

25 Years of Trials and Triumphs – A Personal Perspective by Jules Legal

Editor's Note: Jules Legal is a long-time supporter of Save Our Seine, a former board member and President.

Chapter 1 – Setting the Stage

Winnipeggers have long had a love-hate relationship with the Seine River. Today everyone loves their little river for the inherent beauty and the plethora of plants and wildlife that proliferate along its meandering way. There was a time however when many feared the river for the devastation it caused when it occasionally spread beyond its normal banks and flooded low lying homes.

And so, in the late 1960's when The Floodway was completed, it appeared to many like the perfect solution. Modern technology would defy a natural phenomenon that had prevailed for centuries. Never again would floodplain dwellers in Winnipeg be helpless victims of episodic flooding. Concerns that the floodway could also cause harm to fish and the natural environment were given short shrift.

As it dawned upon owners of river property that the Seine no longer posed a flood threat, more and more began to clean and landscape their yards. Residents who had for years used the weedy banks as a convenient dump were moved to clean up their act.

But what about the vacant lots, city-owned land, and dozens of kilometers of riparian habitat with new potential? Who would clean up the tons of garbage left by generations of polluters?

Recognizing that the city wasn't about to commit to such a task, a small group of neighbors along Egerton Road had the temerity to take on this monumental challenge. In 1990 a few visionaries organized a volunteer group they called 'Save Our Seine' or 'SOS' as it became known. Recognizing that the Seine faced a multitude of ongoing challenges, not just garbage, they soon transformed SOS into a more professional, comprehensive organization. They adopted a formal constitution with both short and long-term goals. They secured charitable status, which qualified donors for a tax exemption. Ultimately they registered as a formal corporation and SOS would now be known as "Save Our Seine River Environment Inc."

The annual cleaning and tree planting events were always well organized, attracting hundreds of volunteers, eager to do their bit to improve the environment. I was one of those early enthusiasts. Although I didn't yet live near the Seine, I had paddled various reaches of the river and was appalled at the garbage and the mountains of deadfall that blocked canoe travel in too many places. When asked to join the SOS board, I committed to what I thought would be a small role for a short period of time. Always the Pollyanna, I remember fantasizing; ah yes, a few more cleanups and the Seine shall be returned to the pristine condition it had enjoyed before civilization visited these environs. Paddlers shall soon be guiding their canoes unimpeded through clean waters from the headwaters in the Sandilands to the muddy waters of the Red River, or so I thought.

It took only one SOS meeting to shatter this naïve assumption and a few more to fully appreciate the myriad challenges that lay ahead.

Chapter 2: Protecting Paradise (Curling Rink)

It took several SOS meetings to fully appreciate the myriad challenges that lay ahead. I learned that over decades, industries, municipalities and private individuals had deliberately dumped tons of concrete rubble, immeasurable volumes of polluting chemicals, old cars, farm machinery, and just about every conceivable type of garbage in the waters and along the banks. Indeed well into the 1940's, the City of St. Vital continued to dump domestic waste, hard up to the river's edge. Household garbage can still be seen poking through tortured shrubbery along the riverbank at the foot of Marlene Street.

I also learned that developers were casting covetous eyes on properties previously deemed unsuitable for building. Riverfront property was becoming a hot commodity and the city appeared eager to facilitate proposals with potential to increase the tax base. One such proposal that came to SOS attention was a plan to build a curling rink on property adjacent to the Seine, just south of Provencher. SOS objected on the grounds that a huge, utilitarian building with adjoining parking lot was just not appropriate along this

pretty reach of the river, however abused it may still be. It was yet another example of 'paving paradise to put up a parking lot' insisted one of our members.

I have to admit that I was one of the skeptics who didn't think that existing city plans could be altered. But hey! Why not take on City Hall? Councillor Dan Vandal listened attentively and agreed to look for an alternative site. And that is why today, The Fort Garry Curling Club is located on Archibald Street and that lovely park space along the river, south of Provencher Blvd. is still green. It has yet to be officially named but hopefully, one day it shall be known as 'Parc Gabrielle Roy' to compliment the newly restored home of one of Manitoba's most beloved writers. And wouldn't it be the perfect location for a future St. Boniface library.

Wow! Was I impressed! Maybe SOS and their supporters could aspire to be more than non-paid garbage picker-uppers after all. Maybe SOS really could make a difference. And since SOS had restored canoe navigability to the Seine, perhaps now was the time to turn our attention to other challenges.

Chapter 3: Of Trails and Bridges

During the late 1990's SOS members began discussing the feasibility of building a pedestrian trail running the entire length of the urban Seine from the floodway to its confluence with the Red River. At the time this may have seemed far-fetched but if municipal golf courses were included, roughly 90% of the land required to build a trail adjacent to the Seine was city-owned. Admittedly these properties were typically located on one side of the river or the other, seldom both, but if the trail were to cross the river in several places, these properties would then become practically contiguous. How wonderful! How serendipitous!

Of course this would require several pedestrian bridges. Now, if these bridges were aesthetically designed and if they were economic to build, wouldn't everyone support this grand vision? Who could possibly object? Certainly not city planners for they had, during the 1980's, prepared an ambitious concept plan that would transform the whole urban Seine River corridor into a series of interconnected parks.

The first phase of our long-range vision was to be built in old St. Boniface through an industrial corridor that extended from Provencher to Marion. We would transform this severely compromised reach of the river into a thing of beauty. The centre-piece would be a high-level pedestrian bridge, which was required to connect city-owned property on both sides of the river. There followed passionate debate over design concepts. The design was particularly critical because the prescribed area was prone to flooding when the Red was at its peak and besides, this was to be the model for a series of pedestrian bridges to be built over time. A local engineering firm proposed a cable-stayed suspension design similar to the one they had recently designed to cross the 'Little Saskatchewan River' near Minnedosa. This bridge was built largely by volunteers, for a fraction of the cost of an equivalent concrete structure and without a doubt it was aesthetically far superior. This marvelous meld of art and technology was to be the showpiece that would put an end to NIMBY (not in my back yard) negativity and no doubt it would attract admirers from far and wide.

Architects, engineers and various professionals were eager to contribute; even a renowned artist volunteered his talents. Engineering professors from the University of Manitoba saw this bridge as a great opportunity to test an emerging carbon-fibre technology and they wanted to monitor performance utilizing recently developed transducers and telemetry technology. Several businesses pledged donations of materials and SOS was to be the convener that would bring together all the players.

These were indeed heady times for SOS. We had accomplished much despite the many obstacles put in the way by opponents. I wish I could report that it was all smooth sailing after that but here we are almost 20 years later with scant few kilometers of trail and not one bridge. So what happened?

Thankfully, unpleasant memories dim over time but I shall never forget how crushed SOS members and their supporters felt when after years of research, countless meetings with city planners, successful fund raising, and dealing with cranky citizens we learned at a Riel Community Committee hearing that it was all for naught.

This noble vision that had consumed the passions of so many souls; this labour of love that cost thousands of hours of unpaid volunteer time, took less than two hours for the committee to kibosh. We never did learn why. Did it collide with plans of private developers? Were councillors obliged to heed advice from a dissenting administration with other priorities? Were they fearful of the dreaded NIMBY factor? I suspect we'll never know.

Chapter 4: Removing Toxins - the IKO Cleanup

I do know that SOS members raised themselves from the depths of despair and went on to champion other causes. And yes, SOS has enjoyed a number of triumphs along the way.

Perhaps the most significant achievement particularly in terms of dollar costs was putting a stop to the toxic sludge that had been poisoning the Seine for decades. While many had noticed this oily substance trickling into the waters near the CPR rail bridge east of Deschambault, no one saw fit to report it. Even within SOS only a few suspected how much damage the stuff was causing, how deadly it could be to fish, turtles, ducks and other aquatic creatures reliant on clean water to survive. The owners of the offending property were notified and they installed a minuscule floating boom, which, of course, did nothing to prevent the spread.

SOS then began a long, protracted period of prodding government officials to assess and repair this insult to the environment. We knew full well that this would take consistent lobbying over years, so when SOS was able to hire our first full-time coordinator in 2002, part of his job description was to continue the lobbying. Perhaps because he was fresh, perhaps because he was naïve, or maybe it was just his passion; David Danyluk pestered and persisted relentlessly year after year. He even got the attention of the Stephane Dion when he was Federal minister of the environment.

Eventually, officials committed to a plan of action, starting with a comprehensive environmental study. It confirmed that this cocktail of deadly chemicals was capable of killing all manner of life and it had to be expunged. The impacted area was far greater than anyone could have imagined. Oily ooze extended to both banks and this would require the river to be diverted while thousands of tons of contaminated soil was hauled away and subsequently replaced with good earth. In the process a significant portion of riparian habitat with mature trees was destroyed and shall require extensive remediation. The worst is now over and nature is slowly working its magic. In time the waters will flow clean and this whole devastated area will be a beautiful natural space. SOS can take great pride in the role we played in making it so.

We commend our federal and provincial governments as well as owners of the property for stepping up to the plate. It took nearly 15 years but in the end I believe we can all take pride in the certain knowledge that it was the right thing to do.

Chapter 5: Bois-des-Esprits

Every successful project was achieved through hard work and stubborn tenacity, perhaps none greater than preserving the last remaining river bottom forest within our city. Today we can stand back and celebrate this sylvan wonder that is "Bois-des-Esprits," this home to countless creatures whose lives are symbiotically entwined with the diverse and glorious flora. As I amble among the ancient oaks, I am moved by their majesty. It seems absurd to think they were in peril not so long ago and I am reminded of the battles SOS fought to preserve what we could. Of course we are grateful to the city and the province for finally coming through with most of the funding required to save what we see today. I still don't understand why after all our efforts and raising over \$115,000, one small donation at a time, SOS was never allowed to be a party to the extensive negotiations that went on among the city, the province and the developers. I don't understand why it took so long - some of us laboured ten years from concept to reality. And finally, why did those with the power not see the merit in preserving the entire contiguous forest as recommended by so many of our professional colleagues?

A part of me still grieves for opportunities lost, but I am comforted by the notion that our little river runs cleaner and Bois-des-Esprits is now a joy to citizens present and shall continue to be for generations to come.

I salute those visionary SOS pioneers who 25 years ago determined that the Seine desperately needed to be saved. I am in awe and profoundly grateful to the multitude of supporters who shared this noble vision and worked so selflessly to bring it closer to reality. I pray that champions, less bruised, shall emerge to follow the dream of a vibrant green corridor the length of the Seine and accessible to all. Meanwhile let us celebrate all the wonderful things that were achieved this past quarter century by SOS and their army of volunteers for they are many and they are priceless.