



Westmount's dogs of winters past

Description

From a public nuisance to a beloved family member

By **Michael Walsh**

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The more I learn about people, the more I like my dog.

Mark Twain, 1835-1910

Quick question – Who were Benjamin Décarie, Théophile Prud'homme and Félix Décarie? They were, in the 1840s, the Village of Côte St. Antoine's first "hound catchers".

Unlike today's "pooch friendly" city, dogs were regarded as "public nuisances". This is largely because, at the time, spaying and small animal veterinary care were non-existent. Interestingly, the Montreal Veterinary College, founded in 1866, became a faculty of McGill University named The Faculty of Comparative Medicine and Veterinary Science and closed in 1903 due to the lack of financial support.



Vintage Christmas card – cavallini.com

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This raises the question – How did the Village of Côte St. Antoine's dog population evolve from a scourge to today's pride of the city's many dog runs and public parks?

To answer that, we need to delve into the extant history that chronicles the relationship between (present-day) Westmount residents and canines in order to retrace a very interesting story. Sit back and enjoy the "ride" – we will end our journey by meeting some of today's Westmount dogs (and their owners) – in Part 2 – as they relate their remarkable stories.

To begin, the Village of Côte St. Antoine's dog tax (By-Law 16) was imposed in 1877 and collected by the Police Department. Because of the excessive amount imposed, collection of these taxes became difficult. As such, the village repealed the by-law three years later. In 1880, a new dog-tax (By-Law 26) was enacted; this time, enforced by a rural inspector who received a ten-percent commission on the taxes collected. This proved to be ineffective resulting in a large number of dog owners refusing to pay taxes on their animals. The village, in 1882, threatened to



~~sue all dog owners in default with little effect. The village, two years later, rescinded their dog-tax by law.~~



Image: Michael Walsh

By 1889, the number of dogs in the village increased to such an extent that "...owing to the large number of dogs roving in the municipality and creating a great deal of annoyance to the inhabitants" (Village of Côte St. Antoine Council Minutes) a new dog-tax was imposed. Specifically, males were taxed a rate of \$2.00 per annum and females \$3.00. In addition, "...all dogs found at large will be impounded and those without a tag will be destroyed." This was recorded as an annual "kennel tax" covering all dogs in an individual's possession.

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Dog licenses were due annually on the first of May – in line with those for pedlar and rag pickers. Enforcement was delegated to the Chief of Police who was also appointed as the town's Pound Keeper.

Despite these measures, the stray dog population in the town continued to grow. The town council stated:



Giada (Westmount's Saint Bernard) with her mother Tootie – Image: Anne Aiken, Nerthus Kennels

“That the Police, Fire and Health Committee be instructed to consider the best method of effecting a reduction in the number of dogs in the Town.”

– Town of Westmount Council Minutes, October 3, 1898

Residents started to direct their complaints to council against dog-breeders within the town's limits:

“... petition dated 3 November 1905 complaining of an alleged dog breeding establishment... at 488 Victoria Avenue and asking that the Town suppress it as a nuisance to the neighbourhood.”

– Town of Westmount Council Minutes, November 6, 1905

In 1926, a province-wide rabies outbreak caused the Secretary of the Province of Quebec to issue a warning to the Town of Westmount. By-Law 192 was quickly enacted requiring the muzzling of all dogs.

As the saying goes, “desperate times call for desperate measures”. As such, By-Law 535 was enacted into law in 1946 – with several amendments. This By-Law is still enforced to this present day.



The introduction of By-Law 535, requiring the licensing of all dogs, caused a huge uproar with the city's residents. A petition, containing over one thousand signatures, opposing this by-law as "oppressive and punitive" was presented to the city council.



Image: [Shaun Streeper](#) via [StockPholio.net](#)

In its original 1946 form, By-Law 535 stated:

"No person shall keep a dog in the City... unless such dog bears a numbered tag..."

"No person shall take a dog to any public place unless such dog bears a numbered tag..."

"No person shall establish or carry on any business... for boarding, keeping, training or treating dogs... unless permission of the Council has been obtained..."

"If any dog... while not in the company of its keeper is found in any public place or on any private property... deemed to have infringed this by-law."

"If at any time in the months of May, June, July and September... in any public place... not held on a leash... not more than six feet... deemed to have infringed this by-law."

"If any dog shall bite another person, other than its keeper... deemed to have infringed this by-law."



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"If any dog shall cause damage to any lawn, grass plot, garden or flower bed, or any flowers shrubs or plants... deemed to have infringed this by-law."

"If any dog shall bark or howl... to constitute an annoyance... deemed to have infringed this by-law."

"Whenever any dog is found in any public place, or on any private property without the consent of the owner... if such dog does not bear a tag... such dog (will be) impounded."

"Whenever a dog has been impounded... not redeemed within seven days... such dog (will be) disposed of or destroyed..."

"The Council by resolution at any time... may order that all dogs within the City shall be muzzled..."

"Every person who infringes this by-law... a fine not exceeding forty dollars... (or) imprisonment of not more than two months..."

"If after any conviction for an infringement... (if) accused of a new charge... it shall be the duty of the Chief of Police to have such dog destroyed."



Image: [Kate Ter Haar](#) via [StockPholio.net](#)

These tough measures, despite opposition, seemed to have effectively controlled most issues relating to dogs within the city. In fact, council minutes from 1946 up to 1972 are void of any mention of residents' complaints.



Dogs now became a part of their owner's family. Evidenced In 1973 when the city's first dog grooming parlour opened at 353 Victoria Avenue. Named *The Dog Brisket*, it also boarded and sold dogs.

During that period, however, dogs were free to run throughout the city's many parks. It wasn't until 1975 that former Mayor MacCallum recognized the need for a "segregated area for dogs". As such, in 1981 his council opened a designated dog run (on a trial basis) at King George Park. (Fenced in 1989 at a cost of \$10,000).

Interestingly, during that time, there was a dog run in the middle of Westmount Park. Following a petition, in 1985, to have it closed; discussions were held between city council and the Westmount Dog Owners' Association to have it relocated. The decision was to have it moved to the corner of Saint Catherine and Lansdowne Avenue. Council would provide fencing, planting, landscaping and lighting (at a cost of \$20,000). The rationale for the location was based on the geographic distribution of licensed dogs. In addition, dogs could use all of Westmount Park as a dog run between the months of December and March.



Image: [DV Pics](#) via [StockPholio.net](#)

Not surprisingly, there was considerable opposition in the closing of the Westmount Park dog run. Many owners regarded it as a "community centre". Former Mayor Gallery reminded residents that there are nine dog runs (mostly parks) in the city. In addition, he added "... (It was an) erroneous decision to locate a dog run in the centre of Westmount Park".

As such, the Westmount Park dog run was closed in May 1987 with council stating, "There should not be a dog run Westmount Park".

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Former Mayor Gallery



Finally, with peace reigning over the city's dog population, in 1982 "dog day" events were held at Victoria Hall. Their purpose was to "heighten awareness and a sense of responsibility among local dog owners". By 1990, the SPCA, RCMP and other groups held "Dog Day Afternoon" events, which featured agility and training exhibitions.



Image: [Tyler Allen](#) via [StockPholio.com](#)

Further regulations on city dogs were introduced in 1995: dogs must be on leash at Summit Woods during the bird migratory period (April 15 – June 15) and that dogs using dog runs must be from Westmount. The latter enforced with a \$100 non-resident dog tag.

Following a brief lull, residents' dog complaints resurfaced. This time, concerning barking from the dog runs and the proximity of the Lansdowne dog run to residential property.

Other residents' concerns included council's plans on regulating certain dog breeds and the number of dogs a person can legally walk, the latter affecting professional dog-walkers.

In 2011 council experienced a wave of complaints following this decision:

"... for the keeper of any dog to have at all times on his or her person a license in the form of a card bearing the dog's tag number issued by the City when having or taking the dog in any public place in the City.."

– City of Westmount Council Minutes, April 4, 2011

It didn't take long for the news media to have a "field day" with this new regulation. The Globe and Mail ran a headline entitled: "Are Your Dog's Papers in Order?"

The article continues:

"Since May the town has required dog walkers to carry their own license if they intend to have their pooch set a paw in Westmount. A small plastic card... must be carried by the human walker at all times, even when traversing the small enclave in canine accompaniment at a risk of a fine of \$75 to \$300." (A Westmount resident stated) "... so I am supposed to put a tag around my neck every time I want to go outside with my dog? ..."



Image: Mali Meder from Pexels

If this didn't cause enough of a stir in the city – the disposition of the Lansdowne dog run came into question. A year later, during the construction of the new Westmount Recreation Centre, Council proposed relocating the dog run once again into Westmount Park.

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Not surprisingly, the opposition to this move was strong. Objections included noise from barking and a petition (2013) stating that the city has enough dog runs. Alternatives proposed were locating it near Academy Road or closer to the WRC; however, the building's membrane roof restricted this option.

Council tried to appease the opposition by conducting a location study (Hodgins and Associates) as well as polling residents.



Image: [Ryan McGilchrist](#) via [StockPholio.net](#)

An exasperated (former) Mayor Peter Trent stated, “After two and a half years of discussion a dog run would have been built by now”.

Finally, in 2015, the new “Westmount southwest dog run” was completed in Westmount Park, along with a water connection for a dog fountain and electricity. Future plans involve planting hedges. Total cost: \$57,487.50.

During 2015-2016 the dog runs in the Westmount Athletic Grounds and King George Park were renovated at a total cost of \$298,273.89.

In addition, in 2016, the city (wisely) dispensed with the regulation of carrying plastic cards as proof of a valid dog license. Residents now obtain their dog licenses online through a Montreal software company “Emili Tracking Solutions Inc”.

This brings us to the end of our journey comprising 177 years of dog history. One has to admit it has been quite a ride. Now if someone asks you “What is the most contentious issue in Westmount”? You can reply, with all certainty, “dogs!”

As for dog muzzles – In 2017 city council ordered an American Staffordshire Terrier to be muzzled when outside the owner’s premises.

From a public nuisance to beloved pets, part 2 of this article will allow us to become acquainted with some of Westmount’s canine residents (and their owners) with the remarkable stories they have to share.



Feature image: [Holly Victoria Norval](#) via [StockPholio.com](#)


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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaelld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)



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