished himself on the [university football team](#) earning his varsity letters in both track and field and football. In 1954, he turned pro to finance his graduate studies, playing first for the Calgary Stampeders, the BC Lions and then the Montreal Alouettes.

Ivan taught both Chemistry and French (unusual at the time since most English speakers in Quebec were not necessarily bilingual) before becoming a Commissioner for the South Shore English Regional School board in 1982, where he represented his school board on the Conseil Scolaire de Montreal for several years. In 1968, under the auspices of CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), he was contracted to teach at the



RIAD institute in Zaire, where he eventually became the Director.

During his 7-year African sojourn he researched the history of Voodoo and visited traditional communities in Zaire, Benin and East Africa, photographing rituals never before captured on film. These photographs are now in the Smithsonian Institution in the USA and are still being published in studies of African ethnology.

... a fascinating and humbling tale of how a life should be lived through a combination of hard work, belief in yourself and by utilizing your talents to the full.

Come listen to Ivan, as it makes a fascinating and humbling tale of how a life should be lived through a combination of hard work, belief in yourself and by utilizing your talents to the full. His is certainly a success story of surmounting life's many challenges to become a great role model, not only for young black people but for everyone.

Stephane Schwartz

Stephane Schwartz, an immigrant to Canada, arriving in Montreal from Paris with her parents, speaking only French, at the age of 18, knowing no one, shy, petite, yet somehow incredibly determined and apparently with an unquenchable drive and a backbone of steel, enrolled as the first female dental student at the Université de Montréal dental faculty. Such a rare bird, U of M was not prepared for her and didn't even have a woman's washroom available for her use. She had to go down several flights to find one.

In addition, medical textbooks at that time were mostly written in English, so along with her medical studies, she also had to learn how to read in English. Asked how hard was that? She replies, "I didn't know anyone, I didn't have a circle of friends, so all I had to do with my time was study. You did what you had to do."

Stephane Schwartz, an immigrant to Canada... speaking only French, at the age of 18... enrolled as the first female dental student at the Université de Montréal dental faculty.

After graduation, she set up her own family dental practise in NDG. Then she was asked to volunteer some of her time at a shabby, run-down children's dental clinic, with broken chairs, set up at 1040 Atwater Avenue (the former [Red Feather building](#) whose name is still emblazoned in gilt lettering over the front door together with a stylized feather relief on the brickwork), and which eventually became the [Gilman Dental Pavilion](#) of the Montreal Children's hospital. Now a world-class teaching and treatment facility, this is where she finally ended up working and teaching for forty years, and where she still volunteers, even in retirement.



Kon-Tiki postcard

Meeting her future husband on a blind date set up by both their parents, tasting an exotic cocktail for the first time in the iconic Kon-Tiki Bar in the former Sheraton Mount Royal hotel on Peel Street, led to a marriage that has lasted for over 50 years. It seems one of the many secrets to a happy marriage is that her husband, a notary with a full-time practise of his own, agreed to look after their children in order for her to go study pediatric dentistry for two years in Boston (no courses were then available in Montreal). Want to know more about this fascinating lady? Come listen to her story.

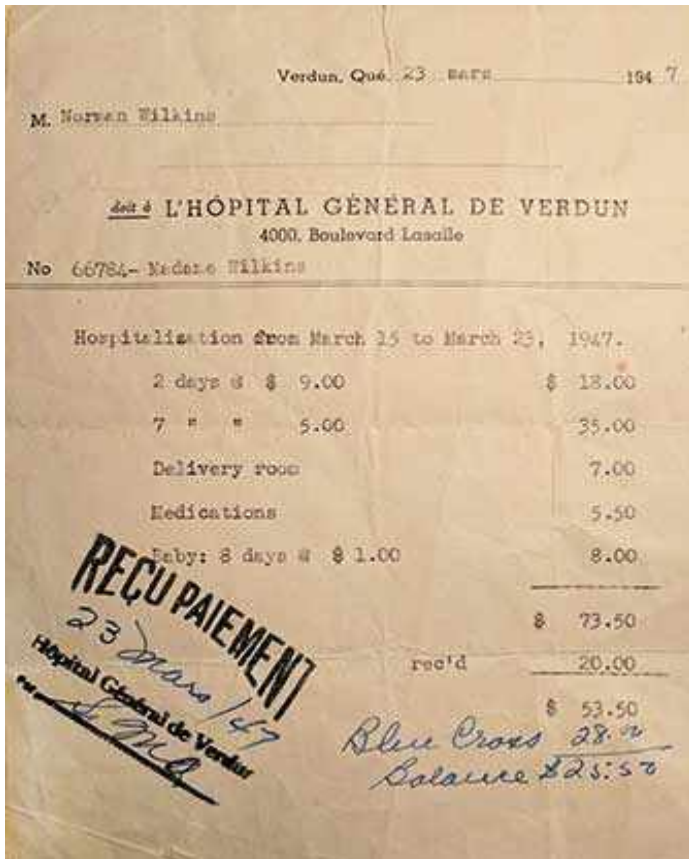
N.B. As the first story told by an invited senior from outside the working group, this recording session was the second portion of a 2-part workshop on “how to conduct audio interviews” using a variety of tools (laptop, table mike, hand-held recording device), with the seniors operating all these recording devices simultaneously, so as to have an idea of the sound quality and range of each. Thus, as the area around Mme Schwartz was somewhat crowded with sound equipment and seniors in headphones, a video camera was not added to the mix that afternoon. Consequently, this story is currently available in audio format only. However, some video accompaniment is planned for and will be added later. Part 1 of the workshop was an hour-long video conference session with [Amanda Aronczyk](#), an award-winning reporter and new media producer at WNYC (New York Public Radio), who shared helpful tips, insights and stories on the art of the interview.

Robert Wilkins

Social historian **Robert Wilkins**, a former high school history teacher, used to travel over an hour as a teenager, taking three buses from St Laurent with his friends to buy standing room tickets to Saturday night Montreal Canadiens’s hockey games at the Forum, waiting in the cold after the game, at the players’ entrance to get their programmes signed. Sadly, he reported, he didn’t keep any of them with their now ‘priceless’ signatures of former hockey greats (i.e. Béliveau, Geoffrion, Harvey, Moore, Plante, Richard) but, as the saying goes,

“hindsight is always 20-20”.

‘... he has authored a book entitled Montreal 1909, painstakingly compiled by going through the archives of the now-defunct Montreal Star newspaper for the year 1909...’



Invoice for R. Wilkins' birth at Verdun General
Image – Image: courtesy of Robert Wilkins

Born in Verdun General hospital, he still possesses the original invoice his father paid for his mother's confinement and his birth. He remembers passing by the Atwater Library, as a child, to change onto the streetcar along St Catherine at Cabot Square in order to go shopping with his family, or to visit his maternal grandmother, further east on Bleury St.

Moving to St Laurent at 10 and then to Laval at 16, he choose a career as a teacher, studying at McGill and working at several area high schools. Later he became a regular contributor to The Gazette newspaper history columns.

In his retirement, he has authored a book entitled [Montreal 1909](#), painstakingly compiled by going through the archives of the now-defunct Montreal Star newspaper for the year 1909, in which he shows the reader that as much as things change, a great deal remains the same in this fair island city of ours. Robert's story reminds us that social history need never be boring. Drop in to enjoy a wander through Robert's life.

Further updates and the public access launch date

The Atwater Library Seniors' group hopes to have at least some of the collection available for access by the public as of mid-2018 but do check back over the coming months on [WestmountMag.ca](#) and on the [Atwater Library website](#)



for more snapshots and updates on this vibrant Living History Collection project.

¹ Redacted from the [Living History project description](#) found on the Atwater Library website.

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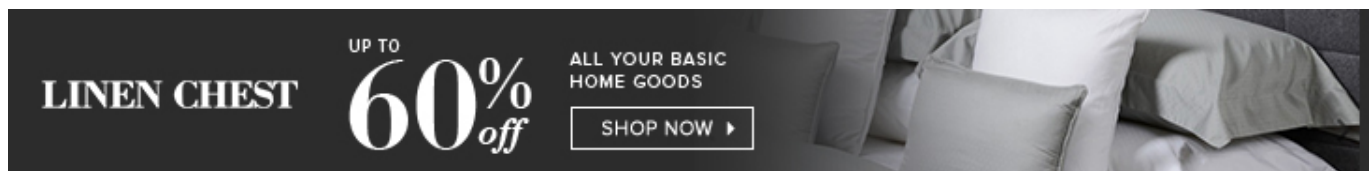
Feature image: Montreal Forum 1950s – Public domain

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